

BRAIN IN A JAR

PART ONE

A SERIES OF NOVELLAS

by

MARCUS FREESTONE

ALL MATERIAL © COPYRIGHT MARCUS FREESTONE 2017.

This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people.

Bath, England - March 2346

The prospect of having all his internal organs replaced by a computerised system was weighing on his mind somewhat. Kip nervously opened the brochure and scanned the introduction. Even though he knew that this was by far the best option, realistically his *only* option, he was still wary. At only fifty one he had been confidently expecting another sixty or seventy years of productive life, so it had been a great shock to be told that he needed this drastic procedure or he wouldn't even make sixty. As a scientist himself he had maybe fallen prey to the hubristic opinion that his species had successfully consigned all organic diseases to the rubbish heap of history (along with, of course, rubbish heaps and most of the other perverse mistakes of the industrial revolution).

So long as his brain was unaffected then he would be able to carry on with his work but, as a biochemist, he was all too aware of the complications of the ecosystem that is the human body. Although this procedure had been successfully carried out thousands of times over the previous few decades, and none of those people had yet died of anything organic or any complications of the operation itself, he was still trepidatious. This was his first experience of any kind of health problem and he supposed that he was merely suffering from an attack of perfectly understandable nerves at the prospect of plunging into the unknown. Even though he understood the science of the procedure, it would be physically and emotionally an entirely new experience to have people putting him to sleep and chopping out large parts of his body.

Kip had no worries about the financial aspect of the eye-wateringly expensive medical procedure. As a precocious student he had filed several chemical patents, two of which had been developed and earned him tens of millions of dollars. He had never married and had no children or expensive tastes and so had been able to pursue his scientific enthusiasms unhindered for the last thirty years. This was the first impediment that had ever interrupted what he had always assumed would be an easy and comfortable life.

He flicked his tablet onto the next page of the brochure and tried to focus. He understood all the science but the legal jargon was beyond him. There was also some stuff in there that looked like science but didn't make sense to him. He supposed that they had to cover themselves even though they had performed thousands of procedures over decades without a single problem arising. Doubtless a vast swathe of lawyers had earned millions for themselves by writing all this unnecessary blather; in his experience as a scientist the lawyers were mainly inadequate, uneducated people who could only get their kicks by obfuscating everything and confusing people. He had originally been determined to read all seven hundred plus pages of the document but he was developing a headache and it was a waste of time anyway. For two days he had tried to read the whole thing but it was exhausting. He had gone back to the beginning to have another go but he knew that he would never make it to the end. There was no reason to believe that after fifty years he would be the first person to experience a problem with the procedure; he knew that all the fail safes were as next to infallible as made no practical difference. He also knew that without the procedure he would become seriously ill within a few months and then have to face a slow, painful and totally avoidable death. He had no dependants and his colleagues would carry on his scientific work if the worst *did* somehow happen, so what the hell was he worrying about? He

clicked to the end of the document and wrote his signature in several boxes with his fingertip, then, taking a deep breath, he clicked the *consent* button. Within a few seconds he received an acknowledgement and was told that he would have an appointment time for the procedure by the end of the day. Had he known exactly what GSKM *really* had in mind for him would he still have consented? That was a question he would never be able to answer honestly.

He stood up and walked to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Kip had never been that attached to his physical self but he found himself thinking that, strangely, he would miss having organic lungs, kidneys and a heart. In practical terms it would make no difference to his life, except to prolong it by several centuries (at least that's what the brochure claimed, though only another couple of hundred years would tell if that was scientific fact or merely part of the sales pitch; after all, once you had died, you couldn't exactly sue GSKM, could you?). No, he would carry on much as before, but would he *feel* any different having a computer in his chest and stomach? How far could you go, how many things could you replace, before you stopped being human? Kip had always found the media frenzy and philosophical debates around post humanism to be of little importance, but now that he had signed the consent form he was being forced to come off the fence. Would this make him an android? So long as his brain was unaffected then, as far as he was concerned, then he was still exactly the same person. After all, having an artificial knee didn't turn you into a robot, and how was having your organs replaced any different? No, the brain was all that mattered, everything else he had was just a meat vehicle for the three pound lump of neurons in his skull. Over the coming years Kip would remember that thought and this day and ponder upon it at length.

As he poured the tea he found himself more than usually aware of his body. He would also reflect on this in times to come and ask himself whether, deep down, he really had understood all of the GSKM brochure and known what was about to happen to him, but still gone through with it anyway. He was of average height and appearance and considered his brain to be his best feature by a long way. Not that he was by any means a stereotypical clumsy, socially awkward professor - far from it - but it was nonetheless an undeniable truth that he had dedicated himself wholeheartedly to a life of the mind, and most aspects of the physical world had just fallen away into insignificance over the years. He had never managed to sustain a physical relationship where the pros outweighed the cons, and all his colleagues who had partners, and especially children, suffered from what Kip saw as unacceptable interference with their scientific work. Now that he was faced with this drastic operation he was glad that he wouldn't have anybody fussing around him. All his friends were scientists of some description and they would surely accept this as a minor inconvenience and he would soon be back at work and everything would carry on as normal.

So why was something nagging away at him and unsettling him? And why was he on some level *afraid* of GSKM and what was about to happen to him?

Kip chewed his fingernails and looked around the waiting room. All the brochures and multimedia presentations had assured him in a variety of soothing tones that twenty fourth century medicine was one hundred percent risk free. As a scientist he knew this to be impossible but nevertheless here he was about to have the operation.

The receptionist's smile was so perfect it could have been sculpted, which of course it was. As a result of quantum surgery, the only way she would ever exhibit another facial expression would be if the company made her redundant. 'All smiles remain the property of GSKM and will be removed from employees faces upon departure', as it stated in her contract.

Kip looked around the gleaming chrome and glass structure of the reception area and blinked again. He was starting to get a headache because he had neglected to bring his factor seventy sunglasses. This was because he had neglected to read that part of the brochure, the part that would have informed him that all GSKM employees had to have their retina replaced after ten years because of the damage caused by the gleaming interior of the building. Still, as the architect had pointed out, you can't put a price on design. Though he clearly had – four hundred and eighty million dollars.

The receptionist glided over to him on her hover boots, another totally pointless display of opulence as she was

only about ten feet away, and gave him another consent form to sign.

"That's the seventeenth one," he protested.

"You wouldn't want us to give your operation to somebody else by mistake, would you, sir?" she smiled perkily, or rather she continued her permanent smile and turned up the perkiness a few notches. Her teeth reflected the chrome interior and only served to increase the intensity of his headache.

He signed it and was then handed a different Portacomp unit.

"Just a final DNA check and then you're ready to go," smiled the receptionist at a point somewhere over Kip's left shoulder where something more interesting or important was obviously taking place. He scraped his thumb over the small square of sandpaper and watched impatiently as it took a full six seconds to process his skin cells.

"I'm sorry about that, sir," she said, her smile seeming to become slightly less perky and more solemn, though in fact none of her facial muscles had moved one nanometre. She shook the unit and held it to her ear. "It needs charging. That's nothing for you to worry about, sir," she paused fractionally to stamp the GSKM logo and a barcode on his left hand, "all done now. Somebody will be here to wheel you into surgery shortly."

"Can't I just walk there?"

"Don't worry, sir, all part of the service," she said. The undercurrent of her tone suggested that there would be dire consequences if he moved from the spot without medical supervision. He breathed a sigh of relief as she finally moved away and turned her radioactive smile onto somebody else. Nonetheless, alarm bells were beginning to ring fairly loudly in his head. Something in her eyes indicated that she knew something he didn't, something he definitely wouldn't like if he knew. Still, there was no backing out now.

A few days later, Kip woke up. He was disorientated from the anaesthetic but something didn't seem quite right. His vision and hearing seemed to be returning but he could discern no other physical sensations and something indefinable was definitely wrong. A movement caused him to focus his attention.

"Good afternoon, Mr.," the man in the white coat tapped a few buttons on his Portacomp, "Johnson, how are you feeling now?"

"I can see and hear, but I can't feel anything."

The man looked taken aback. "Well, obviously you can't *literally* feel anything."

"I'm sorry, doctor, I don't understand."

"I'm not a doctor, I'm a Customer Relations Interface Facilitator. You *did* read *all* the clauses in the contract, didn't you, sir?"

"Well... most of them. I only have a proton microscope," he added sarcastically.

The man ignored the slight and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "I haven't got time for this today, I really haven't, it really is most inconvenient. Mr. Johnson," he sighed, "you are now essentially a brain in a jar."

Kip's stomach would have turned upside down, if he'd still had one.

"I'm a what?" he screamed, then realised that his voice remained at exactly the same volume. In all the confusion and sleepiness it hadn't hit him before – how metallic and distant his voice sounded.

"There's a lot more to it than that, obviously, but I really don't have time to go into all the technical details now. I thought you were a scientist? You should have read the small print."

"But..." stammered Kip through his Synthetic Voice Unit. "I didn't sign up for this!"

"I'm afraid I have seventeen signatures that prove unequivocally that you did, sir. What exactly did you think the operation would do?"

"Well," said Kip, feeling deeply foolish, "I thought it would just, you know, keep me at the age I am now and prevent the further development of my disease by replacing my internal organs."

"That is exactly the procedure you have successfully undergone, sir."

"But I'm in a jar!"

The man in the white coat shook his head, tutted, and brought up Kip's contract on his screen. He held it up to the ocular section of Kip's Brain Nutrition Tank and pointed at it with his light pen.

"This is the GSKM promise. Our unique, patented treatment will permanently 1) Relieve you of all aches and pains 2) Remove all signs of ageing 3) Cure all organic diseases and 4) Extend your life span to approximately seven hundred years. We have successfully fulfilled our promise to you, Mr Johnson, and you will be delivered back to your place of domicile when the next crate becomes available."

"But.. but... this wasn't what I wanted?"

"Well," smiled the man, "there's not much we can do about that now, is there? GSKM have successfully fulfilled all their promises to you and it really is quite churlish of you to complain about their hard work."

He walked away, tapping his pen against his leg in irritation. "Why didn't he read the contract properly?". Being only a lowly public relations functionary, he had no idea that the contract was deliberately worded in such a way that not even the most persistent lawyer would be able to dissect the myriad linguistic red herrings and discover that it did, after a fashion, say *exactly* what would happen to Kip, and what would be done with his body parts afterwards. He had been well trained over the years to deal effectively with GSKM clients and never show any emotion. Nonetheless, he had been very surprised to be taken aside a few hours ago and told that this procedure was somewhat different to the normal one, and that the client might well be more distressed than usual. He was briefed extensively on what to say and he hadn't put a foot wrong. Still, he couldn't help feeling sorry for Kip, who clearly hadn't known what was going to be done to him, and he only hoped he never had to deal with such a case again. Why this man had been picked out for such 'special treatment' he hadn't been told, and he knew that it was more than his life was worth to make any enquiries in that direction.

The next day Kip had the sensation of waking up, though in reality he had merely recovered from a powerful sedative. He yawned and stretched. At least, the part of his brain that used to stretch became active, but the electrochemical signals no longer had anywhere to go. Still, in his drowsiness he had the usual sensation of his body performing the actions.

Then he opened his eyes. After a few seconds he remembered the events of the previous day and began to scream. He screamed so loudly that his SVU began to distort and issue forth an unpleasant variety of feedback that somehow transferred itself to all the speakers in the house and grew into a veritable cacophony.

Kip lapsed into a stunned silence. He hadn't told any of his neighbours he was having an operation and he certainly couldn't cope with anyone coming in and finding him like this. He had been in such a state of shock and disorientation yesterday that he hadn't thought to check whether the driver who'd brought him home had locked the door on his way out. Nothing he could do about it now, he thought, so better keep quiet for the time being.

A few minutes went by while he tried desperately to think of nothing at all. One of the things about being a Jar Head, as the less disciplined members of GSKM were inclined to refer to him, was that thinking was sort of compulsory and would become even more so as the centuries passed.

He tried to recall which bits of the brochure he had skipped and was alarmed when a large display screen on the opposite wall suddenly lit up and presented him with the digital version of the brochure. It scared him that the

device seemed to be reading his thoughts and he wished it would switch off.

It did.

He thought about the screen switching on and off a few times and it obeyed his thoughts instantaneously.

Being a scientist and having a natural curiosity, he made himself have the thought *what else am I able to do with this display unit?* He was presented with a mindbogglingly extensive menu that appeared to have several thousand sub-menus.

"That's no good," he thought irritably, "I need a simple overview to get me started."

Immediately some annoying music piped up and a smiling face appeared on the screen.

"Hello, Kip, and thank you for choosing the GSKM experience. Welcome to your Brain Computer Display Unit. This presentation will help you navigate your way through your wonderful new world." This was all delivered with a saccharine smile and vaguely patronising tone of voice. Kip stifled a scream as he was shown an animated mock up of somebody using a BCDU.

"Is that what I look like now?" he thought, staring in horrified fascination at a brain with electronic eyes, ears and mouth and a multitude of wires sitting in a glass unit suspended in a viscous liquid.

He brought his full concentration to bear as he was told all about his nutrition feeding tubes that only needed refuelling every five years and the digital interface that was wired into several thousand areas of his brain. Despite the shock that chilled his non-existent bones he couldn't help a moment of appreciation and wonder at the technical achievement of what had been done to him. He was then shown footage of the motorised wheelchair that he had thus far been too distracted to realise he was sitting in, though sitting was definitely the wrong word.

"Am I supposed to go outside looking like this?" he gasped. That was something that hadn't yet occurred to him - that he would ever leave his house again. Mind you, an estimated six hundred and fifty years in one room staring unblinkingly at a screen - what sort of life was that? The concept of living for several centuries was not something he had given adequate thought to, even when he mistakenly thought he would have a physical body to move around in.

What would happen if GSKM went out of business and nobody came to change his nutrition feed? He suddenly felt grief-stricken at the recklessness of plunging into this venture without thinking through all the consequences. Where was his scientific training when he'd most needed it? He took what felt like a deep breath and tried to calm himself. He didn't know that *this* was what was going to happen to him.

"Come on," he said to himself, "I must concentrate on this presentation."

Only then did he notice that the screen had paused itself - as soon as he returned his attention to it, it restarted. This mind-reading act still greatly unnerved him but he pulled himself together at least partly and braced himself in order to learn all he needed to know. After all, without this device he was the very definition of helpless.

This 'beginner's guide' lasted three hours but, as he was informed, there was no longer any need to worry about fatigue, getting up to stretch his legs, performing bodily functions, stopping to take on food and water etc. He also had plenty of time.

So he watched the presentation. Then he watched it again. And a third, a fourth, a fifth and a sixth time.

He noticed that time was different for him now. It did not feel as if eighteen hours had passed because he had very few of the usual frames of reference. He had sight and hearing and a very vague, disconcerting sense of his own physical presence but, as the presentation explained, that was merely due to a kind of phantom limb syndrome. He was assured it would disappear completely within a few years as his brain radically rewired itself. It was also explained to him that he would no longer sleep, and in fact sleeping actually used up more brain energy than wakefulness. Kip's scientific mind had now overtaken his shock and confusion and he began to systematically work his way through the smorgasbord of menu options on his screen.

Brain Computer Interfaces had been around for two hundred and fifty years, enabling people to operate a simple

computer cursor by thought waves, but Kip was astounded at how far the technology had come. With a little practise he could operate any electronic device in his home by imagining infrared waves going from his mind to the device. This seemed absurd, but no sooner had he had that thought than a document popped up on the screen explaining that three hundred years of mapping the brains of millions of people had lead to this current technology that could instantly analyse his thoughts in the same way that a speech synthesiser could translate spoken words into digital text in real time. He knew that it looked like magic but, as he read more and more, he found that the science of this pseudo telepathy was perfectly valid. After all, as a biochemist he knew that his thoughts were nothing more than electrochemical activity, so there was no reason in principal why he couldn't communicate directly with computers. He assumed that the nutrition tank was supplying his brain with oxygen, and as soon as he had that thought a document popped up explaining that that was indeed the case. His brain was now wired up directly to the computer on his chair, and that computer could obviously connect wirelessly to any other device, so he should be able to operate anything in his house.

He first tried the lock on his front door. It had been locked and he had just unlocked it, so he locked it again and metaphorically breathed a sigh of relief. He tried opening the electronic windows, though he now had no need of fresh air, then quickly closed them because he didn't want anybody to know he was there. He tried, on a whim, dialling his mobile phone, which was in the pocket of his jacket than hung in the hallway. He was rather startled to hear it ring after less than a second.

This confirmed that he must be automatically connected to every digital and Bluetooth device in his house. And the internet.

The internet.

He hadn't even thought about that.

If he could use that he could continue working. He had told his colleagues he was having an operation, but not the details, even the ones he had actually known, and that he would return to work in a couple of weeks. He was sure that nobody he worked with would be bothered at seeing him as a brain in a jar and would be fascinated by the technology, but he didn't yet feel ready to face anybody.

He tried checking his email and accessing a few web sites. No problem. It was just the same as using a keyboard and mouse or a tablet, though he found that even after only one day of being a brain in a jar it was becoming hard to remember the physical sensations of working in that way. Or maybe he was just desperately forcing himself to forget his previous life.

"Mind you," he thought, "this screen is great but is it the only one in the house? What about if I go anywhere, I'll be helpless." Before he even had time to recall the relevant part of the presentation film, it informed him of the portable screen on the front of the electronic chair. A second later, the screen rose up and adjusted itself so that he could see it and also what was in front of him.

Well, now that he couldn't eat or drink or do anything physical and had no need of rest or sleep, there was nothing else to do but get used to his circumstances and push his new life to the limits. He would conduct a thorough, scientific exploration of the possibilities of the technology.

He began by slowly steering his chair around the living room. He would have to get rid of furniture and other things he no longer needed as they were in the way. Mind you, why did he ever have to move, he had nowhere to go? He wondered if he would ever want a change of scenery now that he was truly living a life of the mind. He decided to put those sort of questions aside for the time being, it was going to take more than a day to get used to living in this manner.

So long as he could continue working then life in a jar might not be so bad after all. Although, he was supposed to be drawing his pension in fifty years - what would happen about that now? When they found out that he was going to live for another six or seven centuries they were hardly likely to pay out. Mind you, if he could go on working in his field for six hundred years, just think of the wonderful advances he would see? It would be like Isaac Newton getting to work with quantum computers for four hundred years or Copernicus using Google Earth.

Sure, there may be challenges ahead, thought Kip, but all in all, and considering that without this procedure I would have died within a few years, I'm quite happy to be a brain in a jar. For now he decided to put aside all

his doubts and fears - all he could do in the immediate future was get used to his new situation and master the technology. Only then would he feel ready to deal with other people and the question of exactly how he was going to interact with the world in the future.

Silicon Valley, California, USA

Gizmo heard the buzzer and opened the door. "I'm through here."

Giz had been the very first person to undergo the radical procedure and become a brain in a jar nearly five years ago. In fact, next month he would receive a visit from GSKM to replace his nutrition tank. Well, that was what GSKM thought but he had other ideas.

Marty, his best friend entered and smiled.

"I've finally done it. Fancy a spin?"

"Of course."

"It shouldn't take long to wire it up."

This new device was the culmination of more than a years work. It was a small box about four inches square containing a plethora of microscopic circuit boards. It was designed along quantum principles so they couldn't be entirely certain what it would do but it would definitely greatly enhance the speed with which he could interact with computers other than the one with which GSKM had supplied him. If this device worked as intended, Giz would be able to interface directly with anything in the world that had an internet connection or an infrared control. In theory he could even fly a plane from his living room.

Three years ago Gizmo had become aware that other people had also been turned into a brain in a jar. This came as a great shock to him as he had invented the procedure himself and paid GSKM to carry out the operation on him. Nobody else was supposed to know about this technology and yet they had been using it on others without consulting him. The only reason he found out about this was because he had hacked into GSKM's computer system and found references to new procedures. At the time of his operation he had had no reason to suspect GSKM of any nefarious intentions but, as a former military man, he became worried about the potential of the technology and so started making his own secret enquiries. He discovered that there were a few dozen people around the globe who had had the operation and become what GSKM employees - at least those in the upper echelons of the organisation who knew about the procedure - referred to as 'Jar Heads'. As he had obtained this information by spying he couldn't exactly confront GSKM about it, but then someone leaked details of their own procedure online. It was speedily deleted and, as Gizmo later discovered, that person was killed shortly afterwards. The few people who saw it dismissed it as the ravings of a lunatic but it enabled him to contact GSKM. He had asked them for the names and email addresses of any other people who had undergone the operation but had been told point blank that no such procedures had taken place. Giz didn't like the tone with which his request had been met – it was highly suspicious, threatening even. What could they have against us communicating, he had thought? Oh well, it just required further work for him and Marty to hack into the computer system again at GSKM's US Headquarters in New York and take the information they required. Perhaps if they had looked further into matters at the time a lot of later disaster could have been averted.

Gizmo had been aware for some time that GSKM were monitoring him and so had used his and Marty's military experience to counteract this surveillance. After discovering that they had blatantly lied to him and were clearly up to something, he upped this counter surveillance to new levels and began transmitting false information to them, allowing himself to communicate with anybody without GSKM's knowledge.

Anyway, everything was in place now and the quantum computer seemed to be working well. Marty had almost perfected the auto translation software which should, after some initial adjustment, allow anyone to converse in any of the major world languages more or less instantaneously. At present Gizmo had no use for such a device,

but they were preparing for an uncertain future. He felt that soon the time would come for them to contact the others and agree a battle plan. He had no desire to return to any form of military action but, the more he learned about GSKM and their true intentions, the more he realised that it would sooner or later become inevitable.

Bath, England - April 2346

After two weeks Kip was relishing the total lack of sleep and how much he was still able to do. His time thus far had been both enjoyable and profitable but now he faced a dilemma. He was supposed to be going back to work tomorrow, with legs and things. He had to email his boss this morning, what on earth was he going to tell her? He had seen nobody since the operation and had not told anybody about what had happened to him. He could work from home to some extent but there were meetings he was expected to attend and his former life to resume. Now that it was an imminent prospect, he didn't think he could face going into work. Besides, how would he even get there, travel fifteen miles in his electric chair? Trundle along the streets looking like something out of a Mary Shelley novel? He was confident his colleagues would quickly adjust to his new appearance but surely the general public wouldn't. Suddenly he felt nothing but anxiety and realised how trapped he really was.

He was frantically pondering his next move when some kind of electrical fault took down his internet connection and most of the electronic devices in his house. Before he even had time to rise to a new level of panic or think about the implications, the screen on his chair came to life and he was confronted with a mirror image of himself. Kip took a deep breath, at least in his mind it still felt as if he had, and focused his attention on the video call.

"Hello, Kip," said the other brain in a jar, "I'm Gizmo."

At no time during the last two weeks had he ever considered the possibility that there were others out there like him. Now it seemed such a foolish omission but it had taken all his willpower to get used to his new condition and not go insane so any thoughts about the wider implications of his procedure had so far eluded him.

"Hello," he said hesitantly. "How do you know my name, and what's happened to my electronics? Hey," he exclaimed, "you have a voice! I mean it sounds like a voice. How do you get a voice that doesn't sound like a robot?"

Gizmo laughed, and Kip realised that that was yet another thing he hadn't experienced during the last two weeks.

"Are you another one who didn't read the whole brochure?"

"Maybe not *all* of it," Kip began, wondering where this was going.

"You could have had a sample vocabulary taken and had a progressively adaptive model of your voice installed."

"Oh."

"Don't worry, I'm sure we can use recordings of your public lectures to sort that out for you. Anyway, we have more important things to discuss, Kip. As you can see, I am like you. I was the very first to undergo this procedure, almost five years ago. I was the guinea pig, if you like. My friend is outside your house now and we need to talk to you urgently. I would say don't be scared but you should be. GSKM have a whole hidden agenda that it has taken me years to fully uncover and we need to take immediate action. My friend has flown over from Silicon Valley especially to see you, will you let him in? The doors are working."

"But how... what the hell is going on?" stammered Kip.

"I'm sorry to spring this on you but we're running out of time. We need your help urgently, to save all of us."

"What do you mean *all of us*? How many are there?"

"Thirty eight. I'll explain when we meet but time is of the essence. Will you please let my friend in?"

Kip took a moment to assess his helpless situation. "I don't suppose I have much choice, do I?" He opened the front door and a man in his mid forties entered the living room.

"Hi, Kip, I'm Marty." The man was physically imposing, and not just because he had a physical body. He carried an enormous black duffel bag on his shoulder that looked as though it weighed a ton. He looked quickly around the room and seemed satisfied, though with what Kip had no idea. He stood behind Kip's chair so that he could also see Gizmo on the screen, and be seen by him. He nodded.

"There is much I need to tell you," began Gizmo, "and the first thing is that we have taken the liberty of hacking into your computer system and disabling the spyware they use to monitor us. I have a more permanent solution but we could not install that remotely. Does anybody know about your procedure, has anyone seen you during the last two weeks?"

"No."

"Good. Is there anything preventing you from accompanying Marty and coming to America?"

Kip's mind span. The idea of travelling anywhere, even to the end of his street, was terrifying.

"Well, I'm supposed to be going back to work tomorrow, but I can't, I just can't face it. I have to contact my boss today, I'll tell her that there have been complications and I've lost my voice. I could work from home for a few weeks before anybody became suspicious. But... I mean, how the hell could I travel? I can't exactly get on a plane like this, can I?"

"We have a private jet waiting nearby. I have travelled in it myself to test it out and it's fine. That and Marty's vehicle have both been specially adapted and we have developed an extra seal for our jars to prevent any loss of nutrition liquid. That is the urgent problem, Kip, the one we cannot solve without your help. Next month it will be five years since my procedure and I'm due to have my nutrition tank refilled. We've been able to hack into GSKM's system and ascertained that we have been an experiment. They are monitoring all of us constantly and, when the five years is up, they will terminate us with a poisonous liquid and pass it off as a fault in the original procedure. We are very close to developing our own, much longer lasting, nutrition liquid to enable us to carry on living independently of GSKM but need your help to complete the process. Your chemical expertise is vital to us, otherwise next month I will be killed and all of us will die when the five years is up."

Marty silently placed a tablet in front of Kip's screen and a number of documents appeared.

"You can read them in the usual manner," he said, "that is our proof of their true intentions towards you."

Kip scanned through the documents, his horror increasing by the minute. His scientific mind was telling him that this was all real, while another part of him was trying to deny it and dismiss it as spurious conspiracy talk. However, he was aware that without this able bodied man he was pretty much helpless, and this Gizmo had had nearly five years experience of being in a jar, so surely he knew what he was talking about. He was about to speak when an alarm beeped on the tablet.

"Shit," hissed Marty, "we're out of time. They have registered the electrical fault and an engineer is on route by helicopter." He picked up the tablet and put it back in his bag.

"Kip," said Gizmo, "this is crunch time. Either you go with Marty now or we restore your electrics and you'll have to play dumb. But if you remain there I will die next month. I'm sorry to press you, but you have to decide now."

Everything about his experience before the procedure, the false smiles of the reception staff and the looks they gave him when he asked questions they clearly didn't want to answer, suddenly all coalesced and he realised that he was indeed in great danger and that everything he had just learned was all too true.

"Let's go," he said, "I believe you."

"Thank you, Kip, I'll see you soon. Get on with it, Marty, we have less than twenty minutes."

Marty nodded and the screen went blank. "Is there anything you need to take with you?" he asked.

"Upstairs in the study are two laptops, a bag of back up drives and a box of paper files. That is my life's work, and I'll need it all. Everything else... well, I have no use for physical objects any longer."

Marty nodded curtly and ran upstairs. Kip then heard the door open and another man entered the living room.

"Hello, Kip, I'm your pilot."

"Umm... hello," said Kip, not sure what else to say. He did notice, though, that he didn't feel any embarrassment or shame at people seeing him existing in a jar and electronic chair. That was a good thing, though he knew that these people has already seen another person like him and it would be a *very* different matter going out amongst the general public. The man pushed his chair to the front door and Kip saw that a large American vehicle that was part car and part truck and had blacked out windows was reversing up to his front gate. As he watched a ramp unfolded, accompanied by an electronic whine, and he was hurriedly transported into the back of the vehicle. Two minutes later his belongings were also on board and the vehicle moved off.

"You can email your boss now," said Marty, "then it doesn't matter if GSKM are able to trace it."

Kip had already been thinking about what he would say and so it took only a couple of minutes to compose the message. Marty sat next to Kip and looked at the screen as he "typed" the words. He nodded his approval. Once the message had been sent he spoke to the pilot, who was driving, and they did a U-turn and sped off in the opposite direction.

Arizona, USA

After more than two years, Pixel had mastered all the functions of her BCDU and finally got used to her electric chair. She was still too scared to go out into the wider world but owning a ranch gave her plenty of scope to roam around unobserved by anyone except her animals and immediate family.

She had opted for the most expensive chair, based on Mars rover technology, which enabled her to confidently climb slopes of up to forty five degrees and negotiate small boulders. Her top of the range chair meant that there was very little limit to her independence. She simply used her mind to switch between the small and large screens as required.

Her BCDU functioned remotely, of course, so it was merely a matter of establishing connections with all the household devices as you normally would with your computer or remote control. This enabled her to operate all the electrical items in the house, open doors and windows, in fact do most things her family could do and much more that they could never do.

The farm animals appeared unable to distinguish her from any other piece of machinery, even when she spoke to them, but their menagerie of cats and dogs had become accustomed to her surprisingly quickly. Within days of using the chair, her favourite cat had taken to walking in and out of the wheels and nuzzling itself against them as it used to her legs, possibly because her husband had stuffed some of her clothes into the storage space under the chair so that the animals would still have her familiar smell. She had gone for the more advanced voice synth that used recorded samples of her own voice – it had been unconvincing at first but now it sounded more or less like her old self talking through a speaker.

She may have got used to all the practical aspects but it worried her that, even after two years, she had still failed to adapt to many of the psychological challenges, certainly in comparison to her friend Gizmo. Being so technically minded beforehand he had quickly and happily adjusted to life as a brain in a jar and appeared to not miss the physical world one bit. Pixel, on the other hand, missed it terribly. What was worse, she and her husband had never been able to talk about that aspect of their relationship, either in the run up to the operation or in the two years since. Not having the military background of Gizmo or her husband, Pixel lacked the

discipline to smother her emotions and they continued to bother her daily. She still wasn't sure that she entirely believed the bit in the GSKM brochure about living for several hundred years but the possibility that it might be true was nonetheless severely troubling her. Gizmo didn't have a partner or any children so he was perfectly happy to forgo the physical life, but the prospect of seeing her daughter age and die was on her mind almost constantly. She was also not keen on all the cloak and dagger stuff that Giz, Marty and, to some extent, her husband seemed to thrive on. She wasn't used to facing the sort of danger that GSKM appeared to pose.

Her husband and teenage daughter had adjusted in different ways to her new situation. Knowing Gizmo they had deliberately opted for the procedure, as opposed to Kip and all the others who had been transformed against their will. Pixel's degenerative wasting disease had already robbed her of the ability to walk and soon she would have been unable to eat or breathe unaided. Faced with that future, becoming a brain in jar seemed well worth the money and the risk. She had never been very interested in technology but now, with little choice, she had immersed herself in it. But she also made a rule for herself that she would spend as long as possible every day away from the screens. She interacted with her family as much as she ever had. Well, with certain exceptions. She kept up a brave face as much as possible but in truth she was struggling.

She turned at the sound of the door opening and her daughter Swan entered the room closely followed by Gizmo.

"He's agreed to help us," said Gizmo, "Marty called, they've just taken off."

"That's great news," she said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

Swan sat cross legged on the floor next to her mother, as was her custom. "So who is this guy, Giz, some kind of scientist?"

"He's a biochemist. He has all the knowledge we need to complete the new, longer lasting nutrition tanks. And he's rich enough that he can leave his job if he needs to and join us in the cause."

"*The cause?*" laughed Swan. "You make it sound like an old time religious cult."

"In a few weeks GSKM intends to kill me, Swan. In three years they will be coming for your mother. We're going to stop them. I'd call that a cause."

"But they don't know where you and mum are."

"That won't stop them for long. Anyway, Marty and Kip will be here this evening."

Once he had left the room, Swan turned towards her mother. "What isn't he telling us?"

"I don't know," said Pixel. "He'll tell us when the time is right, probably when Kip gets here."

"We're not going to like it, are we, mum?"

"No, I'm sure we're not. I know things have been quiet lately but I'm afraid all that is going to change soon. I've known Giz a long time, he never exaggerates about *anything*. I can tell that he senses danger for us, and I'm sure he's right. It'll be tough, but with a scientist who can free us from being reliant on GSKM then I'm sure we'll be able to cope with whatever happens."

She didn't like lying to her daughter but she couldn't admit, even to herself, that she wasn't sure of anything any longer.

GSKM Office, England

"This is very worrying."

The second man rolled his eyes. "Of course it's fucking worrying, Hugo. It's an absolute fucking disaster."

"No need for that sort of language," said Hugo, maintaining his usual infuriating calm.

Robbie gritted his teeth. "Okay, the point is, what are we going to do about it? There's no way he found anything out in two weeks, that American bastard has obviously contacted him. *Which means* that he has found a way inside our system. That is unequivocally a grade A disaster and we need to act *now!*" He punched the table in frustration.

"This company has been around for a long time, Robbie, and we haven't maintained this level of success by getting angry, banging on tables and making instant, head strong decisions. I have already instructed the technical team to prioritise the tracing of all of Mr. Johnson's data since the second he was left alone after home delivery. If it is the case that he has gone to America then the matter is out of our hands. There was nothing wrong with our security procedures in this case, everything went according to plan, and no blame can be laid at our door. For the present there will be no more XSS procedures carried out anywhere in the world until the situation is resolved. In fact, New York feel that our client may have made things easier for all of us."

"You've spoken to New York today?" asked Robbie sulkily, desperately trying to keep his anger in check about being kept out of the loop yet again.

"Of course, it's standard procedure in any XSS complications to contact HQ immediately. They have been worried about this Gizmo character for years, and this recent development appears to confirm many of their suspicions. Feeling among some at HQ is that he should have been terminated after a brief initial trial period, perhaps even never allowed to return home in the first place. It is easy for somebody with his level of financial backing to disappear and we know he still has a multitude of contacts from his former military postings. There is an underlying opinion in New York that the whole XSS project may have to be liquidated."

Robbie stared open mouthed at his colleague for several seconds. "You can't be serious. All these years of work. We have contracts already signed, people are waiting for the product, people I personally would not want to get on the wrong side of."

"New York are aware of all that, Robbie," he replied, and Robbie winced at the patronising tone. Suddenly his anger turned to anxiety as he saw where this conversation was potentially going. If Project XSS was liquidated then there was every chance that he himself would also be a part of that liquidation. He wasn't high enough up in the pecking order to be offered immunity from blame, and there was zero chance in hell they would merely relieve him of his job; he would be relieved of his life as well. Full blown panic began coursing through his veins as he saw how bad the problem really was.

"We'll round them all up," he blurted out. "There are only three we can't locate, if we capture all the others then we can improve the product, some form of brain washing or computer feedback loop that makes them docile enough to follow commands without question. Eliminate all these problems of them going rogue on us."

Hugo subtly shook his head. "That is not an option, as you well know. Or at least, you *should* know if you are doing your job properly." Robbie turned pale at the last few words. Was it just an off hand comment, a figure of speech, or was his liquidation now an imminent reality, a decision that had already been taken at the highest level? He struggled to focus while the other man continued as if nothing especially serious was at stake. *For him it isn't* he thought bitterly.

"Our contractors are not interested in robots, they can get them anywhere. The entire point of this enterprise is that our product will have the best of both worlds, human ingenuity, imagination and adaptability combined with the capability of computers and digital devices. That is what our investors are paying for, not a bunch of electronic zombies."

"Okay," said Robbie slowly, "then we liquidate the three rebels. If they have contacted any of the others then it will be seen as a lesson to toe the line, if not then nothing has changed regarding the other remaining thirty five subjects."

"And how do you propose to find them exactly? They have access to military grade counter surveillance hardware and a huge collective budget, not to mention many friends in high places. If we go after them physically, how do you think that is going to end? Are you personally volunteering to hunt them down, Robbie? You would get your head blown off before you could blink."

"That's probably what's going to happen to me anyway," he thought sourly. "The *only* way out of this is to solve all the problems and keep the product intact. At least, until I can figure out a way to disappear and never be found."

"So then," he said aloud, "what happens next?"

"We carry on with our job at this end. You and I will go to Mr. Johnson's dwelling and clear out all the equipment, along with any evidence that he ever even heard of GSKM."

"Good," thought Robbie, "at least that's something I can't mess up. Maybe I can even spot something vital that nobody else does. Then I can go home and figure out how the fuck to get myself out of this mess."

Robbie gratefully escaped upstairs as the technical team were examining the equipment that Kip had left behind. Any accomplice visiting him during the communication blackout could have spent a brief time up here. Robbie frantically began searching for anything he could find to prove his continuing usefulness to GSKM.

Spaces in the tiny layer of dust that had built up since Kip had last been upstairs betrayed the removal of two laptops, a large container of some kind and another object. If the conjecture they had just received from New York was correct then it made sense that he would have taken all his work and reference materials with him. Quaintly there was a shelf packed with old fashioned bound and printed books.

"Bloody scientists," Robbie muttered to himself. There were too many to go through now, he would take them back to his office and personally go through every single page, lest there be some kind of hidden message or pertinent clue. For now he concentrated on tearing the rest of the room to pieces as quickly as possible.

He stripped all the bedding and looked under the mattress, searched the edges of the carpet for any gaps where papers or hard drives could be secreted, all to no avail. He found various irrelevant items in the drawers of a large antique desk, then his eyes lit up and he breathed a sigh of relief. The small tablet powered up and, although it was password protected, he was able to break into it within two minutes by plugging the device into his own laptop. Searching through the browsing history he found all the email correspondence between Kip and GSKM. Good, at least this was one loose end he could personally tie up. He also found all the research Kip had done that had lead him to GSKM and the procedure; that may prove useful in some way. There was no sign of him communicating with any of the Americans or any indication that he had any idea about Project XSS or any of the deeper levels of GSKM. There was nothing to suggest that he knew that it had been GSKM that had sought him out rather than the other way around.

After another few minutes he had satisfied himself that nothing further was to be gleaned from the room so he moved on to the rest of the upper floor. He was just emerging from the dusty and entirely empty attic when Hugo came up the stairs.

"What have you found?"

"Two laptops and two boxes or containers of some sort have been taken. The only significant thing remaining is this." He handed Hugo the tablet and explained the contents. "I'd like to take all the old books away just in case. He may have made some notes about GSKM in the margin of something but there are hundreds of them, it'll take ages to go through them all."

"Okay, I'll arrange for transport and get some people to help you. Good work, Robbie."

He tried hard not to breath a sigh of relief or show that he had been concerned. Besides, he was far from out of the woods yet. Later, as he was riding back to the office with the boxes of books, he began to seriously plan his escape from both the country and the clutches of GSKM.

Arizona ranch ten hours later

Kip had spent twenty minutes in the room with these people and yet he still hadn't got used to it. They all clearly sensed his discomfort and so the topic of conversation had not yet moved on to the main business at hand. He felt self-conscious about his robotic voice but Marty was already at work in another room with dozens of hours of his public lectures, assimilating them into a new voice synthesiser that he assured him would be ready within a few hours. It was an odd sensation to see Gizmo and Pixel, who both looked exactly like him save for some different colouring on their chairs, speaking in what he assumed were, other than it coming through the medium of a speaker, their normal voices.

"My husband and Giz were in the military together," explained Pixel. "Our families became very close and they worked together in civilian life. Three years after Giz had the procedure I became very ill and, when nothing else worked, I came to accept that I had to either live in a jar or die."

"Hang on a minute," said Kip. "Something is confusing me. You *knew* that you were going to end up as a brain in a jar? I had no idea."

"For better or worse," said Gizmo, "I helped invent this procedure. It's a very long story and we don't have time to go into it all now. Suffice it to say that when I knew I was dying I quickly began looking for radical solutions. GSKM were offering a procedure that would replace all internal organs with mechanical substitutes, apart from the brain. However, the nature of my illness meant that, even with a brand new set of organs, I would still physically deteriorate to the point of total inertia. My central nervous system would cease to function and this would render my brain virtually useless. We worked out that the only way for me to survive at all was as a brain without a central nervous system. We did some research of our own and then took this to GSKM and paid them to carry out the procedure. It was time consuming and hugely risky but without it I would be brain dead within a few years so I had nothing to lose. Somehow it worked and here I am. I have since been in a constant battle with GSKM over who owns the rights to this procedure but they have carried on regardless and performed it almost two hundred times. We understand that in most cases people were not told what would happen to them, and that the contracts are written up in such a confusing manner that it is almost impossible to work out what it all means. However, their legal department can point to certain sections and prove that they state, in obfuscating technical jargon, that the person would become a brain in a jar. If challenged in court they would say that the jargon was explained to the person beforehand and it's their word against yours. And, of course, they would also point out all the wonderful technology we were given and all the advantages of not having to sleep, eat, defecate, and living for several hundred years. We believe that a few of the deaths of people who had had the procedure were down to somebody from GSKM when they realised that they were about to face the negative publicity of a legal challenge. So far as we can tell, none of us have ever appeared in public and it seems that no more than a few dozen people in the whole world outside of GSKM know that we exist. Thus far, none of these people have gone public in any way. We don't know exactly how GSKM killed them but there is almost certainly more than one quick and simple method. Isolate us from our nutrition tanks and we would die of natural causes; remove our electronic interface and we would be helpless, we really *would* be nothing more than a brain in a jar, with no sight, hearing, speech... anything. Sorry, Kip, I'd hoped to ease you into this but, well - there you have it."

The room fell silent, and Kip noticed that Pixel's daughter was gripping the back of her mother's chair in a protective manner.

"This is all rather overwhelming," he said after a couple of minutes. "I hate to appear rude but I'd like to be alone for a while. I also understand that it is a matter of some urgency that we sort out the nutrition tank problem so, if you don't mind, I'd like to get on with that. I need to work on something I can control and let all this sink in before I hear any more." He felt that his cheeks were flushed, but of course they weren't.

"Yes, we must get to work on that as soon as possible," said Gizmo. "If you follow me I'll show you where you can work. All your equipment is already unpacked."

A few minutes later Kip was alone in a room. Somebody had clearly been busy on the plane because all of his paper documents had been digitised and placed on two of his external hard drives. Everything was connected

and he found that he could communicate with his laptops in the same way as he did with his own interface. Forcing his mind away from the awful, terrifying things he had just heard, things that would have churned his stomach if he still had one, he turned his attention to the task at hand. There was obviously no going back for him now and, having gone through the trauma of waking up as a brain in a jar, there was no way he was only going to live for another five years, or risk being killed by some agent of GSKM even sooner than that. Nothing had yet been said explicitly but it was crystal clear to Kip that he was now inextricably involved in some kind of underground resistance movement and engaged in a war with GSKM. This was something he didn't have to think about - he was fully committed beyond any doubt. He was also, as a scientist, determined to get the most out of this experience and push the technology to its limits.

He focused on the work and his thirty years of experience in chemical science came to the forefront of his mind. He quickly read through the work Gizmo and his colleagues had carried out, as well as the original documentation from GSKM, and soon he knew all there was to know about the nutrition liquid. He wondered why he had never previously looked into the composition of the stuff that was keeping him alive but put it down the shock of the last couple of weeks and the time it had taken him to get used to the technology, not to mention all the thoughts about his future and how he would be able to go back to work. Well, if he had burned his bridges there, so be it. He had plenty of money, for which he mostly now had little or no need, and he could sell his house if he needed to. Gizmo was obviously massively wealthy and this ranch would have cost a small fortune so his new friends were well funded.

Now that he had met two other people in his 'condition', and been 'face to face' with a few 'normal' people, most of the shock had fallen away and he found himself thinking that sloshing around in a liquid was a crude and inconvenient way of keeping their brains alive. After all, humans hadn't evolved with their heads filled with liquid, so why had GSKM chosen to do it this way? Perhaps it was *precisely because* it made people vulnerable and so reliant on them, he conjectured. It made it relatively easy to 'pull the plug' should the need arise. And so his mind went in the direction not of improving the nutrition liquid but of doing away with it altogether. Surely it would be far more practical, and make them all far safer and more independent, if they constructed something that mimicked the human skull? It had been such a hassle for him to be transported here because his tank had to be kept level. Most of the nutrition humans needed was to keep their body and organs going, not the brain itself. His brain already contained all the chemicals and electricity it required to function, so why, in the absence of a physical body, did he need anything else?

He pondered all this for a few minutes and then began making some notes. It was unrealistic, he soon realised, to expect a detached brain to survive with *no* external nutrition supply, for some of the energy from the food humans eat goes to powering the brain - twenty percent, in fact. So he had to devise some method of getting that into the brain as efficiently as possible: attaching himself to some machine that mimicked the human body would immediately destroy all the advantages he possessed and render him even more vulnerable and dependent on others. GSKM had installed a portal in his brain via which the nutrition was extracted from the liquid in a similar way to which fish extract oxygen from water - the liquid never actually fed into his brain. Therefore all he had to do was find an alternative source of energy that could be fed into his brain via the existing portal, a source for which they would not be reliant on GSKM. It had to be something that would last a lot longer than five years and was easy to obtain. Then he took the thought experiment further.

"What if we used a source of energy that was totally renewable?" he thought. "It's the obvious route to take, then we would be reliant on nobody. Something that doesn't involve the inconvenience of having a heavy tank of liquid on your head... brain," he corrected himself. He thought for a few moments, then had to strongly resist the temptation to shout "Eureka!" at the top of his electronic voice.

Kip spent a few more minutes making notes and was preparing himself to tell the others when he heard a knock at the door and Gizmo entered. He was just about to ask how the hell he had managed to knock on the door when he realised that the sound had been electronically generated by the speaker on Gizmo's chair. He decided that he definitely liked these people - anyone who would add politeness to a voice synthesiser was the sort of person he could work with.

"Your new voice unit is ready. How is the work going?"

Kip could hardly speak he was so excited. "I think I've solved *all* our problems and markedly improved our overall situation. I'm sure it will work because it's so simple."

"Great. Follow me to Marty's workshop and then we'll gather everyone together."

Half an hour later and Kip was still getting used to the surreal experience of hearing his own voice again but he couldn't wait to share his idea.

"Okay," he began, "I'll skip most of the technical details for now but I believe that in no more than a few days we can all have not only an infinite, free supply of nutrition to replace these clumsy tanks of liquid but also be in a much better position to travel around and deal with any physical attacks on us." He explained the basic biology of brain nutrition and the GSKM portal that they already possessed. "I'm confident that if we connected these portals to solar panels then a couple of hours of sunlight per day would be all we need to totally replace the nutrition tanks. I've also realised that in getting rid of the liquid we don't have to remain as vulnerable as we are by being a brain in a jar - we can have a protective casing akin to the human skull. There's no reason why this casing couldn't resemble a human head but that's a purely aesthetic matter. The main point is that our brains would then be no more vulnerable than that of any other human being; in fact we could make the casing considerably stronger than a human skull. It could be covered in solar panels and then all we would need to do would be sit by a window for a couple of hours, or the panels could be removed by someone else and charged outside. So long as we are somewhere with *some* regular sunlight then we could be totally independent of any physical assistance, though obviously I will need help to construct the casing initially."

He paused and saw that Pixel's daughter had tears in her eyes.

"Kip," she said, "I can't thank you enough. This is just... amazing. Isn't it wonderful, mum?"

"It certainly is. Marty, is this all really feasible?" she sounded cautiously sceptical.

"I'm an engineer, not a biologist," he said, "but Kip is the expert so if he says sunlight will work then I have no reason to doubt him. It makes perfect sense. Our bodies need tons of water but I don't think the brain does. We could always leave a small amount of water in the casing as back up. But in practical terms building a casing of solar panels is child's play. And it shouldn't take long to rig up something that will convert the solar power into a form that can be fed into the brain portal. This ranch has thousands of solar panels, I'll use some of them for the time being. Once we have a casing ready to go it should only take a few seconds to disconnect the digital interfaces from someone's brain, put them in the new housing and then reconnect them. That shouldn't cause any brain damage."

"I hope not," said Kip, "but it's only right that I be the guinea pig as it was my idea. Spirit of science and all that," he said, adding a hollow laugh.

A week later Kip, Gizmo and Pixel were all encased in their new 'homes'. Having a square head made them look like a robot from a twentieth century science fiction film but all had agreed that it was the most practical shape to use, and anything was an aesthetic improvement on a brain floating in a jar of liquid. The Arizona midday sun was so powerful that an hour next to a window was deemed sufficient, but all three of them took to taking the sun as often as possible in order to charge the solar panels to maximum capacity. When this was reached it was estimated that they could survive with zero sunlight for up to three months. The panels also powered their chairs and portable screen and all their electronics. Marty was working on adding further solar panels to the back of the chair to increase capacity even further. So, unless they decided to spend a winter in Iceland, they seemed to be self sufficient for the foreseeable future. After a few days of getting used to their new 'heads' a meeting was convened.

"Kip," began Gizmo, "we can't thank you enough. However, the least we can do is fill you in on the full situation regarding GSKM and the danger we are in. Are you up to hearing it all now?"

Kip had the sensation in his brain of nodding his head, then realised his error and gave an audible answer. He hoped this confusion would go away before too long. He wanted to ask Gizmo about it but now wasn't the time.

"Yes, fire away. I feel so much better now that our brains... now that *we* are protected to such an extent. I can't say I'm a hundred percent used to being just a brain but I'm confident that will come to me in due course. Now

that I've helped us I want to help some more. And I *definitely* want to know exactly what the hell GSKM are playing at and what their future intentions towards us are."

"Okay," said Gizmo, "there's a lot to get through and there are a lot of tough decisions ahead for all of us. It has taken a lot of time to ascertain this but Marty and a few other of my colleagues have travelled the world in search of the others. Whilst we have thus far been careful never to make direct contact, we have been able to confirm that there are only thirty eight of us left. Apart from the ones that GSKM have killed, all the others have died, it seems, as a result of conflict with people in their own family. You are new to this, Kip, but I'm sure you understand what a shock it must be for people when their husband, wife, brother, sister, child or parent comes home looking like us. Not everyone has been as fortunate as Pixel and myself in being surrounded by a group of understanding, supportive friends and family."

Kip let this new information sink in for a few moments. "You mean they were killed by people close to them? How could that happen. Actually, I don't think I want to know. No, I do. We're less vulnerable now than we were two weeks ago but I want to know what GSKM, or anyone else for that matter, can still do to us if they are of a mind to cause us harm for some reason."

"Okay," replied Gizmo. "A few people who, like you, lived alone simply had their nutrition tanks smashed and their electronics disconnected. They were then left to die over a period of days. Needless to say that prospect just doesn't bear thinking about. For those who had people with them GSKM had to be more sneaky. They used a variety of digital means to attack them - computer virus, a surge of electricity to fry their brains, there were several and the details aren't important now. We've known for a while that GSKM were conducting extensive remote surveillance on all of us, essentially monitoring all our communications, even seeing and hearing what we were with our eyes and ears on a screen at their HQ. The three of us are totally disconnected from that system now and this ranch is protected by military grade anti-surveillance technology. Even from a hundred yards away from this building, nobody could tell that we have any electronic devices at all in here, never mind that the three of us are present. GSKM cannot ever get to us in that way. I myself have been broadcasting false data feeds to them for some time, so they thought they were tracking me when in fact they were not. However, there are always new methods of counter-counter-surveillance being developed and, if they can find us physically, they can obviously still harm us, as well as anybody with us. Although it may put your mind at rest, Kip, to know that this ranch is protected by several personnel as well as a whole heap of technology. We're about as safe as we can be in here for the time being. However, we also have our brothers and sisters to consider. I know that sounds like outdated terminology but there are thirty five other people out there who aren't as lucky as us, and they are still supremely vulnerable to GSKM's machinations, not to mention the fear and hysteria of the wider public.

"Which brings us to the first of the many difficult questions we are faced with, Kip. Do we just hide away here for the rest of our lives and keep all this to ourselves, or do we contact the others? If so, what do we tell them, and what sort of assistance do we offer them? The second question is how do we deal with the fact that we are going to live for several hundred years and everyone we know is not? Could we ever be truly independent of all physical assistance. The third question is what to do about GSKM - do we just remain hidden from them or do we go on the offensive? The fourth question is the biggest of all - do we go public about what has happened to us? If so, what form will that take? You can imagine the shit storm that will unfurl when a photo or video of one of us gets out to the media and the general public, never mind what would happen if one of us actually went out on the street. It would be utterly unprecedented in the whole of human history. I'm not sure I can deal with that, or put my friends through it by association. On the other hand, is it really possible for us to carry on hiding ourselves from the whole world for hundreds of years? I'd like to know what you think on these matters, Kip, before I tell you the entirety of what we have discovered about GSKM."

Kip was silent for so long that Marty began to wonder if there something wrong with his technology, but eventually he spoke.

"I've always tried to keep morality and human decency in mind when doing my science," he said. "In that light, I don't see how we can in all conscience not contact the other thirty five and both tell them about GSKM's intentions and give them this dirt cheap protective technology we have just developed. Regarding the second question, I don't think that is a matter of immediate concern - we will only discover over the coming decades and centuries what this *really* means for us. Thirdly, I'm a scientist not a soldier or police officer or anything so I don't think I have anything much to contribute on that front. As for your final question, that is something I have

been pondering since the first day I arrived home after the procedure. Any public revealing of ourselves would have to be very carefully managed, and we would have to ensure the safety of the others before embarking on such an exercise. Quite how that could be achieved I have no idea, I feel that is far more your area of expertise than mine. My only conclusion now is that, unless we do as you mentioned and hide here for the rest of our lives, I don't see how we possibly *can* avoid news of our existence getting out. Then, of course, there are the other thirty five people. I don't see how we can guarantee that one of them won't be found or give themselves away unless we all get together and manage things as one single group. There is also the question of how many more people like us GSKM intend to create. If they carry on doing these procedures indefinitely then the world is bound to find out about it sooner or later."

Kip noticed that Marty was looking at the floor and seemed uncomfortable. Something about his answer to the final question had troubled him, he thought.

"Marty," he asked, "have I said something wrong?"

The man looked up. "No, Kip, not wrong, it's just..." he looked over at Gizmo. "I guess it's time to tell them," he said quietly.

"Yes, I agree," said Gizmo, and even the electronic speaker betrayed the worry in his synthesised voice.

"Giz?" said Pixel. "What's going on? What haven't you told us?"

"We only discovered this information recently. I needed to get Kip here and sort out the nutrition problem before I could begin to think about how we're going to deal with it. This information affects everything that has been said so far, all the fundamental questions we are faced with." His voice faltered. "You tell them, I just can't say it."

"It's fine," said Marty, "not a problem." He took a deep breath. "We have been hacking into GSKM for years now but, as you can all imagine, their security is immensely strong. We've always hit a brick wall that we couldn't get through, we couldn't get to the core of their system, to the deepest level of information. Recently we had some luck and managed to make a breakthrough. It then took a while longer to confirm from other sources the veracity of what we had found, so in fact it was only three days ago that we knew for certain the entire truth about GSKM's plans and why the procedure was really instigated." He looked over at Pixel's husband and daughter. "Jed, Swan, I'm sorry but this is going to be tough. You won't want to hear this but you have to."

Jed walked over to his daughter and took her hand. "We can take it, whatever it is, just tell us."

"Okay. GSKM's original reason for creating the procedure that made... look, I think we need to come up with a collective name for you or it's going to become confusing."

"Well," said Gizmo, "behind closed doors they refer to us as Jar Heads, so why don't we go with Jars for the time being? I know it doesn't really descriptively fit the three of us any longer but we can always invent a cool acronym for it later."

"Fine. So, they originally wanted to turn people into Jars as an experiment. They are trying to create the ultimate weapon, a computerised, robotic soldier but one with human intelligence and imagination. The human brain is way more complex and powerful than any computer yet invented, probably than any that ever *can* be invented, and it was deemed easier to do it this way than work with some form of artificial intelligence. And so they have been monitoring you all since your procedures to see how you adapted psychologically to such a drastic and radical change. For various reasons we don't have to go into, this experiment has been considered a failure. To sum up it seems that many of you have retained too much autonomy and ingenuity. GSKM hoped that you would all be so helpless that they would be able to easily manipulate you, to brainwash you into doing their bidding. They wanted an army of Jars who would carry out political assassinations and do anything they were told because their own situation was so awful that they had nothing to live for and would be grateful to be given a purpose, no matter how morally repugnant. The latest information we have is that somebody at GSKM HQ in New York has decided that the whole project should be discontinued. The physical appearance of Jars has been too repulsive to most people and has resulted in the violence that has killed many of them, and most of them have retained far too much independence." He paused, looking away from everyone and fixing his eyes on an empty spot on the far wall. "We now believe that they intend to kill all the remaining Jars over the next few weeks and cover up all evidence that any of it ever happened."

There was silence for some time.

"Well," said Kip eventually, "my first thought is that if we gather everyone together then it makes it far easier for GSKM to kill us all. My second thought is that remaining silent and hidden also makes it far easier for them to kill us all. No matter how horrified some people will be at our appearance - but that can be greatly ameliorated if we can somehow get to the others and give them all the updated solar skull - it is surely obvious to any reasonable person that we are still human beings, and legally we have the same rights as anybody else. GSKM have already committed multiple murders, we can't possibly hold them to account for that on our own. Even if it were possible for you to muster enough military personnel to destroy GSKM, which I very much doubt, I know that I cannot ever put my name to wholesale killing - that would be sinking to their level and replying to one evil by committing an equal evil. Besides, how we react to this has ramifications not just for us here and now, but for the whole future of humanity."

"What do you mean?" asked Pixel.

"Putting aside for the moment our current predicament and the grotesque motivations of GSKM," continued Kip, "this procedure is revolutionary and has saved all of our lives. If control of it can be wrenched away from GSKM and it can be properly regulated and transparent then it could save millions of lives in the future. And so you can see that how we behave now is of the utmost importance and goes way beyond our own personal fate. If we physically attack GSKM and kill people then the world will see us as monsters, as murderous robots and nothing more. We will be judged as less than human and any future benefits of this technology will have been squandered. Moreover, it could also encourage other similar organisations in the future to have another go at creating a race of electronic soldiers. So, as I see it, the best course of action, both for the three of us and everyone in this room, and for our whole species in the future, *must* be a peaceful one. We have to be seen to be acting in a non-violent, logical manner. Like it or not, we are at the vanguard of this technology, and we are the representatives of this procedure, this totally new way of existence to the world. We must ensure that it is *us* that represent this technology to the people and not GSKM. Sorry to sound portentous but this is a heavy burden and we must carry it with dignity."

Another silence ensued as everyone digested Kip's words.

"Well," said Gizmo, "certainly food for thought. I have to admit that much of this I had never considered, Kip. I'm doubly glad to have you amongst our ranks."

"I agree with everything you said," said Pixel, "but *what* do we actually do about it?"

"There is only one option I can see," said Kip, "one possible way that we can all remain safe and *manage* the way in which the world discovers our existence. I think we have to take our case, all the information you have gathered on GSKM, to the World Council."

"That's a huge step," said Marty. "Once we take that route, there can never be any going back. And, forgive me for sounding like a military man, but once we put ourselves in their hands it would prevent us from taking drastic action to defend ourselves, or launching a pre-emptive strike against GSKM. We would be restricted by International Law."

"Yes, but so would GSKM," said Kip. "If we do not take this course then our only remaining option is an all out war with a huge global organisation. Given what we know about GSKM and their immediate intentions towards us, and the lengths to which they have already gone, I don't see how we can possibly suffer anything but a defeat in that scenario."

"And," said Swan, "who is going to make these decisions? Who is entitled to a vote?"

"That," said Gizmo, "is something that has been on my mind for some time. It is perhaps the most insurmountable problem facing us."

"If I can look at this from a practical, dispassionate point of view," said Marty, "as someone who is very familiar with the procedure but has not personally undergone it. I'm looking at the logistics of whatever operation we decide to undertake. We have the resources and experience to protect ourselves - the other thirty five do not. The more I think about it the more I realise that it would be folly for us to attempt to protect all the others. I still have military contacts and we can easily obtain all the equipment, transport and firepower we need, but in reality securing the safety of the thirty five other Jars, not to mention their families and anybody else with them,

is totally beyond our capabilities. As soon as GSKM become aware of our intentions they will fight back and they will easily outgun us. We could probably rescue a few of the Jars but we would almost certainly be signing the death warrant of all the others. This whole situation is just too big now. I agree with Kip, I think we have no choice but to alert the World Council."

"What do you think, mum?" asked Swan tentatively.

"I agree that this is now too big for us to fight it on our own, and I reluctantly concede that we *must* fight, in a manner of speaking."

"Okay," said Gizmo, seeing Jed and Swan nodding along, "we seem to have reached a consensus. The question now is *how* exactly do we proceed?"

"At the moment we have the element of surprise," said Kip, "but that won't last for long so we have to make our first move count. As I see it we have two options. One, we drip feed the minimum of information and proof to the World Council that will make them take action and hope it is enough to put the brakes on GSKM's imminent plans to murder the others. Two, we go all out and present them in person with one or more Jars. Each plan has pros and cons but I think we need to decide today and act upon that decision immediately."

"Perhaps," said Pixel, "we should all spend a few minutes reflecting upon this momentous decision. I'm sure the others could do with a break and some refreshment."

GSKM Office, England

Robbie and four others were bleary eyed after countless hours of searching through hundreds of books for any indication that Kip had gleaned some item of dangerous information about GSKM prior to his procedure. They were onto the final stack of books when one of his colleagues shouted an exclamation.

"What is it?" asked Robbie. He hoped for something that would justify his suggestion to search the books but was equally hoping that they would not find anything too explosive. The woman passed a single sheet of folded paper to him. He read it with growing anxiety.

"Okay, finish going through the rest of the books. I'd better take this upstairs."

A little over an hour later Robbie sat uncomfortably in front of a huge screen and stared at the video feed from New York. He had personally met only one of the seven people facing him but he knew all too well that they were at the very *very* top of GSKM. If he were to be liquidated, it would be these people who would push the figurative button.

"And that is *everything*?" asked an especially scary looking man in his early sixties. Robbie knew that this man had personally given the order to kill many of the Jar Heads for what he himself considered to be fairly flimsy reasons. There was no question that he could put out an order to liquidate Robbie and have totally forgotten his name fifteen minutes later.

"Yes, sir," he replied, licking his lips nervously. "That and the data we've sent you is all that remained at his home." Robbie didn't like the way the man's eyes shifted across to Hugo for conformation, as if he himself was some underling not to be trusted but he did his best to show neither any irritation nor relief when Hugo nodded his agreement.

"Well, Hugo," said another of the big wigs, a severe looking woman in her mid fifties whose voice alone scared the shit out of Robbie, "this would seem to indicate a wider problem. If this man, a mere biologist, had such suspicions about the procedure beforehand and was wary of us, then *somebody* has clearly not been doing their job properly."

Robbie looked at the floor and desperately hoped that he wasn't about to become the scapegoat for this.

"Okay," she continued, "instigate operation Doomsday XSS immediately. You know what to do."

The screen went blank.

"Shit," muttered Robbie, "it's all over. I know they already decided to kill the current subjects but I thought we would continue with the project."

"No time for snivelling," said Hugo derisively, "pull yourself together man, you know the procedure. Get on with it."

Robbie nodded and gratefully ran from the room. Even as he sped towards his office he had made up his mind. He was sure that a hurricane of shit was about to hit the fan now. All this order meant for them now that they had no Jar Heads within their jurisdiction was the destruction of all files and records pertaining to the research and procedure and their sole client. At present the intention would be for GSKM to carry on with all its other business but Robbie knew that was never going to happen. He was sure that, with three of the Jar Heads off grid they weren't just going to stay quiet and forget all about it. Something unprecedentedly huge was going to happen sooner or later, and there was no fucking way on Earth he was still going to be around when it kicked off.

It would take him twenty minutes to fulfil his role in the Project XSS destruction process. After that he would clear his office, go home and pick up the emergency travel kit he had recently prepared, and catch the next flight to anywhere.

Arizona ranch

"Any last minute suggestions?" asked Marty. Nobody said anything. "Is the encryption and cloaking all in place?" Jed inspected a laptop screen and nodded. Marty took a final look around the assembled group, knowing that this would be the last moment of relative normality they would see for years to come. He could, of course, just walk out and disappear but the thought never even occurred to him. He was in this just as much as Giz, Pixel and Kip. He turned back to his laptop and pressed the send button. Then everybody fell silent as they waited for the reply.

World Council HQ, Geneva, Switzerland

"This is unbelievable."

"You doubt the evidence?"

"No, no, of course not, I just mean... bloody hell, you know *exactly* what I mean."

The head of the council wrapped his knuckles on the table.

"Okay, we've all seen everything now. I propose that our first act should be to protect these thirty five people who are unaware of what GSKM have in store for them. It is crystal clear that under all relevant laws, as well as any conceivable moral system, they are still human beings and what GSKM are intending to carry out is nothing less than murder. Any naysayers?" He looked around the table. "Proposal accepted." He turned to the head of tactical operations who was waiting in the doorway. "You have the addresses of the thirty five people, please arrange protection for them immediately. This is top priority, use all the resources you need to accomplish your

task." The man nodded briskly and left, closing the door behind him. "Right then, now we must decide what to do about GSKM. I think it only fair that we share this discussion with the people who brought this to our attention, and offer them the same protection as the others. If you could all turn towards the screen."

Everyone shuffled their chairs so that they were facing in the same direction. It took a few minutes for the call to be accepted. When the picture finally came through, many of the council had to suppress a gasp at the image they were greeted with.

"Apologies," said Kip, "we should have prepared you for our somewhat strange appearance. These are new protective pseudo skulls we have recently created. They are solar panels that replace the nutrition liquid which made us dependent on GSKM. Apart from that we are still what they refer to as Jar Heads. We decided that we needed a collective noun to distinguish ourselves from everyone else, to make conversation simpler, so, for the time being, we refer to ourselves as Jars. I am Kip, I'm a biochemist."

"I am Pixel."

"And I am Gizmo, I was the first to have this procedure. I trust that you have taken our information seriously?"

"Of course," said the head of the council. "We've had concerns about some of the people employed by GSKM for some years, but we never suspected anything on this scale. Anyway, you will be pleased to know that we have begun an operation to secure the safety of the other thirty five... Jars. As you obviously know they are spread far and wide so it will be a few hours before we know that they are all definitely safe but it is well in hand and I am confident of success unless GSKM decide to act immediately.

"And so we come to the further matter of what can be done about GSKM. I don't have to tell you that the world has never seen anything like this. If I may be so bold, Gizmo, the fact that you have never appeared in public in five years shows that you are aware of how negative the reaction to your appearance would initially be."

"Spot on. And we believe that GSKM were relying on that to keep us hidden. Their long term idea seems to have been to let the social isolation take its toll on us and then, when we were mentally weak, offer us what they hoped we would see as a way out. Doubtless if everyone had been allowed to live there would have been some who developed strong resentments and began to see non Jars as the enemy, thus making them ripe for recruitment in whatever campaign GSKM wanted to wage. Those people would see it as giving their endless, meaningless lives a new purpose. If they came to feel that they were totally separate from the rest of humanity, perhaps even *above* everyone else, then they would feel little to no compunction about inflicting violence and death upon the world at large. You can imagine, I'm sure, what an asset it would be to have a group of soldiers with human intelligence and logic but no need to eat, drink, sleep, no physical desires and no emotional connection to the enemy. And with a suitably reinforced skull cabinet they could be almost invulnerable. It only took Kip a few hours to design our solar skulls, imagine what GSKM's team of boffins could invent with their resources? Some kind of bullet proof, bomb proof casing perhaps. There would be no need for medics, no supplies, just find a way for them to operate weapons and point them in the right direction."

"Quite," said the council leader, "a terrifying prospect. A race of super soldiers. Well, rest assured that, the moment all the other Jars are safe, we shall be rounding up GSKM employees and conducting a meticulous investigation into this whole business."

"But there are tens of thousand of them all over the world," said Pixel, "how would that even be possible?"

"True, they are a huge organisation, but not quite as big as us," he smiled. "Besides, GSKM have existed for a long time as a legitimate company. It is only fairly recently that this other work began, and I'm confident that only their very senior people have any knowledge of this Project XSS monstrosity. We believe that no more than a few hundred people are involved, and we certainly have the resources to round up all of them. Indeed, a list is being drawn up as we speak, and plans are being made."

"I strongly suggest that you begin rounding them up immediately," said Gizmo. "They monitor all of us constantly, apart from those of us who can counteract their surveillance. As soon as one of them is reached GSKM will know and begin to act. If you wait then you'll probably find all their offices empty of both personnel and any evidence."

"I think it's already starting," said Marty, walking into the room. He stood facing the screen. With his military experience he cut straight to the point and didn't seem in the slightest bit intimidated at speaking to the leaders

of the World Council. "I'm picking up unusual activity from some of their servers, I think they are shutting down operations. They know the game is up and I'm pretty sure that they've begun the process of abandoning ship."

The council leader hung his head for a few moments, then leaned forward and pressed the intercom. "GSKM may be alert to our plans, instigate the round up immediately. Pull people off other assignments and focus on the New York headquarters." After receiving an acknowledgement of the order he turned back to the screen. "Well, we can do nothing now but wait and cross our fingers."

GSKM International HQ, New York

"Say that again."

"We arrived at the target's home and there were armed guards outside and what seemed like a whole delegation from the World Council. We turned right around but someone is giving chase. What do we do?"

"Lose them, you idiot."

He cut the call and was about to instigate the Total Doomsday procedure, the final self-destruct sequence that would effectively dismantle GSKM and consign it to the oblivion of history, when all power to the building shut down. He could already hear the noise emanating from the lobby and knew that he had precious little time left.

"Oh well, we had a good run, I suppose," he muttered to nobody in particular, taking the pistol out of his desk drawer and placing the barrel against his skull.

a remote village, Western Australia

Tam was the last of the Jars to be removed from his home, being the furthest away from any outposts of the World Council. There were few dwellings in the quiet, dusty street and the troops were perhaps too relaxed, knowing that all the other Jars were safe and the process of rounding up GSKM's senior people was well in hand.

So they didn't bother to cover up Tam for the ten second journey from his front door to the waiting vehicle.

From nowhere a small boy of about seven appeared and screamed at the fullest extent of his lungs. The ramshackle house next door, separated from Tam's residence by several metres of patchy, sunburnt grass, had seemed abandoned but now a man appeared, leaning out of the front window.

"Daddy, daddy, there's a monster!" he screamed, pointing at Tam and the man accompanying him along the path.

"Fucking hell," muttered the man and disappeared inside. Three more World Council troops rushed out of the house. Just as they were wondering what to do about the screaming child, something moved in the open window and a shotgun went off. The aim was deadly accurate. It shattered Tam's nutrition tank and punctured a large hole in his brain. For some reason known only to himself, the man leaned out of the window and took aim at the nearest troop. Using a firearm against a World Council troop was punishable by life imprisonment with no parole. In this case that would not be necessary. In the charter of the World Council it clearly stated that it's troops were forbidden to use weapons or violence against any unarmed citizen. It also stated with equal clarity what action they were permitted to take in these circumstances, and so the man never got to fire a second shot

on account of most of his head disintegrating into pulp.

Two of the troops quickly ushered Tam into the vehicle and sped away. One of them was a medic and he knew that going to a hospital was pointless. He disconnected the nutrition feed just in case there was any sensation left. He prayed that there wasn't.

One of the two remaining troops proceeded to have a very difficult conversation with the head of the council.

"I haven't spotted anyone taking photos or video, sir, but if they have then it's too late to do anything about it - they will already have uploaded the images. Even if there is no visual evidence we can't possibly keep this under wraps without breaking protocol and arresting the wife and child and anyone else in the area. Word will spread like a bush fire, even in this place. I think we can safely say that the cat is out of the bag."

"Okay," he sighed, "thank you for informing me. Contact the local police about the neighbour and wait for them to arrive, if they haven't been called already. You know the procedure. I'm looking at the video feed from our vehicle and it looks all too straightforward. You can expect my full support at the inquiry."

"Thank you, sir."

The head of the World Council ended the call and let out a long, deep sigh.

"Well," he said to his colleagues, "you all heard that. By the end of the day everyone in the world will know about the existence of Jars. If we're very unlucky, they'll also have seen live footage of the murder of one of them. So, what the fuck do we do now?"

Three days later Kip, Gizmo, Pixel, Marty, Jed and Swan watched the chaos unfolding on television. At first the World Council had thought that it would not be a total disaster as there was no evidence of anybody having any visual evidence, but then it transpired that a house across the street had external security cameras that had captured the whole thing. When the owner arrived home from work and heard about the events he realised he was sitting on a gold mine and sold the footage to a news network for an untold fortune. Once the network had wrung all it could out of their exclusive story the footage found its way onto the internet and within hours the entire world had almost ground to a halt. There was not a single broadcaster, podcast, chat group or any other form of human communication anywhere on the globe that was talking about anything else. It couldn't have been a bigger story if aliens had landed.

Pixel was distraught to discover that within hours of the footage being released there were several versions of a video game where players chased and shot Jars in gruesomely realistic detail. It was then they discovered that a Jar was still capable of something akin to crying. Gizmo immediately began drawing up plans for the sort of bullet proof casing he had mentioned to the World Council, oblivious to the fact that he was now intent on turning himself into the sort of super soldier they had been determined not to become. Pixel and Swan became increasingly worried as Gizmo, Marty and Jed talked more and more about "fighting back", "going on the offensive", "weaponising ourselves" and using other unnerving language.

Inevitably the word "Frankenstein" was being bandied about. Religious figures from around the world were forced into public statements, which ranged from patience and tolerance towards all living creatures to Old Testament smiting. There was so much public discussion on the internet that they were unable to do more than skim the surface.

After a few hours Pixel could take no more of it and went off on her own. For the first time in two years she wished that she could sleep. As it was there seemed to be nothing she could do to calm down her mind and shut out the dread that was overwhelming her. Eventually she gave up and was wondering what to do when Kip found her.

"I am no happier about all this war talk than you," he said, "I'm a scientist not a soldier. I hate to say it but I'm afraid this only confirms my view of Americans."

If Pixel could have smiled she would.

"Thank you, Kip, that's the one thing to cheer me up in the last three days. I've always suspected that my husband misses the military and I'm forced to admit that he's enjoying the prospect of a good fight."

"If I could try and strike an optimistic note," said Kip, "the whole world is in shock. I can kind of sympathise - I was in shock myself when I woke up and discovered what they had done to me. Imagine what people thought when confronted out of nowhere with the sight of Tam? You can hardly blame them for panicking to such a degree. However, I believe that given time they will mostly calm down. There will *always* be people who hate anything that is different from themselves but I am confident that eventually most people will adopt a sensible attitude towards our existence.

"Anyway, I've been thinking that we need to develop a strategy for the future, and I'm not talking about military strategy."

"What do you mean?" asked Pixel.

"Well, for the time being nothing has materially changed for you and me. I wasn't planning to appear in public any time soon even before all this happened, and I'm sure you weren't either."

"No, definitely not," she confirmed.

"So, we continue what we would have done anyway: we hide out here and work on a plan for our long term future. I know this situation is far from ideal but news of us would have come out sooner or later. Now that it has happened in this manner I think the need to manage our public image is more urgent than ever."

"What are you proposing?"

"I think we should record a video."

"We?"

"Yes, you and me. We have different perspectives and, grateful as I am to the others for saving my life, I would rather that my opinions were broadcast to the world before any of them take drastic action and we are forever seen as weaponised robots."

"Are you proposing to discuss this with them or do it anyway?"

"Now that is a question I am currently struggling with. I would value your opinion, Pixel."

She was considering her reply when a considerable commotion reached their digital ears.

"What the hell is that?" said Kip. "It doesn't sound good."

Marty ran into the room brandishing a machine gun.

"We're under attack. Somebody must have found out that there are Jars here. We've alerted the World Council and troops are on their way. I don't know if we can hold them off for long enough. You'd better get to the panic room, Swan is already there." He ran off.

"Follow me," said Pixel moving at top speed.

After a few twists and turns they arrived at a small lift.

"There's just about enough room for both of us, hurry up."

Kip directed his chair and they descended into a concrete cellar where Swan was operating a computer. She smiled bravely.

"Okay, we're safe now, all we can do is watch the killing and hope we win."

Pixel was horrified to hear her daughter talk so matter of factly. She stared at the screen and watched Marty and then her husband emerge from the building. She caught the look in her husband's eyes and her mood dropped even further - he was clearly more intent on attack than defence. All three gasped as Gizmo also emerged into the sunlight.

"What the hell is that?" said Pixel.

"I heard them talking twenty minutes ago about testing a weapon," said Swan quietly, "I didn't think they actually had one ready to go."

"It's some sort of laser," said Kip, "I can't believe they are being so reckless. Do they even know who these people are?"

"No," said Swan, "and they don't care. They have the bloodlust and they're going to kill anyone they set eyes on. One of our perimeter guards has been shot - he'll survive but that's all they need to crank up the war machine."

They watched aghast as Gizmo began to fire the laser and all hell broke loose.

to be continued

marcusfreestone.com

ALSO AVAILABLE BY MARCUS FREESTONE FROM SMASHWORDS:

FICTION

THE T14 SERIES

The Memory Man: T14 Book 1

Random Target: T14 Book 2

Just Murder: T14 Book 3

Two Serial Killers, A Wedding And A Funeral: T14 Book 4

Never Kidnap A Serial Killer: T14 Book 5

THE MENTAL SERIES

Brian: Book 1

Gemma: Book 2

Paul: Book 3

The Least Resistance

[Ethelbert's Sunday Morning](#) (short stories)

[What To Do If Trapped In A Lift With A Dentist](#) (poetry)

NON FICTION

Positive Thinking and The Meaning of Life

101 Ways To Happiness

Tell Depression To #@%! Off

The Psychology Of Happiness: Unravelling Self Help Nonsense By Understanding Your Brain

Donald Trump and Brexit: Misguided Rebellion

101 Completely Made Up Untrue Facts

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcus Freestone has been publishing novels and non-fiction since 2013. This thing that you have just finished reading (or are unwisely looking at the end of before you've started, tut tut, do people do that with e-books?) is his eighteenth published book. Before that he worked in journalism, a variety of tedious office jobs, completely failed to build a career in stand up comedy and was once paid £250 for a script for a TV series that was never made for reasons that were nothing to do with him or the quality of the script. His biggest success to date has been the almost 100,000 downloads of the free version of the e-book 'Positive Thinking And The Meaning Of Life' (though he is probably prouder of the time he stole the register from the school library). He will continue writing books until he is too old and tired to do so.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

Marcus Freestone can be contacted via the electronic telegraph service at

marcus.freestone@yahoo.com

or

[Facebook](#)

He does not do twitter because his mind is too hyperactive to cram anything into 140 characters. He tried it once for a few weeks and couldn't see the point of it, and anyway all the #'s and @'s gave him a headache.

###