

Two Earths Are Better Than None

Opening Three Chapters

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Part One

Protect the Duality

Chapter 1 - Two Failing Marriages

Mason Ross's marriage to Emily was on life support. Only palliative care remained. The weekend would be spent treading on eggshells in clogs, all the while anticipating the sanctuary of the office on Monday.

That refuge only served to tip the balance between stress and frustration. Mason had grown to detest his job with a passion missing at home. There was no escape.

They lived in a mutually imposed purgatory, each refusing to be the one who made the final decision to part, waiting for something to trigger the change. Neither of them expected it to be aliens.

It started like any other Saturday, their respectfully antagonistic routine guiding them from the sterile warmth of the duvet. Mason awoke to a barely audible murmuring from the television in the corner of their bedroom. He lay there for a few moments, breathing slowly, feigning unconsciousness.

A flickering glow through his eyelids and the familiar musical riff confirmed that Emily was watching the BBC News channel, and it was seven o'clock. *Watching* was an overstatement. It was her background source of information overload to accompany scrolling through Twitter on her iPad. Emily shifted position, a brighter swell nearby confirming the iPad's presence.

It was a bloody typical start to the day. He'd awoken with burning indigestion in his chest and a bitter taste in his mouth. His back throbbed, an annoyingly regular occurrence of late. It likely explained why he was tired all the time. Or maybe that was the stress.

No matter. It was time to face the day.

He opened his eyes to see the pale skin of Emily's arm a few centimetres away, as smooth and perfect as when they'd first met on that fateful night at university. Once, he couldn't have resisted leaning forward and kissing it. Now, neither of them would welcome that. She'd only be suspicious.

'G'morning,' mumbled Mason.

'Morning,' said Emily. 'Sleep well?'

Her voice expressed no interest. Neither did his response.

'Yeah,' said Mason. 'You?'

'Not bad,' said Emily. 'Bit short.'

Maybe you shouldn't have turned the TV on then, said Mason's irritation.

'Tea?' said Mason's voice.

'Please.'

Mason rolled over, let one leg fall off the bed, and slid until gravity gave him no choice but to stand. Without looking at Emily, he staggered onto the landing and paused, supporting his weight on the bannister. It was a long way down the stairs.

Somehow, he found himself standing in the kitchen, overfilling the kettle. He sloshed the surplus water into the sink, plonked the kettle onto its stand, and glared at it.

'Alexa, turn on kettle.'

Mason refused to press the kettle's button as a matter of principle. After a reluctant beep, it sprang to life.

He'd bought the smart kettle to save time. The morning struggle would be so much easier if hot water were waiting when he made it downstairs, but no. Emily announced she wanted her tea made with water straight from the tap. Apparently, it went stale overnight. Not that he could tell the difference.

There was no point in arguing. Mason slammed the mugs onto the worktop, threw a teabag in each, and stalked across to the fridge. He was about to splash milk into them when a flash of petty inspiration struck. Emily insisted the milk had to go in first. He'd wait. It would only be a small victory, but she'd never notice the difference.

He placed the carton onto the worktop as the kettle bubbled its disapproval. Mason's irritation waned, replaced by a surge of guilt. What was he doing? What were they doing to each other? He didn't use to be this spiteful, but somehow Emily made him act like this.

They'd once been so relaxed together, joking and laughing their way through life. Over the years, careless disinterest and misplaced jesting stifled the connection. Now, only irritation and boredom remained. He couldn't see a way back. Even if he tried, Emily showed no sign that she would reciprocate. He couldn't do it on his own.

Emily had changed so much. The witty, carefree woman he'd first grown to love would have had a few choice words to say about the person she'd become. Then again, she'd have plenty to say about him. This Emily preferred silence, and so did he.

Perhaps it had never been that great. Maybe he'd only pursued Emily out of guilt after their one-night stand ruined his relationship with Lissa. That was back in their university days.

He'd been going out with Lissa since freshers' week, and they'd made it all the way to the first semester of their final year. Their friends were sure they were in it for the long haul. So was he. Then Lissa went home for the weekend, he went out on a pub crawl, and woke up in the morning next to Emily.

Mason was mortified. He'd always been trustworthy and faithful to a fault. He'd never deliberately betray Lissa. Yet, he had. The moment made him take a long, hard look at himself - not an unusual occurrence, but for the first time, he didn't like what he saw.

Their relationship had been one of openness and honesty. It left him little choice. If they were to have a future, if he were to restore his self-belief, confession was the first step on the road to recovery. Penance must be served.

Lissa would be devastated, but it was unavoidable. He'd do anything necessary to minimise the pain, giving her whatever time and space was needed. She'd come to understand and forgive him.

She didn't.

His loss had to mean something. It took a while to work out what. Eventually, Mason convinced himself that he'd seen something in Emily that was worth pursuing. She was so

different to Lissa, more fun, more carefree. She brought out a side of him that he hadn't known before. Emily was his future.

That future had receded into the past. It was still less effort to stay together and ignore their petty grievances than to admit their failure and part. Their growing antipathy hadn't yet overwhelmed the mutual apathy.

The kettle had boiled sometime during his self-absorption. Mason splashed water onto the teabags, dolloped in the milk, swirled it with a spoon, tossed the teabags into the compost container, and trudged up the stairs. His moment of solitude and reflection was over.

He placed the mug of tea on Emily's bedside cabinet.

'Thanks,' said Emily without looking up.

Mason unplugged his own iPad from the charger and climbed back into bed. The television was louder now, almost audible, but still not worth the effort. A government minister droned on about another inventive scheme that defied the laws of reality. What was the point of listening?

Mason surveyed the room to muster some enthusiasm for the day. Even that was disheartening. The light green walls were shabby, well overdue redecoration, but he didn't have the energy for it. The carpet was threadbare where the badly-fitted door rubbed over it. Cobwebs lurked in the corner above the TV.

For want of something to do, he copied Emily, scrolling through his own Twitter feed for a few minutes. It was as depressing as ever. He was about to give up and shower when a photo caught his eye.

The nearby Crawley town centre was instantly recognisable from its typically English shabby paved pedestrian area, less than ten miles away from their home in Horsham. What he didn't recognise was the massive object floating in the air above the town: an eerie, washed-out silver-gold spherical craft.

It was odd. Someone had gone to a lot of effort to render an impressive spaceship, then had badly photoshopped it over Crawley, of all places. He could even see the clouds in the sky through it. Yet another online idiot pretending to be clever.

That conclusion lasted no more than a couple of seconds. He scrolled up and saw a video of the same scene. His interest piqued, he tapped to expand it to full screen. It deserved a closer look.

The sphere faded in and out, shimmering and glinting in the sun. Its translucent surface was covered by rectangular strips of bright gold and gleaming silver, all of differing sizes, arranged with meticulous randomness. Every time it neared solidity, it faded again before repeating the cycle.

It couldn't be a fake. If someone wanted to trick people into thinking it was a UFO, they'd have made it more realistic. Was it a vast projected hologram? Not that the technology to project something that massive existed. The scale was hard to judge precisely, but it would dwarf a football stadium.

'Weird,' said Emily out of the blue.

Mason glanced across. The same shimmering sphere filled her iPad. It wasn't the same video, this one was zoomed in closely on its surface, but there was no mistaking what it was.

'Yeah, just seen it,' said Mason.

'They reckon it's aliens,' said Emily.

It was no surprise Emily jumped straight to that conclusion. Since the Covid lockdowns, she'd been sucked into various online conspiracy theories, insisting she didn't believe them but wanted to stay informed and keep an open mind. It was another sign they didn't belong together.

As unhelpful as it was, Mason couldn't resist the chance for a dig.

'Maybe this is what causes chemtrails.'

Emily didn't bite, merely glaring at him for a couple of seconds before responding.

'If it's not aliens, then what is it?'

Grudgingly, that was a good point, but Mason needed more evidence before forming a theory. He gave a dismissive laugh.

'Why would aliens want to invade Crawley?'

Emily frowned, peering at his iPad.

'Shit,' she said, turning her iPad to face him. 'This is Milton Keynes.'

They locked eyes for longer than usual, but neither spoke before simultaneously reverting to their iPads, frantically refreshing their Twitter feeds.

'There's one in the middle of nowhere between Reading and Basingstoke,' said Emily.

'That's even more obscure than Crawley. Don't they know where London is?'

'This one's out to sea off Inverness,' said Mason.

After a brief pause, Emily found another.

'Somewhere in France. Near Dijon.'

'Maybe the aliens like mustard,' said Mason.

Stupid jokes were all he had left.

'Look,' said Emily, pointing at the TV in the corner.

Another sphere hovered directly above Trafalgar Square in London. A reporter was speaking, but the volume was too low to comfortably make out what he was saying.

'Must be some sort of anti-gravity,' said Mason. 'There's no rocket exhaust. Can't see any other way it would be floating like that.'

'Do you have to know how everything works?' snapped Emily. 'All that matters is what it's doing here.'

She grasped the remote control on her bedside cabinet.

'Alexa, turn up the volume,' said Mason.

The small moment of satisfaction as the volume increased helped calm his nervous irritation. The reporter's shaky voice became intelligible.

'... phenomena started about ten minutes ago. We've reports coming in of these appearing across the country, indeed, across the world. There must be many thousands of them, but it is unclear what they are. We've contacted the government for comment, but as yet- as-'

He stammered to a halt as two loud notes rang down from the sky. The cosmic bing-bong sounded oddly like a doorbell, quickly followed by an androgynous voice speaking in perfect English, if with a distinct accent. It sounded strained.

'Bear with us, me old muckers.'

The incongruous opening was followed by an audible gulp of breath. When the voice continued, the hint of discomfort had gone.

'Sorry about that. So much for making an impressive entrance. The crossing's always tricky out here near the edge, but we'll get things stabilised soon. Would you Adam and Eve it?'

There was an awkward silence.

'Are we being invaded by Cockney aliens?' said Mason.

'Shush,' said Emily.

The alien, or whatever it was, spoke again.

'Sorry, I should've mentioned a few things. We are the Peria. We need your help. We come in peace, etcetera, etcetera. Look, we'll explain everything properly once we're fully in your reality. There'll be a bit of a light show while we drag ourselves over the line, but please, don't worry. It's mostly harmless. Right, that's really it for now. Back in two ticks.'

A lilac ring lit around the centre of the ship. Several glowing globes pulsed once per second slightly above its surface. It was oddly hypnotic as the frequency continually increased. Even the commentator was lost for words.

Within a minute, the globes were pulsing too fast to notice. Just as it appeared to have stabilised, the equilibrium was shattered by beams of light lancing out in all directions. The sky outside their bedroom window turned a matching lilac.

They both leapt out of bed and rushed across to either side of the window. In the distance, beyond the end of their sleepy cul-de-sac, a beam spanned the sky, shafting through rapidly dissipating clouds. It was painfully bright.

'They must be connecting their ships,' said Emily. 'I bet that's going to the one in Crawley.'

Mason wasn't paying attention anymore. He felt strange. The room swayed; his legs turned to jelly, his arms to lead. While he could, he stumbled back towards the bed.

'Are you okay?' said Emily.

Her voice sounded distant. The weird sensation had come out of nowhere as he stared into the sky. He was too confused to be scared. Had the glare triggered it? The world began to dim, darkening from the edges of his vision.

Unable to support himself, Mason collapsed onto the bed and closed his eyes, hoping it would go away. He was vaguely aware of Emily becoming frantic nearby. He sank into blissful unconsciousness.

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Mason awoke to a barely audible murmuring from the television in the corner of their bedroom. He lay there for a moment, breathing slowly, trying to get his memories straight. It was all so surreal.

He sensed Emily sitting in bed beside him, the glow of her iPad shining through his eyelids. Had he dreamt everything? It had been so real.

He was tired but felt amazing. His burning indigestion was gone, the bitter taste in his mouth had cleared, and his back didn't constantly ache. His sense of smell was acute too,

catching a waft of bergamot drifting through the bedroom. That was new, but he wasn't complaining. The secret memories it triggered warmed him for a few seconds.

There was no putting it off. He couldn't avoid facing the day over one vivid dream. Forcing his eyes open, he blinked the sleep away and brought the world into focus. As expected, an arm rested a few centimetres away. Its skin was dark. It wasn't Emily.

'Ah, good,' said the woman. 'I was about to wake you. You're missing all the excitement.'

Mason instantly recognised the voice. It had once been the most wonderful sound in his life, but he couldn't believe it. He had to look up.

The beautiful face of Lissa smiled down at him. She was older now, her hair longer, but it had been many years since he'd last seen her at their graduation ceremony. Still, he could never mistake the curve of that neck, as perfect as ever. He'd always had a thing about long necks.

'Wha-' was all Mason could manage. It summed up the situation perfectly.

'The Peria are leaving,' said Lissa. 'Well, half of them, just as they promised, five years to the day after they arrived.'

Mason struggled to push himself upright. The last thing he remembered was the Peria arriving, and even that seemed like a dream. It was five years ago? What had happened to him? To them?

'What's up?' said Lissa.

Mason couldn't find the words to reply. He looked around for something familiar to ground himself upon, but the bedroom was fundamentally different. Although similarly laid out, it was more homely, full of Lissa's slightly dated tastes.

The floral wallpaper and chintzy curtains were reminiscent of her parents' home. The bergamot emanating from a diffuser in the corner took him back to her first-year digs at university, used to suppress the smell of dodgy student accommodation. Her influence was everywhere, the teak drawers, doilies and frills telling him all he needed to know. This was Lissa's domain.

Emily's absence left no sense of loss. It had been reaching the end, but finding himself back with Lissa was a dream come true. How could he forget something like that?

He finally managed to speak.

'I... I don't remember.'

'Remember what?' said Lissa.

She was beginning to look confused. It was odd. This wasn't his house, yet he felt instantly at home beside her. This was how it was always supposed to be.

'Anything.'

He couldn't believe he'd forgotten five whole years, but what else could it be? If he was with Lissa now, he ached to remember it. The absence was another betrayal.

'What do you mean?' said Lissa.

The need for honesty with Lissa was seared into his soul.

'About the Peria. I remember them arriving, but... nothing. Nothing after that.'

Lissa's expression oscillated between disbelief and concern before the latter won. That was immediately different to how Emily would have reacted.

'Nothing at all?' she said.

Mason could only manage an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Lissa reached out and took his hand.

'I wonder,' she said. She frowned to herself, a thoughtful expression he always loved so much. 'I wonder if it's a side effect of your treatment. After all, it was a new therapy, not that you had much choice.'

'Treatment?' said Mason.

'Do you not remember your cancer either?'

Mason shook his head again, his disbelief turning cold.

'How long ago was that?'

'About a year,' said Lissa. 'You'd been complaining of feeling tired all the time. Bad back. Heartburn. You wouldn't do anything about it, but I nagged you until you gave in and went to the doctor. You had pancreatic cancer. Can't you remember any of that?'

'I remember the symptoms,' said Mason. 'But that was before the Peria arrived. It feels like only a few minutes ago.'

'No, it wasn't,' said Lissa. 'The Peria had been here for ages. You wouldn't have survived if it weren't for the things they taught us.'

Mason stared at her. He had to say something but struggled to think of anything coherent. He admitted defeat.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'None of this is making sense. I don't even remember us getting back together.'

'Back together?' said Lissa. 'What do you mean? We've never split up. We've been together since university.'

'What? We broke up in the final year. After I...'

Mason trailed off, unwilling to admit his crime again, especially as Lissa had forgotten everything. Somehow. They reverted to staring at each other until Lissa's eyes widened.

'Shit,' she said. 'You must be one of them. A switcher. What are the odds?'

At least one of them knew what was going on.

'Switcher?' said Mason.

'Sorry,' said Lissa. 'I guess the Peria haven't told you anything yet. I'm trying to remember what they said. I didn't pay full attention.'

Mason waited patiently. He needed to know so much, but interrupting Lissa was always counterproductive. It was strange, but slipping back into their old routine was so easy. After a few seconds, Lissa filled in the gaps.

'I think I remember the basics. The Peria warned us that a few people would have their consciousnesses temporarily swapped when they crossed to the other Earth. Not many, something like a few thousand. Looks like you were one of the unlucky ones. Or lucky ones. Whatever.'

On top of all the confusion, Mason struggled to make sense of Lissa's words. His head started to feel woozy again. All he could do was parrot the weirdest bit back as a question.

'Other Earth?'

'That's why the Peria are here, to stop our realities from collapsing. Don't worry; they said you'd swap back to your Earth in a few minutes.'

Mason's head was swimming. He hadn't lost five years at all. This was another version of Earth in which he'd never split with Lissa in the first place. A better world. He'd watched enough of the plethora of multiverse movies back home for the concept not to be alien. Even Emily couldn't call them stupid now.

Lissa adjusted her posture, pulling her spine straight before staring at him. Something had changed, some realisation instantly switching her mood. Her jaw clenched as if trying to stop herself from speaking. She failed.

'I need to know why we split up.'

It was a question that seemed irrelevant to this reality. Before he could answer, the room started to waver. His head throbbed. It distracted him long enough to test Lissa's patience.

'Well? Why did we split up? Quickly. We haven't got long.'

The way his head was feeling was a sign he was about to go back. He had to make the most of these moments. It was a chance to atone.

'I'm so sorry,' said Mason. 'I've never forgiven myself for it. While you were away one weekend at university, I got drunk and slept with Emily. Emily Bryant.'

'And I found out?' said Lissa.

'No,' said Mason. 'I told you. I always wanted to be honest with you.'

Lissa flushed at his confession from another world. Mason had only seen her like that once before.

'Didn't stop you from sleeping with her,' she said.

'I know,' said Mason. 'I was stupid. I've regretted it ever since. I'm so glad I'm still with you... here.'

Mason had no idea why he said that, but if there was more than one of him - a concept he hadn't fully come to terms with yet - then at least his other self was happy.

'You may be,' said Lissa, 'but mine isn't. I bet I know why now. Thank you for that much, at least.'

Mason had no chance to respond to Lissa's bitterness. The room darkened, his body weakened, and he slumped back against the bedhead.

'I-' croaked Mason, but before he could complete the sentence, the world went black.

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Mason awoke. The television was still chuntering away in the corner.

He lay there briefly, breathing slowly before opening his eyes. He was in Emily's bedroom again. His back ached, and the indigestion had returned. Emily glared down at him.

'You're back then,' she said.

She sounded disappointed.

Chapter 2 - Two Converging Earths

Mason took a few moments to adjust to his own depressing reality. Emily didn't say anything more. He took a deep breath and sighed in agreement with her disappointment.

'Yeah, I'm back,' he said. 'That was weird.'

'Tell me about it,' said Emily. 'It's a weird day all around. I assume you went to this other Earth that you - he - told me about?'

'Yeah,' said Mason. 'Did he say who he's married to?'

Mason adopted the traditional dance around the subject until he worked out how she felt. It was a familiar tango for both of them.

'Lissa,' said Emily. 'Apparently, he didn't tell her about our night together. At least you're more honest than him.'

That explained Lissa's reaction to his confession. She must have suspected. He'd initially assumed his other self hadn't gotten pissed and been stupid with Emily in the first place: proof that honesty wasn't always the best policy.

Emily hadn't finished with the bombshells.

'Didn't keep us apart over there. We've been having an affair on and off over the years. The other me doesn't like things getting too serious, although sounds like I might have finally dumped you.'

It was a punch to the gut. He'd dreamed of being blissfully happy with Lissa if not for his moment of stupidity. Surely he'd never have repeated that mistake? Then again, it fitted with Lissa's bitterness when he told her about Emily.

He was at a loss as to what to say. With the fleeting realisation that he missed the smell of bergamot, it was time to change the subject. One fact had occupied his mind more than anything he'd heard from Lissa.

'I think I've got cancer.'

'What?'

'Pancreatic cancer,' said Mason. 'He had it over there. I've got the same symptoms.'

'Shit,' said Emily. 'How serious is it?'

'He's been cured, thanks to some new treatment from the Peria. I'd forgotten what it was like to feel that well.'

Emily stared at Mason for a few seconds, her expression softening. That was rare in itself.

'You'll have to hope the Peria give it to us too.'

The Peria had been there for five years. How long had it taken before they'd started sharing their knowledge? How long did he have? Everything depended on them. Emily focused on the practicalities.

'You need to see a doctor. Get in the queue ready.'

'I will. I'll call once we've seen what's happening.'

Two Earths Are Better Than None

The television was still talking to itself in the corner, showing the same Peria ship over London. It was solid now, its central ring no longer glowing.

'Anything I've missed?' said Mason.

'Don't think so,' said Emily. 'Sounds like most ships across the world spoke at the same time, but in the local language. They even used regional accents.'

'That took some organisation. I guess they've had a while to prepare.'

Emily went to say something but was interrupted by the bing-bong from the Peria ship echoing across Trafalgar Square. The voice of the Peria spoke again.

'That's better. We're here to stay now. Right. I bet you all want to know why we're here.'

They paused as if waiting for permission to proceed.

'Well, you'll have to wait a few minutes. Shouting across the rooftops isn't the best way to say hello. Luckily, we've got everything prepared to do this properly. Here's the name of our YouTube channel.'

Rotating around the side of the ship, giant letters appeared: OnePeriaTwoEarths.

'We'll be starting a live stream in five minutes. You can find us under the same name on Twitch, Facebook, Twitter, Mastodon, and Tiktok, so whatever your age, you can follow along. Anyone is welcome to rebroadcast our live stream. The more, the merrier. We'll see you shortly.'

Mason and Emily grabbed their iPads and opened the YouTube app without looking at each other. The pending live stream from the OnePeriaTwoEarths channel was already the first thing on their home screens.

'Impressive,' said Emily. 'They've hacked the algorithm.'

That was too much like one of her conspiracy theories for Mason's taste, but it did show how familiar the Peria already were with human systems. He had to believe they would be a force for good. Nothing Lissa had said painted them in a bad light, and they'd saved his life over there. He needed them to be the same here.

'I never imagined an alien invasion through social media,' said Mason. 'Aren't they supposed to ask for directions to our leader?'

Emily was scrolling through her Twitter feed again.

'Makes sense,' she said. 'If they can get the public onside, then the government will have to go along with the will of the people.'

Mason hated that phrase, but it was a good point. The aliens might take a different approach in less democratic countries, but it could work well with the vacillating idiots running the UK.

'Has the government said anything yet?'

'Not much,' said Emily. 'They're deploying troops wherever the Peria appeared.'

'What are they gonna do?' said Mason. 'Bomb Crawley town centre?'

Emily shrugged and went back to her feed. The YouTube channel inexorably counted down to the start of the live stream as Mason struggled with conflicting emotions.

His dreams of the path not taken with Lissa didn't lead to happiness after all. Did that mean the same would have been true on his Earth? That assumed he was the same person as his counterpart, which didn't have to be true. There was already evidence that they weren't.

The other Mason had lied to Lissa. He'd had an illicit affair with Emily on multiple occasions. Despite everything that had happened in his life, Mason had never considered cheating behind Emily's back. That made him a better person. Didn't it?

The countdown reached zero. When the stream started, it simply showed a dark purple background with a message in cream text using an elegant serif typeface.

One Schism to part the worlds

One Duality to guide them

Two Earths to live upon

With the Peria beside them

'That's Lord of the Rings,' said Emily. 'Bit rubbish.'

'At least they're not playing the War of the Worlds theme,' said Mason. 'The chances of anything coming from-'

'Shush.'

The text faded to show the first sight of one of the Peria.

It was definitely alien, yet underwhelming. The individual was humanoid, bald, and of light brown complexion with an exotic green tinge. A single strip of darker green skin started above one eyebrow, widened to an arc around the ear, and looped across the top of the scalp to a mirror image on the other side. A central ridge rippled their forehead, giving the impression of a permanent frown. This was belied by the rest of the face, with its prominent cheekbones, large green eyes, and a warm, welcoming smile.

The smile broke into a grin. Like most of him - Mason was sure it was *him* by now - his teeth and lips were perfectly human. He stood on an immaculate golden floor with a shiny silver wall behind, exactly matching the ship's outside. Incongruously, he wore a pair of faded jeans and a dark grey sweatshirt with an odd design across its front.

Side by side on the chest were two green and blue planet Earth emojis. Similarly sized on the stomach was a large zero. Spoiling the symmetry between them was a smaller greater-than sign.

'Looks like a low-budget Star Trek alien,' said Mason.

He loved Star Trek. Most of its aliens had to be pragmatically humanoid, knowing that in reality, any we ever met would be fundamentally different. So much for that theory. Emily ignored him.

The Peria's posture relaxed; he stuffed his hands into his pockets, gave a wry smile, and finally spoke. His voice was more confident than the one they'd heard before.

'Greetings. My name is Winston. Sorry to barge in uninvited like this, but once you understand why we are here, I hope you will forgive us. We need your help. Equally, you need ours - you just don't know it yet.'

The grin disappeared, his expression remaining amiable, yet something serious was coming.

'Some of you will have discovered that yours is not the only Earth. We've just come from the other, where we established the conditions for this transition into your reality. Over the last five years, we have formed a cooperative working relationship with humanity there. We hope to do the same here.'

No surprises there, at least not for him. Most wouldn't be so lucky.

'We have many gifts to bestow in exchange for your cooperation, as we did on the other Earth. We can help you reverse the impact of your self-inflicted climate change. We can solve all your energy needs, share significant medical advances, etcetera, etcetera.'

Winston had the same habit as the original Peria voice of ending sentences with *etcetera*. It was irritating.

'As a gesture of goodwill,' continued Winston, 'we will shortly provide the key to unlocking sustainable fusion energy with all your governments. Consider this a payment for the disruption we have caused today. Your dreams of nuclear fusion are no longer twenty years away.'

'Wow,' whispered Emily.

Mason bit his tongue. She was impressed right now, but by the end of the day, she'd be discussing how her online friends thought it had all been faked. Then again, she'd met the other Mason first-hand. It would be hard for her to dismiss.

Winston continued.

'Captains of Peria ships across the planet will hold talks with your nations' leaders. My responsibility is to negotiate with the central UK government, and my team members will liaise with the devolved assemblies to ensure their needs are not forgotten. First, everyone needs to understand the existential problem we are facing. You need to learn about the Duality and the Schism.'

It wasn't hard to hear the capital letters.

'I've told you there are two Earths,' said Winston. 'It's not just Earth. There are two of my home planet and everything else in this part of the galaxy. I bet many of you think I'm talking about the multiverse. I've watched your Marvel movies too, but no, it's nothing like that. This is a smaller, more localised, and potentially deadly phenomenon.'

As he continued the narration, the screen switched away from Winston to show a spiral galaxy.

'This is our galaxy. Let's take a look at the edge of the spiral arm where Earth is located.'

The display zoomed in. Three locations were circled and annotated.

'This starfield is around one hundred light-years across. Earth, as you can see, is three-quarters towards the left. The planet called Cerritur is dead in the centre, with my homeworld, Asperna, nearby. Now, a few millennia ago, this was all there was. One Earth, one Cerritur, one Asperna. Then something catastrophic happened.'

The screen went white, leaving only the annotations behind.

'Let's simplify things. It's hard to describe this adequately while your race doesn't grasp the higher-dimensional concepts within which reality exists. If I'm honest, we don't fully understand everything either, but we know enough to fear its implications. Consider this flat surface to be the three-dimensional universe. This is the area we're interested in.'

The annotations changed colour. The two red dots labelled Earth and Asperna shifted upwards slightly, with the blue Cerritur in the dead centre of the screen. A solid black line emanated away from Cerritur to the left and right. As it passed beneath Asperna, a green

mirror image appeared below it. The same happened when it passed Earth. The line stopped midway between Earth and the edge of the picture.

'Something happened on Cerritur. We cannot be sure whether it was by design or a catastrophic accident caused by the race who lived there. We assume the latter. It created the Schism, a localised rift through reality more than a hundred light-years wide, with Cerritur lost inside. Two realities were created, shown here above and below the line. The problem didn't end there.'

Near Cerritur, the black line split down its middle, leaving a white gap in its centre. Half bulged up, half down, leaving the single Cerritur in the centre of a white expanse. As the gap widened, the split moved along the line, passing Asperna, causing the two copies of the world to be forced further apart. The bulge eventually reached a point of equilibrium around Cerritur, curving downwards as the split continued to widen, eventually passing Earth.

The two Earths were similarly forced apart, although only about a tenth as far as Asperna. Once the split neared the end of the line, it stopped, leaving a flattened spheroidal shape with a narrow rim around the outside.

Emily sniggered unexpectedly.

'It's a sherbet flying saucer.'

Mason ignored her, partly irritated by the interruption, mainly because she was right. He used to love those sweets when he was a kid.

'This is the Duality,' said Winston. 'The two realities diverged, rapidly forced apart by the Schism - the closer to Cerritur, the more significant the changes. On Asperna, my homeworld, the divergence was total. Our race disappeared in your reality; we exist solely in the other. Only after we travelled further out towards the edge of the Schism did we realise that other races existed in both, with only the course of their histories varying.'

Mason was fascinated. It fitted closely enough with what he'd experienced on the other Earth near the flat part of the Schism. His life had been sent on a different course due to one fateful decision.

'This is like being back at school,' said Emily.

He ignored her again. Anyone who was bored with this had no sense of imagination.

Winston remained silent for a few seconds, giving time for his audience to breathe, leaving the flying saucer-shaped Schism displayed separating the Duality.

'You may wonder why this is a problem. Now it's there, surely we can safely ignore it? Well, think again. Consider the planet Gandera, inhabited by a civilisation slightly more advanced than yours.'

Another pair of annotated green and red dots appeared on either side of the line, past Earth, right near the edge of the Schism.

'You have a saying that nature abhors a vacuum. It also abhors the Duality. The Schism is gradually healing, the differences between the realities lessening.'

The flying saucer flattened slightly, the gap in the centre of the line near the edges closed, and the end of the line shortened, stopping just before Gandera.

'Neither the impetus nor the mechanism which causes the history of the two realities to converge is fully understood, but that is what happens - up to a point. Where intelligent life is

involved, free will interferes. This is what happened on Gandera. When the Schism contracted past it, its two realities were significantly divergent. The Duality could not be resolved.'

The black line shrank past Gandera, and the red and green dots converged, leaving a single black spot. The screen cut to a pair of side-by-side images, both showing a view down onto an alien city.

It was exactly what Mason expected of an alien world: soaring brightly-coloured spires, vehicles flying through the air, with creatures meandering through the pristine streets below. The aliens were too small to discern details but looked quadruped, given how they moved.

Although the cities were similar, significant differences remained in several major buildings and thoroughfares. A large central green park had been cleared on the righthand image, with a single, colossal spire rising skywards from its centre. A not-dissimilar park was in the left image but in an entirely different location. This wasn't going to end well.

'These are the two realities of Gandera's Duality before the Schism collapse. Now see their world after.'

The new image was chaotic. Many buildings were in ruins. Others were amalgamations of the two: a skyscraper with a spire shafting through it, the green park with a street running across its centre. There was no sign of movement.

'The civilisation of Gandera vanished the instant the Duality collapsed. Their reality could not be reconciled. The species no longer exists.'

Winston fell silent. That needed time to sink in. Mason was in a better position than most to understand.

The other Earth was similar, with his life impacted by the one fateful decision to confess to Lissa, but even the tiny part he'd seen was significantly divergent. He was married to a different person and lived in a different house, likely in another town entirely. He probably had a different job. Whatever urge caused the realities to converge still had a long way to go.

The picture switched back to the flying saucer of the Duality and Schism. Earth was worryingly close to the end of the line.

'All is not lost,' said Winston, 'Earth may survive. The outcome is unpredictable, as is the shrinkage rate of the Schism. However, it would be wise not to rely upon this. That is why we are here.'

More planets appeared on either side of the Schism, joined by a series of vertical lines. Shortly after, diagonal lines were added between different worlds across the Duality.

'We have a plan to stop the collapse of the Duality in its tracks,' said Winston. 'It requires all the races on either side of the Schism to work together to reinforce our realities, ensuring we all survive indefinitely. There is no time to waste.'

The picture cut back to show Winston. His relaxed, confident demeanour was just the antidote needed after those bombshells.

'There is no need to worry unduly. Our plan will work, but we need help. We are carrying out the same engagement with many other races across the Duality, and it is time for humanity to join our grand coalition.'

Winston smiled ruefully.

'That's enough for you to take in for one day. We'll be back tomorrow with an outline of our grand plan. Rest assured, it's a great one. In the meantime, we'll discuss the matter further with your government to obtain permission to proceed. This must be a cooperative relationship.'

He held up his hand, palm first.

'For now, farewell. Don't forget to like and subscribe to our channel.'

The stream ended. YouTube popped up with recommendations for videos discussing alien abduction theories.

Emily was the first to comment.

'I thought he was about to say *live long and prosper*.'

He'd been thinking the same thing. Despite the tension, Mason couldn't help but laugh. Emily didn't seem fazed by the concept of the end of the world.

'What do you reckon?' she said. 'You've been over there. Can we trust them?'

Instinctively, Mason did. He had to - but he needed to justify it to himself.

'Nothing they said contradicted what I saw, but then again, I never left the bedroom. Lissa didn't seem worried about the Peria though. I always trusted her judgement.'

That got a glare from Emily, but she kept the conversation constructive.

'The other you seemed to approve too. I didn't know why then, but it's not surprising if they saved his life.'

'Yeah,' said Mason. 'On the subject of which, I'd better get up and phone the doctor.'

It was easier to focus on his cancer than on the end of the world. Emily nodded and reopened her Twitter feed.

'I'm going to stay here for a while,' she said, not looking up. 'Catch up with what people think.'

Mason resisted the temptation to roll his eyes. He threw on last night's clothes and went downstairs. He'd have a shower later. He couldn't concentrate on anything until the phone call was out of the way.

It had been quite a start to the day. Mason had plenty to ponder.

Chapter 3 - Two Convincing Peria

Early the following morning, Mason made his way downstairs and turned on the TV in the lounge. He wanted to view the day's developments in comfort.

Their lounge was functional, the impersonal contents telling a tale of disinterest: a two-seater settee, a single comfy chair, plain yellow walls with a couple of modern prints, a basic sideboard, assorted small tables, and little more. The most expensive things in the room were the television and sound system, his pride and joy.

It wasn't hard to imagine how different the room would be if Lissa lived here, all homely floral prints, knick-knacks and dated wallpaper serving as a tribute to her childhood. His tastes lay between the two, but Lissa's would be an antidote to the current sterility.

Emily remained upstairs, although at least had gotten out of bed now. She was moving around, opening drawers, and generally clattering about. Mason didn't care. He needed to focus on the news.

The rest of the previous day had proven eerily uneventful in the UK. The government put out a holding message urging calm while negotiating with the Peria. The implication was that it was amicable so far. They also confirmed their excited scientists had received the promised breakthroughs in fusion power. The Peria promised medical advances next.

Mason desperately needed the negotiations to be rapid. It was selfish, but knowing the world might end was a lower priority than being around to see it. After an hour of hanging on the phone yesterday, surviving the ordeal of the irritatingly bland hold music, he'd won the booby prize of a doctor's appointment in a fortnight. That was ridiculously far away.

It set Mason in a lousy mood for the rest of the day. The Peria's reception around the world was a welcome distraction. He used his iPad to follow events when not watching television news, keeping his opinions to himself. He refused to be distracted by Emily's latest conspiracy theories.

Not everything had gone smoothly for the Peria. Several ships made no contact after crossing over. A few gabbled away in an unknown language before falling silent. In every case, a small golden vessel emerged from a nearby ship and streaked through the atmosphere before disappearing into the stricken craft. Within minutes, normal service was resumed.

Reactions worldwide were mixed. The majority followed a tactic similar to the UK government, a cautiously cooperative approach given the Peria's obvious technological superiority. The promise of gifts was alluring, proving more persuasive than their instinctive xenophobia. Nobody wanted to be left behind.

For others, their territorial supremacy trumped everything, refusing to engage until the spaceships left their borders. The Peria silently ignored all ultimatums issued, content to make progress elsewhere first.

Some countries took direct action, bombing Peria craft away from built-up areas. It had no effect. The Peria made no retaliation.

Russia televised their attack on a vessel over Siberia in a show of strength. A barrage of missiles exploded harmlessly several metres away from the craft's surface. The final assault was a desperate nuclear strike. The warhead failed to detonate, bouncing harmlessly off the Peria ship. Emily laughed.

That put paid to hostile action. Everyone waited to see what emerged from the first negotiations.

At a quarter to ten in the morning, the UK government revealed they would make an announcement at the top of the hour, immediately followed by another communication from the Peria. Several other countries followed suit.

A few minutes later, Emily came downstairs and sat in the solitary chair ahead of the announcement. She looked tired, avoiding his gaze. When she spoke, she stared down at their scruffy rug, only glancing at him from the corner of her eye. Her determined and forthright tone belied her posture.

'We need to talk. I'm leaving.'

'What?' said Mason.

'I'm moving out. Staying with my sister for a while.'

It shouldn't have been a surprise. One of them was going to do it eventually, but the timing was a shock.

'Why?'

'You know why. You know it's not working. It's been over for ages.'

It had been a stupid question. That wasn't what he wanted to know.

'I mean, why now?'

'Does it matter?' said Emily.

Her offhand dismissal was the final straw.

'Of course it matters,' he snapped. 'You're the one giving up on our marriage. You owe me an explanation.'

'I owe you nothing.' She took a deep breath. 'Look, can we try to keep this amicable?'

Mason glared at her. The anger was still there, fighting to be let out to run amok, but another emotion held it back - one that took a few moments to recognise. It was relief. He copied her and took a deep breath.

'Is there someone else?'

'Of course not,' said Emily. 'It's nothing like that. Well, not really. I did meet someone who made me realise what was missing.'

Mason dreaded what was coming. It was stupid. This was the right thing for both of them; neither had done anything wrong, not really, yet all he could feel was an irrational sense of betrayal. He had to know.

'Who?'

'You,' said Emily. 'The other you, I mean. I'd forgotten that look in your eyes. You were actually happy to see me; you still wanted me. I need that in my life again. I'm not going to get it from you, am I?'

That was a question to avoid.

'You prefer the version of me who cheated on his wife?' said Mason. 'At least I've been faithful to you.'

'I don't want him either,' said Emily. 'Didn't take me long to work out that he was a real shit. Goes to show we're wrong for each other in every reality. But yes, you're more faithful than him. Although...'

'What?'

'Be honest. If you'd bumped into Lissa, are you telling me you'd have stayed faithful if she were interested? I've always known you regretted ending up with me.'

Mason went to deny it, but the words wouldn't come out. He didn't know what to say. If this was the end for them, it didn't matter if he were honest. It might prove cathartic. First, he had to believe the answer himself.

How would he have reacted? All he could judge was how he felt when seeing Lissa over there. The sense of belonging, the glimmers of youthful hope, had to mean something. Yet, the other Mason had grown bored with her too.

'Well?' urged Emily.

Mason shrugged and blurted out the first change of subject that came to mind.

'What about my cancer?'

Emily snorted.

'You really going for emotional blackmail?'

'Sorry,' said Mason. 'It's just... I don't know what the treatment will be like. Whether I can...'

Feeling pathetic, Mason left the *do it on my own* unspoken.

'You don't know you've got cancer yet,' said Emily. Her expression relaxed. 'Look, if we keep this amicable, and you need a lift to and from the hospital, whatever, then I'll do what I can. Fair?'

Mason nodded. He had nothing left to say, but Emily hadn't finished.

'We'll need to sell this place. You're welcome to stay here until then. Split all the money fifty-fifty. Let's not make this complicated.'

'You've obviously thought about this more than me.'

'Had to do something while lying awake all night,' said Emily. 'That okay?'

Mason shrugged again. Given that all she used to care about with Mason's job was how much he earned, not whether he liked it, he expected her to be more mercenary. He wasn't going to complain. Was that all it took to unwind years of marriage?

'Sure,' he said.

It was the longest and most constructive conversation they'd had for months. The fun, carefree Emily he'd once loved had gradually withdrawn into her own world, although admittedly, so had he. This was a determined, practical Emily that he hardly recognised, a butterfly emerging from the chrysalis of their marriage.

'I've packed a couple of suitcases to keep me going,' said Emily. 'I'll be off once this is all over.'

Mason frowned, losing track of the conversation. Emily explained by pointing at the television. The Prime Minister was walking out of the door of Downing Street, heading

towards the ostentatious lectern to make the announcement. Mason grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

'Good morning,' said the Prime Minister. 'I promised an update on our talks with the Peria, and as always, I am a man of my word. These are difficult times, confusing times. Interesting times, as they say, but this may be the catalyst for change we all need. So far, talks have been constructive. The Peria are proving valuable allies. I can assure you we will never be complacent, but this relationship is worth progressing to the next stage.'

The PM's delivery was incredibly dull, but at least he wasn't an idiot like his predecessor, who'd have wanted to deport the aliens. Still, the monotonous drone made it hard to concentrate. The implications of the conversation with Emily were only beginning to sink in.

This might be his last time sitting in the lounge with her. It would be odd not to see her around every day. Odd, but he had to admit, good. She'd been part of his life for too many years now. Change was always unsettling, but this would be for the best, eventually.

He began to relax. The tension of knowing that the end was nigh had gone, replaced by nervousness over what was yet to come. Still, his life would be his own again. He'd make the most of it.

He was only half listening to the PM waffle about inconsequential details but snapped alert when the magic words were spoken.

'... medical advancements. Having worked on the other Earth for five years, they have developed many treatments that will be invaluable to us: targeted gene therapies; cancer vaccines; indeed, cures for most cancers. Many, many wonders. And they have agreed to make these available immediately, in exchange for our cooperation with the first phase of their operation. We are happy to accept these conditions.'

That was brilliant. Even Emily glanced across and smiled. The Prime Minister immediately filled the big gap in the story.

'The Peria need our help to stop this Duality from collapsing. They have revealed the first details to us and will do the same for you as soon as I have finished.'

If only he'd stop talking and let the Peria get on with it. Unfortunately, he had more to say.

'In summary, they need the help of a few thousand people worldwide to work with them to strengthen the Schism. These individuals will be chosen from a select group with the right abilities. They will explain more shortly.'

The Prime Minister deployed his earnestly reassuring expression. It made him look constipated.

'I must stress that this is entirely voluntary. If you are one of the elite group, you may refuse, no questions asked. If you do participate, you may change your mind anytime. No pressure will be applied. I'm assured this will be an enjoyable project, nothing of which to be afraid.'

It was the perfect moment for the PM to joke about anal probes, but he was too dull for that.

'It will be an open-ended engagement. If you are selected and opt to take part, you will be unable to continue in your current employment. However, both you and your employer will be adequately compensated, funded directly by the government. We are currently working

through the details of the remuneration, but you can safely assume it will significantly exceed your current package, likely by an order of magnitude.'

It sounded like a cushy number, despite the leap into the unknown.

'That's all from me,' said the PM. 'I'll now hand you over to Winston to explain their requirements.'

The picture faded to show Winston smiling happily on his ship, hands in pockets. He wore the same casual sweatshirt and jeans as the day before.

'Hi folks, it's me again,' said Winston. 'Right, let's not beat around the bush. You'll all want to know about our project's first stage. Let's take a look at this diagram again.'

The flying saucer-shaped Schism appeared, with the worlds of the Duality on either side.

'Let me show you what we are trying to build.'

Lines connected the pairs of worlds across the Schism.

'That probably doesn't help, so let's zoom in on the Earth.'

Everything expanded and shifted until two large circles were left on either side of the Schism, both labelled Earth. These were covered in an identical pattern of smaller dots, each connected by a thin line to its counterpart on the other Earth.

'These dots represent the people we are looking for,' said Winston. 'Some of you - a tiny fraction of your population - are exceptionally well attuned with their counterpart. With training, this connection can be strengthened, forming an invisible but unbreakable bond to help maintain the structure of the Schism.'

The lines between all the other worlds in the original diagram implied they were doing this everywhere. The scale of the undertaking was breathtaking. With a sudden sinking feeling, Mason knew where this was going.

'Luckily, we have a simple method of identifying those suitable for this task. When we crossed over, it created the conditions for the consciousnesses of these fortunate people to swap realities. Essentially, for a short while, they lived their other lives.'

He sensed Emily looking at him but couldn't take his eyes off the screen. This was personal.

'Those involved know who they are. We were able to triangulate the connections as we arrived. We know where you live.'

Winston paused to give a reassuring smile.

'Sorry, that sounded like a threat. It's not. There is nothing to fear. All we know is where you were when we arrived. We don't know you personally, so we can do nothing unless you volunteer. As the Prime Minister said, this is voluntary, but we'd be honoured if you would trust us to at least make an initial engagement when we visit.'

Winston was bending over backwards to be reassuring, but all he'd given were platitudes with little detail to back them up. There was no clue what would be involved. Mason's gut instinct was to reject it; his life was changing too much already.

Then again, what else did he have to do? His marriage was over, he hated his job, and soon he'd have to find somewhere new to live. It might be what he needed, especially the extra money.

'I'll not keep you any longer,' said Winston. 'If you are among the elite few, hop over to our YouTube channel. There will be more details there shortly. Please, at least take the first step to find out more. I promise you'll not regret it.'

Winston faded out to be replaced by a BBC presenter, but Emily demanded his attention.

'Looks like you're one of the lucky ones,' she said. 'I'll hang around until I see what's happening.'

Only one reason would make Emily care if he went with them. Her mercenary side was back.

'You can't have any money I get from them,' said Mason. 'Not after we've split up.'

'Is that what you think of me?' said Emily. 'I meant that I'll need to keep in touch while we sort things out. I'll want to know where you are.'

He didn't believe that was the whole story, but arguing was pointless.

'That's if I decide to go.'

'You will.'

She was more confident than him. To cover his indecision, he scrabbled for the remote and opened the YouTube app on the smart TV. A live stream was waiting to start on the OnePeriaTwoEarths channel. The holding image showed a gold-silver Peria ship overlaid with a message.

Redirecting to your local representative...

After a few seconds, the text changed.

Welcome to the Crawley Transit Ship

If this is incorrect, please select manually from the channel's home page

'Neat,' said Mason. 'Didn't know YouTube could do that.'

'I told you they've hacked the algorithm,' said Emily.

Mason ignored her. He had bigger things to worry about, happy to wait for the stream to start in silence while he pondered his options. Emily didn't let him.

'I wonder if you got your other self in trouble over there? Lissa must suspect that the same thing happened between us.'

'All I did was tell her what happened here,' said Mason. 'Anyway, he's the one who had multiple affairs with you. He'd deserve it.'

Emily laughed louder than he considered appropriate.

'Classic Mason,' she said. 'Be funny if she dumped you over there too. You'd be alone in both realities.'

That stung, but he wasn't going down without a fight.

'So are you.'

'It's my choice though,' said Emily. 'I'm the one making the decisions.'

Mason bit down a reply. He'd let her feel good about herself for now, even though she'd abandoned her desire to keep things amicable. Maybe eventually, she'd start looking at her own actions. That's what he'd be doing, over and over. He always did. It was hard to ignore that he was a bit of a shit in the other reality.

With a start, it struck him for the first time that the old Emily was back. She'd always had a sharp tongue before things turned bad - it had just never been aimed at him before. Now the decision had been made, the real Emily was re-emerging.

She hadn't finished yet either.

'You going to look up Lissa here then?'

He hadn't seriously considered it beyond wistful dreams. The grail of a lost future with Lissa had been part of him for so long, now might be the chance to pursue it. Yet, over in the other reality, it hadn't worked out.

'No.'

Emily didn't deserve anything more. Lissa did. How could he expect Lissa to love him again if he didn't even like himself at the moment? That had to come first.

'Why not?' said Emily.

'Quiet,' said Mason. 'It's about to start.'

She got the message. After ten seconds, the stream began, revealing a different Peria standing confidently before another gold-silver wall.

At first glance, the similarities with Winston outweighed the differences. He wore the same style sweatshirt with Earth emojis above a greater-than and the number zero, faded jeans, and adopted a relaxed posture. The ridged forehead and reassuring smile were similar too.

Then the distinctions became more apparent. He had a slighter build, a more pointed face, and warm brown eyes. His light brown skin had a slight blue tint, unlike Winston's green, and the pattern of the darker blue strip across his scalp was subtly different. When he spoke, his voice was higher.

'Greetings. My name is Hobson. I run the vessel currently hovering above Crawley. My area of responsibility covers the county of Sussex. Aren't you the lucky ones?'

Hobson gave an annoyingly endearing grin.

'I won't keep you long. As Winston has told you, there are a select few that we'd like to meet. If you experienced life on the other Earth, I'd like the chance to convince you to join us.'

Emily muttered something, but he ignored it. He couldn't afford to miss a word. This was his life from now on if he wanted it.

'We've identified eleven of you in my region. My vessel will shortly route across Sussex, taking in all the identified locations. We'll drop a shuttle craft near where we detected each connection, and I'll be inside waiting to answer any questions you may have. You can still back out if you don't like the answers, but once you've met me, I'm sure I can entice you to come aboard.'

He grinned again, even more enthusiastically.

'Don't turn down the opportunity of a lifetime. Your government will give you oodles of money, and I'll give you an experience you'll never forget. We'll be a fun bunch when we get together, laughing all the way to saving our realities. After all...'

Hobson looked down at his sweatshirt and pointed to each row in turn.

'Two Earths... are better than... none.'

He gave a self-satisfied smirk.

'Yes, I know that's a greater-than, but it was the best I could do. I told Winston you'd all like it.'

Despite everything, it was hard not to laugh at his keenness.

'I'll wait ten minutes at each stop. If you decide not to come, then no worries. More fool you though. You'll regret missing out once you hear what a great time everyone is having. Come for a chat. I promise there'll be no pressure, but you'll have to withstand my irresistible charm.'

No valid reason came to mind why he shouldn't at least speak with Hobson. He refused to give in to fear of the unknown.

'If you come along with me, you can expect to be away from home for two weeks at first. You may contact your friends and family anytime, but we ask for this initial period with us to help establish a bond within the group. You can back out whenever you like, but if you stick with it, this will be an ongoing commitment for around six months.'

Six months at an order of magnitude more money sounded hard to resist.

'Even better, those of you who excel at bridging the Schism will be offered the opportunity of an extended programme after that. You'll even get to go to space. Who could say no to that?'

Mason couldn't. Seeing Earth from space had long been his dream, ever since watching videos of the old moon landings as a kid. He'd happily pay for the opportunity. Now he might get it for free and be given buckets of cash at the same time.

Hobson wagged his finger at the screen.

'No cheating! You'll be scanned on entering the room to talk to me, so we'll instantly know if you're not kosher. You really don't want to try our ejection system.'

The grin came back.

'Just kidding. All that will happen is that the inner door won't open, but let's not waste each other's time.'

Hobson held up his hand and waved.

'Right, time for me to be off. I've one pickup here in Crawley, then I'll head to Horsham. Keep an eye on this channel for updates on our route. There's also a link below if you accidentally miss a pickup. We're a flexible bunch. Will fit you in somehow.'

He waved again.

'I look forward to meeting the lucky ones soon.'

The screen faded to black with two rows of centred white text.

Current destination: Crawley

Next destination: Horsham

'Looks like you're next,' said Emily. 'I assume you're going?'

'Probably,' said Mason.

He'd ask about his cancer first. It might be the fastest way for him to get a cure.

'I'll stay on here then,' she said. 'No point moving out if you're not around.'

'Gee, thanks,' said Mason. 'Don't unpack until I've at least flown away. I might change my mind.'

'You won't,' she said. 'Look, it'll work out for the best. I can put the house on the market in the meantime and sort out the practicalities. We can sign any paperwork when you come back after the two weeks.'

Mason shrugged. It would save him the hassle. He ought to tell his work what was happening but couldn't be bothered. They'd find out one way or another.

He continued staring at the screen while reviewing everything in his mind again. Besides the uncertainty, he couldn't think of a good reason not to go. Even that was alleviated by the fact that the aliens seemed so goddam cool.

The text on the screen changed.

Current destination: Horsham

Next destination: Haywards Heath

'That was quick,' said Emily.

The ship had likely been in the right place for the first stop. It wasn't going to take long to get to him.

'I'm going to wait outside.'

Should he pack anything? Hobson hadn't mentioned it, and they weren't allowing much time, so he guessed not. The Peria gave the impression of being organised. They'd have everything required to hand.

It was sunny out. He didn't even need a coat.

'I'll stay here and follow things on Twitter,' said Emily.

By the time Mason had put on his shoes and was ready to leave, Emily was still staring intently at her iPad. She didn't look up nor seem to care. Annoyed, Mason slammed the front door behind him.

It was an odd sensation. The moment he stepped out of the door, the tension in his neck loosened. He was leaving his home to be voluntarily abducted by aliens and was actually looking forward to it. Bring it on!

The imaginary future with Lissa had to be a thing of the past; he'd mess that up in every reality. His only prospect now was a short-term existence with the Peria. Fun times, space flight, loads of money, and no emotional baggage. Perfect. He needed it to be true. He had nothing else.

There was no time for his nerves to take over. In the distance, a disturbance in the clouds was the first indication of the Peria vessel's approach. Mason was briefly ashamed not to have said goodbye to Emily, but it was too late now.

He didn't know that he'd never see her again.