

Prologue

Game Face

This is not the end of the world, Ross told himself.

He closed his eyes as a low hum began to sound around him, heralding the commencement of the scan. The effect was more white-out than black-out, the reflective tiles filling the room with greater light than the fine membranes of his eyelids could possibly block.

He should look upon all of it as a new start; several new starts, in fact. Yes: multiple, simultaneous, unforeseen, unwanted and utterly unappealing new beginnings. Welcome to your future.

As he lay on the slab he conducted a quick audit of all the things that had gone wrong in the couple of hours since he'd stepped off his morning bus into a squall of Scottish rain and a lungful of diesel fumes on his way to work. He concluded that it wasn't a brain scan he needed: it was a brain transplant. Nonetheless, as the scan-heads zipped and buzzed above him, for the briefest moment he enjoyed a sense of his mind being completely empty, an awareness of a fleeting disconnection from his thoughts, as though they were a vinyl record from which the needle had been temporarily raised.

'Hey Solderburn, are we clear?' he asked, keeping his eyes closed just in case.

There was no reply. Then he recalled the capricious ruler of the Research and Development Lab telling him to bang on the door if there was a problem, so he deduced there was no internal monitoring.

He opened his eyes and sat up. It was only a moment after he had done so that he realised the tracks and scan-heads were no longer there. He did a double-take, wondering if the whole framework had been automatically withdrawn into some hidden wall-recess: it was the kind of pointless feature Solderburn was known to spend weeks implementing, even though it was of no intrinsic value.

There was still no word from outside. Solderburn probably had a lot of switches to flip, so Ross was patient, and as he didn't have a watch on, he only had a rough idea how long he'd been sitting there. However, by the time the big hand on his mental clock had ticked from 'reasonable delay' through 'mild discourtesy' into 'utterly taking the piss', he'd decided it was time to remind the chief engineer that his latest configuration included a human component.

The bastard had better not have sloped off outdoors to have a fag. Seriously, was there any greater incentive to stop smoking than having to do it in the doorway to this dump, looking out at the rest of the shitty Seventies industrial estate surrounding it?

Ross got to his feet and extended a fist, but before he could deliver the first of his intended thumps, the door opened, though not the way he was expecting. Instead of swinging on its hinge, the entire thing withdrew outwards by a couple of inches, then slid laterally out of sight with the softest hiss of servos.

WTF?

Beyond it lay not the familiar chaos of the R&D lab, but merely a grey wall and the grungy dimness of a damp-smelling corridor.

So Solderburn *was* taking the piss, but not in the way Ross had previously believed. This was the kind of prank that explained why the guy had ended up working here in Stirling, rather than winning a Nobel Prize. He must have slid some kind of false wall into place outside the scanning room. Ross walked forward, stepping lightly because he suspected Solderburn's practical joke had some way to go before it reached the pay-off stage.

He looked left and right along the passageway.

All right, so maybe it was time to revise the practical joke hypothesis.

There was a dead end to the left, where the way was blocked by three huge pipes that emerged from the ceiling and descended through a floor constructed of metal grilles on top of concrete, into which sluice channels were etched in parallel. There was a regulator dial on the right-most tube, sitting above a wheel for controlling the flow. A sign next to it warned: 'DO NOT MESS WITH VALVE'.

It was a redundant warning in Ross's case: he wasn't going near it. Even from a few yards away, he could feel the vibration of flow in the pipes, indicating that enormous volumes of fluid must be passing through the vessels. It sounded like enough to power a small hydroelectric station. Even Solderburn couldn't fake up something like that.

In the other direction, the corridor went on at least twice the length of the lab, condensation beading its walls. He could hear non-syncopated pounding, its low echo suggesting something powerful and resonant that was being dampened by thick walls. This thought prompted him to glance at the ceiling, which mostly comprised live

rock, occasionally masked off by black panels insulating lines of thick cable.

He began to make his way along the corridor. Light was provided by strips running horizontally along the walls, roughly two feet above head height. Ross assumed them to be inset, but if so it was a hell of a neat job. They looked like they could be peeled right off and stuck wherever they were required.

There was another light source further ahead, a dim blue-green glow coming from behind a glass panel set high in the wall on the left.

The corridor trembled following a particularly resonant boom from somewhere above. Ross could feel the metal grates rattle from it, the air disturbed by a pulse of movement. It felt warm, like the sudden gust of heat when somebody has just opened an oven door. There was still no rhythm, no pattern to the sounds, and yet Ross found something about them familiar.

As he approached the panel, he could see a play of coloured light behind the glass, constant but fluid, as though there might be a team of welders on the other side of it. Please, he thought, *let* there be a team of welders on the other side: hairy-arsed welders with bottles of Irn-Bru and Monday-morning hangovers, toting oxyacetylene torches and forehead-slappingly obvious explanations for what was going on. Perhaps he had ended up at one of the factories on the estate, somehow?

The panel was high, so Ross had to stand close and stretch to get a look through the glass. As soon as he did, he caught a glimpse of someone on the other side and promptly threw himself back down low, out of sight.

It wasn't a welder; or if it was, it was one who had utterly lost it at some point and started grafting stuff to his own face.

In his startlement and panicked attempt to hide, Ross tumbled backwards to the deck, a collapse that felt less painful but sounded altogether more clangingly metallic than he was expecting. If the hideous creature behind the wall hadn't seen him as he peered through the glass a moment ago, then he had surely heard him now.

He had to get moving, and hope there was more than one way out of this corridor. It might be prejudiced to assume that the man he had seen meant him any harm purely on the basis of his unfortunate appearance, but it was difficult to imagine anybody with a penchant for soldering things to his coupon being an entirely calm and balanced individual. Besides, Ross's alarm hadn't been inspired purely by the fact that the guy would have a bastard of a time getting his face through airport security; it was the look Ross had briefly glimpsed in that nightmarish visage's eyes: wild, frantic, unhinged and, most crucially, searching.

It was as he uncrumpled himself from a heap on the floor that he discovered any attempt at flight was futile, and for a reason far worse than that this mutilated horror might already have cut off his escape. His eye was drawn, for the first time since emerging from his cell, to his own person rather than his surroundings, and a glance at his limbs showed them no longer to be clad in what he remembered pulling on that morning. Gone were the soft-leather shoes, moleskin jeans and charcoal shirt, replaced by a one-piece ensemble of metal, glass and bare skin, all three surfaces scarred by scorch-marks and gouges.

He looked in terrified disgust at his forearm, where two light-pulsing cables were visible on the surface, feeding into his wrist at one end and plunging beneath an alloy sheath at the other. His legs were similarly

metal-clad, apart from glass panels beneath which further fibre-optic wiring could be seen intermittently breaking the surface of skin that was a distressingly unhealthy pallor even for someone who had grown up in the west of Scotland.

His chest and stomach had armour plates grafted strategically to cover certain areas whilst retaining flexibility of movement by leaving other expanses of skin untouched, and there were further transparent sections revealing enough of his interior to suggest he wouldn't be needing a bag of chips and a can of cream soda any time soon.

Trembling with shock and incredulity, he hauled himself upright, finding his new wardrobe to be impossibly light. His movement was free and fluid too, feeling as natural as had he still been wearing what he'd turned up to work in.

Was it some kind of illusion, then?

No. Of course. He had fallen asleep during the scan. It was a dream.

Except that normally the awareness of dreaming was enough to dispel it and bring him to.

Ross looked himself up and down again. There was no swirling transition of thoughts and images bringing him to the surface, no dream-logic progress linking one bizarre moment to the next.

He approached the glass again. He could see two vertical shafts of energy, one blue and one green, seemingly unchannelled through any vessel, but perfectly linear, independent and self-contained nonetheless. Reluctantly, he pulled his focus back from what was behind the glass to the reflecting surface itself.

Arse cakes.

He looked like he had faceplanted the clearance sale at

Radio Shack. It was still recognisably his own features underneath there somewhere: even that little scar on his cheek from when he'd fallen off a spider-web roundabout when he was nine. He recalled what a fuss his mum had made when he needed stitches. Everything's relative, eh Mammy?

Another muffled boom sounded, moments before another shudder rippled the air. He could hear lesser percussions too, like it was bonfire night and he was indoors, half a mile from the display. It was hardly an enticement to proceed down the corridor, but what choice did he have?

He strode forward on his augmented legs, surprised to discover his gait felt no different, his tread lighter than the accompanying metal-on-metal thumps suggested. There was absolutely nothing about this that wasn't absolutely perplexing, not least the aspects that felt normal. For instance, as he followed the passageway around a bend to a T-junction leading off either side of an elevator, he was disturbed to find that he seemed instinctively to know where he was going. Was there something in all this circuitry that was doing part of his thinking for him? He wasn't aware of it if so; though the fact that he probably wouldn't be aware of such a process was not reassuring.

He stepped on to the open platform of the elevator and pressed his palm to the activation panel. A light traced around his atrophied fingers at the speed of an EKG and the platform began to rise.

He looked again at the leathery grey of his hand. It gave a new meaning to the term dead skin. He thought of all the times Carol had ticked him off for biting his nails, of her rubbing moisturiser on his cracks and chaps in wintertime.

Carol. No. Not yet.

He put her from his mind as the elevator reached the top of the shaft, where his faith in instinctively knowing where he was going was put to the test by his arriving somewhere he was dangerously conspicuous. No narrow passageway this time: he had reached some kind of muster point or staging area, and was rising up into the centre of it like it was his turn on *Camberwick Green*.

He got there just in time to see a group of figures – each of them similarly dressed by the Motorola menswear department – march out through a wide doorway. They moved briskly and with purpose, two halves of the automatic door closing diagonally behind them as the elevator platform came to a stop, flush with the floor.

The booms were louder here. The smaller ones sounded like muffled explosions somewhere beyond the walls, but the big ones seemed to pulse through the very fabric of whatever this place was. He could tell when one was coming, as though the entire structure was breathing in just before it; could sense something surge through all those pipes lining the walls. It was like being inside a nose that was about to sneeze.

He was absolutely sure of which way to head next, but it wasn't to do with any weird instinct or control by some exterior force. It was simply a matter of having observed in which direction the platoon of zombie-troopers had shipped out and of proceeding in precisely the opposite.

They'd had their backs to him so he couldn't get a clear view of what they were all carrying, but the objects had been metal and cylindrical, and he considered it unlikely they were some kind of cyborg brass section that had just been given its cue to hit the stage. Given how little sense everything else was making right then, it was always

possible that the latter was the case and they were about to strike up 'In the Mood', but Ross strongly suspected that the only thing they were in the mood for was shooting anybody who got in their way.

He proceeded towards his intended exit at what he realised was an incongruously girly trot: hastened by his eagerness to get away but slowed short of a run in case it should be conspicuous that he was making a break for it. His head spun with awful possibilities, trying to piece together what could have happened. It had to have been the scan, he deduced. Whether intentionally or not, it had left him in a state of suspended animation and his body had been stored until the advent of the technology that currently adorned and possibly controlled him.

Neurosphere. Those amoral corporate sociopaths. This was their doing. There was probably a clause in his employment contract that covered this shit, and as he'd never bothered to read the pages and pages of legalese, he'd had no real idea what he was signing. Now he could be working for them forever, part of a manufactured army. But in that case, why hadn't they erased or at least restrained his memory? Why was he not a compliant drone like the others he'd seen? Perhaps something had gone wrong with the process and he was the lucky one – retaining his memory and his sense of self and thus able to testify to Neurosphere's monstrous crime. Or perhaps he was the really *unlucky* one, trapped in this condition but not anaesthetised by merciful oblivion, and unlike the others he'd be conscious of every horror he was about to witness, or even effect.

He had no idea what year it was, or even what century. Chances were everyone he ever knew was gone. There might be nothing in the world he would recognise.

The big doorway opened obligingly as he approached, its two halves sliding diagonally apart to reveal another corridor, brighter than he'd seen before. Light appeared to be flashing and shimmering beyond a curve up ahead, and with nobody to observe him, he ran towards it.

'Oh,' he said.

The source of the flashing and shimmering on the far side of the passageway turned out to be a huge window opposite, easily twelve feet high by twenty feet wide, through which Ross could see what was outside this building. He hadn't thought he could ever look into another pane of glass and see a more unsettling sight than the one that had met him only a few minutes ago when he glimpsed his own reflection. Clearly it was not a day to be making assumptions.

The first thing he noticed was the sky, which was a shade of purple that he found disturbing. It wasn't so much that there was anything aesthetically displeasing about the colour itself; it was, to be fair, a quite regally luxuriant purple: deep, textured and vibrant. It was more to do with his knowledge of astronomy and subsequent awareness that, normally, the sky he looked up at owed its colour to the shorter wavelengths and greater proportion of blue photons in the type of light emitted by the planet's primary energy source. What was disturbing about this particular hue was not merely that it could not be any sky on Earth, but that it could not be any sky beneath its sun.

Worse, its predominantly purple colouration wasn't even the most distressing thing about the view through the window: that distinction went to the fact that it was full of burning aircraft. There were dozens of them up there, possibly hundreds, stretching out all the way to the horizon. It looked to be some kind of massive extraterrestrial

expeditionary landing force, and its efforts were proving successful in so far as landing was defined as reaching terra firma: all of the craft were certainly managing that much. However, controlled descents executed without conflagration and completed by vessels comprising fewer than a thousand flaming pieces were, quite literally, a lot thinner on the ground.

Ross felt that inrush again, that sense of energy being channelled very specifically to one source, then heard the great boom once more, and this time he could see its source. It was a colossal artillery weapon, sited at least a mile away, but evidently powered by the facility in which he was standing. Its twin muzzles were each the size of an oil tanker, jutting from a dome bigger than St Paul's Cathedral, and its effect on the invasion force was comparable to a howitzer trained on a flock of geese. Each mighty blast devastated another host of unfortunate landing craft, sending debris spinning and hurtling towards the surface.

He had no sense of how long he had been standing there: it could have been thirty seconds and it could have been ten times that. The spectacle was horrifyingly mesmeric, but the car-crash fascination was not purely vicarious. Everything Ross saw had unthinkable consequences for himself. Instead of being merely lost in time, he now had no idea which planet he was even on.

He could see buildings in the distance, only visible because they were so large. The architecture was unquestionably alien, as was the very idea of building vast, isolated towers in an otherwise empty desert landscape. And still something inside him felt like he belonged here, or at least that his environment was not as alien as it should have been.

'It's an awe-inspiring sight, isn't it?'

When Ross heard the voice speak softly from only a few feet behind him, he deduced rather depressingly that he must no longer have a digestive system, as this could be the only explanation for why he didn't shit himself.

He turned around and found himself staring at another brutally haphazard melange of flesh and metal, one he decided was definitely the estate model. The newcomer was a foot taller at least, and more heavily armoured, particularly around the head, leaving his face looking like a lost little afterthought. He looked so imposingly heavy, Ross could imagine him simply crashing through anything less than a reinforced floor, and couldn't picture walls proving much of an impediment either. Wherever he wanted to be, he was getting there, and whatever he wanted, Ross was giving him it.

'Yes,' Ross agreed meekly, amazed to hear his own voice still issuing from whatever he had become.

'You could lose yourself in it,' the big guy went on. His tone was surprisingly soft, perhaps one used to being listened to without the need to raise it, but not as surprising as his accent, which was a precise if rather theatrical received pronunciation. Clearly, as well as advanced technology, this planet also had some very posh schools.

'Perhaps even forget what you were supposed to be doing. Such as joining up with your unit and getting on with fighting off the invasion, what with there being a war on and all.'

His voice remained quiet but Ross could hear the sternest of warnings in his register. There was control there too, no expectation of needing to ask twice. Very bizarrely, Ross was warming to him. Maybe it was the programming, same as whatever was making him feel this place was familiar.

'Yes, sorry, absolutely . . . er . . . sir,' he remembered to add. 'My unit, that's right. Have to join up. On my way now, sir.'

'That's "Lieutenant Kamnor, sir"', he instructed.

'Yes, sir, Lieutenant Kamnor, sir,' Ross barked, eyes scanning either way along the corridor as he weighed his options regarding which direction Kamnor expected him to walk in.

He turned and made to return to the staging area. Kamnor stopped him by placing a frighteningly heavy hand on his shoulder.

'Are you all right, soldier?' he asked, sounding genuinely concerned. 'You seem a little disoriented. Do you know where your unit even is?'

Ross decided he had nothing to lose.

'I have no idea where *I* even am, sir. I don't know how I got here. I have no memory of it. I'm not a soldier. I'm a scientific researcher in Stirling. That's Scotland, er, planet Earth, and this morning, that being an early twenty-first-century morning, I had a neuro-scan as part of my work. I was still totally biodegradable; I mean, an entirely organic being. When I stepped out of the scanning cell, I found myself here, looking like this.'

Kamnor's face altered, concern changing to something between alarm and awe, and everything that it conveyed seemed amplified by being the only recognisable piece of humanity amidst so much machine.

'Blood of the fathers,' he said, his voice falling to a gasp. 'You're telling me you were a different form, in another world?'

'Yes sir, lieutenant, sir.'

'Blood of the fathers. Then it truly is the prophecy.'

Kamnor beheld him with an entirely new regard, readable even in his alloy-armoured body language.

‘The prophecy?’ Ross enquired.

‘That one would come from a different world: a being who once took another form, but who would be reborn here as one of us, to become the leader who rose in our time of need. That time is at hand,’ he added, gesturing to the astonishing scene through the huge window, ‘for our world is under attack, and lo, you have been delivered to us this day.’

Ross half turned to once again take in the sky-shattering conflict in which he had just been told he was destined to play a legendary role. A host of confused emotions vied for primacy in dictating how he should feel. Sick proved the winner. He recalled hearing the line: ‘Some men are born great, others have greatness thrust upon them.’ He wondered if that also applied to heroism. He had no combat training, no military strategy and tended to fold badly in even just verbal confrontations.

He was about to ask ‘Are you sure?’ but swallowed it back on the grounds that it wasn’t the most leaderly way to greet the hand of destiny when it was extended to him. He settled for staring blankly like a tit, something he was getting pretty adept at.

Then Kamnor’s face broke from solemnity into barking, aggressive laughter.

‘Just messing with you. Of course there’s no bloody prophecy. You’ve been hit by the virus, that’s all. Been finding chaps in your condition for days.’

‘Virus?’ Ross asked, his relief at no longer having a planet’s fate thrust into his hands quickly diminished as he belatedly appreciated how preferable it was to the role of cannon fodder.

‘Yes, sneaky buggers these Gaians. They hit us with a very nasty piece of malware in advance of their invasion force: part binary code and part psychological warfare.’

Devilishly clever. It gives the infected hosts all kinds of memories that aren't really theirs. Makes you think you're actually one of them: a human, from Gaia, or as they call it, Earth. It uploads all kinds of vivid memories covering right up until what seems like last night or even this morning. Like, for instance, that you're a scientist from, where was it?'

'Stirling,' Ross said, his voice all but failing him.

'See? It's really detailed. Convinces you that you just arrived here, plucked from another life on *their* planet. But don't worry, it wears off. It's full of holes, so it breaks down: I mean, hell of a coincidence they all speak the same language as us and even sound like us, eh? The virus auto-translates what they're saying. Don't worry, you'll be right as rain soon enough. We find that shooting a few of the bastards helps blow away the mist. So how about you catch up to your unit and help them spread the spank?'

Ross . . . was his name even Ross? He now knew officially nothing for sure.

This couldn't be true. These memories were his. They weren't just vivid and detailed, they were the only ones he had. Surely there would be some conflict going on in there if what Kamnor was saying was right. Yet as he stood before this terrifyingly powerful mechanised warrior, it occurred to him to wonder why the lieutenant would be so patient and understanding even as war raged on the other side of the hyper-reinforced window. Furthermore, there was that disarming sense of the familiar, even of positive associations, ever-present since he'd arrived here. For the moment, he'd just have to run with it, see if the mists really did blow away.

'I don't know what unit I'm with, lieutenant, sir,' he admitted.

Kamnor reached out a huge, steel-fingered hand and tapped the metal cladding that Ross used to think of as his upper arm. There was a symbol etched there, a long thin sword.

'You're with Rapier squad. Mopping-up detail, under Sergeant Gortoss.' He gestured along the corridor in the opposite direction from where Ross had just come.

'Turn left at the first pile of flaming debris and look for the most homicidally deranged bastard you can find. Ordinarily he'd be in a maximum-security prison, but when there's a war on, he's just the kind of chap you want inside the tent pissing out.'

'Yes sir,' said Ross, by which he meant: 'Holy mother of fuck.'

'You remember how to fire a weapon, don't you?'

'I'm sure it'll come back,' he replied, making to leave.

Kamnor stopped him again.

'Well, before you go I would suggest you take a quick refresher on how to salute a superior officer.'

Kamnor saluted by way of example, sending his arm out straight, angled up thirty degrees from the horizontal, his metal fist clenched tight.

Ross was inundated with unaccustomed feelings of gratitude, loyalty and pride, driving a determination to serve and please this man. He had read about leaders whom soldiers would follow into battle, kill for, even die for, but never understood such emotions until now.

He sent out his right arm as shown, his shoulder barely level with Kamnor's breastplate, clenching his fist once it was fully extended. As he brought his fingers tightly together, a long metal spike emerged at high speed from somewhere above his wrist, shooting up into Kamnor's mouth, through his palate and into his brain.

It was a tight call as to who was the more shocked,

but Kamnor probably edged it, aided by the visual impact of blood and an unidentified yellow-green fluid spurting in pulsatile gushes from his mouth. He bucked and squirmed but was too paralysed to do anything else in response.

‘Oh Christ, I’m so sorry,’ Ross spluttered, trying to work out how to withdraw the spike back into his wrist. ‘I didn’t mean it, I just . . .’

But Kamnor was way past listening. He fell to the floor, pulling Ross over with him, his arm still linked to Kamnor’s head by the rogue shaft of steel. The blood subsided but the yellow-green fluid continued to hose, while one of Kamnor’s great feet twitched spastically, clanking and scraping on the metal grate lining the floor.

Ross heard a hiss of pistons and saw the double door at the end of the corridor begin to separate.

‘Oh bugging arse flakes.’

Through the widening gap he could see six pairs of metal-clad legs making their way towards the passage. In about one second they were going to spot this, and it wasn’t going to look good.

How did you get this bloody thing out?

A clench of his fist had extended it, he reasoned, but so far merely unclenching wasn’t having the corresponding effect.

He opened his hand instead, stretching out his fingers. This prompted an instant response. He felt something twang at the end of the spike, like the spokes of an umbrella, then felt a sense of rotation and heard a soft, muffled whir.

The incoming troop made it through the doorway as the spike withdrew, liquidising Kamnor’s face and spraying Ross with the resulting soup as though he had lobbed the poor guy’s head through a turbo propeller.

He turned to face them, the end-piece of the spike still spinning and sending blood, flesh and other matter arcing about the corridor.

'It's not what it looks like,' he offered.

Work–Life Balance

The doors slid closed with a hydraulic hiss as Ross stepped aboard out of the blustery Stirling rain and headed for his seat, shuffling laboriously along the aisle. He was barely awake. Safe mode: only loading the minimum components required to carry out the very basic tasks involved in getting from his bed to his desk. The bus jostled him pleasantly as it moved off, the feeling of warmth and the lulling rock of motion doing very little to encourage him into a sharper waking state. This was less down to fatigue than reluctance. Never a good sign.

Setting 'Autopilot' = TRUE

A sound file played in his head:

'Good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa transit system . . .'

It was the opening of *Half-Life*, a woman's soft voice over the PA of a futuristic subterranean monorail taking the physicist Gordon Freeman to work on what would prove to be a cataclysmically fateful day.

Also not a good sign. Human memory wasn't random-access. What the subconscious chose to retrieve seemingly unprompted was seldom anything of the sort. If you looked deeply and honestly enough, you could usually

trace the connection, and it would tell you plenty about your true state of mind. This voice from the past was telling Ross something inescapably accurate about the present.

The reason it was not a good sign was that this echo from *Half-Life* hadn't been prompted by a reminiscence of playing the game. He was reminiscing about sitting on another bus fifteen years ago, running the same soundtrack in his head as he imagined being on his way into the Black Mesa complex instead of towards St Gerard's Secondary. That childhood bus had been a buffering period, eight minutes to retreat into fantasy before reluctantly engaging with the indignities, torpor and soul-stomping banality of another day in school. He never wanted to get off, wished the journey was a hundred miles. He couldn't wait to get out of St Gerard's. He was planning to go off to uni to study medicine, and once he'd qualified he would look forward to every day's work as both a challenge and an opportunity.

Yeah, that worked out well.

The bus was busy. Ross was squeezed in between a young mum with a toddler on her lap and an old man in an ancient raincoat that was the only thing on the bus smelling worse – considerably worse – than the scrawny hound that accompanied him. Maybe it was for this reason that the mutt decided to position itself at Ross's feet rather than its master's. It sat eye-level with his crotch, at which it proceeded to stare longingly and with unbroken concentration, as though breakfast hadn't quite hit the spot and it was thinking Ross's balls would be just the thing to fill a hole before elevenses.

On the other side, the young mum was so consumed by the text exchange she was carrying out with impressive one-handed dexterity that she failed to notice that

her daughter's face appeared to be melting, presumably as an unforeseen chemical reaction to the toxic-looking cheese string she had given her to eat. Liquid appeared to be seeping from a multiplicity of orifices, mucus bubbling liberally over her top lip on its way to replenishing the layer she had smeared across both cheeks; the southern reaches of her face were swimming in a yellow-tinged paste made up of two parts drool to one part semi-masticated cheddar; and there was something seeping out of one of her ears that Ross really didn't want to think about. Both of her little hands were awash with a combination of these secretions, the resulting solution given a deeper texture by partially dissolving an earlier sedimentary deposit of biscuit crumbs, and each bend, brake and acceleration of the bus seemed to bring her outstretched fingers closer to Ross's brand-new neoprene laptop cover.

To think that Carol said she wanted one of these things loose in the house. She wouldn't let him eat pizza on her new sofa in case he dripped grease on the upholstery: how would she cope if there was a two-foot snot-goblin burying its face in her dry-clean-only trousers and wiping jam on the curtains?

Ross looked back and forth between the dog and the child, the latter still glistening with intent and the former continuing to fixate upon his nads like there wasn't anything else on this bus worth glancing at even for a second. Why didn't the anorexic mongrel solve both problems by sidling over and licking the self-emoliating rug-rat's mitts, thus taking the edge off its appetite and its eyes off his clackerbag?

Some days this bus journey could seriously test his ecological resolve. Today those principles concerning single-passenger car commuting were in danger of being washed away in a tide of baby-gloop or swallowed down

the throat of an underfed mutt. So what did it say that he still considered it better to travel horribly than to arrive?

The view out of the bus windows, where it could be seen through dirt, rain and condensation, revealed the route to be taunting him in a way he hadn't previously noticed. It seemed that everyone was getting off to spend their day somewhere more interesting than him. The bus trundled through the Digital Glen, an enclave of shiny twenty-first-century high-tech start-ups housed in brand-new steel, glass and pine pagodas. It stopped outside the Hirakumico campus, the electronics manufacturer's controversially subsidised venture sprawling amid woodland, a man-made loch and the most fastidiously manicured lawns this side of Gleneagles. It drove for several miles beneath the stern regard of Stirling Castle high on the crags, inspiration for a thousand boyhood fantasies and a dozen teenhood custom maps. And then, to flick him a final two fingers, it stopped at the roundabout for a few moments right under the sign for the safari park, the location he most associated with the simple carefree pleasures of growing up. In his memory, it was always sunny there, no matter what the weather when they got into the car to set off; a place where he played games and ate ice-cream with his sisters while barbecue smells blew on the breeze.

'You're not going there today, matey,' it seemed to say. 'No, you're not going back there ever.'

Instead, it dumped him off at the gloomier end of the most despondently nondescript industrial estate in the west of Scotland, and possibly the western hemisphere.

No underground lab, no monorails and lasers; and as for manicured verges, the only greenery on display was weeds and broken Buckfast bottles. Just as the safari park was somewhere Ross remembered as being sunny even on the

days it wasn't, in his mind this place was always shrouded in light drizzle, even when the sun was splitting the sky. If the Digital Glen's architects had designed their estate to be conducive to innovation and encouraging of forward-thinking in commerce, whoever sketched this abomination out on the back of a bookie's line must have intended it as an environment conducive to the industrial manufacture of despair and the encouragement of worker suicide.

But it was okay, because these were only temporary premises. Or that was what they'd told him when they head-hunted him four years ago. He'd been so intoxicated by his own optimism and the lure of possibilities that he misinterpreted their hosting the interview in a hotel in Edinburgh as an indication that they wanted to impress him. Stage two was to fly him down to their UK headquarters, a purpose-built manufacturing facility on the M4 corridor, where they gave him glossy corporate brochures showing their expanding campus in Silicon Valley, CA. The buildings looked more opulent than anywhere Ross had ever been able to afford to stay, so it would be fair to say that he made certain naïve assumptions about what kind of premises they might have in mind for this new Scottish-based operation.

As Ross neared the pathway leading to the main entrance, he noticed Agnes Kirkwood approaching from the other direction at the same time. Part of him wished he could hurry on inside without engaging her, but it was the part of him that he knew he ought not to indulge. Agnes always wanted to chat; she was the kind of woman who, when she asked you how you were doing, actually meant it. She had a good twenty-five years on him, and had the remarkable ability to make him feel much younger than he was yet simultaneously boost his confidence by acting as though she thought he was the smartest guy in the firm.

Ross felt guilty for wishing he could sneak in without being seen, even with the rain offering an excuse, and took it as an indication of just how bad he must be feeling if he feared he wasn't up to sharing a few moments of a Monday morning with one of the few people in the building who did genuinely put the 'pleasant' into pleasantries. He wasn't sure whether his reluctance was born of not being capable of false bonhomie or whether he was self-conscious about confessing his misery to someone who had a lot more to complain about yet still managed to remain sufficiently buoyant to keep everyone else afloat.

'Morning, Doctor B,' Agnes said, with a wee glint in her eye, like Ross was her favourite nephew.

'Morning, Agnes. Good weekend?'

'Quiet. Highlight was a *Space 1999* DVD marathon and a takeaway curry Saturday night.'

Agnes had a serious sci-fi habit, with a particular fondness for old-school British stuff, the cheesier the better. She loved those Gerry Anderson shows, but Ross knew her true favourite was *Blake's 7*.

'How about you?'

'Not the best, Agnes,' he confessed, his guilt deciding that it would be patronising to lie. Pointless too, as Ross didn't have much of a poker face and Agnes was an adept interpreter of the snapshots people showed to her in passing. 'Mostly work, and consequently I think I've blown it forever with Carol.'

'Aye, it's hard to find a balance,' she replied, 'but the rule of thumb is that the job never loves you back. Chin up, though. Nothing's forever, especially a woman's moods: take it from someone who knows. There's still time to do the right thing by her and sort it out.'

'Problem is I'm coming around to thinking that doing

the right thing would be to let her go and save her from me. I reckon she'd be better off.'

'Away and don't talk mince,' she told Ross with a grin that was both reproachful and reassuring. 'If the lassie's in the cream puff because she doesn't see you enough, then you're not helping either one of you if you take yourself out of the picture altogether.'

Agnes was in charge of component manufacturing, and would probably have been head of the division by now if her husband Raymond hadn't got sick. The cancer had eventually killed him a couple of years back, and now she was largely marking time until her retirement. She'd told Ross that she and Raymond had been planning to buy a boat for their retirement, and spend their time sailing the Scottish coastal waters. She claimed that she was still intending to do so, joking that she'd crew it with strapping young men now that she was single.

Ross knew that neither aspect of this fantasy was any more likely than the other. Most of Agnes's savings had been gobbled up over the sustained course of Raymond's gradual debilitation. Yet her eyes would sparkle with a combination of longing and satisfaction when she talked about that boat, like it was a holiday that was already booked rather than a dream that, in Ross's estimation, would never happen.

Ross wondered whether this dream of the boat kept Agnes going, kept her so positive, or whether it was her innate positivity that kept her believing the boat dream would work out. Whatever it was, Ross wished he had a bottle of it. As it was, he could only get a teaspoon at a time during these brief exchanges, though even that much was enough to make him feel a wee bit better this morning.

Ross made his way to his desk, where he was disappointed and moderately concerned to see that his

machine was in screen-saver mode, already booted up. Disappointed because he had first noticed that the monitor on the adjacent desk was switched on, and he had wrongly interpreted this as a sign that his colleague Alex had returned to work after a couple of days AWOL. Moderately concerned because the reason all the machines were running was that the suits must be undertaking one of their periodic compliance searches to make sure there were no unauthorised files or programs on anybody's systems.

The pretext was that this was a policy imposed by management in the US, where they were indemnifying themselves against lawsuits from employees by making sure nobody could glance at a colleague's monitor and get an eyeful of some 4Chan abomination. In truth, it was just an excuse to snoop through your files when you weren't there, looking for any kind of leverage that could force your shoulder harder against the wheel.

There was always this default assumption on the part of management that everyone in their employ was an inveterate skiver who needed the threat of permanent vigilance to keep them hard at work. Ross couldn't help but interpret this as the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

He gave his mouse a nudge to waken the screen and flipped open his laptop. His first task was to upload what he'd been working on over the past few days and tidy his ideas into a form that would make sense to the suits. Solderburn was developing a prototype scanner, the Simulacron, which potentially might be not merely the future of the company, but the future of neurological monitoring entirely. However, Solderburn's prototype would live or die on whether Ross could help him devise a means of decoding its data and interpreting the results. It was able to render far more complex readings of human brain

activity than anything else in current usage, but, by its chief designer's own admission, 'It's like we've created the most awesome new video camera, but until we suss out how to make a new kind of TV to watch it on, nobody's gonna be able to see shit.' Ross's task in this analogy was to find a way of decoding the signal so that it would play back on the clunky old tellies they already had.

The biggest obstacle was that management was focused exclusively on rolling out Neurosphere's latest model, the NS4000. It was being tested at a number of hospitals up and down the UK, with the company hoping to snag a major contract from the NHS to supply and maintain the equipment.

They had secured the trials on the basis of ambitious promises, glossy presentations and a series of sponsorship packages that stayed just the right side of blatant corruption. Ross's work days were being monopolised by the process of ironing out or simply concealing the NS4000's glitches, so anything not dedicated to this core activity had to be done in his spare time. In an attempt to reconfigure their priorities he had set about devising a presentation that might make management understand what could be within their grasp. This had taken up his entire weekend, something that had not inclined Carol to get out her pom-poms and cheer on Team Baker.

'You do nothing but work these days, Ross. Honestly, if you went missing I'd have to give the police a description of the back of your laptop rather than your face. You don't even play games on it any more. It's all work, all the time. Why don't you come out here to the Big Room once in a while? You know: the one with the blue ceiling?'

He tried to explain how things would improve if he got the green light. What he needed Carol to understand was that the work he was doing that weekend might

mean he wouldn't end up cancelling plans so suddenly in future.

Unfortunately, she hadn't been in a very understanding mood. Perhaps something to do with this weekend's work-athon not exactly constituting an anomaly.

'They're stringing you along, Ross, playing you for a mug. They're just dangling this carrot in front of you every so often so you'll keep pushing their cart.'

Comparing Ross to a donkey didn't strike him as the most supportive thing she could be saying at that point, and, feeling a little stressed and histrionic, he opted to express as much.

'So, in short, what you're saying is that my employers think I'm an idiot,' he huffed, 'and I'm kidding myself that they would take my work seriously? And I suppose I can infer from this that you also think I'm an idiot and don't take my work seriously either. Thanks, that's just the vote of confidence I need ahead of this presentation.'

She had looked at him with a mixture of pity and despair.

'Of course they take your work seriously, Ross: that's the part that makes you an idiot.'

He didn't follow this logic, but that wasn't uncommon with Carol, usually because she was a lot better than he was at interpreting what was going on *outside* the human brain. He'd been going to ask her to elaborate, but she was off on one, going on about being thirty-three again. What was that about? She kept bringing it up: 'I'm thirty-three, Ross, I'm thirty-three.'

He didn't get it; it struck him as a non-sequitur. Where was she going with this sudden obsession about her age? She had been off the drink for the past few weeks too; kept ordering fresh orange juice when they went to the

pub and skulling mineral water instead of wine when they had dinner together.

Agnes was right that there was always time to sort it out; the problem was that Ross suspected she was wrong about Carol wanting him to. For a while previously he had wondered whether she was building up to suggesting they move in together; or at least building up to going off in a huff because he hadn't suggested it first. Looking back, it was becoming all the clearer that her intention had actually been for them to grow further apart.

He had felt the scales fall from his eyes as all the weirdness of the last few weeks finally revealed itself for what it was: her exit strategy. Christ. No wonder she kept saying he couldn't see what was right in front of him unless it was on a computer screen.

He opened his mail browser while he waited for all the files to transfer, the office wi-fi proving a little sluggish, like everything else around here of a Monday morning. The most recent was from Solderburn in R&D, to do with the mapping trials, but he'd open that later. More pressing was a message from Zac Michaels, sent Friday after Ross had gone home. Its contents were likely to be moot now, given how much had changed over the weekend, but with any luck it could be that the meeting was being pushed back an hour, or even into the afternoon, which would be ideal.

Ross opened it.

From: Isaac Michaels

Sent: Friday, 18:28

To: Ross Baker

Cc: Philip Scruton; Cynthia Lister; Jay Solomon

Subject: Re: Presentation Monday

Ross,

I was hoping to catch you as I'm just off the phone to Bristol, but you had already gone for the day. Very sorry about this, but it's been decided that the time just isn't right for a reallocation of your time. (I hope you didn't spend too long putting bells and whistles on your presentation.) As you're aware, it's a delicate time in our trial work with the NS4000, and we need you to redouble your efforts on getting through the data analysis backlog. Then, fingers crossed, if we secure the order, we will require you to go full steam ahead on the conversion model.

It's the old story of you making yourself indispensable, I'm afraid. I would, however, like to stress that we appreciate all your efforts, and should you wish to pursue your research ideas at evenings and weekends, we will make new arrangements to facilitate that (so long as it doesn't interfere with your commitment to core activities).

Cheers,

Zac

This email (and any material attached) is confidential and may contain personal views which are not the views of Neurosphere Inc unless specifically stated.

Ross sat and stared at it, but the words became meaningless. All of their import had been parsed unambiguously upon first scan anyway. He felt as though somebody had taken a ten-yard run-up and swung a full-blooded arse-winder of a kick to his nutsack. And just as if somebody actually had taken a ten-yard run-up before a full-blooded arse-winder, he really should have seen it coming.

He got to his feet and stomped off in the direction of Zac Michaels' office. He had barely made it to the server pen before Zac got to him first, anticipating his intentions with a prescience that indicated Ross's reaction had been planned for since Friday teatime.

Zac emerged into Ross's path as though teleported, filling the passageway with his tall, rangy form and a smell that was a little too close to antiseptic. He was unctuous in a way that Ross found subtly threatening, his thin and insincere smile frequently striking him as more than a wee bit rapey. He was always just a little too sharply dressed, the cloth of his suit annoyingly shiny, the folds and breaks so pronounced you could cut yourself on them. He looked and smelled too clean, in a way that suggested to Ross, perhaps unfairly, that he was into scat porn and coprophilia.

'I know you're disappointed, Ross,' Zac said, in his blandly non-regional American accent. 'But you don't want to say anything you'll regret, and besides, you'd only be shooting the messenger. This came all the way down the line. The NS4000 is top priority.'

'Yeah, sure,' Ross fumed. 'It came all the way down the line, and there was no chance of the local chapter head of Invertebrates Anonymous telling me which way the wind was blowing a wee bit sooner than Friday?'

'It wasn't like that,' Zac said, in those calm but weary tones that made you want to hold him down and staple his nipples to his bollocks just to hear the bastard emote like a normal human being. 'I was the one going out to bat for you. The only reason your presentation was even scheduled was because of my lobbying, believe me.'

'Believe me' was the catch-phrase by which Zac unintentionally revealed that he was lying. Maybe it wasn't even unintentional. Perhaps it was meant to convey: 'We both know I'm bullshitting you but we both also know you can do zip divided by nada to the power of bupkis about it, so why not run along like a good little geek.'

'Listen, Ross, getting the NS4000 locked into a contract with the NHS will change everything around here.'

Stanford will sit up and take notice, see us as more than some forgotten outpost, a corn that didn't pop. But if we let this one slip through our fingers, we might as well be in Siberia as Stirling.'

'And as I've been saying all along, Solderburn's new prototype could be capable of a lot more than any of you have even taken a moment to imagine because you're too busy wanking off at the prospect of trousering your target bonuses.'

Zac fixed him with a last-warning stare. His voice dropped in volume, still calm but not so much weary as threatening. Ross could hear the sound of duct tape being unrolled somewhere in his tones, the seal being broken on a bottle of lubricant.

'I strongly suggest you go and grab yourself a coffee, then take a few minutes to calm down. You've got a lot of work to do, especially with your buddy Alexander still MIA. I think this would also be an appropriate juncture to inform you that there was a compliance search of all computers carried out over the weekend. Unauthorised software was found on your machine: unauthorised software of a kind that senior management take particularly badly to.'

'You think I've got time to play games? I loaded those about two months ago because Solderburn wanted me to cruft together a quick and dirty virtual-world model. But guess what: I was so busy putting out fires on the NS4000 that it didn't happen.'

'I know how busy you are. That's why I stepped in on your behalf. But it doesn't make it easy for me to argue that you're swamped and need more staff if they can point to a copy of *Quake* on your hard drive and make out you've been frittering away valuable time. You know Stanford have a bee in their bonnet about this stuff.'

'Yeah, I remember the induction briefing. *You won't get anywhere with this company if you sit there playing games,*' he mimicked, doing an admittedly awful attempt at Neurosphere CEO Phil Scruton's accent.

'I know you think it's trivial, but if they decide to play rough, it gives them grounds to fire you on the spot.'

'Yeah, and what a disaster that would be. Imagine having to leave all this.'

It was supposed to be a defiant parting retort but Ross felt like it only served to emphasise that Zac was the grown-up and he was just some daft wee boy throwing a tantrum. Zac underlined this further by grabbing a far more resonant last word, verbally abandoning the lube in favour of going in dry.

'Careful what you wish for. It's not the best time to be surfing the jobs market.'

The inescapable truth of this hit Ross as he wandered off with his tail undeniably between his legs. What the hell else was he going to do? He had bailed on his medical career to take this job, the frustrated hacker and tinkerer in him inspired by what more he might achieve here than as a consultant on the wards. He had invested years of work at Neurosphere, and for all he hated the building and half the folk in it, deep down he knew he'd rather put up with that than walk away and leave his work unfinished, his ideas unexplored. And they knew that too.

'Of course they take your work seriously, Ross: that's the part that makes you an idiot.'

Finally he got what Carol was saying. They had seen him coming miles off: a driven geek who would chew through the piece-work for them all day, then push the boundaries for them in his spare time. But despite him belatedly catching on to this, the really sad truth was that it only proved he needed them more than they needed him.

He slouched reluctantly towards the reception area where the vending machines stood. The 'cappuccino' on offer tasted like someone had strained hot water through oven scrapings and then spat on it to provide the frothy finish, but he needed the caffeine. Unfortunately, when he got there, he found his path blocked by a three-headed gorgon: Angela the mistress of the server pen, Tracy the production-line robotics guru and Denise from marketing, united by shared disdain the moment he came into view.

He knew they'd been talking about him. Tracy was dating Carol's sister Beth, so the news of the weekend's developments would have had her fit to burst. It wasn't just that they went silent the moment he appeared, which could have simply meant that their gossip wasn't for other people's ears: it was Denise's pitiful attempt to cover what they had been talking about by pretending to resume a conversation about what was going on in *Eastenders* and *The X Factor*.

He didn't imagine he had been painted sympathetically in Beth's account, and it was unlikely any of this troika would be playing geek's advocate. They kept up their pretence of TV catch-up, a performance even less convincing than that of the actors on the soap and even less endearing than the suicides-in-waiting on the talent show. Ross helped himself to the caffeine equivalent of a shared needle – it didn't matter how horrific the delivery system, he just needed the drug – then walked away.

They barely waited until he was back out of sight to recommence, and certainly not until he was out of earshot.

'You'd have to say it's for the best,' Denise opined. 'I mean, he's not going to change, and if he can't see what's right in front of him, how interested is he?'

Christ, women just loved being elliptical like that, didn't they? Making out things should be obvious to you,

stubbornly refusing to tell you what was bothering them on the grounds that you should know: then they got doubly huffy because you couldn't work it out.

Denise was right, though. Carol was better off on her own. Indeed, Carol would probably argue that the trick would be telling the difference, as she had seen so little of him of late anyway.

'Your head is always stuck in that computer,' she had complained. 'Sometimes I think if you could just live inside that thing you'd be in heaven.'

'It's amazing,' observed Tracy. 'Beth says Carol thinks he's the smartest guy in the world, but what does it matter that he can see patterns in folk's brainwaves if he can't make out what's staring him right in the face?'

Well, sorry ladies, but this was one occasion where he did see what was right in front of him. He'd certainly cracked the code on that one and he hadn't needed to analyse any brainwaves to do it. Carol had decided he was for the bin weeks back, so there was nothing he could have changed about himself over the weekend that would have altered that.

This understanding made him feel just a little better, so he toasted the moment, albeit only with a mouthful of lukewarm crappucino as he made his way down the corridor.

'So,' he heard Angela ask, 'is she going to keep it?'

Setting 'Coffee spray' = TRUE