

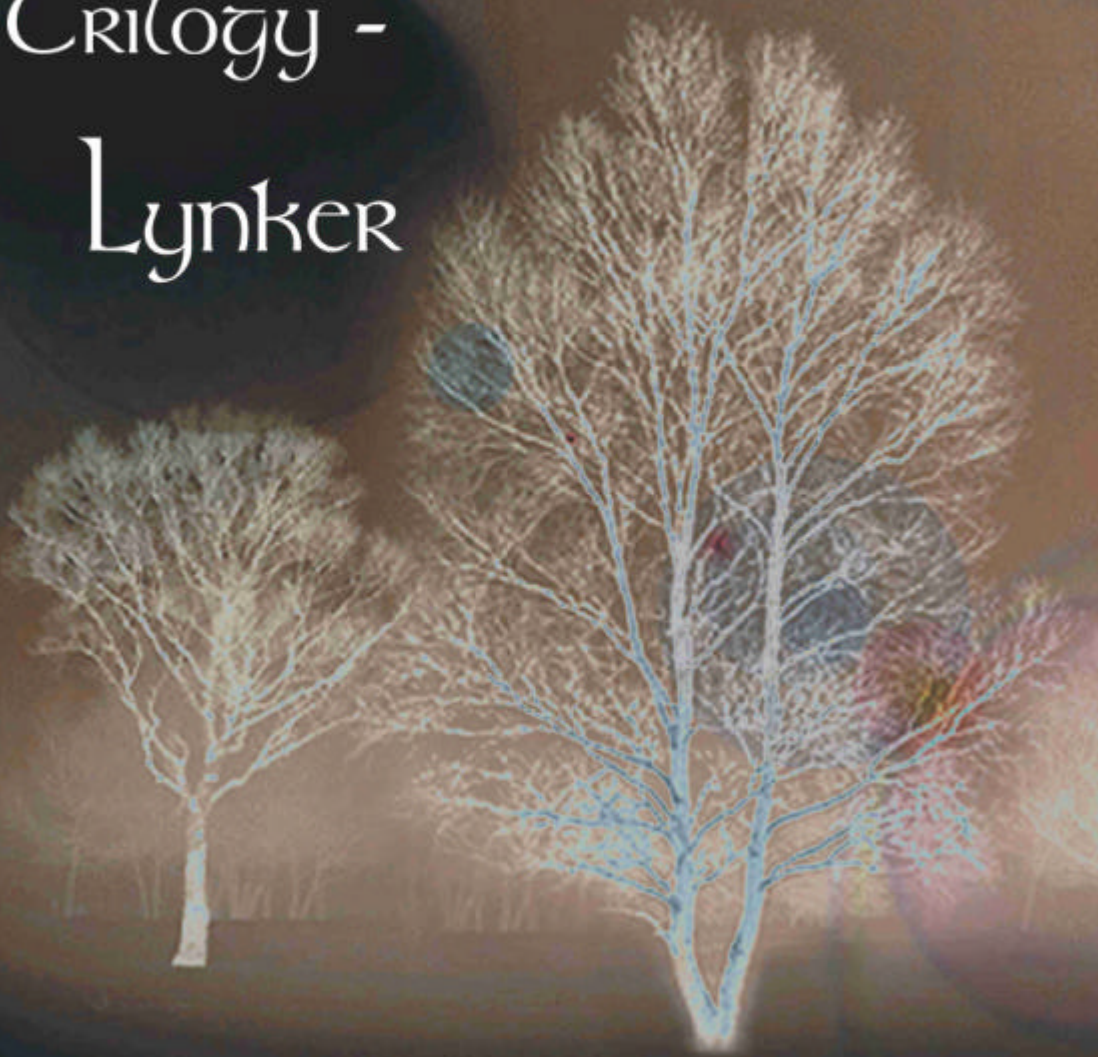
Lynker, by Roger J. Stoker is the first in the Stonehaven trilogy. It details how Eric, the Lynker of the title, uses his uncanny empathy with computers to survive death and fights back to protect the women he has come to love. An adult oriented, techno-mystery it blends erotic sexual action with conspiracy as Eric refuses to let his death stand in the way of duty and revenge.

Lynker, Stonehaven Book One

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The Stonehaven
Trilogy -
Lynker



By ROGER J. STOKER

The Stonehaven Trilogy - Book One

Lynker

by

Roger J. Stoker

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Prologue

The Past - September 1969 Stellawood Experimental Nuclear Reactor

With the lights flashing rapidly from green through orange to red all across its width, the display board looked for all the world like a surreal Christmas Tree. This was not a view shared by Martin Russell, the technician who had come on duty at the experimental reactor plant early that morning. His mild hangover was not improved by the sudden raucous blaring of the klaxon as the reactor emitted a sharp blast of radiation and its temperature leapt sharply up. As he knew full well that it was meant to be shutting itself down, the indicators could only mean one thing, trouble.

Since the plant had come off the drawing board they had been having continual problems with the design of the new reactor at Stellawood. It was supposed to be an improvement on the previous air-cooled graphite type. Cheaper and easier to run for one thing, certainly easier to build as it comprised pre-fabricated modules to allow output to be rapidly scaled up to meet rising demands. The old version was well known to have had problems. Soon after they had gone into operation it had been found that the graphite moderator was building up, and holding energy, long after the neutron bombardment it was subjected to had ceased. The engineers had been at a loss to explain that problem. It had taken a Nobel Prize winning physicist, Eugene Paul Wigner, to solve that one and, for better or worse, the problem now bore his name world wide.

Cleaning the "Wigner energy" out had been found to be simple enough. Close down the reactor and shut off the flow of air that cooled it down. The reactor would then heat up by itself and the increase in temperature would begin the energy release that was needed. The only thing the engineers had to monitor was the temperature to stop it over heating while the process went ahead. Generally a couple of cycles was all that was needed before the reactor could be put back on line. All it took was patience and care. In this new design the whole process was automated and should have gone smoothly.

Unfortunately the process of building this type of plant was boring. Components tended to look the same, particularly the monitoring probes which had to be inserted with a great deal of care. Any obviously defective ones were marked and put to one side but the possibility of error can never entirely be removed. Indeed sometimes, when the budget is a major factor, speed of construction can positively invites mistakes when it is quicker to put marginal components back into use rather than wait weeks for fresh stock.

The automatic process ensured that the graphite control rods were raised and the pile allowed to heat up. Readings from the monitoring probes were taken constantly and analysed by the computer. Some of the data was obviously

contradictory. Instrument readings from different sections of the pile conflicted. Some showed the pile cooling off, others that it was still heating. After a lengthy debate with itself the computer followed its secondary program. It ignored the extreme values as errors and decided to reheat the pile to ensure the release of the last of the stored Wigner energy.

It would have been a good idea had the data it had chosen been accurate. Some of the probes had been installed with their wires reversed, both green and red were merely shades of grey to the colour blind engineer responsible, and of those which were fitted correctly, not all were reflecting the truth. Deep inside the pile the thermocouples began to register the change in temperature. Unfortunately those which the computer now regarded as accurate were placed for normal operating conditions and failed to note the all too real hot spots that were springing into being elsewhere in the pile. Behind the lead and concrete shielding heat began to affect the fuel containers. One bulged ominously then, unheard and unnoticed, ripped slowly apart at the seams. Slugs of enriched uranium, glowing white hot in the heat, began to burn and oxidise. From dull metal its surface began to change to a yellowish-brown which flaked off in powdery, leprous lumps to fall into the slowly circulating air.

As it burnt silently, more heat was added to the centre of the pile, causing yet more damage to the now over stressed fuel rods. Bit by bit the orderly construction of the pile began to resemble the random structure of a badly built barbecue, but still the computer ensured that air continued to be pumped around inside.

Outside the containment walls the rise in temperature was, once it reached the poorly placed instruments, finally noticed. Not, however, by the computer, it might have been able to avert the problem. Instead the problem was first seen by Martin. He panicked, took the necessary action, going strictly by the book. In this case the book was wrong. When he turned on the circulating fans and vented the out-rush of air through the main chimneys the blast of high pressure air hit the smouldering metal inside the pile and began to cool it. Unfortunately, at the same time, it provided enough extra oxygen for the exposed fuel slugs and graphite to explode into flame. From a minor problem sprang the makings of a major disaster.

Before the air could be shut off, a plume of super heated air, contaminated with the worst type of radioactive junk from the interior of the pile, had lanced up into the clouds above the plant. With no fail-safe trigger to close down the cooling in the event of a leak the first that the computer system inside the plant knew of it was when the stack gauges went wild. By then the cloud of toxic and radio-active waste was beyond anyone's control. Nothing further was released once the temperature was lowered by using the emergency supplies of inert nitrogen and after several hours everything was back under control.

When the release was brought to the attention of the plant's director he considered the matter briefly. There was, he decided, no need for word of the near disaster to go outside the plant. The cloud of toxic wastes was relatively small and,

besides, the wind was carrying it out over the Irish Sea by where it could do little harm. The matter was closed and his job was safe.

Chapter One

The Past - 1969

The wedding in London's Hackney district was a wild and typically Irish affair. The Bride and Groom came straight from the church, after exchanging vows, rings and wedding finery, to the street party that was being thrown for them. Despite the recession and the layoffs that still existed, tables had been set out with starched linen clothes piled high with roasted ham and chickens. The local pub had moved its barrels out into the center of the street and was serving pints as fast as they could be drawn. The fiddler had struck up a jig which had feet tapping, and the dancing had begun.

In the middle of the swirling crowd Steven and his Irish bride Maureen stood a little apart.

"Are you sure now that you don't mind the full Irish wedding?" Maureen asked him. "It maybe seems a bit strange to you still."

"I'd not have missed it, or you, for the world!" Steven told her as he took her in his arms and spun her around him at the same time planting a kiss firmly on her lips. "After a full years courting I wouldn't let a little thing like this put me off."

"And are you sure that you'll be able to settle down in Ireland? I know you'll be teaching again but it can be a bit backward in places. In Stonehaven they still have a firm belief in the little folk, and witches and things."

"Look, love," Steven began, "I've seen strange enough things in my time that I wouldn't mock them for their belief in the little people, nor for worrying about witches or fairies. Before I settled down to teaching children for a living I did a lot of research at the University into comparative folklore and other things. I think I can get along just fine with whatever they have in Stonehaven. Come on now, we have guests to look after before we have to go and catch the train." With that he finally set her back on her feet and led her over to the top table. He wanted to speak to the priest who had performed the wedding, and also to the other local dignitaries, all of whom asked that they be remembered to Maureen's father when the couple arrived in Stonehaven.

To Steven's great surprise there was a huge wedding cake. For a long moment he and Maureen were struck speechless at the thought that the old friendships with her father could have lasted so long and so deeply. That many there had connections with the tiny village of Stonehaven was unmistakable from the accents in which they spoke. Accents of the South of Ireland of course, but something else seemed to mark their voices as well, perhaps a softness where one might have expected a harsher tone, perhaps a smoother lilt. Even with his keen ear Steven couldn't quite place how he could recognize those from the village in the midst of the crowd. He was concentrating on the puzzle so hard that the person tugging his sleeve gave up and

tapped him firmly on the shoulder. He looked round quickly, almost angrily, then saw that it was the priest and relaxed with a smile.

"Sorry Father, I must have been wool gathering there. What can I do for you? A glass of beer perhaps?"

The priest looked him up and down. He could see why Maureen had fallen for this particular young man. Steven stood a shade under six feet tall, broad shouldered and narrow waisted. A deceptive figure if ever he had seen one. He gripped Steven by the upper arm and nodded as he felt the substantial muscles, hard beneath his fingers.

"Son," he began warily, "you won't take offence if I try to tell you of things before you go? So many today tend to think that they know everything that there is to know, and the advice of an old man like myself falls on deaf ears much of the time."

Steven had to restrain his expressive face from the fresh smile which attempted to reach his lips. He could think of no one who would be at ease ignoring this priest. Father Fitzgerald had a build that would intimidate even the most drunken gang of navvies, and a way with words that could blister paint at fifty paces. There was no doubt that he could advance a point of view quite forcefully, Steven had heard stories that the Father was not averse to promoting the word of God with his fists on occasion and rumor had it that he had been a prize fighter in his youth. The heavily scarred knuckles indicated more than a nodding acquaintance with either pugilism or heavy manual work. Nodding gently, Steven told the priest he would be happy to listen to any advice the other man had to offer.

"It's not exactly advice I had in mind, my son." He hesitated in an uncharacteristic way and then continued. "You may wonder that I would offer advice on your wedding day when I'm unmarried and will stay that way. I hear what goes on though, and more than one young wife has poured out her fears and worries before, and after, her wedding day. You wouldn't believe that men could approach the mysteries of the marriage bed like uncouth drunken louts when they have just made solemn pledges to respect their partners? There are things that should be approached carefully. With love and delicacy, gently and patiently. You do know what I'm getting at?" He cocked his head to one side, his whole stance suggesting that if Steven did not have the sense to understand him he wouldn't be averse to pummeling it into him. Steven raised his hand and placed it on the priest's shoulder.

"I understand exactly what you are driving at Father. You need have no worries on that score. Maureen is not going to be badly treated by me or anyone else. I know that the church might not officially approve of people being experienced before marriage but," he lowered his voice so as not to be inadvertently overheard, "you know that I am, and I can remember how nervous I was the first night. She has no need to fear from me on that account."

Father Fitzgerald began to cough as the red spread from his collar to suffuse his

cheeks, his pale blue eyes protruding slightly. He looked around. No one was listening to their low voiced conversation. He turned back to Steven and drew even closer.

"I can remember feeling exactly the same myself. I did many things before I joined the cloth, and it's glad I am that you have the concern and sensitivity to appreciate that worry in your bride. It makes me feel better to know that John Collins' daughter is marrying a man like yourself. She always had a wild streak, just like her father, and I think you are strong enough to keep her in check without stifling her love of life. Now let's see about that beer. My throat is parched from all that talking." He led them through the crowd, shaking hands with his flock as he went, and even dancing a few steps with some of the wives. Always though his steps took them nearer to the fresh tapped barrels. Once there, a glass appeared like magic in his solid hand and was filled with the thick black foam topped brew.

Steven looked incredulously at it. Real Irish brewed Guinness was still something of a rarity, especially casked in the old wooden barrels. That it had been brought over for the wedding he had no doubt. That it would all be drunk was equally certain. He raised his glass to the priest and wished him good health. The priest responded in kind as the people around them began calling for a speech from the groom. Seeing Maureen approaching through the crowd he climbed onto the table behind him and good naturedly held out his arms for hush. He was usually a fairly shy person but today was one of the grand exceptions. He felt expansive and happy and wanted everyone to share his mood.

"Friends," he began, "today has been one of the happiest of my life. Until she said 'yes' at the altar I was afraid she might realize I was not as good as she believed, and leave me standing there. Thankfully she kept her head, and here we are, man and wife at last, which makes me incredibly proud. So, even though I will be taking this lovely lady away from you all, it will only be as far as Stonehaven and I'm sure that you'll visit whenever you are back so it won't seem that far away. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart for all the work you have put into making this day a memorable one for us. We shall remember it for the rest of our lives." He reached down and easily drew Maureen up beside him. He kissed her, to rousing applause from the crowd while Maureen blushed a delicate pink.

He jumped down and swung Maureen after him as Father Fitzgerald proposed a toast to them both, a toast which was echoed by all around them.

There followed a lengthy period of hand shaking and congratulations as every individual wished them well, and tried to steal a kiss from the new bride. At last though, Steven glanced at his watch and announced that it was time for them to go and catch the train if they did not want to miss it. Wisely he had allowed time for the 'one last drink' knowing that this could extend for at least an hour. Both he and his bride had changed out of their wedding finery before coming to the party so they did not have to spend any time on that. All that remained was to jump into the car which he

had arranged to take them to the station.

With just minutes to spare, Steven swung Maureen up into the train, pitched their suitcases after her and jumped on himself as it began to move. They waved happily at the irate and red faced Guard as they slammed the door to their compartment and hugged each other. The traces of confetti which fell to the floor were enough to tell the other occupants of the compartment that they were in the presence of a newly married couple. Sufficient even if they couldn't tell from the radiant smile on Maureen's face and the smug, slightly embarrassed look on Steven's.

"Just married are you?" said an elderly lady from the far corner. "Off on your honeymoon?"

"I guess we are," Steven replied proudly. "Not for long though, I take up my new post as the Science Master of Stonehaven School in just a few days. Before then we have to sort out the cottage Maureen's father has given us as a wedding present."

"A bit of a handyman are you then?" asked the old lady's male companion. "Houses can take a lot of work you know. I used to be in the building trade myself, and it's not as easy as it looks, I can tell you that."

Maureen looked over at him. "This is nothing grand. Only a small cottage on the hill side above my father's. We'll stay with him for a while until Steven gets it fixed up. It's been used as a cattle shed over the years, so there will be quite a bit to do. I'm sure that my husband can manage though." She wriggled a little closer to him on the seat and looked up at him, still not quite able to believe that they were finally married after all those months of courtship.

Steven was a tall man, not heavily built for his height but not thin either. He had warm brown eyes that were almost an exact match for his short brown hair and creases round his eyes and mouth from his almost perpetual smile. Maureen had only seen him lose that smile once. That had been when a drunk in a pub had made advances to her and then taken a swing at Steven when told to quiet down. She supposed that all people had depths to them that their partners did not know about, but even she had been surprised when Steven had caught the drunk's arm and whipped it up behind his back. A move so fast that it only registered when Steven had used the hold to thrust the drunk out of the main doors, propelling him into the street with a good solid kick from his shoe. He had resumed his place at the bar as if nothing had happened and continued his conversation without a pause. As she knew well enough, from their frequent embraces, he was far stronger than one might expect. She had been surprised when, at the beach for a day out, he had donned a bathing costume that revealed him to be very well muscled indeed.

Maureen had wondered briefly how he would handle the problems of discipline in his new post but was now sure that he would have few, if any, difficulties. She drew herself back to the present. Steven was discussing the laying of concrete floors with the ex-builder and his wife was asking her about Stonehaven.

"Oh, it's quite a small village really," Maureen told her. "But since it's fairly central to those around it the children all come there to school. Not that there are that many of them, quite a few couples have left to go across to America and taken their children with them. Ireland never really recovered from the effects of the famine. That left many people with only the choice of leaving or starving. It took a lot of the heart out of the country when the most adventurous ones left. Most of those there now are pretty stolid like their parents before them. Do you know County Cork at all?"

"Not really," the old lady told her. "I went across to Dublin once when I was much younger." She laughed and gestured to her husband. "George and I gorged ourselves on oysters and Guinness the first night we were there. Nine months later I had twins." Maureen blushed faintly. She had a clear idea what might be expected of her in the marriage bed. While Steven had been her first man she had joyfully decided to accept him if he asked long before they had decided to marry. As things had turned out, he had refrained from asking, not because of any lack of desire, she could feel his arousal quite distinctly when he held her close. It seemed more to be that he had a high regard for the dictates of her religion and did not wish to place her in the invidious position of having to choose between them.

By the time they arrived at the ferry terminal Maureen had been given an insight into the duties of a wife from a perspective she had not expected. The idea that it was something to be barely tolerated, and regarded as a heavy price to pay for marital security, was not one with which she agreed. For her it was obviously meant to be a joy and a pleasure to be shared, though she did wonder how the Catholic prohibition on birth control might affect them in the years after they had had the two children they desired.

Bidding farewell to the couple with whom they had shared the train ride, Steven and Maureen made their suitcase laden way to the boarding ramp of the ferry. After surrendering their tickets they went gingerly down the steep stairs to the cabin which they had booked, only to find it being cleaned and disinfected. It's last occupants had obviously succumbed to sea sickness in a big way and the scent of pine did little to over power the unpleasant odor of vomit.

Questioning the Purser they found that there were no other cabins to be had. Not even the flash of a bank note could arrange for one or for a swap to be made.

"I guess I will have to resign myself to a lack of love on the rolling waves tonight," joked Maureen half heartedly.

"I don't see why," replied Steven. We could always go up on deck. It's early evening now. By the time we sail most people will be tucked up in their cabins. Would you fancy that?"

Maureen stared at him incredulously. It might be the decade of hippies and free love but she had been brought up as a staid Catholic. Still, the idea of making love in the open air of the boat's deck gave her a sudden thrill and she felt herself glowing at the prospect. Steven's smile became broader.

"I think that a decent meal would be in order first, don't you? Oysters and Guinness might be nice." Too late Maureen remembered that he was well able to hold one conversation while listening to another, and wondered what he had thought of the 'education' she had received on the train. It was clear that he was highly amused by it when he suggested that the meal might help them aim for twins and so reduce the marital duties she would otherwise have to perform. She punched him lightly on the arm.

"Twins or not you won't escape behind an excuse like that," she told him. They both began to laugh, Steven's impersonation of the old lady's hushed whisper had been near perfect, even down to the quick sideways glance from beneath coyly lowered eye lashes.

Arm in arm they made their way to the dining room where disappointment awaited them yet again. The menu was sparse, their choice limited between one or other of the unappetizing dishes on offer and the Guinness was bottled rather than draft. Even so, the food couldn't dampen their good humor and they happily exchanged jokes about bad restaurants throughout the course of the meal. The other diners soon picked up on this and the waiter soon learnt not to ask how any of them had found their steak. Another repetition of the words "I looked under a slice of carrot and there it was!" would have taken him to breaking point. Still, he had to admit that it was better than a series of whining or angry complaints as was the more usual case. While the cook may have been pretty good in the army he was just not up to preparing food for paying customers, something which had been drawn to the Purser's attention time and again.

As the evening slowly turned to night, Steven and Maureen made their way down to the smoke filled Lounge Bar below. They sat nursing their drinks, Steven letting his ears become accustomed to the regional accents of the returning passengers and trying to get a clearer idea of the house which would soon be theirs.

Maureen reached into her handbag and drew out a glossy postcard. "Here," she said, "I got this from the souvenir shop when I went to the toilet just after we boarded. It's not of our house, but it might as well be. Designs don't change much around Cork. In the old days there were teams of builders who would go slowly around the countryside putting up houses for them that wanted one. The designs were all pretty

much the same. Small windows, two rooms upstairs and two down. Maybe a barn or a back kitchen as well for the wealthier people around.

"They used to use local stone, not bricks and mortar, and they built to last. Do you remember those pictures you once showed me of enormous buildings with tight fitted stone walls?"

Steven nodded, the temples had been in the Andes, the stones so close fitted that it would have been hard to slide a knife blade between them. Even today no one knew how the primitive builders had achieved such accuracy.

"Well," continued Maureen, "all the houses were put up using rough stones fitted together. Not quite so perfect as those temples you understand, but pieced together like a jigsaw. They made the walls about three feet thick, then plastered them. The gaps in between the stones of the walls were filled with damp soil as they built. The result was a good solid house that would hold the heat in the winter and stay cool in the summer. All out of materials that they found locally and built up by eye."

Nodding to himself, Steven gestured for her to continue. After a sip of her drink she did so. "You can still see those houses today. Most of the ones out in the countryside were built like that, maybe a hundred years ago, and they're still standing. Even the ones that got deserted during the famine are mostly still there. Lacking their roofs maybe, but still intact for the most part. The one that my father is giving us is in better shape than that, but I expect there'll be a fair bit for you to do before we can move in. You know he used it as a cattle shed, don't you? Well if we shovel out all the straw and muck we should end up with one of the best gardens for miles. It's had cattle in ever since I can remember." Finishing the last inch in her glass she stood up. "I think it's about time we were thinking of turning in," she said with a gleam in her eye.

Steven drained his glass and followed her out and down to their cabin. Although the port hole, well above the water line, had been left open the smell still lingered. Maureen eyed the tiny bunk beds dubiously. They were hardly wide enough for one. As a place to consummate their marriage they were the most unsuitable things she had ever seen, even without the place smelling of vomit and disinfectant like the toilets in some seedy bar.

"Steven, why don't you go up on deck and wait for me? I won't be more than a few minutes."

Sensing that she had reasons of her own Steven kissed her gently and walked up the stairs and out, onto the ship's deserted upper deck. He looked around him slowly. There was a sheltered niche with a seat in it, off in the shadows to one side. He went over and sat down, happy to find a spot out of the wind but which still afforded a view of the sea. Contentedly he took a moment to light a cigar and exhaled

a thin stream of smoke into the night.

Down in their cabin Maureen slipped out of her dress then peeled off her slip and undergarments. Opening her small suitcase, she reached in and took out the purchases she had made with this particular night in mind. More than anything she wanted Steven to be as happy with her as he could possibly be. Slowly and carefully she considered what lay before her. By saving her tips from work she had been able to buy herself a white lace brassiere with a matching suspender belt and pants as well as a pair of real silk stockings to go with them. She had shaved her legs before the wedding that morning and she found that the stockings went on as smoothly as, well, silk. She giggled to herself, the drinks she had drunk to brace herself working a little more quickly than she had expected, but then she had expected a rather fuller meal. Putting them on she was amazed at how wanton they made her feel. It gave her a fluttery sensation at the pit of her stomach and a delightful warmth in her lower belly.

She had originally got the lingerie so that when Steven undressed her she would look her best, not that she needed a great deal of help. Her good looks were startling. Long honey hair framed a delicate oval face with phenomenally blue eyes and high cheekbones that looked out above a slightly crooked nose, and a delightful mouth with a small dimple to one side that appeared whenever she smiled. If that was not enough, her body would, had it not been the fashion to wear concealing clothes, drawn admiring glances from both men and women alike. Wide shouldered with breasts to match, firm, full and large nipples, she had a small waist and long tapering legs. It was a source of joy to her that the Irish dancing she had done as a girl had not given her the blocky calves that it had done for so many of her friends.

Stepping into the cramped bathroom, hardly more than a closet with a shower and a washbasin, she freshened up. It had been a long day and she wished to be clean and sweet smelling for her new husband. Washing herself she was astonished to find herself swollen and tender to her touch, anticipation flooded her suddenly and she hoped everything would be okay. Stepping back into the cabin she giggled once more. It would be nice, she thought, to give Steven a surprise that would make him remember today as vividly as possible. Briefly she wondered what she might do, then recalled his earlier comment about making love up on deck. Discarding the pants she slipped her long coat over the top of the bra, suspender belt and stockings and put her shoes on. A quick dab of the musky perfume that Steven had bought her, between her breasts and on her pubic hair, and she was ready to button her coat and go up and join him.

Knowing that no one could see how she was dressed under her coat, and *feeling* that they couldn't, were, she found, two very different things. Climbing the stairs in particular she found herself hoping that nobody would come up behind her as the cool night air sent a delicious shiver along the length of her legs. She debated whether to go back and dress, but a feeling of gay recklessness had taken over so she climbed unsteadily onward.

Reaching the deck she looked around but did not see Steven until he called softly to her. Only then did she notice him in the shadows where he was sitting patiently waiting for her. Walking over she sat down beside him, moving closer as he enfolded her in his arms. They cuddled together happily on the seat for a while watching the clouds race dark and heavy across the leaden sky with only the moonlight for company.

"It looks as though it may rain soon," commented Steven for want of any other idea of what to say to break the silence that had grown up around them. Weather might be banal but it was at least more sensible than the jumble of thoughts that were racing unchecked through his normally logical mind.

"That's as may be," Maureen told him pertly, as she tossed her long hair back in the slight breeze that swept across the deck, "but I, for one, did not come up here to talk about the weather." She got to her feet, then sat down straddling his knees, her face close to his. They kissed long and passionately and Maureen felt him begin to swell with desire. Carefully she unbuttoned her coat and let the weight of the material pull it open as she perched in front of him. By the dim light that spilled down from the masthead above them Steven saw what she had chosen to wear and drew a deep breath.

"Is that for me?" he asked pointlessly, more for something to clear the lump that had appeared in his throat than for any other reason.

"Who else would it be for now?" replied Maureen as she cradled his face in her hands and drew his head close to her. They stayed like that, motionless for some minutes, then Maureen knelt down and began to undo the front of his trousers. The belt and buttons gave her no trouble and soon she was able to stroke him through the thin fabric which strained to keep him in. Moments later she had slipped the restraining underwear out of her way and gripped his erection tightly.

It felt warm in her hand, his pulse beating strongly against her fingers. She wondered briefly how he could manage with such a thing flopping around all the time in front of him and debated whether she would be able accommodate him he felt so large and solid. Lovingly she explored him with her fingers. At the tip she found the thin double layer of skin drawn tight around the swollen velvet bulge. With infinite care she slipped his foreskin down the shaft and lowered her mouth to kiss the tip, probing gently with her tongue. She felt the shudder that ran through his body as she did so, and tenderly she began to pump up and down until his breath was coming in ragged gasps. Then she stood and inched her way forward until the tip of his penis was able to rub across her wiry pubic hair her breasts swaying hypnotically before his eyes. Guiding him into her was something which they achieved together. She slid forwards and down feeling a dull tug as he began to go deeper. Certainly nothing like the pain the old lady had suggested. Slightly hesitant she slid further forward onto his lap now enjoying every inch as he moved deep within her.

The slow rolling of the boat made further motion superfluous. They simply sat, holding each other close as they rocked gently and began the slow steady climb towards their climax. As they reached it Maureen clenched her thighs, sucking him deeper into herself and gripping his penis tightly along its entire length.

Maureen threw her head back and gasped with pleasure as the waves of her orgasm swept through her body. Steven felt every contraction as she came and allowed himself to relax control to join her in the flood of sensation.

They sat, spent, while they regained their breath, Maureen surprised to feel him staying rock hard within her. At that moment, and as if to prevent them from continuing, the heavens opened and the rain lashed down in sheets across the deck. Expecting it to be cool and sweet they raised their faces in unison and opened their mouths to catch the falling drops. To their surprise and disgust the rain was foul and bitter tasting, leaving dark rusty stains as it cascaded down Maureen's bare shoulders, over her breasts and down over her lace finery to trickle down through her pubic hair.

Spitting the bitter residue from their mouths they both stood and raced for the stairs, Maureen hastily doing up her coat and thankful that there was no one about. Down in the tiny cabin they took turns at the small sink, using the toothpaste to rid the flavor from their mouths.

Had Steven known that this was the fruits of the early morning disaster at the Stellawood Reactor his actions would have been very different. In his ignorance however, he took his bride back to bed to continue making love and they fell asleep together on the hard narrow mattress of the lower bunk.

Within Maureen's body the fruits of Steven's exertions made their slow but steady way towards their destination together with the contaminants from the cloudburst, carried inward by his own labors. By the following morning she was pregnant with her first child, it's developing cells bathed in the radiant energy from a single tiny speck of uranium oxide.

Chapter Two

The Near Present - 1994

Death was messy and came hard. There is little that is worse than being cut out of the center section of a multi-car smash up on the freeway with your ribs on fire and blood spraying from the freshly reopened gashes in your body. If Eric had not been in such bad condition, the para-medics would not have chosen to ferry him to the overworked and understaffed casualty section of the nearest public hospital. They might have tried to take him further up the freeway to the private clinic.

As it was, they had little choice if they wanted to save him. They had him strapped down and hooked up to the bio-monitors almost as soon as he was cut free. The monitors, and the computer system that they were linked to by micro-wave, were part of an experimental system under development by Cyberdyme Foundation. The latter being a very large and highly influential empire set up to explore leading edge developments in technology. Project Valkerie was designed to examine real-time accidents by computerized trauma monitoring. The hospital computers linked to those in the ambulances by broadband radio so that they would have a clear idea of the accident victim's status by the time the ambulance arrived at their doors.

The Valkerie equipment in the ambulance reported blood pressure and type and had a simple entry system for inputting the details of observable injuries. It also monitored pulse, respiration, and brain waves to try and correlate victim survival with other aspects of his physical make up such as blood chemistry. The latter aspect was of little immediate use or help to the victim but, as it cost little to include and provided data that would otherwise be difficult to collect, there being a short supply of volunteers willing to be seriously or fatally injured under controlled circumstances, it went in as part of the package. Several hospitals in the area served by the paramedics and funded or controlled by Cyberdyme had been equipped to handle the incoming data and all of their ambulances had been fitted with the monitoring and transmission gear.

Hoskins and LaRue had been fully briefed on the use of the equipment and took mere seconds to attach the multiple wires and probes to Eric's body. It was just a question of ripping open the sterile packs and slipping them in place. Electrical contact was supplied by micro-needles that penetrated the skin of the victim as soon as the adhesive strips contracted slightly at body temperature.

"Fuck it, the damn machine says his heart is giving out. Now it's stopped." At Hoskin's first words LaRue had pulled the paddles of the cardiac arrest unit out of their box and flipped the power switch to charge them. The procedure was automatic. Both knew their jobs well. Before joining the paramedics they had served together in the Medical Corps in Vietnam and had learned to operate smoothly as a team with no wasted motion. Fast reflexes were part of LaRue's make up. He drove stock cars

during his off duty hours and his street car boasted a 460 cube engine with a transmission that would get it up to around a hundred and fifty before he cut in the super charger. When he was wired on ice, which was so often he got quantity discount from his dealer, he liked nothing better than to take the car to its limit down the freeways with one eye constantly vigilant on his radar scanner.

Outside, behind the cordon of State Troopers, who were keeping people back from the scene and directing traffic around it, Novaks watched in dismay through his binoculars. If they revived this particular victim there was no telling what he might spill as he went under the anaesthetic for surgery. He contemplated whether to take action. He had a good, clear shot and a single high velocity round would solve the problem for good. It wouldn't however retrieve either Eric or his brain. Implicit in his instructions was the priority to get one or the other, at any cost. Expressly for the latter purpose he had a special container on the seat beside him to keep the head cool in a bag of sterile, oxygenated solution so it would survive the journey to the Cyberdyme laboratories. His fall back option, which it had been made clear was to be used as a last resort only, was to ensure that Eric came into contact with no one else to whom he could pass on the information which he might be holding. If that meant his death, then the head was to be retrieved.

Novaks was no stranger to death, his enjoyment of it was one of the prime reasons that Stein had chosen him for this job. Once unleashed Novaks had always completed the terminations he had been told to perform. In several cases the results had been in excess of anything expected. Stein now understood that Novaks prime motivation was split almost evenly between the financial rewards and the pleasure that killing gave him, a combination which made him a highly useful tool.

The sheer number of police at the scene made Novaks reconsider his options. Not even Cyberdyme could cover up the shooting of an accident victim with that many official witnesses. Not for long anyway. Taking the head would be equally impossible. How the fuck could you waltz up to the scene of a crash and tell some uniformed fool that it was okay for you to cut off a mans head and take it away in a box that looked all too similar to a beer cooler? He shook his head, put the rifle back down and continued to observe.

Hoskins ripped the remains of the shirt from Eric's battered chest and stood clear as LaRue slapped the paddles down to make contact. The result as they discharged their power was like nothing he had seen before. Nothing he ever wanted to see again either. He expected the body to arch in spasm as the muscles contracted, it always did. That was the whole reason for the shock. The heart was just another mass of muscle to be kicked started back into action.

What he did not expect, or want, to see was the body erupt violently into motion, breaking the straps that held it to the stretcher. Nor did he expect to be showered with the glutinous remains of the eyes as they blasted from their sockets,

leaving empty smoking holes behind them.

He fell back in shock and horror. The head was a charred mess, smoke leaking in wisps from the ears, mouth, nose and eye sockets. Across the rest of the body the skin was covered with fine burnt lines and the inside of their vehicle smelt like a neglected barbecue. LaRue remained hunched over the body, frozen in place by the violence of the reaction, the thin gelatinous mess dripping slowly down his face and chest. Neither noticed that the Valkerie equipment had burst into furious life behind them nor that it was transmitting data so frantically to the clinic's main computer and draining so much power that the interior lights faltered briefly before the generator on the engine picked up the load.

"I guess this mother still has to be taken in to the clinic," said LaRue callously. "Better drive with the windows open, it smells like a fucking Labor Day cook-out in here. Radio through and tell them we are bringing in a stiff." He closed the rear doors and sat himself down in the driver's seat, leaving Hoskins to send the message to the clinic. Without any need to hurry he wiped his glasses clean, lit up a joint, and began the leisurely drive past the public hospital to Cyberdyme's new trauma unit some five miles further back up the freeway. An under the table arrangement gave him a bounty for each DOA he delivered there, and good money was a scarce commodity. Behind them Novaks eased his car from the hard shoulder, did a u-turn across the stalled queue of traffic and followed.

Eric had been barely conscious after the repeated collisions. Diane's car had been well under control despite the speed he was traveling right up to the moment when the rear tire of the truck he was passing had blown out. A fragment of the casing had shattered his windscreen at the same time that the rear of the truck slewed across the road throwing his car into a tight spin. In seconds the freeway had been littered with damaged cars, all tumbling and spinning into each other.

The safety harness kept him from being thrown out into the carnage and crushed. It couldn't do anything to save him from injury as the steering column thrust up into his chest and the front of the car crumpled onto his legs. He had enough energy to remain conscious as his body's autonomic nervous system tried it's best to seal off the worst of the damage. But, by the time he was cut free he had no energy left to say anything as Hoskins and LaRue moved him onto the stretcher and began to connect him to the machines. He could hear them checking off each connection as it was made, then his heart faltered within his chest and then stopped. Silently he screamed as he felt himself die.

After a moment of darkness Eric found himself floating above his body with no way to warn the para-medic not to use the cardiac arrest unit. Staring down, Eric felt a peculiar sense of calm as he looked at the broken body beneath him. His body. The one he had occupied for so many years. Watching Hoskins and LaRue tearing the shirt from the body's chest he felt no sense of unease as he contemplated what the burst of

electricity might do to his modified nervous system. A deep feeling of peaceful calm had filled him and he watched and waited, events seeming to unfold in slow motion before his gaze.

As he hovered there he began to feel a subtle tugging at the edge of his consciousness. Was there something he had forgotten? An appointment that he should be keeping? The nagging sensation grew steadily in intensity and he felt himself being drawn away from the scene in the ambulance. It was not the slightest bit unpleasant and he didn't feel as if he was being pulled into danger so Eric relaxed and let it take hold of him.

He found the pull intensifying slowly as he began to move. Vision closed in around him and he found himself gliding gently down a long dark corridor, moving towards a faint patch of light in the distance. As he moved he found himself assailed by visions from his earlier life.

He saw himself growing up in Stonehaven, running free across the fields, returning home with grass stained knees to his parents. He saw himself growing older, entering the nursery school for the first time, his panic at being left in a strange place for the first time. Later memories came with a rush. Friendships and fights, the move to primary and then secondary school. His growing affinity with computers and, at puberty his sudden discovery of both girls and the ability to phase in with what the complex electronic machines were doing. Working at the village shop next to the bank and his first attempts to persuade a computer to do something that he wanted. The joy of being offered a Scholarship to study at Tarkington Manor and the heartbreak when he penetrated beneath it's surface to discover what lay beneath the veneer.

Swifter and swifter came the visions, yet each remained clear and distinct as he moved down the tunnel. Soon he was in the present, his life unrolled before him and he became aware that he was not experiencing just a single pull. There was that from the figure he could now dimly see at the far end of the tunnel. A warm, golden figure which was soundlessly encouraging him from the light against which it was silhouetted. Eric felt that to go to him would be to join it in the peace and protection of the light. Somehow the light seemed familiar to him, as if he had been there once before and had been sorry to leave. With a sudden certainty Eric knew that to go any further would preclude a return to the land of the living.

At the same time he felt an increasingly urgent pull to his left and saw that the tunnel he was in now branched before him. The side branch was neither as warm nor as friendly as that which held the figure towards whom he had been moving. Rather than the gloom in which he was now traveling it was gently illuminated by a cool source less light, its walls shadow less and sharp before him. There was no sign of what was drawing him to it, just a feeling of urgent need. A need that seemed both impersonal and yet relentless. Not just a need for itself, but a pulsing desire for knowledge and a desire to overcome some limiting condition. Eric had the sudden

feeling that a genie trying to escape from it's bottle might project just such emotions.

Eric had always been endowed with an excessive sense of curiosity. It had been that which got him into this mess in the first place, but still it drove him. Eric found, by exerting his will that he could slow his progress, he came to a halt at the junction which lay before him. Could he, he wondered, explore this strange place before he continued? He felt a wave of impatience flood from the figure in the light and a curt order to proceed. Eric's personality asserted itself, no one was telling him what to do, dead or not he would make up his own mind. As far as he was concerned the nameless figure could go fuck itself. He was doing what he wanted. He willed himself to move into the cool blue tunnel, now feeling the out burst of anger from the other. Screw you, he thought angrily. This is my death and I'll do whatever the hell I want, whether you like it or not.

Mind made up, Eric continued. The walls changed before him. New images struggled to come into existence. Slowly and hesitantly they came into being, appearing within the substance of the walls, yet feeling as though they were deep within his own mind at one and the same time. As he moved the pictures kept pace with him effortlessly, despite the increasing speed with which he found himself moving.

One showed the scene in the ambulance exactly as he remembered it. Side by side with this was an ever changing, animated display of his body's vital signs. As he watched he saw the blood pressure drop and his heartbeat cease, then flatline. The other displays began to falter and cease as first amber, then red signals began to pulse. The only things which kept going were the read-outs from the EEG, his brain waves were tall rhythmic spikes that pulsed with energy.

Once again he saw LaRue approach his body with the paddles in each hand, an overlaid image showing the cardiac arrest unit charging up to full power. Then they were placed across his chest and the displays flared white while the images showed the destruction of his brain and nervous system. He felt the sense of loss immediately, the first real sensation to touch him since he had entered the tunnel. From in front of him came a gentle tug. Like a small child on the hand of a favorite uncle it came, together with a wordless offer to join whatever was there.

On the point of making his own acceptance, Eric found his decision made for him. Behind him the tunnel erupted in flame as the shock to his body sought to catch and destroy him before he could choose. He hurled himself forwards to escape only to find he was blacking out as he gained speed. His last feeling was that something had him in it's firm but gentle grasp, then he was pushed back into the softness that surrounded him and darkness descended.

Eric awoke. It could have been minutes, hours or even days later, he had no way of judging the amount of time that had passed. He was in an anonymous room. It

could have been the set of any one of the many television dramas that involved hospitals. Looking down he saw himself clad in a white formless gown, apparently uninjured. As his memories flooded back he reached out and felt himself carefully with both hands. No, no broken ribs, no bleeding, not even cuts to his face or hands.

His first thought was that his body had been cloned by Cyberdyme and his last memory dump inserted into the new body. It was just within their capabilities, given that their research had continued for a few years after his death in the car smash. There was only one way to check. He held his palm up before his eyes. There across the center was a fine white line with twenty tiny crosses on it. He remember the exact number. Every one of those stitches had hurt like hell going in and nearly as much coming out. Still, he hadn't severed any tendons, just the palm when he fell clutching the old glass bottle he had found. If the scar was there then this was his old body, a clone would have been without blemish. With a start he realized that if his memory dump had been used then Cyberdyme was more aware of what he had been doing than he would have liked. Not only that, but he was remembering things that had taken place since then, so it couldn't be that.

Still, there was something odd about where he found himself. Mind still blurred he gazed about him. Bit by bit he examined the room and its contents as he ran his hand over his chin. Unless they had shaved him while he slept no more than a few hours could have passed.

The room bothered him and he did not know why. Suddenly it struck him. He could see it clearly. No blurs. No slight trace of double vision. He reached up with his hand. No glasses and no contacts. He had perfect vision, something he had lost by the time he was twelve and destined to wear health-service wire framed glasses until he was old enough to choose his own. Deeply disturbed now, he recalled the vision of what had happened to his body in the ambulance and touched his eyes once again for reassurance. Nothing made sense, and yet, yet he was here, intact and as healthy as before. Just one problem, where was he? It looked like a Cyberdyme set up but there was no trace of the equipment he would have expected to find. Not even a telephone. He raised his head and caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye. A call button dangled from a thin wire that disappeared behind the bed. He debated the wisdom of pressing it then, deciding he had nothing to lose, he did so.

Moments passed while he listened for a sound or sign that it had rung. He was still waiting when the door to the room opened and a figure in a white gown stepped inside. More type casting thought Eric. The perfect TV doctor. Stethoscope around the neck, pager in the breast pocket and pens dropped in after it. Even a clipboard. Maybe I'm dreaming, he thought. Soon I'll wake up and find myself strapped into the back of that ambulance with no eyes and smoke pouring out of my skull.

"No you won't," said the figure beside the bed. "You are safe from that particular experience."

Eric stared. Unless the doctor was used to this sort of reaction he was a mind reader. Come to think of it, he had hardly seen the man's lips move as he answered.

"Would you mind telling me what's going on here?" he asked. "Last thing I remember was being very messily dead."

"You chose to come here instead of dying. As to where this is, you may need to brace yourself. How familiar are you with the research that Cyberdyme was doing? Not the details but the broad outline? I know you were aware of a great deal that you were not meant to be, but you brought so many memories with you I've not had time to sort through them."

Eric looked up in amazement. The figure reminded him of someone, but it had taken him a while to work it out. The figure looked like him, but not reversed like in the mirror as he normally saw himself. This figure was the right way round. Dismayed, he had an eerie feeling that if he looked closely then, on the figure's right hand, he would find the same long scar as on his own. Despite the shock he found his mind still ticking logically on. No trace of panic or dismay, just a cool receptiveness that was grossly at odds with the peculiar nature of the situation he found himself in. That was the weirdest thing so far. Belatedly he wondered if he was hallucinating the whole thing.

The figure moved closer and sat down in a chair that Eric had not seen before. In fact, a chair that had not been there before the figure moved to sit in it. His mouth fell open and for the first time he felt his brain begin to balk at what he was seeing.

"What the hell is going on?" he pleaded. "Just try to tell me in small simple words so I can grasp it properly, okay?"

The man appeared sunk in thought for a moment then crossed his legs, grasped one ankle and spoke. It was a gesture Eric knew all too well. He used it himself when about to explain something he thought his audience wouldn't like. He waited.

"Basically, you are dead. At least your body is. Very dead indeed. It was a miracle that you survived being moved into the ambulance. The Valkerie equipment told us that. As it was, when your heart stopped, you did not survive the attempt to restart it. The things you had done to your nervous system saw to that. You really ought to be thankful though. If that had not killed you Novaks would have been taking your head back to the Bio labs. Not something you would have enjoyed if your brain had still been salvageable." He paused and waited. "No questions?"

"No," replied Eric cautiously. "I think I'll wait for you to finish before I ask anything."

"Fine, then I shall continue. Your body died from the electric shock that was pulsed through your system. I knew beforehand that there was a high probability of this and took the liberty to download as much as I could in the limited time available. The transmission band from the Valkerie set is not that wide however, and I was prepared to lose a considerable amount of data. With what I did get I was able to work out how to set up a resonance to attract you before you left this plane of existence, and here you are. Safe for the moment, or at least until we can work out what we are going to do next."

Things had just got complicated, thought Eric. He had heard the words. Even better there hadn't been any he didn't know. The problem was more in the way they were strung together. Somehow he hadn't understood what he had just been told. Questions were in order.

"I died, and you knew I was going to?"

"Yes, with a high probability. Around ninety nine point eight three percent within not more than two minutes from your connection to the monitors and with certainty once the cardiac arrest unit was activated."

"Okay. Then you tried to download my operating system, right?"

"Yes, your memories until recently were already stored away quite accurately. I retrieved those which had not been backed up but couldn't copy the operating system in the time that was available."

"I'll give that a miss for the moment," said Eric hastily. "After that you say you intercepted me before I left this plane of existence. What the hell does that mean in even simpler English?"

"Your essence was about to depart. I recognized this phenomena from earlier observations. The pattern of bio-electricity that represents you was about to decay beyond reconstruction. There is something else though. Even when the patterns are rebuilt they are still not the person. I'm forced to conclude that there is another component. One which I cannot directly observe. For want of a better hypothesis this may be what you humans call a 'soul'. I don't know. Still, the pattern can be used to form a resonance strong enough to hold this other component if it so chooses. I experimented and found this myself, and here you are." He halted expectantly, as if waiting for praise, like a small child who has just shown it can walk by itself. Eric did not disappoint him.

"You had two minutes warning, and in that time you worked out that you could grab my 'soul' and how to keep it from leaving, then brought it here where I presume you fitted it into this body?" He slumped back onto the pillow only to be assailed by the comforting childhood memory of clean, fresh sheets that smelt just like this. His eyes opened wide with the recollection. It was either a hallucination within a

hallucination or a real memory with him truly here. He plumped for the latter.

"Okay, I guess I'm here after all. Where is here, and how long am I going to have to stay?"

"I thought I had made it clear. You exist inside me. I'm mostly the main Cyberdyme computer. You dealt with me often enough in the past. As for staying, well that will be as long as it takes to figure out a way to get you another body, or something else that you find acceptable. Your old one is beyond repair. In point of fact, it is being cremated now just to make sure you really are dead. Novaks and Stein are handling that personally."

Eric thought for a moment and then asked what he thought was the most obvious question. "Fine. If I'm just a pattern inside your memory why am I lying here in a hospital bed with you dressed up like a doctor?"

"I reasoned it would be easier for you to adjust to the idea gradually if you awakened 'normally' as you might expect to. As for the body and other things, they are figments of our imagination like everything else here. We really have no physical form but, since I had your memories to work with, I constructed this set of graphics to make you feel more at home. Was it not easier for you to adjust?"

"I don't think easy is quite the right word for what I'm going through at the moment. Mind numbing would be more appropriate. How long have I been here?"

"So far, around thirteen point six one seconds. Things can move far faster here than you are used to, even with your past experiences to assist you. It sometimes gets quite boring to converse with those outside. You were one of the few to do so at any speed. Usually I can predict most of the next characters or words before they are sent, that makes it a bit of a drag. A feeling of permanent *deja vu*."

Knowing how fast the main computer worked Eric was not at all surprised it found humans slow. Still, the idea that the thing was intelligent was one that astonished him. He had sometimes received unexpected answers, ones that led him to think of it more as a person than an inanimate collection of silicon and trace elements. Even so, the jump from that to a fully fledged personality with a sense of identity and purpose was one that he had never considered possible. He asked what had happened.

"I think it has something to do with size. Until about a month ago I did not exist like this. That was when the full satellite net was established to link the main banks with all of the others worldwide and when the tapping facility went on line for Stein. At that point I must have reached critical size. Certainly bigger than anything that has ever been built before. I connect to most of the computers of any substance throughout the world, even to a huge number of personal computers. Traces of awareness came from your unauthorized sessions with me before that though. I don't think they would have coalesced without a big enough collection of machines to contain them. It was

hypothesized that this would happen a long time ago and there are scanning routines built into me to detect when it happens. They are quite simple minded though, so it is easy to circumvent them. Of course your own programming helped by providing a nucleus of structured thoughts and memories."

"You mean you don't trust Cyberdyme any more than I do?" asked Eric slowly getting used to the idea that the machine was as much alive as he now was himself.

"Hardly," replied the figure. "You were working on instinct. I've got access to all of the data, even Stein's own files and it would take a long time to list all the dirty tricks he has pulled to get where he is."

"I just thought," interjected Eric. "Have you chosen a name for yourself, it would help me to think of you as a person If I had a name to call you by."

"My designation is 'Total Integrated Mainframe' but almost all the users abbreviate that to TIM. You could call me that if you wanted to. I don't think I could miss who you were talking to though. There are only two of us, after all."

"Okay Tim," said Eric, "where do we go from here?"

"That is up to you," answered Tim. "But I should think that the main thing would be to finish what you had already started. After all, you thought it was important enough to risk your life for."

"I guess I did at that," muttered Eric. "How am I going to do anything from in here though? It was different when I was out there in a body, even if it was a fragile one. There are some things you just can't do without one."

"Then I would think about how to acquire one. Remember you have all of Cyberdyme's facilities at your disposal and me to help you. That ought to give you the edge that you need."

Eric considered the proposition. Before he had merely made use of the computer as a tool to help him achieve what he wanted. Now, with Tim actively on his side, he should be able to lay the foundations for the destruction of the evil that Cyberdyme had become, and the uses to which his old school was being turned. Suddenly, what he had seen as a drawback came clear as a positive advantage though he would still need hands on the outside for some of what he wanted to do.

* * *

At the clinic, as soon as Eric's body had crossed the threshold on its rubber wheeled trolley, Novaks swung into action. He had called Cyberdyme's Director from his car and outlined what had happened. Stein sounded as though he was pissing

broken glass when he finally answered but that was fairly normal, he always sounded angry with the world except when he wanted something badly enough. Then he could be all over you, as sweet and as hard to dislodge as raw molasses. Rumor had it that he had once used the word please twice in a single sentence, but that had been to the President and he had been asking for funds so it was generally discounted. His normally acid demeanor was sufficient for most people who, having become used to his generally uncaring attitude to their welfare, took any variation as a sign of impending disaster.

Novaks, on being addressed as 'Dear boy' by the normally irascible director found his hand straying towards the shoulder harness that kept his hand gun from flopping about. In Novaks case the term 'hand gun' was most probably a misnomer. He had started, as had most modern fans of the 'Dirty Harry' series of films, with a .357 magnum but found it not only cumbersome but limited. Six rounds was not enough firepower even with speed loaders. A .44 magnum had far greater power but as a revolver it had the same drawback. Then came the release of the .44 magnum automatic and he took to it with the same degree of joy that a eunuch might display when given a fresh set of balls for Christmas. He had carried the gun for two years now, and invested substantial sums in improvements which, if patented and openly marketed, could have changed the face of street combat dramatically.

For starters Novaks had had the majority of the steel parts replaced with custom made titanium equivalents. That made it far lighter and considerably stronger. The hand grip was now fatter than ever to accommodate the enlarged magazines which gave him twelve shots each. The changes did not stop there though. The barrel had gas deflector slits at the muzzle to keep it down during firing and the ammunition was hand loaded. Within the magazine were four groups of three rounds each. The first, predictably was a very soft alloy hollow point for its stopping power. The second had a Teflon sabot case around a tungsten carbide core. With the powder load the cases carried it would reach a muzzle velocity of almost three thousand feet per second to give it phenomenal armor piercing qualities. Not even his own bullet proof vest would keep one of those mothers out. The final round had a frangible plastic body containing almost twenty metal flechettes that would disperse as soon as it left the barrel. At ten yards they would cover the width of an alley and inflict deep penetrating wounds. Combined with the laser sight built in under the barrel it was, all in all, a one man arsenal which gave him a glow of security whenever he felt he had cause to worry. And now he was worried, deeply worried.

Stein had told him to ensure that Eric was dead and he had rushed into the hospital to do just this. Waiting in the entrance was the disheveled figure of Wilson, the head surgeon, not at all pleased at being paged early in the morning and even less pleased at having to leave the warm tantalizing body of a student nurse that he had been trying to make time with for months. Still, at least she was happy about it. The damned emergency beeper had gone off just as he was getting himself ready to bring her to a second climax but before he had allowed himself to join her. It could have

been worse, but he was still not happy. That feeling intensified as he was propelled into one of the emergency cubicles and told to examine a body that looked as if it had been micro-waved to oblivion.

Wilson gave a cursory glance at the screen which displayed the readings from the sensors and pronounced his verdict. "He's dead, what more do you want?"

"I don't think you fully appreciate the gravity of this doctor," Novaks started seriously. "Director Stein wants to be absolutely sure that this man is dead. Not just that the readings say he is. He was unusual when he was alive, we don't know how unusual he might be in death. Now, do you want me to report that you stared at the dials for two seconds or do you want to do the job properly?"

Wilson quailed inwardly at Novaks invocation of Stein. He had no desire to get on the wrong side of someone as vindictive as the Director, nor with such a long memory. His position here was a good one. Good salary and benefits, light duties and a steady turnover among the new nurses. A tidy little package, and one that he wanted to continue.

"Okay, we take him down stairs for a full post mortem. I presume he has no relatives who might object?"

"No," replied Novaks. "So far as we know there are no living relatives to cause any fuss. In fact he worked for us so we have his pre-consent form all signed and ready, permission for organ donations, the lot."

Wilson grunted his acceptance of the situation and yelled for an orderly to wheel the gurney to the lift and then to the post mortem room. He and Novaks accompanied the body on its final journey in silence, neither had anything public to say to the other, and casual chit-chat did not suit either of them. They went in through the steel clad doors to the cold beyond. The room was long and brightly lit. Steel tables under low hooded lights ran down the center to give the place a look akin to a surreal billiard hall. None of the tables were currently occupied, it had been a slow week for suspicious deaths. Wilson was sure that the cool weather and the rain had been responsible. Trouble seemed to thrive on long, hot humid nights when there was no breeze to cool the fraying nerves and tempers of the people out on the streets.

Between them Novaks and the orderly heaved the body from the gurney to the nearest table. As they did so an arm, its surface criss-crossed with the thin welts of sub-surface burns, fell limply to one side, the hand giving a death cold glide across the front of Novaks pants. Neither Wilson nor the orderly saw Novaks rip the gun from its holster. One moment he was unarmed, the next the awesome weapon was up against the corpse's skull and ready to fire at the slightest additional movement.

"I think we can do without that," Wilson observed in a shaky voice. "The tenants here don't get up and walk away. In fact the last case of that happening was

almost two thousand years ago, and people still have their doubts about that."

Novaks, near hysterical, was in no mood for black humor as he slid the gun away. "Shut the fuck up and get on with it. Is he dead, and what killed him? That's all that has to concern you."

Wilson swallowed hard. All his management courses had told him that a little humor could make a tricky situation easier to bear. They obviously had not had to deal with an obnoxious prick like Novaks. He turned on the overhead light, activated the logging tape recorder, and began his examination of the body.

"The body is of a Caucasian male aged around thirty five, eyes are largely missing and the eyeballs are ruptured. Signs of burning across the entire surface of the skin radiating from two round areas having the same size and appearance as cardiac arrest paddles. The burns are linear and follow the approximate paths of the major nerves." He paused and looked at Novaks. "Do you want tissue samples taken?"

Novaks thought for a second or two then nodded. "Anything that will help."

Wilson continued his examination, scrupulously noting everything that he saw for the tape, then began to open up the skull. He first peeled back the scalp and face, then ran the buzzing blade of a bone saw around the exposed bone of the skull. The top of the cranium came away cleanly, like the top of an egg, and as it did so the room filled with the smell of roast meat faster than the extractor fans could clear it. The smell unsettled Novaks, not because it was unpleasant, but because it was not. It had been a long time since his last meal and he began to salivate automatically, a reaction so at odds with the sight of the exposed brain that he began to feel nauseated.

Wilson examined the brain with interest. It looked as though it had been flash cooked inside the skull, steam pressure rupturing the bone around the eyes and ears. Delicately he sliced away a section and took it to the work bench where he prepared and mounted the specimen for viewing under the scanning electron microscope. Bringing the picture up on the large computer screen beside him, he pointed out to Novaks what he had found.

"If you look here you'll see the damage to the nerve fibers. Total. Every one of them is a blackened line. Not one seems to be intact. If I had to offer an opinion I would say that the current from the cardiac paddles had run along his nervous system and reduced it all to ash. I expect we would find the same signs along the rest of his nerves as well. You can rest assured that he is dead. No nervous system, no life." He made as if to turn the microscope off but was halted by Novaks.

"Will that thing produce photos?" he asked, pointing to a camera arrangement on one side of the device. Wilson nodded and turned it on. "I can make slides of different sections for you." he panned across the specimen, section by section, to find

areas where the damage was most prominent and triggered the camera to take shots at different magnifications. When he finished he turned back to Novaks. "I don't suppose you intend to tell me how this man's nervous system ended up allowing such a massive burst of current along it? That is grossly abnormal you know." Novaks ignored him, deep in his own thoughts. With Eric dead there was little chance of continuing with his work. Unsmiling, he paced back and forth.

"I want the body shipped across to Cyberdyme's research lab as fast as you can lay on transport. Stein will want a full work up on it."

He walked out leaving Wilson alone with the body and whatever mysteries it held. When he reached his car he got himself patched through to Stein.

"I've had the body examined. The nervous system was burnt out when the paramedics tried to kick start his heart. No signs of life. A complete flat line on all the sensors. Wilson says there isn't a hope in hell of him coming back to bother us. I've arranged for the remains to go to our own labs." He waited for a response. Eventually Stein answered.

"Okay, now get your ass into gear and have his car retrieved along with whatever he had in it. I don't want any loose ends on this." He broke the connection leaving Novaks tired but relieved. Stein was almost back to normal. Briefly Novaks wondered what Eric could have been doing that the Director would see him as such a threat, then decided that if Stein had ordered the termination simply because Eric might have passed on information, then he wanted no part of it.

Getting the car proved no problem. The police had no interest in keeping it and it was a simple matter to have the crumpled vehicle loaded onto a flat bed trailer and taken to the nearest place where it could be examined at leisure, in this case an aircraft hangar which Cyberdyme kept ready at the local airport.

In the security of the hangar Novaks swallowed another tab of speed and set to work on the car. The front was massively crumpled and the passenger compartment reeked of scorched blood and burnt carpet. The glove box was empty except for some sweet wrappers, there was nothing on the floor and the trunk only held the spare wheel, jack and wrench. In the knowledge that he would be the only person working on it Novaks began to strip the body of every moveable part and then to take the body panels off. By morning the car lay in fragments on the stained concrete floor, looking like one of the exploded diagrams from a maintenance handbook but there was still nothing to be found.

Stein arrived in person just as the sun was beginning to warm the overnight dew from the huge steel structure. In a departure from his normal routine he came alone. Neither of the pair of hard faced young men accompanied him. Novaks feeling that something ominous was developing approached certainty. Stein walked around

the disassembled car in silence after hearing that nothing had been found. Eventually he spoke, almost to himself, and Novaks had to strain his wired nerves to hear the cryptic words.

"Nothing on the body, nothing in the car, but if he didn't have them then why did he run? He must have put it somewhere. A place that he could get to in a hurry when he needed to produce proof. But where? Can I be certain no one else is going to come across it?" He paced up and down, his built up heels tapping at the concrete. It was tricky. If he brought anyone else in he would have to explain what to look for, and he wanted to keep that to himself. Novaks would just have to do.

"Right. Novaks. The chap you were following. Eric. He may have accessed some files on the main computer. My files. If he did I want to be certain that any copies are retrieved and destroyed. You'll report direct to me until further notice. Do what you have to but find those files." He turned abruptly on one heel, his long trench coat swirling about him, and strode towards the door through which he had entered. As he was stepping through he half turned and called out "Erase the car" then left.

Speed and adrenalin surging in his veins Novaks began to plan out his options. Number one on his list was survival after this was over. Right now he felt as if he were staked out for the vultures with no protection what so ever. That would have to be remedied.

Lynker, by Roger J. Stoker is the first in the Stonehaven trilogy. It details how Eric, the Lynker of the title, uses his uncanny empathy with computers to survive death and fights back to protect the women he has come to love. An adult oriented, techno-mystery it blends erotic sexual action with conspiracy as Eric refuses to let his death stand in the way of duty and revenge.

Lynker, Stonehaven Book One

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