

A Revision of Reality

Preview

Mark W White

Prelude – Observance

Katinka Farkas was older than she cared to remember, yet the culmination of her story still seemed another lifetime away. As a naive research assistant, she thought she'd mapped out her future: a successful career in neurological research leading to a professorship at a respected university followed by a quiet retirement in the country. That was more than a century ago. None of it had happened.

It had all been going so well – until she met Kofi Albus. That mild-mannered man had changed everything, and not just for her. Earth itself had been transformed by Kofi, working with Carole Cantor to free humanity from the yoke of Raj Tamboli's suppression. Not that the idiots at the Decemvirate had told anyone, the ungrateful bastards. And now the Decemvirs themselves had gone too, disappearing along with the Stream in a puff of self-immolation.

Katinka had grown to like Carole once she'd met her in person – maybe a little too much. If they hadn't got on so well, Carole could never have talked her into all this. It had seemed so easy to agree at the time.

Anyway, that was all in the past; she wouldn't have survived without them.

Katinka, Kofi and Carole still walked the Earth, the oldest people alive along with the unmentionable First Disciple, Pavel Petrov. Three friends living separate lives but sharing the secret of what had really happened all those years ago, known only to them and the older Disciples of Saint Raj.

That was all her fault too – the Disciples of Saint Raj, the Continuity Church, the Afterlife. It had just taken a careless quip all those decades ago, and the world had been reborn. She wanted no part of it.

Nevertheless, the three of them felt beholden to witness the ceremony together whenever there was a new Ritual of Ascension every few years. They knew what the candidate was going to experience when they ascended to become the new Guardian of the Afterlife; they felt a connection. It gave them a chance to reminisce together.

Not that they would reveal themselves to anyone. They'd managed to keep a distance and have little contact with the Archbishops for many decades now. Everyone seemed happier that way, so that's how it should stay.

It was now more than a year since Katinka had last met her friends and she was looking forward to seeing them both again. Meeting at each Ritual of Ascension had become a ritual for them too. There was something oddly cathartic about watching the process happen to someone else – a consciousness uploading into the former Stream, its predecessor emerging into an android body as a Disciple of Saint Raj.

Saint Raj. It nearly made Katinka vomit every time she heard it, knowing what Raj Tamboli had done to Carole and Kofi – and indeed, the whole world. And yet, the Earth loved him, at least ostensibly. There was still plenty of grumbling about the role of the church in the world, and the occasional concerted resistance, but it didn't last. Too many people couldn't resist the lure of the Afterlife.

The upload of their consciousness and subsequent download into an android had happened to the three of them, but so differently, free of the more recent religious overtones. Carole had been duped by Raj Tamboli into the longest stint of all, then a dying Kofi replaced her in a desperate gambit to free the world from Raj's embrace, and finally Katinka had ascended peacefully from her hospital bed. That was before the Decemvirate had become directly involved and screwed things up.

Now, it was all part of the mythology built up around the Continuity Church and the lies about Raj Tamboli, a ritual which helped emphasise the mystique of the Afterlife and maintain control on a too-compliant population. It sickened her, especially as she felt responsible for it.

At least her friends didn't blame her, which was some comfort. Their joint routine for the day would help recharge her faith in herself. Once they'd witnessed the ceremony from the vantage of Ascension Square in front of the Tethys Cathedral, they'd go to their favourite Italian restaurant and chew the fat for a few hours, sharing tales of their lives since they'd last met as well as revisiting their personal experiences in the Stream for the umpteenth time. Somehow, it helped ground them back in reality, ready to head out and find new purpose in their lives. Right now, that purpose was lacking for Katinka.

As usual, Carole Cantor had arranged for the shuttles to deliver them to a corner of Ascension Square at roughly the same time, all part of their ritual, as was receiving the latest copy of Carole's memoirs. Carole insisted on updating them with the recent changes to her story at least once a year, in case the time was ever ripe for it to be published, but something had happened to her in the interim. There was no point trying to publish it while the church held sway though.

For once, Katinka was ready way too early, so decided to make her own way there and soak up the atmosphere.

She arranged for her ad hoc shuttle to stop a few streets away from the main square and then wended her way slowly through the crowds. Grudgingly, she had to admit that the Continuity Church had been pretty successful in turning their ritual into a community event. The streets were lined with colourfully decorated stalls selling anything and everything, especially all variations of food and drink from around the world that she could imagine.

The smells were hard to resist, even for her android sensors. Katinka went up to the quietest stall she could find and bought herself some churros and a mulled wine. It suited her sense of the bizarre to be sipping hot wine in the blistering heat of Pune in India. Naturally, it was mainly for show, and it would be handled by her artificial body's waste recycling system. Still, the sensors in her mouth gave a vague simulated sensation of pleasure at the chemicals and textures of the consumables.

She'd just missed the carnival procession. That was fine, it wasn't really her thing, but the afterglow of the joy seeping through the crowds was uplifting. Those Archbishops really knew how to get their people in the right frame of mind for the transcendental sections of the ceremony to come. The mixture of hope, awe and solemnity continued to inspire the masses.

It took her longer than she'd hoped to get to their regular meeting place on one side of Ascension Square, but she made it with a few minutes to spare before the others were due to arrive.

The area in front of the old Tethys corporate headquarters-slash-museum had been cleared after the foundation of the church and rebuilt as a massive communal area lined with statues, mainly of Raj Tamboli. A permanent high podium had been built in front of the entrance, its façade ornately decorated with the imagery of the nascent religion, glimmering gaudily golden in the sun. That façade was a thin veneer of beauty over a bulwark of paranoia, concealing layer upon layer of protection to shield the church functionaries when they were inside. This ceremony was one of the rare occasions when they'd all emerge from their cocoon together.

On the podium were the accoutrements needed for the day's ceremony, with the two altars being the focus. Covered by a red velvet blanket trimmed with gold, one had a plush pillow at its end and was surrounded by the equipment needed to perform the upload of the consciousness of the new Guardian of the Afterlife. The other altar was already occupied; the android host body of the new Disciple of Saint Raj lay covered by a matching gold-trimmed red blanket, awaiting the download of its new consciousness. It was hard to make out the details directly given Katinka's distance from the podium, but there were giant screens around the square to keep the adoring masses happy.

Unusually, her friends were late. It was now only five minutes before the ceremony was due to start, but there was still no sign of them. Katinka sent both of them a quick text message in case there had been a change of plans that she'd missed having made her own way here.

'Hey guys. Where are you? I'm in the usual place. Hurry up, it's starting soon!'

No reply came within a couple of minutes. Reluctantly, she called Carole on her phone. She hated hassling them directly but was starting to get worried. There was no answer to that either. She tried Kofi. No reply.

Odd.

Katinka was distracted from her concern by the triumphal music blaring from the nearby speakers, which was reaching a crescendo. The ceremony was starting.

Solemnly, the Archbishops – the highest authority in the church – filed in from the back of the podium and peeled off to the right, their bright mustard cotton kaftans gleaming in the sun shining from a cloudless sky. Their heads were protected from the heat by the raised hoods on their cloaks.

Once their line across the back of the stage was complete, the purple-robed Disciples of Saint Raj followed and took their position along the left side, led by Alima Arian. Alima was the only Disciple back from the days of the Decemvirate that Katinka could stand.

The android Disciples had originated as a small ceremonial grouping of previous Guardians, but their power and influence had grown over the years along with their numbers. The jockeying for power between them and the Archbishops was a constant factor in the modern church.

The slight figure of First Disciple Pavel Petrov was last to enter, his glowing golden kaftan covered by a purple sash. He walked forward between the two altars and cast his condescending aquiline gaze across the mass of people before him.

'People of Earth,' he began in his nasal voice. 'Welcome to the Ritual of Ascension. Once again, it is time for a new Guardian to take their place in the Afterlife to fulfil the solemn duty of safeguarding all our futures. As is our tradition, this honour befalls the senior Archbishop of the Continuity Church.'

Katinka cringed. She hated that voice, hated the severe, piercing gaze of the First Disciple, a survivor of the last Decemvirate back when she was in the Stream. The fact that he'd been selected as a Decemvir was final proof to Katinka that the Elector had passed its sell-by date, no longer able to cope with the pressures of the post-Raj world. Nevertheless, replacing the Elector had left that weasel in a position of increasing authority.

She tuned out his droning; it was the usual stuff, whipping up reverence towards Saint Raj and his role in the creation of the Afterlife. All lies, of course, but when was a religion ever based on truth? It kept the crowds happy and gave them a sense of belonging – as well as the promise of a future life. Grudgingly, despite the occasional conflicts, she had to admit it had achieved its primary goal of maintaining a relatively peaceful world at a lower cost than the method imposed by Raj Tamboli – but it still made her angry. Especially as it had been her idea. Well, sort of.

Katinka was currently more worried about what had happened to her friends. They'd never missed a ceremony before. She sent another message and tried calling again, still with no reply, so she unrolled her tablet and pulled up the local map to study the traffic flow. It looked as if there were a few major blockages on the outskirts of town, roads closed by accidents from what she could tell. That was probably it, those delays would easily have held them up for way too long if they'd been stuck in them.

It wouldn't explain why they didn't answer her messages though. Using the privileges she'd conveniently forgotten to remove when she'd left the Stream, Katinka checked the local infrastructure capacity to see if it had been swamped by all the crowds. No, it was close to the limit but looked like it was coping. Unless there had been an unlucky surge whenever she tried to get in touch, that didn't explain it.

Katinka's worry grew.

She spent several minutes on more fruitless research, before switching her attention back to the ceremony, which was just reaching its climax. After the Oath of Ascension had been taken by the senior Archbishop, Pavel Petrov blessed the lifeless mound on the other altar while the Archbishop was connected to the surrounding equipment. Theatrically, Petrov pulled back the cover to reveal the android beneath – a tall, blond-haired white man. As the last electrodes were attached, the Archbishop lay back onto the pillow and closed his eyes.

Pavel Petrov looked back to the attendants, who nodded. He raised his arms aloft and spoke as loudly as he could.

'In the name of Raj Tamboli, saint and creator of the Afterlife, let the transfer begin!'

White spotlights shone over the stage as a fanfare blared from the speakers. Even though it was daylight, the glare gradually grew too bright to bear and, along with everyone, Katinka shielded her eyes. Abruptly, the lights went out – all part of the usual overly-dramatic routine to keep the crowd entertained as the process took its natural time to complete. At the end, the Archbishop's body would be dead, his consciousness uploaded to replace the former Guardian who would now be resident in the android.

Blinking rapidly, Katinka's eyes adjusted back just in time to see the android sit up as a dark shadow crossed the altar. That was odd. Where had that shadow come from? There were no clouds in the sky, nothing in the air as far as she could see from her vantage. The shadow seemed to be hovering there, like oddly flickering smoke. Petrov had noticed it too and looked down at the new Disciple with a frown.

The Disciple was frowning too, staring at the back of his hands with a look of amazement. A broad grin broke across his face as the shadow faded away.

Katinka's attention was so wrapped up in the Disciple, she didn't notice the other event that had caused many in the crowd to cry out in surprise. Once she saw it, her mouth hung open in shock. The old Archbishop's body, supposedly dead after his consciousness had ascended, sat up.

'What is this? Who are you?' said Petrov to the android.

'I... I bring a message concerning the Afterlife,' said the blond-haired figure. He grimaced and tilted his head as if listening for something. 'You... must stop this. I... damn, what was it?'

Petrov gestured to the other Disciples. They rushed forward and surrounded the altar, man-handling the android to his feet, and bustling him off the rear of the stage. The other Archbishops escorted their unexpectedly alive compatriot away too, leaving an empty podium.

Well, that was interesting. Carole and Kofi would be annoyed to have missed it, but at least Katinka had something to do now. She had to find out what had happened.

First though, she had to find her friends.

Part One

Proselytism

Chapter 1 – Commune

Nevin was eighteen years old; the culmination of weeks of longing was finally near. After starting work in the Office of the High Council of Juno a month ago, he'd been mesmerised by Amy at the next desk ever since. She was beautiful, she was funny, she was clever. Now, she was sat next to him, holding his hand, waiting for the service to start. What could be better?

It was just a pity he had no idea what was going on.

He'd wanted to pluck up the courage to ask her out for the last couple of weeks. They seemed to get on really well. A couple of years older than Nevin, Amy was efficient, professional at work, but also great fun too. She was all he could think about from the time he awoke in the morning until he fell asleep at night, the light that brightened every second of his existence. And then this afternoon she'd walked over, leant on his desk and smiled that warm smile that made his mouth go dry.

'Are you doing anything tonight?' said Amy.

'Um, no,' said Nevin. This was his chance. All he had to do was get the words out of his mouth. Would you like to go out somewhere? Maybe have the evening meal together? Anything. 'Err... why?'

'I'm going to the Congregation tonight,' said Amy. 'I wondered if you'd like to come along?'

'I... what's a Congregation?' said Nevin, instantly kicking himself.

He didn't care what it was, he'd go.

'Tell you what,' she said. 'Why don't we meet in the refectory beforehand? Grab a bite to eat first, and I'll tell you all about it.'

'Sounds great. What time?'

'About seven?'

'Great,' he said. Too many greats. 'I'll see you there.'

'Look forward to it.'

She flashed that radiant smile again and was gone.

And then she'd been late. By half-past seven, Nevin felt crestfallen and wondered whether to give up. Had she had a change of heart? Just before he was about to surrender and get his food alone, she bustled into the room and sat opposite him.

'I'm so sorry,' said Amy. 'My Mum needed my help. I couldn't get away.'

'Don't worry,' said Nevin, smiling broadly, hoping it came across as supportive rather than desperately relieved. 'You're here now. You live with your parents?'

'Just my Mum,' she said. 'My Dad died when I was five.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I can hardly remember him. What about you?'

'I've got a room with a couple of friends from university,' said Nevin, hesitating. 'My parents died a couple of years ago.'

'I'm so sorry, that must have been tough when you were at uni.'

He didn't know what to say. It had been so sudden, an accident out of the blue. He shouldn't have mentioned it, as it was still too hard to talk about, so he shrugged.

'It's fine, in the past,' he said. He had to change the subject, get back to something that didn't make him feel depressed. 'So what is this thing we're going to tonight?'

'Have you really not heard of the Congregation of Indra?' said Amy. 'It's very popular.'

'Sorry, no. I... I probably don't get out enough.'

'We can fix that,' said Amy, smiling. Nevin could feel his face flush. 'It just started with a few people, but more and more are going every week. It seems to have touched a nerve.'

'What's it about?'

'There's been too many arguments around Juno lately, disagreements over what our society should be. Some of us feel like we're losing our way. We get together to remember what's good about our ship, celebrate the life of Indra and how she brought us back together after the evils wrought by Tamboli. There's so much we can learn from her.'

He'd not been aware of any arguments, but this was the perfect way to really impress her. Nevin couldn't have asked for a better introduction, especially seeing how passionate she was about the Congregation.

'Indra was my great-grandmother, you know?' he said as nonchalantly as he could.

'No!'

He was delighted at her astonishment. He'd been worrying how he was going to impress her, and it turned out his long-dead family was all he needed. It was a start, anyway.

'Yup. Well, Indra and Riku's adopted daughter Sandra was my grandma.'

'That's wonderful,' said Amy. She reached forward and grasped his hand. 'You've got to come. I'm sure you'll love it.'

'That's why I'm here,' he said, finding it hard to breathe as he savoured the warmth of her hand. He grasped it and squeezed gently. 'I'm really looking forward to it. What time does it start?'

She glanced around at the clock on the wall.

'Oh shit,' said Amy. 'We ought to go if we want to get a good seat. I like sitting at the front. You OK waiting to eat for an hour or so?'

'Sure,' he said, unwilling to ever let go of her.

To his further delight, she kept hold of his hand all the way to the meeting room where the Congregation was to be held, and didn't even let go when they settled into their seats in the front row. The room was laid out with six rows of around fifteen chairs, and was filling up quickly. At the front was a raised dais with a single table draped by a deep maroon cover with two upright chairs to either side. In the centre of the table was a large glass bowl bizarrely containing what looked like boiled sweets. Above the table, a glass crystal globe hung from the ceiling, light glistening through its multifaceted surface, sending subtle radiance through the chamber. Gentle acoustic guitar music played from the speakers nestled

in the front corners of the room. The atmosphere felt tranquil but alive with the buzz of anticipation.

'What's going to happen?' said Nevin.

'Wait and see,' she said, a playful smile curling the corners of her mouth. She squeezed his hand back. 'It's a lovely service.'

He had to admit that he was enjoying the atmosphere, the feeling of belonging to something. With Amy.

'I like the music,' he said.

'Me too,' said Amy. 'There are songs later. Try closing your eyes and just listen.'

He did as she suggested and let the music wash over him, soak into his every pore. He felt so relaxed. The melody consumed his thoughts until all that was left was the sensation of Amy next to him: the feel of her hand in his; the warmth of her arm resting against him; the smell of her natural perfume, something he'd not consciously noticed before but now was overwhelmingly wonderful.

He fought the desire to open his eyes and look at her again, but he could still see her in his mind, the elegance of her long neck stretching up to the dark curls of hair which perfectly framed the beauty of her dark face, her high cheekbones emphasising the intensity of those blue eyes. The thought of leaning across and gently tasting her lips was swimming to the surface. But there was no need to rush. Just being here with her was breathtaking.

The music slowly impinged on his consciousness again. The tempo and volume were increasing as the guitar was joined by a piano. Shortly after, it was also accompanied by a string section. It seemed to be building to a crescendo. He felt Amy lean closer.

'It's about to start,' she whispered.

He opened his eyes just before the lights in the room dimmed. A spotlight lit the stage, and another highlighted a door to the rear of the room which opened to let a man and a woman wearing yellow robes through. They both reverentially carried smaller bowls of sweets in front of them and walked towards the dais, their steps in perfect time with the music. Approaching the table, they put their bowls to either side of the larger one and took their places in front of the waiting chairs.

'Please be upstanding for the arrival of Celebrant Freya,' they intoned in unison.

Nevin scrambled quickly to his feet, still holding onto Amy tightly. The volume of the music increased further but slowed in tempo as it was accompanied by the resonant booms of a bass drum. Striding in time with the beat, a woman in a purple gown walked into the room and positioned herself centrally in front of the table. As the drum beat faster and faster, the Celebrant raised her arms from her sides, holding them straight above her in a ritual pose. Suddenly, she clapped her hands together, and the music stopped abruptly.

A broad smile broke across her face as she opened her arms wide, palms splayed in a gesture of openness as she looked around the room.

'Welcome, my friends, to the Congregation of Indra,' she said. 'It's so good to be here with you again.'

The rich timbre of her voice seemed to speak to Nevin on an instinctive level. There was something about her that made him want to trust her. Maybe it was the blue eyes shining out

over dominant cheeks that reminded him of Amy, maybe it was the cropped bob of black hair that reminded him of his mother. Whatever it was, he was glad to be here.

She clasped her hands reverentially in front of her, as she continued her opening address.

'It is gratifying to see that our numbers increase every week; I can see some fresh faces around the room once more. To you, I say again, welcome.'

She looked directly at Nevin in the front row.

'We are a friendly bunch, don't worry if you don't know what's going to happen. Let others be your guide.'

Nevin felt Amy squeeze his hand once more as Celebrant Freya glanced at her and smiled. He breathed again.

'Let's start the service with a bit of fun,' Freya continued. 'What better way than a singalong to clear the cobwebs from a day at work. You'll all know the song from your days at school, *The Maypole and the Wheel*, so let it rip. We're all friends here, sing as loudly and joyously as you can; make the tune as optional as you like. Dance in the aisles if it will make you feel better. Remember, we are here to celebrate the best of the human spirit, so let yours express itself to the full.'

The familiar musical intro started playing, and he could feel Amy swaying in time to the irresistible tune. Nevin couldn't help but join her. The rich contralto of the Celebrant's voice led the Congregation into the first verse, ably accompanied by her assistants. Next to him, Amy's confident soprano rang out as clear as a bell. Half a second behind, Nevin self-consciously mumbled the words, slowly gaining in confidence as the volume of the others drowned out his pitiful efforts. By the time they reached the chorus, he was fully into the swing of things and ready to shout out the first *Maypole*.

As they joyfully started the chorus, Amy lifted her arms above her head, waving them enthusiastically in the air. Reluctantly, he had to let go of her hand, but raised his arms too and mimicked her movements. As soon as they settled into the second verse, he tried to grasp her hand again; instead, she leaned against him and put her arm around his waist. Without hesitation, he reciprocated, their bodies swaying warmly together. Celebrant Freya caught his gaze again and grinned. His face flushed, his whole body felt hot. By the time the song finished, there was sweat running down his face, but he felt alive, so alive.

He looked around at Amy as they sat back down. She appeared as warm as he felt, her face glowing radiantly and beaded with perspiration. She leant across and kissed him lightly on the cheek and grasped his hand again. A glorious ache danced inside him as Freya started to speak.

'Thank you, my friends,' she said, slightly breathless herself. 'What a joyous way to start our celebration. Hold onto that feeling. Whenever life gets you down, someone upsets you, makes you angry, torments you, remember how you are feeling right now. The joy will return, the negativity can be banished. It is up to us all, as individuals, to make that happen. We must set the example for others to follow.'

Freya's expression turned serious.

'Our first President, Indra, showed us the way; the warmth and generosity of her spirit should be an inspiration to us all. Despite suffering at the hands of the demon Tamboli and

his brown-shirted minions, she reached out to unite our community once the threat had been dismissed, revealing the truth of our world for the first time. Without her trust, her openness, we wouldn't know that Juno is a starship, adrift in space. As long as we are alive, she urged us to enjoy life, to live it to the full, to build a loving community together. We must ensure her message is remembered right to this day.'

Nevin knew the story of Indra from school, but that had been dry historical facts. He'd never thought about what her life really meant, how it related to his life. Glancing to Amy, he realised she was studying his face. She gave an encouraging smile, and he turned his attention back to Freya, wrapt in her every word.

'We live our lives in a balance. We all have the good of Indra inside us. We have the evil of Tamboli hidden in our souls. It is our responsibility to keep the aspects of Indra to the fore, let it shine on the darkness of Tamboli, and urge others to do the same. Indra's friend, Jemma, showed us the way. She was tempted by the words of Tamboli, helped him gain power, and realised too late what she had done. But she turned the corner and helped make amends. The light of Indra must guide our words, our lives. Our world is in danger of going down a dark path once more, and it is up to us to ensure we do not forget the lessons from history. Love and understanding must guide our path.'

Nevin wondered what she meant about the dark path; he had no idea that there were dangers still in the world. Amy would probably know, so that would give them something to talk about later.

'We'll cover this more soon when my friends here share some readings with us,' Freya said, gesturing to her attendants. 'But first, let's sing another song. Music is the best way of letting go, of freeing our inner Indra to help us experience the world anew. The love of Indra and Riku transformed our world. Let it shape yours too.'

That set the pattern for the next half hour, with songs and readings that made Nevin question how he lived his life and what the world meant to him. As words of love and hope inspired his thoughts, he focused on his feelings for Amy.

He knew his life wouldn't be the same again, not if he had his way. He didn't want it to be. Whatever it was going to bring, his life had to include Amy. He was certain of it. It was stupid, to be so sure after just the one date, but he knew. He just hoped that she would come to feel the same.

'And now, our final act of celebration,' said Freya. 'In commemoration of Indra's walk to assume the presidency, we will share the communion of a ceremonial sweet to link us together as we journey back to our daily lives.'

One of the attendants moved forward to the end of the first row of seats, and the other picked up one of the smaller bowls of sweets and handed it to the Celebrant who walked to one end of the dais. The attendant then picked up the other small bowl and stood behind Freya as the inspirational music from the beginning of the service started up again.

'Just do as I say,' whispered Amy. 'That's another reason for picking the front row, we get to go first.'

Nevin nodded, unsure what was happening.

The attendant at the end of the row gestured them forward. Nevin stood up along with the others and moved to stand in front of the dais.

'Kneel down when I do,' said Amy under her breath. A few moments later, she did, and he followed her down. At the end of the row, he could see Freya saying something to each person in turn, and handing them a sweet from her bowl using small tongs, which they then put in their mouth. He could hear the words spoken, so he knew what to do before she got to him.

When Freya reached him, she said the same as for everyone, 'In the name of Indra, accept this offering with love.'

Nevin opened the palm of his hand and replied, 'I accept it, and return the love.'

Freya dropped her voice. 'Glad you could come, Nevin. It means a lot to have one of the family of Indra at our gathering. I hope we'll see you again.'

Nevin was taken aback that she knew about him, but the answer was easy.

'Thank you. Yes, I'll be back.'

As Freya moved on to stand in front of Amy to repeat the ritual, he placed the sweet in his mouth. It was very fruity, although he couldn't identify the exact flavour.

He heard Amy whisper to Freya.

'How did you know about Nevin's family? I only just found out myself!'

'Mothers know things, my dear,' said Freya. 'I'll tell you when you're home.'

'Sure, Mum,' sighed Amy.

Nevin looked around at Amy in astonishment. She smirked and poked out the tip of her tongue.

'I was going to tell you, honest,' she said. 'I didn't want to make you nervous beforehand.'

Before Nevin could work out what to say, Amy gestured to stand up, and they returned to their seat.

'Let's chat later,' she said. 'Just sit, enjoy your sweet and listen to the music. It's a lovely way to end the service.'

'OK,' said Nevin.

He felt self-conscious after the shock, but the warmth of Amy's hand soon quelled his nerves. He sat there, sucking gently on the sweet and staring up at the crystal globe hanging from the ceiling as the music swirled around him.

He hadn't noticed before, but a brighter spotlight was shining on the globe now, presumably since the start of the sweet ceremony. The light was refracting and reflecting at all angles from the uneven crystal surface. It was hypnotic. As the music lifted his spirits further, the chiaroscuro of the pattern entranced his senses. He couldn't take his eyes off it. He could feel his body relaxing, and the fruity flavour in his mouth compounded the transcendental sensation.

Slowly, he became aware of a shadow swirling around the light, an unexpected random dimming without any visible cause. It still felt right, though. Life felt right.

He didn't understand where it came from, but something in that swirl spoke to him. Slowly it solidified, the shadows morphing into patterns of thin black smoke, writhing in circular streams. The streams crisscrossed to plait a dark halo around the globe.

It made no sense. He had no idea how the Celebrant was doing it, but it was supposed to be there. He could sense it. He felt drawn to it as if he was being sucked out of his body and into the sphere.

And then, suddenly, it was gone. The spotlight went out, the music ended in a crescendo, and the smoke was gone as if it had never existed. People were leaving their seats. Amy was looking at him with a concerned expression on her face, and Freya was coming towards them.

'Are you OK?' said Amy. 'You looked like you were in a trance.'

'I... I'm fine,' he said, feeling bemused.

It had been a weird sensation. He still felt disoriented.

'You sure?' said Amy. 'You didn't seem to know I was here.'

'I'll always know you're there,' he said, smiling to try to alleviate her concern. Not that he wasn't worried, he still felt dizzy. 'Sorry, it was probably a bit much for me, first time. I really enjoyed it though.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' said Freya as she reached them. 'I'm pleased you could come. Amy's told me a lot about you.'

'Oh, Mum,' said Freya, looking embarrassed.

Amy's confident demeanour disappeared as soon as her mother was near. Nevin got to his feet, but nearly unbalanced as the dizziness took hold again. Freya grabbed his arm.

'I think you should go home, young man,' said Freya. 'Get some rest. There's always tomorrow.'

'It's OK,' said Nevin. 'I don't want to spoil your daughter's evening.'

'If you're not feeling well, we can go out again tomorrow,' said Amy.

'That sounds best,' said Freya.

'But—'

'I insist,' said Freya.

Amy flashed a reassuring smile. 'I'll walk you home.'

*

After sitting on his bed for ten minutes, he felt back to normal. It had come out of nowhere and gone just as quickly but had ruined his evening. At least there was the promise of another date tomorrow.

And there had been that farewell kiss. Just one, but it lingered in his memory longer than on his lips, a warm farewell with a promise of delights to come. It had been long enough for him to decide that Amy's sweet had been orange-flavoured, though.

The evening had transformed him in so many ways. Amy was part of his life now. To his utter consternation, she seemed to like him as much as he liked her. The Congregation had been a shared experience that made him feel part of something for the first time since his parents had died. He needed that feeling of belonging. And the Celebrant both knew who he was and was Amy's mother too. All parts of his life now seemed connected.

Finally, there was the enigma of those strange shadows that had left him feeling disoriented. He'd have to ask Freya how they did that. It had seemed such an integral part of the experience to him as if he finally understood his place in the world, an ephemeral sense of connection that faded when the light went out.

A Revision of Reality

His mind was too active to go to sleep, so he pulled out his sketch pad and pencil. Drawing helped him relax. There was only one thing he could imagine drawing right now; the picture was so clear in his mind.

First came the outline, the shape of her face, the long curve of her neck. The eyes had to be next, and he took great care to ensure they gleamed from the page. Everything would flow from those glorious eyes.

A quick few lines delineated her nose and mouth, and then a cursory representation of the curls of her hair completed the structure.

Then came the details, the careful filling in of the lips, the dark shading of her skin, the individual hairs in intricate detail. He couldn't rest until he was finished.

Finally, it was done. Amy shone from the page. He stared at it and was content.

Chapter 2 – Consume

Nevin made sure he arrived at the office early the following morning. He had a delivery to make.

Once that goal was achieved, he made his way to the kitchen to prepare a cup of coffee. He hadn't slept that well. He'd need a few brews to get going.

There had been too many thoughts racing through his brain during the night, mainly a multitude of Amys. It was tempered by the odd sensation engendered by that smoky cloud coalescing and evaporating so quickly, yet speaking to him on some deep level. He had no clue how Freya had done that, nor why it had affected him so severely, but no-one else.

That first sip of coffee tasted so good. He took a deep sniff of the wonderful aroma wafting up and followed it with another long swig. That was starting to feel better, although this first cup wasn't going to last very long. He wandered over to the noticeboard to see if there was anything interesting, planning on finishing this first cup and getting a refill before heading back to his desk.

For once, there was something worth reading. A large poster had been newly pinned in the centre of the board.

**Please attend an all-hands meeting
10am, Sadiki Chamber
President Omri**

What was the President going to discuss? Nevin had only seen him in the office a few times since he'd started work there, but he always appeared friendly enough, and everyone seemed only to have positive things to say. It would be good to hear him speak in person. Hopefully, there was nothing to worry about.

Lost in thought, Nevin didn't hear the footsteps approaching.

'Well, hello there,' said Amy, tickling his ribs lightly from behind.

'Oh, hi,' said Nevin, savouring the wonderful wobble he felt inside at her voice. He turned around, trying to mask his nervousness with a smile. 'Sorry about last night.'

'Don't be silly,' she said. 'How are you feeling now?'

'Fine. It went off really quickly once I got home. Odd.'

'These things happen,' she said. 'As long as you had a good time.'

'Definitely. I really enjoyed the service. You've an impressive Mum.'

'So she tells me regularly,' said Amy. 'But I'm so glad you liked the service, means a lot to me. Want to go again?'

'Of course. Try and stop me,' said Nevin, hoping he wasn't overdoing his genuine keenness. 'You still OK to do something tonight?'

'Try and stop me,' she said, smiling.

'Never! Shall we meet for a meal again and then go and do something after?'

Amy hesitated.

'Mum suggested something,' she said. 'Not sure if you'll like it though.'

'Try me.'

'She said you should come around and have dinner at our place tonight. Think she wants to get to know you better too. Sorry.'

That felt daunting, especially so early in their relationship. Her Mum was an imposing presence.

'I didn't realise we could eat in our rooms,' said Nevin, deflecting.

'Ah well, we've got an advantage,' said Amy. 'For her day job, Mum's in charge of all the refectories around Juno.'

'Really? That's quite some responsibility.'

'As you said, she's an impressive woman, but I might be biased.'

'In which case, I'd love to come,' he lied.

If it had just been the two of them, perfect, but he knew he'd be tongue-tied all evening with Freya around.

'Great,' said Amy. 'Afterwards, I'm sure we can go and do something alone together. Give us a chance to get to know each other better.'

'I'd love that.'

'Was that from you, by the way?' she said.

'What?'

'The drawing on my desk.'

'Oh, yes. Was it OK?'

Nevin had a sudden crisis of confidence.

'OK? It was wonderful! You're really talented.'

'Thanks,' said Nevin, failing to suppress a beaming smile. 'I did it when I got home last night.'

'Can I keep it?'

'Of course, I did it for you.'

'Thank you,' said Amy. She glanced around at the door to the kitchen, then leant into him and kissed him, gently at first and then pulled him into an embrace. 'Thank you.'

'My pleasure,' said Nevin, breathlessly and with total honesty. 'That was a lovely way to start the day.'

'Let's make sure we end it nicely too,' she said.

*

Nevin stood towards the rear of the chamber. It was a tight squeeze to fit all the council workers in the room for President Omri's meeting. The conference table had been moved against one wall, and was being used as a makeshift bench; the chairs were lined along the front of the room, reserved for the other councillors. There was a narrow space for the President at the front and a larger gap at the rear where everyone else was standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

Amy had made her way to stand next to him. They were surreptitiously holding hands in amongst the throng of people.

'Any idea what this is about?' said Nevin.

'No clue,' said Amy. 'Hopefully nothing bad.'

'If there were something wrong with the ship, it would be more than just us. Everyone would need to know.'

'True. Maybe he's going to resign. Any scandals you've heard about?'

Nevin shook his head.

'I doubt it. He seems pretty good from what I've seen of him.'

'Yeah,' said Amy. 'Mum doesn't like him, though.'

'Why?'

Amy shrugged.

'Something to do with the workers. I zone out when she starts on about it.'

Before Nevin could respond, there was movement at the front of the room as the councillors started filing in through the door from the executive rooms and took their seats. They were closely followed by President Omri, who stood and faced the main crowd.

'Good morning, everyone,' he said. 'I won't keep you long. Those of you that have been here more than a few years will know the drill, but legally, I need to spell it out for everyone.'

There were a few nods around the room from the older heads. It sounded routine then.

'As you may know, I'm coming to the end of my first term as your President. It has been a privilege to serve, and I thank you for all your hard work during my time in office. It is my intention to stand again to seek a second term.'

There were a few murmurs of approval from around the room. Omri waved these down.

'However, this will not go unopposed. Two other members of the High Council will be standing against me, as is their right. I welcome the challenge. Let me introduce you to the other two candidates.'

He gestured to someone in the front row. A familiar grey-haired white woman rose to her feet, someone Nevin had often seen around the office.

'First, you'll all know Councillor Nadira. She was my opponent last time and has been a conscientious councillor for many years. I wish her well.'

Nadira nodded in thanks but stayed silent as she stood by his side.

Omri signalled again, and a tall black man stood up. He was younger than Nadira, probably in his forties, and wearing a distinctive purple shirt.

'Councillor Erroll is one of the newest members on the High Council but has made an instant impression. Good luck, young man.'

Erroll acknowledged the introduction dispassionately. Nevin wasn't sure he'd seen him before. He'd remember such a striking, intense presence. Erroll looked ready for action, a coiled spring waiting to snap, but Omri continued his speech.

'The election campaign will be starting tomorrow. I'm sure we will keep it a fair one.'

The other two nodded, showing no emotion.

'I have no doubt you will serve the next President as well as you have served me, but as civil servants, you must at all times remain steadfastly neutral. You may vote as you please, but you must make no public pronouncement of your preference. You are here to serve the government of the day, but must at all times be above reproach. You may not be involved in any way with any of the campaigns. I hope that is clear.'

He looked around the room and smiled.

'Lecture over. I know you will do your duty. Thank you for your time.'

And with that, it was finished. Everyone started to slowly manoeuvre out of the room, shuffling their feet as they filtered through the one door at the back.

'That was dull,' said Amy. 'I guess Nadira will be his main challenge again. Not sure anyone knows much about Erroll.'

'Probably, I certainly don't.'

'Bet Mum will know though. She meets a lot of the councillors in her job.'

'What time shall I come?' said Nevin.

He was still a bit nervous about the evening.

'Half seven sound OK?'

'Sure.'

It was going to be a long day, waiting for the evening to come around.

*

In the end, the day had passed quickly. The announcement of the presidential election had the knock-on effect of generating bureaucratic paperwork, all of which seemed to cross his desk for processing or filing. Nevin didn't even have time to stop for lunch, so by the time he arrived at Amy's apartment in the evening, he was starving.

Amy greeted him at the door, kissing him lightly on the cheek.

'Perfect timing,' she said. 'Here, help me lay the table. The food will be here in a minute.'

It was the largest apartment Nevin had seen. The main room was split into two areas: one with a three-seat settee and a single chair, a low table resting in front of them; the other had a large dining table surrounded by six chairs, a sideboard nestling against one wall. There were two doors at the back of the room, presumably leading to Amy and Freya's bedchambers. He could hear movement through the one on the right, presumably Freya getting ready.

The table had light green placemats in front of three chairs, with matching ones arranged in the middle. Amy walked across to the sideboard and passed him three plates.

'Put these on the mats,' she said as she went to the drawer and pulled out some cutlery.

It was a level of personal domestication that Nevin hadn't come across before. Most people ate in the refectories around Juno using the communal facilities and wouldn't have had the clout to get food delivered to their rooms.

As Nevin put the plates in place, Amy followed him around with the knives and forks.

'Do you dine home often?' he asked.

'Not usually, no,' said Amy. 'Only when we have important guests from Mum's work – councillors, that sort of thing.'

'Why tonight?'

'We've an important guest coming.'

'Who?'

'You, silly,' she laughed. 'I think she just wanted an excuse to meet you.'

'Should I be worried?' said Nevin, because he was.

'Probably not. Just be yourself, and if she doesn't like you, that's her bad luck.'

'OK,' he said, failing to hide his nerves.

Amy put her arms around him and hugged him hard.

'Don't worry,' she said and kissed him.

It lingered warmly, and Nevin began to feel better. He pulled her into a tighter embrace.

'Don't mind me,' came Freya's rich voice as she entered the room.

Nevin jumped and parted quickly from Amy, his heart racing. His panic was tempered a little by Freya's grin.

'Just trying to help him relax,' said Amy.

'Not sure how well that worked,' said Freya, as Nevin held his hands together in front of himself.

'Pleased to meet you again,' said Nevin self-consciously. 'Thank you for inviting me.'

Freya was dressed in an elegant dark red gown with a golden torc around her neck. It made him feel significantly underdressed, but at least Amy was dressed as casually as he was.

'Thought it was a chance to get to know you better,' said Freya. 'Amy hasn't stopped talking about you for weeks now.'

'Mum,' said Amy, looking embarrassed.

'I had to persuade her to ask you out when it was clear you didn't have the courage,' said Freya. 'I couldn't stand her moping around.'

'I... I was going to,' said Nevin. 'I wasn't sure she liked me.' He turned to Amy. 'I'm sorry. I wanted to. I...'

'It's fine. We're here,' Amy said, smiling nervously. 'Now Mum, stop trying to embarrass us.'

'Doesn't take much,' said Freya, looking more sternly at Nevin. 'Amy had a rough time last year. It took her a while to recover, which is why I've been urging her to take her life back in her own hands. You're not going to mess her around, are you?'

'No, never,' said Nevin as earnestly as he could manage.

'Mum, enough,' said Amy, anger beginning to show. 'Not now. Don't start.'

'It's only because I care,' said Freya. 'You know that.'

Amy fell silent, breathing deeply. Nevin decided it was time to try to take charge of the conversation before he folded completely. He thought back to the things his mother had told him.

'That's a very nice dress,' he said. 'It suits you.'

'Why, thank you, young man,' she said. 'Don't worry, I don't dress like this every evening. I've got a meeting to go to after we've eaten.'

'Ah, I see,' said Nevin.

That sounded promising, they might get some time alone together then. A knocking at the door interrupted his deliberation on the next thing to say.

'Good, the food's here,' said Freya. 'Let them in Amy.'

Efficiently, the kitchen staff unpacked the dishes and bustled out. They took their seats, Freya at the end of the table and Amy and Nevin opposite each other. Freya served the food, some sort of pasta bake, onto each of their plates.

'Thank you,' said Nevin. 'Looks lovely.'

'It should be,' Freya said. 'It's my recipe. Now eat up.'

It was good; better than it usually tasted in the refectories. They ate quietly for a minute before Nevin broke the ice.

'May I ask a question?'

'Of course,' said Freya.

'How did you know that I was related to Indra?'

'Don't worry,' she said. 'I've not been spying on you. I recognised your name when Amy first mentioned you, but couldn't remember why. Then I remembered where I'd seen it. As part of my research for the Congregation, I prepared Indra's family tree from her marriage to Riku right up to the present. As I said, it means a lot to me that you've joined our Congregation. You will come again?'

'Definitely,' said Nevin. He knew he needed to say more to make a favourable impression. 'I loved the sense of community. It was inspirational; it made me want to be a better person. I reckon everyone needs to go to at least one of them. I'm sure Juno would be a better place if they did.'

'I like this one,' Freya said to Amy.

Nevin felt Amy's foot rub against his ankle. The room suddenly felt warmer.

'Did Amy mention about the presidential campaign?' he said, trying to keep his mind on track.

He was genuinely interested in finding out what she thought.

'Yes, it's going to be... interesting,' said Freya. 'Could be our chance to get rid of Omri.'

'I thought he seemed to be doing a good job?'

Anger flashed in Freya's eyes.

'For the councillors and the civil servants, yes. You get out and talk to workers around Juno, then you'll find it's different. I hear a lot of bad things in the refectories. Neglect, dangerous conditions, people losing their jobs for small misdemeanours. He's pretty authoritarian, doesn't like people who question him.'

Nevin noticed Amy give a warning shake of the head. Presumably, this wasn't something he should dispute.

'I see. Sorry, I didn't know. So, do you think Nadira would be better? She lost last time, I think?'

'Not sure, she's pretty uninspiring,' said Freya. 'She didn't do well last time, and I doubt she'll do any better this. I'm hoping Erroll's a different matter.'

'I don't know much about him, I must admit,' said Nevin. 'He's not been a councillor long, I think?'

'No, but we need fresh ideas. I've heard a few good things about him, but I need to find out more. I'm hoping he'll prove to be the change we need.'

That was a surprise to Nevin, nobody he'd spoken to during the day knew much about Erroll. They seemed to think he was only running to get his name known better so he could make a proper attempt next time.

'I see. I'll certainly take notice of what he says.'

Freya nodded and put her knife and fork down.

'Anyway, I'd better finish getting ready. Enjoy the rest of your evening.'

'Thank you,' said Nevin.

'We will,' said Amy.

They completed their meal and tidied up while Freya was in her room, then settled on the settee and chatted quietly. After a few minutes, Freya emerged and headed towards the door.

'Bye,' she said. 'I probably won't see you both before the morning.'

'Bye,' they both said.

As Freya left, Amy snuggled down into Nevin's arms.

An hour passed. They kissed, they cuddled, they chatted. It was perfect, surpassing Nevin's hopes and dreams for the evening, having survived the ordeal by Freya.

After a long, deep kiss, Amy looked into his eyes.

'Did you notice what Mum said when she left?' she said.

'That she wouldn't see you until the morning?'

'That she wouldn't see *us* until the morning. It was her way of telling me she approved.'

'Approved?' said Nevin. The butterflies were back. He didn't want to jump to conclusions until Amy stated it explicitly.

'Of us. Together. Tonight. Or do you want to go back home?'

'No. Definitely not.'

Amy stood up and held out her hand.

'It's about time I showed you my room then.'

Chapter 3 – Connect

Nevin opened his eyes to a world of black curls. He gently leant forward and kissed the back of Amy's head while shifting the weight from his dead arm, as a deliciously lethargic ache permeated his body. He moved his other arm from its resting position on her hip and wrapped it around her. He couldn't think of a more perfect way to start the day.

Amy stirred and entwined her fingers with his, holding it hard against her stomach.

'Morning,' she murmured.

'Good morning, gorgeous,' said Nevin.

They fell into a contented silence. After a few minutes, Amy shuffled round to face him, and Nevin kissed her tenderly on the forehead as she snuggled into his arms. He could hear the first sounds of movement outside Amy's room – presumably, Freya was getting up.

'Are you sure your Mum is OK with this?' he said.

'Bit late to worry about that,' said Amy lightly, then as she felt Nevin tense, continued. 'Don't worry, she'll be fine. I bet she's got some breakfast for us out there already.'

'I guess we should get up soon.'

'Not quite yet,' said Amy, pushing him onto his back. She climbed on top of him. 'Unless you want to?'

'I'm not sure I ever want to get up again.'

She knelt back astride him and wiggled.

'I think you'll manage it.'

Half an hour later, they emerged from Amy's room. Freya was sat at the table, eating a muffin and drinking coffee. She'd laid two extra places at the table, both of which had a couple of pastries on a plate.

'Good morning,' said Freya nonchalantly. 'Hope you had a good evening?'

'Yes, thanks, Mum,' said Amy. 'Enjoy your meeting?'

'Not as much as you enjoyed yours by the sound of things.'

Nevin felt his face flush.

Unperturbed, Amy replied.

'The morning was nice, too.'

Briefly, they held each other's gaze before melting into amiable laughter.

'Don't mind us,' said Freya to Nevin. 'We like to tease. Please, take a seat. Coffee?'

'Yes please,' said Nevin, still unsure how to act.

Freya poured both of them a mug of coffee from a pot. He sipped it mutely. Amy reached across the table and held his hand, just the reassurance he needed.

'Thank you again for the meal last night,' he said. 'And the breakfast.'

'It's my pleasure,' said Freya. 'I'm often out in the evenings, either busy with work or the Congregation. I'm glad Amy's got someone to share it with.'

'Me too,' said Nevin, finally starting to relax.

'I'm likely to be out a bit more at the moment,' said Freya. 'We're starting up a second Congregation on the other side of the ship in the Gem meeting area. It's starting to get crowded here, and I've had complaints about people finding it hard to make it after work. Hopefully, this will help everyone. Except me.'

'You going to officiate them all?' said Amy.

'At first, but I'm going to train a couple of other people to help out. Otherwise, I'll be doing it every night.'

'When's the next Congregation here?' said Nevin.

'Tonight,' said Freya. 'You coming?'

'I'd love to,' said Nevin, then looked at Amy. 'Assuming you want to?'

'Of course,' said Amy. 'Come around here beforehand?'

'Sure.'

'Bring a toothbrush.'

Nevin nodded. Despite not being entirely sure how to take Freya, he felt at home here. He hadn't realised until then quite how much he missed family life since his parents had died – or at least hadn't wanted to admit it to himself.

After finishing breakfast, they walked to the office hand-in-hand.

'Do we need to tell anyone at work about us?' said Nevin.

'I don't think so,' said Amy. 'Probably best not to rub anyone's nose in it, but no need to hide it.'

'That's good, not sure I could hide it,' he said.

Glancing down the empty corridor, he stopped walking and pulled her close. One long, lingering kiss later, they came up for air.

'That's the sort of thing that might raise eyebrows in the office, yes,' said Amy.

'Just thought it was worth clarifying.'

The morning passed slowly. Nevin tried to focus on the minutiae of the tasks, but everything felt mundane, and he was incredibly tired. Being able to glance across and see Amy kept him going, as did the memories of their fantastic, mostly sleepless, first night together. Everything was moving so fast. He didn't care, it felt right.

His somewhat somnolent routine was broken early afternoon when he saw a towering figure wending his way from desk-to-desk. He recognised Councillor Erroll from the previous day's meeting, although it was that purple shirt that gave it away first. He seemed to be shaking everyone's hand in turn and exchanging a few words. Before long, he was talking to Amy and then made his way directly to see Nevin.

Nevin rose to his feet. Erroll shook his hand firmly.

'Good afternoon,' he said in a deep voice that seemed to require an effort not to boom across the room. 'My name is Erroll. I thought I'd come around and introduce myself in person and thank everyone for their hard work for this administration which I'm sure will continue into the next, whoever it may be. May I ask your name?'

'I'm Nevin.'

'Nevin? The name's familiar,' said Erroll. 'Ah, yes. You're a descendant of Indra, aren't you?'

'Um, yes,' said Nevin, taken aback once more. He'd never met anyone who knew his family connection before, and now he'd met two in the space of a few days. 'How did you know?'

Erroll laughed good-naturedly.

'I'm a bit of a student of history, especially of the time of Tamboli. For some reason, trivia like your ancestor's family tree sticks in my mind, probably from some biography or other that I read.'

'I see,' said Nevin.

He wasn't sure what else he was supposed to say, or do.

'Anyway, it's good to meet you,' said Erroll, and with that, he was gone, off to annoy the next person.

Nevin walked across to Amy's desk.

'That was odd,' he said.

'I'm assuming it's just a charm offensive,' said Amy. 'Trying to get people to know who he is ahead of the election. Our constitution's a bit strict when it comes to what's allowed during campaigns, especially where the civil service comes into play.'

'I didn't know that,' said Nevin.

'It's my speciality,' said Amy. 'My final year project at university was on Juno's constitution. It's why I got this job.'

Nevin knew that her job involved reviewing legislation against the constitution, so it made sense that she'd need to be an expert on the subject. That wasn't what was troubling him, though.

'He knew I was related to Indra,' he said.

'Interesting,' said Amy. 'He knew my Mum was the Celebrant too.'

'Sounds like he's done his homework,' said Nevin. 'Wonder how many other people he knew things about?'

'I'll ask around. Looks as if he's putting a lot of work into his campaign, but I guess he's got a lot of catching up to do. Still, he seemed nice enough.'

'I guess,' said Nevin. There was something about Erroll that felt false, but he couldn't put his finger on it. 'Anyway, I'd better get on. Forgot to ask, what time shall I come around?'

'As early as you like,' said Amy. 'You can help us get ready.'

'Great. Hopefully, I'll be there as soon after six as I can.'

'Perfect,' said Amy.

*

Nevin arrived at Amy's quarters amidst a whirlwind of activity. Before long, he was blown down the corridor behind them, carrying the altar cover under his arm and a large bowl of sweets in front of him. Apparently they usually were able to leave everything set up in the room between services, but today it had been needed for High Council business. And then Freya's refectory meetings had overrun. Now they were frantically trying to catch up, so Nevin wisely decided to offer his help, and then quietly do whatever he was told.

Once they arrived, Nevin moved the large table into position as the altar, covered it with the cloth and then placed the sweets dead in its centre. He was sure that was how it had been for the last service.

'Perfect, thanks,' said Freya. 'Could you help with the chairs next, please?'

'Sure.'

Some chairs were already around the room but were scattered in random groups. Others were stacked up against the wall at the back. Amy was already busily rearranging the ones that were out into rows, so he went to the rear and carried a stack to behind where Amy was working. They exchanged sweaty smiles as they passed up and down, creating the rows. Finally, it was done.

Amy wandered across and wrapped her arm around his waist and leant against him. He reciprocated.

'Thanks for helping,' she said, then shouted across the room to Freya, who was fiddling with the sound system. 'Anything else we can do?'

'No, thanks. I think we're ready,' said Freya. The sound of the introductory music quietly started to drift over the room. She walked across and propped the main door open. 'You may as well take your seats, people will start to arrive soon.'

Hand-in-hand, they walked to the middle of the front row and sat down.

'I'd better go and get ready,' said Freya, heading towards the door at the rear. As she was about to pass them, she stopped. 'Say, would you both like to help out more next time?'

Nevin nodded unconditionally.

'Always, Mum,' said Amy. 'How?'

'I need more people to assist at the services now we've got two Congregations. Would you like to act as my attendants next time?'

Nevin glanced at Amy before responding.

'Sure,' he said. 'What do we have to do?'

'Not much,' said Freya. 'Watch the service today, it's pretty easy. Introduce me, make sure my sweet bowl is full during the communion, maybe do a reading if you want to. Up to you.'

'Sounds great,' said Nevin, not feeling as confident as his words. 'If it's OK with you, Amy?'

'Of course it is,' said Amy.

'Great, we can discuss the details later,' said Freya.

As Freya walked away, Amy turned to Nevin and kissed him on the cheek.

'Thank you, this means so much to me. It's lovely to share things like this.'

'Means a lot to me too,' said Nevin. 'I feel at home with you both. I enjoy being part of it.'

Amy looked straight into Nevin's eyes for several seconds, then squeezed his hand.

'This is moving fast, isn't it?' she said.

'I know,' said Nevin. 'It feels right to me though. I'm not worried. I mean, I'm not if you're not. Are you OK?'

'Of course I am, silly,' said Amy, leaning forward to kiss him. 'Never better. Honestly, I can't imagine life without you in it. Already.'

Nevin returned her kiss, with interest, and then grasped her into a tight hug and held her there indefinitely as emotion threatened to overwhelm him.

Amy coughed and started to pull away, and Nevin realised they weren't alone any longer. The first members of the Congregation to arrive smiled as they went past and took their seats further along the front row.

'To be continued,' said Amy grinning.

They sat there holding hands as more people filed in. The gentle guitar music soon mellowed Nevin into the mood for the service as the layers of melody slowly increased.

He looked up at the glass crystal ball hanging from the ceiling as the light sparkled from its surface. So much had happened since the first service, he'd forgotten to ask Freya about the smoke trick. Amy might know.

'How does your Mum do that thing with the black smoke?' he said quietly, pointing at the ball.

Amy frowned.

'What thing?'

'You know,' said Nevin. 'The smoke around the glass ball.'

Amy studied him quizzically for a few moments.

'I don't know what you mean.'

Nevin was nonplussed. How could she have missed something so obvious? Perhaps it was so commonplace to her that she didn't give it a second thought.

'I'll show you later,' he said.

It had been right at the end, after the communion last time.

The room was filling up quickly. It wasn't surprising that Freya had to hold a second Congregation meeting elsewhere, this one had no further to grow.

As the music inexorably built towards the crescendo that would signal the start of the service, Nevin focused back on the crystal ball. There was something about it that fascinated him, dragged his attention involuntarily towards it as if it spoke his name.

And there it was. The first wispy tendrils of smoke wrapping around the globe thickened as he stared at it. He was sure he could hear it this time too, a very faint crackling hiss beneath the susurrations of quiet conversation around the room.

He tapped Amy on the arm and pointed up.

'There, look.'

'What?' she said, looking up.

'The smoke.'

'What smoke?'

'Around the crystal ball.'

Amy looked at him, up again, and then back at him.

'I can't see anything,' she said slowly.

'But...' Nevin didn't know what to say. 'Can you hear anything?'

'I... I don't think so.' Amy looked uncertain, worried.

Shocked, Nevin looked up again, but the smoke was gone. Had it vanished when he spoke to her, so she'd missed it? He was sure it had been there.

'It's... it's gone now.'

'Let's talk about it later,' she said. 'The service is about to start.'

Nevin felt irritated as the service started; he could tell Amy didn't believe him. He didn't really blame her if she hadn't actually seen it, but it was annoying that it disappeared just as he mentioned it. She must think he was deranged.

The more he thought about it, the odder his story sounded even to him, and he'd seen it. Smoke didn't behave like that, so it must be some sort of optical illusion. Maybe you had to be sat where he was to see it, the same seat he'd occupied last time. If so, what was the point of it?

It would have to wait. He didn't want to let it spoil his enjoyment of the service, and he had to observe what the attendants did, in case that was him next time.

The service followed the same enjoyable pattern as last time: the attendants walked in and took up position after putting down their bowls; they announced the arrival of the Celebrant; Freya entered and made an opening speech; they sang a song; one of the attendants read a passage, which was the bit that scared him the most; another couple of songs; yet more readings. It was all as inspirational as before, but more daunting once he realised it was going to be him up there soon.

There was no further sign of the smoke illusion though. Nevin kept glancing up, but the sphere dazzled disappointingly bright. It wouldn't be long now before the sweet communion when hopefully he would see it again.

After the last song ended, Freya stepped forward to centre stage.

'One of my favourite songs,' said Freya, still slightly out of breath from her dancing and arm-waving. 'Right, before we all share our sweets, there's a couple of things I'd like to talk about.'

'Our Congregation has proven to be a wonderful community. I can't thank you all enough for coming, and for spreading our words of love. With that success, comes problems of course. As you can see, we're a little cramped these days. Luckily, we have a solution. Starting tomorrow, we now have a second venue for our meetings. That should also help those who have to come all the way from the other side of the ship. You can either continue coming here or come see me at the alternate venue in the Gem meeting rooms, the original home of Indra herself.'

That explained the choice of location. It was so obvious as soon as she said it.

'Now initially, I'll be taking these services as usual, but soon some will be officiated by my good friends Gustavo and Aimi here,' said Freya, pointing at the attendants. 'Occasionally I think I might need a night off!'

The attendants nodded in recognition as murmurs of approval came from the Congregation.

'I'm also happy to announce that we will have two new attendants helping out too – my daughter Amy and her boyfriend Nevin. Please, make yourself known.'

Freya gestured at them to stand up. Amy was straight to her feet, and Nevin reluctantly followed, smiling sheepishly. They sat down again.

'I'm particularly delighted that Nevin has joined us. His great-grandmother was none other than Indra herself, so I'm honoured that he supports our message of love and friendship.'

Nevin wasn't quite so keen on this side of his life moving fast. Although he loved what was happening with Amy, he was still a little unsure about how the Congregation fitted in, and as much as he enjoyed the services, he hadn't fully thought through its messages yet. Still, he felt at home here too, giving him another sense of belonging that had been missing from his life. There was something about this room and the atmosphere that tugged at his subconscious in a way he couldn't put his finger on.

'There is one more thing I'd like to discuss,' said Freya. 'I've thought long and hard about even mentioning this because we are not a political movement. However, we do value love, goodness and cooperation over evil, division and corruption. I cannot stay silent when there is something that impacts on the ethos of our movement. I am, of course, talking about the forthcoming presidential election.'

A few good-natured groans could be heard. Freya smiled.

'Yes, I know, I don't blame you. Now, I'm not going to suggest who you should vote for – that's got to be a personal matter. However, I urge you to remember the things we believe in as a group. Judge each candidate on the criteria that matter most to you. That's what I'm going to do.'

'Now we're all pretty familiar with the incumbent, Omri. Indeed, many have mentioned to me the things he's done that have caused you problems, especially those in work gangs. I'm sure you all remember Nadira too from her failed campaign last time. However, I think you'll be less familiar with the new candidate, Erroll. Me too. That's something I need to rectify to make an informed decision.'

'As Celebrant of the Congregation of Indra, I've made appointments to meet all three of them tomorrow. I'm going to ask them the same set of questions, all of which will help me judge them against the ethos of our family. It's only fair to give them all the same chance.'

'Now, I know I'm taking liberties in doing this, and I hope you can forgive me. Please, let me know after the service if you have any issues with what I am doing. I would be happy to report back to you all as to what each candidate says. Naturally, you should still make your own judgement, I just want to give you all the best information on which to base your decision. If we want to live our lives ethically and to the standards to which we all aspire, then we should choose our representatives on the same basis.'

As far as Nevin could hear, there seems to be general approval of Freya's words. It made sense. Nevin was growing to admire and respect Freya, even if she did still scare him a little.

'And that's more than enough from me,' said Freya. 'It's time to finish off our celebration with the sharing of our communal sweets to commemorate Indra's walk through the corridors of Juno as she ascended to the first presidency. Come, one and all. Step forward to receive your offering.'

This was the moment he was waiting for as the inspirational music started again. Glancing occasionally at the rainbow refractions from the glass sphere, Nevin obtained his

sweet, popped it into his mouth and settled back into his seat. He closed his eyes and sucked slowly.

The music gradually inveigled itself into his senses. He was distractedly aware of Amy slipping her hand into his, but focused on his own thoughts, trying to reach that feeling of tranquillity he remembered from the last time. He opened his eyes.

There it was again. The smoky tendrils of... something... swirled around the globe, gradually darkening to obfuscate the reflected lights.

He glanced to Amy and pointed.

'Look,' he said, but didn't wait for her response. He had to return his gaze to the illusion, a siren call to his senses.

That same distorted background hiss was audible again, and there was more, something new. As the globe faded from view entirely, solid points of light broke through the darkness in its centre. He'd seen pictures of the stars outside the ship; he was sure that was what he was seeing. They seemed infinitely distant, and yet so clear.

Without moving, the apparition zoomed towards him, filling his world; the crackling distortion in the hiss vanished, leaving pure white noise. He instantly felt a presence as a gentle whisper entered his thoughts.

Can you hear me?

Nevin couldn't speak. A sensation of floating permeated his being. He couldn't feel his body, although was conscious of the warmth of Amy's hand. Nothing happened when he tried to squeeze it.

"Yes, of course I can," he thought.

Despite the unearthly strangeness, he still felt calm as the seemingly unthreatening presence drew closer. A reply formed in his mind, sounding like a woman's voice.

You must help.

This cannot continue.

"Who are you?"

Call me Safira.

"I'm Nevin."

We need your help, Nevin.

Reality is being eroded.

It must be stopped.

"Stop what?"

Your ships.

"What? Why me?"

We have a connection.

Contact with others is hard.

"What am I supposed to do?"

As Nevin formed the thought, the crackling noise reappeared, and the world started to shake. The stars in the smoke danced across his view.

Talk to the leaders of your planet.

Get them to...

The inner voice faded into white noise, the noise coalesced into words.

'Nevin? Nevin? Wake up!'

Nevin opened his eyes to see Amy's concerned face staring down at him. She had one hand on his shoulder and was shaking him gently.

The smoke was gone. The Congregation was gone. He felt bereft.

'Thank goodness,' said Amy. 'Are you OK?'

'I... I think so,' said Nevin, his mind still lost in infinity. What had happened? 'Did you see it? Did you hear that?'

'See what?' she said, irritation clouding her face. 'There wasn't anything.'

'Nothing?'

Nevin was at a loss. Why could only he experience it? The voice had said they had a connection, but it had been so loud, so visible.

'Mum's gone to get a doctor,' said Amy. 'She'll be back soon. I'm worried about you.'

'I'll be fine,' said Nevin, smiling weakly.

He was worried too. It was increasingly feeling like a dream as the somnolence cleared, but instinctively he knew that it had been real. Someone had been trying to talk to him.

What must Amy think of him? She must be concerned that she'd made a mistake, that he was unstable. He couldn't risk pushing her away by saying too much, it would only sound bizarre. He'd have to stick with the bare minimum in line with what he'd already said. He couldn't frighten her further.

'Sorry, I've probably just been overdoing it,' he said. 'Lack of sleep, maybe.'

He vainly tried to wink but ended up blinking and closing his eyes as nausea washed over him.

'Let the doctor have a check,' she said.

Nevin shook his head.

'I'll be fine,' he said again and stood up quickly.

The room spun around as his sense of balance failed. Nausea threatened to overwhelm him as he saw the floor approach. The world faded to blackness.