

Deadly Applications

A play by

Peter Poole

Characters

Elena Saaki	<i>In her thirties.</i>
Nikolas Vaughan	<i>In his fifties.</i>
Leo Govan	<i>In his sixties.</i>
Claude Rawman	<i>In his thirties.</i>
Katrin Lynda	<i>In her thirties.</i>

Voices

Audio Aide
Warning voice
The PRESIDENT

The United States, a century from now.

The stage is a simple set of grey walls, to suggest various locations. Modern tables and chairs can be moved around, depending on the needs of the scene. Spotlights are used to create a mood, and depict hi-tech functions as appropriate.

ACT ONE

Scene One. Lightweb report.

ELENA SAAKI, a girl in her thirties, stands in a beam of light. She wears a suit of sharp, modern cut, with an air of urban chic. She keeps her head bowed for a while, then raises it.

SAAKI I say this to you, my mentor. I am grateful, most grateful, for the contacts you have given me, and the influence you have had upon my soul. From being a new arrival with an air of naivety, which my younger self would have denied, I have learnt the intricacies of this continental empire, and had an effect within it - hopefully, for good. Please assess my engagement and interaction, recorded in patterns of memory. My persona has been put to the test.

SAAKI lowers her head. There is an electronic hum as she listens to her voice, relayed through speakers as if her memories are being read. There is an air of the confessional as we hear a little of her background.

SAAKI (ON SPEAKERS) Having acquired a secondary diploma in Structural Chronology, I was keen to put this knowledge to use. Even more, to find a task with ethical cause to heal the flaws in society. Spurning tamer roles within academe, I made contact with a mentor - *yourself* - from across the Sea of Atlantica who, admiring my thesis, linked me to some influential friends. Having crossed Atlantica by sky-dart from Britannia, I found a home in the western territories, in one of its newer cities. Your contacts, my mentor, were invaluable. I obtained a key role as private archivist, serving corporate clients with discretion. We masked controversial dealings with careful words, composed by a fiction team. I was not one to write headlines, but create - or manipulate - the back-story. This ensured every tweak of truth, every - I would not say 'lie' - but every partial fact had a narrative ring. Whether it was real, or whether not, was none of my concern.

SAAKI'S voice pauses for a moment. SAAKI glances up, speaking briefly.

SAAKI My mentor, I confirm this.

SAAKI bows her head, and the voice resumes.

SAAKI (ON SPEAKERS) I had free time in the city too, away from the information streams. London Magna had been huge, how true, but cramped upon the island from which I had flown. I loved its mix of antiquity and the hyper-*moderne* - but the elites were so established, my influence would be negligible. You had advised me to travel far, to this ex-colonial land, where I might serve the Core. So what better than to become immersed in its culture?

The electronic hum fades out. SAAKI raises her head.

SAAKI My mentor, I confirm this.

SAAKI moves gently out of the light-beam, which fades away.

Scene Two. The Arcane Spirits Club.

SAAKI explores the space around her, caught in patches of illumination. She takes a small device from her pocket, moving a finger across its illuminated screen. SAAKI speaks aloud, setting the scene.

SAKKI Random bar talk was never my style, so I logged onto several interlink threads to define a network of friends. Tapping 'society', 'politics' and 'theory' into the 'Personal Interests' field, I was told of a small hub of thinkers engaged in regular debate. They met at a dinky venue called Arcane Spirits, a would-be sleaze-hole near the city centre, but nonetheless obscure. It was found in a narrow alley, leading from a cul-de-sac...or dead end. Which I hoped my visit would *not* be...

The lights brighten to reveal tables and chairs, with empty glasses and bottles dotted around. There is a lone man at one of the tables, gazing into a glass with a drop of blue liqueur. A bottle of the spirit, with glasses, stands nearby.

The man is NIKOLAS VAUGHAN, in his fifties, dressed in a plain waistcoat, shirt, and rather worn trousers. VAUGHAN has the air of an earnest intellectual with little cash to spare. The far classier figure of SAAKI stops by his table, touching the back of a chair. She hopes he will look up. He does not, so SAAKI breaks the ice.

SAAKI It must be hard to think on your own.

VAUGHAN ponders this, still gazing down.

VAUGHAN Not if you drink on your own.

VAUGHAN takes a small, economical sip of liqueur, and finally meets her eye. SAAKI raises the device.

SAAKI Guidance brought me here, but then the tags broke down. I had to read the street signs.

VAUGHAN The old-fashioned way.

SAAKI Not a neighbourhood I would...usually come to. But I didn't get any trouble.

VAUGHAN Why should you get any trouble?

SAAKI Oh, a woman on her own...even these days.

VAUGHAN You want to sit down?

SAAKI I mean, I can defend myself. This has a little sting...

SAAKI jabs the device forward as if tackling an assailant, making a buzzing sound with her mouth. VAUGHAN looks at her blankly.

SAAKI *Omni* device. Does everything, nearly.

SAAKI pockets the device.

VAUGHAN Never used one. It's good to read street signs, don't rely on the tags. You never know who defined them.

SAAKI Someone defines everything. There's got to be trust...

VAUGHAN So you still continued here?

SAAKI makes an expansive gesture, stressing the obvious.

SAAKI Apparently.

VAUGHAN And 'here' is a little...disappointing?

SAAKI I didn't say that.

VAUGHAN Sit down.

Slightly bemused by VAUGHAN'S bluntness, SAAKI perches on the chair.

VAUGHAN You don't have a drink.

SAAKI Went past the bar. I wanted to explore...

VAUGHAN What were you looking for?

SAAKI You...?

VAUGHAN is amused.

VAUGHAN *Femme fatale.*

VAUGHAN opens the bottle, pours a shot of blue liqueur and slides it across to her. SAAKI feels the rim of the glass, suspiciously.

SAAKI How do I know it's clean?

VAUGHAN One can say that about anything.

SAAKI concedes, sipping the drink. She is unsure about the taste, but tries to like it.

SAAKI More is not always better, but I expected more. I visualized a group...a debate.

VAUGHAN Can't you see the empty glasses?

SAAKI smiles.

SAAKI Guess my urban navigation delayed me.

VAUGHAN We were talking, good enough. We usually go to three a.m. and now it's only one. That's usually getting to the climax, when thoughts are flowing at maximum speed before liquor takes its toll. Never known the place so quiet.

SAAKI It was quieter when I arrived. We're talking. My name is Elena Saaki.

SAAKI unfolds a palm in a contemporary form of greeting. VAUGHAN returns the gesture, a little awkwardly.

VAUGHAN Where do you live, edge of the city?

SAAKI Middle rim, segment five.

VAUGHAN Came a long way for *this*...

VAUGHAN indicates the empty tables.

SAAKI I'll know better next time.

VAUGHAN To come earlier, or come at all?

SAAKI To come earlier, know the way...and the person I'm talking to.

VAUGHAN So you weren't looking for me?

SAAKI I'm not quite sure...

VAUGHAN Forgot my introduction. Nikolas Vaughan.

SAAKI The Streamtext writer and activist...?

VAUGHAN Who's not writing much, and who's lounging around.

SAAKI is amused, but seeks to encourage VAUGHAN.

SAAKI Your writing is out there, Mr. Vaughan. I found your articles, your voice, inspiring. That's why I thought to come.

VAUGHAN To see me...?

SAAKI No, the...context in which you moved. Where you listen, speak, form ideas and turn them into practical theory.

VAUGHAN That's a contradiction. An action is practical, a theory is just a thought.

SAAKI I mean, theories that can be applied. And yours *can* be, Nikolas, don't doubt it. Sure, I missed the debate, but I know it happened.

VAUGHAN Just count all the empty glasses.

SAAKI I know sincerity and passion were there, even if you disagreed.

VAUGHAN You're reading a lot from a little.

SAAKI Or you wouldn't be here, alone.

VAUGHAN stands, moving away from the table. SAAKI twists round on her chair, watching him.

VAUGHAN If you're following Streamtext, you know my philosophy. I pretty much hate society, or what it's become. I try not to hate myself.

SAAKI Why would you hate yourself?

VAUGHAN It's tempting at times. It is not the hatred of failure or bitterness. I have experienced each of these, but my politics are separate. In many ways, they lack passion. I reach solid conclusions, not quirky mottos. I do not indulge in righteous outbursts, or give a roomful of pop-heads something to cheer. If you're looking for thrill-speech, Miss Saaki, I am not the one you seek.

SAAKI Do you see me walking out?

VAUGHAN This place was full, an hour ago...less than an hour ago. They heard me speak, politely, which meant they weren't really listening. Of course, the drinks went down.

SAAKI How can you gauge their reaction? You gave them something to think about.

VAUGHAN Because I've seen their reaction to others. I am not the only guru here, the only one with ideas. But I'm one of the more pragmatic. Zealots don't like pragmatism, Miss Saaki. Gives you nothing to yell about, nothing to cheer. I believe in social justice, but not everyone is a warrior - or wants to believe they are.

VAUGHAN moves back to the table, reaches for his glass and takes a brief sip. SAAKI observes.

SAAKI Maybe it depends...how much you drink.

VAUGHAN smiles.

VAUGHAN Maybe it depends what you're drinking.

SAAKI I can be pragmatic, too. Glass half *full*...?

VAUGHAN taps the bottle.

VAUGHAN You want more?

SAAKI No. No, thanks.

VAUGHAN sits, looking earnestly at SAAKI.

SAAKI The boisterous ones have gone. You've heard them out, but you're critical. Why? We all have different styles. Maybe they're loud, you're quiet...

VAUGHAN No, it's more than that. I don't like ranters, but I can look past the surface. If there's some basic sense, some valid insight...then I'll respect that, I'll pay attention. They were cheering the performance tonight, the rousing words, but I was listening for an ideology. There was none. I have written a number of books, Miss Saaki, and edited several more. I know when speech or text has meaning beneath an enticing show.

VAUGHAN indicates where the speakers had stood.

Two men spoke, two rebels, supposedly dissidents. They expressed deep concern at our government and its current administration, then jumped to working the crowd. We had populist lines...we had laughs, then cheering. Even I was tempted to smile. I stopped. I could hear they were dulling our critical faculties, making us open, tempted, malleable. They were...selling a dream, not a future.

SAAKI And you're never one to dream?

VAUGHAN shrugs.

VAUGHAN They want a movement, a network, an activist cell, the details haven't been settled. Ask me - it's a rehash, not a rebirth.

SAAKI Perhaps you should give them a chance.

VAUGHAN You came here looking for something. I did not.

SAAKI You came here just the same.

VAUGHAN There was no 'here' before me. I began these meetings to discuss the politics of now and the impact of high technology. We have met each week on a casual basis, and finally settled on this venue. The décor may be shabby, but as a place for the disaffected...it makes an adequate refuge.

SAAKI looks round, taking in the scene.

SAAKI The Arcane Spirits Club...

VAUGHAN There's some very unusual liquor.

SAAKI So that's all this is? A drinking session?

VAUGHAN A drinking session with a purpose.

SAAKI *Arcane spirits*...there's another meaning?

VAUGHAN We think. We analyse. Once we know the nature of society, in its current manifestation, a plan can be formulated. It might be slow to enact, it might take years...decades...but it will be a firm plan, an intellectual plan. We can tackle each aspect of the tyranny in a way so subtle, so devious, that the PRESIDENT will be rendered...innocuous.

SAAKI A slow plan? All theory...

VAUGHAN No, theory is a vital part. We can be loud, we can have riots, but where will it get us? Labelled, incarcerated, judged. That's the price of rebellion in a technocratic world. Thrill-speech is a dangerous thing.

VAUGHAN pours another drop of liqueur into his glass.

SAAKI I did not say I was looking for thrill-speech. But I was not looking for inaction.

VAUGHAN Explain.

SAAKI It seems you have neutered yourself. You do not like society, the government, the system...but the effects of your plan, your theory, are an intellectual game. You may find a perfect answer, or one that you think is perfect, but the answer is never tested.

VAUGHAN We are reticent, for now. But the time will come.

SAAKI Time will not make any difference. Life has many random aspects, beyond our control. These will affect what you do.

VAUGHAN becomes a little irritated.

VAUGHAN You think I'm stupid? Think I don't know that?

SAAKI You know it, but do you *feel* it? Knowing is an intellectual response.

VAUGHAN Sure you weren't listening in?

SAAKI Listening...?

VAUGHAN To Rawman, Philton. Philton said something like that.

SAAKI I would like to know what he said.

VAUGHAN I didn't pay much attention. I got the tone...

SAAKI You prejudged him.

VAUGHAN I don't think so.

SAAKI I think you came with a cynical outlook, hoping to prove him wrong - although you're really on the same side.

Provoked, VAUGHAN speaks with increasing passion.

VAUGHAN Fine - we differ in our tactics, but we share a vision of the world. We want an end to this zoned-out society with its glittering games. We want a rebirth of discussion, of argument. Death to placid conformity! I could show you the facts, the data-streams, on every malevolent influence - genetics, radiation, artificial additives, chemicals in the sky. It's tough for a non-conformist to resist, so imagine the effects on the weak.

SAAKI touches her heart.

SAAKI So there's passion inside. Not just...calculation.

VAUGHAN I'm sorry if I grew emotional.

SAAKI Do not be sorry about *that*.

VAUGHAN Philton and Rawman grew emotional. It is something I try to resist. I must...retain the clarity of argument, like a delicate machine. That's how we shall...

SAAKI cuts across his words.

SAAKI But they have a crowd. You do not. They have rebellion. You do not.

VAUGHAN In time...

SAAKI You can take too much time.

VAUGHAN According to whose measure?

SAAKI Those you are seeking to help. How can anyone else be relevant? Create a utopia in a thousand years, when we're all too dead to see it.

VAUGHAN It will be our children's...

SAAKI The children of slaves, according to your outlook. When you took their side, you came alive. You had not compromised your position, but given it...an edge. That edge can make it keen, make it relevant. Because if ideas are not relevant, Nikolas, then they are just...intellectual trinkets, no better than the charm bracelets the ladies used to wear.

VAUGHAN That's what you think?

SAAKI Why else would I say it? You're calling *me* stupid now.

VAUGHAN At least you have an audience of one.

SAAKI As do you. If Nikolas Vaughan had spoken to the crowd, just as he has spoken to me, Philton and Rawman would have a serious rival - meaning friend. The three of you should work together.

There is a moment of silence as VAUGHAN absorbs this, before SAAKI speaks more briskly.

SAAKI Look, I'm thirsty and...no thanks, no more liqueur. The bar will be closing, I'd like a soda...something to freshen me up. Slow Berry Ice, perhaps, or Chilli Squirt. Can I...?

SAAKI makes a drinking gesture. VAUGHAN shakes his head.

VAUGHAN I'm fine with this, treat yourself. Denny's good, he'll stick it on the tab.

SAAKI smiles, and moves off to the bar.

VAUGHAN is alone. He almost pours a drop of liqueur but stops, ponders things, then lowers the bottle. VAUGHAN stands, moving to the circle of light where the speakers had previously impressed the crowd.

VAUGHAN Have I done wrong? A miscalculation? Have I been working too much in the abstract? Instead of sitting in the corner scribing notes, should I have...got up, got into the spotlight, played the crowd like the others? They had rhetoric and waffle, brilliantly delivered but without a nugget of substance.

VAUGHAN circles a few paces, clarifying his thoughts.

If we...combined my knowledge with their motivation, what a force that would be. This new girl, Miss Saaki...she can see it! I can almost hear...the cheer of the crowd!

VAUGHAN spreads his arms, imagining an audience. Then he becomes a little self-conscious, faltering slightly. He shakes his head, imagining the potential.

Scene Three. Lightweb report.

A beam of light illuminates SAAKI in a field of darkness. She keeps her head bowed for a while, then raises it.

SAAKI My mentor, I make progress in this new land. After careful thought, and subsequent action, I have initialised entry to a cultural group who speak against the Core. My contact is an author of radical works who dislikes the world of now. Thus far, he has taken no action. His thoughts are known to the Core via Streamtext, and have been scanned for probable threat. While his analytical skills are brilliant, they have never been deployed in practice. Others in the group make threats, apparently, but with a lower degree of intelligence. They can rant at the bar, wave placards, but the Core remains unaffected. Neither would the PRESIDENT know danger, for these tactics are reckless and blunt.

SAAKI weighs her words carefully, then continues.

However, I sense a risk. This man - Vaughan - is a thinker, while Philton and Rawman are weapons. Neither can bloom without the other, but so far they have not connected.

SAAKI bows her head for a moment, before speaking.

My mentor, I have a small confession. I have embarked on an...experiment. I suggest a controlled explosion is better than a random one. It can be predicted, and thus neutralized. To this end, I have seeded action within Nikolas Vaughan, and expect it to spread to his comrades. They should strike bold, strike wild, and we shall entrap and finish them. My mentor, I seek your consent and hope I have not acted rashly.

SAAKI'S head remains bowed, as if she is waiting for confirmation.

GOVAN appears near the beam of light, looking at SAAKI. He is an older man with a look of dignified authority. GOVAN wears a grey uniform of smart, almost military cut. It has little in the way of detail, just flashes of colour to denote purpose or rank.

GOVAN walks once around SAAKI, studying her, and stops at his original position.

GOVAN Elena Saaki, you have the consent of the Core.

The beam of light containing SAAKI blanks out. GOVAN turns, and leaves the Lightweb interface.

Scene Four. Vaughan's study, another night.

The study suggests the domain of a deep researcher who has a high tolerance for academic clutter. There is a modern desk and chair, with a small sofa as a concession to visitors. However, this is partly piled with magazines and boxes of archive material.

While there is still enough space to work, the desk is dominated by more acquisitions: ancient cassette tapes, USB sticks, hard drives and other technologies. A computer screen sits on the desk, rising above these ephemera.

VAUGHAN enters with CLAUDE RAWMAN, a man in his thirties wearing a casual jacket and frayed trousers. He also wears a beret, giving him the air of an anarchist from a previous era. RAWMAN glances round the study with interest.

RAWMAN Glad I came. Quite a nest.

VAUGHAN Archive material. I guess it's untidy, in the physical sense. The past hangs heavy around me.

RAWMAN That sounds like a quote.

VAUGHAN Not that I'm aware of...

RAWMAN makes a cinematic frame with his fingers, eyeing the place up.

RAWMAN Set design for an intellectual hero.

VAUGHAN I've never met an intellectual hero. I'd imagine they'd live in a cave.

RAWMAN Still got to prove yourself...?

VAUGHAN That's why you're here?

RAWMAN I'm here because you asked me.

VAUGHAN No assumptions, either side.

RAWMAN I wasn't implying anything. I'm glad you came to the meeting. We thought we'd lost you, on Friday. You were sitting there on your own.

VAUGHAN You forget the Torqina Liqueur.

RAWMAN That filth? Stick a fuse in the bottle, throw it at a drone.

VAUGHAN Big bang, straight to jail. That's your idea of action?

RAWMAN David's blunt but he's not stupid. That's my idea of a *joke*.

VAUGHAN smiles.

VAUGHAN We may be closer than you think.

RAWMAN Perhaps.

RAWMAN glances at some old magazines, spread on the sofa.

VAUGHAN Oh, nothing uncertain about it. David knows we share a motive, it's the matter of approach. One man's error is another man's courage.

RAWMAN You think you know David Philton?

VAUGHAN Not like you. I know he's a man who can rouse a crowd, that much was clear on Friday. And with you as his second-in-command, confidence is assured.

RAWMAN seems distracted by the content of a magazine. He is still listening, but speaks a little distantly.

RAWMAN I've always had confidence...in David.

VAUGHAN waits for a moment, sensing the mood, then continues.

VAUGHAN I have nothing against the man. I've known him for a decade, on and off. I can tell he's a good figurehead. I'm no public speaker, no orator, I could never hold a room like that. And as his second-in-command, I conclude that neither could *you*.

RAWMAN is still staring at the magazine. VAUGHAN notices.

VAUGHAN What's that?

RAWMAN Atrocity. Something from the past.

VAUGHAN The good old meddlesome days...

RAWMAN It's not funny.

VAUGHAN takes a look, frowning.

VAUGHAN Famine, twentieth century. They got used to it back then.

RAWMAN glances up.

RAWMAN The figures look...hardly human.

VAUGHAN There was a country once, in Africa...

RAWMAN Why did they photograph them?

VAUGHAN looks puzzled.

VAUGHAN Explain.

RAWMAN Why make an image of such a...hideous child? Why share that with the public?

VAUGHAN It was a matter of record. The news.

RAWMAN What was that?

VAUGHAN Education's slipping...

RAWMAN I asked you to explain a term.

VAUGHAN A regular update of biased facts designed to manipulate the public. Gradually dumbed down, cut down, watered down and cancelled - unless you count GM hookers with bionic tits fucking the Royal Family.

RAWMAN reacts angrily, feeling belittled.

RAWMAN Hey, now you're joking with me...!

VAUGHAN picks up a box of magazines.

VAUGHAN Set dressing for an intellectual hero? Grab a bunch of magazines from a private archive, handle them with cotton gloves - so I can play the geeky professor a century out of date to a rebel with an unsure cause. Yes, it's *meant* to be disturbing. It's meant to mess up your head. I didn't ask you back for a glass of bubbly and some jolly banter about social ills.

VAUGHAN puts the box down, a little heavily, then cools and adjusts its position.

Think I don't want to punch the air, get an adrenalin kick? When you're out there, Claude, preaching revolution, I'm here at home or at the archive, studying, studying, dissecting the past - trying to find a chink in the wall. If I find where to hit, we'll hit - but it could take years, decades to achieve. You think I sleep easy at night? I don't. No wonder I need the liqueur.

RAWMAN Let's not turn this into a battle.

VAUGHAN So you're the moderate now?

RAWMAN There has to be a middle ground.

VAUGHAN I'm trying to find it.

VAUGHAN spreads his arms, indicating the study and its contents. RAWMAN takes the prompt, glancing around, before his eyes return to the magazine.

RAWMAN I find the contents shocking.

VAUGHAN They should punch you in the gut. Make you want to retch. Body's reaction, that's healthy. I've a whole bunch, 1960s onward...newspapers, magazines. We had a President once, a man called Kennedy, who took an early hit from the Core. Then Watergate stopped another, a scandal in its day. Christened every subsequent scandal, 'gate.

RAWMAN Twin Towers, that's one I know...

VAUGHAN An image in the New Tarot, ushered a time of war.

RAWMAN And the Time of Terror came after.

VAUGHAN But what of the implications? We had disaffection, political change, but eventually riots and unrest. The Core moved to calm things, bring a kind of peace but in doing so, took control. The western lands became an ideal model, something to show the globe. The birth of a new society and the grip of the PRESIDENT. The time we were born into.

RAWMAN David would agree...

VAUGHAN But he doesn't trace the history. There have been years of acquiescence...

RAWMAN We can't answer for that.

VAUGHAN Then a slow realization that things are not what they seem. Society, the PRESIDENT - everything.

RAWMAN You speak of Jansenn...

VAUGHAN Jansenn's zilch, he's just another mouthpiece. I speak of others on the outskirts who could never speak today. They were seen as nuts, mavericks...*conspiracy theorists*, marginal to the Core. They were questioning their so-called reality.

RAWMAN The reality...as in the news?

VAUGHAN You're learning. They wrote books, made zines - amateur magazines - then moved on with technology. The birth of the Internet - that came before Lightweb - gave them their own media. Video, audio, it was all out there, telling the world the truth - or at least, a different kind of truth. Still, they had a problem. Not all the alternative views agreed, so it was hard to know who was right.

RAWMAN Their failing?

VAUGHAN That's how it seems. Say what you like about the PRESIDENT, the Core - there is one voice to rule them all.

RAWMAN seems dazed, as if overwhelmed with input. He takes an available space on the sofa.

RAWMAN I know we should work together. David knows too, that's why he gathers a crowd.

VAUGHAN They sense his magnetism. I like that, it's something we can use. But it's not enough to be magnetic - to have drive, anger, motivation. Without deep research, grounded ideology, action is a blunt weapon and a weapon they can stop. You have a mouth, they have the media. You have a crowd, they have an army. You have a riot, they have a war. It's no use, Claude - you can't beat them that way or I'd be shouting with the others.

RAWMAN What can I tell David? It's a cynical view.

VAUGHAN It's a rational, and hopeful, view. Where's the hope in failure, the death of a cause? Go down fighting, yes, but go down the same. A failure is a failure, either way. I may be passive, Claude, but I have not yet failed.

There is a moment of silence. RAWMAN sighs, speaking thoughtfully.

RAWMAN Let us say, I accept your logic. What is the next step? We sit in your study talking, talking. There will be nights at the Arcane Spirits. What then? We get older, wiser maybe, respected even...hey, grow a grey beard! But the Core's still in command. And there's young ones coming up behind, we'll have to educate them. By the time we have, we're dead...and they have the same problem. Pass the duty to the next generation, never smash the system yourself.

VAUGHAN No-one will smash the system.

RAWMAN How do you know?

VAUGHAN I've explained.

RAWMAN is troubled.

RAWMAN How...?

VAUGHAN No-one *has* to, Claude. I've told you some history, the mavericks before us. They fought the system in their day.

RAWMAN Unsuccessfully.

VAUGHAN Why?

RAWMAN I don't need to explain.

VAUGHAN They held things back. Brought things to light, making the Core retract. I have their words, their images, Claude. They could not have written or spoken if the Core had full control.

VAUGHAN moves to the desk and picks up a memory stick. He remains standing, brandishing it like a wand.

This is a memory stick from 2018. It contains audio and video files, spread by the Internet. The sites were removed, of course...their hosts no longer valid, but their legacy was saved. Downloaded. Okay, I've not seen half of it, or heard all the audio...but there are enough leaks, whistle-blowers and smoking guns to make a liberal blush like a babe.

RAWMAN snorts in amusement. VAUGHAN continues.

Many topics are no longer relevant. We can hardly save a slaughtered princess, no matter how hard we try. But there are issues here. Covert operations, still taking place today. Long-running programmes like genetic alteration, mind control, geo-engineering. Forget straight assault on the political centre, whether lobbying or physical attack. I believe targeted actions on specialized sectors could eventually disturb the Core. Once disturbed, it can be made to falter...and eventually made to fail.

RAWMAN stands, offering VAUGHAN his hand. VAUGHAN puts the memory stick down and shakes it.

RAWMAN You said you were no orator.

VAUGHAN I had no audience. You brought my thoughts to the surface.

RAWMAN We need you.

VAUGHAN So, that includes David?

RAWMAN I will speak with David Philton, convey these ideas. A tactic of small, anonymous actions rather than mass demonstration. Of course, we will gain no credit...

VAUGHAN An activist with credit is a failed activist. How can one affect things when one is known? One becomes a token, a puppet, a mascot of the masses. Victory, that's out of sight. And if you ask...

RAWMAN Yes...?

VAUGHAN ...what my suggestion is? Let me spend more time with this memory stick. Get deeper to the 'core', if you'll excuse the allusion. For it is there, in its circuitry...in those echoes of the past, that the seed of solution lies.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

Scene Five. Lightweb report.

A beam of light illuminates SAAKI in a field of darkness.

SAAKI Nikolas! Can you see me? Are you watching in the dark? I shall assume that you are at home. I have been to Arcane Spirits, twice in a row, but saw you on neither occasion. That saddens me. Having reflected on our conversation, I fear I was too quick, too pushy, in judging your approach. I apologize for the comparison I made between your theories and...decorative trinkets. I was fresh with hope, keen for change, action and even rebellion. I missed the words of David Philton when I first arrived at the club, and had the briefest contact with Claude. To me, they were potential heroes.

SAAKI takes a breath, then speaks more earnestly.

Nikolas, my insult was a form of praise. I imprinted that image on you. However, my attitude and conclusion were wrong. There are quiet ways to serve a cause along with the loud, and who can say which has effect? A misinformed shout is worse than an elegant whisper, for the shout will draw attention to the error while the whisper, though lost, will be safe. I am already wiser, Nikolas, for meeting you - so please, may we speak through Lightweb? Even better, in tangible form. Claude has the buzz of real intent, and your minds could merge so wonderfully. End lightcast...

The beam of light cuts out, leaving a field of darkness.

Scene Six. Vaughan's study.

A small lamp comes on, revealing VAUGHAN on the sofa in a slumped, almost horizontal position. Some of the archive boxes have been stacked on the floor, to allow this. VAUGHAN eases himself up, cautiously, as if afraid of being spied upon. He stands, moving across the room to where the beam of light appeared.

After gazing into the empty space vacated by SAAKI'S image, VAUGHAN makes a circling gesture with one hand. The lights of the study fade up.

VAUGHAN The miracle of Lightweb. Strangers in the home...

VAUGHAN moves to his desk, thinking hard. He taps the surface idly, glancing at the archive materials with a protective eye.

A whisper, Miss Saaki? Whose whisper, and how quiet would it be? A whisper in a club, or through Lightweb? Encrypted or not, who's listening?

VAUGHAN glances back at his archive materials.

Unless conspiracies...makes me paranoid.

VAUGHAN ponders this thought, but rejects it. He picks up the memory stick, studying the small object.

If the truth's in here, we can change the future. If we shout, the future's lost. How quiet is a whisper, Saaki? Quiet enough for you, or Rawman - but what about the Core?

VAUGHAN moves back to the spot where the light-beam appeared. He speaks as if to Saaki, or her image.

You disparaged my theories, but made me think. I thank you for the experience. Something happened, my energy flowed and...yes, an idea has emerged. A way to tackle the Core, if lucky, or merely shake them if not. Your reward for this, Miss Saaki, must be no reward. Plausible...anonymity. So I damn your friendship while liking you. I reject your insights while thanking you. I avoid your contact while...missing you.

VAUGHAN remains still for a few seconds, then returns to his desk. Taking the memory stick, he inserts it into a hub. VAUGHAN sits as the computer lights up, casting a glow on his face. He leans forward, taps the touch-screen and becomes absorbed in his work.

Scene Seven. The Justice Hall.

A stark, efficient office without clutter or decoration. GOVAN sits behind a steely desk, bereft of all visible utilities. His uniform is similar in shade to the walls of the chamber, as if designed in a complementary tone. GOVAN holds a pose suggesting meditation, eyes closed, his hands together in the form of a triangle.

An electronic chime sounds, like a wake-up call. GOVAN opens his eyes, bringing his hands down to the desk. The voice of an AUDIO AIDE speaks calmly, on speakers.

AIDE Your appointment is here. Kat Lynda.

GOVAN I may see her now.

There is a hum, as if an automatic door has opened. A figure walks in, female but with a boyish swagger. LYNDA has cropped hair and a grey uniform similar to that of GOVAN. However, it is tighter on her body to allow more rigorous physical activity.

LYNDA stops in front of the desk, offering the curled palm greeting. GOVAN returns it, a little stiffly as if disliking the affectation. LYNDA remains poised, stationary, in a graceful yet disciplined pose.

GOVAN Relax.

LYNDA spreads her legs slightly, but keeps alert.

LYNDA Katrin Lynda, reporting to the Justice Hall. As such, I shall serve the Core.

GOVAN The Core is accepting, Lynda.

LYNDA My mentor, I thank the Core.

GOVAN stands, and moves out from behind the desk. He stops beside LYNDA, regarding her closely.

GOVAN There shall be no more reference to your 'mentor'. Katrin Lynda, you have been appointed to the Security Group and, as such, you are my equal. This office has little in the way of rank, at least between ourselves, so a familiar tone is welcome. My end-name, Govan, is acceptable, and I shall respect your personal choice. 'Kat' is used frequently, I hear.

LYNDA Kat...my street-name, cute and cool, but not for an officer. Katrin is more formal, but saved for intimate use. My mentor...Govan, I choose my end-name, Lynda, in synch with your own example. If I gain credence, it will be shared with others. This rewards my efforts for the Core.

GOVAN nods.

GOVAN A circle of females, bonded, strong. A true lesson in loyalty.

LYNDA The Lyndas are my family, but do not distract. My loyalty to the Core is paramount.

GOVAN Your loyalty is not in doubt, I was merely giving praise. We are strong in the Justice Hall, or try to be. There is the PRESIDENT above us, of course. That is a different level of strength, which we serve rather than aspire to. The system has been constructed carefully, and it is a very brilliant system.

LYNDA Praise to the PRESIDENT and the Core.

GOVAN There are some who seek to smash it, but they have it wrong. One can only smash a clumsy thing, like a rock or sculpture. The brilliant thing can repair itself and still tick. There are would-be saboteurs in the world, Lynda, but most are unruly thugs.

LYNDA I would not flinch to tackle them, Govan.

GOVAN It warms me to hear that, Lynda. Thugs can only try what a thug can do, devoid of cleverness or skill. It is the clever we should fear, Lynda, if 'fear' was a mood we could sanction.

LYNDA 'Secondary Caution under the Articles of Faith, or Primary Offence in consequence.'

GOVAN Your constitution is...accurate.

LYNDA I study it well. Service is physical and mental.

GOVAN I observe your grades. Defensive Combat, 8 - Offensive Combat, 9 - Crime Law, 7 - Core Knowledge, 9. It is rare to find such achievement.

LYNDA I did not wish to be a rarity. I wished to learn, and serve the Core.

GOVAN Never tempted by politics or social science? Many graduates have spurned us for glamour or respect, assuming these are the final outcome.

LYNDA I saw through the fog, Govan. Justice is more decisive. I want to have an effect.

GOVAN chuckles.

GOVAN Politicians are baubles round the PRESIDENT, while the science of the mind is vague. They can analyse a thug for decades, list every attribute, yet the thug is still a thug. Who can change that, Lynda?

LYNDA We can. 'Change is the meaning of justice.'

GOVAN 'Justice is the key to all.' But a Justice Officer is more. We blend divine spirit, personal nurture and our knowledge of legality. The subjective and objective come together - and the result of this fabulous *frisson* shall 'serve and protect the Core.'

LYNDA stands to attention, sharply.

LYNDA 'To serve and protect the Core.'

GOVAN At ease.

LYNDA spreads her legs slightly, as before. GOVAN speaks with greater sincerity.

GOVAN Take Intelligence - a pull for graduates, of which I was Vice-Commander. Still have a 'finger in the pie', to use an antique expression. I no longer command, but mentor those with latent service potential.

LYNDA I was never attracted to the Intel Group. You have seen my combat grade.

GOVAN I made no suggestion, Lynda. There is another female I wish you to see. She requested a physical meeting, and I have arranged this meeting for...*now*. Disagreement or warm rapport, I shall witness either reaction.

The voice of the AUDIO AIDE makes an announcement.

AIDE Your appointment is here. Elena Saaki.

GOVAN And Miss Saaki may enter.

There is a hum of the unseen automatic door, and SAAKI steps into the room. She seems a little awed by the official environment, while LYNDA regards her warily.

GOVAN offers the curled palm greeting, more boldly than before, and SAAKI returns it. LYNDA greets SAAKI too, following the example. There is a moment of silence as GOVAN moves back behind the desk, sitting to observe the others.

GOVAN I am merely a host. Please - speak between you, Lynda and Saaki.

GOVAN gestures to emphasize the instruction, bringing his hands together. He hunches forward, listening intently. SAAKI glances at GOVAN, in acknowledgement, then turns to face LYNDA.

SAAKI I am Elena Saaki - and Leo Govan, my most respected mentor.

LYNDA I have no mentor now. Katrin Lynda, Security Group. 'Strength in security, strength to the Core. Through that strength, we shall flourish.'

SAAKI 'Through that strength, we shall grow.' I wish you luck in your service, Officer Lynda.

LYNDA I do not deal in wishes. I do not deal in luck.

SAAKI It was a word of encouragement, nothing more.

GOVAN smiles.

LYNDA To need encouragement suggests I lack courage. Your words offend me, Elena Saaki.

SAAKI They were said in good spirit. I had no wish to offend.

LYNDA So be careful what you...*don't* wish for.

GOVAN chuckles, quietly.

GOVAN Good, good...

SAAKI glances at GOVAN, a little puzzled, but says nothing.

LYNDA I have trained on the combat grid, Elena Saaki. I come from a powerful circle...

SAAKI ...of fighters?

LYNDA Of females - yes, and fighters. The one can be the other. I am proud to be of service, and glad that my circle can share.

SAAKI No doubt. We all have circles, of different kinds. Perhaps mine are less defined.

LYNDA It has little impact on me.

GOVAN Now, Lynda. Perhaps *you* are offensive now.

LYNDA glances at GOVAN.

LYNDA And so I apologise, Govan.

GOVAN You should aim your apology at *her*.

GOVAN looks towards SAAKI, who smiles slightly.

SAAKI Really, I am not part of the Security Group. Our attitudes are bound to vary, even clash.

GOVAN A very gracious summary, as I hope Lynda would agree.

LYNDA restrains a sigh while feeling aggrieved, as she wants to impress GOVAN.

LYNDA If it pleases you, Govan, I agree.

GOVAN I have mentored you both, Lynda...Saaki. I have watched Lynda rise to the rank of Justice Officer, while it pleases me to instruct Saaki. She is new to this continent, Lynda, but already assists in a matter of...intelligence. Should this matter be resolved efficiently, she can join our key personnel. As such, she will be your colleague and, as such, I hope you won't fight. Why fight the Core when the Edge is vile? 'The Edge is what needs to be tackled...'

LYNDA 'The Edge is what drags us down.'

LYNDA shifts to a combat position, arms ready to strike, as if these words have activated an automatic response. GOVAN watches with a cool, analytical detachment, and SAAKI rather more warily.

SAAKI She is angry, my mentor. What can I do?

GOVAN Learn, Miss Saaki, learn.

LYNDA makes a graceful move of her arms, sweeping them forward in a mock attack. SAAKI flinches, but stands her ground.

SAAKI I have been to the Edge, Lynda. Not all I have seen was good. I agree, there are things to tackle...

LYNDA 'The Edge will be challenged, then crushed.'

SAAKI It is not a place, but a state of mind. A society that exists beneath the norm, yet somehow entwined within it. It is these tangles we need to unravel, however difficult the task.

LYNDA moves to another combat position, her body tense and statuesque.

LYNDA Are you up to that task, Saaki?

SAAKI I believe so...

LYNDA Can you track down miscreants, counter suspects? Are you able to defend yourself...!

LYNDA moves forward in what may be a mock attack. SAAKI steps aside, neatly. LYNDA is surprised, as if SAAKI is more agile than expected. She tries again. SAAKI dodges neatly, and brings her hand to a pocket. LYNDA pauses, hovering, with the trace of a smile.

LYNDA Not bad for an office girl. But how would you fare outside...?

LYNDA makes a lunge, aiming to stop just short of SAAKI'S head. However, SAAKI whips the *Omni* device from her pocket, intercepting LYNDA'S strike. It touches LYNDA'S arm with an electrical crackle, and she flinches back in shock.

GOVAN continues to watch, showing no emotion.

SAAKI moves forward swiftly, applying a more powerful jolt to LYNDA'S neck. LYNDA convulses, falls back and lays sprawled on the floor. She groans.

SAAKI pockets the device with an air of calm, and turns to GOVAN.

SAAKI Regrettable, my mentor, though I had no choice.

GOVAN You have nothing to regret, Miss Saaki. I am impressed by your speed and self-control. You could have killed with that...

GOVAN indicates the *Omni* device.

SAAKI No. You need the right app.

GOVAN Lynda's moves are automatic, the result of immersive training, while yours had a certain grace.

SAAKI It does not please me to injure - but I am honoured by your words, my mentor.

GOVAN smiles.

GOVAN Enjoy the refreshment lounge, at your leisure. I need words with Officer Lynda.

SAAKI nods in assent, and leaves. GOVAN'S mood alters from reassurance to barely controlled anger. He moves to LYNDA, who is recovering on the floor. She sits up a little, rubbing her neck. GOVAN glares at her, and she freezes.

GOVAN What is the restraint protocol?

LYNDA speaks with some effort, gasping for breath.

LYNDA The restraint protocol...is...uh, 'Pause, Assess, Retract or...'

GOVAN 'Attack'. The option you jumped to, Lynda.

LYNDA No. Just a demonstration...

GOVAN You were ready to strike.

LYNDA I would have...stopped. I can pull up a lunge, instantly. I thought you...knew my grades.

LYNDA starts to get up. GOVAN pushes her back with his boot. LYNDA shakes, in real fear.

GOVAN Would you prefer I use your street name, Kat? Cool and cute to some, perhaps, but with nasty teeth and claws. Assets we observed when we dragged you from the gutter, knowing we could shape you. Six months training, you think you're a boss - but you're not a boss to me.

LYNDA Govan...no, my mentor...

GOVAN squats beside LYNDA and puts a hand on her neck.

GOVAN That is right. I am *still* your mentor. I can restrict your circulation, and you will not object...

GOVAN squeezes his hand. LYNDA'S eyes roll as she is choked.

You will accept it, Officer. You will barely react, apart from a few spasmodic twitches. Do you assess me now, Lynda? Are your reflexes primed and ready? Do you retract or attack? Which is it to be? Which would you prefer? The wrong decision and, justice is swift. We *do* have...deadly applications.

LYNDA tries to speak, but cannot.

LYNDA *Rrr...rrre...*

GOVAN raises his eyebrows slightly.

GOVAN What was that?

GOVAN lessens his grip.

LYNDA *Rrr...retract.*

GOVAN moves back, returning to his usual easygoing demeanour.

GOVAN You may refresh yourself, then report for orders...Gamma Team, with Officer Mead. Your moves were impressive, Lynda, if slightly mechanical. It takes time to gain fluency, when it comes to the martial arts. Welcome to the Justice Hall.

LYNDA stands slowly, recovering her composure. She nods to GOVAN.

LYNDA Govan, I thank you.

GOVAN “My mentor, I thank you.”

LYNDA notices the implied criticism, but repeats GOVAN'S words with apparent sincerity.

LYNDA My mentor, I thank you.

LYNDA turns on her heel, marching from the room. GOVAN gazes after her.

Scene Eight. Lightweb report.

A beam of light illuminates SAAKI in a field of darkness.

SAAKI I hope all is well, Nikolas. I would like to assume so, but a wish has no factual reality. I feel I have offended you, in speaking as I did, while urging you to positive action. You have a long-term outlook but I am younger, impatient. I studied the ways of your land back home, in Britannia, but only in an academic context. Seeing something happen, something real, would mean a lot to me.

SAAKI gathers her thoughts for a moment, then continues.

As an onlooker, a novice, I have not respected your patience. Perhaps a decade is too short to wait, or a month too long. The choice, that is yours to make. Our world needs to rebalance itself, in favour of the Edge, or only the Core will flourish. Only the Core...will rule.

SAAKI pauses again, almost sorrowful, but pushes to a conclusion.

Your lack of reply has an implied meaning - and if that hunch is correct, it is heeded. I shall make no further contact, Nikolas. I shall avoid the Arcane Spirits Club, but wish your kindred well...even if the wish feels insubstantial. Please contact me through Lightweb if your mood-frame changes. That is all from me, Nikolas...end lightcast.

The beam of light fades to black.

Scene Nine. Vaughan's study, night.

The study has been cleared of clutter, as if Vaughan's focus has moved to specific documents: selected folders and memory sticks remain on his desk.

VAUGHAN and RAWMAN sit looking at the spot where SAAKI'S holographic image has just spoken.

VAUGHAN That's the last she sent me. Two weeks ago.

RAWMAN You've kept it on the system...?

VAUGHAN To show you.

RAWMAN An encrypted lightcast might still be tapped. It means nothing to you, a disreputable author, but if you wish to protect Elena Saaki...

VAUGHAN addresses his computer.

VAUGHAN System. Erase Saaki lightcasts.

There is an electronic burble as the system complies. VAUGHAN turns back to RAWMAN, but refers to the departed image.

VAUGHAN She had good thoughts, a fresh approach. Wanted something real I couldn't deliver, at least in a satisfying timescale.

RAWMAN We have also spoken.

VAUGHAN You have...? Where?

RAWMAN Arcane Spirits, where else? You were locked away in the archive...

VAUGHAN Too much.

RAWMAN Maybe. It depends what you found.

VAUGHAN The room looks tidier. I returned a lot of stuff, began to narrow my inquiries. If we wish to 'tackle the Core', to adapt their language, we need a definite target. No good chucking bricks at the Justice Hall, it has to be more strategic. Something vital to their operations, but vulnerable too. Something we can strike effectively.

RAWMAN Go on.

VAUGHAN stands, moving to his desk.

VAUGHAN Have you heard of Operation BLUE?

RAWMAN No.

VAUGHAN But you will have seen its result. Aerial spray since the 1990s, criss-crossing the sky.

RAWMAN Chemtrails? Chemical trails? An old conspiracy theory...

VAUGHAN What did I say about those? It's alternative history, alternative knowledge, hidden in plain sight. Jets caused vapour trails, which dissolved without harm. But chemtrails were mixed among them. Modern sky-darts leave no trail, so why are the trails still there?

RAWMAN We...see the trails, no-one objects. We assume they're *meant* to be.

VAUGHAN So why? Mind control, weather control, making patterns in the sky? Toxins cost money, they must have a reason or why would they be doing it?

RAWMAN You'd better enlighten me.

VAUGHAN Why is our group, our kindred, such a laughable force when we've always...?

RAWMAN cuts in.

RAWMAN Highly debatable, Nikolas, and quite insulting.

VAUGHAN I'm not trying to be popular. Our group has grown but is hardly flourishing. The venue sums it up - Arcane Spirits.

RAWMAN A venue chosen by you.

VAUGHAN It was sympathetic. Options were limited...

RAWMAN We meet other places too. You came yourself that time, to the little church clearly lacking a god. And David has a...

VAUGHAN Forget idolatry for a moment. Yes, Philton has a 'core group', irony intended, nestled in his home. But we're meant to be on the edge. We're the underclass, Claude. The common citizen, but they don't flock to join us. Why?

RAWMAN sighs.

RAWMAN I'm getting an explanation...

VAUGHAN The thing we seek is affecting us. The sky trails are an agent, a cause of apathy within the population. Vapour falls down as an invisible mist, breathed in, ingested and absorbed. The Core know this, they have an antidote or move within sealed vehicles. Maybe they don't even care, like they're immune to their own tyranny.

RAWMAN Now, that's an interesting thought...

VAUGHAN The rest of the world is oblivious, happy and content - made so by Operation BLUE. It works on a physical level, a mental level - perhaps even a spiritual level, if you believe that kind of thing. Shuts down the higher mind, blocks our true potential.

RAWMAN You should say that in church, quite enlightening. David's no mystic, though. Believes what he sees...

VAUGHAN Which is just what's holding us back. Our very threat is compromised by Operation BLUE, hampered right from the start. The more time indoors, in the archives, the more rational I feel. I know there's a connection. I'm shielded from the sky.

RAWMAN considers this new information.

RAWMAN If that's what we're up against, what can we do? The kindred, if you will, has little strength. We have no fleet of sky-darts to fight in the clouds. The vapour trails are high above us...

VAUGHAN That's not where the fight would be.

RAWMAN No?

VAUGHAN Why have I been researching? To write another book? No - for strategy, for practical action. If the spray is coming from aerial craft, they originate on the ground. There has to be an airfield somewhere. What's more, the chemicals are manufactured, then taken there to be used.

RAWMAN So we fight them on the ground? Find this airfield or chemical plant, get in there, do some damage...

VAUGHAN If it slows Operation BLUE for a while, maybe the public wake up.

RAWMAN imagines the scenario, closing his eyes briefly.

RAWMAN There's a sense of the heroic, like an old-time heist. But we'd blow our cover. One hit, yes - a brief advantage, then glorious defeat. The Core will toughen security and clamp down on us all. We will not just lose the battle, but the means to engage. Would we get a second chance?

VAUGHAN sighs, wearied by RAWMAN'S attitude.

VAUGHAN Who's the theorist now, who's the rebel? I'm ready to storm an airfield, you're worried about the ratings. If we stall Operation BLUE, we gain the power to defeat it. After that, it's a fight for the rest. We will have more support, an alert population, and a Core in fast retreat. What do you say?

RAWMAN thinks this over.

RAWMAN I must run it by David. He is effectively our leader. If David is okay, we can act.

VAUGHAN As long as you spell it out...

RAWMAN I'll avoid the spiritual stuff. David is an activist, a man of the street. Show him a target, he's interested. Show him a theory, he's not.

VAUGHAN That's fine. I can show him a target.

VAUGHAN moves to his computer, pressing a few keys. His face is illuminated an ashen blue by the display. RAWMAN joins him.

VAUGHAN That's a satellite grab, over New Mexico. Spectral analysis confirms it as a chemical lab, not far from a military airbase. The lines will be mostly automated, but an employee roll must exist...

RAWMAN studies the image intently.

RAWMAN You know if it's Operation BLUE?

VAUGHAN No, they must have demolished the billboard.

RAWMAN snorts at the humour.

RAWMAN We have experts in hacking and surveillance penetration. There is always a weak spot. I should go now, get our group on the case - or as you referred to it, the kindred.

RAWMAN moves away from the computer. VAUGHAN studies the image a moment more, then shuts the computer down.

VAUGHAN Yes. It's a lot neater. The Kindred of the...what?

RAWMAN A kindred against the artifice of everything around us...society, technology, emotion. A kindred of those...against the false. No, the Kindred of the Real.

Both VAUGHAN and RAWMAN are silent, almost in awe, as if their cause has found its true description.

(CURTAIN)

ACT TWO**Scene One. Lightweb report.**

The voice of the AUDIO AIDE speaks calmly in a field of darkness.

AIDE Commander Govan. Commander Govan. The PRESIDENT can hear you now.

There is a hum as if an electric door has opened. GOVAN approaches in the gloom, standing so a beam of light illuminates him softly.

GOVAN I will speak.

The beam of light intensifies. GOVAN adopts a more formal stance, addressing his remarks to an unseen listener.

My PRESIDENT - a report from the Justice Hall. Elena Saaki, my unofficial agent, has fomented trouble amongst the radicals. A writer, Nikolas Vaughan, has grown silent, which means he is planning something. This is good. Should the radicals act, they become a target and their efforts can be nullified. I also speak of another, Katrin Lynda, now an officer with the Security Group. Her grades are impeccable in theory, although her manner in a live situation showed a poor degree of restraint. I am testing her with Officer Mead, but fear she is too wild to promote. Should I downgrade her status pending further trials, or grant an additional period of training? My PRESIDENT, I seek your guidance.

GOVAN bows his head in deference. There is a sound of low, electronic oscillation as if some vast system is priming itself. Then the voice of the PRESIDENT speaks. It is resonant, deliberate, warm yet decisive.

PRESIDENT I have listened to your statement, Govan. There are two errors of judgement that must be addressed. First error: whilst the silence of Nikolas Vaughan implies possible action, all is not - as you say - "good". The action is an unknown one, and Vaughan has previously been inactive beyond the academic sphere. If Vaughan has a plan, it has been slow to devise. Thus, it may be a danger. You have overlooked this contingency.

GOVAN I regret my foolish mistake.

PRESIDENT Second error: Katrin Lynda is a product of the street, with much inherent instinct. Her training overlays this, but the instinct remains. She will not act like a native of the Core. However, the risk of deploying her is worth the potential gain. Instinct brings insight and intelligence. She must be further tested, but shall remain an officer.

GOVAN Again, I accept the error.

PRESIDENT Your acceptance is noted, Govan. We must be ready for a real attack. I would expect a government target.

GOVAN We should tighten security?

PRESIDENT We should *not* tighten security. The strike can reveal a weakness that would otherwise be missed. It can be used to our advantage.

GOVAN I am humbled by your wisdom, my PRESIDENT. Saaki has had little more to tell. Perhaps she is suspected as an agent, or they are protecting her. She can only say what she knows...

PRESIDENT Saaki has played her part as agent or radical, depending on the side one takes. She is irrelevant, for the moment. An action by the radicals will mean a case to judge, and its verdict can serve as example. 'The guilty must be punished,' Govan.

GOVAN 'But only the PURE can judge.'

PRESIDENT Use Lynda to pass judgement within the Court of the PURE. It shall be an excellent test of her acumen, in a live scenario. Her errors can be noted, her virtues assessed. Then an appropriate role may be chosen, at officer level or below. This is the view of your PRESIDENT.

GOVAN A view to which I concur.

GOVAN bows slightly as the sounds of cogitation fade away. The voice of the AUDIO AIDE speaks.

AIDE Lightcast over.

The beam of light fades away, leaving GOVAN in darkness.

Scene Two. The Arcane Spirits Club.

RAWMAN sits at a table in an otherwise empty bar. He has a whisky cocktail in front of him, although his attention is focused on an old hardback book. RAWMAN reads intently, missing VAUGHAN as he enters. VAUGHAN carries a glass, along with a bottle of his favoured liqueur. There is another glass, upside-down, on top of the bottle.

VAUGHAN stops by RAWMAN, who notices the movement and glances up.

RAWMAN You got here.

VAUGHAN I'm not late.

RAWMAN You've got to be careful. It's a quiet time of the week.

VAUGHAN More dangerous?

RAWMAN No, but we stand out more. They expect rebels to meet on a Friday, so a Monday's strange. Especially the afternoon...

RAWMAN closes his book as VAUGHAN sits down, putting the bottle and glasses on the table. RAWMAN looks questioningly at the second glass.

VAUGHAN Thought you'd like a drop.

RAWMAN That stuff?

VAUGHAN indicates the bottle.

VAUGHAN I get through it slow. Bought the whole bottle, it's kept behind the bar. Shared it with Elena Saaki, when we met. I'd hoped to see her again.

RAWMAN She's out of the picture, for her own protection. I wouldn't dwell on it, Nikolas. Prefer an Old Fashioned myself...

RAWMAN takes a sip of his whisky cocktail. VAUGHAN pours a modest glass of the blue liqueur.

VAUGHAN What's the book? A prop...?

RAWMAN No, I'm reading it. Adventure tales, twentieth century. I find them strangely inspiring.

VAUGHAN 'Man comes in with a gun...'

VAUGHAN glances quickly round the room, smiling slightly.

It's quiet. Talk while we can.

RAWMAN maintains an air of deliberate casualness, brandishing his drink. His voice is low but incisive.

RAWMAN David Philton approves the basic plan, though we'll have to settle the details. We zoned the chemical works, know the layout. Even found an inside man. Union boss with a grievance, they squashed him to janitor.

VAUGHAN What!

RAWMAN Okay, there's an official term - 'Waste Destruction Worker'. We think the place is part of Operation BLUE, although the name is nowhere on the plans.

VAUGHAN If it's secret, hardly surprising...

RAWMAN slides a sketch of the chemical plant from his book, where it had served to mark his page. VAUGHAN huddles closer as RAWMAN points out various features.

RAWMAN Chemical pods are made, then packed in crates ready for the military trucks. They go by road to the air base, then presumably...up in the clouds.

VAUGHAN So how do we break in?

RAWMAN We don't. There's a biohazard drill every other day, which means testing the alarms. It's at six, once the scientists have gone. They oversee the formulation, but the rest is automatic and runs through the night. There's a small staff, including the 'janitor' guy, who deal with packing the crates.

VAUGHAN How many staff?

RAWMAN Doesn't matter, we won't see them. There are always pods rejected due to poor formulation. The outer sphere is a gel-like substance, meant to dissolve in the air. Some pods split, some leak or are otherwise unviable. Our man sticks these in a dumper, ready for incineration. The dumper is near an access door, and that's where we get in.

VAUGHAN While the alarm's sounding?

RAWMAN There's a two-minute window but that's slacking it. In and out in sixty seconds. No fence, just an unmarked boundary with a siren triggered on approach. Animals can set it off, there's often a false alarm.

VAUGHAN Maybe we should dress as hyenas.

RAWMAN They don't bring attention to the plant by installing high security. The ruse is safety, believe it or not. Beware of toxic fumes!

VAUGHAN Very considerate...

VAUGHAN shakes his head, taken by the irony. He has a sip of liqueur as RAWMAN slips the sketch back into his book.

RAWMAN David says we should pass in a civilian car. Pose as travellers waiting for sunset, bring tents like we're camping out. We'll slow by the factory, hear the alarm, run in and get the pods, or...one of them.

VAUGHAN Is that all? What difference will it make?

RAWMAN David says the target is an excellent choice, but we could never change things directly. Unless the Kindred embrace terrorism and civilian casualties, our raid must be small and unnoticed. It is not our plan to slow Operation BLUE by stealing the chemical pods. We aim to retrieve one, bring it to a lab - a sympathetic lab - and analyse its contents. Then proof can be shown to the population of how Operation BLUE affects them.

VAUGHAN seems disappointed.

VAUGHAN It's less than I hoped.

RAWMAN You were the cautious one. We cannot overlook the risks.

VAUGHAN I got fired up when I found the place. Thought, here comes the revolution - jamming conveyor belts, spoiling chemicals and leaving it in ruins.

RAWMAN Not this time. With luck, the theft will never be noticed. Our man will burn the reject pods straight after the drill, when we are safely back on the road. You may never hear much of what happens, but be assured your research has given us hope, and a new sense of...

VAUGHAN cuts in over RAWMAN.

VAUGHAN What do you mean, I won't hear? I'm going.

RAWMAN is startled.

RAWMAN No. We wouldn't expect it.

VAUGHAN I've been accused of detachment, of living in the past, of being a mere academic. Now I put *others* at risk.

RAWMAN They choose to be part of the cause.

VAUGHAN So do I. And my choice has led us to this.

RAWMAN I don't think David would sanction your involvement...

VAUGHAN This is the Kindred, not a fake militia. David guides us, he does not give orders. I'm responsible, I'm ordering *myself*.

RAWMAN Very well.

VAUGHAN The date?

RAWMAN No more than a month. Plan the cover story, buy a tent...I'm ready for a new experience.

RAWMAN taps the cover of his hardback book, with relish.

VAUGHAN You're not just a planner?

RAWMAN I never was. We're a two-man team, heading for New Mexico. Surely that's worth a toast?

RAWMAN raises his glass, as does VAUGHAN. They chink them together gently, then break into grins. RAWMAN slides his book across the table to VAUGHAN.

RAWMAN Now, look at these stories. Daring stuff, makes me feel like an adventure...!

VAUGHAN opens the book and flips through its pages, taking a keen interest in such an antique.

Scene Three. Audio Aide call.

There is a soft glow of light in an otherwise empty space, evoking a sense of the abstract. The voice of the AUDIO AIDE speaks, as flat and dispassionate as ever.

AIDE Officer Lynda. Officer Lynda. This is the Audio Aide to Commander Govan. Please report to the Justice Hall. Officer Mead will relieve you of your current duties. A new commitment is required.

Scene Four. The Justice Hall.

The lights fade up to reveal GOVAN'S simple office. GOVAN and LYNDA are already present, facing each other from either side of the room.

GOVAN You came swiftly. I am glad.

LYNDA The Aide sounded in my earpiece. I was about to start a patrol.

GOVAN Officer Mead has been quite complimentary. You had keenness on the street, yet a measure of restraint. No more sudden moves...

LYNDA I learnt that from you.

GOVAN Perhaps, although I goaded you somewhat.

GOVAN moves closer to LYNDA.

Do you know the Court of the PURE?

LYNDA Only by reputation. They sentence the worst offenders, when penalties are most severe.

GOVAN And you know of their composition? The 'nature of the beast', as it were?

LYNDA Yes. It's not widely known, but no particular secret.

GOVAN We want you to...contribute.

GOVAN moves to his desk and brings out a thin staff topped by a small, grey orb. He holds it before him like a weapon.

Could you handle one of these?

LYNDA For sure.

GOVAN Do you *want* to handle one...?

LYNDA You're testing me?

GOVAN The Court is a trial, in more ways than one. A justice staff, take it...

GOVAN offers the staff to LYNDA, who retains a calm demeanour as she accepts it. LYNDA sweeps the staff gently to and fro, getting the feel.

LYNDA Good balance. Cuts the air...

GOVAN The staff has several functions. The handle reacts to your grip. Enticement, restraint, punishment - each can be chosen in turn. Words are your primary tool, but the staff can underline them.

LYNDA moves the staff in a slow, sweeping arc, emphasizing GOVAN'S point.

LYNDA I shall find the right words.

GOVAN holds up a hand, fingers open. LYNDA stops moving the staff and gives it back to him. GOVAN brandishes the staff for a moment, then taps LYNDA on the neck. She does not react.

GOVAN Non-functioning model, to demonstrate.

LYNDA I held my ground.

GOVAN That would hurt in Court. A medium sting, intended to loosen the tongue.

GOVAN moves the staff away from LYNDA.

The device has a certain visual impact, perfect for scaring felons. You will find the controls intuitive.

LYNDA I will?

GOVAN You will, in a manner of speaking. You need to be *systemized*...

GOVAN steps back from LYNDA, who adopts a fixed pose as if standing to attention. The room darkens as a beam of intense light shines down on LYNDA, pulsating over her body. There is a rising hum of electrical power, as if a complex process is taking place. Then the light and sound cut out, leaving the scene dark and in silence.

The voice of the AUDIO AIDE speaks again.

AIDE Officer Lynda has been systemized by the Justice Hall. She exists within the Court of the PURE.

Scene Five. The desert.

All is dark. RAWMAN steps into view, edged by a bluish tinge of moonlight. He takes out a small pair of binoculars and focuses on a target. VAUGHAN approaches, stopping beside him.

Both wear outdoor clothing in desert tones, with pockets and utility belts, in contrast to their previous urban attire. VAUGHAN seems a little awkward in these new surroundings, but is keen to assist RAWMAN.

VAUGHAN A long way to come, for an academic. Didn't bring a fountain pen...

VAUGHAN pats his pockets, half jokily. RAWMAN continues to gaze through the binoculars.

RAWMAN If we have water and rations, we're good. Need to lie low for a while. Take a look...

RAWMAN offers VAUGHAN the binoculars. He takes them, peering through, but struggles to find the target as if unused to practicalities. RAWMAN stretches an arm, steadying the binoculars. VAUGHAN settles on something in the distance.

VAUGHAN Those lights...the factory?

RAWMAN Shift starts at dawn. The scientists come from the north, by coach. We'll see them in advance. Then...we pull back and wait.

VAUGHAN Why did we come so early?

RAWMAN I wanted to check the terrain. Look for fossils, that's the cover story, our driver comes at five. Kirby's good, he knows the land. We hitch a lift, or pretend to, and head down the road. The rest, we trust to providence.

VAUGHAN lowers the binoculars.

VAUGHAN Fossils? What, the last guys who tried this?

RAWMAN I'm happy so far. We've covered our tracks...took the train, then hiked. Guess it's tough for an academic, but you'll have something to write about.

VAUGHAN Wish I'd made notes...

RAWMAN Stop and search, how do you explain? Keep it here, my friend, the memory...best notebook in the world.

RAWMAN taps his head. VAUGHAN smiles.

VAUGHAN If no-one can read it.

RAWMAN Not easily. Let's hope it won't come to that.

VAUGHAN is perturbed by these words, and raises the binoculars again. He sweeps them to one side of the factory, spotting something.

VAUGHAN There's a vehicle, see the dust cloud? Looks like a coach...

RAWMAN takes the binoculars and observes the scene.

RAWMAN Yes. Back down the hill, have some breakfast. Then we can chip the rocks...

RAWMAN moves off the way he came. After a brief glance around, VAUGHAN follows.

Scene Six. Biohazard drill.

A repetitive alarm sounds, with red flashing lights to underline its urgency. A harsh WARNING VOICE sounds on a Tannoy.

WARNING Warning, biohazard alert - warning, biohazard alert - warning, biohazard alert. Condition safe, all clear. Drill over. Drill over.

The red flashing lights disappear.

Scene Seven. Lightweb report.

A beam of light illuminates SAAKI in a field of darkness.

SAAKI My mentor, I thank you for the offer you have made and am honoured to accept. I have been stimulated by my work with the Intel Group, if only on secondment. To join as a full-time agent is a bold new challenge - one to which my skills, I hope, are suitably matched. As your opinion is so, I concur. I have become a trusted friend to the Kindred of the Real, and am close to David Philton. *Increasingly* close. I encourage him as he shapes his ideas, and urge him to practical action. In a sense, he is my second mentor - although only in service to the Core, my mentor, do I deem to enter his world.

SAAKI pauses for a moment, recalling past events, then speaks with greater passion.

I hear the Court of the PURE has passed sentence on two of our three suspects or, to be accurate, traitors. 'Rebels' has a heroic ring as used by the Kindred, and should only be spoken with contempt. My mentor, the third trial attracts me the most. It has a link to my first mission, when I strolled into the Arcane Spirits Club and made that initial contact. I shall bear witness at the Justice Hall, when the Court is next in session.

Scene Eight. The Court of the PURE.

A chamber of metallic grey, with a single entrance. There is an almost subliminal hum of machinery. Spotlights meet in the centre of the floor, creating a circle of illumination. This remains dim for the moment.

Two figures enter. The first, VAUGHAN, wears a one-piece garment like a prison overall. He walks slowly, head bowed, as if ashamed or beaten.

VAUGHAN is followed by GOVAN, who moves with an air of authority. He holds a justice staff before him, although the orb on the tip is now glowing. This seems to restrain VAUGHAN. GOVAN waves the staff, effectively prodding VAUGHAN into the circle of light. Once there, the spotlights brighten and GOVAN lowers the staff.

VAUGHAN remains still, in a slumped position. GOVAN clips the staff to his utility belt.

GOVAN Your guilt, you must know, is unquestionable. That has been decided by the Justice Hall, an appeal has been declined, and thus you are rendered here. All these things are immutable. Yet there is a chance, a possibility, of salvation. A divergence, if you will, from your probable fate.

VAUGHAN stirs, stretching his arms to test the boundaries of the illuminated area. He flinches, as if stung by a restraining field. He cannot break the light-bonds. GOVAN smiles, subtly amused.

VAUGHAN These words you're saying...these riddles. What am I doing here? Thought I'd be minced by now, or 'fragmented' - isn't that the term they use?

GOVAN There are a number of unfortunate words.

VAUGHAN Kids cheering at the spectacle, knowing there's a man down there. All part of the fun...

GOVAN No fun.

VAUGHAN Not to you, maybe. The masses, seeing the square lit up. Getting high on their rev-pills when the laser-blades start to whirl.

GOVAN You misunderstand the process. The crowd has no say in the decision. To authorize a death would be the greatest sin, for who would have perfect judgement? Any imperfection of morals, however slight, would alter the workings of the mind. The outcome might not be different - but the result could always be questioned, and authorities held to blame. Society would be proved...lacking.

VAUGHAN All I saw...was the death of Kirby. The crowds weren't cringing in disgust, they were cheering - screaming for it.

GOVAN The screams of untroubled minds.

VAUGHAN How do you mean?

GOVAN They were not pained with decision. When Kirby was tried, then Rawman, both were classified as guilty. As the third of that tenuous gang, you have been judged in turn. No sin can be ascribed to the Security Group. They have not laid a hand on anyone.

VAUGHAN They sent the men to their deaths.

GOVAN That is a mere assumption.

VAUGHAN I saw one of them die.

GOVAN You were quite the voyeur.

VAUGHAN You think I wanted to...?

VAUGHAN lurches at GOVAN, but is restrained by the circle of light. GOVAN is softly amused.

GOVAN Kirby arrived in the death-square. That was the final decision, but not of the Security Group. They may ascribe guilt, Mr. Vaughan, but can never issue punishment.

VAUGHAN looks around, more calmly, avoiding the edge of the light beams. He examines the entire chamber as GOVAN watches with detached fascination.

VAUGHAN Where am I?

GOVAN That is irrelevant. You are here.

VAUGHAN Where is here?

GOVAN That is irrelevant. The question you should ask is...why, or *what*, is here?

VAUGHAN seems crestfallen for a moment.

VAUGHAN Is it a cell?

GOVAN You have come from a cell. Why would the Security Group move you from one to another?

VAUGHAN Is it a game, then? A mind-game? You're going to torture me, or drug me to stop me screaming.

GOVAN I have no intention of anything. Your colleagues have been here previously. You could think of it as a portal, or gateway. Even another chance. A possibility of...salvation.

VAUGHAN Yes, you said. I have a really warm feeling. Who are you, a doctor? Hey - maybe a priest! Well, I'm not confessing anything.

GOVAN I am neither a priest nor a doctor. I am a technician, if you will. Lynda and myself - she will join us soon - we work in this facility. You could say, we are part of it. We are integral to its function.

VAUGHAN What, you clean the floor?

GOVAN We are eyes, Mr. Vaughan. We are ears. We listen, we act as beholders. Your guilt, as I said, is immutable. But what happens next is...flexible. The outcome depends on *you*.

LYNDA enters the chamber, acknowledging GOVAN with a subtle nod. Her hair is swept back to create an almost genderless appearance, while her grey uniform blends with the colourless walls. She also has a justice staff, clipped to her belt.

LYNDA We shall begin the scrutiny now.

VAUGHAN What scrutiny? Haven't I been tried...?

LYNDA You have been tried, Mr. Vaughan. You are guilty. Which makes you a free man.

VAUGHAN is confused.

VAUGHAN Then why are you holding me here?

LYNDA moves to the other side of VAUGHAN, flanking him with GOVAN.

GOVAN No juror can be without sin, Mr. Vaughan.

LYNDA So no juror can imply punishment.

GOVAN Since that ruling would be made with imperfect morality.

LYNDA Making the decision of society...imperfect. All they can do, Mr. Vaughan, is pass you to us. Here, you have a second chance...

GOVAN ...regardless of your legal status. Ours is not the question of guilt, ours is the question of fate.

LYNDA We may send you to the laser-blades like Mr. Kirby, or reject that outcome entirely.

GOVAN You can speak up, Mr. Vaughan. The crowd is waiting. They know anyone killed has been justly dispatched by a perfect, sinless decree.

LYNDA They can revel in their shrieks and thrill-speech, Mr. Vaughan, as the sentence has been passed by others.

GOVAN For one who has guilt cannot throw the death-switch.

LYNDA Yet one without guilt can do so.

VAUGHAN shudders, blocking his ears from this cold, efficient barrage.

VAUGHAN Stop it! Stop grilling me, you're hurting my head.

LYNDA The role of the Security Group is not in doubt. But they have their limitations. They can imply a fate in the death-square, which they have no power to enact. We, however, are neutral arbiters. We do not care if you are guilty or innocent. We have no moral qualms.

GOVAN Morals would be an irrelevance.

LYNDA Only those who sin need morals to control their impulses. We are without sin.

VAUGHAN So, what are you?

GOVAN
and
LYNDA What do you think we are?

VAUGHAN Members of a cult? Clones, I think...or programmed artificial Aides. You have optimised cerebral implants, doing the will of the court.

GOVAN No. We are free to decide.

LYNDA Anything else would be...interference. A cult is domineering, and thus sinful. Clones are only clones of imperfect beings. Mind-chips are a crude imposition. You make novel suggestions, Mr. Vaughan, but they contradict our better principles.

VAUGHAN is unsure.

VAUGHAN I am not begging for mercy. We had reasons for what we did.

GOVAN You acted against the Core.

VAUGHAN The Kindred has a basic rationale, and everything defers to that. We have to defend the cause.

GOVAN A cause that has been ruled illegal.

VAUGHAN Only by a sick society, rotten to the...Core. If society's decadent, how can it say we're wrong?

LYNDA Because you exist *within* that society. Your actions and desires must take that into account.

VAUGHAN Why should they? It's a new society we're trying to make, or rebuild what was before. Before this dead, conforming, happy, happy, place where everyone lives with a grin. We saw behind the entertainment. We knew what it was covering up - the land grabs, the chemical skies. The way they were altering the world.

GOVAN Taking the land from renegades. Making the skies *blue*. Is it not a pleasant world, Mr. Vaughan, in which your grubby little gang rebels?

LYNDA Behold the smiles on the streets, the perfect joy. No-one is troubled by the woes of decision. Our sciences, Mr. Vaughan, have aided humanity. Those troublesome twists of DNA have had their hatred quelled. Would you rob the masses of contentment?

VAUGHAN How can they be content?

GOVAN As content as can be, Mr. Vaughan.

VAUGHAN It's totally synthetic...

LYNDA Why cry? The sky is BLUE...

GOVAN Bearing Latent Universal Enzymes.

GOVAN looks at LYNDA, knowingly.

In the end, we concur. True contentment is achieved through personal fulfilment. It cannot be spread in the air. Yet the result is remarkably similar - and for society, exactly the same. Times of art and inspiration have existed, but aspects threaten the Core. That is the pattern, through history.

LYNDA By knowing the extent of those patterns, stability has been achieved. That is the greater truth.

VAUGHAN You know nothing! What kind of truth...?

LYNDA Knowledge has little value, except in its application. That is understood by the Core.

VAUGHAN But knowledge and ethics, you split them apart. We find wisdom through knowledge. It builds strength, character...!

GOVAN Do not embarrass us with a liberal diatribe. You chose to disrupt that stability - a stability that has rejected famine, and wars. Where crime has been neutralized. The Church of the New Adopted Christ is flourishing, as no denomination before. The PRESIDENT makes decisions, and is no longer an object of scorn. And you pit yourself against *this*?

LYNDA You and Rawman obtained chemical pods through illegal means, by breaching an official facility. Kirby provided the transport. He is a known villain, and this affected his fate. Rawman has been dealt with, as appropriate. Now we must deal with you.

LYNDA unclips the justice staff from her belt and waves it towards VAUGHAN, the end glowing.

With a light-slice *here...*

She taps the staff on VAUGHAN'S body. He recoils in pain, gasping. LYNDA moves round, tapping him again.

And a light-slice *there...*

VAUGHAN convulses in pain, with a stifled scream. There is the trace of a smile on LYNDA'S face. She ponders whether to strike again, wavering slightly.

GOVAN The point has been made, Lynda. Remember the protocol.

LYNDA lowers the staff, almost reluctantly, and clips it to her utility belt.

LYNDA Just a simulation.

LYNDA steps back for a moment. GOVAN approaches VAUGHAN, exuding an air of benevolence.

GOVAN Speak more of your organization. You are accountable to each other, we hear. 'Each is all', your motto - The Kinship of the Real.

VAUGHAN Yes. I am not in denial.

GOVAN You fully accept your guilt?

VAUGHAN I fully accept my involvement.

GOVAN That is not the same thing.

VAUGHAN The difference is...trivial.

GOVAN Not to us, Mr. Vaughan. We have our...methods to consider, our procedures to run. Our decision: whether to send you to the death-square or allow you to live. The life would not be pleasant, but no commandment would be broken. There would be no sinful demise.

VAUGHAN A life in a cell. A prison?

GOVAN Possibly. Or suspended animation, through chemical means. That can be the kinder.

VAUGHAN How?

GOVAN Picture decades in a room like this.

VAUGHAN glances round, understanding. LYNDA meets his eye briefly, with a look of contempt.

VAUGHAN I'd still be alive. I could think, maybe hope for a pardon. Society could change outside.

GOVAN Perhaps. A coma would be reversible, although you would be terminated at nine decades to simulate a natural end.

VAUGHAN regards him bitterly.

VAUGHAN So if I beg for mercy, that doesn't fix anything. I'm trapped whatever I say.

GOVAN shrugs.

GOVAN We are not here to display mercy. Rawman tried this. Tell him, Lynda, how he squirmed before us. It was a most disgusting spectacle.

VAUGHAN I don't believe you.

GOVAN Amazing how one can melt under pressure. He was a cool one, too, on the raid - according to your own testimony.

LYNDA steps forward.

LYNDA The woeful things he said to me. He should keep the chemical pods, find a remedy, spread it amongst the masses - glaring at me, like I had sympathy, that I should deny their smiles like a good little mother. Like I should...

LYNDA takes her staff, tapping VAUGHAN three times as she speaks.

 ...slap them and poke them and fill them with pain.

VAUGHAN winces with each tap, but tries to keep face. LYNDA withdraws, smugly.

 Your Kinship would lift the veil of sky-trails that the Lord, in his wisdom, has cast upon a sinful world. That is how Kirby spurned the wisdom of our Lord and Master, the New Adopted Christ. He also damned the PRESIDENT with sacrilegious words. So the fate of the light-square was granted him, and his body turned to dust.

GOVAN Rawman also defied the Core.

LYNDA He was more incisive, more logical. He implied the Kinship of the Real had true authority by lineage from the meddlesome days. In this belief, he was delusional. Delusion is not a crime, but its consequences *may* be. Thus, Rawman was taken from here to a place of rest where he abides now, in chemical sleep.

VAUGHAN I don't know what's worse...

LYNDA You have given us no reason for reprieve, Mr. Vaughan. You aided these men by making plans, even coming on the raid. You trespassed within an official facility, ignoring a biohazard drill, then removed Core property to a private vehicle. You then boarded this vehicle with Kirby and Rawman, each a known and guilty activist.

VAUGHAN That's one way to tell it.

LYNDA However, the chemical pods were intercepted. A Glancer had tracked their path for several kilometres, before a cuffer-drone intercepted *you*. Your assault of our warden is an additional factor.

VAUGHAN There's an action man inside me...

GOVAN An amateurish crime, Mr. Vaughan. Carefully planned, courageous in its way but - I have to say - rather naïve. You did not think to shield the chemical pods, once they left the facility. Though each was a globe of clear fluid, they contained floaters invisible to the eye. These flashed on the screens as you left the facility and moved off through the desert. A cuffer-drone was launched from the air base, and the Glancer looked down on it all. Your car was a beetle on a page!

VAUGHAN Then I guess my crime was incompetence. The pods were transparent, we could see the liquid, but never thought it was traceable. Next time the Kinship acts - it won't be me - we'll do it the proper way. Use a...polarity shell as a buffer, place the pods inside. Go undetected, at least for a while. Save your wardens a headache or two. A cuffer-drone needs charging before it can launch. We could infiltrate the...

VAUGHAN stops dead, knowing he is saying too much. GOVAN is untroubled.

GOVAN We will not divulge your thoughts, Mr. Vaughan. You speak of a future crime, a crime-to-be. We have not perceived this, we offer no judgement. Our only concern is justice. Is it legally right that you die?

VAUGHAN The outcome was always a risk.

GOVAN But now it is a choice. *Our* choice.

VAUGHAN I struck, but only injured the warden. And I conceded capture to the cuffer-drone.

LYNDA It would be very difficult *not* to.

There is a moment of silence. GOVAN and LYNDA gaze into each other's eyes, reaching a quiet decision.

GOVAN You have shown some...decency of spirit. Of course, our empathy is a tactic - just as we, too, are devices.

VAUGHAN Tools of the state, you mean? Working for the Core?

GOVAN In a far more literal sense. We are part of the judicial process. Indeed, we are mere...applications.

VAUGHAN Machines?

GOVAN Within the greater machine.

VAUGHAN looks around.

VAUGHAN Robotic servants? Holograms, you mean...?

GOVAN Nothing so...everyday. We exist within the coding of the software. I am part of the programme, so is Lynda.

VAUGHAN Then how can you be here?

GOVAN Where is *here*? There is no here. We have each been systemized. This chamber is also coded information. So are your bonds, Mr. Vaughan. And *you*.

VAUGHAN What...?

GOVAN This is the Court of the PURE, untarnished by sin as a new image of the living. We are Perfectly Unique Reactive Entities as indeed, Mr. Vaughan, are you.

VAUGHAN Perfect...?

GOVAN Perfection is relative, not absolute. We are perfect for the needs of the Court. You shall die in a sense. We shall all die. As the programme makes its final decision, these fleeting simulacra will be wiped from its mind. What you have said - all of it, and our own reactions - will figure in that decision. Vaughan is sedated now, beyond us. He will soon be granted his fate.

VAUGHAN But I'm real. I *am* Vaughan! I know what I said - *everything!*

VAUGHAN tries to break the light-bonds, uselessly.

GOVAN An implant channels the memories of Nikolas Vaughan, feeding your own thoughts. You have been *most* convincing. Goodbye.

LYNDA steps forward.

LYNDA Govan and I shall be reborn in minutes, with our minds unblemished by sin. There are other cases to be heard.

GOVAN and LYNDA walk out silently, leaving VAUGHAN in a pool of light. The light-bonds fade, releasing him. He stretches himself, and prowls about the chamber.

VAUGHAN It's a trick. They're trying to twist things. How can this not be real...?

VAUGHAN slaps the wall of the chamber, which feels solid.

I remember everything! The raid, Kirby, Rawman and the pods. I've got scars from the cuffing, I feel them...

VAUGHAN rolls up a sleeve, rubbing a sore area of his wrist. The lights in the chamber begin to fade.

It can't be a...simulation. I am part of the Kindred, I know it. (CRIES OUT) The Kindred of the Real...!

The lights black out as VAUGHAN'S voice echoes through the space, "Real...Real...Real", diminishing to nothing.

An electronic sound begins to rise: the bleeps and whirrs of a computer programme, analysing the data. The sound reaches a crescendo, then cuts out.

Scene Nine. The Justice Hall.

GOVAN is seated between LYNDA and SAAKI, all with their heads bowed. Each wears a dark visor over their eyes. As the lights fade up, GOVAN lifts his head and removes the visor. He glances at LYNDA, then SAAKI, with an air of paternal affection.

SAAKI can somehow sense GOVAN'S attention. She emerges from what feels, to her, to be a state of trance. SAAKI removes her visor, and glances at GOVAN.

SAAKI I was there, like I hovered - with no body.

GOVAN I felt a similar sensation.

SAAKI But you were there, in the Court.

GOVAN Not me. A simulacrum, a shadow. It spoke as I would, reacted as I would. Now its consciousness has dissolved.

LYNDA begins to awake, as if she had been more deeply immersed in the experience. GOVAN stretches an arm and eases off her visor. LYNDA blinks, startled by the light.

LYNDA Where is she - my sister, my twin?

GOVAN She is nowhere. She was never...anywhere. It was you, in a manner of speaking. At the same time, a separate entity. An entity reactive, unique and...perfect. She and he - you and I - may be reborn again, to pass sentence in the Court of the PURE.

LYNDA gasps.

LYNDA I knew the principle, but the system at work...!

GOVAN She was good, your shadow. I shall make a report, the PRESIDENT will be informed. As to your other role...

LYNDA stands.

LYNDA Yes, Govan - sir - my Commander. Back to the street patrol.

GOVAN With an expectation of more.

LYNDA Advancement?

GOVAN That is down to Officer Mead. I shall make a recommendation.

LYNDA smiles slightly, then offers GOVAN the palm salute. GOVAN returns it with his usual stiffness. LYNDA offers SAAKI the salute, and she returns it readily. LYNDA turns on her heel and marches out. There is a hum, as if an automatic door has opened.

GOVAN turns to SAAKI, speaking with some affection.

GOVAN I kept your lightcast. Replayed it, several times through. David is your *second* mentor...?

SAAKI In a certain context, Govan. In the service of the Core.

GOVAN 'The Core that holds us, defines us.'

SAAKI 'Without the Core, we are none.'

GOVAN smiles.

GOVAN Philton, the useful idiot. A mouthpiece for the masses. A mouthpiece we can control.

SAAKI We're...close.

GOVAN You are. We have agents who observe.

SAAKI He will make a move, try a stunt, to avenge the colleagues he lost. Philton will soon be vulnerable.

GOVAN Then we must be careful not to attack him.

SAAKI is puzzled.

SAAKI Why...?

GOVAN He is a man with a plan, or many plans. Let him surge ahead. Where he goes, we spy. Where he acts, we counter. Knowledge beats speculation.

SAAKI As you said, a useful idiot.

GOVAN stands.

GOVAN Join me in the refreshment lounge. There are others who witnessed the Court of the PURE, with much to discuss.

SAAKI I shall, but not for the moment. You say Rawman and Vaughan are now at rest, deep in chemical sleep...

GOVAN I do. They remain so while the PRESIDENT takes the final decision. Is a fast demise better than extended death, when it comes to the human condition? Should they each abide in chemical sleep or face the laser-blades?

SAAKI Quite a question. You sound like your own shadow.

GOVAN The simulated shadow of *me*. The PRESIDENT has no shadow, and abides above us all. That is the gift of science. The use of Precise, Rational, Executive, Systemically Intelligent...

SAAKI ...Digitally Enhanced Neural Technology...

GOVAN ...has made a glorious leader, unhindered by the frailties of the flesh. Hail to the PRESIDENT!

Govan salutes the PRESIDENT, with a conventional hand to the forehead. SAAKI repeats the action.

SAAKI Hail to the PRESIDENT!

GOVAN Miss Saaki, the cocktails beckon...

GOVAN indicates SAAKI should follow him. SAAKI declines.

SAAKI Not yet. I want to see them. Nikolas and Claude.

GOVAN Two of the three...*traitors*, here in the Justice Hall?

SAAKI I imagine. The Court had no physical location.

GOVAN is a little piqued that SAAKI will not accompany him. However, he recognizes her growing independence.

GOVAN As an agent of the Core, Miss Saaki, you are entitled to see what you will. Indeed, you have 'access all areas'. Level four, the Rest Room...

GOVAN moves off, briskly, with a hum of the automatic door. SAAKI gazes after him for a while. Turning away, she casts her eyes upward.

SAAKI 'I am here for the Core,' my mentor. 'I am here for the PRESIDENT.'

The rich, authoritative voice of the PRESIDENT fills the room.

PRESIDENT 'Who keeps a watchful eye on you all.'

SAAKI identifies the voice. She kneels, bowing her head.

SAAKI My PRESIDENT. I came from Britannia to join you, and now I am in awe.

PRESIDENT Do not be ashamed of sentiment, my Saaki. This land, these Americas, were built on emotion. The quest for freedom was a fight, and blood ran hot in the veins. I cannot feel this, as a system, but I am programmed to understand.

SAAKI looks up, as if beholding the PRESIDENT.

SAAKI Then my emotion is not a weakness?

PRESIDENT Emotion can never be. The danger is its application.

SAAKI Like the Kinship, my PRESIDENT? The Kinship of the Real...?

PRESIDENT A group to which you belong, as an agent of the Core. Emotion will feed your actions, while intellect can restrain them. A perfect balance, my Saaki.

SAAKI stares up a little longer, waiting. But the attention of the PRESIDENT has gone elsewhere.

Scene Ten. The Rest Room.

RAWMAN and VAUGHAN are stretched out each side of the room on hard, slab-like tables. There is an underlying hiss from a coolant system.

SAAKI enters between the two, regarding the figures with a mixture of tenderness and distaste. She moves closer to RAWMAN, studying him for a moment.

SAAKI One of the arcane spirits...

SAAKI smiles, a little tenderly, and moves over to VAUGHAN. She looks at him longer, closer and deeper.

SAAKI I enjoyed our friendship, Nikolas. I really did. One day, you might wake with better thoughts. Maybe we'll speak again...

SAAKI strokes VAUGHAN'S hair lightly, then pulls back as if feeling she has broken a boundary. SAAKI moves away from VAUGHAN and heads towards the exit. However, she glances back.

The scene is static for a few seconds, SAAKI gazing at the figures as the hum of coolant turns the air to ice. She shakes off her reverie and leaves.

The recumbent figures of RAWMAN and VAUGHAN remain unmoving, silent and unseen. The lights fade slowly, along with the hiss of coolant, until the scene is a void of darkness.

(FINAL CURTAIN)