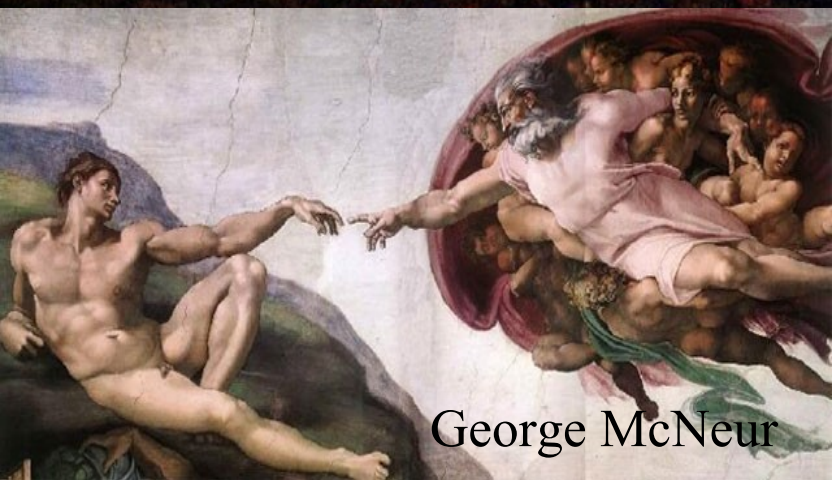


The Hand of God



George McNeur

The Hand of God

by
George McNeur

Dedicated to the real “Jane”, “Tim”, “Helen” and
“Anne”.

While those who know me might see many similarities in the following story, the characters and events in this story, are entirely fictitious.

Cover Art:
The Black Hole at the heart of the Circinus Galaxy
Sistine Chapel detail

Prelude

The empty void of space . . .

Majestic swirl of a spiral arm galaxy . . .

[Zoom in... and in ... and in ...]

Near the outer arm the object moves. It's rate seems languid against the backdrop of stellar vastness, but it's long, kazoo-like shape, gobbled up the parsecs at an astronomical rate.

[Zoom]

The object was clearly artificial, however its surface, which resembled liquid mercury, showed no external protrusions of any kind including engine exhausts, panels, fasteners or openings.

[Zoom]

Slowly, with the speed of molasses dripping off a spoon, a section of the wall dissolved into it's translucent state. She gazed out, seeing with her own eyes, that which her instruments

had already shown her.

Her ship had probed the spectrum, analysing the visual, phonics, sonic, sub-sonic, ELF, RF, SHF, and way past even the microwave range.

It had “sniffed” for gasses, charted, probed and measured each bit of matter encountered as it thundered silently through space, gobbling up the parsecs on it's tireless journey, and now, still far ahead, it showed with the laser highlighted symbology of the viewing port heads-up display (HUD) the spot of light that piqued it's artificial curiosity.

It had woken her towards the end of her normal sleep period with a report on an item that fitted the programmed parameters for special attention. Before it interrupted her peaceful slumber, the ship had run a battery of specific sensor sweeps and collected several Exabytes worth of data which it consolidated into the report. It was still just the beginning, but already the report exceeded several encyclopedia's worth of data covering geology, geography, biology, entmology, and sociology, on the target that had set off the alarm.

She had woken to the muted alarm and knew instantly that they had discovered that which they searched for.

With growing excitement therefore, she reached for the crystal-like object that materialised beside her sleep platform and thumbed the projection node. Instantly a holographic-like projection of a blue-white ball appeared above the crystal-like reader. As the sphere rotated, the data of the report began reciting directly into her brain.

Simultaneously, the white disappeared revealing the geography of the planet hiding beneath the clouds. The atmospheric and planetary makeup played through her mind as she saw the land masses with their plains, mountains, rivers and lakes exposed to her view. It was not unfamiliar to her as she had seen many worlds in her journey, but this one she knew already due to the alarm, was different, and now as the initial basic planetary brief wound up she was going to see what the alarm meant.

The briefing moved on from the planetary geology into the biological/entmological phase of the report and she leaned forward as if this would bring her closer to see all the better.

The planet teemed with life. Large, small, winged, bipedal, quadrapedal, finned, and tailed. On the land, in the air and in the

shallows and depths of the oceans, lifeforms of all stages of evolution crept, crawled and glided. And there, predominant over all, was the bidepal form of intelligent life that had set off the alarm and initiated the barrage of tests, for before the ship had even gotten close enough to see the tiny globe, it had felt it's far reaching presence.

RF communications to and from a small object listlissly tracing it's arcing path outwards on it's own voyage of discovery. The signals had triggered the ships automated sensors, setting in motion the pre-programmed sequence. It had triangulated the signal, identified the craft, swept it with an array of sensors and rapidly determined it's nature.

This discovery then triggered a second tier of tests – the ship computed the object's trajectory, and searched backwards along it's path to see what it could find. The unrelenting physics of the universe rapidly pinpointed the most likely stellar system and zoomed in to find the planetary origin. While still more than a full lightyear away, the ship identified the tiny jewel it sought. Changing course slightly, the ship had sped towards the star system while probing the depths ahead for every possible clue.

Thus, while she slept on, the ship closed inexorably on it's target while sifting the data to prepare the report for her. Recorders locked in on the plethora of faint RF spectrum signals emanating from the distant dot, while the computer dissected the signals for the intelligence that was obviously contained inside.

Measuring, interpreting, the ship was building up knowledge – painting a picture of the world ahead and the nature of the intelligence it was built to seek out.

As the ship had closed on the star system it's powerful sensors probed and prodded far, far ahead of it, sifting and weighing. While still well outside the orbit of the farthest object of the star's planetary system, it determined it had enough data for the preliminary report. It further decided she had slept a suitable period and set about lighting and warming the ship for her awakening and then sounded the gentle alarm to raise her from her slumbers and alert her to the find.

Now she gazed from the holo-globe spinning in front of her, out the viewport to the HUD-defined dot, noting the other HUD-annotated pinpoints of light which were this planet's sisters, and the rapidly largening yellow main

sequence star / sun which they all orbited.

Looking back to the report projector, she again flicked her long digit over the control node, triggering the report to move onto the data it had accumulated thus far on the intelligent life-form.

As the data played through her head she grew increasingly excited as the data showed the technological achievements the species had attained. Obviously they had space flight – the object initially discovered so far away from the planets origin was evidence of that, but the ships analysis of the communication signals intercepted showed much more than that. As the analysis played on her excitement, slowly gave way to alarm and worry . . .

* * *

Chapter 1

“Mok-saaaaannnnnnngggggggggggggggg . . . “

As the last notes of the call echoed around the rafters of the dojo, he breathed in – slowly, through his nose, pushing the air up to the top and back of his head, then smoothly exhaling out through his mouth as he pushed the air down his spine to his toes and then all the way back up to the top of his head as he inhaled again.

Jim had been training Kendo now for about 4 years, and he always looked forward to the circular breathing session at the close of training. After a fast and furious hour and a bit of smacking the living shit out of everyone else, that first deep breath in & out was kind of delicious!

He'd taken a wee while and a bit of research to cotton on to the idea of circular breathing – how could any sensible person think that you pushed air up into your skull etc?, but once he twigged, the practice really did become very peaceful & soothing, and he could see how with a bit more application, there was the possibility of achieving that “no-mind” state where the next level of learning might be

achieved.

“Good training” he said, bowing to the others in the dojo.

And then, he tapped one of the mid-level members on the shoulder and said

“I was watching your attacks tonight – I think you are holding back too much. You can do it, I know you can, I've seen you do it, - you just need to be confident in yourself and always attack, attack, attack.”

Jim always tried to offer constructive advice to the members that were obviously trying hard. As one of the club seniors it was expected of him, and he knew that not only did it help the learners, but it helped push him too, as he had to observe the others and analyse their strengths and weaknesses while working on his own weaknesses – and all in the heat of “battle”.

As he wiped and stowed his armour in his *bogu* bag, Jim's mind started returning to “the real world”. He checked his cellphone for any missed calls or messages and saw one text message had arrived - unheard during the confusion of loud *kiai's* and the stamps and thwacks of bamboo sword on battle armour.

It was from Tim. *“Mail frm Chris. U r on for jpn & me 2 mmbai. C u 2moro, fly on w/e.”*

“Great”, he half groaned to himself.

Approaching his teacher, Jim bowed and said “Sabumnim, I won't be at Kendo next week – I have to go to Japan.”

“No problem James, maybe you can train Kendo while you're there?” his teacher replied.

“Hmmm, I'm not sure, but I'll try!”

Only his Kendo teacher called him by his real name, everyone else called him “Jim”. At 44, Jim was starting to suffer the effects of age. He supposed he wasn't doing too badly compared to others his age, but part from the Kendo, the only other exercise he did was biking to and from work, and so the morning tea hot chocolates and other sweet things he craved from time to time were starting to be noticeable in the tummy area.

He had always been pretty active but recently the demands of his higher position at work meant there weren't enough hours left in the day for the long distance running he quite enjoyed. Well, that's what he always said – truth be known, it was much easier to give in

to the laziness! Of course he knew there was only one person he was fooling, but he figured he'd worked hard to get where he was and had earned a bit of laziness here and there.

Jim was Programme Manager for a family of airport flight information products. The 'boards' that show you if the flight is on time and what gate it's arriving at were just a small part of what they did. What was really needed was a complete integrated information system that connected the arrivals & departure times, passenger check-in details, baggage handling and full airport information.

The beauty of what they did was the integration of otherwise separate systems that gave the airport management much more control and analysis and increased efficiency and therefore profits. Tim was Product & Marketing Manager for their suite of systems. Together they decided and delivered the company's product line and roadmap. Tim steered the direction and Jim made sure it happened.

They had been working together in the role for the last 2 years and they were a good combination.

They were both “can do” kind of people, and

when the other managers and senior engineers told them they were dreaming, they just knuckled in, solved the problem, and did it.

Of course, it wasn't the easy way, but Jim in particular had built up a good team around them. They had spent a lot of effort engendering a team spirit that fostered individual empowerment and a real sense of family. They were proud that after inheriting the team with the lowest morale in the company, they had rapidly turned it around to become the “star” division that everyone wanted to be a part of. But more importantly, they were proud that not only was it a team in good spirits, it was a team at peak performance, and they knew that they could face the customers and make promises that would be delivered on where others couldn't.

It was a good feeling!
But it took effort.

Most managers couldn't be bothered, but to Jim it was worth it. He hardly did anything except talk to customers, suppliers and to his team.

Actually, it was his best place to be – he had no real talent for the engineering or product strategy, but he knew how to get the best of

the people who did. “Wind them up and set them loose” was one of his mantra's.

Right at the moment they were working on the next new development. The world wanted smaller, faster, cheaper, more powerful & more integrated.

Always.

The pace of development never slowed, and Jim's team was pounding the R&D treadmill driven by smaller, faster, more capable micro-processors and other associated integrated circuits or “chips” as they called them. Tim's message confirmed to Jim that they had received approval from their boss to take their next proposed product off the drawing board and into the real world. An important new customer in India had a need for a unique version of their regular product line that combined some features not normally mixed together in the same system.

Normally they knew it would not be economically viable to develop such a product for one market specifically, but Tim figured that this one was what they called a “trend breaker”, and once the rest of the market cottoned on to the idea, that it would sell like hot cakes. Plus, India was a big enough market

on it's own that they would get the return on investment from this one project – just.

They had planned for Tim to visit the customer to make sure they understood exactly all their application issues and requirements, while Jim would “sell” the idea to their counterparts in the Japan head office. While Tim had already discussed the concepts with his Tokyo based Product Manager counterparts, they had learned that in order to make sure the product was correctly delivered into the lucrative and techno-hungry Japanese market in parallel with the new market in India, it required a physical visit to talk through all the co-ordination issues, plan the work schedule and market release.

Through lots of hard work, Jim & Tim had built up the relationships and reputation of success in Japan that meant they could now rely on parallel introduction of prototypes to their colleagues in Japan and their early adopter partners in the market. If the product survived the quality focussed testing that they insisted on, they knew it would be a success everywhere. Without the parallel support, the new product would take longer to test on their own and the decreased market base meant the product would probably not be viable.

Therefore as good an idea as it was, it would

languish on the drawing board.

No pressure, Jim thought! But it was what they did every day – the kind of challenge that got them out of bed in the mornings.

“Good news hon,” Jim said as he stowed his bogu bag in the cupboard when he got home, “you get the bed to yourself next week! Tim just told me we've got the go ahead for the new product so he's off to Mumbai and me to Japan. We'll finalise the details tomorrow but probably be just the week for me.”

Jim's wife Jane, had gotten used to the short notice calls away. Luckily she was practical about such departures and, favouring the bright side, looked forward to having the bed to stretch out in all by herself.

* * *

Chapter 2

Throwing his towel over his shoulder, Jim picked up his bag and exited the shower. It was good they had the shower at work – it made biking in not so much of an issue, as he just had his morning shower after he arrived.

Walking through his teams area to his desk in the corner, Jim chatted to the few people who were either already there or just arriving. Since he always liked to lead by example he was usually one of the first there. Today there was only Luke there checking the report generated from the overnight test suite that was running on one of their current prototypes. Luke was one of Jim's "lieutenants", a young and up-coming Software Engineer until Jim had recognised some organisational qualities in him and promoted him into a Team Leader role.

"Morning tosser! How's it going this morning? Is that overflow bug fixed now?"

"Seems to be, boss. No sign of that particular error code this morning, and what's more I think I've got an angle on that intermittent glitch we've been having. It looks like the watchdog goes off only sometimes, but only

ever when one of the power feeds is switched on or off. Look at the timing here.”

Jim looked at the report on the test computer screen where Luke was pointing interpreting the time stamp and status messages.

“Yeah, looks like it – well spotted chief! Now we just need to figure out why. I bet, since it's only sometimes, and only from PSU on or off, that maybe it's a ground or power rail bounce at the processor, or watchdog chip. Maybe the chip is more susceptible than it's supposed to be, or maybe the hardware boys haven't decoupled it enough, but either way I suggest you show Howard and see if he can pick up anything with the 'scope, or come up with a better theory.”

He looked again at the readout. “Actually mate, look here – it's only ever when the alternate PSU is switched. See here, here & here, PSU1 is switching and it's fine, and here and here PSU2 is switched and you've got the fault. I wonder if it's not the chips susceptibility, but the circuit board power planes from PSU2 – maybe they're too skinny for the length of track – high resistance, causing a voltage glitch. Anyway, whatever it is, Howard will find it with that clue. That's a good find – knowing where to start looking is

most of the battle.”

Jim knew just enough about the various aspects of product engineering, manufacturing processes, and the typical supplier and logistic issues to be able to ask the questions that got the specialists to think along the lines that solved the problems. He didn't consider himself smart at all, but through his guidance, his teams solved the problems that others struggled with, and Luke was starting to learn the same skills. Jim was doing his thinking out loud as a training exercise for Luke.

“Sure will boss, and I'll make sure to compliment Jamal on sussing the overflow bug.”

Luke always referred to Jim as “boss” and Jim called him “chief”. It was their private joke. If they ever referred to the other by their real name it usually meant something serious was coming! The exception was the occasions when Luke and the others called him “Jim-san”. This was their sign of respect name for him as a result of the improved relationship with their Japanese colleagues. It was one of their many “in” jokes – they had a lot of them – Jim had fostered the team spirit specifically along a fun path.

“Oh, by the way, Tim & I are on the move this weekend. Valkyrie has the nod to proceed. I'll have Joan sort the flights today. You can hold the fort while I'm away.”

They had recently started using mythological beings for their project codes. The team had chosen Valkyrie for the India product – probably because the Tom Cruise movie of the same name had recently been released.

“Sure thing boss, no worries, but I don't envy Tim India. At least you'll be more comfortable in Japan.”

“Actually,” Jim replied, “I was thinking on the bike on the way in that I should probably tag along to India as well. We'll have a problem with the dual power supply and I'm thinking that it would be more efficient, cheaper and faster time to market for the customer if we use a local India-based PSU manufacturer and have them integrate the system from the factory with the PSU's. I've got a couple of possible suppliers lined up and want to scope them out & talk it over with them before deciding on that. Plus you know Tim's gonna need me along to keep him out of trouble!”

“Delhi-belly in Mumbai eh?” laughed Luke.
“Don't you want it to be like Taiwan all over

again?”

“I don't want him promising your first born to the customer – you know what he's like!” Jim replied heading to his desk.

Dumping his bike clothes and gear on the hanger by his desk, Jim poked his laptop into life, letting it boot up while he tidied away the clothes, his papers he'd taken home and his lunch.

He logged in and checked the intranet “In/Out page” to see if Tim was in yet. He needed to plan their trip and see if he agreed with both of them going to India together before they took it to Chris to OK. No sign of Tim yet, so he checked the overnight emails. Within ¼ hour he had scanned them all, forwarded the ones he could delegate and flagged the ones he had to deal with personally. They could wait 'til later, if he was going to be on a plane in the weekend, that one took priority!

He was just about to check the In/Out page again when he noticed the unmistakable shape of Tim heading his way.

“Tim-san!” he hailed.

“How's my favourite Programme Director

today Jim-san?" Tim responded.

"Looking forward to a new experience – I haven't been to India yet."

"What, you think you need to hold my hand to keep me out of trouble?"

"Kind-of." replied Jim, "but if the truth were known, it's really so you don't make any rash promises to the customer."

"You are wise and knowledgeable Jim-san and you know me too well!"

"Actually," Jim explained, "I really think the timeline is going to be a problem for them and if I'm there we can work the development and prototype schedule around their needs. Plus, the PSU is going to be a problem. I was thinking we can use one of the local Indian PSU manufacturers and speed up the process and reduce the costs if they don't have to ship the PSU's to China only to be shipped back again. I reckon we can have one of the factory guys set up a test process for the PSU manufacturer and then box them in our packaging just as they'd be from our factory. India quality for India customers. All the rest of the world (ROW) unit PSU's can ship to the factory and be tested there so we can ensure

Japanese quality for the ROW product. It wouldn't work if the PSU was going to be fixed internally, but this one has both units as hot-swap modules so they'll be packaged, shipped & sold separately so it will be fairly easy to co-ordinate logistically.”

“and as for my trip to Japan,” Jim continued, “I think it's better if you're there for that too as you can sell the application much better than I can. I'll do the project schedule and engineering stuff while you talk to the marketing stuff. If we do it on the way back from India, we have all the latest details from the customer, PSU vendor and our planning on the plane. From India to Japan is a relatively low extra cost and you know we always want as much time as we can get in the Tokyo office.”

“You make a strong case Jim-san.” Tim agreed.

“And that's without the whole taking-care-of-Tim-san after local Indian food and a night out with the customer act that you just know is gonna be needed!” retorted Jim.

“Yessss!!” exclaimed Tim gleefully, “the Tim-&Jim travelling circus is on the road again! It's been far too long!”

“Yes Tim-san – as long as Chris agrees. Let's hit him up for it now so Joan has time to get the bookings in place.”

“You know he's just going to rubber stamp it – as long as we both agree it's necessary he's gonna back us all the way.”

“Well, maybe, but let's get that little formality out of the way so I can rearrange my life once again for you.”

* * *

Chapter 3

“Yo, big fella!” Jim waved to Tim from his place in the queue at check-in. For a change, Tim was pretty much on time, and strolled over to join Jim just as the Business Class check-in attendant motioned him forward.

When you live such a long way from the rest of the world, any trip is going to be a long one necessitating the extra cost of Business Class to take advantage of the lie-flat beds and the shower in the airport lounges, to allow them to hit the ground running reasonably fresh.

“Good morning gentlemen.” she smiled a greeting “Where to today?”

“Mumbai” replied Jim handing over his e-ticket and passport. “Come on Tim-san, sort your mud out, the lady's waiting for you.”

“Yeah, yeah” Tim exclaimed “I'm coming, I'm coming.”

“So's christmas.” retorted Jim.

“Hi Jim, look after my husband for me won't you?” said a voice from behind him.

“Helen!” exclaimed Jim giving her a hug
“Of course I will – you know that's my primary mission in life. Plenty of others have given up on that job, but you know I'm a sucker for those lost-cause charity cases!”

The check-in attendant watched the back and forth banter with amusement. It was obvious the trio were good friends who had a healthy respect for each other. She marked their boarding passes for “good guy” attention.

“Here you are gents, I've got you in the center row right in front of the galley, with a spare seat between you. The plane's lightly booked, so that seat won't be filled. You can use it to spread out & leave your in-flight gear on it after take off. Your bags are checked right through to Mumbai.”

“Thank you very much” Jim replied “We appreciate it – I don't want to be too close to him – he smells & he snores!”

She laughed as they took their boarding passes and passports. “Have a good trip.” she added as they headed off towards immigration.

As they walked, Jim dug into his carry-on bag and pulled out a package. “Here you go Tim-san. Can't break the tradition now.”

Helen intercepted it and checked inside the bag. It was the latest Dan Brown book “The Lost Symbol”.

When Tim climbed on a plane he liked to read. Clive Cussler was usually his author of choice but this time around Jim hadn't been able to find a new one that Tim hadn't already read.

When they'd started travelling together, Jim had quickly noticed Tim's ritual and had started the tradition of buying the latest book for him. With the long flight times, Tim would usually finish the book by the time they reached their destination and would need to buy another for the return leg, and if for some reason he couldn't get anything suitable, he'd often be grumpy all the rest of the trip, so Jim figured it was an investment in his own sanity to make sure he always had some reading material.

“Sorry it's different this time Tim, but even with others helping, the guy just can't write them as fast as you read them.” teased Jim, “I thought you might like this one instead – I already read it!”

“Wouldn't want you breaking the budget Jim” replied Helen. “At least this one doesn't appear

to be about ships!”

“No ships in this one Helen – this is a 'real' author, so he'll just have to make do this time!” quipped Jim.

“Just because you guys don't appreciate fine literature, doesn't mean you have to drag down the master” retorted Tim.

Jim chuckled. “Master of regurgitated sea shanties – there's no skill in that Tim-san! Right-o, end of the line Helen. Say good-bye to my man, and no excessive PDA – there's kids around.”

Helen poked her tongue out at Jim and snuggled in to Tim “I'll Publicly Display my Affection any time I like thank you very much Mr McCully, and if you're not careful I'll go all PDA on you too!”

Jim laughed giving her a very brief one-armed hug and waved over his shoulder as he stepped towards the immigration booth at the departure gate. “Don't worry Helen, I'll take good care of him – just like always. Be good 'til we're back.”

Tim wrapped his wife in a real hug and gave her a quick kiss. “See you later sweets. I'll call

when we get there.”

She watched them both go through the gate and onto the escalator to go up to the Business Class lounge, the same as she'd done numerous times before. They all waved to each other – no big deal. These days getting into a large metal tube and thundering into the sky along with a few hundred other people travelling thousands of miles to another country, another civilisation, was no big deal. Every single day, all around the world, millions of people were doing it. And considering how unnatural it all was, it was statistically a lot safer than hopping into a car. But still, no big deal notwithstanding, she always had a small worry nagging away at the back of her head at this point, waving goodbye.

* * *

Chapter 4

As he always did while running, Jim replayed the high points from the latest problem or the previous day through his mind, analysing, problem solving and prioritising. He always thought he did some of his best thinking while running – there was plenty of time to run the various “what-if” scenarios through his mind so that by the time he finished, he usually had a pretty well thought out solution or line of attack to follow.

He was 20 minutes into his pre-breakfast run and decided it was time to turn around and head back. He wanted to leave a safety margin for the unfamiliar locale. It was his first run in India. Part of his ritual – eat too much in Business Class and the airport lounge, so go for a run before the day's business started. It wasn't just for the exercise, it would also allow him to experience a little more of the local sights, sounds and smells than he'd otherwise be exposed to as well as trying to beat off the effect of the excess food & drink.

In a new place, depending on the street density and lay of the land, he usually either went “out and back” which was a compromise between playing it safe on the 'getting-lost-in-strange-

country' front, but not so great on the 'maximising-new-scenery' front since the "back" view was the same as the "out" view, but it was safer than the alternative "round-about" method where he tried to run a circuit with the hotel at the centre. Unless there was a good set of landmarks in relation to the hotel, the "out and back" method usually won out, although one time in Tokyo, he'd gone on a nominally "out and back" run from the hotel in Shinagawa towards the Tokyo Tower and then coming back via different streets. He almost came unstuck but the Japanese are a very helpful race and he only had to ask one person for directions before he was back on track. Since that run however, he now took with him a small "bum-bag" with his cellphone, some cash and a map if possible or at least directions for a taxi driver to get him back to the hotel.

Today he was going slower than usual. India was just packed full of people! So concentrating hard, he turned around and headed back exactly the same way he'd come.

He was thinking about yesterday's meeting – the first one with the customer. Tim had picked up a few more salient details about the configuration they were going to be using it in and the end job it was going to do and was changing the list of features as a result. They

confirmed they had desperate need and Jim was now figuring out how they could fit the prototype schedule around their needs. There was some tie in with the PSU in this regard so today he was going to see his two most promising suppliers.

A couple of blocks away from the hotel he came to a stop. The way ahead was blocked by a seeming riot of people. There was a blockage in the road – it looked like there had been an accident but who knew for sure – it could have been the normal street bustle for all he knew.

The guy with the donkey cart seemed to be the guilty party, pushing and pulling at the poor beast's lead rope to get the cart moving again, but it seemed to Jim that the wheel on the cart had seized hence why the donkey was having a problem getting the cart moving again. Jim wondered whether he should divert off his safe path around the obstruction, or wait for it to clear. Being the calculated risk taker, and hater of inaction that he was, he decided to take a detour – new sights after all.

Half an hour and a few more detours than he had expected later, he was finally back on track and one block away from the hotel – well and truly later than he'd planned.

In his bum bag, he heard and felt his cellphone ring. He unzipped the bag and flipped the phone open. It was Tim.

“Hey sleeping beauty” Jim answered “I’m about half a block away – damn Indian traffic and confusing civic architecture is slowing me down.”

“Still far too keen for my liking Jim-san” replied Tim “I’ve just about finished breakfast and was missing my travel buddy.”

“Yeah right!” retorted Jim “How’s life back home? What is it – jut after lunch there?”

“Yeah, about 2pm. Helen said cooler than here – surprise, surprise! She said...”

there was a pause

“hang on, . . . oh shit! . . .”

Tim’s voice broke off in a howl of static. At the same time Jim was knocked off his feet by a ferocious blast of light and sound as a column of dust and debris rocketed out from the direction of the hotel.

Picking himself up, Jim pocketed the cellphone and started running faster and faster

towards the hotel, dreading, but knowing deep down with a sinking certainty what he was going to find.

Sure enough, as he rounded the corner of the block he saw the hotel – the reception and restaurant area was no longer walled – it was broken and buckled and spread all over the place. And dotted all around were the crumpled shapes of people. Some of them moving, others ominously still.

Shit! Shit! Shit! Where was Tim?

Jim dashed towards the remains of the restaurant scanning the area for Tim.

Others were moving in to the area as well now. Hotel staff and police from off the street. Jim's ears had been ringing from the blast, but now he started to hear the moans of the injured and the whistles and shouts of the people coming in to help.

He heard a strange voice calling out for Tim, and realised that it was his voice. It sounded panicked – and he'd never been panicked before. But then again he'd never been this close to an explosion before either.

Suddenly he saw him.

Half buried under a table and some stones from the wall, was the head and shoulders he thought he knew. Racing over he jerked the rubble off the prone form and turned him over.

It was Tim alright, and it was equally obvious that he was gone. With his forehead smashed in from one of the rocks Tim was not going to be getting out of this one with him.

Jim's legs seemed to collapse and he thunked down to sit beside the crumpled body of his mate. Right now he wasn't thinking or problem solving. Right now he was just pure emotional reaction.

Tears streaming down his face he arched his head back and screamed straight up at the sky a long guttural moan that wrenched itself out from the depths of his guts.

Then slowly he forced control back into his body. Nothing was going to help Tim now. Now all he could do was live, and start doing the things that must be done. He was a problem solver. He was a do-er. He flipped open his phone and started doing.

“Hi hon, how's India today?” Jane answered after a couple of rings.

After a long pause Jim responded with deep feeling and a shaky voice “It's shit. God I love you.”

Jane instantly knew something very very bad had happened. “What's wrong hon?”

After a long pause he answered. “There's been an explosion. Tim's dead.” his voice caught and he couldn't help sobbing a bit, but he fought back the control.

“I'm ok, but it's a mess here. Can you go around to Helen's place and call me when you get there. I need to tell her but I'd really like you to be there to give her some support. It's gonna be a real piece of shit for her.”

Jane's mind was racing with a hundred questions churning around in her head, but she was a very practical woman. She knew that Jim must be physically ok so the details could wait. She knew Helen had to be told and Jim would want to be the one to do it. He would feel responsible.

“Oh my god” she said. “You're sure?”

“I'm sitting here in the wreckage of the hotel beside his dead body.” Jim said “I'm sure.”

Then he added “Jesus hon, I was only 2 minutes away . . .”

A stab of icy shock streaked up her spine and Jane's mind almost went numb with the shock of it. Bloody hell – she'd almost lost her husband. And then she realised that Helen had. And she knew she had to go.

“Ok then. I'm leaving now to go to Helen's. I'll call you on the doorstep – about 15 mins time OK? I love you – BE SAFE. OK??”

“Ok” was all he could muster. “thanks hon.” and he flipped the phone shut.

After a few more minutes sitting there, he sighed and flipped the phone open again and started the first of the many calls he would make that day. There were practical things to do – meetings and flights to reschedule, a body to move back home, a funeral to arrange, and Valkyrie and the other projects still had to be completed.

Life goes on.

“Hello Ann speaking.”

Ann was the HR Director and a good friend of

Jim & Tim. While Jim had seen many in the HR profession acting in unhelpful ways, Ann was the embodiment of what the role can do for an organisation. She had made some dramatic changes for the good and in the process had gained their trust and friendship.

“Hi Ann, it's Jim. I really need your help. It's as bad as it can be – Tim's just been killed. A terrorist bomb most likely. I was 2 minutes away from being in it myself.”

There was a stunned silence from Ann for a bit and then she responded. “Oh my god Jim, I'm so so sorry. Are you sure about Tim? Are you sure you're alright? When did it happen?”

“About 10 minutes ago. I'm sitting beside his body in the wreckage of the hotel – I'm sure. I need you to co-ordinate for me. Get Luke to help. We need to get the word out to the team, we'll need to change our flight schedule, I'll need a new hotel I guess – I'm going to stay here until I can bring his body back.”

Ann heard the deep wrenching sorrow in his voice and knew how hard it must be for him to hold it together while doing what needed to be done. She pictured him sitting there in the wreckage of a terrorist bombing. As much as she liked Tim and wanted to give in to the

shock and sorrow herself, she was also a strong and practical woman and her mind was on the living.

“Be careful Jim – is the area safe? There may be a follow-up attack. You should get out of there – go to the NZ Embassy – you'll need their help bringing Tim home anyway.”

“I'm not leaving him. I promised Helen I'd look after him – I'm responsible.”

“Jim,” she said gently “he's gone, and it's not your fault. You have to look after yourself now. You're no good to Helen or any of us if anything happens to you now.”

Then she added into the silence “Does Helen know?”

“I've got Jane on her way around there now, as soon as she gets there she'll ring me and I'll tell her – I owe it to her.” Jim replied.

“Jim, remember - it's not your fault, but later on she'll appreciate you doing that. I'll set everything in motion here and then go around to Helen's as well – I think Jane will need the support too – how do think she's feeling having almost lost her husband too and then feeling guilty that she didn't while Helen did?”

“Why us Ann? Why here, why now?” Jim asked the unanswerable with a deep deep sigh and his voice breaking in a sob. “Look thanks for taking care of it. I'd better go – Jane might be at Helen's and trying to call. I'll talk to you later.”

“Take good care Jim” was all she could think of to say.

Jim clicked the call off.

After just sitting head bowed for a few minutes Ann's words about follow-up attacks registered. He looked carefully around at the destruction and the people moving around in it. In the news reports and movies about terrorist attacks, there often were follow-up attacks – sometimes the attackers disguised as rescuers for maximum effect. He didn't know how to deal with that just yet other than taking care of things himself.

A policeman made his way over towards him. “Are you all right? How about your friend?” he asked concern, shock, and blood on his face.

“I'm ok and my friends beyond help. Go help someone else.” Jim snapped at him.

As the policeman moved on through the rubble, Jim's phone vibrated in his hand and started to ring.

Glancing at the screen he saw it was Jane and he took a deep breath. This was going to be one of the hardest calls of his life and he still didn't know what he should say to Helen.

"I'm here Jim" said Jane "God, are you sure you're ok? All sorts of things have been going through my mind on the way over."

Jim could hear a note of panic in her voice. "I'm fine, honestly. Some cuts and bruises is all. Now, can you go inside and hand me over to Helen?" he said gently.

He could hear her crunch her way up the gravel path, knock and open the door. "Helen" she called out as she went in. He heard Helen "Hi Jane, what a surprise" and then she must have sensed something was wrong and Jim heard her say "what's wrong?".

Jim imagined Jane handing her the phone.

"Helen? Hi Helen" he said

"What's up Jim?" a note of caution registered

in her voice.

Jim got straight to the point figuring that she was starting to figure out something was dreadfully wrong “It's Tim. I failed you Helen – he's gone. There was an explosion at the hotel while I was out running. Tim must have been right in the middle of it. I'm right beside him now. I'm really really sorry – we've lost him.” He couldn't help it – telling Helen was too hard, it all came out and he started to cry.

Helen didn't answer. The phone had slipped out of her hand and she dropped to the floor.

Jane crouched down beside her and wrapped her arms around her as she started to scream and cry.

“Noooooooo! No, no, no!!!” she wailed.

Half a world away, Jim was feeling much the same way. Helen's grief triggered his own and he let it come, great heaving sobs wracking his body as he crouched beside the lifeless body of his friend. Subconsciously he flipped the phone shut – there was nothing more to say – even if anyone was listening.

* * *

Chapter 5

Jim stared out across the shimmering tarmac. Colourful airplanes moved busily around, landing, taxiing, taking off. The iconic control tower of Singapore's Changi airport loomed behind the terminal buildings in the distance and the heat pressed in on him from the leaden sky of another pending monsoon shower.

He was airside, over by one of the freight hangars, sitting beside the transport coffin of his friend waiting for their connecting flight to be readied for the last leg home. He'd been through Changi often, and he'd even been airside with their work projects, but he'd never seen it from this perspective. The mechanisms of one of the worlds busiest airports was fascinating and normally would have captured his full attention, but Jim saw none of it except as peripheral activity, almost disconnected events.

He was still operating like a robot – acting as required but largely numb.

He felt unnatural, strange - like half of him was missing.

But he couldn't completely break their

traditions – he pulled out of his bag the battered Clive Cussler book, opened it and started reading the story out loud – to Tim.

However, he found his reading patchy. He couldn't concentrate on the words. Too many random thoughts were racing through his mind – fragments of memories from previous trips with Tim, snatches of the practical world that he still had to deal with as life went on all around him, the next steps in the logistics of bringing Tim home and the funeral arrangements . . . There was too much to think of and he was still too weary and uncaring to focus.

Putting the book down, he picked up his phone.

“Hi Hon, just checking in. We're at Singapore. Just waiting for the connecting plane.”

“How is everything?” Jane asked. She heard the flatness in his voice and was worried. Jim was not one to show a lot of emotion. The mere fact that in the last few days he had called her several times a day and not said much of any consequence meant that he was taking Tim's death hard. Usually when he was on a trip, he hardly ever called – a couple of times during the whole trip – certainly not a

couple times a day. Not that she minded this time – until he got back she was going to be worried all the time – a close brush with death will do that for you she guessed.

“Had some red tape problems but the Embassy guys took care of it. How's Helen?”

“Not too good” Jane told him. “The doctor's got her on a sedative at night so she gets some sleep, but during the day she's like a zombie.”

“Are you still camping out there?”

“Yes, and Ann has been by every day as well. She's brought a grief counsellor along too, but I'm not sure if she's doing any good or not.”

“How are the boys?”

“They're fine. Big teenage boys – no problem. It's not like they really knew Tim.”

Jim sighed. He was doing a lot of sighing these days – circular breathing – clear the mind. It wasn't working too well though – his mind was a whirling chaos of unhelpful questions.

“Ok, well I'll be home soon. It's SQ297 by the way - see you tomorrow around 10:30. Love you.”

She could tell he meant it more than usual
“Love you too. Keep safe.”

He flipped the phone shut.

After a couple of minutes gazing into the leaden sky, Jim sighed again and flipped open the phone again.

“Hi Ann”

“Hi Jim, how are you?” Ann answered softly.

“How do you think?” he answered flatly.

“How's everything going back there? Has Luke got everything under control?”

“Everything's fine Jim, stop worrying about us and worry about you. You sound like shit.”

Jim gave a harsh laugh “You always know how to compliment a guy don't you?! But I guess you're right – I've got a lot of no good thoughts on my mind recently.”

“Well lose them. Stop kicking yourself - it wasn't your fault.”

“I know that, but it doesn't put life back in Tim's body. I can't stop the 'what-if's' and

'why's' – why him, why not me, why blow up anyone . . . why? why why why?"

Ann replied gently "You know there's no answer for that Jim. Shit happened and we just have to go on around it. Look, when you get back I've got some red wine here with our name on it. You need to take some time out."

"Still trying to get me to burn my Leave total eh Ann?" Jim replied with a wry laugh, "We'll see. There's a lot more for me to do now with Tim gone."

"And there's plenty of other people in the team who can do it. That's what you & Tim built – now you can sit back and watch it work while you get yourself sorted out." retorted Ann.

She knew Jim exceedingly well and had discussed how to help him with the grief counsellor. She was going to have to play good cop/bad cop all by herself being gentle one minute and firm the next.

"Jim, trust me – everything here is fine and under control. Half of the Japanese office will be here later tonight, Nick's already arrived from Australia, and Toyotami-san is en-route from Milan. We'll see you on the tarmac when the plane lands. The captain will bring you

down the crew ladder from the air bridge and we'll be there waiting.”

Jim paused and sighed again “Ok. Thanks Ann, I really appreciate this.”

“No problem – you're not the only person who can organise stuff you know!” Ann replied softly again. “Take care of yourself and get some sleep on the plane. We'll see you soon.”

The line clicked off and Jim hung up and flipped his phone shut. She really was the best he reminded himself again.

He thought about ringing Helen, but instantly dismissed the thought. He still didn't know what to say to her. He'd see her tomorrow, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

* * *

Chapter 6

As the 747 nudged to a stop and its engines wound down, Jim unsnapped his seat belt and stood up. He got his carry on bag out of the overhead locker and then sat back down again to wait. Almost immediately the Chief Purser arrived at his seat and asked him to come forward.

When he arrived at the front door, the captain was waiting for him and straight away led him out the aircraft door into the air bridge, but instead of going along the “tube”, he handed Jim a yellow high-vis vest and a pair of air defenders, then opened the crew door in the side by the controls and led the way down the steps to the tarmac below.

Off to the side of the gaggle of ground-crew, baggage trolleys and the aircraft tug, Jim could see the reception party – Jane, Helen, Ann, Luke, Nick, Toyotami-san and 2 strangers in black suits standing beside a hearse. As the captain led Jim towards the aft cargo hold, one of the groundcrew drove a mobile platform forward to meet them. The tarmac supervisor motioned to the reception party and they came out on the tarmac towards Jim. He went forward to meet them and enveloped Jane and

Helen in a wordless threeway hug. They all lost their composure, weeping together. After a couple of minutes Jim could feel the hands of the others on their shoulders, patting, pressing – offering silent support. No-one said anything. There was no need. They all knew what they meant.

After a while, as they watched the crew manoeuvring Tim's coffin onto the mobile platform, Toyotomi-san broke the silence.

“You brought him home Jim-san – that's all anyone could expect.”

* * *

Chapter 7

As the last notes of the song died out, Jim reached the pulpit at the front of the funeral chapel. He looked out at the sea of faces in front of him, then glanced over to the coffin containing his friend.

“That song “Daniel” wasn't really one of Tim's favourite songs. He was more into the metal we heard from Axel Rose before. In fact I think he thought Elton John was a bit of a wimp, but that one is a song that the 'Tim & Jim travelling circus', as he called us, used to perform as a karaoke duet on our global travels together. Some of you here today from Japan and Taiwan will have had the dubious pleasure of hearing it performed in the small hours of an evening when the shochu was flowing free.”

Jim glanced over at the small crowd of their work colleagues who had made the trip from Japan and Taiwan to pay their respects. Toyotomi-san, Junichiro-san, and Toko-san smiled knowingly and nodded as their minds rolled back to some of the after-work gatherings they had had. Work hard, play hard, was one of the mantra's Toyotomi-san had instilled in all his senior team members.

“Thank-you - 'Arigatou'. For coming all this way to say good-b...” his voice tailed off and broke. He couldn't yet bring himself to say the word.

He gripped the edges of the pulpit and strangely enough the solidness of the smooth wood biting into his palms did help calm and ground him.

Drawing a deep breath, Jim continued.

“Tim was my friend. He had a lot of friends, as you can tell from the numbers here today, but somehow, he made me feel I was more of a friend than everyone else. I think he did that with everyone mind you, so why am I the one up here? I guess because I'm the last friend that Tim had when he was taken from us – I was talking to him when it happened, and if it wasn't for a silly indian and his broken-down donkey-cart, I might well have been lying there beside him.”

Jim paused and looked around the room but now the crowd of people was a blur and the only face he could make out was Helen. He knew that she was flanked by Ann on one side and Jane on the other but he couldn't see their faces. Or perhaps, more accurately, he

wouldn't let himself make out their faces.

“Life is a mystery.” Jim went on “No-one knows why, or how long we will live for. Sometimes there doesn't seem to be a purpose, and sometimes there does. Tim seemed to have a purpose though. He enjoyed what he did, and he enjoyed at the end of it, going back to Helen. I used to give him grief about it, but Tim loved her more than anything else, and now, all I can think about is that she will be so alone, and I can't help feeling responsible. I'm so sorry Helen that I couldn't take care of him this time.”

Jim stopped with a tear in his voice and in his eyes. Then with an angry swipe at his face, he continued.

“Hate.” . . . deep breath, . . .

“Hatred is a powerful force that can unite a multitude. You see, we are all united by hatred here today. Hatred caused someone to strap a bomb on to their body and go out to kill a bunch of strangers. And today, I bet, each and every one of us feels an element of hatred for the people who made this happen and snatched Tim away from us just as he was really getting into his stride and enjoying life.”

“But, we cannot live properly if we let this hate take us. We do not honour Tim's life if we give in to the hate. Tim loved life and he would not want us to squander the rest of our days in fear and hatred. So, while it might be hard, for Tim's sake, we need to push the hate down. Down, into a little ball way down there, take a deep breath, and smile, and remember the good times, and the good things. And live each day as if it were our last – in happiness, and remembering the good times.”

“I am sure I will need to be reminded of this myself, because already I miss him, and feel sad that he's not here to enjoy this lovely day and this gathering of all the people he loved, but we have to, or else he gave us nothing, and I know my friend gave me something.”

“At work, he gave me the freedom to operate – I trusted him to steer the product direction and he trusted me to deliver it. He made truly wild promises to the customers – he did, didn't he? But he did because he felt he could rely on the rest of us to do the impossible – and each time we did! But it wasn't an unhappy grind because in the process, he gave me and the team a whole lot of fun. He challenged us to meet the bar he set for us and he helped make sure we could meet the challenge. I have never worked with another person who operated this

way and I doubt I ever will again.”

“But I’m going to miss the most his greeting. He had the knack to say your name as a greeting, and make it sound like he hadn’t seen you in a million years and now that you were with him it was the best thing that had happened. You couldn’t help but feel your spirits lift when he said it, and it set the tone for the rest of the conversation. It didn’t matter how deep the shit, Tim was always cheerful and confident we could shovel our way out of it. I really only saw him down less than a handful of times – and the shit was indeed VERY deep then! But I am really, REALLY, going to miss that “Jim-san!”. I think we all will.”

He paused again and suddenly he felt very drained. He’d planned a lot more to say – all the funny stories of Tim’s antics around the world and back home, but his mind was now blank. He breathed deep and gripped the dias again and regained some energy.

He walked over to where his friend was resting and ran his hand over the smooth, shiny wooden case.

“Goodbye Tim. You were always teaching me a lesson of some sort, but this one is going to

take me a while to work out. Thanks for the memories – it was the best of times.”

As he slowly returned to his seat, Jim heard the music start and the Monty Python “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” took over to do what Tim would have done to lift the spirits of everyone gathered.

Luke started joining in the chorus and the rest of the team picked it up – but not with their usual conviction. A quiet chorus of people trying to convince themselves. Soon everyone was standing and singing along – almost. Jim, Helen, Ann & Jane sat quietly holding hands with the weight of the world on their shoulders.

* * *

Chapter 8

The bugs were bothering him. Jim held his breath as he ducked through the tunnel of brush arching over the track. He was slogging up the bush covered hill at the old quarry which was his favourite running track, and the heat had congregated the fat-bodied flying fruit-flies at the juncture between hot and cold in the shadows at the entrance & exits to the areas where the bushy patches cloistered the track.

As he neared the top and the incline of the hill increased, his pace slowed and he slowly dropped into a walk. Subconsciously he noted he had started walking earlier than usual and figured he was out of practice. This was really his first run since the run in India - half a world and a whole lifetime ago.

As was usually the case on his runs, Jim's thoughts ran wild, reviewing recent events, home life, work problems, things his friends had mentioned – a wide and varied stream of synapse connections.

All of a sudden, Jim realised he was reliving a memory. He was recalling the conversation he'd had with Tim on the plane to Mumbai.

Tim had put down the book Jim had given him and said “this whole Noetic science thing . . . what do you make of it Jim-san?”

Jim had paused, stretched, and then pressed 'save' on the file he was working on and closed the lid of his laptop. Here was a topic he could get his teeth into!

“Well, it's certainly interesting. You know I've always maintained that the power of the human mind was something we couldn't quite comprehend. Aborigines pointing the bone and the recipient shutting down and dying, the mother lifting the crashed car off her child, and the people given a death sentence from cancer who defied the odds and lived. Not so sure about the Yuri Geller types though!”

“Yeah, well, it's a better theory than the christian church has.” Tim replied

“You know we've been through the 'business of religion' discussion before” Jim said, “you got any new thoughts on the topic?”

“Actually yeah, I have.” Tim responded. “You know last month when I was in Nepal, I got talking to our agent there about the whole subject. He's a Hindu, and he agreed about the 'business of religion' concept but was saying

about 'faith' and what he believed. I got the feeling he/they were very tolerant of different beliefs, and for instance he said that while his wife liked to go to the temple every day and wanted him to go too, while he personally didn't agree with it, his attitude was that if it didn't hurt him and it made her happy then he went along with it.”

“Well that's fine, but if he figured the temple was 'a business' did he have a 'faith'?”

“I just said he was Hindu. He treated it as a faith separate to a religion.”

“So what's the belief? Heaven? Hell?” Jim was intrigued.

“If I remember correctly, it was along the lines of do good things and you'll be all right. There wasn't really a heaven – they believe in reincarnation but when you achieve enlightenment, like the budda, you achieve oneness.”

“Is that their version of heaven then?” said Jim

“I guess so.”

“And is there a god/creator figure?”

“I guess so. He said they have this concept of 'zero' – when you achieve enlightenment and then die, your spirit joins the rest of the spirits who have achieved enlightenment. Maybe these days we would call it a global consciousness or something. I got the impression it was kind of like infinite but nothing at the same time which is why they called it zero.”

“What, so, at some point in time there was one, or a group, of spirit/spirits that created the world, and as time has gone by and some people have achieved enlightenment, they have joined the collective spirit creature/mass??” queried Jim.

“That's the impression I got.” confirmed Tim. “I can't say I understood it then and we didn't have the chance to discuss it further. It's kind of fascinating though.”

“Yerrrrr” said Jim thoughtfully. “So eternal damnation or heaven?”

“Come on, you know that's the 'business of religion' working it's control factor. They believe you live your life and do your best to be a good person, and you'll be reincarnated at a suitable level for how you went. Eventually, if you keep working at it, you'll achieve

enlightenment and join with zero.” Tim went on “it's a nice concept really.”

“HMMMM, yes.” answered Jim thoughtfully. “How do you think that fits with Noetic science? I checked it out on the web after reading the book. Some aspects seem to be like a business, but others truly seem to be trying to verify scientifically the power of the human mind. I guess, there's a fit with the Hindu view and the ultimate goal of 'zero'. Noetics was really saying that 'god' exists in each and every one of us, as long as we have the mind to unlock it.”

Tim agreed “The Hindu, and Buddhist, belief in enlightenment really does seem to agree with the concept that god exists in each person.”

Jim was thoughtful. “That's a little bit similar but yet quite different to the Japanese Shinto ancestor worship notion. There, when you die your spirit leaves the body and continues hanging around on earth. You need your living relatives to look after you in the spirit world putting offerings of food aside for you etc. If you achieved great deeds during your life you might become a god – like a mighty warrior becoming a god of war, but otherwise you needed your family to look after you. That's

where the whole sense of duty in their society comes from – it's all leading up to duty to your ancestors so that when you join them in the afterlife your family would take care of you. It was a mix of faith and the business of religion.”

He went on. “And the Korean belief is different again. One of the guys at Kendo told me that they have two heavens but no hell. There's a middle heaven where you go when you die. If you led a really good life helping people and being extra good you didn't stay in middle heaven very long but went straight up to the higher heaven where everything is perfect. If however you weren't so good you spend longer in middle heaven until you earn enough bonus points to get the upgrade as it were. But I don't know if this is a recent belief or the original, because I thought the Korean people were very similar to Japanese in following ancestor worship.”

Tim said “well that explains some of the actions they take, but it's not as interesting a concept as the buddhist zero. I kind of like that one.”

“Yeerrrrss” Jim responded thoughtfully, “but I think I'm going to need to find out some more about this before I can get my head around it

fully.”

Tim said “Yes. Norgay gave me a wee book about stories of the Buddha. Most of the tales seemed to be in the area of 'business of religion' rules and control. I pointed this out to Norgay and he said that of course there were people who would make anything into a religion rather than a faith, but if you looked at each story and message that the Buddha had given, there was lots of free choice there – take it or leave it kind of. For instance, the Buddha was saying that in order to achieve enlightenment, one should give away all their possessions and live the life of a beggar. But he also knew & said that if everyone did that then who would have the food to give to the beggars? And the world would fall apart, so that wasn't the only way to go. Indeed apparantly there were some followers of Buddha who did not give everything away but still managed to achieve enlightenment. I really need to read up some more about this.”

Jim had said “You should talk to Ann – she loaned me the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead'. I haven't finished it but from the scan I gave it, and now that I think more about Noetics, it seems like there could well be a cross over there.”

“Good idea.” said Tim. “A philosophical session with Ann sounds good. Some wine would be involved of course! And I might have to read up a bit more about Noetics. This idea that each person is a potential god is really quite powerful, and it would be interesting to see the differences & similarities between the Buddha's way and the modern science way.”

“I'll see if I can find you a book on it for the return trip!” quipped Jim “But only if there isn't a new Clive Cussler - a mind trip instead of a rehashed rusty old boat trip!”

The memory faded and Jim batted the midges away from his mouth and broke back into a trot as he broke out of the bush and neared the top of the ridge.

He ducked off the side of the track and hauled himself up on top of a large outcrop of rock that looked out over the quarry. This was one of his 'secret' places. Most people didn't really know it was there and it had a spectacular view. He sat down on the outcrop with his feet dangling over the edge. For a while he just sat soaking in the warmth of the sun on his skin and also the heat of the rock spreading up through his body. The view of the distant houses merging into the city below and the

countryside and mountains in the background set among the late spring flowering trees, shrubs and greenery helped soothe his mind.

The conversation from the plane was still there in his mind, and the feeling of peace from his vantage point suddenly registered. Why on earth should he be alive to enjoy this moment and Tim wasn't? He wanted to scream and pound the rock but all of a sudden the words of Ann came to mind - "It's no-one's fault - shit happens and we have to go on."

With an effort, Jim forced his anguish down. Almost subconsciously he scooted back on the rock a bit and rearranging his legs, knelt down into seiza. He placed his hands one atop the other and made a circle under his navel - "mook-saaaaannnnngggggg" he thought to himself as he practised the circular breathing from Kendo.

As he breathed in, then out, his breathing slowed and his thoughts did too. Slowly he registered the warmth of the sun, the quiet background chirrup of the insects and birds, and the feeling of the peaceful surroundings. The swirling anguished thoughts dissipated and while it wasn't 'no mind', his thoughts were still.

He opened his eyes and looked out over the city and plains below him. It was almost like he was seeing it fresh for the first time.

It really was a special view. “If Tim were here, he would've wanted a bottle of Waipara Valley Pinot Noir to enjoy it with!” Jim thought out loud and then he laughed.

After a couple more seconds just sitting enjoying the view and the warm feeling of the sun on him, Jim pulled himself up and headed back to the track and back on course. Life went on, he thought. And all of a sudden he felt like it could – that it was ok to be alive and not to be stewing in a deep funk of unfairness. He almost thought he heard Tim's voice say “Come on Jim-san – harden up!” and laugh at him as he used to when turning Jim's saying back on him. His spirits lifted and he picked up his pace.

It was going to be OK.

* * *

Prologue

As her ship crossed the orbit of the outermost sister planet, she thumbed the projector node and ended the report. Her earlier excitement was completely gone and despite having just woken from a good sleep, she felt incredibly drained and tired.

Slowly she looked back out the translucent skin of her ship at the HUD-ennunciated marker that identified the planet of her concern. The analysis was thorough and the over-riding meaning from the messages contained among the plethora of RF signals emanating from the planet was unmistakable. The intelligence teased out from the mass broadcast media and planetary-wide information network showed unmistakably that the lifeform discovered was quite highly evolved, but it was a lost cause. For all their capability to control the planets resources, and reach beyond their own lands, the data showed her they were on a self-imploding path of destruction. And what was more worrying was that in the process of that self-destruction, she felt it was highly likely they would take the entire planet with them.

She knew what had to be done.

Getting up from her sleep platform, she moved through the ship to the flight station control centre. Setting herself into the central seat, she caused the control panel to form in front of her. Her long, slim fingers moved across the panel, setting in motion the chain of commands that would fix the current problem.

Sensors swept the space ahead of them identifying every scrap of matter in the vicinity and feeding back to the ship their compositions, densities, locations and trajectories. A section of the wall became translucent and the HUD symbology picked out and highlighted certain objects that met the criteria she had defined. Projected paths of all the relevant items were projected in spiderweb thin laser light on the viewing and control pane surface.

After scanning the data for a few seconds she made her choice. Digits flying now, she selected one tremendous piece of space rock which the HUD data identified as a fragment of a planet which had not formed. She manipulated her controls, causing a loud humming to commence and powerful beams to reach out towards the distant rock fragment.

The beams insinuated their influence on the

piece of ancient geology, pushing and prodding it to change it's course until the spidery trace of it's HUD-projected trajectory intersected the trajectory line of the jewel-like planet. With a final scan of her data, she snapped the beams off and sagged back into the padding of her couch.

It was done.

The rock was now on a collision course with the planet that worried her so. Within a few short days the giant rock would sweep in as a meteor blazing it's short-lived fiery path across the sky before smashing kilometers deep into the planet's crust unleashing the energy of a thousand atomic bombs in a gigantic fireball. Tons of the planets surface material would be thrown up into the atmosphere creating a sun-blocking curtain that would change the planet's weather pattern and climate irreparably.

The bi-pedal intelligent life-foms would try and stop the meteor from hitting their planet but their technology would not prevent the rock she had chosen. The size of a tiny moon, it could not be deflected from it's path or destroyed with their weapons.

Her calculations showed that several millions of them would perish in the initial impact, heat

& shockwave, while entire continents would be consumed by the tidal wave that followed, and the rest of them would perish over the ensuing years, due to the severe climate change brought on by the dust cloud. It was, as their own entertainment broadcasts showed, an extinction event.

There was no other choice. They had had their chance.

The evidence that her species had visited was visible in the historic data in the signals beaming off the planet. Over the recent thousands of their years, the more primitive societies of the planet had been visited from the stars, and they had recorded the visits subject to the limitation of their knowledge at that time. The attempts to steer them along the right path had failed - with the exception of their technology growth. But technology alone is not enough and the future projection was not good.

She calculated that her work would rid the planet of the threat of this lifeform and simultaneously trigger the conditions to allow another one of the many and varied organisms that existed on the planet, to evolve into intelligence and start down the path that could result in a future meeting. She would likely not

see such a meeting, but her mission would take her past other worlds with such possible meetings, and others of her kind would return to patrol this area of universe in the future.

She had her mission.

And she had hope.

* * *

“and the hand of god moved upon the void”

