

P R E L U D E



Although it was clear that no other car was traveling down Sycamore Lane, Susan Howard switched on her turn signal and glanced in the rearview mirror before pulling into the driveway. Susan lived in a two-bedroom cottage with rosebushes bordering the front walkway. There was a birch tree in the back and a detached garage that resembled a cowshed, covered with ivy.

The garage was filled with storage boxes and old furniture from her mother's house. Whenever Susan arrived home she felt a brief moment of guilt. *I really should clear everything out*, she thought. *Sell Mommy's couch and the dining room chairs or just*

give them away. Because of the furniture, she had to keep her car in the driveway. Whenever it snowed, she spent twenty minutes warming up the car and chipping the ice off the windshield.

But now it was spring, and the only thing she noticed when she got out of her car was the sound of cicadas and the smell of wet grass. Susan gazed up at the night sky, looking for the Big Dipper. Usually it pleased her that she lived far enough from New York City to see the constellations, but tonight her eyes focused on the dark, cold spaces between the stars. They were watching her. She could feel it. Someone was watching her.

“Stop it,” she said out loud. And the calm tone of her own voice made her feel better.

Susan pulled a handful of bills and catalogues out of the mailbox, then unlocked the front door. She heard a familiar *yip-yip!* and a cocker spaniel raced out of the kitchen, his nails clicking on the linoleum. It was wonderful to be greeted by a friend when you came home, and Charlie really was her little friend. But the dog was mischievous, too—especially if Susan was late. She walked through the cottage and made sure that there hadn’t been an accident before she gave Charlie a treat and let him out into the backyard.

Up until a few months ago, she had followed the same routine: she would let the dog out, pour herself a glass of Chablis, and then turn on her computer to answer her e-mail. But she rarely used that computer anymore, and drinking alcohol made her feel sloppy and unaware. They were watching her. She was sure they were watching her. And now she had broken the rules and done something very dangerous.

* * *

SUSAN WAS A computer programmer working for the Evergreen Foundation Research Center in Westchester County. She was involved in creating the software interface for the new quantum computer and had been part of the small group in the observation gallery when Michael Corrigan had left his body for another

world. The Crossover Project was top secret, but Susan's team had been told that their work involved national security and the war on terror.

Maybe that was true, but it was still strange to spend part of your workday staring down at a man lying on a table with wires attached to his brain. For several hours, it had been difficult to detect Mr. Corrigan's pulse. Then suddenly he opened his eyes, got off the table, and shuffled out of the room.

A few weeks later every Foundation employee was called into the administration building and told about a new program called Norm-All. The slogan for the program was "A good friend cares about you." The cheerful young woman from Human Resources explained that Norm-All would automatically monitor their physical and mental health. There was a permission form (which everyone signed), and then her research team went back to work.

Susan was the only one who took the program's informational brochure. She studied it during lunch. Norm-All was something called a "personal parameter program." Thousands of people working for the U.S. Defense Department had been monitored for five years, and this had established the benchmarks for acceptable behavior. Each person was given a number—a sort of equation—that gradually changed as the computer gained more data about their particular lifestyle. If the number went beyond a certain parameter of normalcy, then the employee was more likely to have mental and physical problems.

A few days later infrared cameras appeared in all the buildings. The cameras automatically scanned everyone's body and recorded blood pressure, heart rate, and body temperature. There were rumors that phone calls at the Foundation Research Center were evaluated by a computer program that measured the stress level in your voice and the use of various "trigger" words.

Most of the monitoring was unobtrusive. Norm-All could track the movement of your car and evaluate the purchases you made with your bank card. Susan wondered how much weight was given to certain negative actions; your personal equation would certainly be damaged by an arrest for drunken driving, but

how much did the number change when you checked out a “negative” book from the public library?

There were rumors that two people were fired because of unacceptable Norm-All equations, and several part-timers were not given full-time jobs. Within a month, her research team stopped talking about anything controversial. The three acceptable topics of conversation were shopping, sports, and TV shows. One Friday they all went to a bar to celebrate a colleague’s birthday; when they ordered a third round of drinks, a programmer joked, “Well, this is going to screw up our Norm-All equations!”

Everyone laughed, but there was no discussion about it. They just resumed their conversation about the new models of hybrid cars, and that was it.

Susan had spent her life working with computers and knew how easy it was to trace IP numbers on the Internet. In March, she stopped using her home computer, bought a used laptop at a swap meet, and began to access the wireless connection at a local café. Susan felt like an alcoholic or a drug addict—someone with a shameful problem she couldn’t control. When she left work and drove to the café, she felt as if she were entering a bad part of town with broken streetlights and abandoned buildings. In obscure chat rooms, people who called themselves Free Runners made allegations about the Evergreen Foundation. Apparently the Foundation was the public face of a secret organization called the Tabula that wanted to destroy freedom. This plan was opposed by an alliance that called itself the Resistance.

At first, Susan did nothing but read the various discussion threads. But three days earlier, she had taken the first step and begun to chat with a few Free Runners based in Poland.

I work for the Evergreen Foundation, she typed. We are about to start testing a new version of a quantum computer.

Where are you? a person asked.

Are you in danger? asked another. *Can we help you?*

Susan switched off her notebook computer and immediately left the café. On the way home, she obeyed the speed limit and waited a few extra seconds when the stoplight turned green.

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SHE PLACED A frozen dinner in the microwave oven and stepped out into the backyard to find Charlie. The dog had disappeared and she could see that the door to the garage was half open. That was unusual. On two occasions, the gardener had forgotten to lock up, but he didn't come on Wednesdays. Cautious, she stood in the doorway, found the switch, and flicked it on. Nothing happened. And then she heard the dog whimpering in the darkness.

"Charlie?"

A man stepped from the shadows and grabbed her arms. She fought back, kicking and screaming. Suddenly a light came on and she saw a second man standing on a kitchen chair. Someone had loosened the lightbulb and now the man was screwing it back into the fixture. Susan stopped fighting and gazed up at the person holding her arms. It was Robert—no, everyone called him Rob—a big man in his thirties who worked as a guard in the administration building.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Don't kick me," Rob told her. He looked like a little boy with hurt feelings.

The man standing on the chair had a military haircut and slender body. When he stepped down and approached her, she saw his face. It was Nathan Boone—head of security for the Evergreen Foundation.

"Don't worry, Susan." Boone had a calm, measured voice. "Your dog hasn't been hurt. But we do need to talk to you."

Rob guided her over to the center of the garage and made her sit down on the chair. Charlie had been leashed and tied to a support column. The dog watched as Rob knelt down and placed plastic restraints around Susan's ankles and wrists.

Boone took a biscuit out of his nylon jacket and fed it to Charlie. The dog wagged his tail and waited for more. "Dogs are like humans," Boone said. "They value small rewards and clear lines of authority."

He untied the leash and offered it to Rob. "Take the dog outside while I talk to Susan."

“Yes, sir.”

Boone’s shadow touched her and then glided away as he paced around the garage. “Do you know who I am?”

“Of course, Mr. Boone.”

“And you know why we’re here.”

“No, I—”

“That was not a question, Susan. We’re here because you were disloyal and because you tried to contact our enemies.”

“Yes,” Susan whispered. It felt like the only true thing she had ever said in her life.

“Good. Thank you. That saves a lot of time.” Boone glanced to the right when Rob returned to the garage.

“For the most part, our employees have accepted our system, but a few people have ignored their commitments and chosen to be disloyal. I want to understand this phenomenon, Susan. I really do. I’ve studied your Norm-All data closely and found nothing unusual in your profile. Your personal equation was well within the parameter of acceptable behavior. So what compelled you to violate the rules and engage in such perversity? You have deliberately turned away from a system that protects what is good and right.”

Silence. The plastic restraints were so tight that Susan’s ankles were beginning to hurt.

“I’m just—just stubborn. That’s all.”

“Stubborn?” Boone shook his head as if that wasn’t an adequate answer.

“Yes, I’ve always had a core inside me that’s very independent. I want to make my own decisions without people watching me.”

“We’re watching you for your own good and the good of society.”

“People always say things like that when they’re about to do something really selfish and bad.”

“You violated our rules, Susan. Your own actions have caused the appropriate punishment.”

Boone reached up and grabbed a rope that had been tied to the rafters. He dropped a loop around her neck and tightened it.

“A lonely woman gives into her depression,” Boone murmured

and motioned to Rob. It felt as if the big man were embracing her like a lover as he picked Susan up and made her stand on the chair.

I can't die now, she thought. *It's not fair*. She had all these thoughts that would never be expressed, all these dreams that would never march off into the world. "There's a movement called the Resistance," she said. "People are waking up and seeing what's going on."

Rob glanced over his shoulder and Boone nodded slightly. Yes. He knew all about the Resistance.

"We're going to fight you and we're not going to back down! Because people want the freedom to choose their own—"

Rob kicked away the chair and Susan swung back and forth. Her feet were a few inches above the floor. Boone stood beside her like a concerned friend, checking the noose and the rope. When he was sure that everything was secure he cut off the restraints with a knife, picked up the bright yellow fragments, and followed Rob out the door.

She was still alive, grabbing at the rope as it cut into her windpipe. And then thoughts flooded through her brain in one final wave of consciousness. Her mother lying in the hospital bed. A Valentine box in grade school. The sunset on a beach in Jamaica. And where was Charlie? Who would take care of Charlie? Was she already dead? Or had she finally been set free?

No one was watching her anymore.



Early in the evening, a North Sea storm swept through the German countryside and drenched Berlin. Raindrops rattled on the glass panes of the greenhouse and the orangery in Babelsberg Park. The willow trees around the lake swayed back and forth like underwater plants while a flock of ducks huddled together on their little island. In the streets around Potsdamer Platz, the traffic was slow and halting, the cream-colored taxicabs honking at one another in the clogged intersections while delivery trucks grumbled like large shambling creatures.

Windshields were streaked with water and it was difficult to

see the faces of the drivers. The sidewalks in the Mitte district were empty, and it seemed as if much of Berlin's population had disappeared. But the surveillance cameras remained like mute guardians of the city. They tracked a young woman holding a newspaper over her head as she darted from an office doorway to a waiting car. They followed a restaurant deliveryman as he pedaled a bicycle up the street, a life revealed in a series of grainy black-and-white images: a desperate face with wet hair plastered to the forehead, legs moving frantically while a cheap plastic poncho flapped in the wind.

On Friedrichstrasse, a license-plate scanner mounted on a building photographed a black Mercedes stopped at a traffic light. The plate number was recorded and automatically checked against a central database as Michael Corrigan and Mrs. Brewster sat in the backseat and waited for the light to turn green. Mrs. Brewster had taken a tube of lipstick out of her purse and was studying her face in a compact mirror. This was behavior quite out of character for the current head of the Brethren's executive board; unless there was a party or some other kind of special event, Mrs. Brewster paid minimal attention to her personal appearance. She was a tweed-and-practical-shoes sort of woman, whose only gesture to vanity was the artificial color of her chestnut-brown hair.

"God, I look tired," she announced. "It's going to take an effort to get through dinner with Hazelton and his friends."

"If you want, I'll do all the talking."

"That would be wonderful, Michael. But it's not necessary. There's been a change of plans."

With exaggerated decisiveness, Mrs. Brewster snapped the mirror shut and dropped it into her purse, then slipped on a pair of sunglasses. The dark glasses covered her eyes and upper cheekbones like a half mask.

"Terry Dawson just sent me an e-mail from the research center in New York," she said. "They've finished building the new version of the quantum computer, and Dawson has been testing the

system. I want you to be there tomorrow afternoon when the computer becomes fully operational.”

“Perhaps they could postpone everything for a few days so I could attend the executive board meeting.”

“The Crossover Project is a good deal more important than any meeting. The original version of this computer put us in contact with an advanced civilization that began to supply us with technical data. Dr. Dawson wants you to be there if the civilization contacts us again.”

The Mercedes turned another corner. Michael stared at Mrs. Brewster for a few seconds, but the sunglasses and the dim light made it difficult to know what she was thinking. Was she telling him the truth, or was this just a strategy to separate him from the rest of the Brethren? Her mouth and neck showed some tension, but there was nothing unusual about that.

“I think it would be easier if we interviewed Dawson with a video conference camera,” Michael said.

“I want a full assessment of the project, and you can only do that if you’re at the laboratory. Your clothes are packed and waiting at the hotel. A chartered jet is fueling at Schönefeld Airport.”

“We’ve been meeting people for the last three days . . .”

“Yes. I know. Everything is rather frantic. But the quantum computer has always been our top priority. After the first computer was destroyed, we shut down the genetic research program so that we could increase Dawson’s funding. Kennard Nash was convinced that this other civilization was eager to send us technological miracles. Before we spend more money, we need to see if this new machine actually works.”

Nash’s name ended the conversation. Both Michael and Mrs. Brewster had watched Nathan Boone kill the head of the Brethren as he ate lunch on Dark Island. It felt as if Nash were still with them, sitting in the front seat and frowning like a father displeased with his children’s activities.

The car stopped in front of the Hotel Adlon, and Mrs. Brewster said something in German to the driver. Moments later,

Michael's luggage was carried from the hotel and loaded into the trunk.

"Thanks so much for doing this, Michael. I can't rely on anyone else."

"Don't worry. I'll handle it. Get some rest."

Mrs. Brewster gave him one of her more gracious smiles. Then she slipped out of the backseat and hurried into the hotel.

As the car pulled away from the curb, Michael used his hand-held computer to access the security system at Wellspring Manor—the country estate in southern England controlled by the Evergreen Foundation. Moving the cursor, he clicked through surveillance videos of the front door, the service entrance, and, yes, there it was: a black-and-white image of his father's body lying on a medical table. Matthew Corrigan looked like a dead man, but sensors attached to his body detected a sporadic heartbeat.

The Traveler turned his eyes away from the small screen and gazed out the window. *Still there but not there*, he thought. *An empty shell.*

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THE CHARTERED JET stopped in Maine for refueling and customs inspection, and then continued to the Westchester County Airport, located in the suburbs north of New York City. A town car was parked on the tarmac and a member of the security staff stood beside it like an honor guard. Then it was *Yes, Mr. Corrigan. Hope you had a pleasant flight, Mr. Corrigan*, and the car carried him down a two-lane country road. They glided past stone walls that had once surrounded apple orchards and dairy cows. These days, the land was too expensive for farming, and the area was dotted with corporate headquarters and the renovated farmhouses owned by investment bankers.

The Evergreen Foundation's research center was at the end of a long gravel driveway. Flower beds and pine trees were a pleasant distraction from the high wall that kept out the rest of the world. The compound was dominated by four glass-and-steel buildings

that housed the foundation library, genetic laboratory, administrative center, and computer research facility. At the center of this quadrangle was the neurological cybernetics building where Michael had once been attached to the sensors of the quantum computer.

Michael turned on his handheld computer and checked his daily schedule. This was one activity that truly gave him pleasure. Every morning he was sent a schedule that told him what he was going to do in fifteen-minute segments; the activities and the tight schedule confirmed that he was an important member of a powerful organization. When he looked back on his past life in Los Angeles, there were always hours and sometimes days when nothing was going on. The empty time made it difficult not to feel weak and pathetic.

Now that Michael was a Traveler, the schedule helped him stay focused on the reality in front of him. If he thought about it—really thought about it—the other realms made the human world appear false or unreal. But that was a road straight to craziness. His schedule showed that all his actions had order and meaning. Even ordinary activities like “lunch” or “sleep” were on the list. His occasional encounters with prostitutes were placed in the category of “entertainment.”

“Now what?” Michael asked the driver. “The schedule doesn’t say where I’m supposed to meet Dr. Dawson.”

The driver looked confused. “I’m sorry, Mr. Corrigan. But no one gave me any instructions.”

Michael got out of the car and walked up a sloping flagstone path to the administration center. He still had a Protective Link chip implanted beneath the skin on the back of his right hand. As he approached the building, it sensed his arrival, verified his identity, and confirmed that he had passed through the main gate. The glass door glided open, and he entered the lobby.

There was no need for a security guard or a receptionist; the lobby scanners tracked his passage across the room. But when Michael reached the elevators—nothing happened. Feeling like an unwelcome guest, he waved his hand at the elevator doors. The

lobby seemed very empty and quiet at that moment, and he wondered what to do.

Michael heard a sharp click and turned as Nathan Boone emerged from the side door. The head of security for the Evergreen Foundation wore a black business suit without a necktie. Boone had fastened the top button of his white shirt, and this small detail gave him a severe appearance.

“Good morning, Mr. Corrigan. Welcome back to the research center.”

“Why can’t I enter the elevator?”

“We had a personnel problem a few days ago, and I restricted access to the offices. I’ll reauthorize your chip this afternoon, but right now you need to meet with Dr. Dawson.”

They left the lobby together and walked across the compound. “What kind of problem?” Michael asked.

Boone raised his eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“You mentioned a problem with the staff. As a representative of the executive board I need to know what’s going on at this facility.”

“An employee named Susan Howard ended her life. She had problems with depression and contacted the so-called Resistance using an Internet chat room. We thought it best to change our security codes.”

Did he kill her? Michael wondered. It bothered him that Boone could destroy someone without board authorization, but before he could ask any more questions, they entered the computer building and Terry Dawson hurried out to greet them. The scientist was an older man with white hair and a broad, fleshy face. He seemed nervous about showing the computer to Michael.

“Good morning, Mr. Corrigan. We met several months ago when General Nash gave you a tour of the research center.”

“Yes. I remember.”

“Nash’s sudden death was a real shock to all of us. He was the principal force pushing for the quantum computer.”

“The board has decided to rename your building the Kennard

Nash Computer Center,” Michael said. “If the General were still alive, he would also want to see some results. There have been too many delays in this project.”

“Of course, Mr. Corrigan. I share your concern.” A door opened automatically and Dawson led them down a hallway. “I do need to mention something before we enter the laboratory. Our research team is divided into two groups with different security clearances. The technicians and support staff have blue-level access. A much smaller core group, with red-level access, knows about the messages we’ve received from our friends.”

“How do you know they’re friends?” Michael asked.

“That was General Nash’s view. He believed that the messages came from an advanced civilization in one of the different realms. Anyone who gives us such useful technical data should be considered friendly.”

The three men entered a control room filled with computer monitors and equipment panels that glowed with red and green lights. A window looked out on a much larger room where a woman wearing a hijab and two younger men in lab coats were testing the quantum computer. The computer itself was visually unimpressive, a stainless-steel box about the size of an upright piano. Large electrical cables were attached to the base of this box, and smaller cables were attached to the side.

“Is this the quantum computer?” Michael asked. “It looks very different from what I remember.”

“It’s a whole new approach,” Dawson explained. “The old version used electrons floating in super-cooled helium. This new computer uses an oscillating electric field to control the spin-up or spin-down direction of individual electrons. The electrons serve as qubits—the quantum bits—of our machine.”

“So the technology is different, but it works the same way?”

“Yes. It’s the same principle. An ordinary computer—no matter how powerful it is—stores and processes information with bits that exist in either of two states: one or zero. But a qubit can be a one, a zero, or a superposition of both values at the same time, allowing for an infinite number of states. This means our machine

can calculate difficult problems a great deal faster than any computer currently in operation.”

Michael stepped closer to the computer, but he kept his hands away from the cables. “And how does this lead to messages from another civilization?”

“Quantum theory tells us that electrons can be multiple places at the same time. This is the reason why the atoms in a molecule don’t shatter when they bump into each other. The electrons act as both particle and wave—they form a sort of cloud that binds atoms together. Right now, our qubit electrons exist here, inside this machine, but they also ‘go away’ for a very brief moment.”

“They can’t just disappear,” Michael said. “They have to go somewhere.”

“We have reason to believe that the electrons enter a parallel world and then, when observed, return to our particular reality. It’s clear that our distant friends have designed a much more sophisticated quantum computer. They capture the particles, rearrange them into messages, and send them back to us. The electrons shuttle back and forth between worlds so quickly that we only detect the result—not the motion itself.”

One of the young men rapped his knuckles on the window. Dawson nodded and switched on an intercom.

“We’ve done the system check three times,” the technician said. “Everything is ready to go.”

“Good. We’re going to start up now. Dr. Assad, would you please come into the control room.”

Dawson switched off the intercom as the young woman with the headscarf entered the control room. She had a round face and very dark eyebrows. “I’d like you to meet Dr. Assad. She was born in Syria, but has spent most of her life here in the States. With Mr. Boone’s permission, she’s been given a red-level security access.”

Dr. Assad smiled shyly and avoided looking into Michael’s eyes. “It’s an honor to meet you, Mr. Corrigan.”

Everyone sat down and Dr. Dawson starting typing commands. Boone was the last person to find a chair, but he never relaxed. He was either watching the people in the room or studying the computer screen.

For the first hour, they followed an established protocol. Michael heard an electrical humming noise that started and paused and started again. Sometimes it was so loud the observation window began to vibrate. As different levels of the computer were tested, Dr. Assad spoke with a calm voice.

“The first ten qubits are operative. Now activating group two.”

The computer woke up and became aware of its power. Dawson explained that the machine was able to learn from its mistakes and approach complex problems from different angles. During the second hour, Dr. Assad asked the computer to use Shor’s algorithm—a sequence of instructions that broke large numbers into smaller divisors. During the third hour, the machine began to examine the symmetries of something called an E8, a geometric solid that had fifty-seven dimensions. After five hours had passed, Dr. Assad’s monitor screen went blank for a few seconds, and then the calculations continued without further pause.

“What just happened?” Michael asked.

The two scientists glanced at each other. “It’s what we saw last time,” Dawson said. “At a certain point, the computer begins sending substantial amounts of particles off to another realm.”

“So it’s like radio signals sent off into space?”

“Not exactly,” Dawson said. “It takes light-years for radio and television signals to reach another galaxy. Our computer’s electrons are going to a place that’s not so distant—a parallel level of reality.”

Around the sixth hour, one of the technicians was sent out to get dinner. Everyone was munching on chips and sandwiches when the monitor screen flashed several times. Dr. Assad put down her mug of coffee and Dawson scooted his office chair over to her workstation.

“It’s coming,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” Michael asked.

“The messages from our friends. This is what happened before.”

A dark wall of plus symbols flashed onto the screen. Then spaces appeared between them like holes in a wall. A few minutes later, the computer began creating geometric patterns. The first ones were flat like paper snowflakes, but then they gained dimension and symmetry. Balls, cylinders, and cones floated across the screen as if they were being pushed by underwater currents.

“There!” Dawson shouted. “Right there! See it?” And everyone stared at the first number—a three.

More numbers appeared. Groups of them. Michael thought they were random, but Dr. Assad whispered, “This happened before. They’re special numbers. All prime.”

The monitor screen showed equations using different symbols, and then the equations vanished and shapes returned to the screen. Michael thought the shapes looked like balloons, but then they became living things: fat, globular cells that divided in two, reproducing themselves.

Then—letters. At least, Dawson said they were letters. At first, they were geometric scribbles and scrawls that looked like graffiti scratched on a window. Then these symbols become solid and more familiar.

“That’s Hebrew,” Dr. Assad whispered. “That’s Arabic . . . definitely. Chinese . . . I think. I’m not sure.”

Even Boone looked enchanted. “I see an *A* and a *T*,” he said. “And that one looks like a *G*.”

The letters arranged themselves in lines. Were they in code or just random groups? Then spaces appeared between the letters, forming three-letter, five-letter, and twelve-letter segments. *Was that a word?* Michael asked himself. *Do I see words?* And then words appeared in different languages.

“That’s the word *read* in French,” Dr. Assad said with a flat voice. “And that’s the word *see* in Polish. I spent a month in Warsaw when I was—”

“Keep translating,” Michael said.

“*Blue. Soft.* In German. Those new words look Coptic. English now. *Infinity. Confusion . . .*”

The words joined one another, forming phrases that sounded like surrealistic poetry. *Dog take the star road. The random knife with whiskers.*

By the eighth hour, messages were being sent in several languages, but Michael focused on nine words written in English.

come to us

come to us

COME TO US