

PROJECT NOAH

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Ian Martyn

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About The Author

Also by Ian Martyn

For my wife Catherine and my sons Daniel and Jonathan whose
belief in me never wavered.

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ONE

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6TH MAY 2098

'So, over to Marcus Tonsberg outside the European Institute for Scientific Research.'

'Thank you, Sian. I'm joined by Professor Gunther Kleim who is heading up this new body, the European Commission for Strategic Change. Professor, I understand that the European parliament has brought this group of top scientists, economists and sociologists together under your leadership and basically tasked it with solving the world's current problems. Is that correct?'

'No, of course not, Marcus. I wish we could. But it's going to take a great deal more than fifty people, no matter how good they are, to do that.'

'So what is the purpose of the group, Professor?'

'Well, Marcus, as you rightly said parliament has called for the formation of this multidisciplinary group of fifty leading scientists, economists and sociologists from around Europe. Our first task will be to gather as much data as we can concerning the challenges that face Europe and the world today. Challenges such

as continued global warming, rising sea levels and an ever-growing world population.'

'And what will you do with all that data that hasn't been done before?'

'Given the expertise of such a wide range of disciplines, we want to apply the latest diagnostic theories and technology to that information. With the aim of, as accurately as we can, predicting just what is going to happen to the planet and when. We can then model how various interventions might impact that scenario. Hopefully, this will then help us to allocate resources in the most cost-effective ways.'

'Professor, we've all seen the impact of the global changes you mention. Not least the recent floods in Indonesia and the droughts in Africa. The tens of thousands dying of starvation. Many leading scientists are already predicting that things are only going to get worse. Do you believe we can solve those problems?'

'Obviously not in the short-term, Marcus. But we have to start somewhere. As scientists I believe we can't just sit around talking doom and gloom. It's our job to come up with practical proposals as to how we can combat those issues. It may take a long time, and require a radical rethink as to how we use this planet of ours, but I do think it can be done, Marcus. I believe the human race has the capacity to overcome almost anything if it sets its mind and collective will to it.'

'And this group's remit will allow them to do that?'

'That's the idea. As we've discussed, we're to be a European think tank, tasked with trying to crystal ball the future and ultimately come up with possible solutions. No idea is to be

considered too outlandish, too mad. Extreme circumstance could dictate extreme solutions.'

'Well, Professor, thank you. And I wish you well. I guess the whole world does.'

'Thank you, Marcus.'

'This is Marcus Tonsberg, outside the European Institute for Scientific Research, for EBC News.'

'What do you think of that, David?'

'Huh, another talking shop. Just what we need.'

'Have they asked you to be part of it, David?'

'Me, mother? No, of course not. I'm afraid you think I'm much more important than I am. No, I'm far too low down the pecking order for something that grand. Malcolm Holmgrave is going to be on it, of course. Although knowing him he'll be more interested in making sure global gin supplies don't run out.'

'Can't you do anything for him, David?'

'Malcolm?'

'No, Jasper of course.' The old black Labrador had hobbled into the room attracted by the sound of voices and the rattle of china suggesting the possibility of food.

'I can't, Mum,' David said, looking down at Jasper's greying face. 'He's just old.' Jasper gazed back through watery eyes, pink tongue lolling out of his mouth and tail wagging hopefully. David bent and tickled him behind the ears. This produced a whine of appreciation before the dog's back legs gave way and his rear slumped to the floor.

‘Just look at him,’ his mother said. ‘He can hardly walk. But he still tries. I know you think I should have him put down. But it's so hard.’

Yes, he did think the poor old boy should be put down before he got much worse. ‘I know, Mum. But it's hardly fair to keep him alive like that.’ It wasn't just the increasingly crippling rheumatism, it was whatever was happening inside the poor creature too. ‘I'm sure you must be wiping up after him every morning.’ He knew she tried to hide it from him in case he insisted on that last trip to the vet's.

‘Not much,’ she lied, glancing out of the window. ‘I don't really mind.’

The problem was his father had given her the dog to help her over her treatment for pancreatic cancer. After his death two years ago she wanted to hold on to Jasper for as long as possible.

David sighed and against his better judgement decided to placate her. ‘Alright, Mum, I'll see what I can do,’ he said. ‘I'll ask some of the others in the lab.’ What she couldn't grasp was that yes, he worked in medical research and had the title of doctor, but he wasn't a medic or a vet.

At the door he kissed her on the cheek. As he got into the car, he glanced back and saw the tears in her eyes. His heart sank. With a cheeriness he didn't feel he smiled and waved as he set off for the hundred-mile drive home. Joining the motorway David engaged the autocruiser. As his car sped along the outer lanes, passing the driverless wagon trains, he turned the problem of Jasper over and over in his mind. He should've been stronger. The damn dog would have to be put down soon. All he'd done was

prolong the poor creature's suffering. Next time he must persuade her it was for the best, but then he'd said that before.

Arriving at his apartment, the hall lights came on, helping to lift his gloom. Opening the kitchen door his spirits rose further with the unmistakable smell of his wife's wonderful lasagne. He called hello and received a muted, distracted response above the sounds of applause. She was watching one of the reality shows she was addicted to. He couldn't see the attraction in them himself. Before joining her he grabbed a couple of glasses from the cupboard along with a bottle of gin.

'Ooh, good idea,' Sarah called through. How the hell did she know? He shrugged, she knew him too well. He carried the G&T's into the lounge and handed one to her. She took a sip without lifting her gaze from the screen. He wanted talk through the visit with his mum with her. However, he knew he wouldn't get anything close to an intelligent response until the programme had finished.

'Good?' he asked without enthusiasm as the over-the-top theme tune played and the credits rolled.

'Nah, rubbish really. Don't know why I watch it.'

David shook his head resisting the temptation to give voice to any of the several possible responses that came to mind.

'How's your mum?'

'She's fine. It's that bloody dog,' he replied.

'Oh David, you didn't fudge it again, did you?'

'No. Well - yes. It's not easy, you know. It's the link with Dad that's the real problem. She also thinks I can do something about it.' He hesitated.

‘And?’

‘And this time I said I would ask the guys in the lab.’

‘What!’ Sarah said.

His shoulders slumped. ‘I know, I know.’

‘But that’s cruel David, you’ve given her hope.’ Sarah glared at him, making him squirm. ‘Do you honestly believe any of them can suggest something? Other than the obvious that is?’

‘No, well - maybe. Oh, I don’t know. I’ll ask, OK?’

Sarah tutted. ‘What about your current project, that’s rheumatism isn’t it?’

‘Yes, but you know that’s more about prevention. Looking for genetic blockers or switches to stop it developing.’

‘Well, I guess you’ll just have to ask around now you’ve said you will.’ Sarah relented and her voice softened. ‘Anyway supper’s ready, let’s eat.’ Rising from her chair, she patted his knee sympathetically and kissed him. ‘Don’t worry, your mum’ll get over it you know. Perhaps you can get her another dog.’

‘You might be right,’ he said, following her into the kitchen.

Next morning, in what he liked to call ‘his’ lab, David was thinking about the conversation with his mother while staring absently into a cage containing six rats. He could have watched them from his office, but there was something about the smell of the lab, the mix of sawdust, disinfectant and rat urine, that made him feel more like a scientist.

The animals were genetically manipulated to develop rheumatism between three and six months of age. On average, nine out of ten of them would succumb, becoming almost crippled

by the time they were twelve months old. As his mind wandered and his gaze drifted out of the window, he heard his name being called. Turning round, mind still elsewhere, he found himself staring at a generous white-coated midriff.

A grey-flecked bearded face beamed down at him. 'I thought I might find you here. You forgot I was coming in this morning, didn't you?'

'No, sorry Peter,' David said, smiling back. 'Just not used to seeing you from this angle. Good to see you. My mind was elsewhere.' Peter was one of David's virtual team of co-workers. He had come down from Liverpool for discussions with their funding organisation, the Wellcome Trust, on the future of their research. The problem was that it was not progressing as well as they might have hoped.

'Those animals look alright,' Peter commented, bending forward for a better look, half-moon glasses perched on the end of his nose. Peter refused to have his eyes corrected. Said he couldn't stand the thought of someone messing with them. He joked that being one of the few people with imperfect vision gave him a different view on life to everyone else. But David reckoned it was just part of Peter's eccentricity. He liked being that bit different.

David turned his attention back to the cage. 'Yes, but they've not developed as normal. Which is probably why the rheumatism is delayed. They should be fatter than that. I wonder if I've got a problem with the cloning stock. That's all we need.'

Peter poked an exploratory finger through the bars, which was sniffed at by one of the occupants. ‘Oh I don't know for six-month-olds they look alright. A little underweight perhaps, but healthy.’

‘No, no, these animals are fifteen months old, not six. So you see what I mean?’

‘Fifteen months?’ Peter said. ‘You sure some joker hasn't swapped them. Anyway we haven't got time for this. If the funding meeting doesn't go well we can kiss goodbye to these rats along with the rest of the work.’

The presentations and meeting lasted most of the day. After a heavy grilling they were granted funds for another year, much to the relief of both David and Peter. It was only on the way home that David's thoughts returned to the cage of rats. Thinking about it, Peter was right, they did only look six months old. He was sure they were the same rats. No one was going to change them. He would check the chips in the morning. He'd been so used to looking for failure that perhaps he had jumped to the wrong conclusion.

The alarm buzzed; the radio and the soft, warm morning lighting came on. David was straight out of bed.

‘What's the matter? Sarah grumbled from under the covers. ‘Are we on fire?’

‘No,’ David said. ‘I just want to get in early. Something to look at before the day gets the better of me.’

‘Bloody hell, that's a bit keen isn't it? Well since you're up this early you can bring me a cup of tea.’

David showered in a hurry. He could hardly wait for the warm air to dry his body before dressing. Fifteen minutes later he took in the cup of tea. He kissed the crown of Sarah's head, which was all that was peeking out of the bedclothes, before running downstairs and out of the flat.

Even the underground failed to work its depressing magic and dampen his spirits today. The shuttles glided into the station sending their warm breath ahead of them. The sponsorship panels projecting the latest offerings of the holostads. He'd given up going years ago. Travelling on the tube day after day he felt he'd seen all the best bits. The door whirred but didn't open. The woman in front thumped it hard and it slid back.

'Do not interfere with the shuttles. Do not interfere with the shuttles.'

Regular commuters ignored the announcements. If you didn't interfere with them the doors wouldn't open or close half the time.

Most of his fellow passengers were as miserable as ever. But David was so absorbed in the possibilities that the small cage of rodents might represent that he even managed to ignore the umbrella that kept digging him in the back. He arrived at the school breathless having half-walked half-run from the station rather than taking the tramway. He hadn't felt this excited about his research since being a young student. On presenting his pass and his palm, the door seemed to take an age to open. He dashed through reception. 'Good morning, Dr Marshall,' it chimed. He just heard, 'You have no messages,' before he was through the next set of doors. He went through the same pass-palm routine to

unlock his office. 'Good morning, Dr Marshall,' his console called.

'Yes, and I have no messages,' he said, before it could repeat that as well. He flung his jacket on to the chair where it landed in a heap. Then, grabbing a grubby white coat, he left the office and strode down the empty corridor to the lab.

Pass, palm. The panel winked green. He paused - what if this was a prank? Taking a deep breath, he entered the room. The opaque yellowing plastic cage was in the corner of the bench under the window where he'd left it. Opening the lid, and after a brief chase round the cage, he grabbed one the rats which squeaked its annoyance at this unaccustomed early intrusion. He passed its right shoulder under the chip reader and breathed a sigh of relief. This was his rat. 'Dr D Marshall, expt. 19/313, D.O.B. 4 March 2097, age 428 days, last confirmed weight 415g.' Holding the animal in his right hand, its head poking out between his fingers, he turned the rat so that he could study it face on. There it is was, bright pink eyes, healthy wet nose and inquisitive twitching whiskers. He turned it over. The fur was the colour of single cream with none of the horrible yellowing that old sick rats tended to have. Its legs kicked energetically. No signs of any restricted movement or deformity. It was the picture of a healthy young adult rat; not what he would have expected at the age confirmed by the chip. He selected another. It was the same. Peering down, he saw five healthy animals staring back before continuing to do whatever rats in a cage did. He picked up the cage, pausing for a few seconds. Then after disconnecting the sensor tray, he tucked it under his arm and hurried back to his room, locking the door

behind him. He leant back against the door, breathing heavily, not daring to believe what might be happening.

Picking up his pad, he checked his notes. Then rechecked them. He stared at the animals in the cage again. Perhaps he was mistaken. He even passed them all under the chip reader for a second time, although he wasn't sure why. His pad confirmed the data he'd seen in the lab. He had to tell someone.

He called Sarah. 'Can you do it again?' she asked.

'I think so,' David said. 'Looking back, somehow I'd swapped two sets of the middle numbers in the formula I was using. I shouldn't be able to do that; the computer should have picked it up. But it didn't. So the nano-manipulators have acted on different sets of genetic loci, creating different variants than planned. It was random, a complete fluke. However, it should be reproducible.'

'What do think you've done?'

'Well it sounds daft. To put it crudely, I think we've blocked, or turned off, the genes responsible for ageing.'

'Is it that simple?'

'Well, we age because we're genetically programmed to do so. It's built in obsolescence. The selfish gene and all that. Once you've passed them on you've done your job. So in theory, at least, there's no reason why you can't effectively turn it off. Stop ageing. Click, live for ever.'

'So what're you going to do now?'

'I don't know. I need to think this through. Sorry, love, there's another call coming in. I'll see you later.' His mind whirled. Shit,

was it possible? Just turn off ageing? And what the hell did he do now?

Three miles and a world away, Gunther Kleim sat with his old friend and colleague Bill Chambers nursing a chipped mug of what passed for coffee.

‘What a life you lead, Gunther,’ Bill said. ‘One day appointed head of one of the most august groups ever assembled and the next talking to a group of young students in a rundown academy south of the river.’

Gunther smiled back. ‘You could’ve been part of all that you know if things had worked out differently.’

Bill shook his head. ‘I appreciate the flattery, Gunther, but no. I was never as dedicated as you, and definitely nowhere near as gifted. I guess in my own way I’m trying to do something not dissimilar. It’s just a matter of scale. While you’re striving to change maybe save the lives of millions, I’m trying to change or save the lives of hopefully one or two of these young people.’

‘Is it that bad?’

Bill glanced around. ‘Here you mean?’ Gunther nodded. ‘In a word, yes. All of them come from the Public Project Areas. And for PPAs read slums. They live off the meagre social benefits and what they can get from petty crime. The sad thing is most of the time they’re stealing from people equally as poor as themselves. These are just a few of the vast number of young people mainstream society chooses to ignore, to pretend don’t exist. But they do, if only just.’

Gunther glanced down at the threadbare arms of his chair. ‘And you?’

‘Me? I drifted in one day and failed to escape.’

Gunther leant forward and patted Bill on the shoulder. ‘Don’t give me that.’

Bill smiled. ‘OK. If I can make a difference to just one or two, get them out of here, then maybe it’ll be worthwhile. If I can just inspire a few... Anyway that’s why you’re here.’ Rising from their seats, Bill gave Gunther a shove towards the door. ‘Come on. Enough of my sob story and terrible coffee. The lion’s den awaits.’

Bill led Gunther out of the staff room into a corridor of barred windows and peeling paint; the walls witness to at least three previous attempts to brighten up the place. No doubt the colour schemes reflected what the psychologists of the day had deemed to be uplifting. They passed a noticeboard dominated by a poster for a summer camp; a picture of smiling intelligent-looking multicoloured young faces under a blue sky and surrounded by trees. ‘Any takers?’ Gunther asked, pointing to the picture.

Bill stopped, noticing the obscenity crudely drawn on one of the girls. ‘What d’you think? It’s another government scheme to make them feel better and to convince voters they’re doing something. Sorry, maybe it does help a few. To be honest though, for most of these kids it just not relevant.’

Gunther was about to ask what was relevant when Bill opened a door into a small lecture theatre. ‘Hope you’ve got your hard hat with you,’ he said with a grin.

‘Ladies and gentlemen.’ Bill waited for the general noise level to die down. ‘Today I have a real treat for you.’ The group of thirty young people seemed unimpressed. ‘That is, when you’ve had the courtesy to take your feet off the tables and at least look interested.’ His words were greeted by low murmurings and the scraping of chairs. When Bill was satisfied he had their attention, he carried on. ‘If any of you’ve bothered to pay attention to the news feeds in the last few days you might recognise the person standing next to me as Professor Gunther Kleim. He’s the newly announced head of the European Commission for Strategic Change. Professor Kleim has also not long returned from the international base on Mars where he’s been setting up bio-agricultural systems with the aim of establishing the long-term sustainability of the project. Which is mainly what he’s going to be talking about today. Professor.’

Gunther brought up the holoprojector with a rotating image of the red planet. If any in the audience were impressed they hid it well. Gunther spent about half-an-hour describing the unique challenges of living on Mars. He also showed them a glimpse of what the future could look like; the rich resources and opportunities for scientific research, and the possibility of independent human existence on other planets despite the obvious hardships. By the end of his lecture he hoped he’d at least entertained them and, as Bill had been trying to do, inspired one or two. ‘So, any questions?’ A hand went up. ‘Yes.’

‘Why bother?’

‘Well,’ Gunther said. ‘All knowledge is important. But learning to live in the harsh environment of Mars can also teach us

many things about how to live on Earth more sustainably. That's perhaps one of the biggest challenges the human race will face in the coming centuries.'

The youth grinned. 'Tell you what, Professor, if you want to experience a harsh alien environment you should come and see where I live.' This brought a chorus of laughter from the rest of the students.

'Yes, thank you, Michael, for that particular insight,' Bill interrupted. 'Any more questions for Professor Kleim?' A hand at the back was raised. 'Yes, Jake?'

'Professor, do you think Mars can be used as a base for man to go off and explore space further?'

'Thank you, Jake,' Bill said, 'for a sensible question.' This resulted in a few insults and objects being thrown at Jake. 'Enough!' Bill shouted. 'Apologies, Professor, but if you'd like to answer the question.'

Gunther smiled. 'Yes, Jake, I believe it can. More so than the moon. It has all the resources needed. What's more, being so far from Earth it makes long-term reliance on the home planet less tenable. I think eventually there'll be a large community living on Mars. Then perhaps they will naturally look outwards. How far we can go will be limited only by the imagination of the people living out there at the time.'

Back in the staff room Bill handed Gunther another mug of murky brown liquid. 'I hope that wasn't too arduous,' he said. 'Some at least were interested. Though they try hard not to show it.'

Gunther shook his head. 'You should try talking to a bunch of senior scientists. You know most of them are not really interested in what you're doing, only what they can find fault with. Anyway, I hope it helped in some way.'

'You never know. It may have lit a spark somewhere. Jake, the lad who asked the last question, maybe.'

'Bright?'

'Yes, and capable. I've given him extra tuition. But we have to hide that. If his friends found out he'd get all sorts of abuse. He's doing well and has good grades. Although again we keep that quiet.'

'So he could go on?'

Bill frowned as he slumped down into his chair. 'I don't know. As he gets older he's getting more and more reluctant. It's not a question for them of just being good enough. They have to believe they can get out, do something else. Perhaps if he's lucky, if he can stay out of crime long enough. Or at least not get caught, then maybe, but...'

'You're not hopeful.'

Bill shook his head. 'Past records don't fill you with great confidence. But who knows.'

'David?'

'Yes?'

'David, it's your mother'

'Sorry?' David said.

'Your mother. You know that female who gave birth to you.'

'Sorry, Mum, I was doing something.'

‘Obviously, and it would be nice to see you when I am talking to you.’

‘Yes, Mum,’ he answered, sitting down and turning on the screen.

‘I’ve called about Jasper,’ his mother continued. ‘He’s not getting any better and you did say you’d ask.’

‘Er, yes, right,’ he said.

‘You’ve forgotten, haven’t you?’

‘Er, no Mother,’ he heard himself reply. ‘There may be something, but no guarantees all right? Listen, I’ll come up this afternoon. See you about four.’

‘Yes, yes, I’ll have some tea ready.’

David winced inwardly. He could tell from his mother’s voice that she was already getting her hopes up.

‘See you then,’ he said, regretting what he’d just promised. Why did he say that?

Flicking off the phone, he opened the cage which had sat on his desk most of the day and grabbed one of the rats. He passed the chip reader over it for a third time. The data was the same, what else would it be? He sat for another hour going over and over what potentially it represented before taking the cage back to the lab. After some thought, he placed it in the rack furthest from the door in the middle of one of his other experiments; a stab of paranoia making him feel it was safer there. Then, fingers shaking, he set up another cage of animals, injecting them with nanos programmed as for the first set. These animals were twelve months old and

already crippled. He placed this cage alongside the other one, well away from prying eyes.

Over the next two weeks, when he was alone in the lab he found it almost impossible not to check on them hourly, although heaven knows what he expected to see.

Then he had to go away to the annual waste-of-time team-building exercise. On his return, it was all he could do not to rush into the department on the Sunday evening. After a sleepless night he was on the six-thirty shuttle and into the department by seven-fifteen. Pulling out the two cages he opened the first. They were showing no signs of any changes, no deterioration. It wasn't a dream. He hesitated in front of the second cage; what if they'd got worse? What if the first lot was just some outrageous, random accident? Raising the lid, he saw a pair of pink eyes blinking at him. The rat wandered over to the water bottle and started drinking. David noticed its gait seemed easier, if still a little stiff. Watching the other animals the same appeared to be true for them as well. He picked them up, one by one, for closer inspection. Replacing the last of the rats back in the cage, the potential of what he had accidentally discovered began to sink in. If their health improved further, it would be impossible to ignore.

David wandered back to the office in a daze, his mind switching to his other little 'unofficial experiment'. Sitting at his desk, he took a deep breath then pressed the screen for his mother. She answered almost immediately. 'Hi Mum'

'Hello David, how were the travels?'

‘Yeah, fine thanks. These things have to be endured. How’s Jasper?’

His mother’s face lit up. It was the first time in twelve months that she hadn’t looked pained at the mention of Jasper’s name. ‘Well, I don’t know what you gave him but it seems to be working,’ she said. ‘He’s moving around much better and has even stopped piddling on the floor during the night, which is a relief I can tell you. He’s looking fitter than he’s done for years. I guess it might not last for long. But it’s quality of life, as they say, isn’t it?’

‘Er, yes it is.’

‘How long do you think it’ll last?’

‘I don’t know, Mum,’ he said. ‘I honestly don’t know. Fingers crossed, hey. Listen, I can’t come up this week, too much work on. But I’ll try to visit at the weekend and see for myself.’

‘Yes, dear, I’m not going anywhere.’

He flicked the phone off, but continued to stare at the screen for several minutes. ‘Fucking, fucking hell,’ he whispered to himself.

TWO

21ST NOVEMBER 2099

'And now over to our reporter Marcus Tonsberg who's at the scene... Marcus.'

'Yes, Julian, I'm as close as I can get to where, just a few hours ago, stood two tower blocks housing over three thousand people each. As you can see behind me through the driving rain there are now just islands of rubble poking out of the water.'

'Most importantly, Marcus, are there any survivors?'

'Miraculously yes, Julian. Rescue teams are working frantically in the wreckage with thermal imaging equipment and have pulled a few people out alive. It's difficult to see how they could have survived, but they did.'

'Marcus, are they any closer to establishing what happened?'

'I don't know, Julian. I'm hoping to talk to the mayor in a few moments. What I have been able to do is speak to a few people who were close to the scene. They all report a loud noise, almost like a groaning, prior to what they thought was an explosion. One man said he'd looked out of his window to see huge pieces of the wall give way and the sea pouring through the gap. Then his building shook violently as a wall of water hit it. He said he thought they were all done for.'

'Any thoughts on the two that did collapse?'

'Well, I understand a local group has been complaining about the state of all the buildings in this area. There've been reports of chunks of concrete flaking off the supporting piles revealing rusty steel reinforcing. We can only assume that for the two buildings that collapsed the supports were sufficiently weakened that they gave way under the impact of all that water.'

'Marcus, we're getting reports here that the flood wall was also in a poor state. Any comment?'

'Yes, Julian, again the locals have said the same thing. That sections have been continually patched up rather than replaced. Also, that recently they've reported new cracks developing and say they were just ignored. Sorry Julian, the mayor has arrived. I'm going to see if I can get a comment from him.'

'Mr Mayor, Mr Mayor. Marcus Tonsberg from EBC news. What's happening at the moment?'

'Well, as you can see the rescue effort is in full swing. We're pulling in fire crews from all over the area and rescue specialists from all over Europe. At the moment we're concentrating on rescuing as many survivors from the wreckage as we can.'

'Mr Mayor, can you comment on reports that there were fresh cracks in the flood defences reported to your office only last month and nothing was done about them?'

'As you know, the flood defences are an agency matter, not local government. Now, you'll excuse me if at the moment we concentrate on the rescue.'

'And the buildings, Mr Mayor. Can you comment on reports that they were in a poor state of repair and the belief of local people that perhaps this was a disaster waiting to happen?'

'No I can't. Now get out of my way.'

'Sorry, Julian. As you can see its mayhem down here.'

'Thank you, Marcus, we'll try and get back to you later in the programme.'

'OK, Julian. This is Marcus Tonsberg, in Zeebrugge, for EBC news.'

Gunther was in the coffee shop in the lobby of the Science Ministry, drying out after being caught in a heavy shower. Being early he'd decided to walk; a bad mistake. And he was still early. So now he sat with a steaming mug of coffee in front of him and a small puddle growing at his feet, watching the latest disaster unfold on the screen. Glancing around, he saw that most people were hurrying by, giving the news report nothing more than a cursory glance. Those in the coffee shop were carrying on with their conversations. It was a sad reflection that incidents like these were happening all the time. It was hardly news any more, so people tended to ignore them. It wasn't happening to them or anyone they knew. The common view was, if you spent your time worrying and wringing your hands at every new disaster you'd never get anything done.

Bored, Gunther surveyed the grand glass atrium with its eight-metre high contemporary sculpture dominating the central foyer. As he watched, it rearranged itself into a different random-looking configuration. It was supposed to signify 'hope'. It reminded Gunther more of a pile of washed-up rubbish he'd seen near his parents' cottage on the coast. He wasn't sure where the hope was in that. Finally, his roving eyes settled on the hands of the old-fashioned out-of-place clock above the main entrance. It still wasn't time but he'd finished his coffee and was almost dry, so he decided to make his way up to the minister's office.

Gunther entered the suite through the large ornately-carved door. It was the seventh or eighth time in the last three years the minister had called for him. But somehow, when he walked across the lobby, he always felt like a naughty schoolboy called to the headmaster's study. As he neared the secretary's desk, Maxime glanced up from her terminal giving him a thin smile as if she knew something he didn't. She never did, he just suspected she liked to give out an air of superiority. Or perhaps she was in league with the minister and this was all part of an agreed mind game they liked to play, or perhaps he was letting his imagination run away with him.

'Ah, Professor Kleim,' Maxime said. 'Good of you to come at such short notice.' He could see in her hazel eyes the unvoiced thoughts, 'I know you had no choice so I'll be condescending'. The short-lived smile retreated. 'The minister will see you in fifteen minutes. In the meantime he wants you to read this.' She stood and, stretching over the desk, showed a glimpse of cleavage as she handed him a rather dog-eared brown card folder. As he tried to take it from her grasp it seemed to stick to her manicured fingers, or had she held on to it momentarily? It slipped out of his hands and despite a vain clumsy juggle the contents fell, scattering on to the floor. Bending down, he shuffled the contents back into the folder. He glanced up to see Maxime, hands clasped on the desk, staring down at him with what could only be described as a withering expression. Shit, how could she make him feel like this? He was a professor and one of the Science Minister's advisers. Some people thought him quite brilliant; occasionally he even allowed himself to feel so as well. With a firm grip on the folder and the papers it contained, he stood with all the dignity he could muster, meeting Maxime's gaze with what he hoped was an equally stone-faced expression.

Sitting down on the well-upholstered couch, he opened the folder. Luckily the main bulk of the papers were stapled together. Taking out a loose sheet first he noted it was on London University College Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery headed paper. It was a draft submission to the New England Journal of Medicine. Why in hell was the Minister bothering with draft journal submissions?. Turning to the paper itself, he saw it was titled, "The use of nanomachine technology and a possible genetic mechanism for arresting the ageing process in modified Sprague Dawley rats". The abstract suggested that the scientist, using nanomachines, had

been researching genetic switching mechanisms for rheumatoid arthritis when he'd unwittingly made a mistake in the programming which was only discovered over a year later. The rats on the other hand seemed to have benefited from the error, remaining healthy when normally they should have succumbed to the disease. What's more, rather than postulating a cure for the disease, the paper concluded that they had not developed arthritis because they hadn't aged, or at least their ageing had been retarded.

He had finished reading the conclusions and was starting on the discussion when Maxime interrupted him. 'The minister will see you now.'

Rising in haste he almost dropped the folder again, only saving the situation by squashing it against his legs. He was sure he heard her tut. Without looking at Maxime, he hurried into the minister's office. The minister was staring out at a depressing monochrome grey sky and teeming rain which ran in rivulets down the floor-to-ceiling windows. 'It's been doing this on and off for a week now, you know. With hardly a break.' Gunther did know, everyone knew.

'Yes, Minister. I've just seen the reports of those blocks that collapsed in Zeebrugge.' Gunther was glad his home was on higher ground. All those at the bottom of the village in the new housing were suffering despite the dwellings being built on stilts.

The minister, still with his back to the room, nodded. 'Yes, as if this world isn't in enough shit as it is.'

'Yes, Minister,' Gunther said, not sure if the minister was still referring to the rain.

'Read the paper, Gunther?'

'Just now, yes. At least the salient parts.' Gunther waited, wondering where this was going.

'And?'

'Well it's not my field, Minister, but it looks genuine. They've sent it to the New England Journal so they must be pretty confident that it'll pass peer review. The possibility of arresting, or at least slowing, ageing has been postulated for most of the century.'

'Yes, yes. Have you read the memo that came with it?'

'Er, no. There was a bit of an accident and...'

The minister turned, scowling at Gunther. 'Well read it now, please.'

The minister sat down behind his large antique desk, watching as Gunther fumbled with the contents of the folder and found the memo. Gunther scanned it, then read it word for word, forgetting his awkwardness.

'Well?'

'Well, Minister, I didn't grasp the full significance of this from the draft, but these conclusions seem logical to me.'

'And those are?' The minister stared across at him; his look of haughty superiority gone. Gunther thought he could sense desperation behind the man's eyes.

'That we have the very real possibility of extending healthy human adult life... slowing or arresting ageing.'

'And this is not something that's limited to rats?'

'Well, Minister. I think I agree with the memo. There's no reason to believe this shouldn't work in humans.' The minister nodded. Gunther continued: 'It could potentially also end much of the major suffering caused by ageing and degenerative diseases.' He stopped there; it was not his area at all. He was an exobiologist working on manipulating plant species to survive in extreme conditions in man-made environments in space or on other planets. But it didn't take an expert to understand the potential ramifications. It was a monumental discovery. However, the impact of people living extended lives on an already over-populated planet didn't bear thinking about.

The minister shook his head. 'No reason to believe it shouldn't work in humans,' he repeated. 'It's a potential ticking bomb. A disaster waiting to happen.'

Gunther stared at the minister. What could he say? 'Perhaps it won't translate to humans after all.'

'Do you really believe that?'

'No, Minister, sorry.'

The minister slammed a hand on the desk, making Gunther jump.

His terminal beeped: 'You alright, sir?'

'Yes, Maxime, just me getting a little over-excited.'

The minister swept a pile of papers off the desk, then looked across at Gunther as they floated to the floor. 'I'm sorry, Professor, I've been staring at this for the last twenty-four hours. The more I think about it, the worse it gets. Christ, Europe can hardly feed itself now. Areas of low-lying agricultural land are being wrecked by seawater, despite attempts at flood defences. Although I have to admit most of those are too little too late. Then other areas are being hit by drought, year after year. We're subsidising the hydroponic and the mould farms as much as we can, but it's still hardly making a dent in the food deficit. So we're shipping in food from Africa where millions are already starving. We're talking about closing our borders; the only thing stopping us is the likely backlash on food imports. The human race is on the brink, Professor. This might just nudge it over the edge.'

'Sorry, Minister, I understand. But I don't think you can stuff the genie back in bottle. On the plus side, such a discovery may have knock-on benefits we just can't think of at the moment.'

The minister looked unconvinced. He shook his head. 'Take it to its ultimate conclusion. We're doing as much about birth control as we dare and, despite all the predictions over the years to the contrary, the Earth's population still rises. Europe's birth rate may be low, but we're struggling to keep a lid on immigration, both legal and illegal. As for the developing world, little's changed in the last hundred years despite all the so-called education programmes. The poor have more children, which keeps them poor. Now you have the potential of people living for God knows how long.' The minister threw his hands in the air as words failed him.

'Could you restrict its use?' Gunther asked.

'How?' the minister said. 'Price it high? I'm sure the drug companies will do that anyway. Then what? Can you imagine the social and political backlash? Money, or worse, politicians deciding who can live, who can't. Anyway, that wouldn't last long. It's a drug; basic technology I'm told. Patent protection has little meaning in many parts of the world. Before you know it there'll be countless generics out there.'

'Yes, I see,' Gunther said. No matter how you looked at it, this piece of academic good fortune was going to have the most severe consequences.

The minister peered at him. 'I take it it's too late to stop this getting out?'

Gunther shrugged. 'You might delay it, Minister. Put pressure on. Have the London School withdraw it or to have the publication rejected. But it's already gone for peer review and they'd be suspicious if something this big doesn't get through. Also, we don't know who else he's told or is involved. I think it's safe to say the can of worms is open. The pharma spies are already likely to have picked up on this. If not, they will soon. Stopping publication may even alert them to it.'

The minister glared at Gunther in silence, making him squirm in his seat. He could almost see the other man's mind working. 'How soon can you get the ECSC together?'

'If I tell them what it's about I'm sure we can meet in a couple of weeks time.'

The minister shook his head. 'No, don't tell them about the paper yet. Let's call it scenario planning for continuing population expansion, or something like that. Stress the importance. I want it soon.'

‘Yes, Minister. Will I be able to tell them at the meeting? It’s conceivable some will have been on the review panel.’

‘I don’t know yet, Gunther, I’ll let you know.’

‘Er, yes, I will get right on it.’

‘Oh, and I want them all to sign an additional confidentiality agreement. There must be no misunderstanding of the consequences if they blab any of this; understood?’

‘Er, certainly, Minister.’

‘Now make an appointment with Maxime for some time next week so I can brief you and we can go over the remit for the meeting in more detail. Better make it a couple of hours.’

This worried Gunther as much as anything. Getting half-an-hour with the minister was hard enough, two hours was unheard of. ‘Sure.’

The minister turned back to his desk indicating the meeting was over. ‘Good,’ he said as Gunther rose from his seat. ‘Maxime, can you get someone in here to clear up?’ Gunther closed the door behind him. ‘Oh, and Maxime please tell the Minister for Internal Security I’d like to see him.’

‘Sarah, is that you?’

‘Yes, who else were you expecting?’

‘Are you alone?’

‘Hang on, I’ll just send my secret lover out of the room, oops. David, what is all this? What’s going on?’

‘Sorry, I’ll call you back. Stay there.’

‘Sarah it’s me again, I’ve just gone in to Gerald’s office.’

‘David, what is going on? Why can’t I see you?’

‘I just wanted to phone, so I could listen to the line before coming in here. And I don’t want to risk the video link.’

‘Listen for what? David, what is it?’

‘Some men from the government are here. Malcolm reckons they’re MI5 or MI6; I never know the difference. I’ve managed to park them in my office. They think I’m gathering my things but I needed to talk to you. Also, I think my phone is being monitored. But that’s not important.’

‘David, what have you done?’

‘Nothing, or at least nothing intentional. It’s not me. Look, stop asking questions for a minute and just listen. We’ve had a break-in here at the school. My room’s been ransacked. They’ve turned over everything, but I think they knew what they were looking for and where to find it. My lab book is gone. I’ve been keeping it hidden. The rest of the mess is just camouflage, so these guys say.’

‘So who would do that?’

‘They’re saying it could be industrial espionage or even a radical religious group.’

‘But how would they find out?’

‘You know what it’s like with something like this and academics, everyone wants to be the first to tell someone else.’

‘But why are the government guys there?’

‘For our own protection, apparently. If they’ve broken in here, then anything’s possible. They’ll be with you later.’

‘Oh shit, David.’

'I know, I know. But I need you to do something before they arrive.'

'David, David.'

'Sarah please, my work, even the back-ups have gone.'

'You sure?'

'Yes, it's the first thing I checked even before I called security. Sarah, please just listen, you know that mess two years ago when I lost my lab book.'

'Yes'

'Well I didn't. Lose it that is.'

'What? And you were on a disciplinary for that.'

'I know, well I did kind of lose it. But then I found it again. I just didn't tell them I'd found it. Anyway it's in my desk at home. I've been backing up on that as well.'

'But that's not supposed to be possible. You can't take those things out of the school.'

'I know, well, not easily. You can't imagine how difficult it was lowering it out of the window. Sorry, I haven't got time to explain.'

'David, why are you telling me all this?'

'Just send it to Peter'

'David, what...?'

'Just send it to Peter, please. He'll know what to do. I must go. I love you.'

Gunther looked round the room as the participants settled in their seats. In the end it had taken four weeks to assemble the group. It always took twice as long as you thought, no matter how urgent you tried to make it seem. Anyway, forty-seven had turned up, which was good. One had a commitment he couldn't move and the other two were ill.

Although there was no defined seating plan, they all gravitated to the same places they had sat in many times before. There was much shaking of hands and exchange of banter as friendships were renewed. There was also the occasional glare. As always with such a group there were rivals and those who simply couldn't stand each other.

Gunther tapped the microphone. 'Ladies and gentlemen, shall we begin?' There was the scraping of chairs and some mumbling as they broke off their conversations and the last few took their places. Gunther was about to speak again when the door opened. Henry Gibson rushed in with his pad under his arm. He was clutching a croissant and a mug of coffee. He waved in an apologetic manner before shuffling at speed round the tables and sitting down next to Gunther. 'Sorry,' he mumbled. 'Bloody alarm.'

'Nothing to do with those scotches in the bar last night then?'

Henry made a big show of looking innocent before grinning in reply.

'Right, if we're all here now,' Gunther said. 'Preferably in mind and body,' he added, glancing at Henry, which produced a few smiles. 'Let's get the housekeeping out of the way first. Myself and Henry will chair the meeting. We'll break for lunch at 12.30 and be finished by 6.00 today and then finish by 4.30 tomorrow. On the dot, I promise.' The last statement raised a ragged ironic cheer. These meetings had a habit of over-running so no one booked travel based on the scheduled finish time.

Gunther cleared his throat. 'So, on to business. I know it's unusual for us all to get together in person. Normally it's just the sub teams. However, the minister has requested we meet physically so that we have your undivided attention. He's also asked me to stress the security of these sessions. On your pads is an additional confidentiality agreement. Please read it now. And I'm sorry, but if anyone can't agree to it before we start I'm

going to have to ask you to leave.’ This produced another round of muttering then a few minutes of silence as they all absorbed the detail.

Eventually Gunther could see the agreements coming in. To his relief everyone signed up. ‘Thank you for that. Now we can get on with the real business. This time we don’t just have a single topic to discuss. The minister is keen that we move on to what we were originally brought together for; scenario planning. I know it’s early days and we’re still gathering data, but he’s insistent that we bring our collective expertise to bear on building the model and making those predictions.’ Gunther projected the agenda. ‘You should all have had a copy of this. I’ll make a few opening remarks. Then we’ve invited ten of you to make short fifteen-minute presentations. The rest of the time will be dedicated to break-out groups looking into specific issues. After lunch tomorrow we’ll all get back together to review progress. Now we’re not expecting to complete at this meeting. I’m sure we’re going to throw up as many questions as answers. That’s fine. At the end of tomorrow we can discuss the next steps, work needed and that type of thing. So, any questions around the agenda?’ Gunther looked round. There were a few nodding heads; it was all standard to these people.

‘Good, I’ll get straight on with my opening remarks.’ Gunther outlined the discussions he’d had with the minister, at least those the minister had agreed to. He stressed the minister’s worries around the cumulative effects of population growth and the reliance on developing world food production when they couldn’t even feed themselves. He referred to the ever-growing influence of climate change and the world’s inability to have a major impact upon it despite a century of talks, proposals and targets. It had been slowed down for certain, but nowhere near enough. Then, despite all the measures to conserve energy, the simple equation was that increasing population increased demand. Other priorities had ensured all too little investment in solar, wave and wind power. The final dwindling of oil and gas supplies in the middle of the century had led to a brief flurry of research activity. But in the end many countries had fallen back on nuclear, and those with remaining coal stocks had taken the easy way out despite the obvious potential environmental impacts. It could easily be another century before renewables would fill any gap.

Next, against ever-rising sea levels, the world’s flood defences were crumbling and the cost of renewing them was prohibitive. They had all seen the reports of major disasters accompanied by horrendous loss of life.

Finally, in Africa and parts of Asia, the cumulative impact of seasonal droughts were growing every year. Millions starved and tens of thousands died. Added to this, the world’s ability to react to each disaster was weakening as food aid stocks dwindled.

Gunther’s ten-minute summary painted a gloomy picture. Around the room were long faces. Some glanced at their colleagues, some doodled on their pads; most just watched the pictures in silence. It was nothing they hadn’t heard before but it didn’t make it any easier to digest.

Gunther tried to end on some notes of optimism. He had to send them off in a positive frame of mind, thinking of what could be done rather than that the situation was hopeless. There was increased investment in the hydroponic and fungi farm technology. Productivity was rising, even if it still only supplied around ten per cent of the world’s food needs. Asia had again agreed to limit its use of coal-fired generators and to invest more in their carbon trapping technology despite its impact on the cost of the energy produced. This was greeted with mumbled scepticism. One of the talks was to be on the potential of huge carbon scrubbers, both on the ground and in low orbit. While it was early days, the predictions on what these might achieve was encouraging.

Gunther glanced around the sea of faces. The usual ones were filled with doubt and cynicism. But some at least looked positive, bright with hope and ideas. What he hadn’t mentioned, of course, was the possible life extension therapy and the minister’s view that this just might be the final straw. Many if not most in the room would already be aware of the pending publication, and Gunther was sure they were already drawing their own

conclusions. But the minister didn't want to give the impression that he was anything other than optimistic about the future. What didn't help, of course, was that finance to act on any major new initiatives would be hard to find. Every resource currently available was focused on short-term fire-fighting. The political will to look far ahead was limited. For many, it was just too painful. Gunther couldn't say he knew the minister well and perhaps he'd caught him on a bad day. But Gunther had been surprised when he'd used phrases like sitting on a powder keg, a worldwide tinderbox and widespread anarchy. At one point he even made a vague reference to some high-level working group looking at a doomsday scenario. He couldn't decide whether the minister saw this conference as a possible beacon of hope or some last desperate throw of the dice.

Gunther closed his pad after the final session of the two days. It was five-thirty, not the four-thirty as promised, but that wasn't bad. He glanced across at Henry. He smiled. Henry was patting his pockets. What was it this time... room tag, ID? Whatever it was he must have located it. Henry gave a faint sigh, then noticing Gunther, smiled back with a look of relief. Gunther resisted the temptation to pull Henry's leg about it. 'What did you make of all that?'

Henry sucked in air. 'Well, I suppose it's bound to look depressing at the moment. Basically, all we've done is outline the problems, the present situation and where it's going if nothing's done about it. I guess it didn't tell us much more than we already knew. The difference is that this time we've seen it all together. It's hard to deny the conclusions when it's been laid out in such stark naked reality. Next time when the groups come back with more detailed scenarios, new ideas and what's possible, it should be more positive. What about you?'

'Yeah, I guess I agree. Listen, you got time for a drink?'

'Sure, I'm on the late flight back. Here?'

'No, let's find somewhere quiet.'

'Oh, intriguing.'

Walking out of the hotel lobby they grabbed a couple of umbrellas. The rain was bouncing off the pavement, falling from a dark and brooding sky, matching Gunther's mood. As they hurried along, shoulders hunched, Gunther decided he was going to discuss with Henry the minister's views on the impact of the anti-ageing treatment. He knew he could trust Henry and would square it with the minister if he ever found out.

Entering the bar, they shook the water off their umbrellas and propped them up in a corner with a host of others to drip. Opening the inner door, they were greeted by a welcoming warm glow from the low lighting and a humid fug from the drying clientele. Gunther pointed to a couple of seats in an empty corner. 'Grab those, I'll get the drinks. What're you having?'

'Er, a small beer. The local one.'

Gunther carried two small beers over to the table, placing one in front of Henry. He then managed to spill some of his own as he took a sip from the overfull glass. 'Ugh, I hate that. Now I'll smell of beer for the rest of the evening.'

'There are worse things,' Henry said. 'Anyway, I take it there's something you wanted to tell me you didn't want wagging ears to pick up? Not a woman, is it?' he added, smiling.

'No, it's not a woman.' Gunther tutted. 'Is that all you think about?'

'No, just kidding. The trouble is at the moment that's all I'm doing after Susan left... thinking about it.'

'Well, sorry, I haven't got time to play agony aunt at the moment.'

Henry nodded. 'So what is it?'

Gunther talked Henry through his discussions with the minister and his view that the anti-ageing treatment might just be the last straw for a world already stretched to the limit. Henry whistled through his teeth.

‘Well,’ Henry said, ‘the publication is probably one of the scientific world’s worst-kept secrets. But I guess most of us were waiting to read it before drawing any final conclusions. You sure it’s as good as the rumours say it is?’

‘Oh yes. I’ve read the draft. It’s been speculated about for decades of course, so in some ways it shouldn’t be that much of a surprise. Also the minister’s had one or two in the regulatory agency look at it as well. They’re convinced this is a real goer.’

‘Hmm, how long?’

Gunther leaned back and took a sip of his beer. ‘Say five years before it hits the streets, if it hits the streets.’

‘What do you mean if?’

‘I got the feeling the minister was going to do his best to bury it.’

‘Seriously?’ Henry shook his head. ‘No chance. If it’s gone to the New England, the chances are it’s already out for peer review. You know some of those old boys, they couldn’t keep news this big to themselves if their own lives depended on it. I’ll bet some big pharma company is already drooling over a potential profit forecast.’

‘I think that’s for definite. The original researcher, David Marshall, had his rooms ransacked and his lab note pad stolen. Apparently they’ve had to organise protection for him. But I think that may also be some sort of attempt to regulate who he talks to. But despite that I hear he’s been offered a post by at least two of the big companies.’

‘You don’t say,’ Henry replied.

Gunther approached Maxime's desk feeling as usual like a naughty schoolboy. She looked up. ‘Go straight in, the minister’s expecting you,’ she said.

The minister was standing, staring out of the window with his hands clasped behind his back. As he turned, Gunther noted the red-rimmed and puffy eyes. ‘Well, Gunther, you’ve seen the news channels?’

‘Yes, Minister.’

‘We shall deny it, of course, for all the good that’ll do. We already know one pharma company has its grubby hands on at least some of the data. I’m told it won’t take them long to put the rest together.’

‘I shouldn’t think so, no.’ Gunther paused as the minister sucked at his teeth. ‘It didn’t come out in the New England Journal though.’

The minister gave a rueful smile. ‘No, we stopped that. But it seems our clever little academic was somewhat more resourceful than we gave him credit for. He had a copy of his lab book elsewhere. Completely against the rules, of course, but not uncommon apparently,’ he added, raising an eyebrow at Gunther.

‘Ah,’ Gunther said, feeling a little guilty and relieved at the same time about his own arrangements. ‘And the academic in question?’

‘Hmm,’ the minister said, shuffling in his seat. ‘It seems that he’s accepted a position with the company I was referring to. Coincidence, you think?’

‘I don’t suppose so, Minister.’

‘No, neither do I. I don’t blame him though. At least we know where he is and we have some sensible connections with company concerned.’

‘So what now?’

The minister smiled without humour. 'I guess you can now officially work this into your scenarios. How's it going by the way?'

'Well, as you know, we've had three meetings. The first was a review of the current situation and...'

'Yes, yes,' the minister said. 'I can guess. Just give me the bottom line. How bad is it?'

'Er, not good, Minister. Of course, any crystal ball-gazing has its limitations and we're still collecting data. But the basic prediction is that without some radical action soon, your doomsday committee may be aptly named.'

The minister nodded. 'It doesn't take a genius to understand things are going to get worse before they can get better.'

'No, Minister, but I'm not sure you understand the scale of what we're potentially saying. From what we're seeing at the moment there may not be a better.'

The minister stared at him and sat down at the desk before reluctantly saying: 'Go on.'

'I'm sorry, Minister, but I want to make a proposal before we deliver the final report. A few weeks or months more is not going to make any difference.'

'And the proposal is?'

'I want to pick a dedicated team of five or six rather than use the full group. Then take our conclusions, add in the life extension data...'

'Which can only make things worse right?'

'Maybe, Minister, but it may just offer other possibilities.'

The minister shuffled the pens and stylus on his desk before lining them up. 'Fine, whatever you want. We've been playing at this for over a hundred years. So, as you say, a few weeks isn't going to make much difference.'

Gunther levered himself out of the chair. 'Thank you, Minister, I'll get right on it.'

'Gunther,' the minister said as Gunther opened the door. 'Just give me the bottom line.'

Gunther closed the door again, turning round. 'That's why I want a small team to work on this.' He said, avoiding the question. 'At the moment, even with radical action, we're not sure how our current scenarios might be avoided. Also, I'm not sure anyone would want to carry out what we're suggesting will be needed to even stand a chance of avoiding them.'

The minister raised his voice. 'Gunther, I'm not a child. What're we talking about?'

Gunther took a few paces back into the room. 'I'm sorry, Minister. We've not worked this through fully yet. However, a few possible examples: mass compulsory sterilisation of certain sections of society; immediate dismantling of all coal-fired power stations; halving the world electricity consumption; standing back and letting millions die of starvation; the possible annexing and the military defence of parts of the Earth for select groups of people to act as "safe havens". And those are some of the more palatable.'

The minister bowed his head before holding it in both hands. After a few seconds he looked back up at Gunther. 'And getting back to my question. The bottom line?'

Gunther sighed. It was hard enough to think it; somehow saying it out loud made it worse... more real. 'Within fifty to a hundred years, a hundred and fifty at the outside, the total breakdown of what we currently recognise as human civilisation. Even if we take all the actions we're recommending it may not be possible to prevent. In some scenarios those actions could even accelerate that conclusion. That's why I want a small dedicated team to work on this from now on and for as long as it takes.'

As Gunther walked back to the door he heard the minister slump down in his padded leather chair. 'Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.'

It took Gunther an hour to complete the seven-kilometre journey across town. The extensions to the metro system had been constructed in a hurry. There'd been rumours at the time about corruption and corners cut to meet unrealistic deadlines. So shoddy workmanship, coupled with a high water table, meant that parts were regularly declared unsafe and closed off for repairs. Eventually Gunther emerged into a fine drizzle gusting around the rust-streaked concrete buildings of the institute, sweeping with it plastic bags and discarded paper cups. The security system was playing up again and he had to call for someone to open the door. That added another few minutes for drips to run down his neck.

Gunther stared at an empty office. 'Henry?'

Henry strolled into view holding a steaming mug in one hand and a pile of biscuits in the other. 'Want one?' he asked. 'Although it looks like you could do with something stronger.'

Gunther grunted, mopping at his shirt collar with a paper towel. 'Please. It would've been quicker to walk all the way, and only slightly wetter.' Henry handed Gunther his cup but kept hold of the biscuits as he wandered back to the kitchen area to get himself another cup. Two minutes later he returned with even more biscuits, handing a couple to Gunther.

'How did it go with the minister?'

'He agreed to the small team. You and I need to come up with names we can trust and work with.'

Henry took a noisy slurp. 'Now you really are making it difficult.'

Gunther cupped both hands around his mug. 'Yes, I know. Last week, even when we'd finalised the conclusions of the meeting, some of them just seemed to see it as an opportunity to get more funding for their own pet projects.'

Henry shrugged and laughed. 'Hell, yes, Gunther. The end of the world is one thing. But, hey, if you can get a few more Phd students out of it...'

Gunther smiled back. 'Yeah, yeah. Listen I'm serious. I also want to find a space ship engineer. And get an expert in off-world living, or whatever you call them, on the team. We can always bring others in as we need them but...'

'Whoa, backtrack a minute. You did say space ship engineer and something about off-world?'

'Yes, I have an another idea I want to explore.'