

Unholy Spirit – first 3 chapters

By

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Many thousands of years ago.

Hammon could feel the skinsuit start to respond to the presence of his consciousness, but it was slow work integrating with the neural interface. It must have been an earlier model sent out on one of the first wave of exploratory missions; the later models came to life almost instantly.

His eyelids finally opened. The cabin was bathed in a red glow.

“Warning,” the soothing voice declared. “Entering unknown system.”

Hammon could feel the artificial heart pumping faster as the cabin neared optimum temperature. It had probably been hundreds of years since someone had visited the explorer craft for a maintenance check and during that time the cabin would have been kept at deep space temperatures to conserve energy. It would take the body he was inhabiting a few more minutes to warm up and he would be able to move properly.

The instrument panels came to life and the screens lining the walls of the cabin created a seamless 360 view of the outside.

“Warning,” the voice said again. “Ninety percent chance of collision. Use manual override to change course.”

A huge brown and cream striped planet with a vast eye shaped storm on it loomed ahead. Hammon looked at the manual override button. It was within reach. He stared at his right hand, willing it to lift up, a finger moved slightly.

An alarm sounded.

The giant planet hurtled past. Hammon breathed a sigh of relief.

“Warning. Ninety-seven percent chance of collision. Use manual override to change course.”

Dead ahead, still distant, but growing nearer by the second, was his worst possible nightmare...a star...the one place his consciousness could be obliterated. Even if he didn't crash, and somehow got trapped in its orbit, if he was too close to the star, and without access to a

source of energy sufficient to create a quantum space bridge, its gravitational pull could trap his consciousness in this system forever.

He focused all his will on his hand. It slowly raised a centimetre from the arm rest.

He screamed out loud in frustration and cursed. At least the lungs were working.

“Ninety seconds to impact. Use manual override to change course.”

The star grew larger. He knew that the ship would not change course automatically. Many of the exploratory craft they sent out were intended to crash into systems and send back data of the final seconds before impact to provide information on suitability for colonisation.

“Impact in 60 seconds. 59, 58...”

He lifted his hand again. This time he moved it towards the manual override button.

What if they had known this ship was destined to collide with a star? His presence in the palace had become increasingly unwanted by others on the council. His ambitions had caused many to resent him. But surely they wouldn't obliterate another soul because their pride had been wounded?

“49, 48,..”

He strained, roared again and hit the button.

“Manual override implemented.”

The suit was coming to life, he hastily plotted a new course. He just needed to shift the direction by a few degrees to avoid the star.

“39, 38...”

He finalized and input the instructions then looked at the view ahead. He was veering away from the star.

He breathed out and leaned back in his chair.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized he must have been set up. When he got back, he would make whoever was responsible pay.

“4, 3”

He jerked back up. Out of nowhere a planet covered in patches of green, blue and white burst into view.

“1, 0”

Chapter 1 - March 25th one year ago – Boston, Massachusetts

“Science has proven that consciousness survives death,” Mark said into the darkness of the bedroom. “That’s what Dr Parnia said. That’s what the AWARE studies have shown. ”

No reply came. He rolled onto his side and could just make out the pillow next to him in the faint green glow of the clock. It was 2.02am. Before last autumn he needed to lift his head to see the time. He pictured Julia lying there, asleep, as she had most nights for the six years before she died...before her body died.

He rested his hand gently on the pillow. “The soul survives death,” he repeated. “Doesn’t it?”

It was a question he would know the answer to before the day was out.

After a while he drifted back to sleep. His mind flitted between vivid dreams, finally placing him in a familiar scene. He buried his hands deep into the black stallion’s thick mane and gripped tighter.

"Ha!" he shouted, urging the huge beast forward as its hooves pounded the wet sand and scattered pools of sunlit water left by the receding tide. He looked ahead; they were gaining on the white mare carrying Julia. It wouldn't be long before he'd catch her and his fingers would be buried deep in her fair hair instead of the horse's.

She looked back, and laughed, her blue eyes challenging him to close the gap faster.

A shriek pierced the thundering sound of the gallop. Mark looked up. An eagle passed in front of the sun as it glided towards the snow-capped mountains that rose from the shore. The shriek came again, but it wasn't the sound of a bird, it was a child's scream.

He opened his eyes, and glanced at the clock. It was 5.04.

The scream came again. "Help me!"

He sighed and pushed back the duvet, trampling across clothes that lay on his bedroom floor as he made his way to Charlie's room. The door was ajar, as he'd left it before going to bed. The glow of a nightlight, projecting an image of a slowly swirling galaxy onto the ceiling, revealed his six-year-old son tossing back and forth. His duvet, covered in pictures of rockets and planets, lay in a pile on the floor.

"Get off!" the boy shrieked.

Mark walked over, and knelt on the floor by the bed. He turned the small reading lamp on and laid his hand on Charlie's forehead. He stroked it gently until the thrashing subsided.

"It's just a dream," he whispered softly. "Wake up. You're safe."

Charlie's eyes opened. They were just like Julia's blue eyes and for a second they wrenched his heart.

"Daddy!" He reached out and put his arms around Mark's thick neck and held tightly. "It was trying to get me again."

"I know." He lifted Charlie out of the bed and held him close. "It's gone now."

"It threw you aside," Charlie said, his voice trembling. "You're supposed to be strong."

It was always the same dream, a dark monster that overpowers both of them. Maybe he should take him to a psychologist. He could feel Charlie's heart beating against his own chest. He kissed the dark brown hair that his son had inherited from him. The heartbeat slowed, and after a few minutes, Charlie drifted back to sleep.

Mark gently laid him back down on his bed, picked up the duvet and covered him. He leaned forward and kissed him again.

Mark left the room, and paused in the hallway. If he went back to bed he wouldn't sleep now, he had a big day ahead. He went into his study, closed the door and switched the light on. Piles of chemistry journals sat on the floor, bookshelves were filled with a mix of postgraduate texts on synthetic chemistry, neurochemistry, or books on Near Death Experiences, or NDEs as they were usually called. Papers were scattered across his desk, detailing reaction pathways, and chemical structures. Most of the relevant information was imprinted in his memory after countless evenings spent pouring over them, struggling with the obsession that had driven him since Julia's death.

He gathered all but one of the papers together and pushed them into the shredder. He didn't need them anymore and they could cause trouble. He'd signed dozens of legal agreements since joining GoWest Industries. He wasn't going to take the chance of anyone finding out what he'd been up to. He'd be tied up in law for the rest of his life...or worse.

Was all the stress and fear worth it? He would find out soon enough.

He took in a deep breath. He felt like he had the morning before he defended his Ph.D. thesis in front of MIT's top chemistry professors. If anything, this was a bigger milestone, and a tougher challenge. Today he would find out if he had been successful in creating the molecule

that had eluded him for months. Was the Soviet paper right about the substance they'd isolated from a rare flower from the Caucasus? Did it really simulate an Out of Body Experience, or OBE? They had never found out as the Soviet Union collapsed before the lab published another paper. The funding for the remote viewing program evaporated and the lab was abandoned.

If they were right, then today he would learn if he'd created the molecule that would allow man to cross the line between life and death; the living and the dead...if such a line existed. If the paper was right, then today, he would finish making a chemical that may allow him to see the love of his life again.

His life without Julia was not even half a life. What was the point in all the pain if Parnia was wrong and our souls were annihilated when we died? What was the point in finding perfect love if it was snatched away by some moronic drunk in a truck? What was the point in loving his son if it all came to nothing? What was the point in any kind of love if the part of you that loved was nothing more than neurotransmitters buzzing round your brain?

He had to know if there was more. He had to know if there was a chance he'd see her again...life was pointless otherwise.

Two hours later Mark was dressed for work in smart jeans and a casual shirt. He was sitting at the kitchen table reading. Charlie appeared at the bottom of the stairs already in his jeans and T-shirt. Mark took another sip of coffee as he memorized a few notes he'd made. He'd destroy them before leaving. This was his project, his idea, and GoWest would not be getting their hands on it.

"You didn't buy any Cheerios," Charlie said.

Mark looked across at his son who was holding an empty cereal box upside down over a bowl.

Mark closed his eyes and sighed.

“Sorry buddy...”

“I know,” Charlie said angrily. “Too busy again.”

“I can make you some eggs instead.”

Charlie walked over to the kitchen table and pulled himself on to a chair. He pulled his phone out of his bag and started playing on it.

“Don’t you want eggs? They’re healthier than Cheerios.”

“I can wait till I get to Aunt Debbie’s, she’s always got Cheerios.”

Mark looked around at the piles of unwashed dishes on the once immaculate granite surfaces and the unopened mail which were probably hiding payment reminders. It wasn’t that he was short of money. His savings account was nudging six figures and he even had ten thousand bucks in cash in a safe in the basement ready for a grid-frying solar flare. He was good at stashing away any left over money, but paying bills was a whole different matter. Julia had always taken care of the day to day stuff leaving him free to focus on his work. Now she was gone, he barely did the minimum at home, working all hours to keep on top of his job and work on his project at the same time.

He was not succeeding at being a single Dad, a point highlighted since Debbie stopped coming round to help out. It wasn’t her fault, she’d come for a few months after Julia died and she had her own family to look after, but now he was left alone, things had fallen apart. At least

she'd agreed to look after Charlie during the Easter break. The kid needed family, stability, and Julia's sister gave him that in spades.

“Can we go now?” Charlie said. “I'm hungry.”

Quarter of an hour later they were walking between the neatly trimmed rows of bushes that lined the pathway to the gloss black front door of Steve and Debbie's house. The sun was out but it was cold. He removed a glove and lifted the large brass knocker, but it opened before he released it. Debbie was dressed in a dark grey suit with an emerald blouse, her red hair formed a perfect wave of shiny curls like the ones in shampoo ads, and her make up was sharply applied.

“Hi Debbie. How are...”

“What time will you pick him up?” she asked as Charlie rushed past her to join his younger cousin standing in the hallway. “Steve is going bowling with his buddies so I have to take Kristy to dance class this evening.”

Steve never invited him bowling. The recently retired chief of police had sniffed out his fear of cops the moment they met, either that or he was racist. Probably a bit of both...in his experience, having slightly brown skin from his Native American mother and being nervous about a certain kind of cop was a survival instinct. He was quite happy not to go bowling.

“I'll try to be round by six.”

“Try?” Debbie folded her arms. A small pair of hands grabbed her pants and tugged lightly.

“Mommy, mommy, can we play in the yard?”

“In a second honey,” Debbie said without taking her eyes off Mark. “When I’m finished speaking to your uncle.”

The hands let go and Kristy disappeared back into the hallway.

“I will be here by six,” Mark said, with just a tiny bit more conviction than before.

Debbie shook her head. “You know I love that kid, but if this is going to work you need to help me out and pick him up when you say you’re going to.”

He nodded. “You know how grateful I am.”

Debbie’s expression softened a fraction. “Just be here at six.”

Mark turned away and headed for his car.

“And Mark.”

He stopped and looked back.

“Don’t smoke.” Mark’s mouth opened to deny the accusation.

“Charlie told me you’d started again.”

How’d the kid know, he hadn’t lit up in front of him? He opened his mouth again, but his sister-in-law cut in.

“Save it Mark. He’s already lost his Mom, Charlie doesn’t need his father dying of cancer.”

Mark turned and finished the walk to his idling Impala, got inside and closed the door. He looked back at the front of the pristine brick MacMansion his brother-in-law had provided for his family. He waited to see if Charlie would come and wave goodbye. Their son would have waved

to Julia the evening she dropped him off at her sister's, just ten minutes before the Dodge Ram crushed her flimsy Toyota like a tin can.

The front door closed. No goodbye wave. His heart filled with a deep sadness. What if he never saw Charlie again, just like Julia hadn't that hideous night?

He shuddered and put the shift in drive.

Chapter 2

Twenty minutes later Mark flashed his security pass to the guard at the gate of the research facility where he worked. He glanced at the sign next to the gate that read GoWest Industries in curvy coloured letters. Until a year ago it had read Benton Biotech in angular old school corporate chrome. The lab had been part of a wider conglomerate, including a UK based bank. It was the latter that had been the ultimate target of GoWest's take over, but to acquire the bank, they had been forced to buy the whole group. Given the overall lack of interest in the lab, the changes this far from the London HQ had been slow and largely cosmetic.

Entering the redecorated lobby of the Boston facility still required swallowing a mouthful of corporate bullshit every morning though. The logos might have changed but the smell of shit was always bad, no matter the shade.

He'd thought about leaving, but it wasn't really an option. The lab operated in the shadows, working on defense contracts, and other secretive projects and invariably his work was the most sensitive. The organization had always been neurotic about security, and the change of owner had altered nothing in that regard. The management team had remained intact and they went out of their way to keep their secrets in house, including the human vessels of those secrets.

In spite of all of this, he still got a thrill every time he entered the biochemistry labs, which were stuffed floor to ceiling with the latest hi-tech gadgetry. Working in a lab creating novel chemicals was more than just a job, it was a nano-scale adventure offering an infinite expanse of opportunities. Every day that he went to work he could make a discovery that changed the course of history, and today he was more likely to do that than any other he had worked there.

He pushed aside some glassware he'd left out the night before, and put his backpack down on his work bench. There was a note by his phone. It was from Jacob, the team leader, asking him to come to his office "pronto".

Mark groaned. The guy was a real prick...pronto, really? Were they in the special-forces or something? There were few he respected who had authority at GoWest and Jacob least of all.

He walked past the lines of benches with men and women in white coats reading journal articles, making notes, working on experiments in tubes and flasks containing different coloured liquids, or tweaking bits of expensive equipment. He reached the office at the end of the lab and knocked on the door.

"Enter!" Shouted a voice from within. Mark opened the door and stepped inside.

Jacob began twisting his body toward Mark while still looking at an open email, then allowed his head to follow. He must have his blond hair cut every weekend since it was always precisely the same length corporate comb over. His eyes, framed by a pair of black rectangular Ted Baker glasses, were a cold blue. His thin lips created a brief smile that disappeared rapidly enough to insure you knew there was no sincerity in the expression. He stretched out an open hand and gestured at the chair next to his large three sided desk. Unlike Jacob's chair, it had no arm rests, was low and had a hard plastic seat. Mark walked over, sat down and stared at the regimental organization of stationary and other objects laid out around his boss.

"It's nearly time for your quarterly review," Jacob said, leaving a long pause.

Mark nodded slowly. The ominous nature of the pause set off alarm bells. He couldn't care less if he wasn't considered for promotion, he just didn't want to attract negative attention.

“You know, it’s never good to have surprises in these meetings. I think it’s best that we all know where we stand. It avoids any unnecessary...” Jacob looked at the notepad on the desk filled with immaculately written bullet points. He looked back up at Mark, “disappointment.”

Mark suppressed the reflex to object. Fighting these people never worked, in fact it just made things worse. He kept silent and tried to keep a lid on his rising panic.

“How would you rate your performance so far this year?”

Mark took a breath. “Not the best. I’ve been struggling since Julia...”

Jacob’s curt nod cut his flow, his boss’ expression showing just the required amount of managerial sympathy. “I understand Mark, it’s been a difficult time for you.” He turned and picked up an iPad. He flipped through some screens until he stopped at a spreadsheet. “And yet you still put more hours in than anyone else.”

Jacob looked up from the screen. “It’s not like you’ve been at home grieving,” he said coldly.

Mark shifted in his seat. Was Jacob on to him? “Work helps me take my mind off things.”

Again the expression of feigned sympathy, only briefer this time.

“I understand why it might.” He flicked the iPad screen, and glanced at another spreadsheet. “However the number of new experiments logged and the amount of substances produced is less than anyone else. Only a half of your yearly productivity since you joined.”

Mark looked down. He was running out of rope. “I’m finding it difficult to concentrate.”

Jacob ignored his reply and swiped the screen again. Another spreadsheet.

“But your consumption of chemicals hasn’t changed. You still order more than anyone else.” He put the iPad down and looked up. No attempts at feigned sympathy now. “Working longer hours, ordering more chemicals, yet not producing so much. What’s going on?”

This was worse than he could have imagined. He thought he’d covered all his tracks.

Jacob’s long stare filled the room with silent accusation. Mark opened his mouth to say something, anything to take the pressure off. A beep from Jacob’s laptop rescued him. Jacob looked at the screen.

He turned back with a look of irritation.

“I have a leadership meeting now. We’ll finish this when I get back.” He stood up and looked at Mark. “Your answers need to be good. You’re up to something and I will find out. There are procedures to follow in circumstances like these. I have already drafted a report for security noting my concerns.”

Mark felt the world close in on him. Even if he could blag his way out of this, there was no way he could carry on with his personal project under that kind of scrutiny. His dream, his one chance of seeing Julia again, was about to be taken from him.

Then there was his future...Charlie’s future. You never want the security arm of the organisation to be sniffing around you. When you’re on the right side of them, you’re a well-rewarded asset, but he was about to become a liability. He’d heard rumors of what happened on the rare occasions people dared get on the wrong side of their secretive corporate security division. The more swivel-eyed of his colleagues used words like “Deep State” and “Davos Devils”. Fear had always been a part of why employees with families towed the line.

Mark left Jacob's office and went to his fume-hood where the final step in his reaction sequence was swirling in a round bottomed flask on an automatic stirrer. Donning some blue nitrile gloves, he reached for a long syringe, pierced the rubber lid of the flask and drew a small sample of the liquid, then dispensed it into a plastic vial. He turned around. Jacob was just leaving the lab. Mark followed a few paces behind until he reached the door, then waited for his boss to disappear into the meeting room at the end of the corridor. Mark walked halfway along the same corridor then entered the NMR Lab. The room was dominated by the beige colored cylindrical machine containing a huge magnet that spun at thousands of revolutions a minute to generate a field that made atoms dance to its tune and give up their secrets.

Nigel sat at the control terminal. Why did it have to be Nigel, the most pedantic scientist in a lab with more than its fair share of pedants? He didn't know how long he had before Jacob would be grilling him again, and then who knows what? He probably had one chance to do this analysis. No more.

"Hey Mark," Nigel said, looking up briefly from the large screen.

Mark nodded, then grabbed a thin glass sample tube and dispensed a small amount of the liquid from his vial into it. He then walked over to a robotic rack where the samples were lined up to feed the magnet for analysis. As soon as Nigel finished processing his run, he could start his.

Mark walked back and stood next to Nigel who was flicking between two images of multiple overlapping lines on the screen. Mark folded his arms and stared at his colleague's large back with its folds of flab stretching the seams of the grubby lab coat. He wrinkled his nose at

the flecks of dandruff that peppered the straggly grey hair that rimmed the spotted bald dome of his head.

“Will you be long?”

Nigel didn't reply, but his shoulders tensed, and he leaned forward, pushed his wire glasses up his nose and looked at the screen closely. He slowly zoomed in on a section of the graphic.

Mark breathed in. Don't ask him again. The more you push, the deeper he'll dig his heels in.

He looked up at the clock, and watched the second hand tick around. Which second would be the one that meant it would be too late to work up his experiment before Jacob finished his leadership meeting?

Nigel sat back and hit a key on the terminal. A printer whirred to life, and spat out a copy of the screen. Nigel got up, retrieved the document, gave Mark a smileless nod, then walked out.

Mark sat down and quickly worked through the menus selecting the analysis method he wanted. A second later the robotic rack rotated until his tube was in place and a metal grappling hook grabbed it and lowered it into the center of the powerful magnet.

In the next five minutes he would know if all his work on creating the structure of the OBE drug had been a success or not. The fact that this was now his one shot as Jacob had rumbled him, didn't help settle his nerves. He looked at the clock again. The meeting had been running about ten minutes. Jacob could have finished already, and put another pronto note on his desk.

The progress bar crept across the bottom of the screen, each new block taking what felt like an eternity to appear. Finally the machine began processing the data. The robotic arm retrieved the tube and placed it back in the rack. A moment later the NMR spectrum appeared on the screen. Mark's heart began to race as he zoomed onto a central portion of the image and expanded the jumble of peaks.

Compared with the spectrum of the molecule before the reaction, one very tall peak had disappeared, and three new ones had taken its place.

"Yes!" he hissed under his breath. The reaction had worked. If only he was still in a University lab, synthesizing a molecule of this complexity from an entirely new reaction pathway would have instantly been worthy of a publication in a major chemistry journal. More to the point, in that tube was his final target molecule, the derivative of the agent isolated from the Russian flower. There was a trace of some side product, but from first analysis the contents of the tube were about ninety five percent pure.

Mark looked at the clock again, got to his feet and went back to the lab as quickly as possible.

He stopped the reaction, removed the rubber stopper and hurriedly tried to withdraw the flask from the fume hood, but the contents sloshed around and he had to put it back. His hands were shaking.

He breathed in slowly for a few seconds, then resumed. Taking greater care this time he was able to get the flask out without risk of spillage. He connected it to a vacuum condenser and started the machine. It spun around and before long, white crystals slowly began to form around the flask as the solvent evaporated.

He checked the time. Jacob had been in his meeting twenty minutes now.

He looked back at the flask urging the last traces of liquid to leave. Finally it all turned to a streak of solid crystalline powder lining the rotating flask. He stopped the machine, removed the flask, went to the high accuracy scales and scooped ten grams of the contents into a vial for testing. He accessed his computerized log book and printed a bar code and wrapped it around the vial. He put a replica barcode onto his official workbook. Only he would know what that related to and the fact that any test results would be nothing to do with the project he was officially working on.

He was tempted to take the compound home with him that evening and see if it worked. He was so desperate to see Julia again, or at the very least know if it was possible. But he wouldn't take that risk yet. The ten grams would be used for in vitro cell line toxicology tests and in vivo tests on rats. For Charlie's sake he would wait till he knew it was safe.

He looked at his watch. 9.55am.

"Has the courier been yet?" he asked Jenny, who was working on a nearby bench.

"Don't think so, but the pick-up is due now."

He put the vial in his pocket, opened his backpack and pulled out his pack of Marlboro lights and a lighter. He hesitated for a moment as he thought of Debbie's words about cancer. No. He'd give up tomorrow, he was too wired today. He began walking towards the door but before he reached it, it swung open and Jacob marched in.

Jacob pushed past him, then looked back, snapped his fingers at Mark then pointed at his office. "Follow me. Time to finish what we started."

Mark pulled the vial out of his pocket. "I just need to drop this at reception."

"Now Mark!"

The clinking of glass on nearby benches stopped, and goggle covered eyes peered at them.

If Mark went with him, Jacob could tell him to stop everything and spend hours going through all his work and note books accounting for every gram of chemical and every hour he'd spent in the lab.

Screw him, what did I have to lose now anyway?

"It can wait," Mark said, and pushed the door open and left before Jacob could reply.

Mark walked quickly towards the reception area, expecting his boss to follow him and grab his shoulder, but he didn't. It would only make him look weak, so Jacob was probably already planning escalating the matter when Mark returned.

He stepped into the reception area. A thin young man with a dark hipster beard in a UPS uniform was handing a clipboard to Shellie, the middle aged blond receptionist who had been at the organization since long before Mark joined.

"Hey!" Mark called to them. "Hold up, I've got one more."

Shellie rolled her eyes. "We've just completed the manifest, can't it wait till tomorrow?"

He held the vial up. "Just one," he pleaded. "And this one is the one...I've got a feeling."

Shellie smiled and ripped the manifest off the clipboard, throwing it into a recycling bin. “It always is the one with you guys.” She shook her head and started filling out a new form on her computer.

“Guess you’re going to want to put that vial in here?” The courier lifted a large plastic box onto the counter. He undid the lid and a puff of CO₂ vapor escaped as the warm air came into contact with the dry ice.

“Thanks.” Mark added his vial to the row of other sealed vials containing powders and liquids of varying colors.

“I need to scan it first honey,” Shellie said.

“Sorry.” Mark pulled the vial back out and handed her the tube.

Mark looked at the door of the corridor leading to the labs expecting Jacob to appear, or worse still a security guard.

Shellie scanned the bar code, looked at her computer screen, and hit enter.

“There you go.” She handed it back to him and he replaced it in the container. The courier resealed it. Shellie printed the new manifest, signed it and handed it over. She glared at Mark for a second, “Any more, or can we let this young man go now?”

Mark thought about returning to Jacob’s office, but what difference would a few minutes make?

“I’m all done,” Mark said. “I’m off for a little celebration.” He held his cigarettes up.

Shellie shook her head, “They’ll kill you, you know.”

“So everyone tells me.”

He left the entrance of the building and walked across the parking lot to the small plastic shelter that had been constructed to humiliate the few smokers that remained at the labs. It was OK in the summer, but winters were hell out there.

Mark entered the shelter, lit up and inhaled deeply. He smiled as the nicotine smoothed away his anxiety. He'd done it. He took a few minutes to take in his achievement, then looked back at the building. Jacob would be fuming by now.

It was time to face the music.

He dropped the cigarette on the ground and lifted his foot to stub it out, but before his shoe reached the smoldering butt there was a blinding flash and a deafening blast.

Chapter 3: March 20th the following year – Kabwe, Zambia

Helen sat at a plastic table by a shabby drinks stand covered in fading coke posters on the edge of the city. The dusty streets around the small group of vendor huts were full of litter and worn out bits of furniture. It was a different planet from her usual haunts in Fitzrovia.

Some local men were leaning against a nearby fruit stall and leering at her, but she felt decidedly unattractive. The nine hours in business class from Heathrow to Lusaka might have been comfortable, but the glass of champagne followed by 4 glasses of wine, and a scotch had left her nauseous and dehydrated. The subsequent four hour drive from the airport to this less than appealing corner of Africa had not improved her overall sense of wellbeing. Worst of all she hadn't had a chance to change out of her jeans and put on a different top more suited to the heat and humidity. She was conscious of odors starting to emanate from her own person that she normally associated with the rare occasions she was forced to use public transport in London. Her mood matched the grotty vibe of her surroundings.

The trip had better be worth it.

The men continued to oggle her. She got stared at by men all the time wherever she was, but being the only white woman they had probably seen all day, she was drawing more attention than normal. She wasn't concerned. She could look after herself, and more to the point the muscle she'd hired for the trip was sitting in a Land Cruiser less than ten meters away, also staring at her. Better still he was armed to the teeth and would only receive the generous payment for his services if she was returned to the airport safely the following morning.

She pulled the front of her blouse away from her clammy skin to try to create a layer of cooler air. It didn't work and the damp material just sucked straight back against her chest.

Where on earth is he? She looked at her watch. He was five minutes late.

The last glints of sunlight deserted the tops of the half finished one story concrete buildings that separated the tin shacks lining every street for miles. Even with her guard, she was not keen about sticking around after dark.

A man pulled up next to the juice stand on a push bike. He looked around nervously. He propped his bike against the stand then cautiously walked over to her. She knew he was 32, but the man in front of her looked at least ten years older. He was thin with pronounced cheek bones. His shirt and trousers hung loosely on him, and despite his head being shaved, a slight sheen of grey could be seen surfacing in various places.

“Jane Mandelson?”

You think? How many other white women are sitting here? She bit her tongue. Sarcasm would be wasted, and in actual fact, she was not Jane Mandelson, but she wasn't going to let a convicted thief know her real name. She took her now redundant sunglasses off, smiled and extended her hand. “You must be Michael Unbamo.”

He offered a limp, uncertain hand in return, then sat down.

“Drink?” Helen asked, lifting her warm beer can. Michael shook his head.

He looked around again, and this time allowed his eyes to rest on the group of men still leering at Helen.

“Don't worry,” she said. “They didn't follow me, they were here when I arrived.”

He nodded slowly. "I was told never to talk to anyone about the tests. If I did, they would put me back in prison."

"But you changed your mind?"

He looked down. "It's not for me. My daughter needs medicine."

Helen reached into her bag and withdrew an envelope slowly.

"Under the table," Michael hissed. "I don't want anyone knowing. They might follow me and..."

Helen nodded and discretely passed the envelope with two hundred dollars under the plastic table. His eyes flashed down, and there was a frown.

"It's only half."

"Half now, and the rest once I'm satisfied that you've been forthright with me." She noticed him looking down at her bag. "In case you are wondering, the other half is in that Land Cruiser sitting next to my friend with the AK47. We will give it to you and take you and your bike to a safe spot to drop you off once we've finished."

He looked at the huge man sitting behind the wheel glaring at him. Michael looked less than pleased with the arrangements, but nodded and slid the envelope inside his pocket.

"I guess you aren't missing life on the inside?"

"Do you know much about Zambian prisons?"

"I can only imagine."

He shook his head, his face sullen. “No you cannot. The cells are so crammed that we have to take turns to lie on the floor and sleep. It is hell.”

Helen winced at the word. She tried to picture the barred room, filled with the stench of sweat and excrement, and the evil that lurked in their hearts and the abuses that occurred. She hadn't been in a Zambian cell, but she knew she'd experienced something even worse, an unspeakable terror. That was part of the reason she was talking to Michael now.

“You were in prison for stealing.”

Michael's head fell, a mixture of shame and regret. “About thirty of your dollars. No man should suffer what I did for such a small sum. I was in that cell with rapists and murderers.”

“You are out now though.”

“I would rather die than go back.”

“But your daughter...”

He nodded. “If this is some kind of trick, and you are just testing me...kill me. Don't send me back.”

She looked into his bloodshot brown eyes and felt a flood of sympathy wash over her. What would he do once the money she had given him ran out? Steal again. Maybe she would give him more, she could afford it more than him. “The experiment took place in a facility near the prison last June, but they only let you out a few weeks ago. The deal was an early release, so why the nine month delay?”

“That was an early release. I would have had another four years otherwise. Also, we were in a private prison with single cells. It was more like a hotel after the state prison. They wanted to keep us there in case there are any long term effects.”

“Were there?”

He shook his head. “Not physical. I had strange dreams for a while, but I didn’t get sick in any other way.”

Helen nodded. Now for the reason she came. She picked up her bag and pulled out a file with a few pages of the report from the experiment. She read through the words she’d highlighted. ‘Subject M reported seeing himself from outside his body and watching the scientist and guards while he was unconscious. He remained unconscious for six minutes.’

“Describe exactly what happened after you took the drug.”

“At first nothing. Then after about twenty seconds there was a pain in my chest.”

“Like a heart attack?” She glanced at the report again. Other than a brief period of raised heart beat and blood pressure, the ECG showed that the heart rate slowed to below 50 beats per minute. There were no signals of a heart attack, and the subsequent lab work showed no signs of one either. What was highly unusual was that the brain appeared to completely shut down, the EEG monitoring brain function had flat-lined. The scientist and attending physician had discussed reviving Michael but concluded that because the heart was still pumping blood around the body, resuscitation attempts would be redundant, so they just let things be and continued with their observations. Presumably he was as disposable to GoWest, the funders of the project, as a lab rat.

“I don’t know. I have never had a heart attack, but it felt like my inside was being ripped in two. It then spread up my body, through my spine, into my head and I passed out.”

He looked at her intently.

She raised her eyebrows inviting him to continue.

“Then I was standing outside of myself.”

Helen nodded. She had to stop herself from running ahead to what she was most interested in. She had to ensure that she noted all the details from each stage. “How much time passed between you becoming unconscious and standing outside of yourself?”

He shrugged. “No more than a minute. People were in much the same place that I remember them being when I took the drug.”

“And then?”

“That was it.”

“Nothing else?”

“I stood there looking at myself and the room, then after a few minutes everything went black. I woke up, but not immediately. I think at least one person had left the room.”

“Is that all?”

“All?” he said. “I was standing outside of myself looking at my own body. I had only heard of these things from witch doctors, but here I was a spirit, free from my body.”

So there was no tunnel, no boundary with dead relatives telling him to go back, no life review.

“You didn’t glimpse a heavenly realm with a Being of Light?”

He shook his head.

It didn’t sound like a classic NDE. Maybe he was scared of saying what really happened.

“No place of hopeless darkness being attacked by...” she wanted to use the word demons. Was that what they were? That’s what they’d seemed like. Others who’d had hellish NDEs used that word too, but it had religious overtones “...violent spirits?”

He looked confused.

“These are all commonly reported elements of NDEs...Near Death Experiences.”

“But I didn’t die.” He shrugged. “I can only tell you what happened to me.”

Helen leaned back and folded her arms. “Can you prove it?”

He looked offended.

“I’m not questioning whether you believe you experienced what you did, but can you actually prove that it happened, that your consciousness actually left your body and observed events in the room. OBEs have been described after various stimulations of the brain in experiments over the years.”

“OBEs?”

“Out of Body Experiences.”

“I don’t know if that is what happened. I can only tell you what I experienced.”

This was going round in circles. Helen closed the file and sighed. It was nothing like her NDE, and there was no proof it really happened. She shoved the file in her bag and looked at her watch.

“What did you want to hear?” he asked.

She shook her head. “You told me what happened, that is all I wanted to hear.”

She closed her bag and was about to stand, but stopped. There was another question.

“How did it feel?”

He thought about it for a moment. “It wasn’t like normal.” He looked up at the sky and rubbed his chin like he was trying to find the words or the memory. He looked back at her. “It was like I could see three hundred and sixty degrees, the whole room, all at once. I could see every detail, every hair on the scientist’s head, everything all at once. I could also hear every single sound perfectly. I heard a beetle crawling along the floor!”

That was more like it, much more in tune with regular NDEs.

“All my senses were really strong. In fact it was like I had more senses than normal.” He began nodding with excitement. “Yes, I could even hear what the doctors were thinking.” His expression changed to a frown. “And...”

Helen waited for a few moments but he didn’t finish his sentence. “And?”

“Nothing, I don’t think it was anything.”

“Please. I’ve come a long way, and I want to hear everything...every detail, whether you think it was important or not.”

“I didn’t see anyone else, but…” he stopped, and the frown returned. “...I didn’t feel like I was alone.”

“You mean other than the staff in the room.”

He nodded. “I’m not sure, but I felt as though there may have been something else with me in that state.”

“Did it make you feel loved or at peace?”

He shook his head. “The opposite.”