

TIME'S ADVERSARY

J. G. MCGOVERN

Copyright © J. G. McGovern 2016.
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in an online or print review.

First published 2016.

www.jgmcgovern.net
ISBN 978-1522932598

1

As Andrew Vaughan lay between clean hospital sheets, surrounded by flashing diodes and snaking wires, his life flashed before someone else's eyes.

The wrinkled man clung with weakening grip to the hands of his wife and daughter, as his two sons stared down sadly, and while his grandchildren sat in subdued silence.

"It's nearly time," Vaughan said.

He wished he could go on. He wished that more than anything else! To be young again, to taste the delights of the universe! But he was old, far too old. Did Andrew Vaughan regret any of the choices he had made while on Earth? No. Would he reverse any major decision if given the chance? No. Did he feel guilty about any of the crimes he had committed? No. Had he ever lost sleep over the loss of a life? No. He had always acted correctly, then? Yes.

Oh, of course, if his tearful family encircling the bed had ever learned about the Grossman fiasco, or the London Petroleum feud, or his role in the RT Goldberg shares scandal, or if they had discovered his long succession of secret lovers or secret victims, they would almost certainly have disagreed with this appraising catechism. Anyone who truly knew him would be unlikely to describe him as a great man, certainly not a good one: he would be denounced as a liar and a murderer. But Andrew Vaughan was unrepentant and unashamed. Now, with his loving family around him and the hospital room at a comfortable ambient temperature, he prepared himself for death.

"Goodbye," he whispered, closing his eyes.

Fearlessly, he stepped off the spinning world. The transition from life to death was painless. It was just like falling asleep, asleep, asleep . . . and the exact moment of departure was imperceptible.

Andrew Vaughan was dead.

And then—he was alive. His eyes flicked open, and a focused stream of red light blazed into his retinas. Vaughan tried to focus on a figure which swam in front of him, but the ill-defined shape refused to resolve itself.

Then his eyes were opened. He was sitting in a conference room. The windows were screens projecting scenes of nature, and the conference table was a huge flat computer displaying numerous data sets. In front of him sat a thin, moustached man, who flashed him a professional smile.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Mr. Vaughan," the man said. "My name is Tella Urquhart."

The fussy-looking man spoke with a soft Scottish accent. He was dressed in a business suit, although it was of a style Vaughan had never seen before. The lapels were completely angular, like two rectangles sloping down from the shoulders to the stomach, and the four buttons were shaped like red coins.

"What's going on?" Vaughan demanded, clenching his fists.

The strength he felt in his own forearms surprised him. As an old man, he had become enfeebled. Now he was powerful again. And his voice sounded strange to his own ears—it wasn't his voice at all but someone else's. It was young . . . so young! The man felt the youth in every part of his body; his blood surged with it; his muscles throbbed with it.

Urquhart cleared his throat. "I'll start from the beginning. Well, to put it simply, you have been brought back to life by a technological process."

“I don’t want to hear any bullshit.”

“Good, because I don’t want to speak any. I’ll explain everything, if you allow me to. Let me give you a full account.”

Vaughan yielded and leaned back in his chair.

Urquhart said, “I’m one of the principal shareholders of Eyclight Industries. The year is 2118, and Eyclight is the largest and most profitable corporation in the Solar System, the jewel in London’s crown. We began life in the early twenty-first century as a search engine and social network. You must remember the name?”

“Of course,” Vaughan said. “Everyone uses Eyclight.”

“Yes.” A smile pushed up Tella Urquhart’s moustache. “And your choice of tense is correct; they still do. We made ourselves indispensable. Need help with your homework? Just type the relevant search term into Eyclight. Booking a taxi? Book it through Eyclight. Meeting with friends? Send them an Eyclight message. Need data storage? Just upload everything to Eyclight. We offered just about every useful service you can think of and charged for nothing. And all the while we silently gathered the data, sifted it, stored it away; our company sat on a multiplying pile of knowledge like a dragon upon a swelling heap of gold. And before the world had caught on to the fact that data is power, it was too late. We’d taken over the planet without anyone noticing.”

Vaughan nodded offhandedly, saying nothing.

Tella Urquhart went on, “Now, Eyclight is more than just a part of people’s lives; in a way, it *is* life.”

Urquhart straightened his moustache, put his hand to a scanner, and opened a secret compartment, removing from it a white visor, which was scarcely heavier than a pair of twenty-first century reading glasses. Vaughan took hold of the visor and placed it over his head. The world, filtered through the device, was suddenly enhanced. A dashboard on one side of his peripheral vision showed the current time emblazoned in virtual neon (Vaughan noted that it was displayed in UT0, which meant he was almost certainly still in England), along with other utilities, including a calculator and a chat box.

“The device which you are wearing is a master visor,” Urquhart explained. “In fact, it is *the* master visor. Note that the lenses cover the whole field of view; the eardrum is electronically stimulated by an aural field.” He paused to allow Vaughan to briefly explore the headset, then continued, “The majority of the human race accesses Eyclight by means of permanent lenses—or ‘contacts’, as we call them—wired to the brain. Visors are reserved for the ‘brains’, or non-consumers. Contacts can’t be removed, though visors can. Only non-consumers can leave the system at will. At least, that’s the way things should be.”

“Enough of that for now,” Vaughan said, with deadly courtesy, sitting forward in his chair. “If this really is the future, I want to know why I’m here. And how I got here. I want the truth.”

Urquhart sighed. “The twenty-first century into which Eyclight was born experienced great advances and breakthroughs in physics, advances that led some people to suggest that one day the past might be viewed as if on a screen of history. Such ones imagined machines that would allow the user to watch vanished days like a picture-show. Although—of course—such speculations proved to be incorrect, it was discovered that the past is indeed recoverable.”

Vaughan tapped his chin as he analysed Urquhart’s words; he was beginning to understand.

“The problem was,” Urquhart went on, “the past could only be perceived as a mass of

pure information. When humans observe the universe ordinarily, they do so from a narrow and limited perspective, processing the input from their sensory organs. When the time-salvager was developed, it became apparent that the harvested data was impossible for humans to understand. Even when one pioneer managed to convert the data to machine-compatible binary, the material was unmanageable, due both to the file size and the limits of human comprehension.” He moistened his lips, then went on, “But we could still recognise a few pieces of data, like recognisable faces enisled in a sea of static. Specifically, we could identify brain patterns. The human brain is a singularity. Irreducibly complex . . . each brain is unique and yet comparable to all the others.”

“And once you realised that,” Vaughan said, “you could scour the history of the universe, searching the catalogue of the minds of dead mankind.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s how you resurrected me. Some scientists and engineers expected that human-like robots would exist by the twenty-second century. They were right, weren’t they? You recovered my memories and transferred them into a cybernetic brain, with command over a cybernetic body. I’m a living robot.”

Urquhart beamed, evidently pleased at the speed with which Vaughan was understanding and accepting the facts of his situation. Vaughan stood up, stretching out his arms and legs. It was quite obviously a different body, although the engineers had clearly tried not to depart too much from the original design. There were improvements. The excess fat around the belly, he was gratified to notice, had not been reconstructed. He was a little taller, too. Andrew Vaughan walked around the room, powered by limbs he had never used before, brimming with power, energy, youth . . .

He turned back to face Urquhart and said, “But why resurrect anyone at all? What do you want with me?”

“To the living we can offer only money, power. To the dead we can offer the chance of a new life. No motivation could be greater.”

“Motivation to do what?”

Urquhart touched his fingertips together. “Eyelight Industries is in trouble. Our trouble comes in the most distressing shape of all: that of an organised religion. For the past two years, the Church of Sagacity, a doomsday cult, has been tirelessly preaching the supposed evils of Eyclight. According to the Church, one cannot hope to be saved except through disconnection, or as they seem to call it, *apotheosis*.”

Vaughan sat down again. “You mean by leaving Eyclight completely?”

“Yes. The whole thing is a bit of a mystery. Let me give you some idea. Apotheosis is purported to be a state of godlikeness achieved by only the truly faithful. Whenever one of their believers allegedly attains apotheosis, that believer immediately disappears from the Eyclight network. More people are disappearing every day, although we do not yet know how; contacts should be irremovable.”

Vaughan nodded slowly.

“No matter how it’s achieved, you can see why disconnection can’t be tolerated,” Urquhart said. “The world economy depends on Eyclight. The working classes are woken up in the morning by their Eyclight alarms, and pay for their morning coffee with Eyclight’s proprietary currency. Throughout their day those consumers are bombarded with sponsored advertisements, delivered through the Eyclight lens. They purchase goods through Eyclight, and—”

“I get the picture,” Vaughan said. “Who’s behind Sagacity? And why does the Church wish to harm your company?”

“Nobody really knows,” Urquhart said. “The control structures of the Church are shrouded in layers of secrecy. We have tried to get dozens of our spies into the organisation but with no success.”

Vaughan glanced at the colourful windows that decorated the wall of the room. Each pane was a simulated portal offering a lifelike vision of another place. Here a swelling ocean tide; here a mountain of towering dunes; here a hushed emerald forest; here a cultivated garden of white flowers. . . .

“So this organisation—the Church of Sagacity—threatens your entire corporation,” Vaughan said. “The shareholders are agitated. You are agitated. You want to do something about these damaging evangelists.”

“Yes.”

“And you want me to help.”

“Yes.”

“Why me?”

“Oh, come now, Mr. Vaughan. Do you think the world has forgotten you? Andrew Vaughan, who became the third wealthiest man on Earth by the age of twenty-eight. Andrew Vaughan, who published *The Art of Commerce*, which is still the number-one bestselling business book in the world. Andrew Vaughan, who was on the cover of *Time* magazine four times, and who had fingers in more pies than any other capitalist in history. Yes, we remember you.”

“What about your glorious founder, Mr. Berkovich? Or have you simply overlooked him?”

“We still respect Thomas Berkovich,” Urquhart said. “But he was always rather . . . unsound. Difficult to predict. Berkovich was our progenitor, without whom there would be no Eyclight Industries, and we owe him a duty of reverence. Yet I believe that his resurrection would be potentially problematic.”

“You mean you’re still afraid of him?”

“You might say that.”

“Should I gather from your choice that you are not afraid of me?”

Urquhart smiled. “Whether or not we are afraid of you is unimportant. But we do believe that you will do what’s best for the company, at least while you stand to benefit from the arrangement. The same could not necessarily be said about the founder.”

The shareholder reached into his jacket and removed a silver cigarette case, offering it to the other man. Vaughan gratefully slid out a cigarette and lit up with Urquhart’s jewelled lighter.

He said, “Now that resurrection is possible, why isn’t everyone at it? Or are they? Is this world filled with Hitlers and Gandhis?”

Urquhart touched a finger to his temple. “No, there aren’t any Hitlers—or any Gandhis, either. The technology is known only to a handful of Eyclight employees and board members. Furthermore, the cost of resurrection is very expensive. The creation of your new body cost almost a billion credits. That’s approximate to nearly 1.5 billion US dollars in your terms. Of course, the secrecy of the technology is the main thing preventing other corporations and wealthy individuals from getting into the resurrection game. Only we have the power to grant life.”

Vaughan smoked thoughtfully, blowing a grey cloud into the room. Nothing in the experience of smoking offered any hint that he was actually an inorganic machine. He was alive in every meaningful sense of the word. *Fumo ergo sum*. I smoke, therefore I am.

“Your life is your payment,” Urquhart said. “Take the mantle of CEO of Eyclight

Industries. Conquer the faith of millions. Lay low the Church of Sagacity. If you succeed, you shall live forever, or as close to forever as we can achieve. If you fail, we will withdraw the gift of life.”

Vaughan held his breath; so that was the prize . . . and the price. Stop Sagacity and live, or fail to stop them and die.

Urquhart put on his own visor and winked into it. “Now, I have to go. You don’t need to make your decision yet. Sleep on it. If you decide not to accept the position, your mechanical body will be painlessly deactivated. In the meantime, your assistant will take care of you. Oh, one more thing. I believe it would be for the best, if you do decide to accept our offer, for you to take a new name.”

The little man with the moustache gave Vaughan a brisk handshake and hurried out of the room. Vaughan simply sat in his chair for a while, then began to laugh at the absurdity of his situation. Yet he knew it was all real. He stood up, switched off the screen embedded in the shiny table, and took a long look at himself in the polished surface. He bore a vague resemblance to his old self, yet his hair was thick and brown, his muscles were firm, his spine unbended, his lips full, his green eyes gleaming. He was a new man. A new man. His body was dressed up, factory-packaged, in a black jumpsuit, black shoes, and black gloves. He was fresh and unused, like a slick car straight from the showroom. Everything about his body was vital, potent. How could he turn them down? How could he reject the chance of a second life?

While alive in his own time, the love his family felt for him had placed a considerable restraint upon Vaughan, despite his ruthlessness. Now he would be placed in no such bondage. Vaughan’s former legacy would stand, and he could admire it from a distance, but he was free of it: he could begin a new legacy. There were no immediate relatives to placate or appease. He had been cut loose from his past, freed from the necessity of any kind of pretence, made free to do exactly as he thought best.

A sudden thought occurred to him. What about his descendants? Of course, his wife and his children would certainly be dead—and his grandchildren, probably—but what of his great-grandchildren, his great-great-grandchildren, and his great-great-great-grandchildren? Had the family line continued? What had become of the Vaughans? He silenced the inward voice. There was no point following that line of thought. At least not now. His family belonged to his old life; they belonged in his memories. Now he was a new man and could not afford to be shackled by sentiment. No, he would forget about them as much as possible. At least, he thought, until I’ve defeated the Church. Focus was everything.

The manufactured man, still wearing his visor, darted to the window displaying the virtual forest and flung it open, unveiling the stars and the night. He shook a black glove (with balled fist inside) at the deaf and empty heavens. He would do it—he would bring down Sagacity. Hell, he would tear down a hundred, a thousand religions if it would mean his life! He would crush ten thousand temples—and smash a million shrines!

A new name, thought the man. Urquhart said I needed to take a new name. It should be something not unlike his old name: he did not want to lose too much of his former identity. Yet it needed to be harder, sharper, carrying the weight and wisdom of two centuries. . . . He shifted the letters around in his head, musing.

Anders Vorg, he thought, with satisfaction.

Suddenly the conference room vanished, and a heavenly space appeared all around him. Clouds all around, shifting, expanding, condensing. Amidst the clouds stood a tall golden throne, from which a light shone, making it impossible for Anders Vorg to make out the details of the figure sat upon it.

Anders Vorg knelt down, cautiously, and slid a hand over the floor of clouds. His fingers passed through the white mass as if passing through morning dew, yet somehow the clouds were still able to support his weight. He scooped up cool water and poured it over his face, trying to wake himself up.

“Come here, Anders Vorg.”

The voice from the throne was like the voice of an archangel. Vorg bowed his head, protecting his eyes from the surge of light, shielding his eyes with his palms.

“Come here, Anders Vorg,” the voice said again.

What was this? What was the meaning of this celestial vision, this Heaven-like waking dream? Vorg knew, at least, that he was not asleep: no sleeping man had ever dreamed so brightly. Left without an alternative, Vorg approached the blinding judgment seat, determined to learn the facts.

“Where am I?” Vorg asked.

There came forth no answer from the throne; the overpowering glow shone without modulation.

“Where am I?” he asked again, and again received no reply from the silent seat. He drew in his breath and said again: “I must know, and I demand to be told: where am I?”

“You are here to be offered a deal, Anders Vorg.”

The phrase “offered a deal” seemed somewhat alien in that sacred environment.

“What sort of deal?” Vorg asked.

A pair of shining white hands, holding a white fountain pen and a white document, thrust themselves out from the seat. Vorg took the pen and paper. The paper, utterly blank, glowed like the throne.

“Sign the document,” the voice said.

“Why? What am I signing?”

“Sign it.”

“But what does the document say?”

The enthroned figure made no reply. Vorg slid the pen between his fingers, examining the material. It was hard and textureless, like polished and bleached bone. The man did not know how to respond. Perhaps signing the document would end the vision.

He felt his hand moving without his permission. He tried to restrain himself, but it was impossible—like a puppet, Vorg signed the paper. He handed it back to the pair of hands, which stamped the document with a golden seal. Then another voice rang out, not from the throne this time but from all around, as if each cloud released waves of sound.

“You . . .” the voice rumbled. “You, Anders Vorg. You are the enemy of Time!”

Before he could answer, the heavenly throne room dissolved like sugar in hot rain, and Vorg found himself sitting back in his office chair. What was the meaning of it all? Perhaps just teething problems, he thought. He was in a brand new body, after all. Maybe it would take a few hours for his perception to fully stabilise.

Anders Vorg sat back down in his chair and relaxed a little.

2

Can't stand the heat? Why not move somewhere cooler? Mars offers tranquil surroundings, welcoming people, and a hospitable climate. Emigration shuttles open only to consumers of subclass "C" or greater. Those receiving disability or old age payments should not apply. There is a particular need for plumbers and electricians. . . .

EYELIGHT ADVERTISEMENT

Miriam Heath was not a believer. She did not believe in the policies and practices of Eyclight Industries. She did not believe that it was in humankind's best interests to multiply further, to spread out across Mars, and then across the stars, without first solving the problems that plagued Earth. And there were problems, despite what many Eyclight executives seemed to think. It appeared to her that humans were destined to constantly repeat their failures, always seeking to replace but never to mend. Thus it was somewhat ironic that she had ended up as the governor of Mars.

"What are you doing?" Ted Fernández asked her.

"Hmm? Sorry." Miriam Heath took off her visor to give the man her attention. She had hair as white as candyfloss, the result of a rare genetic condition. "I've found some files on the local system. An application that I don't recognise. I'm going to see if I can compile it."

"You should still be in bed," Ted Fernández said. "Leave the early mornings to us proles."

"Ted," Miriam Heath muttered, "you're an A-class consumer and a very high one at that. It was only by some quirk of testing or system malfunction that you weren't labelled a brain."

"Maybe."

The sun outside the hovel was still rising; the light was hazy, and the star was fringed with a soft blue band. Dust rose up in sheets and swirled in funnels.

Miriam Heath smoothed back her hair. "The class system is a carefully constructed myth," she said. "How many people live in this hovel? Six. One A-class consumer, three B-classes, and two Cs. And any of you would be quite capable of doing my job. There's very little for me to do. More important is what I don't do. I don't clean, I don't plant, I don't water, I don't mend, I don't build—that's the perverse luxury of being an A-class brain. The whole thing is a sham. The idea that you can determine someone's potential based on computer tests alone . . ."

Ted Fernández said, "Well, you've done well out of it."

"Agreed. Being placed in the top A-class is like winning the solar lottery. And it requires just as much effort and skill."

Miriam Heath's oration was interrupted by a beep from her visor. The application which she had discovered had finished compiling. She placed the device back over her eyes. A red dialog box appeared in the centre of the virtual screen:

The application "Elysian Fields" wants to make changes to your visor. Accept?

YES

NO

Heath thought, What an odd name for an application. Surely it could do no harm? After all,

if the files proved to be malware, she could simply reset her visor. Her overwhelming curiosity overrode any other mental objections, and she winked at the affirmative option.

The Martian hovel vanished, to be replaced with what Heath could only describe as paradise. She was lying in a meadow of grass and flowers as birds sang sweetly overhead. The soft blades tickled her skin, and she felt the gentle movement of bugs beneath her. Standing up, she glanced around.

Astonishing, she thought. To judge by appearances, it was Earth—perhaps one of the luxurious resorts of Old Germany or Austro-Hungary. A few solitary clouds drifted through an otherwise blue sky, and the sun was warm yet not overpowering, due to a light breeze. Mountains to the north and the south bookended the scene. It looked like Earth, smelled like Earth, and sounded like Earth . . . yet she knew it could not be Earth.

Ancient oaks surrounded the meadow, and Heath walked over to one of them to stand in the shade. She still wore her Martian uniform. Beneath the shadow of the tree, she began to gather her thoughts. It had to be a virtual reality program: that much was obvious. There were several VR applications already available for the Eyclight system, yet all were in some way flawed. Sometimes the graphics were unrealistic or the latency too high. Another issue was the level of dissonance between the real world and the virtual. Heath noticed none of those problems here. As she began to walk along the line of trees, she saw that the wood was gnarled and knotted with apparently perfect realism. She didn't just see herself walking but *felt* it too, felt her limbs carrying her over the soft grass. Yet surely she was still sitting in the hovel, frozen in place, visor attached to her head. She touched her fingertips gingerly to her eyelids and felt no visor. The illusion was complete. Scrolling text appeared in mid-air:

Welcome to Elysian Fields. You are running Sample Application v. 2.33. We do hope you enjoy your visit. To open the developer menu, wink three times. To exit the application select "Quit" from the menu.

The text dissolved, and Heath did as it had instructed. A menu appeared, formatted not unlike the default Eyclight menu. She winked at "Quit", and the application terminated: the green meadow vanished, to be substituted again for the grim metallic reality of the Martian hovel.

Miriam Heath removed her visor thoughtfully. She had to blink a few times before her senses felt completely restored.

"Are you OK?" Fernández said, grabbing her arm. "You became sort of stiff. Staring straight ahead. I couldn't get your attention."

"Interesting. Very interesting."

"Aren't you going to tell me what just happened?"

"Virtual reality. That's what. And it's incredible. No cognitive dissonance whatsoever. It was so real." She glanced at the door inside the hovel, which led to the bunks. "What time are the others getting up?"

"Very soon."

"Hadn't you better be going?" Heath said. "You have the sensor rewiring to do today."

"But—"

"I'll be fine," Heath insisted. "I want to figure out how this program works."

"All right," he said reluctantly. "Good luck."

Fernández grinned, leaned over, and kissed her. For one tiny moment, she forgot herself and kissed him back passionately, flinging her arms around his neck, but then remembered

herself again and desisted.

“See you later,” Heath said.

When he left, she replaced her visor and continued to work. Miriam Heath stared at the discovered application files; she had found them in an encrypted area of the system while trying to fix a minor bug; the discovery had been a complete coincidence. They had odd names, such as “r9893a.ica” and “ro00l.ica”, which did not conform to any established system of nomenclature. She had not been able to trace the source, but she knew that only A-class brains were permitted write-access; the files must have been placed on the local server by a member of Eyclight Industries, one in a high position of authority. . . .

Heath spent hours scrolling through the application in code view, striving to understand the core modules. She remarked to herself that the code was very lean. It had to be. Generating such complex three-dimensional graphics in real time was no small accomplishment. She gradually realised that the application had two main components. The first was involved with the generation of the artificial world, all of its surfaces, textures, sounds. The virtual world was fed to the user through the Eyclight system.

The second part of the program acted directly on the user’s brain, stimulating the production of theta waves by extending the aural field. Hypnosis, she realised. Or something much like it. The idea was to put the user into a suggestible state. That was how the application’s creators, whoever they were, had solved the cognitive dissonance problem. The user sees himself walking through the forest, or picking up a pine cone, or eating a peach, and the theta rhythms quell any signals from his body that this is not the case. The data from the visor or contacts flooding the user’s brain could thus become his unquestioned reality—he could experience five artificial senses with utter verisimilitude.

But what was it for? Entertainment? Had Eyclight developed the software to brighten the lives of its consumers? Or had it been produced by a third party? Either way, it was a giant leap forward for the system. The extraordinary render quality of “Elysian Fields” explained the phenomenal file sizes—and of course Heath had no way of knowing how the artificial world was delineated. The virtual countryside might extend merely to the horizon or across thousands of miles. Activating the program, Miriam Heath entered paradise for the second time.

Oscar Mathieson’s head ached, his arms and legs were cramped, and he felt sick. He rolled over and brushed against some warm unfamiliar figure, slowly realising that he was not alone in the bed.

“Morning,” the girl said. “Are you going to make some coffee?”

Oscar Mathieson frowned, taking an inordinately long time to ponder the question.

“Yes,” he muttered finally. “Just let me lie here for a while.”

The girl said, “If you tell me where the coffee is kept I’ll do it.”

“It’s just a machine,” Mathieson said. “You just push a button.”

The girl slipped out from under the covers, her naked skin warm and orange in the rays of the interior sunlight generators, which were fading into life. She was, Mathieson decided, extremely pretty, with a shy but distinguished bearing, although he could sense some deep sadness. Perhaps it was noticeable in her lips, slightly downturned, or in her face, slightly lowered, or her shoulders, slightly hunched. When she stepped into the tiny adjoining kitchen to activate the coffee machine, Mathieson scrambled out of bed and began to ritualistically strip the sheets, taking care not to let the material touch any part of

his body except his hands. The girl poked her head into the bedroom, frowning slightly.

“I thought you took a CleenSheet,” she said.

“Did I?”

The girl shrugged and went back into the kitchen. Oscar Mathieson noticed for the first time a pile of armour beside the bed, which had evidently been flung off in a hurry. A linen undershirt, a red tunic, a thin metal breastplate and shoulderplates . . . He groaned quietly. Oh god, he thought. She’s one of those.

By the time she had returned with two cups of coffee, Mathieson was already in the shower. Only the sonic setting was operative; London was in the middle of a serious drought and all non-essential water facilities had been disabled. He scrubbed himself with liquid soap, his fingernails accidentally biting into his flesh. His skin looked clean, but he could sense dirt all over himself, invisible contamination, invisible filth . . .

A knock at the door. The girl. What was her name? It might be awkward if he couldn’t remember it. He would have to disappear before she returned. Mathieson called out that he would only be a few more minutes, then allowed a few more sonic waves to wash over his skin, purging him of uncleanness, removing every impurity. Then he stepped back into the bedroom, naked and completely dry, letting the girl slip past him into the bathroom. Mathieson removed one of three identical grey suits that hung in his wardrobe and dressed himself, draping a translucent tie around his neck. He slipped on his Eyclight visor and ordered some breakfast. By the time he reached the office, it would have arrived, carried by an Eyclight drone. Quickly, and without saying goodbye to the Roman girl, Mathieson left the apartment.

As Oscar Mathieson drove to work, the sun poured through his car windows, making his skin cook. The whole city was slowly baking in the heat. They were drying out. Something was wrong with the cooling system, yet Mathieson dared not open the windows—the pollution reading was abnormally high. The shrill voice of Veda Tristick shrieked over the radio:

Oh, oh!

Oh, here I go now, ohh!

Like a real woman, all my heels are sharp

I’m thinkin’ about you as I bullet up my gun

Here I come, shooting up the whole scene

Here, here, here, worship goddess Veda (yeah)

Oh, here I go now . . .

Oscar Mathieson angrily deactivated the radio by winking into his visor. Terrible song. He had been using, or rather abusing, InTox again; he had the characteristic foul taste upon the tongue—and the characteristic memory loss. He didn’t even remember meeting the Roman girl, let alone getting into bed with her.

As he neared the London headquarters of Eyclight Industries, Mathieson felt a twinge of longing for the city as it used to be. It was irrational nostalgia, he knew, for London had been a faceless megacity since before he was born. But he remembered learning at school about what the city had been like in the early twenty-first century—all red buses, red soldiers, and black taxis. He felt an illogical and foolish yearning for the time when Britain had been more than a tax haven for American and Chinese businesses, an island of cultureless commerce. It hadn’t been all that long ago.

His breakfast was waiting for him when he entered his office at Eyclight Industries.

After unwrapping the protein burger and hurriedly eating the meal, he winked into his visor and called for his assistant Eugène. The person who came in was not Eugène.

“You!”

“Good morning, Mr. Mathieson.”

“Where’s my assistant?”

“I’m your assistant, sir.”

Mathieson nearly choked on his tea, and he placed the paper cup down before his shaking hands could spill any of it. The girl who stood before him was the Roman, the girl he had woken up with. She had shed her armour and put on a blouse, business jacket, and skirt. Mathieson felt as if the floor of reality had shifted beneath him.

“Since when?”

“I was hired last week and started this morning. Your wife introduced you to me last night—and then we . . . don’t you remember?”

“Right. Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” he mumbled. “I mean—it *was* a pleasure to meet you. And it still is.”

Christ, he thought. I’m babbling. How had he forgotten about the whole thing? He really ought to lay off the InTox for a while.

“Have there been any messages for me?” he asked, trying to regain a semblance of dignity.

“Yes, sir. Your wife . . . I mean, Mrs. Mathieson . . . no, that’s not right.” A blush coloured the girl’s cheeks. “Your manager wanted to see you.”

The corners of Mathieson’s mouth twitched. “Just call her Amara. Send her in whenever she’s ready.”

“I think she wanted you to go to her.”

“Yes, she probably did.”

The girl hesitated.

“Is there anything else?” Mathieson asked.

“No. I’ll tell her what you said, sir.”

The girl hurried from the room, and Mathieson put his head in his hands, glancing around his office. Mathieson was indentured to the corporation, had signed a contract promising his service for at least twenty years, of which nine had expired. He was a slave to Eyclight . . . and Eyclight, like any good slave-owner, dignified its slave with moderately comfortable living and working conditions.

Amara Mathieson entered the office, dressed in red, unnaturally tall in high heels.

Oscar Mathieson said, “Do you mind telling me what’s going on? Where’s my assistant? What’s that girl doing here?”

“We have had a change of staff.”

“I can see that,” Mathieson snapped. “But what’s the reason for it?”

Amara Mathieson pulled out one of his chairs and lowered herself into it. She was wearing a red dress made of light synthetic cotton, and her dirty blonde hair tumbled over her shoulders. Behind her, a brook babbled on the virtual window.

“Did you sleep with her?” Amara asked.

“Yes. Or at least I think so.”

“Good.”

“What do you mean, ‘good’?” Mathieson said.

He stared into her unrevealing eyes, trying in vain to locate a hint or glint of anger or jealousy.

“You really don’t mind that I slept with her?” he said.

“Don’t be silly. We haven’t made love for over a year. Do you think I’ve been celibate all this time?”

Mathieson coloured. “I guess not.”

The estranged couple broke eye contact. Both partners would have jumped at the chance of a divorce, but the dissolution of marriage had become ridiculously expensive. Neither partner was in a stable enough position, financially speaking.

If only she knew, Mathieson thought bitterly, what this marriage has done to me. If only she knew that I’ve developed an obsession with washing my bedclothes every time I have sex, even when I’m on CleenSheet pills. If only she knew that I can’t even get hard any more without InTox. . . . But it wasn’t her fault, not really. Amara wasn’t a bad person. They were just totally unsuitable for one another. They were too similar, that was the problem. Oscar and Amara had all of the same weaknesses, the same foibles, but in differing proportions. When one of them looked at the other, it was as if they saw themselves, saw all of their personal issues reflected back at them, but distorted grotesquely, as if in a deformed mirror.

“Do you realise,” Mathieson said, “that she’s a consumer? Worse than that—a bloody Roman, too.”

“She’s an A-class consumer, which means we were allowed to hire her.”

“Maybe so, but Eugène was an E-class brain,” Mathieson grumbled. “Eugène was a good PA. Honest, capable, experienced. Why get rid of him?”

“Lock the door, and I’ll tell you.”

Mathieson winked at the door switch through his visor and it locked. “Done.”

“What do you know about apotheosis?”

“As much as you do,” Mathieson replied.

“And do you also realise,” Amara went on, “that people who disconnect often belong to counterculture movements? Did you know that ten percent of splinters are Romans, twelve percent are Greeks, and thirteen-and-a-half percent are Visigoths?”

“I know that,” Mathieson said patiently.

“The new CEO wants us to find out what exactly apotheosis is and how it is achieved. Mr. Vorg wants to know how it’s possible for consumers to leave Eyclight and why Sagacity is so keen on encouraging the practice. Cornelia Agate—that’s the name of your new assistant—is how we’re going to do it. Or, precisely, how you are going to do it.”

“I’m not sure I like where this is going.”

“Cornelia Agate is a member of the Church of Sagacity. You must pretend to convert to her religion. It will be a long process. You will have to get to know her over a period of time, learn about the Church slowly, put up resistance whenever she tries to preach to you. Then ultimately you will sign up as a Sagacian. We need information.”

“We’re going to exploit her then,” Mathieson said.

“Don’t think of the matter in such moralistic terms,” Amara said. “I’m sorry, but the company comes first. We need to get you into the Church. Eventually, you will pretend to offer your loyalty to Sagacity; you will be baptised. You’ll become one of them, while remaining one of us.”

Mathieson laughed sourly.

His wife scowled, flashing her teeth. “Take this seriously, Oscar!” She paused to allow a falsely sweet smile to return to her face. “For obvious reasons, none of this will be made an official task of this department. As far as Cornelia is concerned, our main job over the coming weeks will be to iron out a couple of problems in the recog server. Time is of the essence. Mr. Vorg has also assigned four other departments to work on the problem. It’s a

race to the finish.”

“He subscribes to the Sun Tzu school of business management then,” Mathieson muttered.