

EXCERPT

GA NY ME DE

1. THE SARCOPHAGUS

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ÉDITIONS
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PROLOGUE

In the 21st century, a hitherto modest company develops the first battery capable of extracting energy from the void and *transducing*¹ it into electricity. The world is shaken. It ignites a revolution. Maps are redrawn and everything has to be revisited, reimagined: the economy, ecology, energy, geopolitics.

At the dawn of the 22nd century, as traditional empires collapse and give way to new ones, all eyes turn to the stars. Humanity discovers a potential new playground, and with it, hope for a second chance and the prospect of real conquest at long last. A new challenge, a new objective preoccupies *the* human race. The project Terra Galactica is conceived, forming the embryo of the future Terra Galactica Federation, or, more simply, the Tergalian Federation. The solar system is within arm's length, but electricity alone still does not enable objects to travel in a void. The conquest needs fuel.

At the end of the second century according to the new calendar, Venus has two tiny atmospheric research stations. Mars hosts a permanent colony and is transforming into a

1. Words marked in italic when they first appear are defined in the glossary at the end of this book.

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veritable *terraformation*. It is, however, the Jovian orbit that is home to the second largest human population, after Earth, with around two billion people. Close to a hundred civil stations, including the gigantic Thor and Wotan 1, 2, and 3 are in orbit here. Also in circulation are several military and scientific facilities as well as a dozen commercial stations. Jupiter has become the engine of the entire solar system. The Jovians have formed their own civilisation – autonomous, independent, and increasingly ready to throw off the yoke of the Federation.

1

February N184, somewhere on a Nomad Jovian station...

She inhales deeply. The air is lukewarm. Lukewarm and dry, too dry for this to be her room. The bed in which she finds herself is not hers either; it is too firm and the weight of the covers seems unfamiliar. In a *cymed*, she calls up the three-dimensional map of her location, which is instantly projected onto her retinal implants. *A hotel room. Yes, I remember now...*

Gabriella has a vague memory of the events of last night, or rather of the plans she had in mind yesterday, namely her desire to get away for a bit and let loose drinking with strangers.

In another *cymed*, she switches on the lights in the room.

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That's odd, I don't remember this place.

She doesn't recognize the fuchsia walls or the black lacquer furniture. She has no recollection of the imitation wood parquet floor, or of the layout of the *polymaps*; she has no memory of slipping into the sheets that swathe her. Yet, the fact that she can control the automation system here means that she was able to synchronise herself with the hotel network. Her clothes are carefully folded on the chair by the wall. On the floor, nearby, are her shoes. A minimalist array of toiletries, her own, is on the dresser next to her suitcase. No doubt about it, this is her doing. Even the decor, in very bad taste, fits perfectly with the kind of place she would have chosen.

It's still strange that I have no memory at all of this room...

Gabriella is an extremely organized woman. She leaves practically nothing to chance. Witness the care with which she has laid out her belongings in this suite, no doubt the largest in the hotel. And this is but a glimpse of the many precautions she takes in her methodical, calculated life. Even last night's adventure was in fact the result of a calculated risk. On the other hand, the adventure has barely left a trace in her biological memory.

Firmly convinced that her amnesia is only temporary, she removes the heavy blankets and plants her feet on the floor.

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The temperature is perfect; the usual setting. However, it seems to her that something feels off. As she thinks this, she notices the markings on her forearm: Monica.

It's one of the fake identities she sometimes uses. Visiting a minimal security orbital station, blending into the revellers at a randomly chosen bar, drinking with strangers, they represent too many uncontrolled variables for her to be using her real name, especially when she takes the added risk of consuming synthetic drugs. Hence, Monica. She has blond curls and piercing black eyes, and she sports abstract black and red tattoos on her forearm.

Gabriella runs her fingers through her hair and pulls a lock before her eyes. They do look like Monica's wavy mane. *Yesterday, I was Monica then. And she seems to have run wild. I wonder what she... what I took to feel like this, my goodness!*

She doesn't worry too much about finding the answers to her questions, because all her experiences are saved on the *mnemoquartz*, a type of silica micro memory card commonly called a *silicard*. If she so wished, she could relive in virtual reality almost all the events of her life from birth to this very morning. But she is a strong-willed woman. She never relies on these sorts of recordings unless absolutely necessary. She believes, with good reason, that people have become so dependent on virtual memory they can no longer use their biological memory at will.

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Of course, almost no one lives without these crutches anymore. But mnemoquartz have been corrupted and needed replacing. Worse, despite numerous data security precautions, they can be hacked. People who cannot function without virtual memory thus find themselves handicapped. There's no way she will let this happen to her. Plus, for now, she prefers to give her body time to recover from the side effects of last night's abuse. She will, then, recover her memory of the events herself. This has happened before, after all. The experience was not all that pleasant, but everything came back in orderly fashion in under an hour.

She gets up and heads to the dresser, where she picks up her toiletries. She refuses to use the cheap stuff provided by the hotel. In the bathroom, she carefully lays out her products on the shower caddy, gets her towel ready, undoes the plastic wrapper on the robe, which she hangs behind the door, and then glances at herself in the mirror.

Hello, Monica! What did you get up to last night, you little fool?

The face looking back at her is indeed that of the other woman. Gabriella remains still, inspecting Monica's skin, as if her mere reflection could help her recover her memory or reveal what junk she consumed last night. Nothing comes back to her, however. And the metabolic data screening on her retinal implants reveal no unusual substances. Odd! She sighs resignedly and undoes Monica's features in a

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few cymeds. Her hair gradually loses its waves and changes from black to light brown; her eyes become emerald green again, her cheeks become less pronounced, her nose more angular, and the tattoos on her arm disappear revealing pale, immaculate skin.

And I'm back! she thinks to herself. But it's not exactly her. She's just woken up from a sleep that clearly didn't last too long, given how she spent last night. Yet, she feels like she's been asleep for ages. It's as if she just reintegrated into her body and has to reacquaint herself with it.

She jumps into the shower. She loves taking showers. Not that she really needs to. Her *biomecatronic* body is literally almost ninety percent self-cleaning; it's a near-perfect mechanism that regularly maintains and repairs itself. Her blood is teeming with the latest *nanorobots* that periodically upload diagnostics onto the virtual screen in her retinal implants, and she follows their recommendations scrupulously. Due to this, illness and physical discomfort have virtually disappeared from her life. Of course, her body is sensitive enough to detect any threat to her health. She can feel pain, but it bears no resemblance to the primitive sensation felt by those who, unlike her, don't have access to the most cutting-edge cybernetic parts. Pleasure and pain exist only in her mind.

Paradoxically, there's something pleasant about physical discomfort, or at least the feeling that follows the discomfort. Eating when hunger is gnawing at you, the surge of

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endorphins washing over the pain, the sensation of heat creeping into your body after you've been feeling cold, these are sources of pleasure. But these are merely distant memories for Gabriella, and no doubt are what push her to excessive drinking or the euphoric highs of synthetic drugs. It's also why she loves taking showers so much. The gentle thermal shock is relayed back to her by the *microcaptors* dispersed in her skin. There's something pleasant, even soothing about it.

Now, to accentuate this small pleasure, she turns the temperature in the bathroom down lower than usual before soaking up the jets of hot water. She stays in the shower for some time. The water bill will be painful, but she can afford to buy the entire orbital station. However, she hasn't rented a hotel suite to lounge around as if she were on vacation. In any case, she never really takes a vacation. She never manages to do nothing. Each time she officially allows herself a few days off, it's so she can focus on other more personal projects in peace. She still hasn't recovered her memories in detail, but she knows very well why she ended up in this second-zone hotel. She must have been working on a private project that was better kept secret.

I wonder for how long I booked this room! she thinks, while the hot water runs down the back of her neck. A quick call to the hotel reception will give her the answer, but she'll wait until she's thrown on her bathrobe; a remnant of human modesty, no doubt. For the time being, she prefers to enjoy the moment a little longer.

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She drags herself out of the shower a few minutes later, after having rinsed off all the excess scented gel. She dries herself off quickly, switches on the fan, pulls on her robe, and cracks open the bathroom door. The subtle aroma of coffee tickles her nostrils. Eight o' four, in the kitchenette, the coffee machine obeys its usual automated settings.

My croissants should be here...

A beeping sound rings out in the suite. The cyborg immediately connects to the camera surveying the entrance to the suite. The little robot is carrying a covered platter. *Here they are.*

In a cymed, Gabriella unlocks and cracks open the door. The small robot lays the platter on the designated stand and scuttles off, while the door automatically shuts behind it.

Gabriella walks into the kitchenette while drying her hair with the towel. She sits at the table with her coffee and plate of croissants. Her first instinct is to examine the electronic labels on the little condiment containers one by one. She then studies the biometric data that screen on her implants and slathers the croissants with just enough jam to meet her nutritional needs.

She takes a first bite, followed by a sip of coffee. The croissant is average; it's an organic 3D printout of mediocre quality. The coffee is also clearly synthetic, but the end result

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is much better. It's just that she's used to food of much higher standards. However, getting real food delivered in such a place would be a megalomaniacal self-indulgence. She's here incognito as it were. It's better not to attract attention. For someone like her, this place may as well be a campsite, but she deals with it; these are circumstances that make her realize how lucky she is in any case.

Seated alone at the small table, she's tempted to consult her favourite news feeds. A simple command on her part will call up any one of the multiple suite *polyplans* on her implants. But, since she wants no one to know where exactly she is, she prefers to not leave a trace by relying on her usual research algorithms. All that's left is for her to eat quietly and do nothing but try recalling the events of last night.

It's time to get to work.

Gabriella returns to the bedroom. There, she rummages through her suitcase and pulls out a portable terminal that she sets down on the work desk by the large window. She runs her fingers over a touchscreen console and the shutters in the bay window swing open. The station is circling past the illuminated face of Jupiter. To reproduce terrestrial gravity, the station continually spins on its own axis, which means that the scene outside the window soon causes vertigo. It's bound to ruin her concentration, so she quickly selects a screensaver from the hotel image bank. A soothing

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animation of Jupiter with her moon Io visible on the horizon replaces the actual landscape.

She switches on her terminal, which instantly connects with her implants to offer a relatively large virtual screen. It's not the most ergonomic set up, but she'll make do. This isn't supposed to last too long, after all.

She's all set to start working when she again wonders for how long she's rented this room. As her memory is still hazy on this point, she settles for calling the reception.

"Yes, madam?"

"I wanted to know... Uh..."

"Yes? What can I do for you?" the clerk asks.

"Well, I was wondering... I know this sounds odd, but... tell me, for how long have I rented this suite?"

"For the week, madam."

For the week? I can't stay here a whole week, she thinks to herself. I have way too much on my plate at the lab to just languish over here for so long!

"And tell me," she asks the clerk again, "how was the room paid for?"

"You paid for everything in cash, Ms Satt."

So, I made the reservation under the pseudonym of Monica Satt and paid for it in person, apparently, she thinks.

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“Well. Ok. Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Ms Satt?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so... Actually, there is something else.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well, could anyone besides me, perhaps someone on the hotel staff say, have entered my room?”

“No, madam. You gave clear instructions yesterday that you did not wish to be disturbed by anyone. No one went in or will go in to make up the room, not even an automat, unless you say otherwise, just as you requested. The establishment makes it a point of honour to respect the wishes of clients of your standing. Is there a problem with your room?”

“No, everything is good,” she replies. “It’s just that I had a rather eventful evening, yesterday. You wouldn’t have any idea of what time I returned to the hotel, by any chance?”

The clerk seems surprised by the question. He hesitates before answering.

“I was not at the desk last night, madam. If you wish, I can check with my colleagues.”

“Uh no, that won’t be necessary. But do you have any surveillance cameras?”

“Uh... Madam is surely aware that all recordings of this nature are exclusively for the hotel and cannot be used for any other purpose unless expressly ordered so by the relevant authorities.”

“Yes, I know. Excuse me.”

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Well at least someone still respects the laws in this godforsaken place! she thinks.

“If I may, Ms Satt...”

“Yes?”

“I don’t want to meddle in what doesn’t concern me, but your suite rental includes several services. If you wish, I can send our robomedic up to you at no extra charge. It’s a completely confidential service and...”

“No, thank you, that will be all!”

“Forgive me, madam, it’s just that ...”

But Gabriella ends the call. The poor devil clearly meant well, and she understands that her questions made her seem like one of those troubled socialites in the throes of withdrawal. But there’s no way she’ll allow herself to be treated by a cheap robomedic. She’s merely got temporary partial amnesia after all. In any case, if her memory fails her for much longer, she’ll turn to her mnemoquartz and it will all come back to her. She just needs a little more time. It’s been less than an hour since she woke up. Despite what her nanorobots say, the effects of whatever substances she took last night have surely not totally disappeared, because the strange feeling that she’s woken up in someone else’s body still plagues her. *Better get to work and let the nanorobots get to theirs. We’ll investigate later.*

AT THE END OF THE SECOND CENTURY ACCORDING TO THE NEW CALENDAR, HUMANS HAVE BECOME CYBORGS AND ENJOY EXCEPTIONALLY LONG LIVES. EARTH IS STILL POPULATED, BUT HUMANS ALSO LIVE ON MARTIAN COLONIES AND ON SPACE STATIONS ORBITING THE OTHER PLANETS IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM.

GANYMEDE, JUPITER'S LARGEST MOON, HAS BECOME A SPACESHIP GRAVEYARD, INHABITED BY UNDERGROUND SCRAP MERCHANTS CALLED THE VULTURES. THOMAS FALCON IS ONE OF THEM. WHEN A MYSTERIOUS CONTAINER CRASH LANDS NEAR HIS HOME, HE THINKS HE'S WON THE LOTTERY. INSTEAD, HE'S ABOUT TO OPEN A PANDORA'S BOX. THE CARGO IS PRECIOUS AND THERE ARE THOSE WILLING TO DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO RECOVER ITS CONTENTS: AN EXPERIMENT THAT COULD ALTER THE COURSE OF HUMANITY'S FUTURE.