

Chapter 1

Monday 6th January 2144

I live alone now, not far from my place of birth, in a small self-sufficient cottage overlooking the beautiful Criccieth coastline in North Wales. I've spent much of my last half-century, collecting the truths of a tale that led our once great civilization to its current neo-medieval state; facts that otherwise would surely have been lost beneath historical spin.

In memoriam, therefore, I feel it my duty to history, to the future, and to the others, to relay as complete an account as I can of the cataclysmic events we set in motion, and concluded, over sixty years ago. My name is Oak Madoc. I am the last Survivor and my role you will discover later but for now, we start with my dear friend Emerald McKenzie.

Monday 10th June 2075 - Rockley, England

'Em, Emerald?' Dieter shook her.

'Huh?'

'There's a call, it's Martha,' Dieter murmured into his pillow and fell back to sleep.

She squinted at the clock. *Four! Hell!* Still half asleep, she pulled on her robe and rubbing sleep from her eyes crossed the room to the Euronet terminal.

Her delicate features, chocolate skin and curvy athletic body would normally draw the description of jaw-droppingly gorgeous but at four in the morning her Personal Genetic Rating of only 2 was less than obvious.

Emerald tried to focus on the screen. Martha was fuming, her piercing blue eyes ice cold with frustration.

'Hi Martha, what's wrong?'

'There is a fault in the ACV!' Martha snapped impatiently.

'What *fault*? The code's perfect!'

‘Poor longevity, a by-product of the gene washing process, I’ve just tested another batch and the virus mutates into a useless strain thirteen days after production. You do the maths, three days for the tankers to deploy to the processing plants, four days for bottling and five for distribution to health centres etcetera.’

‘Twelve. Giving us only twenty-four hours. Shit! We’re going to have to inoculate the entire FSN population on the same day!’

Martha calmed visibly. ‘Brilliant, Em, and there I was thinking we’d have to start from scratch! I’ll call Ernie; he can make it a decree or something,’ she paused, thinking, then with a big grin, ‘We’ll make it an event, Inoculation day - *The Death of Cancer!* Fabulous. I knew you’d come in handy one day. Goodnight.’ The screen faded leaving Emerald in dawn twilight.

21:00 hours

Ernst Rush, President of the Federation of Sovereign Nations, stepped behind his desk in the presidential apartments on the top floor of the Berlaymont building. Well groomed as always, in a top quality light-grey double-breasted suit and crisp white shirt, he sat at his desk, straightened his blue silk tie and swept his greying hair back from his face. His pale-grey eyes caught reflections of the transmission lighting in his office as he shifted in his seat. Then with a final, almost ritualistic clapping together of his hands on the desk in front of him, his trustworthy and honest appearance was complete.

He hated live speeches and was already feeling clammy under the collar. *Keep it short Ernie*, he warned himself as the sound-man counted him in. ‘Two, one...’

‘Citizens of the Federation of Sovereign Nations. Good Evening. After exhaustive consultation, the Medical Overseers have today informed me that it would be most beneficial to administer anti-Cancer inoculations to all FSN citizens at the same time. I have therefore scheduled inoculation day for the twenty-second of October.’

Saturday 27th July 2075 – 87 days to Inoculation day

21:30 hours - Holisticorp HQ

Emerald wasn’t really thinking anything, she was too tired. The day was too long, the dinner too filling, Mr Shu too attentive and the contract needed finalising, *as soon as*, but as she drove into the

expansive grounds of Holisticorp headquarters she ordered, ‘Car; Scenery, Window; Open.’ The vehicle slowed to its preset speed and in flooded birdsong and the scent of pine. She breathed the clean air, relaxed into her seat taking a lazy five to gaze across the Marlborough Downs.

She was still entranced by the distant half-silhouetted hills glowing in the twilight, when Car rounded the final bend and the sunset revealed the majesty of the Ivory Tower’s pearly domed roof shining through the canopy of a group of Scots Pine. Set atop the highest ground in the immediate landscape, the tower dwarfed all other buildings in the complex. Car’s door opened as it pulled to a stop in front of the five chromed pillars of the main entrance. Emerald picked up her PCS and Memgem case and stepped out refreshed.

The first units that could truly be described as Personal Communication Systems came about in the mid 2020’s. A natural convergence of mobile phone, personal stereo, video and Sat Nav technologies, bundled with some gadgets derived from a fighter pilot’s headset, the main body of the PCS weighed only a few grams and hugged the back of the ear, much like an ancient hearing aid. A thin arm from the top of the earpiece terminated at the temple in a flat coin-sized disc which housed a microphone, a camera to capture the view in front of the wearer, the retinal image projector to transmit images to the user and retinal scanner to confirm user’s ID. It did feel a bit like you always had a pencil behind your ear but it was a very neat piece of kit. Providing the wearer with the ability to receive and transmit all data formats, anywhere, in a matter of seconds, it quickly became an indispensable part of daily life. Consequentially, the Memgem crystals it used became the standard form of digital data storage. About the size of a peanut, they were able to store a massive quantity of data indefinitely whilst inside a Gemport but lost their charge in just a few hours once removed. Many citizens, therefore, carried powered Memgem cases to ensure the integrity of their personal or sensitive data.

The silver double-helix of Holisticorp’s logo spiralled with the lazy rotation of the revolving glass doors, glinting orange with the evening light as she approached.

Inside, conditioned air and the Chief greeted her.

‘Good evening, miss McKenzie. Working late?’ He was the shorter of the two guards at the desk. Beyond him, a new boy stood

attentively, his pencil thin neck sticking out of his oversized collar and tie rose into a narrow face, topped by poorly cut short blond hair. Emerald noted his resemblance to a stippling brush and forced back a chuckle as she approached, ‘Yes, Chief, a few loose ends. A new partner?’

The old guard pulled a smile from between his heavy cheeks that still displayed plethoric pocking from adolescent acne.

‘Yes, ma’am, Guard John Wilkinson; his first shift. We’ll soon knock him into shape; well,’ he chuckled, ‘maybe we’ll be able to get rid of the startled bunny look anyway!’

Emerald laughed aloud at the Chief’s ruthless candour but stifled it offering, in her now little evident but native Martiniquais accent,

‘Chief, you are evil! Take no notice chil’, you be jus’ fine,’ she smiled at the red-faced youngster as she passed the desk, thinking, *I sounded just like granny McKenzie.*

‘What a babe!’ Emerald overheard him whisper to the Chief.

Still got it then. she thought as the Chief answered.

‘Mind your manners youth, she’s old enough to be your grandma.’

‘No way, she only looks about thirty!’

‘Yeah! That fine lady’s actually sixty-eight. Had her genes tweaked.’

‘Tweaked?’

‘Yeah; longevity biobots.’

‘Eh?’ asked the young guard ignorantly.

‘A type of bacteria, bio-engineered to inhibit the loss of telomeres.’

‘The loss of what?’

‘Okay, try this. They’re like a maintenance team that slow down the aging process!’

‘Gotcha!’

‘Just after I started here it was. They went to the top Harley street boys of course, Telomeraise you know; only the best for them. It cost old Enrique about five million and that was back in ’38! But I swear neither, Mrs English or miss McKenzie, has aged more than a year or two since. That’s some employee perk,’ he sighed, ‘I wish I could have afforded that for my Clara, she used to be a stunner you know...’

The mahogany double doors that terminated the entrance-hall slid apart as Emerald approached. She thought, *Emerald Holisticorp zero-two*, to activate the elevator and ordered, ‘Chat off; my office Henry.’

It began to carry her into what she considered a completely

different world. On the outside of the tower, people went about their daily rituals doing the same humdrum things day in, day out. Inside, no two days were the same; there was always some new idea, a project, a new breakthrough or an old disease finally laid to rest. Emerald really loved her job.

The doors opened onto the tower's luxurious top floor. With an interior as spectacular as the exterior, it was more like a lavish hotel than a place of work. Emerald walked the short distance to her office, one of only two on this floor, and was already ordering, 'Monty; On' as she entered. The door closed behind her as the very efficient office A.I. responded.

'Good evening, miss McKenzie; a pleasant dinner?'

'Excellent Monty. Collate all information regarding the Misihatsu Corporation's funding agreement and draw up contracts for the current deal using the following data.' Emerald retrieved a green Memgem from her PCS and dropped it into her desk's Gemport. The crystal illuminated and began to spin its data into the system. She walked to the window. She had noticed a portion of Avebury stone circle glowing in the hazy distance, the stones looking much bigger than their actual size.

'What do you wish me to do with the finished document, ma'am?'

Emerald loved the view from that window at dusk and only just heard the question, 'One for me, three copies to Misihatsu, one to Mr Shu, three to our lawyers and one to Martha in Prague.'

'Yes, ma'am, however, Mrs English is not in Prague, she is in her office. Do you wish me to wait until she *is* there?'

'No, I'll get back to you on that! No wait, unless you hear otherwise send it to Prague.' Emerald was puzzled and headed immediately to the door. *What is Martha still doing here? She should have left hours ago.* She crossed the hallway to Martha's office, knocked and entered. Martha was sitting in her favourite armchair facing the window, holding a datapad.

'Martha?' No answer, Emerald walked to the chair and speaking softly so as not to startle her, 'Martha,' still nothing. *Amazing, how can you just fall asleep when you are supposed to be guest of honour at a party, which is celebrating, well, essentially you?* Emerald put her hand gently on Martha's shoulder, 'Have you forgotten? You're supposed to be in Prague.'

Without opening her eyes Martha murmured, 'Not forgotten, just asleep. What time is it?'

Emerald glanced at the clock on Martha's desk, 'Ten. Weren't you supposed to be at the party by now?'

'Yes. Not to worry though, they're hardly likely to get upset with *The Great Martha English; their Philosophical Leader.*' She opened her eyes and grinned impishly, then stood, straightened herself and stretched, still clutching the datapad.

'What were you working on that sent you to sleep anyway, nothing of mine I hope?'

Martha let out a little denying laugh, 'No, I was reading reports from our Pan-Panacea division. I think we may be able to adapt the ACV technology to eliminate airborne viruses. I was selecting a team to research it when I started daydreaming, then dreaming of Elysium.'

'That's heaven?' Emerald's knowledge of Greek mythology was shaky to say the least but to her surprise, she was right.

'More or less, Em. To be precise, the final abode for the souls of the virtuous, heroic and blessed. A paradise situated at the end of the world or, to put it another way, just a dream,' Martha grinned again, took Emerald's hand and pressed the datapad gently into her palm as she said, 'You finish this off and we'll get started when I get back.' Martha collected her coat and hat and walked to the elevator.

'Oh yes, How was Mr Shu? You know he has a soft spot for you, Em,' Martha flashed Emerald a cheeky grin.

'Mr Shu is just fine, Martha. He sends his regards. If he were twenty years older and looked twenty years younger I might be interested, but when all is said and done he is just a boy, so his soft spot can stay soft.' Martha laughed and the elevator doors closed.

Emerald returned to her office, poured a glass of rum, settled onto the leather couch and flicked on the datapad. Listed by name, suitably qualified Holisticorp employee files scrolled up the screen. *Adam Meacock, yes, Hannah Weldon, yes, Ivan Jones, yes, John Drew, Ellen Sanchez - PL2 Briefing. What's this?* She scrolled further down. Several other files had a similarly appended code, all with different dates. Number forty-six had today's date.

'Pad; Release file forty-six.' It flashed on screen, the profile image showed a woman in her early thirties with straight mouse-brown hair. *Hmm, kind o' short, kind o' plain.* Emerald thought as she read. *Lorna Smithson, Environhance labtech of four years service, good methodical and analytical skills but...* Emerald's sense of, *nothing out of the ordinary*, was growing until she saw the bar graphs displaying employee's current training level. *Too high for a labtech! Perhaps*

Martha has already had some people specially trained for this! She requested more details. 'Pad; PL2-Briefing, Define.'

'PL2 is defined as Project Lysis part two. Briefing is defined as the preparation and training of employees for a project. The time and date refer to the end of the employee preparation period and start of training. Definition ends.'

'Pad; Project Lysis part two, define.'

'Project Lysis part two is defined as resorption.'

'That's it? Resorption, define by context.'

'Dictionary definition available only; context definition unknown.'

'Unknown? What actions are prompted by the PL2 code on an employee file?'

'The selected employee and family are collected from home and transported to an Holisticorp building for briefing in PL2.'

At eleven o'clock at night? That's a very antisocial time to be starting a new project. And the family too! What's Martha up to? I thought we'd discussed every detail of Lysis; she's mentioned nothing of any extension! Emerald took a new Memgem crystal from her case, removed the wrapper and inserted it into the Pad's Gempport.

'Pad; Transfer all files and a copy of this conversation to this gem.' After a few seconds it stopped spinning and she transferred it to her PCS. 'Pad; Off,' she checked the time, 22:35, and arranged her PCS around her ear as she walked to the elevator. Interrogating the file via the PCS now, the same circular answers flashed onto her retina. Emerald's repeated requests for more information, revealed only various versions of 'refer to Martha English for more details'. *She's completely locked out every access point to this data. I know airborne viruses would be a big project but this is ridiculous, even the project supervisors won't know what the job is!* Emerald passed reception and nodded to the Chief and the boy, 'Goodnight, Chief, John.'

'Goodnight, miss.'

CAR. She ordered as she passed through the revolving doors. The PCS transmitted the signal and Car met her outside. Emerald transferred the Memgem to Car's Gempport, and dumped her PCS onto the seat beside her. 'Car; Drive to Lorna Smithson's address, file forty-six.'

'Yes, ma'am, destination Landsdown, this journey will take 16.25 minutes, ETA 22:57 hours. Indexing entertainment tracks of suitable length and selecting auto-play; introducing Bach's Concerto for two violins and Orchestra in D minor.'

As Car sped almost silently through the Holisticorp scenery, the concerto's fierce first movement rumbled into the interior and with it a fog of doubts tumbled over Emerald. *What am I doing? Why am I so curious? It's just an odd file code! This is stupid; I could just ask Martha about it on Monday.*

She obviously didn't feel stupid enough to stop though, as a few minutes later Car was accelerating onto the motorway. The 'Vivaces' had faded into the more soothing second movement 'Largo, ma non Tanto' and she settled back in her seat with the mellow strings wafting over her.

Fifty kilometres away in Landsdown, Lorna Smithson yawned and looked at her partner sleeping in his chair. Quietly she called for Richards, the family's Timesaver; a humanoid house servant, mass-bio-engineered by Holisticorp. There was no response and she called again a little louder, 'Richards.' She stood and took a step towards the hallway but her sleep-heavy legs grumbled at their task. As she reached the door, in burst Richards, 'Ah, there you are.' She was always surprised at how small he was; he only came up to her shoulder. He looked somewhere in his forties and sported a preposterous, dark-brown three-fingered comb-over, one finger of which was regularly dangling by his ear. He was a little obsequious but efficient and a boon for when one had imbibed just a little too much.

The little man spoke in a slightly high pitched, educated English accent, 'Sorry madam I was with Annabelle. She was having that nightmare again but she's okay now. Mark, of course, has been snoring for hours.'

'Awww! Little love. I'm retiring now, Richards. That wine at dinner has hit us both, as you can see,' she gestured at her other half, 'Could you assist Philippe?'

'Certainly, goodnight Madam,' the little Timesaver replied proudly.

'Goodnight, Richards.' She disappeared down the hallway to the bathroom and Richards turned to the master of the house.

'Mr Smithson. Sir,' he had to make sure but wasn't expecting an answer. 'Come on you long streak of unwashed spittle,' Richards whispered as, straining a little, he pulled the sedated man over his shoulder and started slowly across the room. 'You're not as sturdy as Lorna are you, Mr Smithson,' he said whilst gingerly but deliberately bumping Philippe's head on the doorframe as they passed through it.

‘Sorry, sir!’ he said sarcastically. ‘You don’t deserve her you know! She needs more than a beanstalk-Belgian who can’t hold his liquor!’ he chuckled as he deposited him on the bed then scurried off to find Lorna. *She’s taking much longer than expected!* His thought caught somewhere between admiration and panic at her resilience to the combination of sedative and alcohol.

He listened at the bathroom door but there were no sounds from inside. *They’ll be here soon!* The thought prompted him to risk intrusion. He knocked. ‘Everything alright madam?’ No response. He started sweating as he imagined the mess and noise that breaking into the bathroom would cause. He tried the handle. It clicked open and he berated his paranoia. Lorna was slumped under the sink. He lifted and carried her to her husband’s side.

Only fifteen minutes! Fifteen minutes, to prepare all these! Now where to start? Children I think, let’s save the best to last. He moved to the boy’s room. Mark was big for a nine-year-old but Richards soon stripped him and secured him in the Morphalloy wrap. The only part of him still visible was his face with a few of his blond curls poking out under the securing cover. *Only two more then it’s Lorna’s turn. Annabelle next.* The little man shuffled swiftly next door to the smaller child’s bedside, knelt and looked on her sweet serene face.

‘Goodbye,’ he said softly as he kissed her on the nose. He undressed her, laid her gently on the Morphalloy wrap and it immediately curled around her. With the rise and fall of her shallow breath, the outline of her body encased in the gold metallic fabric glinted in the streetlight reflecting from her vanity mirror. Richards paused and looked at her once more from the door. *What an angel.* There was a tear in his eye as he moved to the master bedroom.

22:46 hours

The piercing motorway lights flashed by hypnotically as J.S. Bach worked his magic on Emerald. The sound completely enveloped her and she floated amongst the notes until Car’s voice gently broke the spell. ‘Leaving motorway ETA five minutes.’

The soft strings mellowed to nothing and the third movement ‘Allegro’ began as the bends on the road became more acute and frequent. *This is very fitting.* She thought as the road perfectly matched the inflections of Car’s selected music.

22:50 hours - Landsdown, England

The two adults were as Richards had left them.

‘Right, Mr Smithson.’ He undressed the dead weight of Philippe one limb at a time, arranged him neatly on the Morphalloy sheet and sealed the package then moved eagerly to the woman.

‘Lorna, ah, Lorna, I’ve wanted a go on you since I first arrived!’

The little man climbed onto the bed next to her, his eyes wide and soaking in the sights as he sensually undressed his toy. Slowly she became naked; a well-rounded voluptuous thigh crept into view as he peeled off her trousers and pants. He buried his head in the warm welcoming flesh, emerging to slither upward rubbing himself against her like a cat.

Sitting her up, he removed her shirt and laughed aloud, startling himself. *The fullness! The glory!* He released them and they tumbled out to meet him.

‘Hello girls,’ he chuckled and let Lorna fall back, her ample breasts came to rest a moment later closely followed by their biggest fan. He sucked in a nipple, whilst greedily fondling the other breast like dough. When he’d had enough, he stood and took off his shirt then bent to remove his trousers but as he straightened, a pair of headlight beams crossed the room and his chest.

‘Shit! They here already, they’re early!’ He quickly arranged the Morphalloy sheet and parcelled her.

22:57 hours

In perfect unison with the dying embers of the concerto Car announced, ‘The Smithson’s residence is the corner house, just ahead on the left, ma’am. ETA 30 seconds.’

Emerald looked across the street to the house which, along with the others in the row, was set higher than the road. From this position, she had a clear view of the front door.

‘My compliments Car; Park here and Dark glass.’

‘My pleasure, ma’am.’ The engine stopped and the windows slowly darkened.

22:58 hours

Having regained his clothing, Richards made his way to the front door to meet the removers and waited for the knock but it didn’t come. *Where are they?* He opened the door and looked out but he could see no one. He checked his watch, 22:58:30.

‘Shit! Curse my paranoia,’ the Morphalloy slogan went through his mind, *Morphalloy, the tamper proof memory cloth - when it’s sealed, it’s sealed - It’s the only way to be sure.* ‘Shit!’ he closed the door and stormed off to tidy the lounge, frustrated at his missed opportunity.

22:58:40 hours

He must be their Timesaver; an early model. He’s so tiny! Emerald thought as a Transport-8 hummed quietly around the corner and its headlights flashed through Car’s mirrors.

The vehicle passed Car and came to a halt outside the Smithson’s as the little Timesaver popped his head out of the front door again; he checked the street furtively then signalled. The driver and passenger got out, both women, mid-twenties, short-cropped hair and fit looking, in body hugging black overalls. Each walked to the Transport’s rear doors, collected anti gravity clamps from inside and headed for the still open front door of the house. *That’s weird!* Emerald thought.

After only a few seconds they emerged with two black sacks supported by the clamps. They walked to the Transport, deposited their cargo and returned to the property. *They must be relocating for this job! That must be why the family of the employee go too! It’s still an odd time though?*

Again the two removers exited the house, this time with two more smaller sacks. They loaded the sacks and clamps into the Transport’s rear, the driver returned to her seat and her partner slid open the side door. Four new figures, emerged, two adults followed by two children. They walked single file along the pavement and up the steps, all in complete silence. *Now, that’s really odd; trance-like. What is going on here?* ‘Car; Confirm adult female is Lorna Smithson?’

Car’s response didn’t make the event any less strange, ‘There is an 82 percent probability that it *is* Lorna Smithson, ma’am.’

As the little girl stepped inside the house and Richards closed the door behind her, the Transport-8 pulled silently away.

‘What? I, I thought the file said that the family would be transported to, not home from an Holisticorp building at this time?’

‘You are correct, ma’am,’ Car confirmed.

This gets stranger by the second! ‘Follow the Transport but don’t let them know we’re following.’

‘Certainly, ma’am but I would like to point out that I’m not a surveillance vehicle and cannot guarantee success.’

‘Noted. Do your best but if we’re spotted you’re scrap! Now, chat

off. Drive. No music.'

As Car pulled away, Emerald could see the family inside the house being greeted by Richards, their silhouettes clearly visible on the front room blinds.

What on earth's going on? Emerald's attention returned to the Transport-8 as Car followed it through the suburban outskirts of Bath.

'Car; Extrapolate possible Holisticorp destinations within a fifty K' radius.'

'Collating sites. There are three Holisticorp complexes in the area, Yeovil, Blandford Forum and the closest, Hinton Charterhouse.'

'Can you get to Hinton Charterhouse location via an alternative route before the Transport-8 arrives there?'

'Only by transgressing the speed restrictions, ma'am.'

'Do so. They're going to spot us if we follow them any longer.'

Car took the next turn and was soon hurtling along a winding B-road, at speeds that threw Emerald across the vehicle from one bend to another. Gradually the road straightened, Car decelerated and stopped. Emerald gathered herself after the roller-coaster ride and looked around. Either side, bracken rolled away up the slopes of the shallow wooded valley. Ahead, in a clearing that dipped away beyond the perimeter fence, stood a narrow, squat building illuminated only by the small spotlights of securicam positions. The sign on the gate read, 'Holisticorp OGP Hinton Charterhouse. Access restricted. Identify yourself here'. A red arrow pointed to the autoscan sensor on the gatepost.

'Car; is this the right place? This is an Organ Generation Plant. Why would Martha brief staff investigating airborne virus here?'

'This is the location you requested, ma'am. As to your second query, I have no data. I suggest you ask Mrs English.'

'Don't you start! How long until the Transport-8's arrives if this is the correct site?'

'Approximately two minutes, ma'am.'

'Okay. Good, let's relay my scan to the sensor.'

Car drove to the gates and interfaced. 'The sensor is ready for you, ma'am.'

Emerald Holisticorp zero-two, crossed her mind and the electric gates sparked as the circuit was broken, they parted and Car glided through.

'Right let's get out of sight. Find me a concealed position with a good view of the cargo bay.'

‘Which building, ma’am?’

‘Eh?’ Emerald could see only one.

‘There are six warehouses in the complex, ma’am.’

‘Does the main building have a cargo bay?’

‘Yes, ma’am; two.’

‘Then find a concealed position to view both.’ Car started down the sharp incline into the complex and selected a position on the far side of the main structure in the shadows of a transformer building. Emerald could see not only the cargo bays but also the main gate and approach road.

‘Excellent choice, Car; we’ll have to get you that surveillance badge.’

The moment Car stopped she started wondering. *Is this the right site? If it is, maybe the Transport is going to one of the other warehouses! Will I have to follow. If I do, do I walk?* The Transport-8’s headlights flashed between the perimeter trees and the gates opened automatically. *They’re expected!* Passing through the shallow fog that had begun to drift across the site, the Transport rounded the corner of the building and reversed to an abrupt halt in the cargo bay right in front of Emerald. *Yes! Okay, let’s see what’s in those bundles.*

The bay doors rattled upwards and interior lighting flooded out, illuminating both Transport and bay. The two women unloaded all four parcels, carrying each inside the building. As they exited for the last time the bay door rattled back down, gobbling up the interior light. Its shadow slipping over the shell of the vehicle ended the whole tableau and the Transport-8 left the site.

Near silence fell over the now eerie looking compound and as Emerald left Car and crossed the yard to the entrance, only the soft hum of the transformer ruptured the quiet. The securicams tracked her as she approached. *It’s okay; you have every right to be here,* she thought, trying to reassure herself. She crossed the Ident-loop and the door spoke, ‘Identity please.’ She thought, *Emerald Holisticorp zero-two,* and the door opened.

Inside, dim yellow ceiling lights trailed away along a dull and dusty corridor, to a single faint red LED on the securicam at the end. Emerald entered a small poorly lit office. *It looks like time’s stood still in here for a couple of centuries.* She thought as her eyes adjusted. Towers of tatty cardboard boxes covered most of the floor and every surface. Emerald carefully negotiated the well-worn path between the easily toppled stacks to the desk. Alongside a number of half-finished

sandwiches and drinks, one of the boxes was open, inside were a stack of employee files. She looked back at the room, *There must be thousands of files! What are they doing here?* She turned to the computer.

‘Terminal; On. Display building plan.’ One room’s label immediately drew her attention. *Resorption. Now we’re getting somewhere, down the hall, through organ generation room one, through the clone storage area,* ‘Terminal; off.’

She moved quickly to the end of the corridor, through the door and into the Organ generation room. Row upon row of multifarious body parts and organs in various stages of growth, for replacement and cosmetic surgery, lined the wall shelves and central housings. These rooms always brought a shiver to her. *It’s like being in the exotic disease exhibit at Tussauds.* She rushed through into the clone storage area, a large cold room with no ceiling lights. The thirty-two occupied biotubes that lined the walls provided sufficient illumination. A bead of condensation dribbled down one of the glass-fronted tubes. It made Emerald jump. She thought the occupant had reached out for her! She laughed at herself and searched out the exit, the forced shadows between the biotubes made it difficult to see but she was soon out and breathed a sigh of relief.

On the other side of the door was a corridor with windows extending along the left-hand wall, from a few metres in front of her, to about the same distance from the door at the other end. There was nothing of significance there but through the glass Emerald could see what appeared to be a Victorian dentist’s chair complete and equipped with a spider-leg cantilever pulley-system and an array of power drilling and cutting implements. *This is Bizarre.* She moved slowly along the passageway and another similar chair came into view. As she took the next step, a light sparkled off the chrome on one of the other chairs further inside the room. Emerald adjusted her position, levelled her eyes on the source of the reflection and her world shrank to the hideous scene of carnage that greeted her.

Occupying an almost fully reclined chair was most of a young woman, to be exact, her torso and head. Both she and the chair were awash with her blood after the removal of her limbs. Emerald was viewing the systematic dismemberment of Lorna Smithson. What Emerald had mistaken for a dentist chair was automatically dissecting her with its swift cantilever arms.

As the robot-arms cracked the ribcage of the *hopefully* dead young

woman, steam mushroomed from her chest cavity and drifted lazily through the pool of light in which the chair was working.

An assistant surgeon stepped out of the shadows to retrieve her lungs and while he carefully position them in organ support booths ready for despatch, a second pair of cutting implements started work harvesting her reproductive system intact, from fallopian tubes to labia.

Illuminated in three other chairs close by were the other members of the Smithson family, all in various stages of clinical mutilation.

One pair of cantilevers was removing Mr Smithson's left arm, whilst another pair worked inside his chest cavity. Blood from the massive trauma ran down his abdomen matting his pubic curls, dripping steadily from his testes and the tip of his large flaccid penis, the organs made all the more prominent by his distinct lack of legs.

As Emerald watched, a third pair of cantilevers swung into action. She involuntarily covered her mouth, her heart pounding in her chest. The third pair homed in on what had been Mr Smithson's groin and tore into the surrounding tissue separating him from his manhood. The blood pooled on the chair's seat, mixing with the flow from his abdominal and pelvic wounds. Spilling over, it ran freely down the chair's pedestal into specially designed gullies in the floor to a central drain.

Mark was in the chair next to his mother. His hands, right foot and the lower half of his left leg had been removed. His sister being much smaller was almost all gone, only the blood drenched carcass and eyeless head remained; all her limbs and internal organs, removed and packaged. Their blood drained away through similar gullies.

Emerald was transfixed, she had no thoughts. The emotional shock was total and overwhelming. She just stood open-mouthed with tears escaping. She trembled as she gazed in disbelief around the room and the full scale of the operation came home to her. On full-body organ-support slabs were other people in various stages of dissection. There were sixteen dissection chairs in total. *Sixteen! Sixteen at a time!*

Emerald's senses returned sharply when an Aerobot buzzed her. 'This is a restricted area, please identify yourself,' she spun around to face it and found herself just staring at it blankly. Fortunately, an echo of the much-repeated ID code leaked out. 'Very well, miss McKenzie, sorry to disturb you,' it replied and hovered silently away.

Disturb me! Fuckin' hell! She looked back at the scene to make sure it was really there; she shouldn't have. One of the assistants was

removing Lorna's heart; it was still beating! The sight inflamed all her primeval fear and flight instincts at once sending Emerald running back through the building to the exit. As she felt the bile rise, her mind repeatedly screamed, *Oh my God! Oh my God!*

As the door slammed behind her, the rush of cold damp oxygen that filled her lungs and the icy bite of ankle high fog were the final overload on her senses and she hurled her very expensive dinner into a nearby bin. The horrible images chased her, flashing through her mind forcing her to vomit again mid car park and again by Car, the vehicle's door opened and she fell in.

Wiping bile and spit from her mouth, Emerald just sat slumped, staring into space, unable to see through revulsion expelled tears and barely hearing Car questioning, 'Ma'am?... Are you alright, ma'am?'

A cargo bay door at the other end of the building rattled upwards flooding the compound in front of it with light. An engine started and a Transport-6 rolled out. Emerald pulled her legs in and the door closed as the Transport's headlights passed over Car. It drove out of the compound with the fog swirling up after it. Emerald's tender stomach cramped again. She pushed the door release as she retched, there was nothing left but an empty heave. Trembling, she fell back against the leather seat, swallowing the metallic saliva that was filling her mouth and mumbled, 'Get me Dieter.'

'Mr Fredric has requested no calls after 23:00 hours, ma'am, and it is now 23:54.'

'Jus' fuckin' get him will you!'

The urgent ringing brought Dieter to his feet before he was properly awake. He switched on the lamp and, squinting against its pale-blue light, caught sight of his naked reflection in the mirror. He dragged the sheet around him and walked towards the Euronet terminal. Yawning and scratching his pillow-matted locks he dropped into the chair, ordered, 'Answer call', and leaned towards the camera.

Dieter appeared on Car's console screen, his strong stubbly jaw and large nose momentarily distorted to larger proportions by his proximity to the camera.

'Emerald, is that you? Jesus! You look like shit! Where are you?'

The virtual safety of his pleasant face, his sleep dishevelled soft brown curls squashed flat against his head and familiar, if a little bloodshot, loving brown eyes softened her shock. Instantly comforted

but still shivering, unable to think straight and forcing back tears she croaked out, 'Dieter, meet me at Trinity's', and closed the link.

'Car; Trinity's. Open windows, no music and steady on the corners!' As Car pulled away, Emerald closed her eyes. It didn't help.

Sunday 28th July 2075

00:30 hours

When Emerald stepped into the smoky lounge of Trinity's bar, she had collected herself and her manner and expression belied what she had just witnessed. Trinity's was starting to clear. Its Saturday night revellers moving on to clubs and dance parties. Emerald looked around for Dieter.

'Him not 'ere, miss.' Clinton Brown's deep voice came from behind a group of girls bundling merrily from the toilets. Emerald felt nauseous amid their boozy chorus. She closed her eyes to steady herself as they rolled, in a wobbly strut huddle, past her and out of the door toward the taxi rank. When she opened her eyes again, the huge cheeks of Clinton's almost jet-black round face, greeted her with a wry grin and wide happy eyes, 'Sorry 'bout dat, miss, those young girl have much fun, and you's lookin' like you need a little quiet time, like you needin' a medicinal?'

Emerald liked him. He had an amiable honest nature, a typical barman, part skivvy, part philosopher.

'Rum, thanks.'

'I bring you a large one, on me, you sit,' he turned to go then turned back, 'You okay, miss?'

Emerald nodded but he eyed her a second longer so she added, 'Fine, Clinton really, but I need a key.'

He raised an eyebrow but said only, 'Sure,' and, grinning, loped off to the bar.

Taking a pack of Ganj Kings from her pocket, Emerald lit a smoke as she walked to the usual booth. Trinity's was a bar she and Dieter frequented often. Its wide comfortable booths made a thoroughly pleasant place to chat, tonight though was much different.

Clinton arrived with her drink.

'Thanks,' she took a large swig, 'D's meeting me here soon.'

'Yeah, I figured,' he placed the key on the table, 'if you need anything, jus' holler,' and he returned to polishing his already shiny bar.

Emerald had consumed another Rum and was on her second GK before she was feeling easier. Her memory stained, polluted, she still felt sick but easier. Her thoughts turned to Dieter. She had dragged him out, she knew he'd be thinking, *why couldn't she just have come home*, but she also knew she wasn't ready to take this into her home. It was too horrific.

She was staring into her empty glass, pondering a third, when Dieter's shadow fell across the table. She was on her feet and planting a passionate kiss on his lips before he had chance to speak. The comforting wave of relief the kiss released washed over her. When they parted she was smiling, lost in his handsome face. He was unsullied still, her beautiful young man.

Dieter was over a quarter of a century younger than Emerald, almost young enough to be her grandson but because of Emerald's biobots he looked about the same age. Actually, he looked slightly older.

She held up the key, took his hand and without a word, led him through the bar to the stairs. Their silence remained, as muffled sounds of sexual trysts reached their ears from behind each door they passed in the narrow, dark red corridor between the rooms above Trinities.

Emerald smiled at Dieter as she slid the key into the lock but her eyes were dark, hollow and evasive. The handle clicked open. She dragged him eagerly inside, kicked the door closed and clamped him forcefully to her. As her hands pulled impatiently at his belt, she kissed him with an urgency, fervent and needy, almost obsessive.

Their passion increased with each hurriedly removed item of clothing, as their already entangled bodies tumbled hungrily to the bed. A moment later she was beneath him, letting out a feral groan of relief as he entered her, instantly satiating the hollow emptiness she'd felt since leaving the OGP.

With her head surrounded by soft, sweet-smelling pillows and her man's thrusts obliterating her earlier experience, she was almost lost in the moment, until she whimpered against a flood of remembered horror and tears filled her eyes. She pulled away and rolled him onto his back, straddled him, lowered herself back onto the pleasure and started riding. With each wave of hideous images flashing her consciousness she rode harder, trying to cover one all-consuming emotion with another.

She knew he was watching her, could tell he felt something was wrong but she evaded eye contact, focussing on the fuck; attempting to

reap comfort, passion, love, but mostly reality from him. Her tears fell onto his chest and he opened his mouth to ask the problem but she shushed him with a trembling smile and a soft finger on his lips. She closed her eyes and rode harder, rocking him inside her, determined to draw every morsel of pleasure from him and it was starting to work. Her body was starting to respond. She squirmed on the comfort, started to relax. Wrong choice. Emerald's battered psyche conjured Lorna's heart's final beats. It was too much. Traumatized and trembling, she slumped, defeated, to the sheets beside him.

Dieter turned, wrapping a strong arm around her distraught body. He had known something was wrong from her call. *And* from this, what amounted to little more than a seedy motel room would not have been her usual choice for an impromptu romp. As passionate as she was, she was more five-star than this but, that something serious had happened, had not entered his head until he'd felt the splash of her tears. And now, she was clinging to his arm as a child hugs a teddy bear, shaking and sobbing. It was blatantly obvious that whatever had happened, had deeply disturbed her. Saying nothing, he just held her.

Minutes passed before she said anything.

When she finally relayed what she had witnessed, he wished she hadn't.

'I feel sick,' he said.

A multitude of questions fell from Emerald's lips. 'What possible reason can there be for such callousness? What could the Smithson's possibly have done to warrant that? I can't get my head around it, D. What's PL2? If Martha is involved, what the hell's going on and why don't I know about it? Who'd believe it anyway? How long...'

Dieter swallowed the shock, his cognitive powers returning. He held up his hand and looked her straight in the eye.

'Before I answer, Em, and don't take this the wrong way,' She raised an eyebrow but he continued, 'is there any way you could have misinterpreted what you saw?'

Emerald glared at him, 'I've not *interpreted* anything! All I did was tell you what I've seen. You're just in denial! You know it's true, so what are we going to do about it?'

'I don't see what we can do. Martha's a living Legend. You're right, no one's going to believe that the great and good Martha

English, *Planet Saver*, is some kind of monster! It's preposterous! And the Transport you saw leaving, probably carried away any evidence, so no proof. Come to that, there's no proof that it's at her orders.'

'It has to be her, the trail I followed started with her datapad!'

'Did your PCS record any...' Dieter's hopeful question tailed off as she shook her head.

'No, it was in Car! You're right. As it stands we have nothing.'

'Okay. Anything in the datapad we can use?'

'No. It just shows Lorna to be working on a new project and anyone investigating can ask her! Anything we say would sound ridiculous. I have a copy of the file though. It's not much but it shows that other employees were marked for the same briefing. It's not proof of anything on its own and it won't do *them* any good either. Lorna was the latest date listed, I presume all the others have already met the same fate!'

'There's only one option open to us then.'

She felt relieved. Dieter was about to come to the rescue. She was half-expecting his usual full and satisfactory solution but his suggestion was shockingly less so.

'We do nothing.'

'NOTHING! You can't be serious! Either you've not been listening or you're as callous as her!'

Dieter smiled lightly, 'Bad choice of words, Em, I apologise.' The tiger left her expression as he continued. 'What I meant was, we do nothing physical. We agree, don't we, that it would be futile to attack Martha's reputation with neither evidence nor proof, not to mention motive! I'm saying we should hang in there, *as though* nothing has happened. There's no one better positioned than us to find out what's going on.'

Emerald sighed, 'I'm sorry, D, it must be the shock, I don't feel all together sane. You're right of course,' she glanced at the clock. 'Shit, D', it's twenty past two. Let's get out of here.' Looking around for her clothes, she added. 'I feel better now we've made a decision.'

Dieter wasn't aware that they had but went with it as her mood seemed to have shifted for the better. They closed the door to the room and headed back downstairs as Emerald continued to affirm their intentions.

'We'll go with your plan to stay put and gather information. We'll figure out the details at home but, for now, it's a plan.' Taking his hand she smiled, 'Thanks, D.'

Trembling through a yawn he replied with a sincere, 'You are entirely welcome.'