

E D G E

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He has written freelance non-fiction for UK magazines and had short stories published in the UK, US and Canada. His presence on the Internet got him a place in a BBC documentary in 2000, 'Through The Eyes of the Young.'

He spent 8 years working for a government agency, within the IT Division, developing a virtual communications service, before moving into commercial online project management for a major UK media company.

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David J Rodger

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For Mum

Freud used the term "unheimlich" to signify a sudden feeling of strangeness and discomfort, often in places where a person normally feels secure. Could this be a reaction to unseen forces at play? There are colours the human eye cannot see, and sounds we cannot hear. Have the gods left echoes of themselves that we can only feel with senses we barely comprehend? Clouds covering a mountain summit invoke thoughts of the unknown, what might lie hidden beyond? More potent are volcanoes, seen either as linked to the underworld and the evil spirits therein, or as points of contact with superhuman beings, ancestors using them in battles as, for instance, in Maori mythology.

- Hans Sabbioni, *Misty Mountains and Indigenous Voices*, TGI Press, 2021

DAY

ONE

1

"What is that state of mind when you sleep with a woman you don't even find attractive?" Halo Santana asked out loud, addressing his reflection in the rear-view mirror of the jeep. The jeep was parked on the side of a dirt road, near the edge of an impressive cliff overlooking the Atlantic; this was the area formerly known as New England.

He paused to survey his features in the mirror, then continued with his sensuous rolling American accent he'd spent years perfecting, "Is it the consequence of the primal man overriding all sense of discretion? Or is it purely female charm?"

Halo narrowed his eyes in a mock scowl and allowed his perfect smile to form.

He had perfect skin. Every woman he had ever met told him that. His Dad had been a white guy, his mother a Mexican, so his skin always had this 'white-guy with a glowing tan' thing going for it. At least that's how his first wife used to describe it.

Yes, he was definitely looking better-than-good today.

Throwing a glance through the windshield he checked nobody was watching him admire himself. The jeep was parked a little distance from the solitary building, halfway down an incline so he could only see the tip of the lighthouse tower. There was nothing outside but wild grass, the dirt road and the cliff edge.

Back to the mirror.

His eyes, tear-shaped, gave a clue to his Latin American blood, they were brown and usually alive with an inner

energy - playful and sexually suggestive. Some people saw the predator in them, but that was usually after he'd slept with them, or after he'd hard-boiled a tech contract.

Lifting his face closer to the mirror Halo checked his teeth had no remains of breakfast stuck between them; all clear. He popped open the driver-side door and climbed out, forced to squint in the bare rays of the sun. There was a slight breeze, it was a good day for learning how to sail.

Halo pushed the jeep door closed rather than slam it and tempted fate by leaving it unlocked. The dirt road led off the coastal highway, he didn't imagine anybody would be coming up this way without a reason, and he was only stopping to pick up his instructor. This was where Kimberly lived but she ran her business in the sleepy tourist town further along the coast.

As he headed up the dirt track more of the lighthouse tower came into view; old stone, painted white. Kimberly had converted the bulb room into a lounge with a truly jaw-dropping view of the ocean. The crash of waves boomed with a regular rhythm as enchanting as the smell of brine carried up by the cool breeze. The breeze ruffled the heavy mop of his dark hair but it didn't bother him; there was enough product in his hair to keep the expensive cut back into shape.

There were no neighbours, nobody to disturb the isolated beauty of the location. Real estate in the Harbour Coast State was not cheap; this place must have cost a bomb.

His legs easily carried him up the moderate ascent of the track; he thought about the day ahead. Kimberly Aanerud was not what he would call a babe, indeed there was very little about her face to engage a man's libido, but her figure was good, lean from years of aggressive professional sailing and more recently teaching it.

In the beginning there had been no chemistry but by the end of his first lesson he knew she wanted him; most women did. He'd had two half-day lessons in the past three days; not that he needed them. Although he now lived in Paris, his boyhood years of growing up took place on the Gulf Coast of Mexico with a lot of boats occupying his childhood.

He had travelled to the Harbour Coast to conclude some business and had decided to stay on for a bit; the advance on the deal had given him enough money to live well for a couple of weeks. Halo felt he deserved some downtime before he threw himself into work again. Polishing up on

his sailing skills and being seduced by his instructor was a good way to unwind.

Halo reached the crest of the short hill, bringing the entire lighthouse into view. Attached to the base of the tower was a small one-story building, old stone painted white and a steep red roof. The sea and wind had eaten into the cliffs here, bringing the edge precariously close to the structure. Boulders of smooth rock lay around like lumps of chocolate left out in the sun.

The breeze blew around his ears, filling them with a roaring sound punctuated by soft thunder of the waves far below. He felt the waves more than heard them. He slowed his stride to soak up the moment.

It was good to spend time here but he couldn't live here. North America held too many dark memories. Not even the exclusive status of the Harbour Coast could lure him back. The Collapse had left much of the former United States a place of nightmares.

Nearing the one-storey building attached to the tower his attention went to the line of dark green trees that came down from a slope to the left.

Something had glinted, catching his eye.

What was that? Something inside the tree line. He slowed his pace even further and tried to get a better view of what it was – some kind of vehicle maybe? Sunlight reflected off metal bodywork.

Strange that it would be parked in the trees.

He looked and saw Kimberly's station wagon parked under the extended eaves of the building. His mood dropped a little. Could it be that somebody else was joining them for the lesson? Damn. He'd counted on having her alone.

Halo came to a stop when he glimpsed the curved bulges of jet turbines either side of the vehicle out in the trees. It was an aerodyne. He knew Kimberly had wealthy clients but these things cost an absolute fortune: and he should know, he owned one; albeit his was currently behind on the payments. He'd hired the jeep because he figured he would enjoy driving the coastal road.

Halo stopped still. Why would somebody land an aerodyne inside the tree line? That required a skilled pilot or a damn good AI-emulator controlling the computerised navigation systems.

Something felt wrong.

Where was her dog? A golden Labrador, it usually came bounding out to greet any new arrival, too friendly to be an effective guard dog.

Glancing around him an uneasy feeling settled on his shoulders.

To his right the cylinder of the lighthouse tower rose up above the steep red roof. Behind him his jeep was concealed beyond the slope of the hill.

Halo looked at the front door, then at the station wagon protruding from the side of the building.

He knew there was another entrance around the side, through Kimberly's workshop-come-garage.

His eyes went back to the aerodyne squatting in the trees.

Pare el ser estúpido, he told himself, and moved forward deciding to go in through the side entrance.

It was when he reached the corner that a sight stopped him dead in his tracks.

2

Eight o'clock in the morning and Carlo watched the sun setting.

He was tense. Stewing in his juices as his thoughts went round and round; always the same issue. Sweat clung to his plain white T-shirt. He was experiencing an acute lack of self-confidence. It was to be expected, he supposed; some kind of personality crash. He hadn't been out of the workshop in months; lost in the world of his technological creations; little contact with anybody other than his employees, and that was always by holopresence, none of them living in Copenhagen.

Now he was here: Incheon airport, South Korea. Waiting for a connecting flight to New Zealand.

Christ.

One hand trembled where he clutched a pair of disposable chopsticks, poised over a plate of anonymous meat and rice he'd barely touched. Carlo put the shakes down to a combination of nervous tension and lack of sleep. He was worrying about the impact being away for two weeks was going to have on the delivery of his latest project: he needed to get problems with the prototype ironed out; flesh out the product brochure, and nail down a thousand other irritatingly necessary tasks associated with launching a technological revolution.

His PA was on the table beside the plate, the wide rectangular hardscreen displaying a slowly rotating schematic of the prototype: an extended field generator, or XFG as he called it. There were issues with the accuracy of the manipulator function, and power surges to the tips

when there were multiple fields which was creating havoc with their agility and dexterity.

The airport restaurant was cheap; the tables were formed from compressed recycled cardboard, the plates were bright coloured plastic; but it was the only place that had pictures to go with each item on the indecipherable menu.

His PA had a Babel application but the translations it churned out made no sense; and he didn't have an AI-emulator to decipher the cultural differences for things like "mushroom cow innards soya oyster".

The issue with choosing somewhere to eat reinforced his sense of alienation from humanity, and brought back a sickly feeling of anxiety regarding the days ahead. He had two things making him uneasy: looking like an idiot whilst he tried to refresh his pathetic snowboarding skills; and the arrival of Robin, his ex-girlfriend.

No, three things. There was the presence of Samson, the man who had originally suggested Carlo come on this trip; and somebody who had been interested in Robin before Carlo stole his thunder, so to speak.

The anxiety he'd gone through, during the week leading up to departing, had almost made him cancel; but he'd got it into his head that was what Samson wanted, that Samson was counting on him dropping out, to show him up in some way. Carlo didn't know, and wasn't sure if he was just being unfairly paranoid towards Samson.

Carlo was conscious of the fact he'd barely said a word to the man sitting across the table from him. Samson was contentedly picking through a plate of thick noodles with stir-fried vegetables.

Robin lived in Vancouver, but had been travelling through Thailand for the last few weeks and was coming directly from there to meet them at the Zen Dow resort, in New Zealand. Samson had arranged everything. Why? He and Samson barely knew each other. They had only shared a few awkward encounters in Vancouver the previous year. Didn't Samson begrudge Carlo stealing the woman he'd been interested in?

To Carlo's left there was a large inwardly sloping window, one of many forming a glass wall along one length of the building. Through the window beyond the tarmac, scrubland and runways, rose a barren mountainous landscape wrapped in a dense haze, the colour of brown ash. The sun was a vast and dirty orange orb dropping out of sight in the background.

Carlo's body-clock was fixed on Copenhagen time and the sepia quality of the setting sunlight created a clash between his internal and external reality. In Denmark he would be eating breakfast right now, here he was technically eating dinner.

What if you injure yourself?

His imagination crept around the idea of him taking a tumble on the slopes. A serious injury would jeopardise his delivery schedule for getting a licence agreement for the prototype, and testing the market for investor interest. Yet the worry about business details paled in comparison to his horror at the idea of Robin watching him awkwardly attempt some simple manoeuvre. He visualised her laughing at him as he fumbled and fell with clumsy calamity. Samson would be there to show how it should be done.

Samson looked his way, as if sensing Carlo thinking about him.

"How you feeling, compadre?" Samson's voice encompassed a range of North American dialects within its back of the throat drawl.

"Getting excited," Carlo lied, not wanting to discuss his state of turmoil, "I, err...suppose we should start making our way to the departure gate."

"Leave it a while. Let the crush settle down. I mean, we got seat numbers so what's the rush?" Samson replied in a relaxed tone.

"I suppose."

"You suppose." Samson chuckled but was not being unkind. "You're one of those eager types who likes to get somewhere an hour early...just in case."

Carlo smiled self-consciously; of course he was right. Samson nodded knowingly and pulled a grin.

"Can I ask you something?" Carlo asked abruptly.

The pause in Samson's response said he'd noted the apprehensive tone. "Sure."

"Why did you ask me to come along?"

Samson looked genuinely amused. "Why wouldn't I?"

Carlo hesitated, "Well, I mean, wouldn't you have preferred it to be just you and Robin?"

"*What?*" Samson laughed, thumping the surface of the table with the palm of his hand.

"I mean-" Carlo could feel his face going red.

"Carlo, Carlo, please," Samson implored and leaned in over the table; large shoulders and biceps straining against the stretchy-fabric of his T-shirt.

Carlo sighed, resigning himself to the fact he'd just asked a stupid question, and leaned in to listen-up.

"Nothing happened between Robin and me, man."

"I know, well, I used to wonder but-"

"And nothing *will*."

"Okay. Yes. Okay. Errr, what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," Samson retorted easily and sat back, leaving Carlo to think about it.

A notification - *beep* - sounded simultaneously from Carlo's PA and his ear-clip. Samson must have got the same notification because he reached a hand up to the band of plastic hooked around his right ear to pick up the message. Carlo looked at the hardscreen of his PA and saw the message advising them to go to the departure gate.

Samson was heaving his muscular figure from the chair. Carlo stared at the hardscreen with unfocussed eyes. Did Robin still have feelings for him, is that why she'd agreed to come along? He wasn't sure what he thought about that. Carlo realised he'd been assuming she was coming for Samson...

"Shake a leg compadre," Samson prompted.

He'd just have to wait and find out.

3

Halo took an immediate step back away from the corner of the building and froze again, giving his brain time to review what he had just seen.

The extended eaves of the one-story building came down to a height just above his head. Kimberly's station wagon was parked beneath, alongside a roll-down shutter that had been left open. Beyond the open shutter was Kimberly's workshop and it was from inside there that he could see a thick trickle of blood; deep red against the pale concrete floor. The blood was following a subtle gradient, crossing the space between the open workshop and the station wagon.

For some reason he knew the blood was not a result of any accident. His eyes flicked to the aerodyne hulking within the trees less than fifty metres away.

Get away from here. No need to get involved.

He started to take a slow careful step, turning his body as he did so. Whatever had happened here it would involve the police. Any investigation would take up his time and he couldn't afford that. His current funds would evaporate within several weeks and he needed to go out and find more business.

"Is she dead?" A voice asked; not his own.

The voice had come from just around the corner...from inside the workshop. Hushed and chillingly calm, as if the question had been about the weather.

Halo's blood ran cold.

"No. Give me a moment." Another male voice replied, more than irritated. Both had European accents.

Gulping rapidly, Halo lowered his foot to the ground and wondered what the hell to do. Run was the simple answer; get away from a situation that was evolving in danger with every moment. Yet curiosity had a hold of him.

The silence of the two men continued. What were they doing? Was it Kimberly's blood? Who else could it be but...?

The early morning sun was baking the side of his body. The sound of the surf pounding the nearby cliffs sounded out-of-place, too serene for this moment of drama.

Slowly twisting his shoulders he brought himself back to face the rear end of the station wagon and started moving towards it, taking each step one at a time. Reaching the corner of the building he placed his hands on the cold stonework, allowing his weight to shift onto his arms; then he began to lean forwards. The station wagon began to emerge into view again, as did the trickle of blood coming from inside the workshop.

Pausing for a moment, he calmed his breathing and strained to hear the two men but there was only silence, punctuated by the beating of his heart. He was sweating; he could feel his hands getting slippery against the painted stone.

He could smell turpentine and wood varnish. The same as the previous two times he'd come here to pick Kimberly up before a lesson.

The men started talking, exchanging brief sentences he couldn't pick up. They must have been from different countries, both using English as a common language. He heard the tear of Velcro being ripped open. What were they doing?

Leaning further he started to expand his view inside the workshop. In the corner opposite him by the entrance were gardening tools, then a stack of deep wooden drawers and the beginning of a wide workbench. Then he saw the dog. It was Kimberly's golden Labrador, motionless on the concrete floor in a pool of blood. It was impossible to miss the ragged gash of his neck – as if somebody had taken an axe to it, or a large knife.

That confirmed it. Something very bad was happening here. Did he want to risk getting involved?

His eyes never left the dog. The gore didn't bother him. It never had. Both men continued talking quietly, and he still couldn't make out what they were saying. His legs were quivering beneath him, his grip on the stone wall was starting to slip.

Just get back to the jeep and drive away. He knew that was the smart option to take right now, but he wanted to know what was happening.

His body refused to obey him. He couldn't lean any further, his legs and arms wouldn't take the burden. What would happen if he fell? What would the men do if they saw him?

This is insane. Just get away.

Halo started to ease away, the sun uncomfortably hot against his back.

My shadow.

Glancing quickly to his left he could clearly see his shadow leaning away from the black line that was the edge of the building. Fortunately the angle of the sun was throwing his shadow across the ground behind the station wagon. Then he saw something else. The long rear side window of the station wagon was reflecting a distorted version of what was happening inside the workshop.

Two men stood over a figure tied into a chair. He couldn't see the figure's face but it had to be Kimberly, long hair hung forward from the limp neck, thin shoulders slumped and resting against the bonds tying her to the chair. Both men were wearing jeans and plain T-shirts, and after a bit of working out Halo realised they were also wearing clear plastic aprons. So they didn't get blood on their clothes?

One of the men was holding something long and metal in his right hand. Halo shifted his head to overcome the distortion created by the vehicle window. It was a knife, the blade heavily soaked in blood.

They kill her dog and tie her to a chair? Were they interrogating her? Or just threatening her? What was Kimberly involved in?

Halo had to assume the aerodyne belonged to them, but what kind of thugs flew an aerodyne worth several hundred thousand dollars?

"She seems dead to me," the knife man said clearly enough for him to hear.

The other man retorted quickly, something about a lack of faith in his ability. Halo watched the same man abruptly lean toward the figure with something small poised in one hand, and do something to the figure's limp arm. An injection?

There was too much distortion to make out their faces. Injection man stepped back and said something.

Then Halo heard a sudden intake of air, not from either man, and made chilling by the gurgling quality to the sound and the edge of panic it contained. The figure in the chair stirred, the head lolled a couple of times, the long hair dangling like a curtain.

"Welcome back Kimberly," injection man said, very loudly and very clearly, "I was worried I'd lost you. Now, again, where is Professor Komossa?"

Halo didn't know the name. He gripped the wall with sweaty hands and watched and listened.

Injection man continued, "Your loyalty to her is admirable, but also entirely misplaced. She has brought you into this for her own selfish gain. Kimberly? Can you hear me? You have the choice to walk away from this with your life, or not walk away at all. Kimberly? I know you can hear me. All I want to know is where she is. Professor Stefanie Komossa."

Silence.

Halo moved his head, tried to see more clearly how Kimberly was responding.

Without warning knife man stepped forward and stabbed the blade into Kimberly's abdomen.

She screamed and wailed, her head came up and she stared at her captors with an expression Halo couldn't make out.

He didn't want to find out. He'd seen enough. These men, whoever they were, were professionals. They handled violence like a job. Halo knew he wouldn't stand a chance if they spotted him.

Injection man was shouting at Kimberly now. Where was Professor Stefanie Komossa? What had she given Kimberly?

Kimberly was sobbing, squealing, gasping, sounding like somebody close to dying.

Halo retreated. Using every gram of concentration to make sure he moved away from the corner of the building without making a noise or tripping over.

Hurrying down the dirt road he reached the jeep. Thank God he didn't lock it, the alarm activation tone would have alerted the men, even above the pounding of the surf against the cliffs.

Just thinking about what might have happened if the men had caught him made his whole body tremble.

He yanked open the driver door and climbed inside, but only pulled the door-to. Looking through the windshield up the dirt track all he could see of Kimberly's home was the top of the lighthouse tower.

Too terrified to start the engine, he released the particle-brakes and allowed the jeep to gently roll backwards down the hill. If the men spotted him now they could easily catch up in that aerodyne of theirs. It was likely they would do anything to stop a witness from getting away. Not that he had any intention of going to the police. No way. Kimberly had gotten herself into some bad trouble. That was her problem. He couldn't afford to be held back by some investigation. Especially one that might make him the target of professionals like that, wanting to make sure he never got to give evidence.

Reaching the bottom of the short slope he could see where the road joined the Coastal Highway a hundred metres further on.

He started the engine, hauled on the steering wheel and pulled the jeep round to point the right way. Gunning the engine he braked long enough to make sure he wasn't going to ram anything coming down the Highway, then accelerated hard and tried to get as much distance as quickly as possible.

4

They left Auckland around 4 o'clock in the morning. Three hours of driving along dark, wintery highways passed in relative silence; within moments of climbing into the hire car, Carlo had reached into the leather holdall between his feet, and pulled out the fat rectangle of his PA. It was an automatic reaction; he wasn't driving; he had free time: time to work.

In the back of his mind a voice nagged; reminding him that the main reason for coming to New Zealand was to relax. Yet sitting there and not working would have steadily wound him into a tight bundle of frustration.

Carlo focussed on fleshing out the latest version of the product brochure he'd been working on; he kept a softscreen bundled up in the leather holdall, which he could unroll across his lap and use as a touchboard if he needed to get into some heavy typing. So far, this journey, he hadn't needed it; most of his time was spent staring at the product brochure on the PA, mulling over what he wanted to say in it.

Most PAs were no bigger than a credit card, although the expensive ones came in unusual shapes or materials. Carlo's was the most recent 'Blue' model from SUB, a specialist manufacturer. Bigger than the palm of his hand, flat and rectangular with nice curved corners that were pleasing to rub the tips of his forefinger over; one face formed a hardscreen with a resolution good enough for him to run three-dimensional schematics and Eriksson-Miggs simulations.

Switching it on always produced a combined sense of delectation and professional anxiety; the familiar retreat

into his work realm made him happy but as usual, tough challenges lay ahead.

The prototype of his Extended Field Generator would soon be working well enough to be able to start looking for a license agreement; once he got the bugs ironed out. The sooner he tested the market the quicker he'd know what his invention was worth. The product brochure would go to his agent back in London and then the fun and games would begin. Carlo hated dealing with the big corporate hotshots. He was glad to leave all the haggling to the agent; even if there were some outstanding issues with the man.

A sharp lurch by the rental car started him; shooting a glance up from the SUB's hardscreen he saw Samson's thick arms moving with the steering wheel as he took the narrow icy road at speed.

"Sorry." Samson grunted, considerate of the fact he'd disturbed Carlo's thoughts.

Dense forest, dusted with fresh snow, flashed past the windows. Above them the darkness had rolled back; the sky was ablaze with vibrant colours: clouds of pink, purple and yellow in vivid contrast to the blend of pale blue and indigo of the firmament further ahead.

Carlo pictured the Earth in his mind's eye; he saw a globe, and himself traversing an invisible line near the bottom of the southern hemisphere.

I'm upside down.

He was underneath the planet. It was a surreal notion.

"I never imagined it would be so beautiful," Carlo stated, having to raise his voice above the revving of the engine.

"Sure is," Samson replied in a level tone. "Kind of numbs the mind. This is what it's all about. All the stupid shit we think about vanishes when you come to a place like this."

Carlo smiled, appreciating the sentiment in Samson's words.

The trees either side of the road reminded him of his parents house in England, where he'd spent segments of his childhood growing up when he wasn't abroad. A tiny yet historical village called Bucklers Hard, not far from the great New Forest.

"Nothing like Yellowstone," Samson commented, interrupting his reflections, "But then I've not been there since the place fell apart."

"Yellowstone. I've never been." Carlo confessed.

"No? Well, I guess you've probably missed your chance now."

Carlo wasn't one hundred percent certain of the new geography of North America. "Is it still within the Union?"

"Yeah, damn shame too. Washington DC's still trying to run the place like a tourist reservation but last I heard, some renegade militia's gone and taken a bunch of Japanese hostage."

"I heard about that." Carlo remembered the media bulletin from a couple of weeks back.

"Wasn't pretty." Samson said grimly and seemed to go into his own thoughts for a moment, staring at the road ahead.

Carlo noted how few vehicles he'd seen when leaving Auckland, but now the road was starting to get busy with morning traffic. They were approaching a place called Taupo.

"That's a nice bit of kit you've got there." Samson tilted his head, indicating the SUB in Carlo's hands.

"It does the job," Carlo answered modestly.

"So what's got you so hooked you can ignore the beauty of Mother Nature around you?"

Carlo smiled at Samson's playful tone, "Have you ever used a Holographic Touch Matrix Display?"

Samson stared at the road, "Yeah, they make things out of light that you can touch like they're really there."

"That's right."

"I had a client last year," Samson continued, "She had this fancy car, some kind of sports critter with a raised chassis. All the controls were made out of holograms you could touch."

"That's impressive." Carlo wondered what kind of person had the money to buy a vehicle with an HTMD control suite and the desire to live rough with Samson for a few days.

"So..." Samson began, grinning around the word; "We've determined I'm not so much of a back-to-nature neo-Luddite that I don't know what an H-T-M-D is. What have they got to do with what you're working on?"

"I invented them."

"You're shitting me." Samson turned his head and stared at him.

Carlo watched the road. "I shit you not."

Samson swung his eyes back to the view ahead. A few moments passed whilst he thought about it, then he laughed and let out a whoop of admiration. "Man, you must be totally loaded."

"Hmm. Not yet." Carlo answered truthfully.

"What? No way! How come?"

"Problems with getting paid what I'm owed," Carlo replied, sounding a little uncomfortable.

"Ah don't worry man, I won't stick my nose in your business. You seem like a smart guy. I'm sure you'll get it sorted."

"I hope you're right." Carlo did hope so, because he was still owed tens of millions.

They passed through Taupo without stopping, the busy road hugging the shore of a large lake on their right. A cold mist hung over the calm water; large sections of ice had formed around the edges, dusted with recent snow.

The mention of money-owed had spoiled Carlo's appetite for work. He went online and brought up a satellite view of their destination on the SUB's hardscreen. The Zen Dow resort occupied a basin shaped area on the slopes of Mount Ruapehu, one kilometre from the ski-fields. A cluster of thirty or so chalets was spread in a wide arc around a central building.

Carlo experienced another flutter of worry about what he'd let himself in for. He was not a confident snowboarder. In fact, when it came to physical activities he wasn't particularly adventurous. He didn't have great agility and he wasn't very strong. Unlike Samson whose stocky frame always appeared to move with the supple grace of an athlete. Whereas Carlo's white flesh was baby soft and faintly tanned, Samson was deeply tanned and weathered from years of teaching people outdoor activities. Samson's high cheekbones hinted at a racial heritage stemming from a time before European settlers spread across North America. Samson's eyes, narrow and penetrating, were as if made of dark and polished stone; and his hair fell past his ears in a cascade of muddy brown curls streaked with blonde highlights.

So what about Robin? Carlo's thoughts circled round again to what Samson had told him, back in Incheon airport. And what about Samson's motives for inviting Robin on the trip? And him for that matter?

Both he and Samson had met Robin around the same time, just over a year ago: Samson joining the martial arts group Robin taught at a Life Therapy centre in Vancouver; Carlo meeting her on-line in a chat-room used by film buffs.

Carlo and Robin swapped phone-tags and swiftly built a friendship and more beyond the fabrications of cyberspace.

That marked the period when Carlo started living between his apartment and workshop in Denmark, and Robin's apartment in Canada.

He had met Samson a couple of times in this early period; Samson always came across as friendly but Carlo could sense how much he liked Robin. Carlo couldn't shake the feeling, paranoia perhaps, that his arrival on the scene as a 'boyfriend' had stepped on Samson's toes.

Samson had only stayed in Vancouver for a month after that; and then returned East, to the Harbour Coast, where he ran his own business taking people back to nature.

Carlo thought: *if Samson hadn't returned East would my relationship with Robin have ever happened?* If Carlo had to put a woman like Robin d'Valios with a man, it would be with a man like Samson.

Carlo was short in height with a slim build, a small head with tall and broad forehead distinctively speckled in freckles. Pale green eyes, almond shaped, bright and energetic. He used to believe he was somebody with frank eye contact, as if everybody and everything he came across could be considered interesting. He used to be able to talk to strangers like they were best friends. People had always commented on that rare talent. But somehow, at some point during the months of locking himself away in the workshop, he'd lost his social confidence: at least that's how he felt right now.

What if Robin fell for Samson this time? That was going to hurt.

Carlo and Robin had enjoyed six months together before ending the relationship. It had been good, and they were still friends...

He knew he missed spending time with her, and her four-year-old son. There had been e-mail contact, a lot of brief phone calls, but they hadn't seen each other since it ended.

It was Carlo's work that made them separate, or rather his growing irritation at how much of his time the relationship was taking up. Eventually he had come to a point where it felt he had to choose between his work and Robin.

Robin hadn't stood a chance.

Carlo shook his head slightly at the redundant nature of his thoughts. He focussed his attention on the SUB's hardscreen.

The satellite view was overlaid with several data-layers; tapping through the information boxes with his finger he picked up some interesting points.

"Zen Dow sounds like a lap of luxury," Carlo reckoned aloud.

"Beats the hell out of the other resorts on the mountain," Samson replied, eyes glued to the narrow road as he pushed the car at high speed around a broad sweeping bend.

"You've been before?" Carlo thought this was Samson's first time.

"Not Zen Dow. I couldn't justify the cost."

"And now?"

Samson laughed quietly, "Now I can justify the cost."

Carlo didn't pry any further into his finances, but running his own business in Harbour Coast had to mean good money.

"Zen Dow...they have an awesome hop to the Turoa ski-fields." Samson told him. Carlo glanced down at the map and saw Turoa was on the opposite side of Ruapehu Mountain. "Think I'll be finding it handier for checking out bars in Ohakune...if the local girls are nothing to get excited about."

Carlo laughed.

Samson grinned broadly. "Last time I came to Ruapehu I bribed the pilot to let me fly over the summit and drop me off there."

"On the summit?"

"Hell yeah. Ruapehu! The longest vertical drop in Australasia. Over seven-hundred metres. Pure adrenaline rush...right down to the car park."

"That won't be me," Carlo said a little glumly.

"Ahh it's nothing. Just put all your weight forward onto the front of the board and keep going." Samson was enthusiastic.

"That's where I always freak out, leaning forward down a mountain."

Samson chuckled. "Gotta conquer that fear, man. You might hurt yourself... but you won't die. Pain teaches you a lesson."

Carlo wasn't so sure. He wasn't a great fan of pain.

"There's a mighty more dangerous run than that one, compadre. They called it The Edge," Samson began to explain but a *-beep-* from Carlo's ear-clip announced an incoming call followed by a chip-voice stating who was calling: it was Robin d'Valios.

5

Carlo scanned the windshield for an option to route the call through the car but couldn't see one. He ran it through the SUB but there was no picture.

"Hi Robin. You there?"

"Hiii. How are you?" Robin's voice came through the SUB's speakers, sounding cheerful. Carlo smiled and settled into the seat. He had always loved the way she spoke. Her Philippine accent very distinctive. Even though they were no longer 'together' they still spoke once a week, although the past three weeks had been silent.

"I'm good, thanks. I'm with Samson. Still en-route to the resort. Where are you?"

"Hi Sammo." Robin's voice called out.

"Hello little lady," Samson replied, taking his eyes off the road to look at the SUB on Carlo's lap.

"I'm in Bangkok." Robin said.

"No video?" Carlo queried, "Do you look that bad?"

"Hah-hah wise-ass," Robin rebuked, "I think the camera must be broken. I had to wait half an hour just to get this booth so I'm not changing to please you."

Samson made a wincing sound and glanced at him.

Carlo raised an eyebrow and smirked.

Robin had been travelling for the past three months. Some friends of his suggested she might be working through the pain of him leaving her, but he doubted that.

"So what's the plan?" Carlo asked.

"I'm flying out of here in a few hours. If it all goes to plan I'll be in Auckland sometime early tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" Both Carlo and Samson exclaimed.

"Shit Robin we could have stayed back a day and given you a lift." Carlo suggested.

"Like hell," Samson quickly followed up, "I'm going snowboarding!"

Robin made a happy sound, "I'm so looking forward to seeing you guys."

"Likewise," Carlo said. They'd not seen each other face to face since he walked out of her apartment in Vancouver half a year ago. "Looking forward to hearing all your adventures."

"How was it?" Samson asked.

"It's been three months since I left the familiar four walls of my flat and I've seen some crazy shit and survived some even crazier moments, but I guess that's what happens when you go further than Granville Island. At least my cat is still alive."

"Nothing could kill that critter anyway," Samson muttered under his breath.

"What was that?" Robin challenged.

"He was asking who's looking after it," Carlo covered, smiling indulgently.

"Marina, the girl in the flat below," Robin answered, "I think she's been using my place for parties but I'll deal with that when I get back. No point pissing off the cat-sitter when you still need her."

"Sitter parties, my ass. Probably that cat raising hell with every flea ball in the building." More low vocals from Samson.

"It's really hard to here you Sammo," Robin complained.

"Sammo's driving," Carlo stated.

"Okay. Well I'll say goodbye here. See you both tomorrow."

They made their closing comments with good humour before the call ended.

Carlo went back to grappling with the product brochure.

Carlo was concentrating so hard on the SUB's hardscreen that he'd been completely unaware of the journey, or the change of scene. When he glanced up he saw they were driving through a town. A mixture of wooden and brick apartment buildings, interspersed with snow covered pine trees, lined a wide road that gradually snaked its way up a gentle rise. Deep snow.

Carlo's brow lifted as he tried to catch his bearings. Were they nearly there?

The snow was new. The car's heaters were on full blast. They must have ascended a good distance. It certainly looked cold outside.

A sign on the side of a building proclaimed Whakapapa Maori Museum.

"Wuh-aka-papa." Carlo tried to pronounce the word as they crawled past. The road was clogged with slow moving 4x4s bristling with skis and snowboards, their wheels churning up the fresh snow into twin channels of dirty slush.

Samson chuckled, "Fuh, you pronounce the 'W-H' as a 'Fuh' sound. So it's Fuhkapapa."

"Whakapapa," he said it correctly this time. It sounded almost rude.

"Should be there... in twenty minutes," Samson said. "We keep heading up here to the top of Bruce Road, past Iwikau Village where I stayed last time. Zen Dow is tucked away another kilometre after that. Very secluded."

Leaning forward in his seat Carlo peered upwards through the windshield. He went rigid with awe. Mount Ruapehu loomed ahead of them, a broad mass of rock and snow criss-crossed by the arterial network of the skifield tows.

"Christ," he muttered. Carlo had seen much larger mountains in the Alps yet this one made a deep impression. Perhaps because it stood alone rather than shoulder to shoulder in a busy range.

There was something else though. A sense of... apprehension?

"Can you feel it?" Samson asked quietly.

"Eh? What?"

"Got quite a vibe, don't it," Samson replied mysteriously, leaning over the steering wheel and peering upwards.

Carlo said nothing. Unsettled by the moment.

"There's an essence in these mountains. Ruapehu particularly. The Maori's...they got a lot of spiritual values centred on them. Behind the beauty... there's a character you need to respect."

END OF SAMPLE (AUGUST 2008)

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PAPERBACK

Coming Later

Living In Flames

David J Rodger

Lurking beneath the grime stained streets of London is a criminal gang never mentioned by the black markets they supply. There are rumours of grave robbing, necromancy and cannibalism but even these are only ever whispered in the loftiest, most brightly lit chambers of criminal power. Fear is the shadow that hides them. Only one thing is known, and this is because the gang have made it clear, their leader, Cray, seeks a rare African idol and will do anything to get it.

One hundred miles West, Dex Raškovic is making a name for himself. Running a night club in Bristol for a big UK crime boss, a front for a wholesale drug distribution operation. When he finds a strange African idol clutched in the hands of a dead man his instincts are to take it and see what it's worth. That was his first mistake. His second mistake is trying to skim an extra percentage off the drug money. *LIVING IN FLAMES* follows Dex through a heart-thumping descent into a bloody web of occult horror and gang warfare.

Part of David J Rodger's continuing cyber-fiction series

Coming Later

Oakfield

David J Rodger

When Annabelle Spaulding inherits her grandfather's house in the idyllic rural town of Oakfield, in the South West of England, she decides to use it to patch up the emotional rips in her family relationships. Arriving with her husband, two brothers and a family friend, she makes a bold effort to reconcile the differences between them. However, it soon becomes apparent that her grandfather's death was no accident and that the house itself harbours a secret: a physical connection to a monstrous battle between Order and Chaos at the dawn of Mankind. Malevolent forces within the town focus their attentions on the new occupants, and the destiny of all humanity becomes entwined in the outcome of the family's stand against an unearthly Evil.

Coming Later

Dog Eat Dog

David J Rodger

The first novel in David J Rodger's 'Yellow Dawn' series. The Earth has been ravaged by viral pathogens. A handful of cities come through intact and remain in-step with the advance of history, connected to the unscathed orbital and Deep Space communities via New Tokyo. Beyond these scattered islands of modern civilisation is an overgrown wilderness, reclaimed by Nature, littered with abandoned cities, crossed by decaying highways and peppered with survivor camps of varying levels of law and technology.

Complicating the lives of survivors are immense throngs of infected, mindlessly wandering through Dead Cities, locked in a perpetual chemical rage by the engineered virus that swept the planet in the 2nd wave of Yellow Dawn. Vast resources lie untapped, degrading, and waiting for those brave enough to enter the Dead Cities to recover them.

It is a Brave New World. With new challenges, new opportunities, new idealists, new fears, new boundaries of political tension.

Into this melting pot comes Mikhail Drobna and Carlos Revira.

Drobna is a mountainous slab of criminal muscle, freelance killer and extortionist.

Carlos is a specialist criminal investigator familiar with using violence and breaking rules.

Thrown together by circumstance they can chose to fight or work as allies for mutual benefit. How long can such loyalty lasts in a dog eat dog world?

Coming Later

Shadows of the Quantinex

David J Rodger

Charles DeBruck is known as a fire-breaker in the world of corporate security. Once a senior investigator within an international law firm, he avoided the horrors of Yellow Dawn by burrowing deep into the orbital placenta of New Tokyo. In a world that was rapidly falling apart, he sold his skills to the space-based executives of corporations wanting to protect physical assets on the Earth. He dealt with blackmailers, kidnappers, extortionists and covered up the misdemeanours of his clients. Whilst over seventy-percent of the planet died, he grew rich and lived in luxury.

When he's hired by the Carthew Trust to handle a potential blackmail attempt, what starts as a standard negotiation scenario abruptly turns into murder. DeBruck finds himself at the mercy of a ruthless puppet-master, and is forced out of his cosseted lifestyle onto the rough roads of the wilderness to hunt down a man. A man supposed to be already dead; whose existence threatens the stability of a vast corporate empire. He unearths a plot that leads him onto a trail of clues and urgent research to the shocking truth of what caused Yellow Dawn: the truth behind an event that caused the death of billions of people. A truth so monstrous it challenges his sanity to accept. Ultimately humanity faces new horrors from the perpetrators of Yellow Dawn. DeBruck is confronted with the brutal choice of killing an innocent man in cold blood, and shouldering the responsibility for the fate of billions of people.

For the latest information on
David J Rodger, excerpts
from his books and other
projects, visit his website.

www.davidjrodger.com
