



**INFINITY
DRAKE
THE FORBIDDEN CITY**

The title is presented in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The words 'INFINITY' and 'DRAKE' are stacked vertically, with 'DRAKE' being significantly larger. Below them, 'THE FORBIDDEN CITY' is written in a smaller, all-caps font. The text is set against a white background and is heavily stylized with bright white lightning bolts that strike through the letters, creating a sense of energy and danger.

Books by John McNally

Infinity Drake: The Sons of Scarlatti

Infinity Drake: The Forbidden City

JOHN MCNALLY

INFINITY BRAVE

The title 'INFINITY BRAVE' is rendered in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are filled with a dark, stormy texture. Multiple bright white lightning bolts strike across the text, creating a sense of intense energy and danger. The bolts are most prominent over the 'I' in 'INFINITY' and the 'A' in 'BRAVE'.

THE FORBIDDEN CITY



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To my mother and father, with love
and thanks for all the books.

FILE NO: GNTRC 9447549 [REDACTED] -OP/DRAKE~∞

TOP SECRET – MOST CLASSIFIED – RESTRICTION ULT9

FILE ABSTRACT: NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF OPERATION FORBIDDEN CITY 操作故宫

(.1) BASED ON DEBRIEF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY [REDACTED], TECHNICAL SURVEILLANCE DATA FROM 来源 中国技术情报报告# [REDACTED] SUPPLEMENTED BY [REDACTED] UPDATED [REDACTED] (.2) TO REFLECT TESTIMONY AND INTERROGATION OF [REDACTED]. FULL OPERATIONAL DETAILS. DECISION-MAKING PATHWAYS. FULL PSYCHOLOGICAL/EMOTIONAL CONTEXT.

ACCESS: PRIME MINISTER/CABINET SECRETARY/SECRETARY OF STATE DEFENCE/SECRETARY OF STATE FOREIGN/CHAIRMAN JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF/CHAIRMAN GNTRC.

LIFETIME ACCESS: A. ALLENBY/ ∞DRAKE.

STUDY ACCESS: LEADERSHIP AND TACTICAL COMMAND LEVEL 009.

FILE MOST SECURE – NOT TO LEAVE REGISTRY

And the Lord said unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the land, that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt. And they did so; for Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod, and smote the dust of the earth, and it became lice in man, and in beast; all the dust of the land became lice throughout all the land of Egypt.

Exodus 8:16-19

Carbon will take over.

Mildred Dresselhaus

A large, stylized white lightning bolt graphic is centered on a black background. The lightning bolt is composed of several sharp, angular segments. At the bottom tip of the lightning bolt, there is a bright, glowing sparkler effect, with numerous thin, white, radiating lines extending outwards, resembling sparks or a firework. The overall composition is dynamic and energetic.

**PART
ONE**

ONE

September 28 23:58 (GMT+1). Hook Hall,
Surrey, UK.

Midnight in the heart of England. The witching hour. In the woods an owl screeched, then ripped through a mouse, beak blood-wet in the moonlight.

The great old house of Hook Hall stood empty. It had not been used as a home since the day it had been requisitioned by Her Majesty's Government to become the top secret headquarters of the Global Non-governmental Threat Response Committee¹. It lay now at the heart of a complex of modern laboratories and military installations

¹ Aka the G&T, formed by an alliance of international powers in 2002 to deal with extraordinary threats to global civilisation.



that spread around it in the darkness like the still, silent courtiers of a grand old lady.

The silence did not last. A low hum penetrated the dark and along the great drive the largest of the buildings began to glow.

Inside the cathedral-like space, the massive Central Field Analysis Chamber (CFAC), power surged and a great stone circle of particle accelerators, each the size of a shipping container, came to life.

“My Henge,” as Dr Al Allenby, the dishevelled genius behind the machine, called it. “Everyone should have a Henge.”

From the windows of a laboratory overlooking the henge a very small boy sent up a mad private prayer.

Finn (full name Infinity Drake) was about to turn thirteen. He had sand-coloured hair that grew in several directions at once (like his father’s) and deep blue eyes (like his mother’s). He had been orphaned two years before. He was into gaming, mad science and most lethal pastimes, like any other boy. But unlike any other boy, thanks to getting caught up in Operation Scarlatti² the previous spring, Finn was now only 9.8mm tall.

With a deafening electrostatic crack and hum, white lightning began to spin like candyfloss around the core, the hoop of accelerators whipping up a cyclone of pure energy. With one last push they would form a perfect subatomic magnetic field.

Perched above the Henge, crammed into his cockpit command

² See FILE NO: GNTRC 9437549-OP/BLAKE~∞ TOP SECRET: an attempt by transnational terror czar D.A.P Kaparis to blackmail the G&T into handing over the secrets of the Boldklub process by releasing a doomsday bioweapon, the Scarlatti Wasp, and threatening Armageddon. The attempt was thwarted by a military kill team shrunk to hunt down the wasp, and by the heroic actions of Infinity Drake.

pod, Dr Allenby (known to all as Al), recited the snatch of poetry he used to remember the crucial sequencing equations he kept secret from the world –

*“But at my back I always hear
Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity...”*

(... adding in his head: *where B is acceleration and E opens and closes brackets and where all other vowels are disregarded*).

Several calculations ran at once inside his brain and in an instant he typed a series of numbers into his control terminal...
WHOOOOOOOMMMM!

The spun lighting became a continuous arc, then, with a flash, the Hot Area was created – a throbbing orb of white light within which the distance between the nucleus of any atom and its electrons would be reduced, thus shrinking all matter to a fraction of its original size. Called the Boldklub³ process, it was a remarkable feat of physics that only Al really understood.

“OH YEAH, BABY!” he cried, incongruous given the surroundings and the presence of so many distinguished scientists, soldiers and political functionaries.

His boss, Commander James Clayton-King, Chairman of the Global Non-governmental Threat Committee, sighed and briefly lowered his eyelids.

³ Named after the Danish football club Akademisk Boldklub, who Nils Bohr, the father of subatomic physics, used to play for.



It had taken months longer than Al had anticipated to reach this point and there had been many mistakes along the way, but finally he thought they'd got it right. In a few moments he would be able to prove that he could shrink a living mammal, then reverse the process and successfully return it to its normal size. Alive. Countless tests had been run with countless objects – up to and including living plants.

All that remained was a live mammal test.

A white mouse had been selected, sedated and encased in monitoring devices.

It had been named 'Fluffy'.

It was for his nephew Finn, and his three Operation Scarlatti team mates, that Al had worked so hard day and night in the hope of being able to return them to their normal size.

A technician up in the Control Gallery, on a command from Al, started the conveyor that fed items into the Hot Area. Fluffy moved along the belt and slipped into the perfect light.

Finn watched, transfixed, as the Hot Area rippled and the white mouse was reduced to 'nano' scale, just a 150th of its original size, just like Finn. Next, the process would be reversed, bringing Fluffy back to normal 'macro' scale. If it worked, the four nano-humans, including Finn, would be resized next.

They watched the show together, hopes looping the loop.

"Come on, Fluffy," whispered Captain Kelly of the SAS from where he stood beside Finn – six foot six of muscle and scar-tissue, currently reduced to 13mm, and so convinced the experiment would

work he'd booked a flight to Scotland where he planned to spend the next few weeks sailing around the Western Isles accompanied by a crate of whisky.

"Kick it, Fluff!" agreed 11mm-high Delta Salazar from behind her Aviator shades – the best and coolest pilot in the US Air Force. She'd grown as close to her nano-colleagues as she had to anybody in her life, but she couldn't wait to fly back home to see her younger sister, Carla.

Even 10mm-high Engineer Stubbs, ancient and given to doom and gloom, had boiled an egg in case things went well (party food would just upset his stomach).

"Reverse the polarity!" cried Al.

Finn's heart beat like a drum. He could not wait to be big again, to open a door, to hug his stupid dog, Yo-yo, to kick a ball around with his best friend Hudson. To—

Suddenly everything went purple as his view of the action was eclipsed by a gigantic, well-preserved lady of sixty-four in matching top and slacks.

"Now, does anybody want more Welshcakes?"

"GRANDMA! GET OUT OF THE WAY!" Finn screamed.

Nobody in the universe had a more uncanny ability to interrupt than Finn's grandma – and Al's mother – Violet Allenby. She was drawn like a magnet to Hoover in front of any given TV and always asked too loudly who was on the phone.

"Oh, am I in the way?" she said, towering over them like a colossus.



“YEEEEES!” Finn wailed until she moved along to offer yet more cake to the technical staff, her way of taking her mind off everything that could possibly go wrong.

The Henge reappeared just as Al cut the power to the Hot Area, everyone watching as the spinning cyclone evaporated into a million specks of light.

As the sparkles faded Fluffy’s test rig was revealed at centre of the Henge... at full size.

There were whoops from technicians. A smattering of applause. “Yes!” shouted Finn.

Delta got him in a headlock-come-hug.

Kelly began to dance a jig, then got Stubbs in a headlock too.

Out in the CFAC Al popped the perspex lid on his command pod and hurried down the ladder.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep... went an alarm.

Al ran into the middle of the Henge.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep...

Fluffy was very still.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep...

Al examined her.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep...

Seeing the angle of his uncle’s shoulders, Finn knew at once.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep...

Fluffy was dead.

TWO

September 29 07:04 (Local GMT+8). Song
Island, Taiwan (disputed).

Dawn broke over the South China Sea.

Song Island stood roughly 150 miles southwest of Taiwan and 150 miles southeast of Hong Kong, part of a forgotten archipelago – uninhabited, untouched, undisturbed, except for the occasional visit from a mad nationalist or a passing naval patrol. Three countries lay claim to Song and it had been the subject of a United Nations disputed territory process since 1948, though Song's file lay at the very bottom of the pile, uncared for by a diplomatic community with better things to do. After all, it was just a Karst Limestone sugarloaf – a big conical rock stuck like a sore thumb out of the deepest azure ocean, baked by the sun and whipped by typhoons, with barely a



scrap of life upon its rocky surface. True, there were some nesting seabirds, patches of vegetation, but mostly it was just a sheer 200-metre column of barren, bare rock...

... within though?

Kaparis settled down. There was nothing quite like moving into a new HQ: they always had that irresistible 'new top secret operations facility' smell. And this place, even Kaparis had to admit, was special. The creation of his eccentric personal architect, Thömson-Lavoisiér, it boasted 2km of tunnels, bunkers and laboratories built into the seabed, a submersible weapons platform, a sub-aquatic escape vehicle and – the pièce de résistance – a personal recumbent operations chamber for Kaparis and the iron lung he'd spent his life in since he was totally paralysed by a medical 'accident' in 2001.

The chamber was set into the sugarloaf itself and featured not only 'the usual' domed screen array and cranial panopticon (allowing a 360 degree field of vision and eye-track control of all screens) but also: a window. Unremarkable, until you realised the whole chamber could move up and down like an elevator within the stick of rock. Kaparis could enjoy a commanding view of the South China Sea and the surrounding islands one minute, then descend to a point six metres below sea level to watch the local sharks the next.

All in all he was delighted. His eyes spun round the opticon as he sought out his butler.

"Heywood?"

"Yes, Master?" Heywood stepped forward – bald, immaculate.

"What do you think to something local for dinner?"

"Of course, Master."

Heywood pressed a button. For mood music, Kaparis flicked his eyes across the screen array and called up a performance of The Mikado by Gilbert and Sullivan.

The sharks circled.

A portal opened on the seabed and an official of the Taiwanese Coastguard – who had attempted to report his superiors for accepting bribes to keep clear of the island – was expelled. He began to swim desperately for the surface.

The sharks exposed their teeth, then expressed their delight... in the only way they knew how. And the chorus sang –

*“Behold the Lord High Executioner
A personage of noble rank and title
A dignified and potent officer
Whose functions are particularly vital!
Defer! Defer!
To the noble lord, to the noble lord
To the Lord High Executioner!”*

Blood bloomed through the waters and what remained of the coastguard official drifted down to the ocean floor.

Kaparis ordered his chamber to rise then checked the progress of his agent in Shanghai via a live video feed. It was all so nearly over, the Vector Program so nearly complete. He could imagine the weight lifting from his shoulders. The long months of struggle, the long months of effort and excellence in his secret factories beneath the deserts of Niger had resulted in the production of fifty-two of the most devilishly sophisticated robots ever conceived.



Finally he was on the road to recovery, putting distance between himself and the memory of Infinity Drake and all the damage he'd managed to inflict during the Scarlatti episode.

Finally, he was to master mankind and take over the world...

All that remained was to enjoy the yields of his genius. As the chamber broke the surface of the water, sunlight flooded in and momentarily Kaparis felt free again, as free as the Booby Birds and Great Crested Terns now wheeling around the rocks. And in that moment he forgot himself and a thought bubbled up through his mind: I... am... happy...

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep...

An alarm sounded.

The bubble burst.

September 29 07:22 (Local GMT+8). Kung Fu Noodles, Concession#22, Food Hall D, Sector 9, Forbidden City Industrial Progress Zone, Shanghai, China.

The food hall was vast. At dozens of outlets staff in ridiculous paper hats served hundreds of customers, night workers just off shift. The air was hot and street-food aromatic.

Baptiste spotted the plain-clothes cop as soon as he walked in – neat, serious, casually checking out the handful of westerners in the food hall. Including Baptiste. The cop glanced down at a palmtop

screen, then immediately walked across the seating area towards him.

As he approached, Baptiste touched his phone and initiated emergency contact. His free hand felt instinctively for the fountain pen in the front pocket of his bag.

The cop flashed his ID and said something in Mandarin Chinese.

Instantly, Song Island relayed a translation back to an audio device embedded behind Baptiste's ear. *"He's asking your name."*

"Jaan Baptiste."

Baptiste. It had started as a nickname. Many religious scenes remained on the walls of the Kaparis seminary, a school for Tyros housed in an abandoned monastery high in the Carpathian Mountains, including an icon of John the Baptist. With greasy hair that dripped as far as his shoulders and a soft-as-silk teenage beard 'Baptiste' was a dead ringer for the dead saint. Aged between twelve and seventeen, the Tyros were the foot soldiers of Kaparis, secretly selected from care institutions across the world and brought to the Carpathians for training and NRP⁴ indoctrination.

"Passport?" the cop asked, in English now.

"At hotel." Baptiste answered in a Bulgarian accent, mentally checking off the six ways he could kill the cop with his bare hands.

"Hotel name?"

"Tiger Star."

⁴ Neuro-Retinal Programming aka NRP – an accelerated learning and personality control process whereby a probe, inserted directly through the eye, connects to the optic nerve and delivers information (specialist knowledge, emotional association, ideology, etc.) straight to the brain's cerebral cortex.



* * *

“This just received by Shanghai Police Command...” Kaparis heard Li Jun report.

From her bank of screens at the edge of his operations chamber, Li Jun posted the image of Baptiste that the cop had just sent to his headquarters. She was an unassuming young Tyro who had become Kaparis’s chief technologist.

Kaparis seethed.

“Happy...” His brief moment of sentiment had been punished. By fate. The following moments would determine the outcome of the entire project.

What to do?

There was a fifty-fifty chance Baptiste would be exposed as his agent. Half the world’s security services were on the lookout for the Tyros and their telltale retinal scarring. Baptiste’s cover could be blown. But if they aborted the Vector operation now and started again they would waste months, years even, of careful planning and preparation.

How close were they? Never been closer. Fifty-one of the fifty-two bots were already in place. The last bot, the one full of executable⁵ data, was about to be released. The brain of the entire operation. The ace.

What to do?

You make your own luck, ‘they’ say, but fate, according to Kaparis, was different. Fate you have to assault, coerce. Kaparis prided himself on being its master. One of the very few. Like a god on Mount Olympus.

⁵ In computing an executable file contains actionable program code rather than just data. It’s the bit that says Do This, Do That, and Stop Complaining.

He felt a delicious shiver.

“Play the ace.”

“Have you visited this restaurant before?” the cop asked.

“I do not remember,” said Baptiste.

The cop pulled up a grainy CCTV image on his palmtop screen of Baptiste at the Kung Fu Noodle counter.

“This is you last week. Six times in the last month. Come with me,” the cop said, leading him out of the food hall and into the back seat of an unmarked police car. Baptiste reached instinctively into his bag. He was not yet under arrest. The cop got in the front and picked up the radio, waiting for his orders.

But Baptiste received his first.

“Release it. Complete Vector at all costs.”

Baptiste relaxed. The point of action had arrived. He took a luxury Mont Blanc pen out of his bag and flipped off the top, as if he were about to make a note.

The Prime Executable Bot woke.

XE.CUTE.B0T52:BORN



An order came in from Kaparis Command on Song Island.

**KAPCOMM>>XE.CUTE TERMINATE LIFE FORM LOCATION
COORDINATES: 4578377/46294769**

XE.CUTE.BOT52:KILL

The cop finished his radio message and turned his head to speak to Baptiste, but before the first word made it out of his mouth –

Ttzxch.

The smallest sound as it entered his brain.

The tiniest entry wound at the temple.

His face went into spasm, then froze.

THREE

September 29 10:14 (GMT+1). Hook Hall,
Surrey, UK.

The morning after the night before was 150 times more disappointing than any previous morning at nano-scale.

Finn, Delta, Kelly and Stubbs sat in silence at a tiny table that had been specially made for them and stared at nothing in particular for a good long while.

The Sons of Scarlatti (one technically a daughter) as they liked to call themselves, lived in an ‘apartment block’ fashioned from cellular seed trays that sat inside a biohazard bubble, which protected them from insects and other threats, inside Laboratory One. It was known as the nano-compound. First they were going



to be there a week. Then they were told twelve days. Then three weeks “tops”.

So far, five months had passed.

On the upside, the longer they'd waited for the one thing they wanted most, the more they got of everything else. They could come and go as they pleased from the biosphere (as long as they followed elaborate safety procedures) and anything they wanted could be shrunk in the new accelerator array, so they enjoyed the finest foods, consumer goods and high-end leisure activities. Finn had his own private zoo full of his favourite insects, a laboratory and a skate park, and there was even a ski slope inside a macro freezer in Lab Two. Best of all a perspex-covered road and model rail network had been laid that allowed them safe access to the entire complex. Finn had been gifted a red Mini to drive around, which he adored (even though its speed had been restricted at Grandma's insistence).

But right now none of that helped.

Various people had already called to reassure them: Grandma, Commander King and, over a video link, the Prime Minister. Even Hudson had been sent for. Not many kids could ruin the 'jeans and hoodie' look, but with his long hair, massive glasses and uncomfortable expression, Hudson was one of a kind. He was in on the Boldklub secret because he'd been dragged into the climax of operation Scarlatti and proved himself an unlikely hero.

“What a bummer... That's so rubbish. Bet you were looking forward to being tall again?” said Hudson when he arrived.

“Mmmm,” said Kelly, looking round for a gun to shoot him with.

“It must really eat away at the back of your minds...” Hudson mused.

At which point Delta politely asked that they be left alone “to suck things up a while”.

“At least he didn’t offer to write one of his poems⁶,” said Finn when the nano-team were alone again.

Stubbs grunted. “We are at the very margins of human comprehension. We might be stuck here for years and years...”

“What do you know, old fool!” Delta said to Stubbs.

“Quite a lot, actually,” said Stubbs defensively.

Doubt stirred like a great black eel in the pit of Finn’s gut.

Be yourself. Trust yourself. Just keep going. These had been his mother’s Big Three rules. But how could you *be yourself* when you were stuck in the wrong-sized body? What was the use of *trusting yourself* when you were totally dependent on other people? And how could you *just keep going* when you were so obviously stuck? When he’d complained about this to Christabel, their local vicar and a good friend since his mother’s funeral, she’d said, “Use it. Just like your mum left you three lessons, see what lessons you can learn from what you’re going through.”

All he’d learned so far was that *the more you wanted something, the further away it got.*

“I expect you’ve had better birthdays, Finn,” said Stubbs, looking more than ever like a dejected tortoise.

⁶ Hudson had won a Hertfordshire Schools anti-bullying poetry prize for ‘Willow: Bowed, Yet Ye Stand’.



Kelly gave a hollow laugh and slapped the old man on the back for being such a grouch. Stubbs could fix anything, but didn't have much clue when it came to 'being a human being'.

"Thanks – it's not until tomorrow," said Finn.

"Hey – a birthday is still a birthday. What do you want to do?" asked Delta, trying to brighten things up. She didn't normally do 'close' but her younger sister Carla was the same age as Finn so he'd become a de facto younger brother.

Finn shrugged. What was there to celebrate at 9mm? He didn't even get to skip school. Instead he was attending via Skype, Hudson dutifully carrying him around on a laptop (the official explanation for Finn's absence being he had a highly-contagious skin disease). Grandma insisted on the arrangement. "So he can live a normal life, like any other boy," she had said, to which Finn responded, "IN WHAT POSSIBLE WAY COULD MY LIFE BE CONSIDERED NORMAL! I'M NINE MILLIMETRES TALL!"

"At least you lot get to go to work..." Finn complained.

There was a military research project that Finn wasn't really supposed to know about called the 'nCraft'. One great problem of being a centimetre tall was the time it took to cover even a modest distance and a new vehicle was being developed to take full advantage of the massively improved power-to-mass ratios at nano-scale. Al disapproved of *any* military application of his technology but Finn knew, that out of sheer boredom, Stubbs and the others had been working on it.

They felt for him.

"Don't sulk, you'll get over this! You can get over anything,"

said Kelly. “You know how many cars I’d stolen by the time I was thirteen? I spent half my teens in youth custody – and look at me now!” he boasted, opening his massive, battle-scarred arms as if he was a model citizen.

“This is what I tell Carla,” said Delta. “Between thirteen and seventeen you do a lot of suffering, then life gets much, much better.”

“Oh great,” said Finn, sarcastically.

“People always say things like that to teenagers,” said Stubbs, “but as I recall you never really get over the trauma of your teens. The bullying... the heartache... the loneliness...”

“The being nine millimetres tall...” added Finn.

“Hey! If I got over a childhood in a Philadelphia children’s home, you can get over this. You just need a little help and support – am I right?” said Delta, glaring at Kelly and Stubbs.

“She’s right,” said Kelly, then added generously, “and if you need things livening up, just say the word! One of us can always tie you to the train tracks, or shoot at you...”

“I could drop you out of a plane?” offered Delta.

“Or ostracise him. Mental cruelty,” added Stubbs.

“You’d really do that for me? Thanks, guys,” said Finn, smiling at last.

A pulse came from Finn’s nPhone⁷.

⁷ Reducing matter collapses the electro-magnetic spectrum in such a way that nano radio transmissions cannot be picked up on macro radio receivers and vice versa. An nPhone is a tiny macro phone carried in a backpack with a keypad that allows texting on the regular phone network. It also allows constant tracking.



He opened the pack and checked the screen.

U there? Skype?

“What’s wrong? You look like death.”

The girl who on a daily basis filled his Skype screen with dark hair, bright eyes and wisecracks, peered into the lens at him, suspicious.

“Wrong? Nothing’s wrong,” said Finn, wondering how Carla’s emotional radar could possibly work at this distance.

The background usually showed her bedroom in the States, but right now he was looking at a hotel room in Kunming, China, where Carla was on tour with the Pennsylvania Youth Orchestra. Her luggage and a cello case lay on the bed behind her.

What she saw from China was a mock barrack room that had been built especially within the nano-compound. Carla thought Delta was stuck at an airbase in England working on a secret project and that Finn was just a kid who lived on the base with his uncle. They had hit it off as soon as Delta had introduced them, not so much soul mates as complementary opposites. Carla knew everything Finn didn’t know – and much he didn’t want to know – about art and life, and Finn knew everything she didn’t know about the natural world.

What Carla also didn’t know was that everyone she saw on camera was about a centimetre tall.

“Something is definitely wrong.”

“I lost a pet,” said Finn for cover.

“A pet? They let you have pets on an airbase?” she said, sceptical.

“Only a mouse.”

“A *mouse*? What was its name?”

“Fluffy. It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters. I had a hamster die on me; it nearly broke my heart. Does Delta know?”

“Sure. She told me ‘life is much better than you think.’”

“How patronising! They think we’re just kids! They have no idea what ‘life’ is like for us,” bemoaned Carla, who enjoyed being disgusted with her sister and with grown-ups in general.

“What happened? Was it old age?” she asked, gently.

“No, my uncle killed it,” said Finn. “It was late, they’d been drinking, a fight broke out...”

She laughed despite herself.

“Oh HA HA – you’re avoiding your emotions.”

There was a call off-screen. “Carla, we have to go!”

“OK!” she shouted back, and turned to Finn.

“That’s it. We’re going to the airport. You should have seen this place we passed – there’s this actual *dwarf world* here! A theme park full of little people to gawp at. Can you imagine anything so cruel?”

“Honestly, I can’t,” Finn said without a hint of irony.

Finn wished he was going with her, wished he was going anywhere, with anybody.

Carla grabbed her things and went to shut down the screen, then paused and confessed, “You know, I often wonder if you two are locked-up in some theme park – isn’t that the weirdest thing?”



“Ha! Why?” Finn stalled.

“I don’t know, the crazy stories and everything. Plus I’ve never even seen outside this barrack room...”

“Well it is a *secret* base,” said Finn.

“Exactly. Always the big mystery with you two!”

“Carla!” called the voice off-screen again, and she waved goodbye.

Phew, thought Finn.

As Finn walked out of the fake barrack room back into the nano-compound, Delta, Kelly and Stubbs suddenly stopped talking. He hated when grown-ups did that.

“What?” said Finn. “What were you talking about?”

“Nothing,” said Delta.

“Liar,” said Finn.

“We said the main thing is we’ve got to stick together as a team. Everything takes time,” said Kelly.

“I know,” said Finn. At least he could be sure of that.

“Your uncle will eventually find the answer,” said Stubbs, almost reluctantly.

“You better believe it!” came a familiar booming voice, as a shadow, like a huge cloud, fell across them.

The four tiny figures looked up at the giant, praying for good news.

“I just don’t know what the answer is yet,” Al finished, to a chorus of sighs. “Now, who’s up for Sunday lunch?”

* * *

For want of anything better to do, Finn agreed to spend Sunday at Grandma's with Al and they razzed along the country lanes between Hook Hall and the village of Langmere in Al's incomparable De Tomaso Mangusta sports car⁸, happily outrunning the Mercedes of the security detail and scattering autumn leaves.

Finn sat in a nano-den (or 'nDen' as Al liked to call them) that was clipped to Al's top pocket.

A way had to be found for the nano-crew to be housed, heard and taken out of the lab complex from time to time and nDens were the answer. This particular nDen was a typically eccentric choice of Al's: a vintage Sony Walkman cassette player. About the size of a book, it had been adapted to hold nano-humans: there was a sofa, tinted glass for them to see out of, a line to Al through the earphones, and a built-in loudspeaker for when they needed to make themselves more widely heard.

"Tell me what went wrong with Fluffy. Maybe I can help," said Finn.

"About three grams," said Al.

"Three grams?" said Finn.

"That's right," said Al. "We reduced Fluffy, then we rescaled Fluffy – in perfect form, every atom, every molecule in the right place – and yet... somehow Fluffy ends up stone cold dead and three grams lighter. It's as if the electrical relationships and reactions that run a body – *the stuff of life* – somehow disappeared. We just have to isolate

⁸ "The greatest thing to come out of 1969, after the moon landings by NASA and *Abbey Road* by the Beatles" – Al.



why, what, where and when, and then we'll be able to do something about it. But at the moment we haven't got a clue – just three missing grams.”

The conversation continued as they walked through the woods with Grandma later that afternoon – another headache for the Security Service. Al was thought to be a prime target for kidnap, but Grandma refused any extra security. For her there was no appeasing villainy – and no mystery in Al's missing three grams, either.

“The three grams are obviously the Soul,” said Grandma. “The divine.”

“Mother! As the wife of one scientist, the mother of two more and as a medical professional, do you *really* think that—”

“Don't you dare be rude about simple faith!” squawked Grandma. “People have the right to experience mystery!”

“Let's not have this argument again!” Finn pleaded, as it was one that had ruined at least three mealtimes a week for most of his life.

Yap! agreed Yo-yo, running ahead and making Finn wish he'd opted to ride with him instead. He often did this, sitting in the fur just under Yo-yo's ear, guiding him with simple commands. Yo-yo was the best, most uncoordinated mongrel ever born. He couldn't fathom the mystery of Finn's physical disappearance – just as he couldn't fathom what clouds were – but he could still smell Finn and hear him, which was all he needed.

Grandma and Al lowered their guards, warily.

“If it isn’t supernatural, what’s your best guess on the missing three grams?” Finn asked Al from the nDen.

“My best guess is there’s a relationship between dark matter, the speed of light and the timing of electrochemical reactions within a body,” said Al.

“Dark matter?” said Grandma.

“Yes, dark matter, also known as dark energy. It’s mystery stuff that makes up nearly all of the Universe, but no one knows what it is or how it works. No one except *us*. We have discovered that when you shrink ordinary matter – atoms and stuff – there must be a proportionate shrinking of dark matter, otherwise you’d be incredibly heavy; as heavy as you were when you were big.”

“But where is it?”

“Who knows? It’s unobservable, we can’t even begin to experiment – and without experiment we are nothing but apes groping around in our own excrement.”

“Charming!” said Grandma.

“Think of dark matter as a shadow – in this case, a shadow that makes up ninety-five per cent of our weight. When you get smaller, the shadow gets smaller. But that’s just a guess.”

“Didn’t my dad work on dark matter?” asked Finn.

Grandma stiffened and called to Yo-yo, who had reached the house and was scratching at the back door.

Grandma didn’t like to talk about Finn’s dad, Ethan Drake, who



had disappeared in a lab accident before Finn was born, fire consuming him so completely that only the sphalerite⁹ stone he wore around his neck was recovered. The same stone – that Finn’s mother had worn until she died of cancer two years ago – now hung around Al’s giant neck, next to the nDen.

“Nobody knows exactly what your dad was doing just before he passed away,” said Al. “We have some of his notes from around then, but your mum had just had you and most of his assistants were sitting exams.”

“I didn’t know he’d left notes. Can I read them?” said Finn.

Al frowned. He’d spent the best part of thirteen years crawling all over them. He could probably recite them.

“Tea! We must get in and put the kettle on before it gets dark,” Grandma interrupted, trying to move things on.

But Al was in the moment, and it was clearly an uncomfortable one.

“They’re complicated, Finn. A mess, in fact. Lots of stuff that looks like answers but isn’t. It’s not what you want,” he said, cryptic and awkward.

“And cake! We have plenty of cake,” Grandma said, taking out her keys to let them in.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Will you show me or not?” said Finn.

“Maybe. One day.”

“Sherry!” concluded Grandma, hurrying them into the house.

⁹ Sphalerite possesses a quality called triboluminescence, which means it glows when scratched.

* * *

By the time they got back to Lab One it was late.

Al opened the Sony Walkman and said goodnight to Finn at the edge of the nano-compound.

“We’ll try the experiment again tomorrow, and every day, till we get it right,” he said, winking and walking away.

Finn took comfort as he watched him go. His uncle might wear glasses held together with tape, but he was reassuringly massive, in brain as well as bulk.

Everything was dark and Finn supposed the others had already gone to bed.

Then he heard a voice.

“Feeling any better, Noob?” Delta asked, using her nickname for Finn.

Suddenly – *POP!* – all the lights came on at once, dazzling him.

“What the...?!”

As Finn’s eyes adjusted to the light, he could make out three figures, some balloons, and... a Thing.

“Surprise!”



FOUR

September 29 22:58 (GMT+1). Hook Hall,
Surrey, UK.

Delta slapped Finn on the back.

“Happy nearly-birthday!” grinned Kelly.

“Thought we’d cheer you up,” said Stubbs, deadpan.

They stood back and let Finn take in the Thing.

The others had been testing it for the last month. He’d glimpsed parts of it before, designs on-screen, but he’d never seen the whole thing.

“The nCraft?” said Finn.

“I see you’ve been paying attention,” said Kelly.

“Say hello to the XI Experimental Nano-thruster,” murmured Stubbs, reverentially.

Delta bit her lip excitedly, like they had pulled off the best birthday surprise ever.

“Guy’s a genius,” said Kelly, roughing Stubbs’s remaining hair.

“It’s fast as a whip and can turn on a pin!” said Delta.

“It’s –” Finn tried to put it into words – “a little ugly.”

Three faces fell at once. He thought Kelly would cry or hit him. “This isn’t a beauty contest!” he yelled.

It was, thought Finn, like one of those weird deep-sea fish that had evolved in the perpetual gloom of an ocean trench. Roughly the size of a limousine at their scale, it had a gawping front grill like a great mouth and two headlamp eyes. It had multiple stubby wings and rudders that looked like fins, and a tail section with a scorched and nasty-looking exhaust, and its underside was regularly pockmarked with clusters of small thruster units.

“I’m not being mean,” said Finn, apologetically. “I’m just saying it looks like an ugly bug and when you go into production—”

“It’s the prototype!” shouted Kelly. “You think we’d let you *near* one of the new X2 models?”

“So shallow,” sighed Delta.

“Hey, I’m still twelve –” Finn checked his watch – “just. I’m meant to be shallow!”

“Well then I don’t suppose for one moment,” said Stubbs, “you’ll be wanting a go.”

And with that he flicked a switch on the outside of the craft. Computers and gyroscopes woke within, turbines turned over and



the Bug came alive. Lights blazed all over its body and it floated off the ground, suspended on a cushion of air, flexing its tail and wings to keep absolutely steady.

“Wow,” said Finn, gobsmacked.

“We’ve ‘borrowed’ it for one night only. Not a word to anyone, especially not to Al,” warned Kelly.

“Note the extraordinary stability,” Stubbs began, gearing up to explain the technicalities. “A central jet runs a compressor that feeds cold gas rockets all over the body controlled by an intelligent thrust-vectoring syst—”

“OK, OK, I want a go!” said Finn.

With a high-pitched hum from the jet engine beneath them and the hiss of collective thrusters, they rose steadily towards the roof of the Central Field Analysis Chamber. On top of the Bug was an open cab with four seats, a roll cage, a windscreen and some crude controls. It was like sitting in a fat flying sports car, thought Finn, yet with a ride so gentle they might have been in a bubble. There was also a mount for an M249 Minimi light machine gun, to defend themselves against insects and any other threat they might face in the outside world.

They had to be careful, the craft was supposedly strictly out of bounds in Lab Three, but the Duty Techs were in Lab Two and Stubbs and Kelly had nobbled some of their monitoring equipment, smuggling the Bug out through the model rail network, first to the nano-compound in Lab One, then into the vast, empty spaces of the CFAC.

Finn was just admiring the view as they rose above the stone circle of particle accelerators when Delta said, “OK, brace,” and punched her arms forward against the dual joysticks.

Finn’s head snapped back and the roof rushed by, his insides galloping hopelessly to catch up with his skeleton, as Delta turned hard to avoid hitting the far wall of the hangar. They shot back across the CFAC at roof level, then dived and... *SLAM!* Halfway to the ground Delta made the Bug turn 90 degrees without bothering to slow down, the nCraft morphing to deliver thrust at all the right angles at once. Finn was left gasping.

Delta then plunged towards the rows of benches crammed with computers surrounding the accelerator array. Down they went, skimming along the desks, slaloming the accelerators and monitors, whipping up paperwork, then down again to rollercoaster beneath benches and between chair legs, then up again into empty space.

Finn’s mind was spinning. They were not flying: they were motion itself. Pure euphoria battled memories of his terror-flight, trapped on the back of the Scarlatti wasp the previous spring, till – *SLAM!* – Delta opened up the reverse thrusters and stopped the Bug dead. Finn was thrown forward so hard he thought he was going to bring up his lungs, never mind his dinner.

In sudden stillness, he took a gulp of air and looked at the clock on the lab wall. It was midnight, his birthday: his turn. He grinned.

Finn climbed across and took the controls, and for one minute and forty-nine seconds he had the best birthday ever.



Delta ordered him not to think too much. “Just point and shoot.”

He took hold of the twin sticks, looked at the far wall of the CFAC and pushed them forward.

The Bug shot forward, so he eased back, getting a feel for the power as he coasted the entire length of the building, rising all the time. He felt a surging joy and remembered sitting on his mother’s knee steering her old Citroën 2CV around a beach car park in the rain.

He accelerated and made a turn, arcing back around, just below the roof, then more turns.

Then he began to throw the Bug around like rodeo horse. *It was easy.* The speed and distance you could cover was awesome and the handling was amazing – it felt as though you had thrust from a thousand places at once.

It felt alive. This was almost better than being big.

He flew up towards the Control Gallery that overlooked the CFAC, then dived and curled to fly around the circle of accelerators like Ben Hur around the circus maximus, laughing and loving it, until...

POP! POP! POP!

For the second time that night he was dazzled by sudden bright lights.

Delta leapt across and snatched the controls from him, pulling the Bug to a halt and leaving them hanging in mid-air, staring down at a group of incoming officials, hurrying across the CFAC towards the gantry steps of the Control Gallery.

“What’s happening?” asked Finn.

“Oh no...” said Stubbs. “King.”

Finn looked over. The great hanger doors of the CFAC were whirring open and Commander King was crossing the chamber, trailing aides and flanked by General Mount of the British High Command on one side and the head of British Intelligence on the other. Then, even more remarkably – *VROOOOM! SCREEEEECH!* – in roared a 1969 De Tomaso Mangusta, and out hopped Al.

“Good evening, Dr Allenby,” uttered King, trying to ignore the showy entrance.

“Peter. Wendy. Tink,” Al said to the trio. All three, used to his odd sense of humour, ignored it and carried on up the steps.

Finn’s heart was in his mouth, he looked at the others and they were already grinning.

“It’s the G&T. It’s meeting.”

They should have been afraid, they were absent without leave in the Bug. But suddenly the normal rules didn’t seem to apply any more.

After the months of tedium and frustration *something was happening.*

Nine miles away, Grandma was finding it difficult to sleep. She had been on her way to bed with her cocoa when she’d heard Al’s car pull up in front of the house, only to take off again immediately. Perhaps he’d forgotten something and gone back for it? Perhaps he’d decided to go back to his bed in London for the night? Perhaps anything, really. She’d got into bed and tried to put it out of her



mind, but the moment she closed her eyes a maternal sixth sense had kicked in. What if something was wrong?

She called Al. Straight to voicemail. She called Commander King. Straight to voicemail.

She smelt a rat.