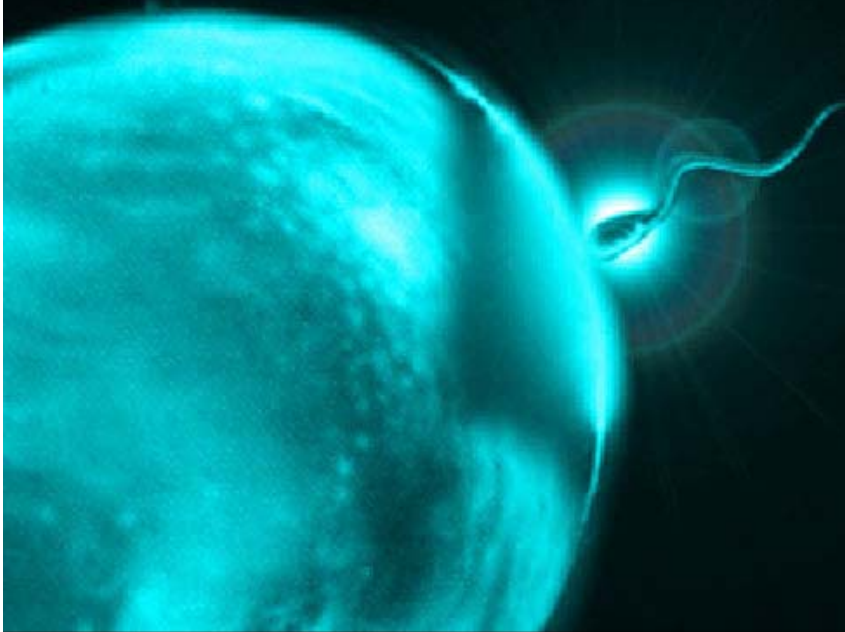


David James Morton



Awaken

AWAKEN

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Diary entry - Hector Chavez, August 1

The Final War

If we possess the means to destroy ourselves, are we Gods?

On conclusion of the Manhattan Project in 1945, a device was born that could, at some future date, lead to the demise of all Earth's species. Despite past wars butchering millions, they were mere aberrations. "The Bomb", however, was different.

Now, many decades on from the Trinity test in the desert of New Mexico nuclear weapons, so long the ultimate deterrent in a superpower-dominated world, are a threat once more. But for how much longer will the sum of human goodness outweigh its evil?

As Earth's supreme sentient beings, we possess a passion to create, yet also to destroy. So where does this fervour come from?

It is no secret that all Earth life owes its origin to stars. It is also true that everything alive now is able to trace its ancestry back to the point where life first began. We, or fractions of us, can therefore be viewed as eternal. And if our deepest drives were sown into our cells at that instant of creation, then could those instincts have been carried across space from the stars? Is it therefore possible that this interstellar pollen could have germinated similar cells on other planetary bodies capable of supporting life? That is a question we are still unable to answer. Our partial wisdom, of this inestimable black ocean that surrounds us, reveals we are totally alone.

In recent decades we have despatched numerous craft into deep space and begun to listen for signals of life, but so far, there is nothing to suggest we have brothers. Still, I am sure we do have brothers, yet are prevented from finding them by higher beings that seek to maintain our ignorance and isolate us from our true heritage. Disturbingly, these beings exist on Earth and look no different from us, merely set apart from the greater mass like the

queen of an insect colony. They are the gods and goddesses of forgotten realms, present in our psyche as the angels and demons of established religions. And they exhibit such noble insight that it is hard to discern if life is not preordained, and our precious Earth a stage for their battles.

Is our lasting existence therefore due to chance or the prevalence of good beings over evil ones? In many ways, “the Bomb” was pure science. However, if I were to suggest that dark and evil forces guided human beings to build this weapon, would you believe me?

It is truly shocking to contemplate that everything we are yet to discover is already known to the higher beings. So, when a discovery is made is it because an ordinary mortal momentarily ventures into their dominion, or are discoveries merely “announced” when it is apt? Whatever the truth may be, good beings have always tried to build humanity’s ladder whilst evil ones endeavour to chop it down: or so it would seem.

It took millions of years for Leucippus to be born. It was Leucippus, a good being, who first postulated the theory of Atoms and Void. Sadly, the ultimate extrapolation of his discovery was “the Bomb”.

In between, Newton pioneered the view of the universe as a mathematical model, Pierre and Marie Curie discovered radium and plutonium, whilst Franz Planck developed quantum theory, which dealt with matter and energy on the subatomic level.

Then, in the early 20th Century, Albert Einstein published a theory regarding the convertibility of matter and energy. This first glimpse at the horrifying promise of “the Bomb” accelerated the pace of scientific breakthrough, as the higher beings traded greater and greater technological blows.

In 1913, Niels Bohr published a theory of atomic structure that combined nuclear theory with quantum theory. A decade on, Rutherford and Chadwick achieved the transmutation of elements, whilst Cockcroft and Walton accelerated protons to study nuclear reactions. And finally, the same two men split the atom at

Rutherford's Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge University, proving Einstein's theory.

As World War II approached, further key discoveries were made about the fissioning of atoms. Then, all this work reached its culmination with the Manhattan Project, which built and tested the first atomic bombs.

It is uncertain whether the good beings allowed "the Bomb" to be used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for it was the showcasing of its shattering power which led to the end of the war. Despite this, hostilities between the higher beings continued. And when the USSR detonated its own "Bomb", the Cold War began.

Fought along ideological and propagandist lines, the Cold War resulted in nuclear arsenals capable of destroying the world many times over.

Ensuing tensions between the superpowers reached critical levels during the Cuban Missile Crisis. After the USSR placed nuclear weapons in Cuba, a hundred kilometres off the Florida coast, the world teetered on the brink of nuclear war for thirteen days. However, the crisis eventually ended with an agreement in which the Soviets consented to take their missiles out of Cuba, whilst the US would remove theirs from Turkey.

As the higher beings continued to conspire in the shadows, their discord led to further military conflicts. Whilst good wished to nullify the desire for war, evil craved more destructive weapons, and provoked increasingly perilous situations.

Eventually, good prevailed, convincing the superpowers that their nuclear arsenals were sufficient to do disastrous damage to both countries. Several arms limitation treaties followed, but it wasn't long before evil sought to regain the ascendancy.

A new arc of malevolence reached its pinnacle in the early 1980s, when the US declared the USSR as "the Evil Empire" then engineered a massive build-up of nuclear arms. Yet within a few short years, the Cold War ended as the Berlin Wall fell and Glasnost flourished as a mostly peaceful revolution across the

former-Soviet Bloc. It seemed that evil had lost forever. Inevitably, the skies darkened again.

Despite the Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus forgoing their nuclear arsenals, other nuclear weapons states did not follow suit. More worryingly, India, then Pakistan tested weapons. And by the start of the new millennium, the US proceeded with their nationwide missile defence system.

Whilst these events monopolise the headlines, the long and bloody conflict between Chechnya and Russia continues without the slightest cursory glance. But it is here many believe the darkest soil lies, tilled by the higher beings before they plant the seeds of their “final war”.

They say the world was created in seven days. Maybe its destruction will unfold in time of equal measure?

CHAPTER 1 - LAKE GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, OCTOBER 21, 4 P.M.

Franz Richter was a damaged man. And despite his sixty plus years, his inner wrath showed no sign of fading. And lately, it was intensifying.

Franz had been bored and irritable most of today, having decided against attending work in nearby Geneva. In fact, he'd not been to work for the previous five days.

Franz was uncomfortable in an environment where colleagues were a generation or two younger than him. He felt incongruous and obsolete, and those thoughts had been nibbling away until fear ultimately prevented his journeying to Geneva. He'd been told he did a good job, but was baffled as to why he'd barely progressed in his professional life. The world had moved forward but Franz Richter had stayed where he was.

'I should be doing more,' he whispered, with bitterness, staring out from the shoreline and upon a glass-smooth Lake Geneva. It was fine and sunny today, but distinctly colder than last week. And around him, the trees were drifting into sleep, the animals were contemplating the same, and vast cloaks of snow were inching farther down the mountains that bordered the lake.

'Good day,' breathlessly proclaimed an elderly woman as her dog, a black and tan monster, took her for a walk.

Franz heard her but didn't answer immediately. Only when she'd gone did he croak a weary response. Alas, the woman couldn't hear him, so all she could surmise was how rude that squat, shaven-headed and bespectacled man was. Whatever the circumstance, Franz had an unerring ability to offend, disorientate and infuriate those he met.

Alone again, he considered what he'd tell Irena when he finally got home.

Despite the dotting nature of her inquiries, Franz sensed Irena was always prying, but that's probably because he'd something to hide. Infatuation with his "lost" past and concern over his future were causing instabilities in his behaviour. Yet he'd so many wonderful things in his life – a job, a loving daughter, a house, and

a woman who, with the right look, would melt your entire body. Irena though, was the root of Franz's melancholy, as he was convinced he didn't deserve her. Such paralysing insecurity, and jealousy of her UN job, would surely tear them apart unless something changed. Yet even now, Franz didn't believe *he* should be the one to change.

As old as he was, Franz Richter remained far from inner peace. He had talents, or so he believed, but could still not accept that there were others who were smarter, more personable and played the "game" better than he. Today's calm and boring world did not suit a nature that revelled in conflict.

CHAPTER 2 - LAKE GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, OCTOBER 21, 5 P.M.

Franz was tired and it was time to return home and convince Irena that he'd worked today. Casting one last look at the rippling, dappled, water of Lake Geneva his gaze then followed a leaf as it fluttered to the stone pathway on which he stood. Now, he hoped the woman walking her dog earlier would return so that he could convince her he was human after all. Sadly, this secluded shoreline enclave remained empty, as though the people were waiting for him to go away.

Soon after the dark orange sun laid its face upon the pillow of the mountains, a northbound blanket of filthy grey cloud began liberating rain from under its mantle.

It was inevitable that the ensuing rainstorm would trigger hold-ups. Franz could have taken the back roads, yet fatally, he chose the main route to Amphion.

It was wet, dark and hostile outside; and if people weren't overcompensating by driving slowly, or stamping their brakes too hard, they had their fog lights on unnecessarily. But in Franz's tapered world *they* were always wrong.

'Fuck!' he bawled, noting road works ahead, but it was too late to spin the car round.

Joining an extremely long queue, Franz did his utmost to control his growing rage whilst the antlike jam inched forward. And after many long and tortuous minutes, he'd almost reached the lights when, to beat the queue, a man in a large silver car drew alongside. Despite warnings that the road was narrowing the man had blatantly disregarded them, hoping other drivers would defer to him. They did.

'Idiot!' Franz sneered, fingering the oddly shaped gold amulet that hung from a chain around his neck. Curiously, the slur wasn't directed at the man in the large silver car but at the driver of a white SUV directly in front who'd allowed the silver car in. Exasperated, Franz punched his horn then flashed his headlights.

In reaction, the SUV's driver hit the brakes. Franz countered, but his harsh response served only to hurl him forward into the

seatbelt. Meanwhile, the large silver car sped off, just making it through before the lights turned red.

'Idiot!' screamed Franz before sounding his horn again.

Seeing the SUV driver gesticulate, he smiled devilishly.

'So you're a woman,' he taunted. Moments later though, his smirk became a frown as a far larger form stirred before stepping from the SUV.

Witnessing the figure uncoil to a towering height, Franz became mute. Backlit by a galaxy of headlights and hazard beacons, the figure was utterly black as though just shadow. Even so, the looming presence was very real. All Franz had to do was wave and offer an apology but he was petrified and could barely blink to indicate he remained conscious.

'Come on!' he whined, praying for the temporary lights to turn green and release the knot of vehicles. 'Yes!' he exclaimed brightly, as his wish was granted. Predictably, the SUV didn't move, and as Franz was tight against its fender, he couldn't move either. Fearing an altercation where he'd come off worst, he locked all the doors before cursing under his cowardly breath.

'Live and let live,' the man whispered as he stood to Franz's side. Rather than agree and let the moment pass, Franz ignored him and began fumbling with the gearbox to find reverse.

'What are you doing?' the man questioned as Franz continued struggling with the gears. 'I'm talking to you!' he shouted but then fell silent, as though allowing Franz the space to make an apology. Any decent human being would give one; then again, any decent human being would never have construed this circumstance in the first place.

'So, someone beat the queue,' the man droned. Right now, it was vital Franz didn't dilute the reasons for his anger by talking about them. Instinctively, the immense shadow felt this and began beating a fist against the windshield.

'Guess you're the guy who's never wrong?' he questioned, drawing his arm back as though holding a bowstring. 'What's the use,' he groaned then relaxed his posture for he'd reconciled that the sad outline within was never going to learn. 'Just take care,' he

proffered before trudging away, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders.

Rather than consider his wrongdoing, all Franz saw was yet another “cheat” who’d just flitted by. And this time, it wasn’t even a car he could at least “compete” with, but a tiny red jalopy that hardly deserved to be on the same stretch of road.

‘Scum!’ screamed Franz, as the driver’s conceited wagging of a middle finger heated his inner cauldron to boiling point.

With hatred transcending thinking, Franz finally engaged reverse as the notional chain around his neck shattered. Ramming the vehicle immediately behind, he was able to force enough room to manoeuvre round the SUV. Accelerating to the head of the queue, Franz was then disgusted to see the lights turn blood red.

‘Fuck!’ he cried in frustration, but quickly realised he couldn’t stay here. If he did, it wouldn’t be long before that towering shadow was close by again, and maybe this time, the man would finally force his huge fist through the windshield. Franz therefore had no option but to chase the “cheat” who was now coolly chugging off into the distance. ‘I’m coming!’ he growled.

In the melee, he’d failed to observe that the opposing queue had begun moving. When finally he saw them, he chose to increase his speed, believing utterly that it was his right to be here.

Alarmed by the pace and intent of the approaching vehicle, the female driver leading the rival flow stopped violently. Sadly, the cars behind weren’t prepared. And, one by one, they crunched and thudded into each other.

It was only now that Franz slowed. Wickedly, he did this merely to mount the kerb in order to slither by the smashed cars. Passing them, he was too spiteful to shed the briefest glance. Franz didn’t care about their condition, for he simply must have this one little victory.

‘I’m free!’ he proclaimed as the endorphins coursed through his body. Now, with his more powerful car, he could rapidly close on his quarry. ‘What a pathetic little car you have,’ he moaned, ‘and what a sad little life you must lead!’

Outwardly, Franz showed no shame for what he'd just done. Moreover, he wouldn't shy from more heinous acts he may still undertake. In fact, Franz seldom questioned himself, and that was why he was out of control.

'I've got you now!' he bawled, closing further, whilst madly blinking the headlights.

Panicking, the "cheat" snapped left: ironically onto the deserted country roads Franz had first considered taking. Inevitably Franz followed, despite the counterarguments warring inside.

Apart from the occasional dwelling or passing vehicle, it was bleak and open countryside. And that delighted Franz, for he had the scope to do anything now.

Despite the "cheat" squeezing maximum horsepower from a miserable engine, Franz closed effortlessly to his taillight. Oddly, his prey then began to slow.

'Chicken!' goaded Franz, seeing the driver wave submissively from a side window. Rather than consider it an act of surrender, Franz judged the gesture to be mocking.

'I'm going to kill you!' he bleated, swerving out from behind before manoeuvring alongside.

His face pinched with revulsion, Franz eyeballed the "cheat" for the first time. Then, he grinned sinfully. A black baseball cap, sculpted goatee and mock gold earring may well be the emblems of a strong man amongst a gang of believers but alone, and in unfamiliar territory, he was just a "boy" who'd probably already wet himself.

Distracted, the "boy" skidded on a strip of freshly fallen leaves. Slewing onto the lush roadside, the jalopy's tyres and rusting underbody were soon captured in thick brown mud.

'I'm going to kill you!' Franz repeated ravenously as the "boy" tried desperately to escape the deepening quagmire.

After bringing his car to a gentle stop, Franz casually straightened his tie. For a moment he was disinterested: the rush of pursuit serving to muddle his thoughts.

A seemingly unceasing squeal of rubber was silenced when one of the jalopy's tyres burst. Cutting the engine power instantly, the "boy" then jumped from his car and scurried away.

After making sure his tie was perfect, Franz stepped from his own car and began striding effortlessly toward the other.

'Don't hurt me!' cried the "boy", in a high voice that adolescence had hitherto robbed him of. Reaching the foot of a steep bank of bare earth, he began clambering up it. Alas, he was weak now and his feet weren't biting into the soil. 'Please go away!' he begged, feeling a shadow stretch over him.

Despite the alacrity of his movement, it seemed only seconds later that a steely hand grabbed his legs.

'Go away!' screamed the "boy".

Stretching out his fingers, he clawed frenziedly at the soil but Franz's strength dragged him down, centimetre-by-centimetre, until he was at the foot of the bank.

'Let me go!' sobbed the "boy", raising his cold, muddy hands to protect his face.

'Why?' roared Franz, wrenching the muddy hands from the other's face. There'd been a little resistance to begin with, but the "boy" quickly sensed he may be harmed less by yielding.

'Don't rape me!' he pleaded.

Franz wiped his mouth and chuckled.

'I'm not going to rape you,' he replied, aware of the absolute power he now had. 'I'm *just* going to kill you!'

Confident the "boy" was under his spell, he stepped away. And, as expected, the "boy" remained on his back and motionless.

'Why'd you do that?' Franz shouted, pouncing on the "boy".

Screwing a concealed hand into a fist, he prepared to strike, but the tiny part of his humanity that remained stopped him. To appease the blocking of his need to injure, however, Franz demanded his question be answered.

'What?' gasped the "boy" as Franz's scowl became evermore threatening. 'I've done nothing,' he yelped.

'Then why run away?' snarled Franz.

'You were pursuing me.'

'I had reasons to pursue you,' hissed Franz. Making another fist, he then pressed his diamond hard knuckles under the "boy's" chin, and imagined the most dreadful things. 'Why sneak past me in the queue?' he interrogated.

'It was a mistake,' replied the "boy". 'It doesn't matter.'

'It *does* matter!' whined Franz. 'What *you* did triggered me off!' he sneered as he strove to transmute blame.

'What are you going to do with me?' the "boy" pleaded, badly wanting Franz to let go. 'I'm sorry.'

'You're not sorry,' snarled Franz. 'It's in your eyes!'

'I am! I am!' he cried.

'You can't begin to understand what these things do to me,' barked Franz, baring his teeth.

'Why do you hate me?' jabbered the "boy".

'I don't know,' said Franz miserably, retracting his fist before softening his clench into something dimly human. Many moments of uncomfortable silence followed.

'I felt you really wanted to kill me and didn't care,' the "boy" ventured.

'I did,' Franz reflected before heaving himself upright.

'But I'm a human being, doesn't that mean anything?'

There was no reaction.

'Because of the way I look, you probably think I'm into drugs and stuff, but I'm not,' said the "boy". Franz huffed to himself. 'I'm not perfect, but I've got respect for you despite what you've done,' he added then took a raking breath. 'And if I did wrong in *your* eyes...'

'In *my* eyes!' screamed Franz.

Feeling inhumanity return, the "boy's" heart missed a beat.

'Maybe your eyes see other things?' he quietly questioned.

Strangely, the words pacified Franz and got him thinking.

'Do my eyes see other things?' he mused, rubbing several muddy fingers over his shaven scalp. With the notion capturing his mind, Franz strode decisively to his car.

'Please go away,' prayed the "boy", fearing Franz had a gun stowed in the car. 'Why did you do this to me?' he shivered, for

the cold, wet, earth had soaked into his clothes. Disturbingly, Franz turned round, his eyes shining with a hellish scarlet before returning to pitch black.

'Do my eyes see other things?' he thought as he continued walking. With no answer forthcoming from his faithless heart, he sank heavily into the driver's seat, and sped away.

CHAPTER 3 – AMPHION, SWITZERLAND, OCTOBER 21, 6 P.M.

Remorse rarely dwelled in Franz's soul, nor did memories of important events. Despite his long years, he remembered little of his past, just that he was here and in the now. Moreover, he didn't understand why a virulent fire had always raged within him. Like the Sun, there were many times when a flare would suddenly burst from his surface and consume all those around him.

'Who am I?' he cried when a sufficient distance from where he'd left the "boy". 'Who am I?' he repeated, gazing at his own ghostly shape projected onto the car's windshield.

After finding a suitable place to stop and perform ablutions, Franz finally drove home. Whilst his face and hands were now clean, the knees of his trousers, and the elbows of his jacket remained damp and dirty.

Slithering up to his beloved shoreline cottage, Franz turned the headlights off, then dropped the gearbox into neutral as he coasted the last few metres. Although he wanted to sit here until his body heat had dried the fabrics, he was already late.

'I'll have to go in,' he muttered.

Ensuring his muddy shoes were swapped with a spare pair in the boot, Franz locked his briefcase, papers and jacket in there too before hiding the ignition key in his secret place. Finally deciding to head toward the cottage, he began guessing where Irena might be. If she was upstairs, he'd take the back entrance into the kitchen then spill something on his trousers to make the dampness legitimate. Despite his comfortable life, Franz still possessed a weakness to deceive.

Easing the kitchen's wooden outer door open, Franz was met with a comfortable modern silence. A small TV was divulging the life of a minor celebrity, the timer on the microwave still had two minutes to energise the food inside whilst the washing machine hummed and whirred as it neared the end of its cycle. Unexpectedly, Irena entered the room. She was starkly beautiful, with short, black hair and square cheekbones over which an ivory

white skin was tautly stretched. Franz stopped dead, his face puckering into one of those looks that disturbed the recipient but left the perpetrator ignorant of its nature. Snubbing him, Irena checked the washing machine. Meanwhile, Franz breathed slowly, trying to picture what body language he normally displayed when he got back from work.

'How are you?' asked Irena, now staring at the microwave timer that pinged on reaching zero. Franz leant toward her and licked her ear. Irena smiled then turned to meet his gaze. 'How are *you*?' she asked sexily before kissing him fully on the lips.

'I'm OK,' he replied, hugging her tight and showing his humanity. 'But right now, you're the only thing that's real,' he murmured, still harbouring doubts as to why she remained with him. Irena was young, he was not. She was attractive and athletic, he was not. She was sociable and extrovert, he was not. Nothing seemed compatible, yet, nevertheless, there was a bond between them.

'Thank you,' she accepted before retrieving a plate of steak slivers from the microwave. Stealing one of the slivers, Franz received a playful slap on the hand.

'How did your day go?' she asked knowingly, as he noticed a strange look in her eyes.

'Fine,' he reacted, but had almost choked on the partly mulched meat.

'That job's getting you down, isn't it?' she quizzed, placing the meat into a brown cooking pot on the stove.

Allowing her words to trickle inside, Franz suddenly wanted to tell the truth about today. A part of him was sickened by his actions. Alas, the dominant portion curbed those thoughts.

'Do you want me to speak with Dad?' Irena gestured, hugging him again. Sadly, this comment uncorked his frustration.

'I don't want to talk to anybody!' he snapped.

Irena's father, Luther Strauss, was a good man, but also someone else in Franz's life he couldn't own or control. Franz was an orphan, and despite past attempts to unearth his origins, they had proved fruitless. From what he could recall, his first name

was real but his second name was that of the childless couple that had raised him in a small village on the outskirts of Zurich. His “mother” and “father” had long since died and for many years he’d lived a solitary life. At one point, he’d considered having a child through surrogacy. Unfortunately, medical tests found he wasn’t sufficiently fertile. Then, with everything seemingly in terminal decline, he met Irena and they adopted Anna-Marie. Despite Franz’s deep love for the little girl, she was still not *his*. In the purest way, nothing really was *his*. And sometimes, that made him feel as though he didn’t belong here, not anywhere.

‘I know Luther’s got connections,’ he replied, ‘but I still have ambition.’

‘Of course you do,’ she said softly, but Franz took that as derision.

‘Go on, tell me I’m useless!’ he shouted, slapping Irena hard across the face. ‘Go on!’ he hounded, hitting her again.

‘Mummy!’ yelped Anna-Marie, tiptoeing into the kitchen dressed in a pair of yellow cotton pyjamas.

Slumping over the sink, Irena used her arms to earth the emotional tremors that were igniting all through her body.

‘You’re a bad man, daddy!’ Anna-Marie squealed before running back up the stairs.

‘I don’t mean to be,’ he moaned and followed after her.

Although the door to Anna-Marie’s room wasn’t locked, Franz still rapped a quivering knuckle on its white painted frame.

‘I don’t like you, go away,’ whined Anna-Marie.

Squeezing his eyes tight shut, Franz tried to think of something to say. Worryingly, the sadistic episode on that desolate road was already being wiped from memory.

‘Don’t go,’ he pleaded to his past, for his failure to remember stifled his ability to learn. Franz often thought that the skulking greyness surrounding the recent past was an irreversible sickness. Soon, he feared, he’d forget Anna-Marie and Irena too. ‘Please remember,’ he pressed, sinking to his knees, but almost that entire slice of time had now disappeared. ‘Daddy’s sorry,’ he cried, allowing tears to trickle down his dark Asian-like skin.

Slowly, the door yawned open.

'Daddy's sorry,' he repeated as Anna-Marie stood there, exhibiting the same countenance as that frightened "boy" cowering on the cold wet grass.

'I accept your apology,' said the precocious girl before pushing the door shut again, 'but you're not coming in.'

Pressing his lips to the painted doorframe, he murmured, 'I love you.'

'I love you too, Daddy,' stated Anna-Marie, secreting herself beneath the bed covers, 'but sometimes you scare me.'

As Franz continued to tell his daughter that he loved her, Irena had quietly crept up the stairs unnoticed. Looking on, she smiled, but a wary expression still dwelled on her pretty white face. Stepping over to Franz, she then leant down by his side.

'Please don't hurt me again,' she murmured.

'I love you,' he croaked, 'but I hate *myself*.'

Irena held him, but, unlike her, Franz couldn't cry.

'Why do you hate yourself?' she asked sincerely. Sensing Franz wouldn't answer; Irena tugged his hand and led him down to the kitchen.

A change of focus briefly calmed Franz. But when devouring another sliver of meat, a divergent thought entered his mind.

'It's hard to believe that *this* comes from a living creature,' he declared, pointing at the final piece of steak on his white plate. Swiftly discerning unease, Irena poured the remaining contents of a bottle of Chilean Chiras into Franz's tall glass. 'It's also amazing to think that all life is interrelated, and,' he whispered, 'that all life *is* of extraterrestrial origin.' With that, the wine bottle slipped from Irena's sweating fingers, knocking over his glass. Rather than react in his normal way, Franz became trancelike as he held on tenaciously to this notion.

'Isn't that an exquisite idea,' she remarked, praying he wouldn't explode with rage. It'd been a good year so far, but today he was struggling for control. He'd struck her many times before, yet

she'd loyally, or stupidly, covered the damage whenever her father called. But maybe one day, would Franz really hurt her?

'Yes, it is beautiful,' Franz ultimately agreed, and for a fleeting moment, recalled today's entire events. 'Do my eyes see other things?' he slurred, but if he ever learnt of his true past, he'd realise he was the most dangerous man alive.

'There are times you frustrate me and make me cry,' said Irena. 'Yet there are other times when you inspire me. That's why I married you. Franz, you have a deliciously vulnerable side, and you can be the most wonderful person when you are yourself.'

Whilst Irena mopped up the spilled wine, Franz stroked the back of her hand. Then, a knock at the door raided their collective thoughts.

'Ignore it,' he insisted.

'It could be Dad,' she responded.

The knock came again. This time, it was a far fiercer rap, which sent Franz fleeing to a corner of the kitchen, where he crouched down on the stone floor and tried to hide.

'Franz, do you know who's there?' she quizzed. Nuzzling his chin tight into his chest, Franz refused to answer.

The stern face and unblinking eyes of a male police officer acknowledged Irena as she opened the door.

'Mrs Richter?' ventured the man.

'Yes,' replied Irena hesitantly.

'Does your husband own that motor vehicle?' he asked, pointing at Franz's jet-black sports car. Her heart thumping hard, Irena unwisely ran to see whether he'd damaged it.

'Is that your husband's car, Mrs Richter?' Irena nodded before making an arduous swallow. 'At what time did he arrive home this evening?'

'Why?' she requested anxiously, but the officer's unyielding eyes forced her to reply. 'About an hour ago,' she faltered as the man hummed confidently. 'Why, what's he done?'

'I need to see him,' the officer responded humourlessly.

‘And if he doesn’t want to see *you?*’ she defended, racing to the door, somehow thinking it would remain unbreached if she stood there. The officer, however, wasn’t here to play games.

‘Then we’ll employ more direct tactics,’ he notified her determinedly. ‘Mrs Richter, I *need* to speak with your husband. Please allow me to enter.’

When Irena and the officer finally reached the kitchen, Franz had curled into a ball and was childishly wishing them away.

‘Mr Richter,’ quizzed the officer, ‘we’ve received a complaint regarding an incident that allegedly involved you and another person earlier this evening.’

‘I don’t remember,’ he answered automatically.

Concerned, Irena squatted close by Franz and began brushing her fingers across his arms and legs. Rather than soothe, her care made him coil up even tighter.

‘Go away,’ he yearned. ‘I don’t remember,’ he sobbed.

‘Mr Richter, I think you do remember,’ the officer argued.

‘I don’t,’ he cried feebly.

‘There was an incident,’ stated the officer, drawing his face close to Franz, ‘at road works along the main road to Amphion.’ With this, Franz raised his head from a nest of limbs. ‘Mr Richter,’ the officer added strongly, ‘I have confirmation of this from three independent witnesses. And after causing a series of accidents at the road works, *you* then chased a vehicle, against the flow of traffic, before assaulting its occupant.’

Closing his eyes, Franz grasped that his current condition was as a result of this “incident”, yet he could scarcely remember it. And rather than see the experience in the void existing between his eyes and shuttered lids, he saw nothing.

‘Franz?’ urged Irena, breaching the enduring silence.

‘What are you going to do with me?’ he begged, looking into the officer’s eyes.

‘Nothing,’ the officer replied. Irena let out a sigh, but the gesture upset the officer. ‘I detest bullies, Mr Richter!’ he shouted, his presence compelling Franz to unravel his limbs. ‘I abhor

people who're forever in denial of their actions. There are enough horrors in this world, Mr Richter, don't add to them.'

'Am I evil?' grieved Franz, finally standing upright.

'Mr Richter, sometimes we feel evil stems from outside, but, all along, it's from inside us and we alone have the power to choose,' the officer remarked. 'Come with me,' he stated.

'Why?' Franz panicked, desiring to wither again.

'I want to show you someone,' whispered the officer who'd already turned and was hurrying to the door.

Following the man out into the dark night, Franz noted a metallic grey car sat alongside his own.

'This is *my* son,' said the officer, pointing at a bowed figure in the front passenger seat of the grey car.

Impulsively, the officer's son lifted his head and gazed at the three figures in front.

'You,' murmured Franz, his face ashen through shock. 'You,' he repeated for not only did he now remember that vile incident just a few hours before, but also sensed that within the "boy" resided an ancient brotherhood to which he felt connected. It was perplexing as Franz had not sensed this during their earlier encounter.

Shaking his head, Franz tried desperately to dispel those abstract notions, but they wouldn't disperse. He was not, by his own admission, a spiritual man but he just knew there was something unfathomable that linked him to the officer's son. Inside, he denied it a million times but whenever he looked into those innocent eyes, they calmed him and, moreover, forgave him. And when finally he cried, a tear tickled down the "boy's" cheek at exactly the same time.

'*Who are you?*' thought Franz.

'*The same as you,*' said the "boy."

Franz didn't understand. Even so, there was a primeval part of him that knew they'd meet at this precise point in time.

'*Who are you?*' he repeated.

'*The same as you,*' replied the "boy."

'Am I evil?' whimpered Franz as the "boy" raised a hand before pressing his palm to the windshield. 'I'm sorry,' he added humbly. Moments later, the "boy" bowed his head, apparently severing their profound channel of communication.

'Don't go,' begged Franz, but the officer was already motioning towards his grey car.

'It's over now,' calmed Irena, but Franz was anxious for he couldn't re-establish the fleeting bond he'd had with the "boy".

'Is it over?' he rowed. 'For a moment I glimpsed my past, but also my future,' he added in a chilling voice. Sensing his fatigue, Irena encouraged him to come into the house, but he wouldn't budge. 'Who are you?' he pleaded over and over again. Sadly, there was no reply.

CHAPTER 4 - SWITZERLAND, OCTOBER 22, 1 A.M.

It took numerous glasses of Chiras for Franz to be calm. And for the past hour he'd sat alone on the couch, consumed by the murk of his spacious, unlit living room.

'Anna-Marie's finally asleep,' Irena sighed, sitting next to Franz before laying her legs over his lap.

'I don't like that,' he whinged, shuffling his body vigorously to shake her legs off him.

'Sorry,' she pacified, but then thought on. 'Why should I be sorry, I'm your wife!' she barked, putting her legs back over his lap. This time, he didn't react. 'What's wrong, darling?' she whispered, noticing he'd sunk into a pensive mood.

'I didn't go to work today,' he said, liberating a truth that had been haunting him. 'In fact, I've not been to work for the past week.'

'I know,' she coolly remarked. 'Someone called from your office a couple of times. They wondered how you were feeling.'

'What did you say?'

'I said you had flu,' she explained. 'But dishonesty doesn't sit comfortably with me,' she added yet still noted anguish in his face. 'What's wrong, darling?'

'I'm a failure,' he grieved before nuzzling his tired and aching face upon her breast.

'No you're not,' she encouraged, 'but you're worrying me again, and I'm scared.'

'You know I don't like the winter, and the darkness that it brings,' he answered.

'Yes, but you're not prepared to do anything to combat it,' she argued. 'You know the lack of sunlight makes you moody and sometimes...' Irena stopped abruptly. Shoving her legs away, Franz demanded to know what she was going to say. 'Violent,' she murmured. Sadly, that word was too painful for him to bear. And, as he often did during these moments, Franz stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

For an instant, Irena was afraid, but a substantial gulp of wine fortified her resolve.

She found him in the kitchen.

'Don't come any closer,' he demanded, his back turned to her.

'What are you doing, Franz?' she grilled, noticing the cutlery drawer was open.

'I told you *not* to come any closer!' he roared.

Ignoring his "advice", Irena edged over to him before touching his shoulder.

Spinning round quickly, Franz drove a long knife at her throat. Irena screamed, but as the blade glistened in the moonlight, it began to entrance him. Allowing its polished steel to catch the light, he now remembered the "boy" and the sensation that brief mystical connection brought. Somehow, he was experiencing a similar connection with Irena, yet it possessed the exact opposite feeling. And there was something about her eyes that knew so much.

'Who are you?' he whispered in delusion, suddenly fearful of her.

'Someone who loves you,' she said softly. 'Don't do it, Franz,' she begged.

Now, when he looked into her eyes, he met innocence and the gentle nature that first let him fall in love with her.

'I won't,' he said pitifully, slowly returning the knife to the drawer. 'Please don't tell anyone,' he requested then held her tightly. 'You're the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me,' he cried as Irena felt the warm wetness of his tears again.

'So are you,' she remarked, 'but I'm scared, Franz.'

'But I don't need help!' he quarrelled, sensing what she was thinking.

'Let me speak with Dad again,' she offered.

Irena's father, a retired psychiatrist, had helped Franz before, but ego refused to let him become dependent on Luther's counselling. Nonetheless, he needed help.

'I'm so sorry,' he sobbed, hugging Irena even tighter.

'Franz, you need to live life and love life. And what is life without love?' she cried.

'Nothing,' he responded pensively. 'I asked a question of myself earlier,' he declared then took a deep breath. 'I asked myself if I was evil, as that's how I sometimes feel.'

'That's a horrid notion,' she remarked, 'and you must forget it.'

'Who am I?' questioned Franz, as he lay in bed with Irena.

'You're Franz Richter, my husband, and the father of our child,' she replied, stifling her emotion in order to bestow strength onto him. Irena sensed, however, deeper questions beneath the enquiry, for Franz may never know his true origin. His mildly Asian looks told of kith in another country, possibly another continent. Whilst he remained curious of his beginnings, however, Franz rarely possessed the courage to discover the truth.

Without the comfort of knowing his past, Franz had tried to anchor his future and sense of belonging with a child. Sadly, that was not to be. Now, there were times, he even felt Earth was not his home, for he occasionally dreamt of stars, of constellations he could never have seen. He also imagined previous lives, and other existences. Franz believed it was the product of a wayward, malfunctioning mind, but it was not. He, like the "boy", and many others, were purposely set apart from the rest of humanity. An ancient, extraterrestrial, "seed" dwelled within them all. And, as key points in future history neared, these "seeds" would be sown, and the persons belonging to them would be able to influence the development of the human race. That was how it had been in the past, and the future would be no different...

CHAPTER 5 – BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, LATE 1960S

Finding life elsewhere in the universe is one of the hardest things humankind has set itself to discover. Out there, in the incalculable and mind bending vastness of space, there should be countless planets and satellites teeming with life from the most basic forms to the most advanced species, but, so far, that has proven to be incorrect. Yet, could these civilisations be so advanced, that our somewhat primitive methods of communication are futile?

Whilst there is a lot of space, there is also much scope for things to go wrong. The environment required to sustain life, exists on such a narrow bandwidth, that we may currently live in a time where all the past civilisations have already died and we are God's only survivors. Maybe we are indeed lucky, yet, also unlucky, to never meet someone whose origin is different to our own. So, the notion persists that we are unique and that maybe powers beyond our imagination have placed us here, and allowed us to grow, as though all Earth's species were part of some great cosmic nursery?

Maybe we are the last incarnation of life and that all that we will find, when we are able to scour the great astral wastes sometime in our distant future, will be artefacts and the realisation that all our "brothers" are already dead.

Still I, like many others, fervently believe that we do have "brothers" out there, and as such, there is no greater mission available than to find them...

Jeff Macready wrote those words in his personal diary many years ago. Back then, he was a bright young thing working for NASA on the Voyager projects.

As an unruly adolescent a decade before, Jeff had opened his door back to reality when he "found" a book inside a bag stolen from a fellow high school student. The subject of the book was the search for extraterrestrial life. And when Jeff first held it in his trembling fingers, the dollars and nickels in the student's purse meant nothing, for the book's words and images had captured his

bleak imagination and coloured it so vividly. It was as though the moment was truly meant to happen.

Whilst the book contained concepts and advanced mathematics he simply didn't understand, he was able to read beneath the academia and let a pure vision dominate him. From now on he'd *use* that dormant intellect of his, a gift he'd been on the cusp of deserting.

Humanity's intent to wage war greatly disillusioned Jeff. Vietnam, the Cold War, civil unrest in his own country, and the segregation of colours and castes made him feel weak and helpless. Weakness, however, was the root of evil. But through this book, Jeff had found his cause. Whilst the rich imaginings it instilled would not totally anaesthetise him from the greater evils around, it would console. And already, Jeff found he had an affinity with extraterrestrial life and also the greatest optimism that, one day, "brothers" would be found.

As he read on, the day advanced inexorably. But despite daylight's death, he continued, for the pages shone back at him, and each word read was a step forward on a great journey. Suddenly, life had so much meaning.

Through the book, Jeff realised that there were two great "Drake's" in the world. His primary education had introduced him to the Great British explorer Sir Francis Drake. But now, Frank Drake, a latter-day visionary with the same sense of discovery, captivated him.

As Jeff continued, he discovered how Frank Drake had distilled into a single equation, named, quite naturally, the Drake Equation, a means to determine how many intelligent, communicating, civilisations there were in our galaxy.

To find the answer, Drake asked a total of seven questions...

Firstly, how many stars are there in the galaxy?

The book estimated there were around 200 billion.

Secondly, what proportion of those stars, have planets around them?

The book confirmed it was currently impossible to detect planets. However, technological advances in the intervening decades had allowed many new planets to be discovered. Whilst

we are still years away from an accurate number, the best estimate remains 20%.

Thirdly, of those planets that orbited stars, how many planets per star were capable of sustaining life?

Our solar system contains three planets that could possibly support life: Venus, Earth and Mars. There is also a chance that one or more of Jupiter's moons could also support life. If our solar system were typical, the answer would be between three and five.

Fourthly, on what fraction of these planets would life evolve?

The book could only suggest the widest possible range of views from near zero to 100%. Jeff considered the optimistic view where, if life was able to evolve, it would.

Fifthly, what was the fraction of these planets where intelligent life evolves?

Again, estimates ranged from 100% to near zero. And again, Jeff took the positive view; that intelligence was such a survival advantage it would certainly evolve given sufficient time.

Sixthly, what was the fraction of these planets, where intelligent life resided, where the indigenous species could communicate?

To sustain a coefficient in the equation that was more the zero, the book assumed a figure between 10% and 20%.

And lastly, what fraction of time during a planet's geological lifespan did communicating civilisations live?

This represented the toughest of all the questions. So far, we have been communicating with radio waves for less than 100 years, yet the expected lifetime of our Sun and the Earth is roughly 10 billion years.

Abruptly, the hot blood coursing through Jeff's veins stopped. A bitter realisation had struck, for he knew that the minute fraction of time we'd inadvertently been communicating with deep space meant that the chance of finding other life was extremely slim.

After closing the book, Jeff's thoughts inescapably turned to the world's current woes as a mood of failure doused his mind's fire. The ongoing Cold War in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Kennedy's assassination, left him unsure whether

civilisation would survive for much longer. But then, and utterly contra to his distress, a gloriously warm and glutinous sensation spread evenly from the pit of his stomach until it reached seemingly, into, every cell within his small and illness-prone body. It was the awakening of an ancient “seed” within him that would now take him on a great spiritual journey to find his God.

Within minutes, the “seed” had instilled permanent hope into Jeff’s outlook, in addition to imbuing him with great scientific knowledge. His mission was to advance space technology sufficiently to allow a spacecraft to be conceived, built and launched, its prime objective being to find our missing “brothers”. And if such a moment came about, it may be so humbling that the human race’s accumulated evil would instantly dissolve. Whilst Jeff believed he’d reached a defining moment in his life, it was the “seed” that was truly guiding events.

Standing up to let his numb legs renew with sensation, Jeff buried the book in a deep pocket of his blue denim jacket. After slinging the stolen bag over a shoulder, he then trailed back to his small, but now beautiful, home.

‘Thank you,’ he whispered to the student from whom he’d stolen the items. Jeff then pledged to return the things tomorrow, but not *this* book. Instead, he’d get a replacement then season it until it looked exactly like the original. ‘I’m keeping this,’ he remarked, believing *this* book was his talisman, and that fate had seemingly opened up like a rent in the fabric of space-time. Presently, Jeff sensed he was destined for great things, yet could not fathom why he felt that way. Despite the “seed” awakening within, he was ignorant of the event. And that’s how it would continue; the “seed” perpetually active, yet invisible.

Jeff’s “Ma” and “Pa” were tearful when he arrived back at the small house. But rather than have his usual angry face, Jeff’s countenance was soft and welcoming. Then, for the first time in years, he said he was sorry. Ma beamed a huge smile then asked him to sit down whilst she reheated the meatloaf that she’d prepared.

'I was scared,' said Ma, shaking her head. 'I didn't know what to do. It's really late.'

'Sometimes, I feel it's too late,' mumbled Jeff as he saw stars; those countless white pools of incandescence that were the origin of our souls.

'Where've you been?' asked Pa, puzzled by Jeff's reply.

'On a journey,' he responded, raising his head from the meal. Jeff then took his father's hand, and in a blinding ribbon of pictures, he saw his parents die, his future entrance to MIT, his marriage, and his eventual working for NASA. But there the images stopped, and, try as he might, Jeff could see no further.

'Where did you go on this journey, Jeff? What did you see?' asked Ma as Jeff chewed on a large piece of meatloaf in order to avoid answering. He so wanted to say "the future", but if he did, they'd only think he'd been drinking or taking drugs, or worse. He'd had similar visions before, but this one was so real and would sustain; alternately haunting and inspiring for the rest of his life.

Later, and still unwilling to accept sleep, Jeff read the book again. Eerily, the symbolic mathematics now began to make sense, despite him never having been taught about these realms. Predictably, his Ma thumped the wall and told him to get some shuteye. Obediently, Jeff turned the light off then lay back on top of his narrow bed to concentrate again on all those wonderful notions, praying they would still be there by morning.

Jeff's mind was now like a lagoon of tropical water: warm and crawling with life. He'd never felt so good about himself and other human beings before. In a way, he felt reborn.

'I'm going to find *you*,' he decreed to his "brothers", willing the bedroom ceiling to part like the vast doors of an observatory. 'I'm going to find *you*,' he repeated before diminishing into a restoring sleep.

When all the variables of the Drake Equation are multiplied together, we reach a figure that estimates the potential number of communicating and coexisting civilisations in the galaxy. The

equation's real value, however, is not in the numeric answer itself, but in its power to captivate and stir deep sensations in great scientists. And from that foundation, the human race moves forward.

Sadly, Jeff Macready passed away before any "contact" was made. He was still a young man with a young family when a microburst during takeoff from Chicago Airport ended his brief and brilliant life. During those few years he'd had at the crucible of his profession, Jeff had contributed so much to our understanding of space and our quest to intercept signals from intelligent life. A principal designer on the Voyager missions, he was also instrumental in building NASA's Deep Space Network for long-range communication, and countless other visionary projects where the goal was to find other sentient beings. And just as Frank Drake had inspired Jeff when he was a delinquent teenager, so his own ambitions continued to infuse those that followed him. Jeff had not died in vain.

Unfortunately, some argued that not everything Jeff worked on was in the public domain. Whilst clandestine activity was never proven, scurrilous views persist to this day.

Jeff left two children and a wife, Layla. Clarrisa, their elder child, was now married and had children of her own. Patrick, who'd been just three years old at the time, grew up a lonely and unfulfilled person. Nevertheless, Patrick, like his father, possessed a dazzling mind and had long engulfed himself with his father's work. Now, a quarter of a century since his father's tragic death, it was finally time for him to follow in those hallowed footprints.

Sadly, the mood surrounding the dream of "contact" was now at an all-time low. The Voyager missions were a distant memory, and cynics had written-off the Drake Equation. "Contact" was now too fanciful a notion for businessmen who believed that space exploration should be profitable. Patrick Macready, however, remained convinced otherwise. He didn't know why he shared a foolishly naïve optimism with his father, but maybe it was the genes?