

SPAWN OF HELIOS

Chapter 1

Hermann Reicher sat in the darkened control room bathed in the soft green glow of the transor, the information sphere that spun beside him in its transparent container. Reicher was a neuro savant and although his eyes were closed as if in slumber, his sub-conscious was hyperactive, for he had the rare gift that allowed his brain to connect directly to the computer via the transor, an information sphere, and its sensor ring, thus speeding up the processing of data a thousand-fold.

A faint click from the timing relay signaled the session's end and Reicher stirred. For a moment his eyes blinked rapidly as normal brain function took over, then as it did, he got up and moved across to the window. After opening the metal shutters he looked out into the night trying to calm his racing pulse.

The building was unlit, its bleak exterior illuminated only by the faint glow from the surrounding city of Pasadena. Reicher was in charge of security in the building which during the day housed some 500 scientists working for DOS, the Department of Science, an organisation probing at frontiers that made secrecy mandatory.

Reicher could not have known that he had only a few more minutes to live but the thought of what he'd just been instructed to do next, which was to circumvent his own security, was deeply disturbing. Espionage was now conducted almost exclusively on an electronic front and he was moving into dangerous territory—not what he'd anticipated when he'd originally agreed to provide information, but the money on offer was worth almost any risk.

After some moments he closed the shutters, stepped into the corridor and took the elevator to Sub 27, the lowest level in the building, some 90 metres underground. As with all DOS offices, this one was built down rather than up with the most prestigious offices on the lower floors. The contrast of Sub 27 with those above was considerable. Here were the trappings of luxury given only to the elite. The relatively few doors that led off to either side of the corridor gave access to offices whose size and furnishings spared no expense. To anyone familiar with the parsimony of DOS it was obvious that the people who worked here possessed special talents

that warranted pampering.

He paused momentarily before a door on which the name "Dr L. C. Charmaine" was pronounced boldly in black enamel on gleaming brass, then unlocking it, he crossed to her desk on which sat a transor identical to the one he'd been using. Dr Lorelle Charmaine, like himself, was a neuro savant although far more skilled than he was.

From the electro-furnace in the wall he took out two transors that had just been processed from Washington and which were still warm to the touch. He dropped the first one into the drive, then slipped the sensor ring over his head and settled back.

An audible sigh escaped him as his mind came to terms with the NS language that flooded his senses and filled his brain with a gigantic symphony of controlled magnetic field interaction. His face became suffused with a look almost of rapture as his mind traced down the myriad channels until the logic circuits were set like the map of a huge city.

Dr Charmaine's work covered an extraordinarily diverse field. Initially he had been skeptical of her importance and the likely value of any work undertaken by a 23-year-old mathematician and a woman at that, even if she had obtained her Doctorate of Mathematics at the extraordinary age of 16 and later taken out degrees in physics and psychology. He had since revised his opinion and now understood why she was housed with the elite, for the deceptively simple and direct approach with which she came to grips with the problems submitted to her by DOS indicated a unique talent.

He scanned the latest projects:

"The Harmonic Interaction of Long and Short Gravity Waves."

"Perfect Numbers. The Infinite Weakness in Langley's Theorem".

"Stressed Particle Fields".

"A Fifth Dimension for Space - Time Matrices".

He skipped quickly through the list and decided to extract everything. So far so good. He put in the second transor, then tensed as he saw the title. "Helios Review. Mass Energy Conversion." This was the information his contact wanted.

He worked through the files totally absorbed in the concept,

noting that the project had stalled apparently, which was why Dr Charmaine was to become involved. He tensed suddenly, sensing a problem with the data that was both confusing and frightening. As he grappled for mental control sweat beaded his forehead and once again his pulse was set racing for a nightmare began to take hold. He sensed something menacing had entered the room which now grew steadily darker. Strange shapes appeared and faded—ghoulish impressions made hideous by the greenish light of the transor. He tried to rip off the sensor ring, but his arms would not respond. Hands encircled his throat and he cried out in fear and panic as they squeezed tighter and tighter. Barely conscious now, he sensed he was being lifted up to stand on the chair and he rocked unsteadily as his head was forced back until he was staring up at a large ceiling fan. A noose, hanging from the fan, was slipped over his head and the fan switched on.

The menacing shapes gradually vanished from his consciousness leaving him alone and he blinked, trying to clear his mind. He knew that what was happening could not be real. He knew there was no overhead fan in this or any other room and he could feel the top of the desk pressing into his forehead when he had slumped forward, yet the illusion of standing on the chair was overwhelming.

Even as he reasoned his mind began to fill with the discordant scream of a billion electrons surging in stroboscopic intensity: hurled back and forth by the sensor on his head until his brain seemed to liquefy. In growing horror he watched as the turning blades of the fan twisted and tightened the rope. He could feel the pressure on his windpipe then and the stress in his lungs as he gasped for breath. The rope continued to wind up, forcing him on to his toes, throttling him steadily.

He tried to scream, and then gagged as his feet were lifted off the chair. A red mist filled his vision and his body twisted like a limp puppet, slowly at first, then faster; unwinding the rope until his feet contacted the chair once more. In the few seconds that the rope was slack he had time to gasp great lungfuls of air before the noose tightened and the sequence was repeated. He could feel his heart pounding, bursting in his chest, the throb of a blinding headache splitting his brain. The telering monitor on his wrist sent a signal to the computer in his office as his pulse reached 120, at 150 a light flashed in the empty control room. At 180 outside security were

alerted.

The electronic ceiling eye in the Lorelle's office recorded his progress dispassionately. Reicher appeared to be resting with his head on the desk except that his mouth opened and shut in small gasping movements, the lips drawn back to expose the teeth and gums, while his eyes, wide and dilated, reflected the faint green luminosity of the spinning transor. It duly noted the change in body temperature and heart beat, both of which began to drop at that moment. The temperature kept dropping; the heartbeat ceased.

* * *

Lorelle was told of the events of the previous night by Jack Morgan, head of DOS security, and agreed to meet him at her workplace at 10 am. When she arrived he was waiting, along with a medical consultant he introduced as Dr Phillips. Morgan looked rather tired and a grey stubble on his chin indicated that he had been out of bed from an early hour.

"I'd like to play you a video of what happened to Reicher as he sat in your chair last night," Morgan said, after introductions. "I can assure you it is not violent but why he died is a mystery."

Lorelle shook her head. "Play it by all means."

As the video ended Lorelle sighed. "The poor man; why was he in my office and what happened to him? I don't understand."

"Can you think of any reason why he should break his own security and come down here?" Morgan asked.

Lorelle pushed back a strand of long platinum blond hair. "All my work is now classified. If you label it as secret it tends to generate curiosity."

"I'm told he was a neuro savant and that you share that ability, but to a much greater extent."

She nodded. "Yes."

He held up the sphere that Reicher had reviewed. "Are you aware of what's on this transor?"

"No, it would have been fired last night."

For a moment Morgan looked puzzled. "Fired, you mean as in gun?"

Lorelle smiled, displaying a glint of even teeth. "No, as in furnace. These are made right here. Washington initiates the process when it has all the data together; they're made only for NS work."

He shrugged. "I've had no experience of people with such ability. It's very rare isn't it?"

"There are only four others known in the US now Reicher is gone."

"Is it possible that the information on the transor could have been tampered with to affect people like yourself?"

"You mean a sort of death program?" She frowned and shrugged. "I've never considered it but given the way the mind-computer connection works it might be possible."

Morgan exchanged glances with Dr Phillips before turning back to Lorelle with a troubled expression. "Dr Charmaine, I have a somewhat brutal request to make of you. Reicher's death appears to be linked to a request to transfer you to the Helios Project team at the Jicarilla Facility in Los Alamos. This project is at a critical stage. We need to know whether someone or some group wants to keep you away and whether we're looking at some new form of electronic bastardry."

She second guessed what he was after. "You want me to review the data on the transor?" She picked up the sphere. Made of ferrosilicate, it was about the size of a large marble in which the sector filaments could be seen like a gossamer of orange spider web. She flashed a brief smile. "I'm intrigued. Yes I'll try it out for you."

The test was carried out under the control of Dr Phillips and a young technician. Phillips had the practiced air of a Hollywood Psychiatrist accompanied by an authority of manner similar to Morgan; they were obviously a product of the same government system. When they had hooked Lorelle up and were ready Morgan turned to her; the slate grey eyes were softer.

"You still want to go through with this?"

In answer, Lorelle put her own fingers on the switch but before she could begin Dr Phillips held up his hand for one last check. He looked at the analogue recorders and then shook his head. None of the dials monitoring Lorelle were registering any change from normal; yet he and Morgan were sweating blood. He inclined his head for her to begin.

As the transor was activated there was a marked change in the output from the three main brain divisions, each attached to five separate channels. Phillips had done extensive studies on neuro savants and as he watched Lorelle he reflected that their skill almost certainly arose from their ability when under sensor stimulation to command performance from the whole brain, not just part of it.

At 2m 06sec the critical sector from Washington was

accessed by Lorelle, requesting a transfer to the Helios Project under its director, Dr Newstead. Phillips noted a sudden increase in pulse rate and a spikiness appearing in the delta wave pattern. More disturbing was the sudden burst of brain stem neuron activity. It was as if she were experiencing a vivid dream.

He scanned the dials anxiously. Blood pressure breathing and sweating were becoming irregular, the flow of blood to the brain was up 5% and there were signs of atonia, the paralysis of sleep.

His hand hovered over the switch, ready to shut down the transor but Lorelle was obviously not undergoing the trauma that Reicher went through; she remained relatively relaxed, her pupils normal.

At 2m 21sec., the sector finished and Lorelle looked down as if to check that she was in one piece. She smiled. "I appear to have survived, I'm sorry, I mean I'm sorry your theory was flawed, Mr. Morgan."

Morgan smiled. "Believe me, I'm delighted too. Let me ask you a few questions and we'll let you get on with your work. I take it that you have no objection to transferring to the Helios project then?"

She felt a sudden shock. The word Helios evoked what seemed like a lightning bolt in her brain and she shuddered.

"Dr Phillips." The doctor's assistant broke into the silence, his voice low and urgent.

The two men swung round in unison and Phillips cursed as he took in the display panel in one quick glance. All the dials had moved into the red, mirroring Lorelle's now highly disturbed state.

"Quick." He swung back to Lorelle as she slumped forward in her chair but she waved him off. "I'm ok," she said. "Just give me a moment."

Lorelle's condition appeared to stabilise but against her protests they transferred her to a stretcher that had now been brought in.

"Get her up to Med," Phillips said. He turned to Morgan. "I'm sorry, she seems ok now but this is a new form of warfare, I've no idea if she's injured permanently or temporarily or what other side effects there might be."

Morgan turned away, a pricking sensation at the back of his eyes. "Thanks." He spoke gruffly to hide the catch in his voice. "It was my decision and I'll take the rap. I'll meet you in Med shortly."

* * *

Vic Goldman sat in the lounge of his Penthouse apartment at the Seattle Goldstrip Casino. From here he looked down on the greater part of the city that in the deepening twilight sparkled with the glitter of innumerable multicoloured neon and laser displays.

From his office he could not only see most of the city but also into every part of the casino, from the goods elevator to the exclusive bordellos on the upper floors where only the richest and by implication, the most corrupt, could afford the sexual fantasies he provided. One of Goldman's many pleasures—and his life was full of pleasure, was to view the physical agility of customers seeking sexual gratification and he occasionally recorded the more heroic feats for playback but rarely if ever for blackmail. There was more important business to be conducted that was generally of less risk and greater reward.

Goldman liked to be surrounded by feminine company and as owner and manager of the casino he now had nearly 4000 women on the payroll, generally under age 30, most of whom he had personally selected. Over the years he had come to realise there were limits to what punishments his body could sustain without putting at risk the empire he had built and at fifty, grossly overweight and unfit he now confined his private pleasures to voyeurism and food.

Today the lounge was shared by Louise his million dollar a year secretary and by Cherie, his favourite hostess, a 25 year old redhead who had the knack of exciting his normally jaded fantasies with little more than a raised eyebrow or the caress of her hand.

Female staff, with the exception of Louise and a few others, all wore a uniform that comprised a tight black leather skirt and a peasant blouse. The skirt was slit on one side to display the entire leg, which was encased in black stocking attached to a red suspender belt. A low cut peasant blouse of ultra-thin white silk with skimpy uplifting bra, was designed to tantalise and distract customers from their losses at the gaming tables and in this it was very successful. The girls were trained to give the impression that they were demure yet saucy, of high moral tone but possibly seducible.

“A call for you,” Louise said, catching his eye.

Goldman was expecting it. He went into the office and shut the door, then turned on the wall screen which remained blank.

“Firestone” The voice over the speaker was clipped, the vowels very English but flawed by the Asian inflections that

occasionally intruded.

"Go ahead." Goldman had never seen this contact but had a picture in his mind of what he looked like.

"Reicher is dead."

Goldman was suddenly alert. Getting Reicher's cooperation had been expensive but brilliant; now it was blown before it had really got started. "You want a new contact?"

"No, the opportunity's gone."

"What happened to Reicher?"

There was a short pause. "We think he intercepted a missile meant for the woman." The voice continued. "In a few weeks Helios should blow. I don't want that girl in there meddling." The voice was hard, uncompromising.

"You want us to take her out?"

"No. San thinks he can use her once Helios blows. He tells me with her genius she may have the ability to solve the outstanding theoretical work, I don't like it; keeping her about is risky but we'll try for that."

"So where do I store her in the meantime?"

"At Goldstrip. Give her the pleasure treatment. Make her nice and cooperative but keep her out of sight until we spike Helios and San gets out."

"Where is she?"

"On vacation. A DOS resort called Seascan. If there's trouble, eliminate her; we can't afford risks."

Goldman closed the contact and the steel and carbon fingers of his prosthetic right hand that he had lost in the Columbian drug wars thirty years ago, tapped the console as he thought for a moment, then he called up security on the ground floor where a man was sprawled before a bank of consoles. "Boris?"

The man sat up, suddenly alert. "Yes Mr Goldman?"

"Crunch and Vitani. They're here for the Robinson Brief."

"They're in the bar."

"Find someone to replace them. I want them up here in one hour, sober. I also want the ambulance for 8 am tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

Goldman worked in his office until Cherie informed him of his visitors' arrival. He returned to the lounge and lumbered across to the table by the window as Cherie ushered the men in.

"Mr. Vitani and Mr. Coker," she said. Cherie returned to the

bar to mix them drinks.

Goldman had used the men before. Vitani was the hit man. He was neatly dressed, with intelligent eyes, quick movements and a smile that failed to reach his eyes. Coker or "Crunch" as he was called was the opposite, a huge man, who looked like the heavyweight boxer he'd once been. Two teeth were missing, his nose was flattened and his face was puffy from excess alcohol and the absence of his training schedule, which he'd neglected for the past two years. Despite his size he seemed strangely dependent on Vitani, at least in the uncertain territory of the casino and he watched him continually, smiling when he smiled and ducking his head and grinning during the conversation.

"Welcome back to Goldstrip Seattle," Goldman said.

"What's the job?" Vitani asked.

Goldman leaned forward. "As you know, the casino has an active recruitment program and generally we get all the girls we need from Rehab, however we're always on the lookout for a better class." He passed a photograph across to Vitani who whistled and pushed it across to Crunch.

"That's the current assignment. The girl is to be handled with care and I stress that word." Goldman's eyes hardened momentarily as he looked at Crunch who was drooling over the picture. "The deal is worth \$200,000 if you get her back here in good condition. If you can't, I want her disposed of and in that case she's only worth half. Are the terms acceptable?"

Vitani nodded assent.

"Good. We'll supply transport along with an expert on Goldstrip therapy to get her started as a new recruit."

* * *

Jack Morgan riffled quickly through the print-outs in front of him. Across the table sat Stuart McArthur, the head of DOS; a small energetic man in his early '70s. Also present were Colonel George Buller from the National Security Council and Dr Art Sleens, Director, Office of Science and Technology. They had met in McArthur's office in Washington to discuss Reicher's death and the security of Helios.

McArthur opened the conversation, turning to Morgan. "Jack, you won't be as familiar with Helios as the others. It's a fusion project, which has been in train for many years and it represents a massive investment in research, which is now about to

pay dividends—we hope. I'll fill you in later; right now I'll get you to sum up what happened back in Pasadena for the benefit of Art and George.”

Morgan tapped the charts in front of him. "These are the readouts when Dr Charmaine agreed to run the transor for us.”

McArthur sat up in his chair in shock. "My God Jack, that's going too far surely? Dr Charmaine is our brightest research star and more than likely of critical importance to Helios. She can't be put at risk like that."

"Believe me, Stuart I shared your concern, but we took precautions. We believe the transor was encrypted with a subliminal message in the form of pictures.”

"Pictures?" Buller queried.

"Yes; they come across like Rorschach ink blots. The brain sees a series of coloured, flashing blobs which triggers an unfavourable response

Buller grunted. "So the intention was to scare her off rather than kill?"

"It would appear that the transor program was intended to produce a feeling of fear associated with the request that she transfer to Jicarilla and the Helios program.”

"I take it she still intends going?" Buller growled.

Morgan nodded. "Yes. She was furious at not being master of her own mind, even for the short time the transor was operating; she's out on R&R at the moment."

"Where do you fit Reicher into this?" McArthur asked.

"Someone screwed up, clearly."

"I agree,” Newstead said. "And I see you also have a possible connection of Reicher with the Asian economic group CITAK and with Goldstrip. Why would Helios interest them?"

Buller bunched his hand into a fist. "Because, Stuart, Helios is sitting in the greatest concentration of scientific know how and technology in the world. CITAK would do anything to claw back to economic dominance. If they can't get our research then they might want to destroy it." He looked angrily around the room. "Everyone involved in this project could be at risk, but especially those at Jicarilla and I'd put Dr Charmaine and its project leader, Newstead, at the top of the list. Since we moved Helios into stage three we've had nothing but malfunctions, delays and conflicts over theory that should have been sorted out months ago. In my opinion putting a

woman in at this late stage is ludicrous.”

“But she’s not just any woman,” McArthur said. “She not only fills the theoretical gap but the security gap as well. You yourself approved her.”

"If Helios is sabotaged, what will happen?" Morgan asked.

Art Sleens stirred, his voice a dry rustle. "Helios is a massively powerful machine, Mr Morgan. If it gets out of control ,Jicarilla and surroundings could be in the meltdown along with 20 years research and the billions invested. Better hope it works.”

“I think Art has pretty well summed up the position,” Buller said, after an unusually long silence. "So for God’s sake let’s get Dr Charmaine up there pronto and make sure she doesn’t get served another of those poison pills.”