

A Supervision of Society

If you've wondered about Nevin and Amy's life subsequent to A Revision of Reality, this story will fill the gap. The first half of this story inspired the novel Scouring Juventas. The second half was written after that novel was written.

If you've read In Memory of Chris Parsons, you'll notice a familiar location in the opening of this tale, whereas the ending has more in common with Scouring Juventas. The thread the last part introduces will be picked later in the Juventas short stories.

*

Amy and Nevin Farkas climbed hand-in-hand up the slope towards the brow of the hill. The muddy path bisected a field of golden wheat waving slowly in the breeze. They'd fortuitously chosen a perfect day for it, with bright sunshine pouring down from a cloudless sky as the sun sank towards the horizon.

Amy slowed and pulled Nevin to a halt.

'Slow down,' she said. 'You'd think that after all this time, you'd remember I'm not an android.'

'Sorry,' said Nevin. 'Just keen to explore the top before the sun sets.'

'I know. You sure about heading down this hill in the dark afterwards?'

'It'll be fine. I've got a torch,' said Nevin. He skipped a couple of steps backwards, just out of Amy's reach. 'Anyway, I've got night vision.'

'Bastard.'

It was the last day of what Amy had called their farewell tour. For the previous three months, they'd been sightseeing around the globe, experiencing as many of the most spectacular natural and historical locations as possible, finishing off with a whirlwind tour of ancient monuments. In recent weeks, they'd visited Machu Picchu, the Great Pyramid of Giza, Angkor Wat, Easter Island, Chichén Itzá, ending today in rural Wiltshire in the province of England to see Stonehenge in the morning followed by Avebury in the afternoon.

They were originally going to finish the trip at Avebury until Nevin had realised there could be a moment of perfect synchronicity with the following day's plans if only he could find a suitable viewing location. He found it, tucked away in a footnote of the description of the Avebury complex of standing stones and surrounding neolithic sites.

'Are you sure this is the right place?' said Amy after they resumed the climb. 'There's no one else here.'

'Definitely,' said Nevin. 'It's one of the reasons I chose this place. It's slightly off the beaten track and completely uncommercialised. Look, there it is.'

Poking slightly above the brow of the hill were the standing stones that guarded the entrance to the West Kennet Long Barrow, its grass-covered mound leading away behind the stones along the hilltop. Soon, it came fully into view.

'Wow,' said Amy. 'We can actually touch these stones?'

'More than that, we can go inside,' said Nevin. 'Come on.'

Amy peered into the dark hole behind the sentinel stones at the entrance of the barrow.

'Can I borrow your night vision?' she said.

'It'll be fine,' said Nevin. 'Take it slow and give your eyes time to adjust.'

They made their way the short distance to the gloomy central chamber, where a tiny modern ceiling window let in enough light for Amy to make out the small alcoves off of the central passageway. A couple of burnt-out candles nestled amongst the rocks and a few dead flowers were scattered on the floor.

'Looks like people still use the place,' said Nevin.

'How old did you say it was?' said Amy.

'About six thousand years, I think.'

'Amazing.'

'Let's go up on top and take a look at the view before it gets dark,' said Nevin.

They made their way out of the darkness of the barrow and into the glare of the sunlight. Nevin's android eyes adjusted more quickly, so he held Amy's hand to lead her past the stones and up the rough path to the roof of the mound. They stopped once they reached its centre.

Nevin turned full circle to admire the rolling countryside covered in a patchwork of fields all around, before stopping to look down the hill in the direction they'd climbed. Dominating the landscape between them and Avebury was the large mound of Silbury Hill, another man-made remnant of neolithic times.

As humanity was in the early phase of its next stage of historical development – and Nevin and Amy were about to embark on another reinvention – it was sobering to be reminded of its long history. Growing up on Juno, this had all been part of a mythical past that never had any importance in their day-to-day existence. Earth was nothing more than a fairy story to entertain children. Yet, all the inhabitants of Juno now lived here and had done so for the last decade.

Amy leaned against him as they stared down the hill. Nevin put his arm around her, and she rested her head against his shoulder. Her relaxed posture was belied by the taut muscles of her back.

'Is everything alright?' said Nevin.

'I'm fine,' said Amy. 'It's just...'

'Just what?'

'You know I've never quite adjusted to all this... this space,' she said, pointing around to the horizon. 'I'm not sure I ever will. I mean, the scenery is amazing, I can see for miles, and there's not a wall in sight. It just makes me feel uneasy.'

'I know darling,' said Nevin. 'Shows we've made the right decision.'

Nevin wasn't sure why he'd adjusted more quickly. The sensation of background agoraphobia had inflicted most of the people who'd lived on Juno to varying degrees, and

indeed he'd felt it at first. Perhaps it was his experience on an alien world with Safira that had made it easier, perhaps living in an android body without the chemical influences coursing through his veins, or something else entirely. Still, it had been a factor in their decision to make this fresh start.

'Let's sit down and wait for it to get dark,' said Nevin. 'Won't be long now.'

'Good idea,' said Amy. 'I'll lay back and stare at the sky and pretend it's a blue ceiling.'

Amy took off her shoulder bag, and they positioned themselves side-by-side on the grassy slope of the side of the long barrow, gazing upwards, holding hands.

'That's better,' said Amy. 'Funny, it doesn't usually affect me too badly, but then again, we're not usually anywhere quite this open. You can see the horizon all around.'

'Won't be an issue soon,' said Nevin. 'Don't worry, you're not the only one. Omri was much worse, especially at first. At least his job gave him an excuse to stay indoors most of the time.'

Omri had been appointed the interim President after the fall of the Continuity Church, but had sensibly stepped down after his first term to allow an elected Earth-born President to take over. He'd done a brilliant organisational job in getting the new order established and managed to escape the responsibility before things took an inevitable turn for the worse.

The shock, anger, and – in too many cases – disbelief over the true role of Raj Tamboli in the preceding three centuries had given added impetus to solidifying the new world order before people recovered enough to start jostling for position.

There had been a background nervousness in some quarters that Safira would reappear and assert her authority, but as the years passed, people were more than happy to forget about her – unless it was useful. Sometimes she popped up as the subject of worship, other times as an external threat to whip up hostility and fear to further someone's claim to power.

Safira had contacted Nevin every year or so at first to check how things were, but no one else. She resolutely stayed out of human affairs and would only intervene if they threatened to impact the bulk. That was highly unlikely. Nevin didn't expect to hear from her again.

Dusk began to fall.

'I wonder what Omri's doing today?' said Amy.

'Probably saying goodbye to people,' said Nevin. 'He always was more sociable than us and made lots of friends during his time as President.'

'Hope he's relaxing too,' said Amy. 'He's not going to have much chance after tomorrow.'

'Nor will we.'

'I fear you're right,' said Amy. 'Should be fun though.'

The only person they'd explicitly made an effort to see was Amy's Mum, Freya. Freya had settled down pretty well on Earth after being freed and had remarried last year. Amy didn't want them to part for the last time on bad terms, so they'd met and made peace. It had given Amy the sense of closure that she'd needed.

'Look,' said Nevin, pointing at the sky.

A few stars were now visible, with a couple of brighter points of light.

'Jupiter?' said Amy.

'Must be,' said Nevin.

'That's Mars then,' said Amy, pointing slightly further round.

'Think so,' said Nevin. 'The only other home of humanity right now.'

The Mars colony had expanded significantly in the last five years under the tenure of Omri's successor – the first step to fulfilling one of Raj Tamboli's original goals, not that anybody cared what he thought anymore.

Along with others, Raj had strived to ensure humanity didn't have all its eggs in the basket of its mother planet. If an extinction-level event occurred on Earth, there had to be enough of an independent population of human beings resident elsewhere to continue the species.

Raj Tamboli's Tethys had been one of the driving forces behind the launch of the initial fleet of generation starships, including Juno. It had been odd that he'd never followed that through and established interstellar colonies after the invention of the bulk drive. It wasn't as if suitable sites hadn't been encountered, but exploration and discovering alien races had been his priority.

No one was sure why that was. The most convincing theory was that Raj didn't want to lose control of a population of humans that he couldn't influence so easily through the Stream. That was why he'd been trialling the establishment of a slave Stream around the planet of the Proximates on the pretext of improving communication. Once that had been proven, he could safely roll it out for any human colony, but before that had happened, Carole Cantor and Kofi Albus had defeated him.

After that, it hadn't been a priority for the Continuity Church at first. The Afterlife was all they cared about, especially the way they could use it to keep their congregation as submissive as possible. It was only in the last decade of their reign that colonisation appeared back on the agenda, mainly driven by private individuals.

While a new class of colony starships were being built, scout ships were sent to viable destinations. If they found the location suitable, they would leave behind an automated vessel to prepare the colony for habitation and provide the tools needed to get it established.

The starships to transport the colony were proving more problematic. The ideal scenario was to take the old generation starship design that was perfect for transporting a high number of colonists in one go, strap on a bulk drive, and take them to their new home in one fell swoop.

However, the bulk drive was proving unreliable in jumping such a massive vessel across more than a short distance, each jump using an inordinate amount of energy. It seemed as if the journey would still take decades, even if occasional jumps could be undertaken to shorten it. Generation starships would still be required.

Before any ships had left, Safira made the bulk drive go away. These generation starships would have been the worst offenders in damaging the bulk, so the original plans were abandoned, but Omri wouldn't let them die.

During his term in office, Omri kicked off a series of programs to look forward again, including repurposing the design into a new fleet of generation starships powered by conventional drives. In recompense for giving up the bulk drive, Safira provided the

theoretical foundation for new understandings in science, leading to the creation of a more efficient sub-light speed drive based on gravity manipulation.

It would still require a few generations to arrive, but less than half the time that the old Juno would have taken. On arrival, the gravity manipulation would allow the rings of the generation starship to be used as the basis for the colony on the ground prepared by the original scout ships.

Raj Tamboli's dream would come true at last, but only after his influence had finally died. The irony was delicious.

'Should be visible any moment,' said Nevin.

It was pretty dark by this stage. Amy fumbled into her bag and pulled out a pair of binoculars.

'It's alright for you with your zooming android eyes,' said Amy, 'but these should do the trick.'

They stared towards the horizon.

'There,' said Nevin. 'I missed it. It's about ten degrees up.'

'Where... Ah yes, I see it,' said Amy. 'Hold on, let me look.'

While Amy focused her binoculars on the bright speck of light which was slowly moving up from the horizon, Nevin zoomed his vision to the max. There it was.

He could just make out the long central spindle capped by a bulbous shape at either end, with six large rings rotating around it. It was hard to take in the scale of the spacecraft from this distance, but he'd seen the plans. Although based on the basic design of the original Juno-class generation starships, it had two additional rings as well as the new gravity engines. Given that one ring had been destroyed on Juno, that meant this new class of starships had double the living capacity that Nevin had grown up with.

The first crew were moving in tomorrow. Nevin and Amy would be among them and would serve on the initial ruling council, under their leader – Omri, of course.

Over half of the survivors of the Juno mission had opted to leave with them. There were plenty of other volunteers too. After centuries of relative peace, things were starting to look unstable again around the planet, especially currently in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Relations with the Mars colony were beginning to sour too. It seemed that every couple of generations had to learn old lessons anew by repeating the mistakes of their ancestors for themselves. It was how things were.

'No regrets?' said Nevin.

'None,' said Amy. 'We've achieved a lot here, but it's never felt like home to me.'

'Me neither. I'm proud of what we did with Safira, but this isn't our world. Its history isn't our history.'

'Says the man who played the part of Raj Tamboli for a year,' said Amy.

'No one's perfect,' said Nevin.

'We are though,' said Amy, snuggling towards him. 'As will be our new home. We'll make it so.'

'We will,' said Nevin. 'I've been thinking about that. We know the problems that occurred on the original Juno. It was more stable after Tamboli was defeated, but even that wasn't

perfect. Look at what your Mum managed to do. At least this time, we're starting off in a much better place. We need to ensure it stays that way.'

'We're on the council,' said Amy. 'We're in a better position than anyone to make sure nobody forgets why the rules are in place.'

'Exactly,' said Nevin. 'We won't be around for the whole journey, but we can pass the message on.'

They'd make it work, one way or another.

As the Juno II sailed overhead, Nevin put his arm around Amy. They were moving on again. Everything was turning full circle.

He couldn't wait.

*

The years on the Juno II passed too quickly, but Nevin and Amy's life together was even more fulfilling than they'd expected. It wasn't without its problems. Most of that was down to the expected wear and tear of decades in flight, although nothing too serious as yet. Everything had to come to an end though.

Nevin plumped Amy's pillow and gently lifted her up in bed. She was so light that Nevin was increasingly afraid he'd break a bone whenever he moved her.

Amy was too frail to get out of bed now. They both knew she didn't have long left, but they refused to be sad. They'd enjoyed their many years together on the Juno II and had an incredible life before that. All that was needed now was to pass on the responsibility that their friend, the late President Omri, had bestowed upon them – not that they weren't doing it anyway.

When they'd set out, only a few people on the crew of the Juno II had known the full truth behind Nevin's role in the rescue of the original Juno. Nevin had asked them to keep the fact that he lived in an android body secret, and they'd held true to their word until the end. Now only the two of them remained.

There had been tragedies along the way. Their two closest friends had been killed in an accident. They'd left behind young twins, Ben and Sara, who were only toddlers at the time. Nevin and Amy felt obliged to adopt them, even though they'd never expected to have children. It was the best decision they ever made. Life went on.

Ben and Sara were grown up now. Ben was married to Gemma, and they now had a month-old baby, Brian. They were all waiting outside to come in once Amy was ready. Nevin had an ulterior motive for inviting them; a long overdue confession was due.

Nevin walked around the bed and climbed onto it, sitting next to Amy atop the duvet. He took her hand.

'Come in,' he called.

Ben, Gemma, and Sara entered the bedroom. Gemma had a sleeping Brian in her arms.

'How you feeling, Mum?' said Sara.

'As well as...' Amy paused to take a deep breath. '... can be expected.' She turned to Nevin. 'You do the talking.'

Nevin squeezed her hand, smiled at her, then looked up to his family.

'We need to talk,' said Nevin. 'There are things you need to know before we both go.'

'You're not going anywhere,' said Ben.

'I wish that were true,' said Nevin, 'but you have to accept reality. Come to terms with it now while we're both still here. Your Mum and I have. You know she's not got long left, and when she goes, I go.'

That was a blunt way to tell them his plans for the first time, but Ben was too prone to wishful thinking. This got to the heart of the matter quickly.

'You're strong, Dad,' said Ben. 'You're in amazing shape for a man of your age. You've got years left in you.'

In retrospect, Nevin wished they'd had this conversation before, but it was a hard one to casually bring up out of the blue. They'd hidden his artificial ageing well, swapping to pre-prepared android bodies twice during the journey and delicately adjusting prosthetics to fake natural changes in between.

'You don't understand,' he said. 'You know I'm a man of my word. I made a vow that I'd only stay here while your Mum was around. I have no choice. When she goes, I go.'

That caused consternation.

'A vow?' said Sara. 'Who to? What do they expect you to do, kill yourself?'

'I don't have to. I'm already dead.'

'What?' said everyone.

'I'm sorry,' said Nevin. That had been a stupid thing to say, but it had been hard to resist. 'There's a lot I should have told you before, things you need to understand for this to make sense. Bear with me. We've told you that your Mum and I met on the original Juno. Do you remember how we were all saved?'

'Some sort of alien discovered you floating in space and took you back to Earth?' said Ben.

'Close,' said Nevin. 'The alien was called Safira. I was her only contact on Juno – she couldn't talk to anyone else. It was her that I made my vow to.'

'Why?' said Sara.

'You've all been taught about the bulk in school, I hope,' said Nevin. 'About its role in life across all universes.'

'In passing,' said Ben. 'It sounded like a fairy tale. I'm not sure anyone believes it.'

'It's real,' snapped Nevin. 'I've been there. I was murdered on Juno, and Safira saved my soul and took it back to Earth to live in an android. It was me who told them where Juno was. I came back to save everyone.'

They all looked at him in disbelief.

'It's true,' croaked Amy. 'I met Safira. I thought Nevin was dead, but he came back to save me.'

Gemma spoke for the first time.

'What are you?'

'I told you,' said Nevin. 'It's still me, the same person, but my body is artificial. Look.'

He'd prepared for this. It wasn't usually this easy, but he'd carried out the first steps of a routine maintenance task, so there were only a couple of things left to do. He rolled up his

sleeve to reveal a loose flap of skin. He poked a finger beneath it, pushed hard, and his hand fell off.

Gemma let out a little squeak, then held Brian closer to her neck. The others stayed silent for a few moments before Sara plucked up the courage.

'Tell us everything that happened. Don't miss anything out. We need to know.'

Nevin went through the whole story from the first visits to the Congregation of Indra, the connection to Safira, his murder by Erroll, his time in the Bora universe, and his return to Earth, ending when Juno was saved. The rest of the story could wait.

'Why didn't you tell us before, Dad?' said Ben.

'You were too young, at first,' said Nevin. 'Then there was always a reason to put it off. It's a hard thing to start talking about, but we've run out of time and excuses now. You need to know. It's why I must leave when your mother goes. I'm living on borrowed time, but I must move on with her. We will journey together.'

He'd gone into so much detail, backed up by Amy, that from the shifting tone of the questioning Ben and Sara seemed to reluctantly accept their word. They knew him well enough that he wouldn't make up something like this.

'I need you to make sure this isn't forgotten,' said Nevin. 'We must pass this down through the family. Remind each generation of this reality. When we arrive at Juventas, there must be someone who will ensure the truth is remembered. We cannot let the human race make the same mistakes again. You say people think it's all fairy tales now. That can't stand. At the very least, our family must remember.'

'We'll try, Dad,' said Sara. 'Won't we, Ben?'

'I'll make sure Brian knows,' said Ben. 'I can't do more than that.'

Nevin was about to insist on more from Ben when Amy squeezed his hand. She was right. It would be counterproductive to force Ben. He would come around to it in his own time if Gemma let him. Sara was his best hope.

Amy coughed, then managed to squeeze out one word.

'Omri.'

'Ah yes,' said Nevin. 'I made one more promise, this time to President Omri before he died. I'd like to pass it on to you. This is for all your benefit.'

'Go on,' said Sara.

'Your Mum put a lot of effort into designing the rules of our society before we set out, with others on Earth too. We know how well they've worked to keep us safe, peaceful and happy. It's loosely based on what was done in the final decades on the original Juno, but stricter. We know what happened when things went wrong beforehand. Juno nearly destroyed itself, twice. That mustn't happen here.'

'You haven't mentioned your promise,' said Sara.

'Omri asked us to ensure things stayed that way before he died. That's why we both served on the Council for so long, reinforcing the message, making sure we didn't backslide. I want our family to be a force for good. Remind people down the generations how dangerous it can be cooped up in here unless we all work together. It wouldn't be a bad way to start even after we arrive on Juventas. I want you all to carry the flame.'

'I'm not a politician, Dad,' said Ben.

'You don't have to be,' said Nevin. 'Just stand up for what's right. Tell your friends about it. Bring Brian up believing in it. Vote for the right candidates. Don't let it be forgotten.'

'I guess,' said Ben.

'I was thinking of running for Council eventually,' said Sara. 'Family tradition, after all. It sounds as good a platform as any to run on. Sure. I'm in.'

That was all he could ask for. It wasn't much, but he wanted his legacy to live on, his family to have peaceful, rewarding lives down the generations, and then onwards once Juventas was reached.

'Thank you,' said Nevin. 'That's brilliant. You're just the sort of Councillor Juno needs.'

Amy started coughing.

'Let your mother rest now,' said Nevin. 'I'll be out in a minute. I'm sure you've plenty more questions.'

They came across in turn and kissed Amy on the cheek before leaving. Amy stroked Brian's hair gently, trying not to wake her grandson.

Nevin helped Amy lay back down again. She closed her eyes. Nevin thought she'd fallen asleep, but she spoke softly.

'They'll do fine. Trust them.'

'I do,' said Nevin.

What other choice did they have? All he could hope was that their legacy could live on, keeping his family – and the Juno II – safe on the rest of the journey. Their part of the story was over.