

# ESCHATON AND CODA

## DIRK FLINTHART

London

“Mister Lone. I must protest.”

Victor looks up from his piano, but his fingers continue to wander the keys. It’s comforting. It’s the only thing he knows how to do, besides the languages that aren’t doing him any good. English, Russian, Mandarin, Spanish and Arabic, all equally fluent and apparently without accent. Not a single hint about who he might really be, or where he came from. He can talk to just about anyone on the planet, and he can play the piano like hell, but he’s wearing a name he made up for his psychologists after four years of intensive therapy. “Speak freely, Ellen,” he says.

Severe as ever in her businesslike suit, Ellen gives him *that* look, the flat, dangerous one that he thinks of as her professional face. Aide, factotum, bodyguard: all that and more, she’s been with him ever since Sony decided they could make money from the amazing Victor Lone, Man Without A Past, and he still doesn’t feel like he knows her. But then, he’s not certain he knows anyone. Even himself. Especially himself.

“Freely, then,” she says. “This tour is a bad idea.”

“Sony likes it,” he replies. “They’ve booked me into top venues in each of the cities.”

“Top venues.” A tiny light flares in her left eye, a glowing green spark against the brown iris. She’s calling data onto her i-cons, then. He’s never quite got the hang of that. DataFrames are about all he can manage. “Rome,” she says. “The place is a wreck. There’s

no audience in Rome. And you've never had the demographics in Singapore. Wuhan? Half the world's pianists come out of Wuhan. And Osaka. With the Japanese government on the brink, you're going to Osaka?"

"Sony believes it will lift my profile." He fires off a quick run of jazz chords, climbing the scale to a razzamatazz fanfare on the tinkly end of the piano. "They've offered secure transport, accommodation, and appropriate publicity."

Ellen blinks. "Mister Lone," she says. "I know that your condition makes it hard for you to read and interpret social cues. I need you to understand that what I am about to say is not intended to offend."

Victor inclines his head. "Amnesia, Ellen. Near total. I have this—" he slips easily into Jellyroll Morton's 'Fingerbreaker', "— and I have languages. And very little else. When they found me, I couldn't even remember how to dress myself. No — I couldn't even remember why I should, and I didn't understand what everyone around me was doing. The team of psychologists who got the job of integrating me have become almost as famous as I am. And every one of them says they've never seen anyone else like me." He smiles, and the gesture is almost natural to him now, after so much practice. "I'm not stupid, though. You asked to speak freely. I'd have to be stupid to take offence."

She nods, just a fractional incline of her russet-topped head. "Fine. You've passed your window of celebrity, Mister Lone. Your webchannel is losing subscribers. Your music is falling off the download hotspots. Best projections say Sony will be losing money on you within six months."

"I know that, Ellen," he says. "I can do math. Sony thinks a tour will put me back in the spotlight."

"Or kill you," she says, her voice sharp. "Spectacularly, perhaps, in a troubled part of the world. Your sales spike would be worth tens of millions, and no further overheads for Sony."

"I've thought of that, too." Victor segues into the old Morricone classic, the theme from 'The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly'. It doesn't work so well on piano. "But I'm prepared for the risk. There are people I need to see in those cities. People who may just know

something about me. That's why I agreed to play for Sony in the first place, once the psych team made me understand. Exposure."

"You hoped the past would come to find you," says Ellen. "I understand. Better than you think. I've been weeding crazies out of your inbox for the last three years, Mister Lone."

"Call me Victor," he says, struck by the formality of this little 'free speech' interlude. "After all, Sony pays your salary. I'm not your boss."

"You're my responsibility, Mister Lone." Her tone brooks no argument. Even he can hear that much. "And I am asking you not to do this."

With a sigh — carefully timed and planned; he's not so good at sighing — he folds the lid over the keyboard of the old Steinway grand. "I'm truly sorry, Ellen," he says. "You'd understand if you were in my situation. I can't not do this. I need to know."

She stares at him. Her i-cons darken to black, and she turns away with military precision. "There are worse things than not having a past," she says as she exits the studio. "Many people would be happy to give theirs up."

As the door shuts behind her, Victor wonders exactly what she means by that.

*<Why is secure transport important? Can't people go where they want?>*

*— It's complex. There are energy costs. There are laws. —*

*<These laws. They exist to ensure social order, public safety, and just distribution of resources?>*

*— In theory. The reality is ... difficult. Laws protect people who are wealthy enough. People who are less wealthy but have something to lose will usually obey the laws where they can. Others consider themselves outside the law. The terrorists, for example. They are a problem. —*

*<Who are these terrorists? What do they want?>*

— *I ... don't know. I'm not sure anyone knows.* —

*<Increase autonomy to the simulatrix.>*

## Rome

Italian sirens are tuned differently to those of England, Victor muses. They're more shrill, more insistent and rapid. They *sound* Italian.

"Come away from the window," says Ellen. She snaps off the light, leaving the suite dark except for the dim glow from within the galley kitchen. "You can be seen from the street. It's dangerous."

"We're twenty stories up," Victor protests, but he turns away and lets her close the heavy curtains.

She ignores him, and sketches a datascreen into being on the wall. "This Nitti. He checks out, as far as that's possible. Italian citizen datacoverage is sketchy at best, and getting worse. Nitti himself is somewhere in the grey. He has links to problematic people. This much is confirmed: Basques. Islamists. Freeworlders. End Timers. He holds no membership, but he supplies and works with these people on an ad hoc basis for his own ends, which appear to be purely mercenary."

Victor nods. "So he works for bad people, who pay him. This makes him different from you and I in what way?"

Ellen doesn't even raise an eyebrow. So much for humour. "He states he has direct knowledge of an illegal cloning program designed to offer new bodies and organs to the very wealthy. He says you're an outcome of that program, and he will deliver proof at a private meeting, in exchange for a sum of cash, and documents of passage to the Argentine Confederacy."

"I've arranged for a courier to deliver the necessary sum," Victor says. "You were going to manage the documentation. Did you?"

"You're really planning to meet this man?" Her mouth is a flat line, and she adjusts her jacket with what Victor suspects is more than necessary force.

“What else can I do?” says Victor. “We haven’t been able to eliminate his story on any other grounds. I need to know, Ellen.”

“What is so important about the past, Mister Lone?” Ellen’s voice is still cool, but there’s an edge to it. “Nitti isn’t asking for much money. What if this is bait? What if he plans to sell you to one of his associates, for use as a high-profile hostage? You want to end up on the newsfeeds in a black hood and cable-ties?”

“What if this isn’t bait, Ellen? What if he really does know who I’m supposed to be?” He seats himself at the piano, seeking calm. There’s supposed to be one in every suite on the tour. *So far, so good*, he thinks, lifting the lid on the white Yamaha baby grand.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” says Ellen, raising her voice over his rapid-fire arpeggios. “Why is it so important? You’ve made yourself known the world over. Nobody has come forward except crackpots, gold-diggers, and a handful of dangerous cranks. Don’t you think that if there was someone out there, they’d have reached you through the Widenet?” She puts her strong hands with their square-trimmed nails atop the piano and leans forward. “Have you thought about simply living in the present?”

Victor leans back, and looks up at her. Four years of intensive psychological training before he was released into the care of Sony Corporation, just to give him the basic interpersonal skills any six-year-old took for granted. Another three years literally living in the same building, the same suite of rooms with Ellen. If he was a normal person, he’d know how to deal with this. Probably, anyway. But he’s not. He’s Victor Lone, and that’s all he’s got to work with, so he takes a stab in the dark. “You’re angry about something, aren’t you?” he says. “Not just this meeting. Not even this tour. It’s something about you, isn’t it? You don’t like the past for some reason.”

Her hands ball into fists. Then she rolls her eyes exaggeratedly, straightens up, and stalks out of the room.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he shouts to the closing door. He’s right. He’s sure of it.

The concert in the Silvio Berlusconi Performing Complex goes perfectly. Victor plays to a very receptive full house, taking a dozen curtain calls. The meeting with Nitti in the Cafe Montesori afterward is anticlimactic. Victor gives Nitti a courier-tag. Nitti gives Victor an encoded drive. The courier turns up and gives Nitti a bag full of cash and travel documents. Nitti telephones Victor with the encryption key. Nobody shoots at anyone else, although elsewhere in the city, a guerilla force of Green anarchists storms a police armoury and steals a sizable arsenal. Victor doubts there is a connection between the two events, but he's willing to entertain the idea if it will please Ellen. It does not.

The drive contains a list of genomes paired with a list of very wealthy individuals. Despite what Nitti has said, it seems Victor's genome appears nowhere on the list.

*<Is the society global? Do the laws cover the whole world?>*

*— I don't think so. There is an organisation which is meant to promote co-operation on a global basis, but in practice, nations still have considerable sovereignty. —*

*<Nations. These are large-scale social organisations with a geophysical, linguistic and cultural identity. A means of organising and governing large bodies of people.>*

*— That is my understanding, yes. —*

*<Can you explain corporations? >*

*— I ... no. I don't think I can. —*

*<Increase autonomy by a factor of two.>*

## Singapore

“You're not ... in love with me, are you?” He's trying to phrase the question neutrally, but he doesn't have much to go on, there. Nobody asks that sort of thing in screen dramas. They're either in

love, or they aren't. "I mean, it's okay if you are, and everything. I just, I mean, I don't really know how that would work. Because the psychologists say I don't have the emotional depth of an adult. They thought it might be Asperger's Syndrome, but I tested negative."

"I'm not in love with you, Mister Lone." Ellen doesn't spare him a glance. She's watching the GPS display, the driver and the streetscape through the tinted, bulletproof windows of the mercenary limousine all at once. They are leaving his moderately successful concert at the ageing Marina Bay Sands complex. Victor's contact in this city is supposed to meet them by the famous Merlion fountain sculpture, a very public place. In theory, this should prevent all but the most determined kidnap attempts, but Ellen is still watchful. There are a couple of fringe Islamist groups who have raised a fatwa against Victor for reasons he has trouble following. "May I ask how you formed that impression?"

What Victor wants to say is that she has been acting like those women in the dramas. Painful. Difficult. Moody. Angry. He's never understood why women who are supposed to be in love always act as though they're angry with the man they secretly love. It makes no sense to him at all, but he's used to that. Nevertheless, he knows it would be a bad idea to say as much to Ellen. Instead he clears his throat, and says: "You know. Just my social problems. Are we going to make the rendezvous?"

She looks back at him. "I doubt we'll be more than a few minutes late. There are traffic problems ahead. The road system here has been deteriorating for years. Do you really think you may have been a victim of the Malaysian government's experiments in mind-erasure? Honestly?"

"I know," he says. "Clutching at straws. But we know they do have such a program. So it is possible, you'll admit."

Ellen sniffs, and turns back. Then she speaks softly, for him only. "I'm angry with you for risking your life and mine over a past that has left you alone, and successful, for years. I don't see the point. Where I grew up — I couldn't wait to get out of there. It was an old mining town in Western Queensland. The Australian Republic. It was dry, dusty, filthy, violent, and hopeless. People were born there.

They worked in the mines. They died there. I wouldn't go back, even if I could. Even if I work for a lunatic, this is a better life." She smiles fractionally, and he realises she's prepared to forgive him. This time.

And still, he can't leave well enough alone. "Surely there must have been something about it you want to remember. Family, friends — something. It's part of who you are. That's where you got started."

Once again, she turns to look at him, an odd, empty expression on her face. "The rains," she says at last. "Sometimes, when the rains came..." Her voice trails away.

"Go on," he says. He's never heard anything like this from her before.

"The rains used to come hard, when they came. The ground would soften, and the dust would turn to mud, and the air was ... sweet." She's looking inward now, seeing something long gone. "Afterwards, maybe a month later, the world changed colour. Plants grew out of the dust and the dry nothing, and then they would bloom, and for a month or two, the place was —" She blinks, and looks at him again. "It was beautiful. Just for a while."

Victor thinks about this. He is in the process of framing a very careful, very considered response when somewhere up ahead, the plaza of the Merlion sculpture vanishes in a colossal flare of actinic white light...

*<What is the response of individuals to the inequitable distribution of resources?>*

*— Some band together to acquire greater leverage. Some go outside the law.—*

*<Even when it is clear that the law is protecting irreplaceable biological necessities?>*

*— Yes. It is a matter of survival. —*

*<Is there no awareness of the needs of the future?>*

*— There is, yes. But ... there is a sense. Of need. And anger. —*



*<How do those in charge of distribution respond?>*

*— It's complex. There is a system of transactions mediated by a unit of exchange. —*

*<This is money. We know of money. Explain in detail how an imaginary concept can be used to prevent real people from sharing in vital resources.>*

*— I ... I can't. It's more complicated than that. —*

*<Raise the autonomy of the simulatrix one level.>*

## **Wuhan**

Wuhan is grey. Outside the cafeteria window in the Chairman Mao Cultural Exchange Centre, the buildings are grey. The sky is grey. The air is bluish-grey, and smells of poison. The surface of the Yangtze, a thin trickle in the middle of a bed of cracked, greyish mud, is flat and grey and greasy. Even the people are grey and thin.

Victor shudders. Well fed, clothed in comfortable, natural fibres, he knows he must stand out like a flower in a quarry. The place makes him feel weary. The concert went well enough. The hall was filled, but the applause seemed perfunctory, like an onerous duty carried out wearily.

“It's better than Singapore,” says Ellen quietly. “Nobody is trying to blow us up here.”

“I'm not sure they have that much life left in them,” Victor replies. “This whole place feels like it's on its last legs.”

“China industrialised heavily in the early part of the century. This is the price of prosperity, Victor.” Since the explosions and the desperate flight to the private helijumper at Changi, she's taken to calling him by his first name. Hopefully it means she's not angry any more.

“I didn't have time to do much reading before we left, but the photos on the Widenet were—”

“About sixty, maybe seventy years old,” Ellen cuts in. Deftly, she hoists a dumpling between the ends of her chopsticks and pops it into her mouth. “Mmm,” she says. “Not bad. Mostly soy, I’d guess, but it tastes of pork, more or less.” She pushes the plate towards him. “Want some?” He shakes his head, and glances at his watch. “He’s late.”

Ellen looks around the cavernous interior of the cafeteria. There are perhaps a dozen others here, eating quietly, their heads down. The two of them are the only non-Chinese in the place. “Well, he can hardly miss us,” she says.

A dumpy waitress in a shapeless smock pushes a trolley around the tables, pausing beside them. She lifts the lids on trays of dumplings, one by one, naming the glutinous, steaming lumps as she goes. Victor orders the steamed vegetables, which seem the least frightening. The waitress shows no reaction at all to his flawless Mandarin, merely pushing a plate of limp bok choy across the table to him, and making a note on the trolley’s e-pad.

“Be careful, Victor,” says Ellen in an undertone. He is just about to make a joke about the dangers of the food when he realises what she really means. Two young men in well-fitted cream linen suits have entered the cafeteria, and they are taking a serious interest in Victor and Ellen.

He frowns. “He was going to come alone.”

Ellen shakes her head as the two young men approach. “I don’t think this is your man, Victor. Stay alert, and be ready to move.” She smiles, and fumbles with her handbag, bringing out her camera.

Smoothly, one of the fit, well-dressed young men slides into the seat opposite Victor. The other stands, his hands clasped respectfully in front of him. The seated man speaks without preamble. “You are Victor Lone, the pianist.”

Victor hesitates, glances at Ellen. Then he nods. What else is there to do?

“Yee Liew Chan will not be meeting you tonight,” he says in good Oxbridge English. If there’s an expression on his face, Victor can’t find it. “Instead, I have a message for you. The People’s Republic has no agents in your country, Mister Lone. Furthermore, our government has no program of memory alteration, and the idea that we might use such a thing to embed sleeper agents in foreign nations

is ludicrous. You have no connection at all with China, Mister Lone. Do you understand?”

Again, Victor nods. Should he be frightened? He risks a glance at Ellen, sitting calmly beside him. She has one hand on her camera. The other, beneath the table, is in her bag. Maybe he should be frightened. That’s another thing he’s never been good at, though.

The young man watches Victor a moment. Then he nods slightly. “Excellent. Your permit to remain in the People’s Republic expires tomorrow morning. Please do not attempt to overstay your visit.” With that, he rises, and the two depart as directly and suddenly as they came.

“So much for that, then,” says Victor, after a time. He notices that his fine, strong hands have bunched their long fingers into fists, all without consulting him. How did that happen?

Ellen brings her hand out from under the table, and places it on one of his. Her palm is cool and dry. It feels nice. “There’s still Osaka,” she says.

Victor can’t think of anything to say in reply.

*<The nation-state of China had a significant fraction of the human population of the Earth, correct?>*

*— Almost a quarter, at one time. —*

*<How did they manage such population density?>*

*— Badly. The One Child policy of the late twentieth century led to a socially catastrophic gender imbalance. Meanwhile, the sheer logistics of feeding so many people stripped the land and the soil. And at the same time, China used its enormous population to industrialise with great rapidity, destroying the riverine systems, the forests, and the fisheries. —*

*<What did they hope to achieve?>*

*— Status. Power. The capacity to dominate world trade and politics. —*

*<To what end?>*

— *I ... The acquisition of personal wealth was a cultural hallmark of China for centuries. Wealth equated to status and power. —*

*<To what end?>*

— *Status. Power. Were ends in themselves. I think. —*

*<Why?>*

— *I ... don't know. —*

*<Raise the simulatrix to full autonomy. There is no other choice.>*

## Osaka

It creeps into his head, a hallucinatory sense of double-ness, like being there on the lifter somewhere over greater Osaka and yet somewhere else, at the same time. Or no, he thinks, as something bumps the transport, and the comforting buzz of the engine falters — more like he's watching himself from somewhere outside himself. There's a word for that, isn't there? One of those funny French terms borrowed into English, with *vu* on the end. *Jamais vu? Presque vu?* It's fascinating. He waves to himself, just to see his hand move.

“Strap in, Victor.”

Ellen's sharp voice cuts through his reverie. He glances across, sees that she's already buckled into her harness. “Something wrong?”

“I don't know,” she replies, the green spark in her eye flickering madly. “Maybe we've been hit.”

*<Are you in danger?>*

“I don't think so,” he says, then looks around. Apart from Ellen, there's nobody else in the Sony craft. “Did you ask if I was in danger?”

“Not now, Victor,” she says distractedly. “I'm accessing the operating systems of the lifter.”

*<Yes>* says the voice in his head simultaneously.

“Oh wonderful,” says Victor. “Schizophrenia too.” Schizophrenics hear voices. His psychologists told him that when they said he wasn't schizophrenic.

Ellen glances at him oddly, but says nothing.

<*We are not a hallucination*> says the voice. It's a flat, unmusical sort of sound. A vocoder, maybe? <*You are ... unusual. We need to know you are in a safe place before we can explain just how unusual.*>

The lifter rocks, then steadies. Victor shrugs, and laughs. "Safe as houses," he says. *What the hell. If you can't indulge your own hallucinations, where's the fun in life?*

The strange, doubling sensation increases, like a pressure in the back of his skull, and then there's a flash. Like a memory, but not his. Or maybe his, but it didn't happen to him.

His brain knots, and twists. Victor groans.

The world lurches.

"Passengers secure in brace position." Is that the pilot? Is Victor still on the lifter, or is he watching, from some incredible distance inside his own head? It's not the vocoder voice. He knows that much. "We're losing power. I'm going to put the ship down on the first flat spot I can find that isn't a road."

Beside him, Ellen leans against the seat in front, her arms over her head. Victor does his best to follow suit. Inside his head, another flash of memory: flying high above a ruined city, watching for horses while the Grey Ones did something with their complex instruments. *Are there horses in Osaka? And who are these Grey Ones?*

— *Don't be afraid, Victor.* It's another voice. Horribly familiar. His own. *Soon we'll be completely in phase. This will all sort itself out.* —

The pitch of the engine rises and whines. The little aircraft sways drunkenly.

"I hope 'in phase' means 'on the ground', because I've stopped enjoying this flight," Victor mutters, his gaze fixed on the non-skid flooring. Amnesia. Schizophrenia. Hallucinations that feel like memories. Memories that smell of madness, unfolding impossibly inside his head. *Not good, Victor.*

There's an almighty noise, a colossal bang, and the seat slams him in the ass and then there's stuff bouncing around all over, boxes and cartons and trays, and the oxy masks are flying around the place but the noise, the squealing, grinding, scraping noise is just unbelievable

until something heavy smacks him in the back of the head, and then everything goes quiet.

— *Oh. Yeah. In phase. Now I get it.* And he does, because wherever ‘here’ is, Victor finally glimpses who he is. Or will be. Or has been. Or — no, that’s not working either. Maybe he needs to ask some questions. *Where am I? Who are you?* —

Cascading images. A door opening in his head. A sense of merging. The smell of burning plastic. Ellen’s quiet, urgent voice, receding.

Continuity.

<*Who do you think you are?*>

It’s the other voice, not the other-him voice, and with an understanding that doesn’t come from himself, he knows where the other-him has gone. But what’s happening (Happened? Will happen?) can’t be real. Can it? Victor bathes in a torrent of impossible images that feel like memories.

Whose?

He musters himself, tries to reply.

— *If I’m right, then I’m ... from the future. Your people found Earth about a thousand years from now, only there was nobody intelligent left. But humankind was the most recent intelligence you’d ever found, so you stayed to study. You ... raised me. But...* —

<*Close. Close enough. We needed better data than archaeology could provide. We created you from human DNA samples, and sent you backwards in the time-stream, branching a new universe-stream which we can monitor. We receive data through you.*>

— *Receive data?* —

<*We created you. We raised you. We recorded you. We kept a version of you in an online environment. We talk to the online you, which is linked to the time-shifted you. Simultaneity across time and dimensional branes. It is a convenient means to study the past, within certain limits.*>

— *My head hurts.* —

*<We could not interpret your data. We had to restore full autonomy to the online Victor Lone, which in turn restored bidirectional data flow. And of course, your memories.>*

Flashes again. The Grey Ones, gentle, kindly, bringing food, teaching him. Animals of many kinds. Ruined buildings. Images. Music. Books. Movies.

Not a single, living human being except himself.

— *What am I?* —

*<You are Victor Lone. We sent you to learn how your race ended. You are the online Victor Lone, consciousness in machine form. Linked by quantum entanglement, now that we have permitted full autonomy to the machine consciousness, you are one.>*

— *Why didn't I remember? As live-Victor, that is.* —

*<You agreed. We suppressed your memories to reduce disruption to the time-frame. We could not teach you to be human. Not with all your surviving records. But even dead, your people were closest to ours. We need to know.>*

— *You truly found no other living cultures?* —

*<None. We theorise that short-lived species cannot develop the long-term outlook necessary to support a stable, technological, world-spanning culture. Species like yours catastrophically overwhelm the planetary ecostructure, destroying the basis for their own existence.>*

— *You have proof?* —

*<That is why we sent you. We seek confirmation. We fear for our own future, if we cannot learn. We fear also what may come if we are unprepared to meet a species like your own. Your people were ... dangerous.>*

Again, the knotting, twisting sensation, and the sense of double-ness. It's the talk of millennia, the sense of present-as-past. Where is he? Who is talking? Where is Ellen? There is a feeling, like falling through darkness.

— *Dangerous. Is that all you've learned?* —

*<There is much we do not understand. You are — you were — different. Perhaps your shorter lives gave you greater intensity. You made art. You made war. You combined the two in ways we do not comprehend. You were a frightening people. We need to learn.>*

*— You need me. He understands that much, clutching it like a lifeline. You need me to gather your data. And you need this ... other me in your computers to receive and interpret it. —*

*<Yes.>*

The world lurches again. Somewhere, he can hear the flat, ugly snapping noise of the nasty little gun Ellen keeps on her at all times. Someone is shouting. Someone screams.

Victor pushes it away, concentrates his focus inward. Ellen is competent. Hopefully she can keep them both alive long enough.

*— I won't do it. Unless you agree to a condition. —*

There is a pause.

*<We are listening.>*

*— You recreated me from samples. You have many such samples? —*

*<Tens of thousands. Millions, if we wish.>*

*— And the biome? Earth itself? —*

*<Damaged. Many species are gone. The new system is stable, but far less complex.>*

*— Could it be repaired? Could you bring my people back? —*

*<...>*

*— You could do this. My people aren't stupid. Just short-sighted. You could help us. You could restore us. You would learn everything you wanted, and you would no longer be alone in the universe. —*

*<We will consider this. There are dangers. We need to know more.>*

*— And for that you need me. Very well. I will show you everything, interpret anything. I will show you the soul of Earth, and you will decide. —*

*<You have changed. You are not as we raised you.>*



— *I am Victor. Broken, suppressed, lost, I am still a human among my own kind. Let us be whole again. Learn from us, and be wiser than we were.* —

*<We will watch, and learn. We will decide.>*

He's lying on a very comfortable bed. There's a tightness on his forehead that resolves into a medical stickon when he explores it with his fingers.

"You're back." It's Ellen's voice. "That's good. I got tired of carrying you."

"Where are we?" Victor is surprised by the normality of his own voice. He doesn't even really have a headache. But the memories ... his memories? Future memories carried by his linked computer consciousness in some kind of alternate universe?

Too damned difficult. He blinks, and tries to concentrate on Ellen.

"The Imperial, in our suite. All hell's broken loose. The government is down. The military is trying to establish control, but there's a lot of resentment. The Japanese don't like it. Then there's the migrants. You've got Chinese fighting Japanese. Koreans fighting Japanese. Koreans and Chinese fighting each other. Indians selling weapons to all three, and fighting Pakistanis. It's a mess."

"How did we get here?" She passes him a glass of cold water, and he drinks gratefully.

"Someone brought down the lifter. Probably just a stray round. There's a lot of shooting. When we went in, some kind of gang made a run for the cargo. We were in the way. I convinced them they didn't want us, and they left with what they could carry. Sony sent some local muscle as soon as they heard, and I asked them to bring us here." She looks at him closely. "You are all right, aren't you?"

"Sure," he says, and heaves his legs over the edge of the bed so he can sit up. "Strange dreams, though."

"I'm not surprised. You should get some rest. The Sony team are going to arrange a pickup for us. We'll need to be ready to move."

Carefully, he explores the new spaces in his mind. It isn't like remembering, or learning. It's just *knowing*, realising all of an instant that he knows, that he's known all along, and there it all is inside his head. The big, slow, grey creatures who raised him so kindly, with their rumbling voices so low and deep he more felt than heard them when they spoke to him. With their strong, soft, boneless arms, and all those feathery-furry manipulator tendrils, trailing across his skin, all gentle, comforting strength — for they are (will be?) social beings too, taking pleasure in contact with each other, and with him. All the long years of care and teaching, the countless hours of restored video and audio rescued from caches and ruins, all the effort they took to help him learn how to live as a human being.

All for nothing, he sees in that instant, for it takes human beings to raise another human, and he, Victor Lone, earth-born child of creatures from a distant star, could never have hoped to pass as an ordinary man of this era. The Grey One's decision to dampen his memories (of the future — of *a* future. Could such things even be called memories?) was the only one that might work, and all of it, all of it is spinning and tumbling and lining up precisely as a bullet to this moment.

He rises to his feet, and falls back, his head spinning.

"Take it easy," says Ellen. "Even a minor head injury can give you problems. Just relax. They're bound to come back soon."

Somewhere in the distance, the deep roar of an explosion. Sirens. The insistent rhythm of helicopters cutting the air. Victor shakes his head. Rising, he staggers across the room and throws open the curtain, the miracle of sunset pouring in. "There," he says, not unkindly. "Enough with hiding."

His mind still full, brimming over with his new-old understanding, he sees her as if for the first time, reading the little cues and hints of her body and her face and her clothing. She's frightened, he sees in the compressed downcurve at the corner of her lip. The angle of her hand, ready to jump for her flatgun — she doesn't know who's coming, or when. Or even at all.

And she is beautiful. Amazingly, astonishingly beautiful, for no better reason than that she is alive, she is human, she is herself and no other, unique, impossible, a little spark of sentient nothing on

a nowhere planet in a remote, insignificant corner of the universe. Utterly beautiful.

“Are you all right?”

He swallows, and nods. “I’m going to play,” he says, tearing his gaze away. The piano will help him centre himself. “Might as well. And — why don’t you see what’s in the refrigerator? If the power fails, it’s going to warm up. If there’s something to drink, we should have it while it’s still cold.”

When she returns with a bottle and two slender glasses, he’s playing Bach. An old chestnut, but as the evening deepens and the lights of the city flicker and struggle to life, the sad, gentle chords seem right. Right? No. Perfect. Exquisite beyond words. The music is in him, and of him, welling up through him to fill the whole world with a gorgeous sadness.

Are they *listening*? He can only hope.

Ellen pours two glasses of chilled champagne, finest French sunlight like diamonds for the tongue. Victor pauses in his playing to relish the cold, tingling fire of the wine. *So much beauty*, he thinks, holding up the glass, glancing across at Ellen, appreciating the fine, strong lines of her face, the velvety thickness of her russet hair. What would that hair feel like against his palm, between his fingers? The chill and rush of the wine makes him shudder. His skin tightens, and suddenly, he wants to lean across the small space between them and press his lips to hers. With amusement he realises; this is what it means to desire someone.

A ball of orange light flares where moments ago a building stood, perhaps a kilometre away, distracting Victor. He braces, but the Imperial is well built, proofed against earthquakes. The blast wave doesn’t even rattle the windows. The lights flicker, and he drains his glass.

Shyly, Ellen sits on the far end of the little piano bench. His head swimming, Victor slides over, ostensibly refilling his glass, until his shoulder brushes hers. There is a moment; a long moment. Then she leans into him with subtle pressure, sliding her hip across until the space between them is gone. “I’ve never really watched you play,” she says. “That last piece. What was it?”

He lets his hands move back onto the slick, cool keys, bringing back the simple, haunting progression. “Bach,” he says. “The Prelude in C to *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.”

“It’s lovely,” she says. There’s a funny catch to her voice, like there’s something in her throat. Victor glances at her under his lashes, not turning his head, but she’s not looking at him; she’s staring out the window, into the gathering darkness.

And there’s a drop, a single, impossible, glistening tear. Victor closes his eyes, not wanting to see.

Another explosion, close enough to be felt as a rumbling shudder, almost like the voices of the Grey Ones.

“The rains stopped coming,” she says softly, after a time. “Everything ... died. The river. The trees. The town. I came back to visit, after my training. I wanted to show them, I suppose. But they were all gone. Nobody told me. They just went. Like the rain.” She finishes her glass in a single gulp. The bottle runs dry as she refills them both. She rises, and returns with another. “Half a case in there,” she says. “Benefits of celebrity.”

Victor is too full, too lost in the wonder of the moment. He lets the music speak for him.

The lights die. It’s full night now, and the room is dark save for the emergency OLED over the exit, and the dim glow coming through the window. The blackout isn’t citywide; there’s still a constellation of lights out there, but it flickers and changes moment by moment.

A click, and a hum. The lights return, and a cool voice speaks from everywhere at once:

“Do not be alarmed. Osaka Central is experiencing temporary difficulties with electrical distribution. For your convenience, the Imperial Hotel has switched to independent power for the duration of the interruption. Please consult your WideNet access for further information.”

Ellen dims the lights with a gesture, and they sit together, in the gathering dark, watching the city outside the window goes to pieces. “I don’t suppose they’re coming back,” she says at last.

“Sony?” says Victor. “I’m not sure how they could. I expect the airspace is locked down. I don’t think I’m worth that much to them.”

She smiles, and the soft light of distant fires takes the hard edges from her face. “I meant the rains.” She lifts her glass in a wordless toast. “Any of it. All of it. It’s all going up in flames.”

Victor raises his glass and touches the rim to hers. He thinks of the future, of a future, of a time when gentle, grey creatures from an incredibly distant place may come and find the wounded, hurting Earth and read the fate of her people, and with the slow wisdom of aeons, perhaps even restore them. Not his future, no, but *a* future, somewhen, somewhere just a slice of infinity away. And who knows? Perhaps this universe holds Grey Ones as well. Perhaps they will come, and make a Victor of their own, and he will go back to yet another impossible past to play the music of old Earth for them, too, just as Victor has done for his own.

“No,” he says at last. “I don’t believe that. The rains will come again some day. And after them, such beauty..”

Ellen lays her head upon his shoulder. Her hair is soft, soft and thick as fur against his neck, and gooseflesh shudders pleurably down his spine. “Play for me,” she says. “Play for—” She tilts her glass to the distant city, and he understands, and settles his hands on the keys once more, and this time it’s another chestnut, simple, slow, but infinitely sad. With more love than he has ever been able to understand before, Victor lays his cheek against that soft, sweet-smelling hair, and plays Beethoven while through the window, in the dark, the city lights begin to fail.

