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Note: This is the 50,000-word novel that [Richard MacManus](#) wrote in 27 days during November 2003 for the [NaNoWrimo](#) contest. It is a DRAFT only. It's been spell-checked, but not reviewed (even by its author). Think of it as Version 0.9.

Dirtside to Spaceside

By Richard MacManus

Chapter 1

Declan Atomz was a paid-up member of the dot com generation. He worked for SnoopDaddy.com, a software development company that employed about 30 people. Based in Auckland, New Zealand, SnoopDaddy.com specialised in building and deploying corporate snooping software – monitoring staff website surfing, tracking ip telephony call patterns, filtering abusive language from emails and generally ensuring all forms of corporate communication was within whatever parameters the customer wanted. It was high-tech snooping. Declan was a Technical Support Analyst, which basically meant he helped install the software for customers and was on the end of the phone if configuration problems arose. There wasn't much time for "analysis", even though it was one third of his job title. Declan found he spent most of his time on the phone with customers or visiting their premises to install the product.

Declan Atomz was 30 years old and he liked to say that his only real talent was "tinkering". He'd never finished University. In fact he'd started a number of different courses of study, but never managed to make up his mind which career direction to take. He'd started Accounting, Engineering, Computer Science, Mathematics – none of them kept him interested beyond a couple of semesters. But one thing Declan did know was how to tinker with technology and cobble together something new from his tinkering. This desire to tinker wasn't reflected in his choice of jobs until a few years ago. The first 5 or so years after University were spent in a variety of dead-end jobs: mostly as a customer service rep for government departments and banks. Then two years ago he found a niche building computers. Well, he *assembled* computers was a better description. Declan mostly just pieced together computer parts according to strict instruction manuals. But still, Declan had finally found a job where his love of tinkering had an outlet. It was at this time that Declan went back to software programming study – this time unofficially by learning straight from the World Wide Web. In a couple of years he'd learnt enough Delphi and Visual Basic to land a job at SnoopDaddy.com, a semi-established software company in Auckland. The job gave Declan the opportunity to expand his career beyond hardware into software.

SnoopDaddy.com's 3 founders had developed a family of corporate snooping software products and, at the time Declan joined, they had a number of loyal customers and were thinking of listing on the stock market. It was 2000 when Declan joined and 3 years later he was still with SnoopDaddy.com – which was an

employment record for Declan. He enjoyed working at SnoopDaddy.com, but he was still waiting to be given a chance to design and develop a new product. Declan suspected this chance would never come, because that type of “play” was the domain of the founders – or expensive specialist programming consultants. But still, Declan was satisfied with his job. It gave him a license to tinker, even though it had to be within corporate boundaries. But in the final analysis, Declan had to admit that his dot com job was not completely fulfilling his desire to tinker.

In the evenings, after discussing his day and watching tv with his girlfriend Florrie, Declan divided his time between surfing the Web (he’d recently discovered “blogging”) and mucking around with his home-baked astronomy equipment. Declan was an enthusiastic amateur astronomer and had built a number of useful tools using bits and pieces of electronics. He’d cobbled together a number of sophisticated radio telescopic tools.

He’d used pieces bought from Dick Smith Electronics and many other bits borrowed from old radios, televisions, computers, torches – any old piece of electronica that Declan could lay his hands on. He’d built sensitive microwave receivers, powerful computers and elaborate antennas. For the software requirements, Declan had downloaded various software components from amateur astronomy mailing lists and even managed to obtain some software parts from underground groups, who may have swiped them from real companies. Declan wasn’t sure and he didn’t mind either – he figured it didn’t hurt anyone.

Declan had assembled all of this hardware and software into a home network that was, Declan was sure, one of the finest amateur radio telescope data collection and analysis systems on the planet. Most of the things he had built were much more powerful than any ready-to-build kit he could buy from Dick Smith Electronics, and Declan was quite proud of this fact. He’d brag about his electronics prowess on his blog and in the mailing lists he subscribed to.

Declan’s radio telescope system was a Frankenstein’s monster in a way, but he was proud of its raw power and number-crunching abilities. It was a bespoke system that Declan suspected only he would ever be able to operate – it had a lot of odd and at times illogical commands. But it worked a charm for its creator – and that’s all that mattered to Declan.

SETI stands for “Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence” and throughout the world many thousands of people are enthusiastically scouring the galaxies for signals from an alien intelligence. The most famous, and largest, project is [SETI@home](#) - a scientific experiment run from the Berkeley University. SETI@home encourages people to participate by downloading a free software program. Once installed on their personal computer and connected to the Internet, the program automatically gathers and analyses radio telescope data. Declan had of course signed up to the SETI@home program and a couple of his computers were now contributing to the cause like thousands of other people. But Declan was also able to explore the universe on his own, using his own devices.

Declan’s current project was to scour parts of near-by galaxies that he thought had some promise. Often these were parts of galaxies that the official SETI crowd had already dismissed. Declan had other ideas and he was convinced that [SETI@home](#) had overlooked some promising regions.

So far he had not encountered any signals that could confidently be claimed to be from an alien civilization. He’d managed to capture a variety of radio waves from outer space, but no really unusual signals. Like everyone else, Declan was searching for “spikes” - radio waves that occur at single frequencies strong enough to be

onto the pillow. Everything was blurry. After a couple of minutes, he was able to focus again. He didn't know what had happened to him, but he felt like someone waking up after being hypnotised.

After calling in sick at work, Declan watched tv absent-mindedly for a couple of hours. Florrie had called shortly after midday, asking if he was OK. Yes, Declan had assured her, "I stayed up a bit too late again last night and overslept this morning." Florrie had gently scolded him, and as usual Declan sheepishly agreed that he must not stay up so late on a work night.

Eventually Declan made his way into his computer room and sat gingerly in his chair. Not quite knowing what to expect, he logged in. The first thing he did was check the recording from last night. It was all intact and as he remembered it. Dum dum dum, DUM DUM. This pattern repeated throughout the whole recording session, never changing. This was most unusual, Declan thought. Then he remembered his dream – blinding flashes of light in his eyes and blasts of harmonies in his ears. And that strange whispering. He remembered it, but couldn't recall what it was saying. Maybe he couldn't hear it above the harmonies and white noise? But he was sure that someone, or something, was trying to communicate with him.

Chapter 3

Declan spent the rest of the day doing data validation. One of the first things he checked was whether he was the target of an elaborate joke, perhaps played on him by his Internet mailing list buddies. A few of them were certainly smart enough to infiltrate his computer system. But Declan quickly discounted this possibility, after some quick sweeps of his network confirmed there were no intruders. The next possible cause was RFI (Radio Frequency Interference). That is, did the signal he picked up originate from earth? Declan ran some software programs and analysis to test this and decided that it probably wasn't RFI. So he'd ruled out to the best of his knowledge that the signals had emanated from earth.

He'd need to re-test the spot in the Boolion Galaxy where the signal had come from. Of course if it was an extra terrestrial message, it may have stopped by now. The transmission may not be continuous, or it may be coming from a rotating planet. The signal may also "scintillate" - rise and fall due to the interstellar medium between earth and the source of the signal. For these reasons, there was no guarantee the signal would still be there when he re-checked. Declan half-expected this to be the case.

Sure enough when Declan checked the same spot – there was no signal to be found.

Chapter 4

The next night Declan stayed up late again, to the annoyance of Florrie. Once again he fell asleep at his computers.

BZZZZZZZZZZZZZ, the white noise jolted him awake. He checked the clock on his computer. 1.24am, same as last night! Where was this white noise coming from? He wasn't sure, but he quickly looked over to the display console and saw the same steep red curves as last night. He flicked the signal volume: -dum dum. DUM DUM dum dum dum. DUM DUM dum dum dum. The same pattern. And this time Declan

noticed that the white noise had stopped. He still didn't know where it came from. Was it just a signal to wake him up? Declan took a mental note to investigate the source of the white noise the next day.

He turned his attention to the signal processor. He ran some real-time tests and analysis. The pattern was so stable and monotonous that Declan knew it must be extraterrestrial. Well there was still a chance it might be an RFI, but Declan had a feeling it wasn't. He *felt* this was The Real Thing.

Throughout the night he tried to decode the message. There was no point trying to reply to the message, because it would take hundreds of light years for his reply to be received in the Boolion galaxy. As it was, he had no idea how old the signal he had picked up was. It could've been sent many years ago, by a now-dead civilization. Declan entertained the possibility that it was a real-time message – who knew what type of technology an advanced alien civilization had achieved? Real-time communication over distant galaxies could be as common to them as weblogging was to us!

Declan continued to monitor and run tests on the signal throughout the night, finally falling asleep exhausted about 5am.

Chapter 5

This time Florrie woke him up in the morning, after just 1.5 hours sleep by Declan. Florrie was furious with him. How could he stay up all night, after what happened yesterday?! Declan sheepishly apologized and said he would make it into work later this morning, even if it killed him. He promised to get an early night tonight. Florrie set the alarm before she left, for 9am, to allow Declan to get a little more sleep before he went to work.

After he fell back to sleep, the same dream as yesterday morning assaulted Declan again. Waves of very bright red and violet colours crashed in on him, deafening harmonies struck his ears. He experienced the same feeling of being unbalanced, not having any ground to stand on. And more whispering, frustratingly unable to be heard above the din of sounds. But there was one thing more: Declan could now discern a human-like figure standing, or floating, in front of him. The figure didn't appear to be standing on any ground. It was shaped like a man, but taller and with a narrower head. It had very long arms. Very skinny body. It raised an arm and Declan could see its mouth moving. But he could hear no sounds, apart from the inaudible whispers in his right ear. Was that from the being in front of him? If so, it could throw its voice...

Declan awoke suddenly. He swivelled his head to see the alarm clock. 12.31pm! Shit, Declan thought, I've got to get to work. When he tried to get up, waves of nausea hit him. This time Declan made a superhuman effort to overcome the nausea. He quickly put his clothes on and rushed out the door.

Chapter 6

The managing director of SnoopDaddy.com, Greg Rod, was in a foul mood.

“Bloxdale, Telephon, and DDF all rang this morning with urgent jobs. We covered for you yesterday when you were sick, but we thought you’d be back this morning! Why didn’t you call?”

Declan mumbled some excuse about feeling unwell this morning and he had thought Florrie had rung in for him. But when he realised she hadn’t, he’d decided to come into work despite still not feeling well. Declan was a terrible liar and he knew that Greg didn’t believe a word of it.

Greg shoved a bunch of post-it notes into Declan’s hands and told him to call these people straight away. So Declan did.

“Good morning, Bloxdale Corporations, Tony speaking”

“Yeah hi Tony, it’s Declan Atomz here from SnoopDaddy. Sorry I didn’t get back to you this morning, I was a bit under the weather.”

“Oh hi Declan mate. Listen, we’re getting this server error when we try to log in. I had a look at the error logs and...”

Declan couldn’t focus. He could hear what Tony from Bloxdale was saying, and Declan instinctively knew the answer to the problem. But Tony’s words were falling into a well of blackness. Slivers of red and violet light rained down. Declan heard himself issuing some robotic instructions to Tony. It was like he was watching the conversation from a vantage point directly above the pitch black and bottomless well, with only the red and violet rain that was falling into the well to illuminate proceedings. Looking down at the well, Declan could see Tony at his desk - 400 kilometres away in Wellington - hunched over his computer and following the precise monotone instructions from Declan...himself...who he could also see sitting at his desk – telephone headphones on – talking robotically while absently staring into his workstation screen. Declan was aware of the strangeness of the situation – he could see himself talking to this customer. Both the customer and this ‘other’ Declan were sitting across from each other in or on the well. It was like the two people were sitting 1 foot from each other. But in reality one was in Auckland and the other in Wellington, 400 kilometres away. Very odd.

Declan felt himself click the disconnection button on the phone and take off his headphones. He knew somehow that the call had been successful and Tony at Bloxdale’s problem had been solved satisfactorily. But he didn’t have any direct memory of what he or Tony had said. Then Declan looked down at his right hand. It had a red pen in it and he had been scribbling something on a notepad. Declan looked closely at the notepad, He’d been not just scribbling, but drawing an elaborate picture. It was densely coloured with the red biro pen, vivid red shading was the first thing that caught Declan’s eye. On closer inspection, Declan recognized the drawing to be that of an ear. A human ear. It was incredibly detailed and it not only showed the exterior of the ear, but the inner workings of the eardrum were meticulously illustrated too. Declan marvelled at how the exterior and interior of the ear blended together into one drawing. It was like a work of art. But how had... Declan had never been good at art, so he doubted that this drawing had been done by him. Yet he was still holding the red pen and there was nobody else around. Then Declan noticed something at the bottom-right of the drawing. A signature. He picked up the notepad and, bringing it right up to his eyes, squinted at the signature. He didn’t recognize it. It wasn’t English letters either – it was a symbol.

Chapter 7

Over the next few days, Declan drew more and more elaborate pictures. Drawings of ears, eyes, doors, tunnels, mouths. And they were beginning to get more abstract. He was not conscious of doing any of the drawings. Some of them were created while in a daydream of sorts – he had visions of black wells, outer space, or vast 3 dimensional grids. Some of the drawings just seemed to appear after a blackout, or so it seemed to Declan. But the crazy thing was, his work and social life remained unaffected. In fact his work performance had lifted a little – his supervisor had received some positive feedback from customers regarding the efficiency of Declan’s service and his ability to nail a problem first time. It was as if Declan’s brain was on autopilot during these artistic episodes, allowing him to function as per normal in his job and life. Meanwhile another part of his mind was watching proceedings like an out-of-body experience. As for the drawings, Declan wanted to think his subconscious was somehow responsible for those. But he knew that the drawings were caused in some way by the signals from space.

The DUM DUM dum dum dum pattern returned every night at the same time: 1.24am. Always Declan awoke at that time. He had tried staying awake till 1.24am, but no matter how many No-Doze he took or how much caffeine he consumed, he’d always fall asleep before then. And he’d always be awoken by white noise, followed by the signal. The origin of the white noise remained a mystery – it did not seem to emanate from any of Declan’s instruments.

After a few more days, Declan decided to show the drawings to Florrie. He had been living with Florrie for 5 years now and he trusted her more than anyone.

He decided to take out the drawings during the 6pm news.

“Hey Flo” Declan said in as off-handed manner as he could muster, “check out these drawings I’ve done. Um, I think I have some kind of, um, hidden talent for this...what do you think?”

He proffered a handful of SnoopDaddy notepad papers. Florrie reluctantly reached out a hand to take them. She was watching John Campbell, the TV3 news presenter, grill the Prime Minister about Genetic Modification and didn’t want to be interrupted. She glanced down at the papers. One by one, she pored at the drawings – mouth slightly agape.

“Honey, who did these? They’re fantastic – so much detail!”

“What do you mean, *I* did them”, Declan said.

“Come on hon, don’t kid with me. You can’t draw, remember? I’m serious – who did them? They’re incredible. Look at this picture of an eye...it’s almost mesmerising...”

Florrie trailed off and continued to stare at the drawing of the eye. Declan waited.

“Well, the thing is, I started having these dreams –“

“Wait a minute”, Florrie interrupted, “have you *seen* this signature?” She held up the eye drawing and pointed at the symbol written in the bottom-left. “That’s like nothing I’ve...I mean Prince had a symbol, but this is... what *is* this?!”

“Flo, have you noticed any change in me recently?” Declan asked, trying to move the subject of conversation from the drawings to him. “I mean, have I been acting weird or anything?”

Flo looked at him.

“Um, you know – have you noticed me, like, falling asleep...or, um, day-dreaming?”

“What are you *talking* about?” Florrie’s eyes narrowed. Then her eyebrows lifted up. “Wait, are you saying you did these drawings?!” She sounded incredulous.

Declan sighed. He didn’t have the words to explain. “Yes, it was me. I mean, yes, I drew them. Only I’m not sure, well, *how*...exactly...”

Florrie stared at him. John Campbell on TV3 news twittered away in the background. “You mean I’ve been living with you for over 5 years, without ever knowing you were a fucking *genius* artist?!”

Declan squirmed.

“Honey, you have something here. Why haven’t you ever shown me these drawings before? Is this the reason you’ve been staying up so late? How long have you been drawing this stuff?” She waved the drawings under Declan’s nose, accusingly.

Declan decided now was a good time to explain about the extraterrestrial signals, and the vivid dreams that left him nauseated, and the out-of-body visions...and the subconscious creation of the drawings which he had no memory of doing.

Chapter 8

Florrie had listened to Declan’s story with some bemusement. She’d been with Declan for over 5 years now and had always been tolerant of his fixation with astronomy and extraterrestrials. She’d never allowed herself to become interested in the subject, partly because she’d always been a sceptic when it came to flying saucers, crop circles and other such “nonsense”. Florrie liked to think of herself as being the equivalent of an atheist when it came to science fiction like UFO’s and aliens. She just didn’t believe. She did believe in God though and was semi-religious. That is, she went to church on Christmas and at Easter and prayed every now and again. Like a lot of people of her generation, she had a slightly slacker attitude when it came to religion. But she liked to think she was a spiritual person. Which was the other reason she was disinterested in Declan’s hobby, she couldn’t reconcile her spiritual beliefs with the idea that little green men were sharing the universe with her. Oddly, Declan and her had never debated this issue or argued over anything to do with extraterrestrials or religion. Both just accepted the other’s viewpoint, with slight feelings of dismay but also a healthy dose of respect.

So Florrie had listened to Declan as he animatedly told her about the signals from a distant galaxy, his out-of-body experiences, his weird dreams, and the beautiful drawings. Florrie was a little worried about Declan, but she thought it was probably just due to lack of sleep. She found herself strangely affected by Declan’s drawings. She would be looking earnestly at Declan while he told his story, but out of the corner of her eye she felt the drawings bit by bit seduce her attention. After a while, she started to find her attention drifting away from Declan and onto the drawings. She picked them up again and stared at the deep patterns of red and black biro – the drawings were all in biro. Declan must have gone through a box of pens drawing these, Florrie thought, look at the shadings. How did he manage to get the tones of red and black? She looked up every now and then, so that Declan did not think she wasn’t listening. But she was finding it hard to listen. All she could

concentrate on was the drawings. Declan was talking about a black well or something now, but she'd already heard enough.

Declan was exhausted at the end of his speech and Florrie made sure he went to bed early. She told him he needed some sleep and that there would be no computers tonight. Normally she didn't use these motherly tones with Declan, but it almost felt as if Declan was frightened of the extraterrestrials on his computer - like a child afraid of the dark. So she babied him, got him a couple of aspirin and a hot water bottle, and sent him to bed. He went to sleep as soon as he fell into bed, as if someone had flicked a switch in his brain.

Chapter 9

The next day there were no further dreams or drawings. Declan spent most of his day at a SnoopDaddy customer, Frodingers Insurance. He was installing the IP telephony call-monitoring software and the software called WebSniffer, a product that kept an eye on what websites staff visited during the day and compiled automatic reports for management. WebSniffer was SnoopDaddy's most popular software and Declan knew it back to front. He was probably SnoopDaddy's most knowledgeable person in the product - he reckoned he knew more about it than the developers.

Fred Snapple, CIO of Frodingers Insurance, greeted Declan at reception. "Declan! Glad to see you buddy, howzit going?"

It was a rhetorical question. Fred Snapple briskly steered Declan towards the elevator. Snapple's mobile phone rang, as if on cue, as soon as Declan opened his mouth to comment on what a beautiful day it was and what a shame to be stuck inside.

"Glenda! How *are* you?" and Snapple launched into a conversation with his colleague about a CRM system they were installing. He winked at Declan conspiratorially, as if Declan was in on the joke he was sharing with Glenda at this moment.

This was the first time Declan was visiting a client since the signals from outer space began. But strangely Declan felt comfortable with the situation. He had a feeling that the dreams wouldn't occur today.

He got to work installing the WebSniffer software onto Frodinger Insurance's server. WebSniffer was the easier one to install, as the IP Telephony software would require some configuration with the company's phone system. Declan followed his installation routine, almost robotically.

Almost halfway through, Declan decided to do something slightly different. He installed a tracer software program that he'd downloaded from the Internet a year or so ago, but had never used. In fact Declan had forgotten he still had it and he was surprised to find he'd brought the disk it was on along with him. Why had he done that? He had never intended to use the program, he only downloaded it to perhaps dissect and use bits of its code for his astronomy software. He hadn't even got around to that, one year later. Yet here he was *installing* this somewhat disreputable program onto a client's system. Declan recoiled. But immediately he hunched back over the keyboard and finished installing this nefarious little software program. When it was done, he leant back and stared blankly at the screen. He'd just opened a backdoor entrance into Frodinger Insurance's IT system.

Later while eating his pre-prepared sandwiches – tune fish – Declan asked himself some serious questions. Why had he risked his job, his reputation? He

couldn't think of any reason why he'd want to access the IT systems of one of New Zealand's largest Insurance companies. He was not in any way a hacker, in fact even as a teenager he'd never done any dodgy hacking. It was very out of character. Declan munched on his tuna fish sandwiches.

Declan looked down at himself, sitting one hundred feet below in Aotea Square park eating his lunch. He looked down at his thick dark brown hair, slightly unkempt at the back but not long enough to match the current fashion for men his age. He saw himself adjust his glasses. His blue suit, the one he wore when he knew he was visiting clients, hung off Declan loosely. It was another out-of-body experience, but this time there were no strange colours or pitch-black wells or astral grids. It was just blue sky and clouds, like the Microsoft theme when you run Windows XP for the first time. And a man Declan recognized as himself, sitting one hundred feet below eating sandwiches.

Chapter 10

Unknown to Declan, Florrie had taken the 5 drawings he'd done and put them in her purse. She intended to take them to show someone, perhaps her friend who had done Art History at University.

Florrie worked as an Assistant Manager at the Hoyts movie complex. She'd spent most of her working life in the civil service, doing administration jobs. The job at the movie complex had come up a couple of years ago and at the time she took it because it was the only way she could get a job with the word "manager" in it. But she'd grown to like this job and accept it for what it was – a steady earner with some prospects for a management career, but without the mind-numbing dullness of a civil service office job or the pressure of working in a corporate office. Florrie got to deal with lots of people in her job at the movie complex and she enjoyed organising movie schedules and having responsibility for (mostly teenage) staff. There wasn't anything glamorous about it, even if she did "work in the movies" – an old joke repeated many times to her by people trying to engage in small talk. Florrie usually laughed along, but Declan always rolled his eyes whenever someone said it.

Florrie took out the 5 drawings and handed them over to Ashley, a very skinny woman with long blond hair who was an assistant curator at the Auckland City Art Gallery.

"These were done by my boyfriend...I wondered if there was some sort of competition I could enter them into. Or perhaps there is a course that you guys run? I think my boyfriend would be interested in doing a course..."

The woman with the blond hair stared at the drawings. A long silence ensued, which Florrie did not try to break. She knew that the drawings were incredible and spoke for themselves. The curator sighed, then looked up startled, as if she'd just awoken from a trance.

"These drawings, who did you say did them?"

"My boyfriend", Florrie said proudly, "Declan Atomz. He's only just started drawing. But he's obviously got some innate talent, don't you think?"

"I want to show these to my boss. Would you mind?"

Florrie shook her head. No she didn't mind at all.

Chapter 11

Florrie didn't mention that she'd been to the Art Gallery. She knew Declan didn't want anyone else to know about the drawings, but she didn't know why he felt this way. They were stunning drawings and proved he had a gift. Florrie figured that Declan was still getting used to his new-found artistic flair, so she didn't want to push him. She also didn't interfere in his evening routine in the computer room. Whatever he was doing in there was obviously inspiring him to express himself in his drawings. So she left him to his computers, while she went swimming.

Tonight the alien signal was different. The sounds were irregular and did not follow a repeated pattern. It was almost like morse code. Declan sat and listened to the sounds, mesmerized. He occasionally glanced over to the monitors to watch the graphs that were evolving. The curves went up and down like a breathing monitor.

Declan's ears seemed to be especially attuned to the sound of the signal tonight, as it beeped and whirred. He thought he could discern a voice, a whisper. He felt his attention narrow even further, until he could no longer focus on the computer screens and other hardware around him. Pretty soon all he could discern was a fuzzy grey shape in front of him, very tall and skinny. Narrow head, long arms. It was the creature who had visited him in his dreams. What was it saying? He could hear a whisper in his right ear.

It was two hours later and Declan was in the kitchen. He'd taken 12 leaves of A4 paper and stuck them together with Sellotape. The paper was draped over the floor and Declan was flinging a mixture of oil, vegetable dyes, and sauces across the cobbled together canvas. He didn't hear Florrie come in.

Florrie lifted her hands to her mouth. She watched as Declan threw mixtures of oils and foodstuffs onto the leaves of A4 paper on the floor. His eyes were blank, but intensely focused. He seemed in a state of hypnosis. Florrie didn't interrupt. She watched as beautiful patterns emerged on the canvas. Swirls of blues and greens, waves of browns and reds. Common foods and oils were being transformed into a kaleidoscope of ellipses and circles, and other more specific shapes. One part looked like a black hole or or tornado. Another part looked like stairs going up to heaven. Still another section reminded her of angelic faces.

After he'd finished, Declan immediately walked out of the kitchen and slumped on the sofa. Florrie remained for half a minute to survey the masterpiece of food-derived art on the kitchen floor. She thought she could discern a pattern. Yes, they were images of outer space and heaven. Never before had she seen these two themes combined so hauntingly in one picture. And this was made out of common foodstuffs, she reminded herself! She walked into the lounge to congratulate Declan. But he was sound asleep on the sofa.

Chapter 12

James Hore made a point of always greeting the receptionists at Network 3 television studios. He liked to wave at them and say a cheery "Afternoon!" every day, around 2pm when he arrived for work. The receptionists always smiled reverently at him and greeted him with affection. James Hore was Network 3's star performer, the ratings king for the 7pm slot, and all the staff at Network 3 treated him with kid

gloves. His show consistently topped the Nielsen Ratings and so he pretty much anchored the entire evening schedule of television programming.

Today James Hore strode through the lobby with especial purpose. Tonight he was going to be interviewing an All Black. And not just any All Black, but Joseph Crashvalau, the giant New Zealand winger. Crashvalau was the All Blacks star performer right now and Hore hoped to make him cry on national television. James Hore had not told anyone this of course, for he did not want to appear cynical and heartless. But the facts were that Crashvalau had just had a very public break-up from his sweetheart of the past 2 years. The girl in question, Tina Vahr, had made some very public accusations of infidelity against Crashvalau and there was even a hint of domestic violence. Hore knew that the big All Black winger was a big softie in reality and he doubted very much that any domestic violence had occurred. Hore thought the girl was just being bitter and nasty (as Hore had always suspected she was). So it wasn't going to be an accusationary grilling under the heat of tv lights that would reduce Crashvalau to tears. No sir, James Hore would not stoop to those tactics. Crashvalau was not known for his verbal dexterity, so it would be too obviously unfair for James Hore (an award-winning television journalist with over 15 years experience) to subject the All Black winger to a battle of words. James Hore had a better plan. He was going to entice Big Joe to spill his emotions – about the break-up, the love he felt for Tina, the long absences from her while he was on All Black rugby duties overseas, the regret. Hore felt this was what the New Zealand public wanted to hear about. And if he could get the big guy to sob a little on national television, well all the better.

James Hore was shorter than he looked on tv. Most people assumed he was at least 5 foot 10, but actually he was about 5 foot 7. James had a large head and a JFK-like crop of brown hair (with a few appropriately placed grey flecks), which made him look bigger on tv. It also made him look intelligent, however this part wasn't an illusion. James prided himself on his intellectual rigour, particularly when he bested politicians in interviews – which was quite often. Even the Prime Minister, who had a formidable brain, was defeated in verbal jousts now and then. But James also had a soft side that endeared him to a majority of the viewing public. He was in his mid-to-late 30's and was perhaps the last remaining SNAG in the land. James was a Sensitive New Age Guy before it was trendy in the 90's, and after it stopped being trendy in the 21st century.

Seated before his dressing room mirror in preparation for tonight's show, James touched his great crop of hair gingerly, smoothing out the rebellious bits and wiping away a fleck of dry gel. James had to use copious amounts of gel to keep his hair under control, but amazingly it always behaved. Even in the gusty winds outside the Beehive (New Zealand's parliament house) in Wellington. James took a final look at himself in the mirror, took off his make-up bib, and prepared to exit his dressing room. Production crew milled around him, busy as worker bees. James' personal assistant, Mimi, prepped him on tonight's schedule. After Joseph Crashvalau, there was the piece on the solo mother who had been treated badly by the Department of Social Welfare, followed by a short interview with Burt Reynolds who was in New Zealand to film a tv movie, and lastly a cutesy animal story about an otter who escaped Wellington zoo and was video-taped sunbathing on the deck of a student flat.

But James' prodigious mind was ticking over on the possibilities of the Crashvalau piece. He had a few subtle tricks to play if Crashvalau didn't play ball. Once such ploy was to insert long pauses between each sentence, and perhaps James

would compliment this with a wet-eyed look. James would also place special emphasis on words such as “love” and “regret” and “lonely”.

James had a peculiar habit (all tv personalities needed to have something they could call their own). He often exaggerated the pronunciation of the beginning of certain words. For example “million” became “MMMIL-llion” and “President George Bush” became “PPPPRES-ident George Bush”. This was actually not a deliberate affectation, it was something that Hore had always done. What *was* an affectation was his constant chatter with the cameramen and in-studio producers. When Hore was talking to the camera, he would often look over the camera’s shoulder to some hidden person in the studio and chatter conversationally. Or he would continue talking to the camera, but every now and then would turn his head to the left or right and fire off a side comment. Many people thought this practise was cute and showed Hore was relaxed and a regular kiwi bloke. Others thought it was unprofessional and worried that a new generation of broadcasters, television and radio alike, were becoming too loose and conversational in tone. Either way, it wasn’t harming the ratings and in fact they may even have climbed.

Hore walked toward the studio, flanked by assistants and his main producer Sheila McLeod who was updating him on Crashvalau’s arrival.

“He looks very nervous James, you better treat him nicely today.”

“Fuck yeah, Sheila. What do you fuckin’ take me for, course I’m going to fuckin’ treat him nice. He’s a fucking All Black for Christ’s sake. What’s going to be the angle on that Social Welfare story?”

Sheila told him that the solo mum was quite mouthy and it would actually be difficult to present her as the victim if she didn’t keep her mouth shut.

“OK ok, I’ll fucking well have to improvise and not ask her too many questions then. So should I get stuck into the Minister then?” (meaning the Minister of Social Welfare, who had agreed to be interviewed live for that story).

“We’ll play that by ear James, remember we need her for Wednesday night’s program...that’s when the report on the department’s spending is released.”

“But she’ll have to turn up for that won’t she? She’ll look like a fuckin’ wanker if she doesn’t.”

“True James, but still...”

They’d made it to the tv set now and Joseph Crashvalau was already sitting down. It was true, thought Hore, Crashvalau did look nervous. He’d better use some banter to get him to calm the big guy down. The odds were looking good for the wet stuff though...Hore noticed that Crashvalau’s eyes were looking a bit puffy, as if he’d already shed some tears today.

Chapter 13

While The Hore Report beamed into living rooms across New Zealand, Declan Atomz was in his computer room hacking into the IT system of Frodingers Insurance. Declan’s face was blank and his motions at the keyboard robotic. He was browsing through Frodinger’s confidential VIP client files. These were files of important people like politicians and celebrities. Declan stopped when he reached the name of James Hore. He opened up that file and ran his eyes over Hore’s claim history. Nothing much there, Hore had claimed for some jewellery and a video camera. Someone had broken one of the rear windows in Hore’s Ferrari car and there was a claim to get that fixed. But Declan brushed over these details and went to the

Contact Details screen. There he downloaded all the contact information Frondingers had on James Hore – his address, phone numbers including a cell phone, even an email address. That was all Declan required and he logged out Frondingers systems immediately after.

Declan then livened up a bit and began to investigate last night's signals from the Boolion galaxy. He ran a battery of tests on the data on his home-build equipment, but couldn't detect any patterns. Declan went back onto the Internet and browsed through his astronomy newsgroups, mailing lists and blogs. He went onto an amateur astronomy chat room, known to be populated by particularly smart people (it wasn't advertised on the Web, it was "invitation only" by word-of-mouth). There Declan cagily discussed the signal he'd received last night. He didn't mention the galaxy it was from and he was careful not to reveal too many details about the data. A couple of the chatroom regulars, Fr*dy and Grego, got a bit suspicious and began to ask specific questions.

Fr*dy: Spill the beanz, kiwi, what r the coordinates?

Grego: Yeh, come on Decl. What did u find ;-)

DA*z: heh, I wish I had found something. I just need some info for some testing.

Declan fished around in the chatroom for a few minutes more, but it became obvious that nobody knew any answers.

Florrie had arrived home and Declan could hear her bringing in what sounded like some shopping downstairs. He switched off his computers and other equipment and wandered downstairs. He was feeling more relaxed now, although a bit vexed that he hadn't managed to get anywhere near cracking the code of last night's signal. The illegal intrusion of Frondinger's computer systems was strangely absent from his thoughts.

"Hi honey, look what I've bought you!" Florrie sounded excited. Declan hugged her and gave her some playful kisses.

"What did you buy me?" he asked.

Florrie took out a collection of art supplies – paints, paper, brushes, an easel, the works. Declan was surprised to see all of this, but he kept his mouth shut.

"I figured after those drawings you did, and the food art, that you would like to try some painting maybe. The people at the Art Gallery were really impressed with your drawings, hon."

"You showed my drawings to someone?" Declan was bemused, not angry.

"Well, yes...but they're so beautiful. I didn't let them keep the drawings, I've got them here." Florrie took out the 5 biro drawings from her purse, where she'd obviously been hoarding them ever since Declan showed them to her.

"I don't know about all this paint equipment..." Declan said. But Florrie was insistent.

"Honey, you have a wonderful talent. I want you to keep doing this stuff. I wish I had that sort of talent."

Then Declan realised that perhaps painting was a way for him to "communicate" with the extraterrestrial intelligence. After all, the art he'd already created – the drawings and the foodstuffs painting – seemed to be channelled through him by an alien presence. And he remembered his visions of the tall being with a narrow head. It appeared to be trying to communicate with him by whispering and by radio wave signals, both of which Declan couldn't decipher. So maybe he could use painting as a communications channel between himself and the alien presence. It would be a way for the ET to express itself through Declan's hands.

“You’re right Flo, I want to give painting a go. But on one condition. I want to put this stuff in my computer room.”

Declan thought that by having the painting as near as possible to his computers and telescope equipment, that he’d somehow be able to analyse or control whatever it was the extraterrestrial intelligence was trying to communicate to him via painting.

Florrie, oblivious to all the thoughts of 2-way communication with aliens that Declan was having, agreed somewhat reluctantly to put the art equipment in the computer room. It was crowded enough in that room, how would he find space to fit even more equipment? But Florrie didn’t want to inhibit Declan’s creativity and obviously he felt more comfortable in that room.

Chapter 14

The next day Declan received a phone call from Franco McCovsky, head curator at the Auckland Art Gallery. McCovsky had viewed copies of the drawings that Florrie had taken there and he was mightily impressed.

“We want to invite you, *Declan* (McCovsky said Declan’s name as if he was addressing a pampered pet poodle), to our fortnightly gathering of our wee artistic community. It’s called the Guild of New Zealand Artists and we have in our group such distinguished names as Gavin Hooper and Maline Malinger (he pronounced it Mellon-ger, as in ginger). It’s quite a special group of *people* (pronounced as if referring to a group of poodles). We’re from all over the country, but all of us live in Auckland now. Anyway, *Declan*, we’d like you to come along and meet us. Maybe show us some of your latest work. You’re quite a wee *find*, aren’t you?” McCovsky positively purred when he said that last sentence.

Declan paused for a few seconds on the phone. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to mix with any real artists. After all, he wasn’t even the one responsible for creating his paintings. That was the realm of the extraterrestrial that was communicating with him. But he decided to take up the invitation, if only as a way to please Florrie. She would want to come too, so he asked Mr McCovsky if he could bring her.

“Yes *yes* of course *Declan*. That would be wonderful. We’ll see you there then, it’s this Wednesday at 7.30pm at the Queen Street Galleria.”

It was Monday today, so Declan figured he had a couple of nights to work up a real painting to show the Guild of New Zealand Artists on Wednesday. He told Florrie about the invitation as soon as he got home and predictably she was bubbly with excitement. She almost jumped up and down. Declan knew that Florrie had always harboured a secret desire to be part of the “Art Set”. She’d never admitted it, but Declan had figured it out a few years ago. Florrie did not have any artistic talent and even her taste in art was sometimes dodgy (she once bought a painting of a bunch of monkeys playing cards). But Art held a glamorous appeal to her. It was like the celebrity world of movie stars to most people, except for Florrie movies no longer held any magic now that she worked at a movie complex. If she was honest with herself, she’d admit that it was a social need to love art and not a creative urge.

Declan had never been interested in art himself and he had no talent at it either. He knew that the art he was producing now was the product of an alien mind, not his own. But he didn’t tell Florrie that, because he knew Florrie was deriving a lot of vicarious pride in Declan’s new-found artistic bent.

Declan excused himself to go to his computer room, where his art easel awaited him. Florrie smiled at Declan and gave him an “oh wow, the artist is going to work!” look of admiration.

Declan first checked out his computers for any sign of further signals. There had been none, but then they usually didn't arrive until after 1am. Declan didn't know how to get started on his painting. The easel was set up, together with a stool with an adjustable height lever. The new paints and brushes had been dutifully laid out by Florrie. Declan decided that he needed to distract himself and then maybe inspiration would hit (in the form of whatever vision or dream the extraterrestrials had in store for him tonight). So he logged onto the World Wide Web and surfed around, looking for information on alien intelligence and news of SETI discoveries.

After a couple of hours of mucking around on the Web and checking some of the signal data from the previous nights, Declan decided to call it a night and go to bed. He thought maybe he'd get up later in the night and check what new data came in after 1. But he didn't feel any desire to do any painting. The easel remained untouched, the stool with the adjustable height lever not sat in, the paints and brushes undisturbed. Maybe tomorrow, thought Declan with a yawn.

Declan had a strange dream that night. The alien being, tall and skinny and grey with a narrow face and long arms, appeared. This time though Declan could see it clearly and it began to move towards him. Everything around Declan and the alien was pitch black, not even stars were present. The light grey alien being walked towards Declan and with each step its visage got less blurry and more defined. It's walk was a long and gangly one, almost like a giraffe. When the being reached to within a foot of Declan, he could see that the creature was extremely tall – perhaps 10 foot tall. Declan peered up at the being, and the being peered down at Declan. It had a large triangular face – wide at the top and pointy at the bottom. Its face looked down now and what Declan noticed the most was its large oval-shaped eyes. The pupils were black, set within milky white eyeballs. The creature's nose was flat, with two narrow slits that angled apart like the letter “v”. The nose slits opened and closed like the gills of a fish. The mouth was very wide and when it opened it revealed a toothless black mouth with no tongue. The mouth opened and closed like it was talking to Declan, yet he could hear no sound. Then he heard the whisper, in his right ear. Unlike the dreams before, this time Declan could hear what the being was saying. But it was a language he had never heard before. Declan had trouble hearing some of it, because the pitch seemed to go outside his human hearing range every now and then. The being then lifted up his long hand, with five thin grey fingers – which looked like those bendy pipe cleaners Declan used to play with as a child. The being's entire hand descended over Declan's head. Declan didn't move, in fact he wasn't even sure that he could move. Whatever force or power this creature had, it was keeping Declan rooted to the spot he was on. And Declan's mind was rooted in the spot too – that is, he wasn't afraid and he didn't feel any need to struggle. Declan closed his eyes and let the being's hand envelop him.

When Declan woke up it was after 1.30am. he gently lifted himself out of bed, so as not to disturb Florrie. Hurriedly he put his dressing gown on and sneaked out of the bedroom and up to the computer room. He felt energized and he was eager to see what signals from outer space awaited him. He flicked on the radio telescope monitors and looked at the computer graphs. He could see there had been activity over the past few minutes at least and he could now hear the familiar blips and beeps that meant the signals were still being received. He put his headphones on and proceeded to run some tests on the incoming data.

Chapter 15

The next morning Florrie found Declan fast asleep on the floor of his computer room. She was about to angrily shake his shoulders to wake him up, when she noticed the new painting. It was very brightly coloured, yellows and reds were especially prominent. Florrie was stunned by the painting. It was large - The canvas used was the largest one she had bought. The brush strokes on the painting were broad and thick, so he must have used a big brush. The colours were bright and mixed with each other to produce a multitude of shadings and new colours. Florrie looked over at the paints used – all the bright coloured pottles of paint were nearly empty. The blacks and browns and blues had hardly been touched. The painting appeared to depict a giant metropolis city, with hundreds of very tall buildings and a lot of spires and tower pinnacles. The point of view was from miles above the metropolis, a bird's eye view. The city itself didn't seem familiar to Florrie. In fact when she looked closely she wasn't even sure if it was supposed to be a city on earth. The colours depicting the air and atmosphere were so bright and vivid that it almost seemed like another planet. And the shapes of the buildings, the height that they appeared to be – made it look like a metropolis from the future. But there was nothing else to put this city into any context. Only hundreds of buildings, captured from miles above in a bright yellow and blood red sky.

Chapter 16

Declan took the next day, a Tuesday, off work. Florrie had left him sleeping in the bedroom. He spent much of the day sleeping, but at about 1pm he got up and did another painting. Then he went back to sleep. Florrie arrived home about 5pm and Declan eventually got up about 7pm. He didn't feel much like talking, so after having some dinner he went into his computer room. Florrie let him be. She was worried about his behaviour, but on the other hand she continued to be amazed at his artistic output. Florrie thought that Declan's odd behaviour was due to his new-found creative talents and so she decided to nurture him instead of pushing him back down to normality.

At about 11pm, Florrie went to bed. Declan stayed up, as he was not yet tired (having slept through most of the day). However before midnight, Declan drifted off to sleep. He had another dream, this time back at the bottomless well. The alien being was present, but had faded into the background and was only a blurry grey stick figure. The strange and brutally loud harmonies returned, which meant the whispers of the alien were drowned out like in the original visions.

Declan woke up at the usual time, 1.24am, and heard the incoming signals from space. This time he didn't even bother analysing them. He went straight to the painting easel and proceeded to paint another masterpiece. His mind seemed blank and he was not conscious of his actions. But he was conscious this time of the subject of the painting. He was doing a portrait of James Hore, the television personality. It struck Declan as odd that he was doing a painting of James Hore. For one thing, he didn't watch his television show. And for another thing, he disliked the culture of celebrity that Hore was a representative of. But Declan wasn't going to question why the extraterrestrial wanted him to draw a picture of a two-bit media celebrity. He was

just curious to find out what part James Hore had to play in whatever the being from outer space was trying to communicate to him. Then Declan remembered he had broken into Frodingers Insurance to get contact details for James Hore. Declan was concerned now, but this did nothing to distract the flashing blade of his paint brush. He continued to sweep across the canvas, piecing together the portrait of a New Zealand television personality. And Declan hoped he would eventually piece together the puzzle of what exactly the aliens were trying to tell him.

Chapter 17

On Wednesday evening Declan and Florrie dressed up in their best clothes and prepared to spend an evening at the New Zealand Guild of Artists soiree. Declan was feeling a bit tense, though not due to nerves. He had done 3 paintings over the last few days and he had no idea what they meant. It bothered him that the extraterrestrial intelligence was trying to communicate with him, yet he was seemingly too dumb to figure out what it was saying. And the radio signals, well it was almost embarrassing that he couldn't decipher those. Declan felt like a newbie who had just posted a screamingly simple and obvious question to a Microsoft FrontPage usegroup and was now waiting in trepidation for the first smart arse FrontPage expert to post a condescending response. He felt like the alien being had sent him many signs and messages, which were going completely over Declan's primitive head.

But Declan thought that maybe the New Zealand Guild of Artists would be able to help him interpret these signals from outer space. They were experts after all in interpreting art, so they might be able to figure out what the ETI was trying to communicate.

Florrie was tense for another reason. She was nervous about meeting the artists and also about how they would treat Declan. But she put on a brave face, because she could see that Declan was tense too.

"Don't worry hon, you'll fit in just fine" she said and patted his head.

"Huh? Oh, yeah nah, I'm not worried" Declan said, fumbling with his tie.

"Just think though, you'll be meeting Maline Malinger (she pronounced it correctly - Mellon-ger, as in ginger) and Bob Twizel!" Florrie visibly tingled with excitement.

Declan looked over at his 3 paintings, meticulously tied up in newspapers and string by Florrie. He hoped that the people he'd meet tonight would be able to give him some answers.

When Declan and Florrie entered the reception area of the Queen Street Galleria, they noticed a myriad of eyes turning towards them. People holding flutes of champagne and delicate-looking finger foods, some of them with little smirks on their faces as they turned to eye the new entrants.

At first Declan and Florrie did not know what to do, as no one seemed willing to come over and greet them. Declan was holding two paintings in one hand, and the large portrait of the metropolis in the other. He was struggling to maintain his grip on them and he hoped that someone would hurry up and greet them. Florrie stood nervously clutching her handbag, which held the 5 biro drawings. She wondered which of the people gathered in this expansive room, dotted with paintings on large canvasses and pieces of abstract art, would come over and welcome them into the fold. Finally a thin, elderly man with a wispy moustache made his way from the pack and walked over to Declan and Florrie. He outstretched his hand.

“Hello there, I’m Gordon Golightly. I’m the managing director of the Auckland Art Gallery. And you are?”

He was looking at Declan with a mischievous look in his eye.

“Oh, we’re Declan. I mean he’s Declan (Florrie pointed at Declan) and I’m Florrie.” She reached out to shake Mr Golightly’s hand. “Declan is the one who drew these paintings...” at which point Florrie dove into her handbag to retrieve the drawings.

Gordon Golightly looked over at Declan, who had begun to cast his eye over the works of art scattered around the room.

“Are you an artist?” Gordon enquired gently, “there are some exquisite works here tonight. Look over there (he pointed to a rather obtuse looking carving made out of kowhai tree), that’s the latest work by Harold Spoke. He spent over 100 hours on that carving. The features on it are absolutely exquisite” Gordon squeezed his right thumb and forefinger gently together, to emphasize the exquisiteness of the piece.

Florrie shoved the pieces of SnoopDaddy.com notepad paper that held the biro drawings into Gordon’s hand, somewhat abruptly, for Gordon had not yet completed his thumb and forefinger gesture. He seemed surprised and for a moment it looked like he might lose his temper at this tiny bit of rudeness. But he very quickly recovered his poise.

“Well well”, Gordon said, accepting now the drawings from Florrie, “what have we here?” He set down his flute of champagne, which he had been holding with his left hand, onto a nearby table. He then looked down at the biro etchings. One by one he peered at the drawings, not looking up at all. Florrie noticed that a few other people were looking over at them now and whispering to themselves from the corners of their mouths.

“Why, these are rather good” said Gordon Golightly with an upward lift of the eyebrows to signify his mild surprise. He looked over at Declan and then noticed the 3 paintings that Declan was still grasping. “And what have you got there, hmm?” Gordon said, arching his left eyebrow.

Declan was about to speak for the first time, when their cosy little group of 3 was interrupted by 3 other people. One of them was Ashley, the skinny assistant curator with long blond hair who had met Florrie on the first occasion. Ashley was dressed in a smart-looking paua shell-green outfit, which Florrie guessed was bought at a boutique fashion shop in Ponsonby (a trendy suburb of Auckland known for its cafes and trendy culture). The other two people looked like artists. One was an unkempt, 50-something man with a short scraggly grey beard and cunning-looking light blue eyes. He wore a red woollen jersey that had seen better days and had bits of wiry red fluff poking out of it at odd angles. His blue jeans were faded and slightly muddied. It was obvious this man did not care about his appearance and that marked him out as an “artiste” in this setting. The other person was a plump woman in her mid-to-late 40’s with bushy hair that was dark brown coloured with patches of grey. She was dressed for the occasion in a smart-looking blue suit, which nevertheless she looked uncomfortable wearing. Neither Declan nor Florrie was sure what it was exactly that gave her away as an artist and not a corporate sponsor or an employee – perhaps it was the glint of curiosity in her eye, or maybe the bushiness of her hair. But whatever it was, their first impressions were soon confirmed.

Ashley spoke first, saying hi to Florrie and then shaking hands with Declan.

“I can’t wait to see your new work”, she said enthusiastically, nodding her head at the paintings Declan carried with him. “But now I’d like you to meet Gavin Hooper (gesturing to the man with the red woollen jersey) and Katey Cain (gesturing

now to the woman with the bushy hair). Gavin as you know is famous for his religious paintings and his most recent paintings depicting numbers and letters.” Gavin’s cunning-looking blue eyes peered at Declan, who looked away shyly. “Katey”, continued Ashley, “has just finished showing her latest exhibition called ‘Sublime Aspects’. Who could forget her portrait of Lady Diana made entirely of tongs and other food preparation utensils? Did you see it?” She directed this question at Declan.

“Ah no, I must’ve missed it.” Said Declan. Florrie jumped in. “Perhaps you’d all like to see Declan’s latest works?” she said. Gavin shrugged and Katey looked non-plussed. Gordon and Ashley nodded politely.

Florrie unveiled the 3 paintings, leaving the metropolis one till last. She watched as the 4 Guild members inspected the paintings. All of them seemed impressed. Ashley was holding the painting of James Hore up to the light and it soon attracted the attention of other Guild members, who wandered over to see what was happening. Gordon and Gavin were looking over the painting of the alien, which featured predominantly dark colours - apart from the grey of the alien itself. Their hushed looks of awe soon attracted other members of the Gallery crowd, who walked over to see. The large painting of the other-worldly city was being held by Katey and its vivid yellow and red hues soon attracted the biggest number of observers. Within a few minutes, a group of about 20 people were gathered around Declan’s 3 paintings. Some of them looked over the biro drawings, but most of them were glued to one or other of the paintings. Florrie could hear gasps of astonishment and whistles of admiration. She turned to smile at Declan, but he himself was absorbed in one of the paintings – the portrait of the alien being.

Declan was soon fielding questions from the gathering, which had expanded to most of the people in the room now. Only a few people, obviously artists resentful that they weren’t being paid any attention, remained outside the circle of activity that had Declan at its centre. Most of the questions wanted to know what the paintings were about. Declan decided that he’d better give some background first, and then ask for people to give their own interpretations. After all, that’s what he came here for – to get people to decipher the paintings for him.

So Declan proceeded to tell the gathering that he’d been picking up signals from a distant galaxy, which he believed to be from an alien civilization (Florrie looked at him alarmingly at this point, but Declan was on a roll). Declan explained that the paintings were not actually his own art works, but those of an alien being. He said he believed it was just one single alien, and not a group, but he couldn’t say why he thought that. It was just a feeling. Declan went on to tell the Guild that the alien was using him to channel its ideas and messages, via the paintings and drawings. He thought the alien was trying to communicate something to him, or to earth in general, through the art works. But he has no idea what the ET is trying to say. At this point Declan began to appeal to the gathered group of people to try and interpret these paintings for him, to decipher what the ET was trying to communicate.

The members of the Guild of New Zealand artists stood hushed. No one knew what to say next. Declan could feel Gavin Hooper’s steely blue eyes drilling into him. He saw Katey Cain looking at him quizzically – she was still holding the yellow and red cityscape painting. Declan looked over at Florrie, who smiled supportively at him.

“Well”, piped up a tall balding man in his early 40’s who spoke with a fey English accent, “I think this picture of James Hore is a masterful commentary on Western media in the 21st century. I think the garish colours, the huge dollops of paint splashed over the canvas, the hint of a twitch around Hore’s mouth – as if he’s half

grinning and half scared – I think the cold colours employed around the eye region, the accentuated crevices in the forehead (how did you get the groove effect in that?), I think all of this and more is suggestive of a media landscape in Western civilization that has become too loud, too sure of itself, but without any substance. There's too much loud noise and not enough meaningful information in the media, and this painting does an admiral job of expressing this dichotomy.”

Other voices now rang out, each with their own interpretation of the paintings. One man suggested that the cityscape represented an amalgam of all the great cities of the world – New York, Moscow, London, Paris, etc – and that the painting was an allegory of the 21st century, showing that barriers of physical distance had been broken down by modern communication tools such as the Internet and telephone. The morphing together of all the great cities of the world was a metaphor for this, he assured the crowd. A woman suggested that perhaps the yellow and reds signalled the dawn of a new age, the rising of a new sun for a new century. Someone else shouted out that the buildings were far taller than anything today – what if this was a city of the future? Maybe the yellow and red was an atmospheric change that will occur over time.

Lots of other interpretations and critiques followed, but by the end of the evening Declan still wasn't satisfied that he'd discovered the message that the alien was trying to communicate to him.

In the taxi ride home he turned to Florrie and said “You know, all those people put a big picture spin on everything. I wonder if the signals I'm receiving, the paintings and drawings...I wonder if they aren't so much deep meaningful works of art, but something more personal...I think the ETI wants to open a conversation with me. You know, maybe it's just trying to introduce itself to me? The painting of the alien is a self-portrait – telling me “this is who I am”. The city may be where it lives. That still leaves the portrait of James Hore...not sure about that yet...it seems to want something from Hore, or perhaps it wants Hore's position? Anyway, I'm certain now that this ETI wants to converse with me. Now I just need to figure out how to respond to it. I want to write back to it.”

Chapter 18

Declan was aware that nobody believed him when he said that an extraterrestrial intelligence was responsible for the paintings and drawings. Florrie went quiet whenever he talked about it, as if she was dismissing it as a side effect of his new-found artistic genius. And the Guild of New Zealand Artists members all thought that Declan was a bit loopy – he could see it in their eyes when he told them about the alien contact.

Declan had another theory, that was possibly even less likely to be believed and would certainly be scoffed at on all of the amateur astronomy mailing lists he subscribed to. The official SETI crowd would also dismiss it, and “real” scientists who specialised in physics would have a field day arguing against it. Declan's theory was the radio signals he was picking up were “real time”, that they hadn't travelled thousands of years across the Universe and only just reached Earth now. Declan believed, although it's important to point out that he couldn't prove it, that the radio signals were being sent to him in the present. He also thought that the alien intelligence was controlling him somehow, in real time, through the dreams he was having (and attendant actions such as breaking into Frodingers Insurance's computer

system) and the paintings that were being channelled through him. It was if the alien was trying to communicate with Declan either via radio signals, dreams, or art – or all of the above.

Regarding radio waves being sent in real-time over hundreds of thousands of light years, well obviously this went against well-established laws of physics. He could just hear the cry now from scientists and even SETI members – “It’s impossible!” they would cry. But Declan wondered, if an alien civilization was advanced enough to successfully send a communication signal to a distant planet like Earth, then it was possible they had the technological prowess to travel and communicate over vast distances instantaneously. You couldn’t rule out things like wormholes in space, which may allow these alien beings to travel across galaxies in the blink of an eye. And who knew what other discoveries an alien civilization had made and what else they were capable of. Declan had always thought that sometimes physics and other scientific “laws” were flawed, in that they were the product of human minds and we ‘don’t know what we don’t know’.

This is why Declan had kept quiet on the newsgroups and had not officially sent SETI word of his discovery. He could not be bothered defending himself against nay Sayers and the “It’s impossible!” people. Even his mates on the Internet Chat group, Fr*dy and Grego and the others, even they would think Declan was nuts.

So Declan hatched a plan on his own. He wanted to respond back to the alien, to have a “two-way communication” with it. Right now Declan could pick up, or “subscribe” to, the alien’s signals – or “feed”. Hmmm, thought Declan, yes it was like weblogging in a way. Every night the alien would “post” an “entry” to his interstellar weblog. The entries consisted of radio waves, but perhaps the dreams and paintings were a form of “multimedia” to the alien. This amused Declan and he checked himself, wondering for a moment if perhaps he was crazy after all! But no, this was an interesting way of looking at it and maybe he would stumble onto the answers if he continued with this analogy with weblogs. Declan allowed himself to continue.

So the alien had this “space blog”, to coin a phrase, and was “syndicating” its content feed to the Universe via radio waves. Declan had discovered these radio waves in the Boolion galaxy. That is, he had found the location of the signals by their co-ordinates - just like finding the location of a weblog by its URL on the Web. Declan had then “subscribed” to the radio waves, by tuning in his radio telescopes to that specific location and waiting for more signals to come out. That was the equivalent of subscribing to a weblog by adding an RSS feed to his News Aggregator. So now, whenever the alien broadcast a signal, it would be pushed out to Declan’s computer. Just as whenever (for example) Clay Shirky broadcast a weblog entry, Shirky’s “signal” would be sent out to Declan’s News Aggregator. Hey this is great, thought Declan, now I am beginning to grok what is happening!

Now the challenge was for Declan to communicate back to the alien. If you like, Declan had to come up with his own ‘spaceblog’. To do this he needed to match the alien’s mode of communicating. The only way for Declan to do this would be to send out radio wave signals. After all, Declan could not make the alien have dreams or do paintings – like the alien could with Declan. So that only left radio waves as the one common form of communication they had. Radio waves were, if you like, the RSS of the spaceblog world. Heh, the acronym could be RSR - Really Simple Radio waves! Declan chuckled to himself.

But there was one problem, he still had not deciphered the radio waves from the extraterrestrial. He hadn’t cracked the code. Surely in order to communicate with the alien, he had to be ‘speaking the same language’ – to be on the same wavelength.

But then Declan considered that perhaps it wouldn't matter, because the alien would probably be able to interpret Declan's radio signals – even if Declan couldn't interpret the alien's message. This was a huge leap in logic, but again Declan came back to the theory that the alien was obviously far more advanced than humans to have gotten this far – for example it could channel dreams and paintings through Declan. So if the alien was so advanced, it would probably be able to interpret whatever radio communication Declan threw at it. Inspired by this revelation, Declan set about creating a radio wave signal in order to converse with the ETI.

Chapter 19

Gordon Golightly, the managing director of the Auckland Art Gallery, was in his late 60's. He was a thin and relatively short man with twinkley eyes that suggested an inquisitive and mischievous nature. He was always impeccably dressed - today he wore a navy blue three-piece suit made out of mohair. He had a taut and finely featured face, offset by a wispy moustache. People often wondered why Gordon didn't just shave the moustache off, because its wispieness was a distraction from the sharp definitions of the rest of his face. But perhaps it was an indication of a small stubborn streak in Gordon that he continued to wear the moustache, despite knowing himself that it was detracting rather than adding to his general appearance.

Gordon tapped gently on the large round mahogany table, calling to order the board member meeting for the Art Gallery. The 5 other people present stopped whatever side conversations they had going and turned their attention to the head of the table, Gordon Golightly. Today's agenda would include finalising details for the coming weekend's "Artists of the Millennium" exhibition. It was to be a best-of collection of New Zealand's contemporary art and would feature works from a select group of 6 of New Zealand's best artists. Calling it the "Artists of the Millennium" was a bit controversial, as it was really the only the best artists of 2003. But as it was only 3 years into the new millennium, it was a technically accurate description for the exhibition.

The first topic of discussion turned out to be last night's Guild of New Zealand Artists gathering and the unexpected unveiling of a stunning new talent – Declan Atomz. Declan had agreed to lend his 3 paintings to the Gallery for further artistic interpretation and the paintings were currently leaning on the wall opposite the board room table. Gordon started off the discussion:

"As you know last night we met a new and heretofore undiscovered artist from Auckland, a Mr Declan Atomz. His paintings (gesturing to the 3 paintings with his head) are quite frankly the best I've seen in many years...in my opinion they're on a par with Bob Twizel's famous "Pastoral Dreams" series of paintings in the 70's."

The other board members nodded and murmured their agreement.

"So the question is", continued Gordon, "what should we do with Mr Atomz's paintings? I want to show them off as soon as possible.... Perhaps even this weekend."

Gordon knew that this last bit would elicit a strong response and that some of the board members would vigorously argue against adding a newcomer to their collection at such short notice, especially as the "Artists of the Millennium" exhibition was due to start this weekend. And sure enough, Gordon noticed a few blanched faces among the board at his suggestion.

“Now hear me out”, Gordon said raising his hands up and leaning back slightly. “I’m not saying we include Mr Atomz in the Millennium exhibition, no no. I’m suggesting that these works (Gordon made a sweeping gesture towards Declan’s 3 paintings) could be put in a small display among the general art.”

“But Gordon”, interrupted Fran Ledbetter, a shrill lady in her 50’s who was one of New Zealand’s most respected art critics, “I agree the paintings are magnificent, but we don’t know anything about this boy! He arrived out of nowhere (she flung her arms up to emphasize the point). And did you hear him talk last night – all that nonsense about aliens!” Fran snorted and rolled her eyes up to the ceiling.

The other board members pitched in and soon the discussion got heated. Fran and a couple of the others animatedly argued against exhibiting Declan’s works so soon, particularly at the same time as the Millennium exhibition. There was a danger, they contended, that Declan’s art would distract the public from the Millennium exhibition and possibly even the media. That scenario would undoubtedly upset one or more of the distinguished 6 artists chosen for the Millennium Exhibition.

When it came time to voting, Gordon had the support of the other 2 board members and in the end it was a 50/50 split vote on the matter of whether to exhibit Declan’s paintings this coming weekend. However Gordon, as head of the board, had the casting vote. So it was decided: Declan’s art would be exhibited this coming weekend. But to somewhat appease Fran and the other dissenting board members, Gordon assured them they would place the paintings as far away from the “Artists of the Millennium” exhibition as possible and in a discreet corner of the gallery.

Chapter 20

Florrie took the call from Mr Golightly and she squealed in delight at the news. She liked Mr Golightly and was grateful for his support, especially as she knew that Declan’s talk about little green men had, ahem, *alienated* some of the other Guild members. Florrie recognized that Mr Golightly had probably been a key person to get on side so early, so she thanked him effusely for this opportunity the Auckland City Art Gallery had given to Declan.

Florrie rushed upstairs to tell Declan the good news. Declan was in the middle of composing a message for the alien when Florrie entered the room. He was a little bit irritated to be interrupted. When Florrie told him the news that his art works would be exhibited at the Auckland Art Gallery this weekend, Declan just nodded and grunted. His head remained focussed on his computer screen. Florrie was still buzzing after the phone conversation with Mr Golightly. She couldn’t understand Declan’s reaction, or lack thereof. But once again she attributed it to Declan’s “artistic temperament”. So she gave Declan a kiss on the cheek and skipped out of the room, shouting back to Declan that she’d open a bottle of wine to celebrate. Declan continued to tap away at his keyboard.

Declan had decided on a radio communication system that was in common use amongst astronomers, including SETI itself. It had a simple structure and was relatively easy to decipher. It was like Morse code, except it used radio waves instead of dots and dashes. Declan hoped the alien would quickly detect the patterns in his radio transmission and work out the message promptly.

Declan read back the missive he had just typed:

“Hello, my name is Declan Atomz from the planet Earth. I am happy that you have contacted us. The human race is a peaceful species and we look forward to

establishing a relationship with your species. You have been communicating with me by radio transmission, and then by the drawings and paintings that you have channelled through me. I would like to understand you and your civilization further. Would you be willing to establish a two-way communication with me? If so can you please send me a message using the same pattern of radio transmission I am using now? Unfortunately my human brain is too primitive to decipher the radio transmissions you have kindly sent to me.”

Declan wasn't entirely happy with the wording, but he decided to go ahead and “publish” it. He didn't have time to fluff around with finding the right words.

Chapter 21

Later that night Declan woke up from a deep snore-embellished slumber, caused in part by the glasses of wine he had consumed earlier. He looked at the alarm clock beside the bed and saw that it read 1.24am. His pulse immediately increased, because he wanted to find out whether the ET had responded to his message. He scrambled out of bed, nearly waking Florrie in the process, and dashed up the stairs to his computer room. Excitedly he flicked on his computer, to be greeted with the now familiar white noise (the origin of which he had still not discovered!).

Soon enough the radio signals started up, again coming from the Boolion galaxy. Declan listened carefully to the crackle of radio waves that were coming from his speakers. It sounded like a new pattern. He looked at the visual display and sure enough the pattern was regular and fairly simple in structure. Could it be? Yes, it was the exact same structure he had used to write to the ET! That meant it was likely the alien was replying to his message from earlier in the evening. It was beyond human comprehension how this was happening, because there was thousands of light years distance between Earth and the Boolion galaxy. But if anything, it strengthened Declan's belief that the alien civilization he was conversing with was much more advanced than human civilization. They knew how to overcome vast physical distances, something human beings hadn't even come close to cracking yet. Declan shook off his curiosity about the ‘how’, because at this stage he was mainly interested in the ‘what’. As in, what did the alien's reply say?

Chapter 22

It didn't take long for Declan to decode the message. It was:
“Hello Declan Atomz. I do not speak on behalf of my species. Your time is now.”

And that was it. Give or take some grammatical details, those 3 simple sentences represented the first clear and understandable message Declan had received. The message repeated itself over and over, presumably to give Declan the maximum opportunity to record it.

What did it mean? The first sentence was easy, it was a straight response to Declan's message. It confirmed that the ET had received Declan's message and recognized it as a greeting. The second sentence “I do not speak on behalf of my species” was curious. Again it was responding to something Declan had said in his message. The ET seemed to be saying that he wanted the conversation to be private

and did not want to generalize it as a communication between Earth and its own civilization. The alien was definitely referring to itself in the first person and as a singular entity. The third sentence was mysterious. The “your” probably referred to Declan, but possibly it stood for human beings in general. However given the previous two sentences, Declan thought it was probably directed at him alone. But “time” for what? Was it saying something was about to happen? Was it saying that time was limited? Was it even an apocalyptic warning? Declan checked himself. No the message was directed at him alone, it was not a message to all humanity. So Declan discounted the apocalypse scenario, for now at least. Declan felt that the alien was readying him for something. “Your time is now”...Declan repeated the phrase over and over to himself, He would have to think more about this.

Declan awoke a few hours later slumped at his keyboard. He dozily looked at the clock on his main PC – it read 5.27am. Declan roused himself and after a cursory check on the computer to see if any more messages had arrived (none had), he dragged himself back to the bedroom. He felt an odd buzz in the back of his brain and felt very light-headed.

The alien looked down on Declan from a great height. It stopped looking into Declan’s mind for a minute, to allow him to go back to sleep. The alien checked on James Hore now, diving deep into his mind like it had with Declan only minutes earlier.

James was fast asleep, but now he began to dream something vivid...red and violet slivers of lights fell from the darkness, strange harmonies blasted at him. James could make out a thin and very tall grey creature.

Chapter 23

The next day James Hore felt a bit odd. He couldn’t focus on anything and was constantly doodling on Network 3 notepads. The doodles were quite elaborate – mouths, eyes, hair, people. One drawing appeared to depict the crying eyes of Joseph Crashvalau, which was strange because in reality James had failed to entice any tears out of the All Black winger the other night. In fact the Crashvalau interview turned out to be a dud. He didn’t get any juicy details out of him. James suspected that Crashvalau’s manager, a ruddy-nosed Englishman called Clarrie Harvey who hated the media, had told Crashvalau not to say anything incriminating. All James got out of the story was a bunch of pre-rehearsed “I’m innocent” lines, that sounded more like the words of Harvey than the big All Black winger. However the show ended up being a success anyway, due to the story about the otter that escaped from Wellington Zoo and was videotaped sunning itself on the balcony of a student flat. That otter had saved Hore’s bacon that night, as it was the talk of office water coolers all over New Zealand the next day. There had been a follow-up piece the night after too, as the same students managed to catch the cheeky otter on videotape a second time. It was an even better piece because this time the otter spotted the videotape and, after a brief stricken look at the camera, legged it down the porch and off into the sunset. The otter was captured later, but James was very pleased to get two exceptional cutesy animal stories out of it. Pleased because it brought in the ratings. But he remained disappointed about the Crashvalau story.

Tomorrow James would be covering the Artists of the Millennium exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery. He doubted it would be a ratings puller, but there was nothing else on around town. The Prime Minister would be in attendance to open

the exhibition and say a few stately words about New Zealand's 6 foremost contemporary artists. James would try to get in a sly question about the Genetic Modification issue, which may rouse an interesting response from the PM. But other than that, he fully expected it to be another middle-of-the-road piece about kiwi culture. The punters would like it, but it was ho-hum for James.

Chapter 24

Declan received another message the night before the opening of the Artists of the Millennium. He was awakened at 1.24am, but by now it was almost second nature for him to wake up at this time. It was if his body clock had adjusted itself to the schedule. Declan flicked on his visual display monitors (now he kept his main PC running 24 hours round the clock) and waited for the patterns to focus into vision on the screens. He read the incoming message:

“Hello Declan. Do not be afraid. You are my link. And I am your link.”

And that was it. 4 sentences this time, repeated over and over as before.

Declan reflected on what the two messages he had received might mean. The first one was an introduction, Declan was sure of that by now. It had made it clear that the communication was a personal one not a generic “civilization to civilization” one. The “your time is now” implied that Declan was in the middle of a unique and life-changing event. Or at least that was Declan's interpretation. The second message seemed to assure Declan that the ET had no untoward intentions – “Do not be afraid”.

The last sentences “You are my link. And I am your link.” These seemed to convey that the ET needed Declan for something (Declan was a “link” for the ET), but the ET would offer something in return. A return link.

Declan returned to sleep with lots of thoughts running through his head. But he wasn't thinking in the least of his debut as a professional artist tomorrow at the Auckland City Art Gallery.

Chapter 25

James Hore arrived at the Art Gallery just before 10am. He was listening to the wondrous sounds of Rautavaara's Symphony No.7 – ‘Angel of Light’ – as he pulled up outside the Gallery's entrance. His personal assistant, Ivana Pratt, was waiting for him.

“Ivana, can you do me a favour and park the car round the back?” James said sweetly, as if he was asking a huge favour and wasn't expecting Ivana to say yes. Ivana rolled her eyes to the sky and stretched out an arm to open the door for James, who got out of the car immediately and bounded to the Gallery door. “Thanks love”, he said as he disappeared inside. Ivana got into the car. She revved the engine and quickly scooted the car around the corner, looking for a suitable car park for her boss.

James was greeted in the Gallery foyer by Gordon Golightly, who was impeccably dressed in a bright white shirt, a dark red pure silk tie with thin white stripes, black pinstripe suit and very shiny black shoes. Even Gordon Golightly's wispy brown and grey-speckled moustache was looking polished. James thought the moustache looked a little too wet, but he decided not to mention it.

“Mr Hore, a pleasure to see you again sir” said Gordon in an overly reverential manner. He’d not wanted to appear too eager to please James Hore, even though he was looking forward to the publicity that Hore would bring and secretly hoped that Hore would interview him on tv later. Hore had not mentioned anything about interviewing Gordon, but still Gordon held out a small bit of hope. He’d never once managed to get on tv, despite being the Gallery’s Managing Director for the past 5 years. It was almost embarrassing and Gordon wondered whether there was something wrong with his appearance to deny him a measly 15 seconds of fame. His picture had been in the newspaper a couple of times, but it wasn’t the same as being on tv. Gordon held on to Hore’s hand just a little too long and James had to pry it free.

“Mr Golightly, superb to see you.” James said, looking past Gordon and into the main exhibition area – which was curtained off. James could hear last minute scurrying about from behind the curtains. He turned to Gordon.

“Mr Golightly, when will the 6 artists be arriving?” James said, looking past Gordon and waving at Ivana who had just appeared at the door.

“Oh I expect them to arrive after midday, when we open to the public. Would you like to take a walk around James, we’ve done up the place over the past month. You’ll like some of the enhancements we’ve made, for example we had some Tudor –

“Yes that sounds great Mr Golightly”, interrupted James, “May I call you Gordon? Actually my crew needs to stake out the place for the best possies. So I’ll tag along with them. I’ll see you later then”. James walked over to where Ivana and 3 of the Network 3 crew were standing.

Chapter 26

Declan and Florrie were one of the first guests to arrive. Declan had wanted to stay at home a bit longer to work on his computers, but Florrie had insisted they go early. They were greeted at the door by Ashley, the assistant curator with long blonde hair. Today she was decked out in one of the latest Karen Walker designs. Ashley took them over to Gordon Golightly, who was busy checking schedules and last-minute details.

“Declan and Florrie, how are you?” Gordon looked up with a smile and reached out to shake Declan’s hand. His eyes sparkled. “I expect you want to see where we’ve put your paintings?” he said with a wink. “Walk this way.”

Florrie was slightly disappointed at where Declan’s paintings had been hung. They were in a little L-shaped room off the room that housed some Pacific Island jewellery and other trinkets. Florrie thought that not many people would find their way to this part of the Art Gallery, but she tried to hide her annoyance from Declan. For his part, Declan didn’t mind the location of the paintings. He was pleased to see them there at all. He wasn’t overly proud, after all they weren’t his works of art. But he felt glad that the ETI was getting some coverage, even though not many human beings would get to see its art works. Declan chuckled to think how popular these paintings would be if people knew their real origin.

Just then James Hore dashed into the room, accompanied by Ivana.

“There you are, Gordon.” Said James, slightly out of breath. “Listen, I’ve got this great idea. Why don’t we have a panel discussion of all 6 Artists of the Millennium, I’d like you to ask the artists about it, as I don’t know any of them. Would you do that for me?”

Something caught James's eye. It was if something or someone was looking at him. He turned around slowly. When he saw his portrait hanging on the wall staring down on him, James jumped back and put his hand over his mouth.

Gordon was the first to speak. "Oh, ah, James this is one of our newest exhibits. In fact it's opening this weekend. We, ah, opted for a low profile, but I see you've... I'd like you to meet the artist. Declan", he turned and gestured towards Declan – who right now was feeling very awkward. Florrie was a little star-struck at seeing James Hore in the flesh.

James kept staring at the portrait of himself, then he noticed the other two portraits. He looked carefully and silently at each of the 3 portraits. A couple of minutes of awkward silence ensued.

"Actually these paintings are the work of an extraterrestrial." Declan spoke in a monotone voice. He had a feeling that James Hore would understand. Florrie looked at Declan, appalled. Gordon shifted uncomfortably in his shiny black shoes. Ivana simply looked bored, although she had smirked when she first saw the Hore portrait hanging on the wall.

James turned to look at Declan. He saw a young man in his late twenties or early thirties, average height, slightly unkempt (but not enough to be trendy) dark brown hair, spectacles that looked like they were three or four years out of fashion, and sporting a cheap blue suit that was a bit too big for him.

"Did you paint this picture of me?" James said, his throat dry and croaky.

"Well as I said, it wasn't me. It was an extraterres-" Declan was interrupted with a sharp elbow to the ribs by Florrie.

"Awww!" Declan grimaced. Florrie looked over at Gordon, imploring him with her eyes to say something to cover for Declan.

Gordon stepped over to James and pointed up at the painting of the alien.

"As you can see, Mr Atomz has a vivid imagination. These two paintings (gesturing to the alien portrait and the cityscape) are futuristic in theme but at the same time very evocative of the 21st century technological landscape we live in today - don't you think?"

James wasn't listening. He was back staring at the portrait of himself. He was reminded of his own doodlings of the past couple of days...and the dream of the tall grey figure. He turned slowly back at the portrait of the alien. It was grey and its head was similar...was it? Yes, it was the same figure James had seen in his dreams! The colour suddenly drained out of his face.

Chapter 27

James recovered after a couple of hours, but he was much quieter than usual. He was in the main exhibition room now with everyone else, listening to the Prime Minister's opening speech. Declan noticed that James kept looking over at him, with what Declan thought to be a very weird and vacant look in his eyes. The Prime Minister finished her speech and handed the microphone over to Gordon Golightly, who was to introduce the 6 Artists of the Millennium.

James couldn't concentrate. The paintings that this young man, Declan Atomz, had done had affected him somehow. James liked to think it was the shock of seeing an unexpected portrait of himself, but there was something else too. The alien in the painting bore an uncanny resemblance to the strange tall being he had seen in his dreams recently. The cityscape too looked familiar, although James couldn't place

that at all. And one more thing, James thought that the paintings looked strikingly similar in style to the doodles and drawings he had been absent-mindedly doing over the past few days. It was almost as if the paintings were plagiarizing him, or perhaps it was the other way round and he had plagiarized Declan Atomz?

A couple of hours later and James Hore was preparing to go-live with tonight's The Hore Report show. He had the 6 Artists of the Millennium lined up round a panel table. The plan was to interview them as a group. He would question them about New Zealand's art scene and then moderate a civilized discussion about the cultural significance of their collective art works.

Declan and Florrie had been persuaded to stay for the tv show, because Gordon Golightly wanted to introduce Declan to the 6 Millennium artists after the show. Reluctantly Declan had agreed, mainly as a favour to Florrie who was loving this whole day. Declan really wanted to get back to his computers and radio telescopes, to compose another message to the alien.

The Hore Report's producer Sheila McLeod signalled that the show was about to go-live. 3-2-1...

"Good evening New Zealand, I'm James Hore and this is The Hore Report." He sounded weary, emotionally drained. "Well tonight we're at the Auckland City Art Gallery for the Artists of the Millennium, this marvellous event celebrating the best of our culture and the achievements of 6 of New Zealand's very best artists." He paused, letting the camera pan around the 6 faces. "But first, here's a report from the exhibition by our roving reporter, Ralph Tansley." James smiled tiredly to the camera and let Ralph's pre-taped story take over the nation's attention span for the next 4-5 minutes.

"James!" shouted Sheila, "wake up, luv! You're in la-la land, are you OK?"

James nodded to Sheila, taking a sip of water. He looked up and eyed the 6 artists with slight disdain. He looked out behind the cameras and spotted Declan.

The make-up person leaped over to touch up James's face, to try and "put some life into it" as instructed by Sheila.

When Ralph's piece was finished, James Hore straightened and said "That's Ralph Tansley. Will that man never learn?" He turned as if to address one of the cameramen. "There's more to New Zealand culture than rugby and beer, eh!" James said with a wink at the cameraman. Sheila sighed in relief. Good, she thought, the old James is back. The show won't be a total disaster then.

But then James did something unexpected. He stood up and picked up one of the microphones that had been placed in front of the 6 distinguished artists.

"We're going to do something slightly different" James said, "Cameras, follow me please". James stepped over some cables and made his way behind the bemused Millennium artists. They thought he was going to do an impromptu tour of their paintings, or maybe just get closer to the artists as he interviewed them. Sheila was surprised by James' move and didn't know what he was up to, but she had known James Hore long enough to know that he sometimes did impromptu things like this to break away from routines. They usually ended up endearing him to his audience, so Sheila didn't mind too much when he did it.

James led the posse of cameramen and production crew, along with the 6 distinguished artists and other hangers on, through several hallways. He chattered with good humour throughout, so most of the followers (and the tv audience) thought he was just trying to liven up an otherwise seriously artsy affair with some typical Hore banter. But where was he leading them, they all wondered.

James Hore at last entered the little L-shaped room. It wouldn't be able to fit more than a couple of cameramen plus a few others in it. Still clutching the microphone and cracking jokes to keep the tv audience entertained, James ushered two cameramen in and motioned for them to focus on him initially. He then peered back into the crowd of people that had followed him. He ignored Sheila's frantic sign language, which could basically be interpreted as saying "What the fuck are you doing?!", and finally spotted Gordon Golightly.

"Hey Gordon," James said as if Gordon was his long-time best mate. Gordon's face lit up. Maybe my time has finally arrived, he thought. Smiling and adjusting his tie, he made his way to the front of the group of people. The cameras were still pointing at James, but Gordon prepared to step out in front of them to join him. But just as he was going to, James said "Gordon, where's Declan? Can you go get him?"

Gordon stopped, surprised. "You, you want to interview Declan?" Then he saw Declan's paintings and the penny dropped. James Hore was about to make a mockery of the Artists of the Millennium celebration by interviewing a complete unknown, when he should be talking to the 6 distinguished artists who had come from all over New Zealand for this event. Gordon's heart sank and he felt sick. The board would have his guts for garters for this. It's exactly what Fran Ledbetter and the others had warned him about: Declan Atomz and his ET paintings would deflect attention from the main event.

Gordon stammered that he didn't know where Declan was and perhaps they should head back to the exhibition hall now. But James was having none of it and kept looking around for Declan. Then he spotted him. He was trying to hide behind Florrie and looked like he was about to sneak away, but James called attention to him just in time. The crowd of people parted so that Declan could make his way into the L-shaped room. Declan gulped. He was about to go prime time.

Chapter 28

James Hore put his arm around Declan's shoulder. The contrast between the custom-made svelte black Armani suit of Hore and the ill-fitting \$200 navy blue suit of Declan was stark in the harsh strobe lights that lit up the make-shift studio.

"Now Declan," Hore began in his customary matey interviewing tone of voice, "this is your first ever art exhibition, eh?"

Declan nodded and silently gulped, drops of sweat beginning to break out at the top of his forehead.

"Shall we show the people of New Zealand what you've created, because I have to tell you Declan that these paintings...that you've done...they're..." James looked down and bit his lower lip contemplatively, as if trying to find the right words to describe his emotions right now. "These paintings are, um, how shall I put it, they're DDDEVestating Declan, simply DDDEVestating!" Hore poked the microphone up to Declan's mouth, catching him off guard.

Declan nodded. He looked at the camera, little beads of sweat now crawling down his face like a troop of caterpillars.

James noticed that Declan wasn't faring well in front of the tv cameras, so he decided to change tack. He waved at the cameramen to turn their cameras onto the paintings – the portrait of Hore first of all.

"Now this painting Declan, THIS painting" James said with a wave towards his portrait and a self-deprecating smirk for the camera, "I like this one, eh. Eh!" He

hugged Declan round the shoulders, causing Declan's cheap blue suit to crumple visibly. "The handsome features, the colourful face, the glint in this bloke's eye, eh eh!" James playfully poked his fingers into Declan's shoulders.

"But tell me," James turned to Declan with a grin, "what does it MEAN? What's the purpose of this PPPainting, DDDDeclan?" James said, in full throttle banter mode now. He turned back to the camera, his eyes sparkling, then back to Declan – who was by now bathed in sweat.

Declan hadn't meant to tell the story of how an extraterrestrial had contacted him from a distant galaxy and had channelled these works of art through him. In the past few minutes, he had been quickly plotting and had decided to regurgitate the theories of his paintings that the Guild of New Zealand Artists had come up with a couple of weeks ago. That the Hore painting was a commentary on 21st century media, the Cityscape painting depicted the melding together of the great cities of the world which represented the bridging of physical distance by modern telecommunications, and the Alien painting was a metaphor for the increasing alienation of Western Civilization. Declan had planned to use all those theories and more. But at the last minute, despite his most conscious efforts to stop himself, he decided to tell the real story.

Chapter 29

The skyline was a deep yellow and red, wisps of silver clouds trickled across the horizon. Declan descended down to the ground at what seemed like a hundred miles an hour. It took a long time for him to reach the ground. The buildings that were rushing past him seemed to be a thousand stories high. There was no wind in Declan's face, it was like he was coming down at high speed in a glass elevator – only he was definitely outside the buildings and not in them. Finally Declan touched down on the ground, which was a dark grey asphalt. But very smooth, like marble. As Declan looked up, he saw immensely tall buildings towering over him. He could only glimpse a small piece of the yellow and blood red skyline that he had just dropped from. As Declan looked around him, he saw that none of the buildings had any doors or windows. They were different colours and different materials, but there seemed no way inside them. Declan focused now on the road and he saw many of the thin grey creatures walking around him. But they were the same height as him this time. Declan reached out a long grey arm to try and touch one of the buildings and it was then that he realised he was one of the tall thin grey aliens.

Declan looked down the long road, which disappeared into the distance alongside all of these huge skyscrapers. The road and skyscrapers seemed never ending. As he looked around him, none of the other aliens looked at him. They walked past him as if they all had business to attend to. Declan looked at his thin grey body. He could not feel anything different from being in a human body and so his mind struggled to come to grips with the situation he found himself in.

Declan next found himself standing inside a building, presumably one of the buildings he had just been viewing from outside. He could see two other aliens standing in front of him. They were talking to Declan in a language he did not understand. One of the creatures approached Declan and reached out a large hand. Declan watched as the hand projected a type of hologram into the air right in front of Declan's eyes. It was a movie of earth, it showed himself talking to television cameras. Declan was shocked to see himself, in human form it must be added, talking

animatedly in front of the camera. He wondered what he was saying. Whatever it was it seemed to have impressed James Hore, who had begun to clap. The rest of the audience squeezed into the little L-shaped room at the Auckland City Art Gallery soon followed James Hore and clapped too. All of this was being projected into a 3-dimensional hologram about two feet away from Declan, at least the Declan that had assumed alien form. He looked at the other 2 aliens, whose deep and reflectionless black eyes were staring back at Declan.

Now Declan found himself flying through a great tunnel. Colours of all descriptions flashed blindingly. Strange harmonies assaulted his ears. He was travelling at a great speed and he couldn't focus on what body he had assumed now. Declan's consciousness faded out again...

Chapter 30

The next day Declan woke up with a huge headache. When he turned his head just a little bit, a wave of nausea hit him. So Declan lay completely still. He could make out a fuzzy human being. It was Florrie, who seemed to be calling to him. After a minute or two, in which time Florrie began to get more and more in focus until she was completely in focus, Declan finally roused himself.

"Declan, are you alright?", Florrie asked with concern in her voice. "You had such a big day yesterday, with the tv and then the newspapers and radio. I was afraid you'd completely worn yourself out. How are you feeling?"

The nausea was still present, but Declan made himself sit up in bed. He held his head in both hands, trying to allay a flashing headache. He could see Florrie looking at him worriedly.

"It's OK Florrie, I'm OK", and in fact as soon as Declan said that he began to feel better. He started to shake off the headache and the nausea. "What happened yesterday?" he said.

"Why, don't you remember?" asked Florrie, feeling Declan's forehead for a temperature. It was normal.

"I...I don't know" Declan stammered.

"Well it was a long day," Florrie admitted, humouring Declan. "And unfortunately it won't get any easier. You blew them away yesterday Declan, I've never heard you speak so inspirationally before. You had everyone in the palm of your hand. Apparently the ratings for that show went through the roof. And the papers this morning..." Florrie leaned over to pick up the New Zealand Herald for this morning and showed it to Declan. On the front page was a large photo of Declan standing in front of the cityscape painting with a big smile on his face. An odd smile he did not recognize. The heading was "New Face Stuns Art World" and the caption read:

"Local Auckland man Declan Atomz, 30, yesterday stunned the New Zealand art fraternity with a small collection of 3 paintings that had critics reaching for superlatives."

Declan read on to the article:

"At the Auckland City Art Gallery yesterday, 30-year old Declan Atomz from Mt Eden in Auckland debuted 3 revelatory new paintings. The stunning paintings were unveiled during last night's The Hore Report television program. Celebrity James Hore was the subject of one of the paintings, which led to some speculation that it was an elaborate publicity stunt initiated by Mr Hore. However the sheer

quality of the 3 paintings, which along with the Hore portrait were pictures of a futuristic city and an alien, convinced the Herald's Art Critic Harold Spoon that Mr Atomz is "an explosive new talent".

"Declan Atomz went on to deliver a scintillating speech during the Hore Report, which examined his own paintings in great detail and revealed many layers of meaning in a manner that enthralled those at the Gallery and those watching at home on television.

"However the paintings and performance by Declan Atomz overshadowed the Artists of the Millennium Exhibition, which the Herald understands caused consternation among some respected members of the Art community. One of the Artists of the Millennium, Bob Twizel, lambasted the management of the Auckland City Art Gallery for debuting such an innovative new artist on the very same day of the exhibition.

"This young man is probably the most promising artist this country has seen in decades, but why on earth did the Auckland Gallery decide to exhibit him this weekend? They have embarrassed and insulted 6 of New Zealand's most respected artists by this act."

Declan put down the newspaper and wiped his eyes with disbelief. He had no memory of any of this. He remembered he'd dreamt of visiting the home of the alien, with the giant skyscrapers and the aliens around him. And he'd been in alien form, not human...then he remembered the hologram which showed Declan back on earth delivering a speech to the television cameras. Perhaps while Declan was visiting the alien's home and walking around in its skin, the alien who he had been conversing with was doing the same – in Declan's body!

Florrie hugged Declan suddenly. "I'm so proud of you", she said. "Now get up, you have appointments with magazines and newspapers lined up today. Remember we met that media agent last night, Lionel Hope? He's already arranged for all these interviews, can you believe it? You're a star Declan!"

Chapter 31

Dave Darwin was a resident of Silicon Valley, California, and had just started a social software company called Social-Kinetics. Dave was a big man in all senses of the word. He was 6 foot two, with a large build and a king-sized personality to match. He wasn't overly extroverted, but he was the type of person who would sooner lead a conversation than follow it. His bulk perhaps intimidated some people when he was socializing. But he also possessed a knack for original ideas and it was this aspect of him that kept people quiet and in listening mode during conversations. He often kidded about his physical size. He liked to say he had "plenty of padding". Sometimes he would refer to himself as "big boned". He had red hair that he kept closely cropped and, perhaps to compensate for the frequency of his haircuts, he didn't shave very often.

Dave had previously worked in the graphic design business, where his speciality was creating avatars and other characters for online gaming worlds. Earlier this year he decided it was time for a change. He'd been working at one of the more prestigious Silicon Valley graphics companies for some time now, long enough to have earned a respectable sized nest egg. Not enough to retire on, but enough to buy a large apartment in the heart of Silicon Valley and a nice new Jeep car. But he felt he

was missing out on something, not just money but also a sense of adventure and an opportunity to stamp his mark on the world.

He'd been in the graphics design industry for close to 20 years now and had been lucky to ride through some high times, especially during the dot com boom. But frustratingly for Dave, he'd never managed to hit real paydirt with stock options. That was partly because Dave had always been an employee, never an entrepreneur. Dave was not confident in his business skills, so he had tried to make his fortune by being one of the key technical staff in the dot com companies he'd been with. But he was forced to admit that tactic hadn't worked. It was time for him to start his own business and really push himself to explore new opportunities as an entrepreneur. It was now or never for Dave. He was approaching 40 and he had a young family – a wife and 2 children aged 4 and 6. Dave felt the time was now to strike out on his own.

He had decided to utilise the many skills he had at creating online graphics, but he was going to mine a new Web trend known as “social software”. Social software is software that enables group communications and in 2003 it began to hit the mainstream market. Social software companies were popping up everywhere, companies like Friendster and Ryze. All social software companies aimed to link together people via the Web. New companies had also been spawned to take social software into the corporate world, such as SocialText. Dave's idea was slightly different, yet also old hat.

Dave had a plan to design a Web community where people would sign up and utilise graphical avatars, or graphical online personas, to interact and mix with each other. The idea of avatars and 3D virtual worlds actually pre-dated the World Wide Web. They reached a feverish stage of popularity with online games such as Quake, EverQuest and The Sims. And before that, Dungeons and Dragons served the same purpose of offering up a fantasy world for people to escape to. And here's where Dave believed lay the opportunity. So far avatars and online graphical personas had merely been used as a method of escapism. Dave believed avatars hadn't yet been fully exploited as a means to socially interact with people. By “socially interact” Dave did not mean hiding behind a false persona, but showing your real persona in graphical ways. It was going to be a big challenge. It is currently so easy to create an online persona or avatar that does not accurately or fully represent who you are as a person. As the old saying goes: “no one knows you're a dog on the Internet”. Well Dave intended to change that. He believed he had found a way to use avatars not to hide a person's true nature, but enhance it. He was going to make it very hard, if not impossible, for people who used his social software to mask their true nature with it. Moreover, Dave intended to make people actually want to reveal their true personas with the help of an avatar. It was Dave's killer app, or so he hoped.

So Dave set up a new company, which he called “Social-Kinetics”. Kinetics is a branch of mechanics concerned with the forces that cause motions of bodies. Dave felt the name was an apt description. He wanted to move “virtual” bodies in a social manner.

It was Monday morning and Dave had just finished speaking on the phone to two new software engineers he'd just hired. That brought the total number of engineers to 4, not much, but it was a start and pretty soon they would have some workable software for Dave to push. He'd already developed some prototypes, but he needed a small team of people to deliver production quality software in good time. He had found a rudimentary office for his new company to work from and had some basic office supplies set up, as well as the specialist high-end graphics tools they needed. He'd financed this with some initial capital of his own, together with some

funding from a group of interested investors who were willing to take a punt on Dave (there weren't many of those, as Dave had virtually no experience running a business).

One of his first employees was Hector Lopez, a young man in his early 20's. He was Latino and was an incredibly smart graduate engineer. He'd been the first employee Dave had hired. Dave saw immediately that Hector was an innovative and intelligent software developer. The young man came across as very brash and in conversation he was blunt and often rude. This probably scared off all the A-List companies that Hector had applied to. Graduate engineers with good grades were a dime a dozen in Silicon Valley nowadays, so companies could afford to shop around for kids with better communication skills. But Dave had seen through the arrogant attitude of Lopez and recognized a sharp intelligence and probing mind. He reminded him of himself at that age! So he hired him on the spot.

At this moment, Hector Lopez was engaged in a heated discussion with the only other employee who had started so far, Lydia Grep. Lydia was a developer in her mid-30's. She had a serious face that didn't smile too often. She often had violent disagreements with her new work colleague Hector Lopez. They were opposite personalities and in a sense were opposite in skillsets too. While Hector was a heavy duty code merchant with a passion for Linux, Lydia had worked all her life as a graphic artist and so her skills were based around graphical software for Apples and Macs. She had worked for a time as an animation artist for Disney, before moving on to more exciting work as a graphical conceptual artist for a couple of Hollywood movie studios. She had decided to try her luck in Silicon Valley and was grateful for the opportunity to be the first employee on board in a promising start-up.

Hector and Lydia were arguing about what characteristics to pre-program, and which characteristics would be moulded by the person who purchased the avatar. That is, part of Dave Darwin's plan for this software that was avatars came with some initial "pre-programmed" actions and characteristics. Much like a new mobile phone comes pre-programmed with some ring tones. But Dave wanted the majority of an avatar's "personality" to evolve over time, according to the personality of its owner. It would be a revolutionary advance in both avatar and social software technologies, precisely because it would be so difficult to pull off from a development point of view – but it would be a killer feature if it was achieved. Dave had begun to develop the idea and he believed he had the answer now. It still meant the team had to decide which parts of an avatar to pre-program and which parts would "evolve".

Hector was almost yelling now. His voice kept rising in tone and volume: "But Lydia, there is no point in an avatar copying its walk from the user (meaning the person who owned the avatar). What could other people possibly learn from the way a person walks? It doesn't matter, therefore it should be pre-programmed. We can introduce slight variations in how each avatar walks, but I don't see any reason why an avatar's walk should be evolved from its owner. If you're going to do that, why not have arms, fingers, toes fer chissakes?!" By the time he finished saying that, Hector's nasal and high-pitched voice could be heard down on the street by passers-by.

Lydia sighed dramatically and her dark and bushy eyebrows furrowed even deeper than usual. "Hector, these avatars will be representations of human beings. The more features and functionality they get from their owners, the more realistic they will be. Walking may be a small detail to you, but it's those types of things that we need to automate - as much as possible." She crossed her arms and glared at Hector.

Hector remained unimpressed. His nose raised a few more degrees and his voice went up another octave and decibel. "No no, that's rubbish Lydia. Let me tell

you why. The more the program (meaning the avatar) has to learn, the more code we have to write. Who do you think is going to write all that code? You!?” Hector laughed and shook his head. “No it’ll be me and whatever other poor sap Dave hires to develop the backend, we’ll be the ones who spend hours and hours doing the programming necessary to make one of your avatar’s toes wiggle. Read my lips” Hector said doing a passable imitation of George Bush Senior, “We have to draw the line somewhere. Walking is out, as is arms. In fact, most things will have to be pre-programmed except for the face!” He put special emphasis on the word “face”.

Lydia threw her arms up in desperation. She then noticed Dave come up and decided to bring him into the conversation, even though she knew he didn’t like to be drawn into their arguments.

“Dave, exactly how much of an avatar’s body should we pre-program and how much should we leave to nature? I know the face is the most important, but surely a person’s characteristics and personality is also displayed in their body – the way they walk, for example. If they’re confident, they’ll have raised shoulders and a swagger. If they’re a quiet person, they’ll walk softly. If they’re a driven person, they’ll walk fast. Don’t you agree?”

Before Hector could retort, Dave held up his hand as if to say “Stop!” Hector closed his mouth and waited for the boss to talk.

“It’s a compromise I know, but Lydia bear in mind Hector and the other programmers will have to write code to cover all the possibilities you just mentioned. Maybe it would be better to provide generic walks, at least to start with. I’ve always said the face is the key here.”

Before Hector could finish his smirk aimed at Lydia, Dave finished his little pep talk by turning to him and saying “But Hector, Lydia is ultimately correct. Eventually we will have to find a way for all our avatars to evolve not just facial expressions but body movements as well. Don’t forget the name of our company: Social-Kinetics (he emphasized the word “kinetics”).”

Dave turned to leave. “By the way, you’ll have two more workmates starting next week. Things are looking up guys!” he said with a grin.

Chapter 32

As Declan’s star began to rise in the New Zealand art world, and there started to be interest from overseas too, the extraterrestrial began to make more and more use of Declan. It was apparent that Declan’s body was being used as some form of avatar. The ET would regularly take over Declan, in particular during periods of artistic activity and when Declan had media engagements. In a way that was fine with Declan, because he did not know how to handle the media. All the attention he had been getting was like an intrusion to him. Ironically he felt that the media was more of an intrusion than the ET using him as an avatar. He actually welcomed the ET’s “visits”, as he came to call them, for a few reasons. Firstly, he enjoyed the artistic output of these visitations. He enjoyed looking at the art afterwards and trying to interpret what it meant. It was intellectually stimulating and he discovered new ideas every day via the paintings. That was probably why they were so popular amongst the art world too – the paintings were very original and thought provoking. The second reason Declan enjoyed the ET’s visits was that the ET had taken on the onerous media tasks that had befallen Declan. Well they were onerous to Declan, who was a shy mammal and did not like being scrutinised in public. Perhaps the ET was aware of

this, because it now almost always visited Declan just as he was about to speak on television or field the first question from a reporter. Declan was grateful for being “rescued”, because he felt sure he would blow the ET’s cover if he had to speak in his own voice. Declan suspected now that the alien enjoyed conversing with the world’s media. Or perhaps it was a game to the ET. Declan was still working through what the alien wanted from him. It wasn’t obvious, but Declan suspected that slowly over time the reasons would become apparent.

The third reason had begun to appreciate the alien being’s visits was that Declan was being granted return visits to the alien’s world. These were becoming more frequent and Declan was starting to adjust now to the shock of the different. The ET’s world was about a thousand paradigm shifts away from the world Declan was used to on Earth. But Declan felt that now he had gotten over that initial overload of strangeness. It had taken 3 or 4 visits to the alien world, but now Declan was learning to appreciate the experience. In addition he had to get used to having an alien body. Because just as the alien being had been using Declan’s body as an avatar on Earth, so Declan had been given an alien body with which to explore the new world.

Declan did not know when the ET would visit, but he knew as soon as it happened. He would go into a dream state, with the familiar loud harmonies and colourful sparks of light. He would either stay in the dream state and wake up after the event, or sometimes he would have an out-of-body experience and see himself – as if watching himself on television – conducting interviews with the media, or conversing with large crowds of people, or showing off his new paintings on The Hore Report. During the times Declan was creating new works of art, he had no memory of it either during or after. Florrie often mentioned that his expression was blank and he said absolutely nothing while in the act of painting. But the visitations Declan now enjoyed the most were the ones where he paid a return visit to the alien world. He had no way of knowing when these return visits would be granted, but it was now something Declan looked forward to with relish.

He had begun to remember how he travelled to and from the alien world. He seemed to be hurtled through a tunnel or black hole in space. Bright lights and strange harmonies flashed past him at what seemed like a million miles per hour. He had no sense of balance, although he must have been travelling in such a manner that was outside human comprehension so Declan doubted that his primitive human sense of “balance” had any relevance whatsoever. He felt no sensations of movement, but was aware of being shifted a great distance. He had no sense of time passing and wondered if that too was irrelevant. In short, he didn’t have a clue what was happening to him when he was being carted through this tunnel or black hole. The only thing he knew for sure was that it took him from A to B – from Earth to the alien planet, and back again.

The alien world had a beautiful sunflower yellow and blood red atmosphere and skyline. The buildings that had been built were immensely tall and densely populated. They seemed to run for miles and miles into each horizon Declan cared to look at. It was kind of like Hong Kong city on steroids, but actually Declan believed Hong Kong and any other city on earth paled into insignificance compared to the great cityscape he saw each time he visited. It was exactly like his first painting too – the ET had done an admirable job depicting its world in that painting.

Declan had still not figured out how to communicate directly with the tall thin grey alien beings that he saw. Their speech was still incomprehensible to him, although no longer inaudible (in his dreams on Earth, often the ET’s voice went outside the range of Declan’s human hearing). The aliens usually took Declan inside

one of the vast buildings and often showed him hologram videos, some of which appeared to depict different worlds or planets. One of the videos Declan saw showed the construction of what seemed to be a giant computer. It had thousands of mechanical parts, which were made up of materials that Declan had never seen before. Another time Declan saw a large gathering of aliens, as if in the middle of a kind of mass. A group of about 12 of the tall grey beings were huddled together and lifting their elegant arms in the air like giant preying mantises. Their hands kept lightly bumping each other, like humans toasting champagne glasses at a wedding. Hundreds of other alien beings were viewing this performance, or ritual perhaps, in a large semicircle around the group. Declan could see a burning white light above the outstretched hands of the main group of 12. The light was growing brighter each time their hands bumped together. Eventually Declan had to turn away, so bright was the light even seeing it second-hand in the hologram. When Declan turned back, the hologram had been shut off and his two alien hosts were staring at Declan with deep horizonless black eyes. Declan wondered what the ritual he saw meant. How could his human mind ever comprehend? He hoped that eventually he would begin to understand.

Chapter 33

Dave Darwin was feeling a bit nervous. He'd shaved this morning, which was unusual and it normally only meant one thing – Dave had to impress somebody. And because he was just starting out in a business of his own, it was likely that someone had a pocketful of money that Dave needed. Or more specifically, the someone was probably a Venture Capitalist. And so it was this morning. Dave would be meeting with the Venture Capitalist firm Britney, Bullock & Brockhocker. They were known as the “3 Bees”, not only due to their alliterative names but because they often had a sting in their tail when dealing with young dot com hopefuls. If they didn't sting them with outrageously high stock options, it would be high transaction fees. One way or another Britney, Bullock & Brockhocker would try to make the most of their clients while they could. One reason was because the clients they picked were usually high risk. The 3 B's were simply not big enough or reputable enough to attract the business of the Googles or the Amazons of this world. They had to pick a bunch of unknowns and hope one or two of them would hit the jackpot. It had happened twice before, which was why Britney, Bullock & Brockhocker were still in business. The first time was the successful (at least until the IPO, at which point the 3 B's bailed) online medical supplier BandageIT. That earned BBB a big wad of money, via stock options which they unloaded a couple of months after the IPO when the stock was at its peak. The second time lucky was a dot com company that, funnily enough, specialised in online lotteries. It was called Cash-In.com and indeed Britney, Bullock & Brockhocker had done just that. They somehow managed to get a 60% stake in the company, which was daylight robbery. But as they pointed out to everyone who questioned it, Cash-In.com would have had no money to offer prizes if it hadn't been for them. So neither Britney, Bullock or Brockhocker had any qualms about the deal. Except perhaps that Cash-In went bust during the Dot Com bust, not longer after BBB had (luckily) divested most of its stock in it.

The secretary opened the door of the room Dave was waiting in, which looked suspiciously like a dentist's waiting room, and motioned him to “come through”. Dave collected together his papers, which he was reviewing while he waited - mainly

so he could remember the projection figures he was supposed to spout. He walked briskly after the secretary and into a large, dab brown-coloured meeting room. Around the table sat the 2 of the Venture Capitalists.

“Hello Mr Darwin, I’m Bill Bullock. Please sit down”.

Dave sat his big frame down and waited expectantly for the grilling to begin. He didn’t particularly enjoy these VC sessions. Even though he was never short of words, he found the focus on sales projections and profit predictions to be draining. He wanted to expound on his software, but he knew that most VCs didn’t want to hear about the bits and bytes that would drive the business. They wanted buzzwords and trendy phrases. So Dave knew to include plenty of those: “social software”, “collaboration”, things “leveraging” off other things, “knowledge management”. It was all turkey talk to Dave, but he could gobble gobble gobble with the best of them.

Bill Bullock was in his 40’s and had a face etched with lines and crevices. He wore a svelte silver and black chequered jacket, a plain white shirt from a boutique shop and blue jeans in the latest fashion. The other man introduced himself as Gary Britney and he was much more formally dressed. He wore a black suit, white shirt and a gold tie. He looked about 40, but was probably older. His silver speckled black hair was slicked back neatly and he had black-rimmed glasses. The overall effect was a detail-oriented man dressed for business.

Bullock spoke: “Dave we’d like you to begin by telling us your vision for your company.”

Dave liked that opening. It gave him a chance to outline all his best ideas and get the VCs on board with his enthusiasm.

“Well my company is called Social-Kinetics. My background, as you know, is in graphic design here in Silicon Valley.”

Britney interrupted “We’re very familiar with your work history Dave, you have a great deal of experience in this industry. Would you mind moving straight to the company, Social-Kinetics – what are you selling and why will people buy it?”

“Well OK then, let’s get straight to the nitty gritty. We’re selling a new software service in the social software market. We’ll be targeting a young audience initially, because of the graphical nature of our software. But it will have broad appeal. We’re building a new way for people to communicate and collaborate online. We’re developing avatars, which are like virtual representations of people, with graphical features and functionality beyond anything you’ve seen. And these avatars will be how people interact with each other. But it’s not like games with wizards and elves, because that’s probably what you’re thinking right?”

Bullock grunted and Britney ignored the question.

Dave continued, “No these avatars will literally be graphical depictions of human beings. They’ll have a face, eyes, nose, legs, arms – the works! You see, we plan to build communities of people based around avatars. The groups will be totally fluid, so people can move in and out of whatever groups they choose. It’ll be like the World Wide Web, only finally, truly, it’ll be a three dimensional experience. But, hey, I think you’ve heard this pitch before right? Every man and his dog has probably come to you with a 3D multimedia idea for the Web. But here’s the differentiator...”

Bullock leaned forward slightly. Britney sat back and chewed his pen.

“Our avatars will be self-learning, they’ll assume the personalities and characteristics of the people who use them. So eventually the avatars will be like a virtual self and they will know their owner’s preferences. They’ll be able to intuit what their owners want. People will, I believe, become very attached to their avatars. And this is what I think will make our software successful.”

“Wait a second,” said Britney sceptically, “How will avatars be able to “self-learn” as you put it? Where do they get the information from?”

“Good question”, Dave said pointing excitedly at Mr Britney. “The people who use our software already communicate and write using tools such as email, Instant Messaging, weblogs. They’re already expressing their thoughts and ideas using those tools. So there’s a bunch of information about that person right there. Our avatar technology will be able to mine and aggregate information collected in emails, blogs, the newsgroups and forums they participate in on the Web, indeed our own Social-Kinetics community forums – the avatars will collect data from all those sources and more, and glean knowledge about a person. This is not a trivial task, but I’ve got the software to do it. Heck, Google has the software to do it. The difference is I’m taking it a step further by actually using all the data about people that is out there – on the Web. Your own personal avatar, built by Social-Kinetics, will be a graphical personalisation of all your personal data on the Web. Avatars will sift through data and use chunks of it to help them grow. Help them evolve.”

“Evolve?” Britney said, eyebrows raised.

“Yes,” Dave replied matter-of-factly, “you see the longer the avatar collects and processes information about a person, the more like that person they become. So the avatar will assume aspects of its owner’s personality, their likes and dislikes, and all that. The avatar becomes an extension of its human owner. But more than that, the avatar will actually evolve its own identity. It will be a very similar identity to its human owner, but it’ll have unique aspects to it that could only have come about through it “living” on the Web. That may sound a bit scary, but actually that’s where I believe the avatar will be at its most helpful in the social software context. People will communicate and work together like they never could do in real life, because they’ve discovered new aspects of themselves – via their avatars.”

Chapter 34

Later on as Dave reflected on the meeting with Britney, Bullock or Brockhocker, he decided that the most likely outcome would be no funding. Bullock had seemed fairly interested, but it was Britney that would be the problem. Britney, the besuited man with slicked back hair who was an accountant by trade, was the one who asked all the questions and he seemed to get more sceptical as the meeting wore on. Even at the end, when Dave had got back to the bread n’ butter of VC meetings and delivered financial projections and the like, Britney’s mood had not improved. So Dave fully expected another negative result from a meeting with Venture Capitalists. What he really needed was to get a decent prototype finished soon, so he had something concrete to show VCs. Currently his small team were working on enhancing the development prototype that Dave had built. It needed a bit more work to get it up to a stage where the test avatar was sufficiently different from existing online gaming avatars, and also showed hints of the self-programming creature it would become. Dave was convinced that as soon as VCs and others could see a working prototype in action, Social-Kinetics stood a much better chance of securing funding.

The prototype avatar they were working on had been nicknamed Elvis. But not after Elvis Presley, after Elvis Costello. The avatar had begun to take on a striking resemblance to a young Elvis Costello, even down to the horn-rimmed glasses – which Dave thought was a quirky touch. He hadn’t meant for this original Social-

Kinetics avatar to look like a pop star who was big in the 70's. It had just turned out that way. Dave didn't want this first self-programming avatar to look bland and like a Ken Doll. He wanted it to have a unique personality, in order for it to have a good chance of growing into something interesting. This wasn't going to be your typical "Adam" (a name that Dave had dismissed immediately, despite the obvious "In the beginning there was..." associations of the name). In order to ensure the very first evolving avatar was an interesting character, the pre-programmed bits of Elvis had lots of "quirks" as Dave put it – the horn-trimmed glasses and big nose being just two external parts of this. The internal quirks included a slightly cranky personality, a penchant for sarcasm, and a talent for music. Hence the similarities with Elvis Costello.

Dave had probably unconsciously chosen the looks and personality traits of the venerable pop star, because he had always been a fan of Costello. Dave felt he "knew" Elvis Costello already, through his albums and media profile. Sure he didn't know the real Elvis Costello, whose real name is Declan MacManus, but he knew the superficial layer – which was exactly how avatars would be pre-programmed. Social-Kinetics avatars would be packaged with a "superficial" layer of external looks and some obvious personality traits taken from the human who would own the avatar. For example if Elvis Costello had an avatar, then it too may be pre-programmed with crankiness, sarcastic manner and musical ability. But Dave suspected that the real Elvis Costello would have a different idea of what his defining characteristics were – maybe he didn't see himself as cranky. And that was the point – every person knew better than anyone else what their basic personality was. So when a person signed up to Social-Kinetics, the first thing they would do would be to sit down with a Customer Service Rep and map out their personality. It would be at a superficial layer at that point, like doing a Myers-Briggs test (a bit more personal than that though). Then once a human began to use the avatar, over time more and more nuance and depth would be added to that avatar's character. It would be derived from its human owner, so eventually the avatar would begin to assume the same characteristics of its owner. Say that Elvis Costello had decided not to include crankiness in his avatar's pre-programmed personality. Well if the evidence on the Web – in blogs, emails and so forth – showed that Elvis Costello had exhibited crankiness, then the avatar would assume crankiness as a personality trait. It could be argued then that the avatar's personality would not necessarily reflect its owner's true real-life personality, because often people do and say things on the Web that they wouldn't do or say in real life. But Dave felt that because the avatars would be used in the setting of social software, that is enabling people to collaborate and communicate in groups, then the participating people would be more likely to display their real personalities. It was a bit like the argument for weblogs, which enabled people to have a voice to the world. Some people have likened blogs to an online representation of a person. In the same way, Dave wanted the Social-Kinetic avatars to be online representations of human beings.

As Dave got out of his Jeep Cherokee and prepared to go back into the Social-Kinetics office, he reflected on where the business might be in 4-5 years. He hoped by then Social-Kinetics would be the leader of a new wave of social software based on graphical avatars, a wave that would be similar in scale and mass to the World Wide Web which had become so big in the 90's. Dave had big dreams to match his big frame and big personality.

Chapter 35

By now Declan Atomz was a regular guest on James Hore's nightly television show, *The Hore Report*. The alien would always take over Declan's body just before the shows began, so Declan himself had little knowledge of what he was saying to James Hore. But Florrie always taped the shows on video, so sometimes Declan would watch those tapes and marvel at how eloquent he sounded and how visionary his ideas were. Well they weren't his ideas, but they were coming from his mouth.

Neither Declan, nor the alien who played Declan on tv, ever mentioned the extent of the visits from a distant galaxy. They both hinted at extraterrestrial intelligence and Declan (the real one) continued to blurt out at inappropriate moments that he was conversing with an ET. But people seemed to dismiss those as slightly eccentric manifestations of Declan's artistic genius.

Heh, Declan thought it was fun being a genius – you can get away with lots of strange behaviour!

Today was another one of Declan's appearances on *The Hore Report*. As usual the show would air live at 7pm. Declan was going to debut yet another astounding work of art on live television. The ratings for *The Hore Report* had skyrocketed since Declan had started showing his new paintings on air.

James Hore was enjoying this purple patch of ratings bliss, but he also had begun to like Declan Atomz very much as a person. James thought Declan was a little strange and eccentric, but nevertheless James felt he could relate to him on some level which the general public wasn't aware of.

Just before tonight's show, James decided to confide in Declan that he too had been experiencing dreams and had begun to draw pictures of a high quality. He wondered if perhaps Declan experienced dreams too? He had tried to grill Declan on a previous tv show to find out how Declan had discovered his artistic talent, but Declan had confidently swatted those questions away - like a seasoned politician deflecting attention away from a topic which would likely embarrass them. In fact Declan, on camera, had what seemed like an innate ability to swerve around the tough questions that James (and other media) asked him. James had learned to admire this and thought that Declan had a great future as a politician if the art thing didn't pan out. But off-camera, James had discovered that Declan wasn't quite so confident. He often appeared nervous and jittery before a show, but then would magically transform himself into a confident non-fasable person once the cameras started rolling. So James decided that he'd try to get to know Declan off-camera, to see if the dreams and drawings were something they had in common.

It was 5 minutes to go-live and James walked over to Declan, ignoring the protestations of his producer Sheila McLeod that he didn't have time to "fanny about". James laid a hand on Declan's shoulder and gave it an encouraging little massage. Declan's shoulder felt tense.

James led Declan across to a quiet corner and turned to him with a serious look on his face. "Declan I haven't told you this before, but I've been having some strange dreams lately and they remind me of a few of your paintings."

As he began to talk, James noticed that Declan's face had suddenly altered. His face had been nervous and slightly twitchy before he had started talking to him, but now Declan's face was like a blank canvas. James continued speaking.

“The first time I noticed it was at the Millennium Exhibition. Remember when I walked into that little room and saw your portrait of me? Well the other paintings seemed familiar to me too, especially the one with the alien in it. Declan, I’ve seen that alien!” James stared earnestly into Declan’s empty blue eyes.

James could see that he wasn’t getting through to Declan, so he tried a different tack.

“There’s one more thing Declan. I’ve started to draw as well...and it’s good stuff too. Like your paintings in fact.” James looked up into Declan’s eyes to see if he was taking this in. But Declan still looked like a robot, thought James.

Sheila shouted over to James to hurry up, because it was getting time for the show to begin.

“Well anyway Declan, I just wanted you to know that your paintings seem to have affected me quite a lot. I wondered if you have the same dreams, is all...” James sighed and put his hand back on Declan’s shoulder. Now his shoulder was relaxed and soft to the touch. James steered Declan in the direction of the cameras and they began to walk back.

As they were about to enter the television set, Declan whispered to James

“Do not be afraid. You are my link. And I am your link.”

James moved his head back, startled. “What did you say?”

Sheila interrupted at that instant and separated James and Declan, steering James into the studio. Declan stood behind the cameras as Sheila pushed James into the presenter’s chair. James continued to stare at Declan, his face contorted with confusion and curiosity.

Chapter 36

It transpired that Britney, Bullock or Brockhocker (the 3 Bees) called Dave Darwin the day after their meeting and told him they wanted to invest. The wheels of finance started turning quickly and soon Dave was able to hire more staff. After 8 months, Social-Kinetics was ready for beta testing on the Web. That 8 months had featured lots of highs and lows, including financial squeezes and day-to-day business pressures on Dave and his management team. Most of the hassles emanated from the 3 Bees and the other investors that had come on board. But that was par for the course with Dot Com companies and Dave had tried to calmly navigate the troubled waters of Start-up financing as best he could, while ensuring his technical team (which included himself when he could get spare time) created the next wave of social software.

Today was the day Dave would announce Social-Kinetic’s new social software product to the world. The product was simply named after the company - “Social Kinetics” - and it was made up of three main ingredients: firstly it was an online community space on the Web, which was like other online communities. That is, it was a website with a URL (web address) and, in order to use the website, people were required to sign-up and register an account. The second main ingredient was the personality assessment and physical body mapping. Once a person had registered to become a member of the “Social Kinetics” community, that person would fill in a questionnaire to establish the basic parameters of their personality. This was a very superficial personality type, similar to Myers-Briggs. Social Kinetics had 50 initial “types” (eventually the number of types would number in the hundreds). The person would also have a “mapping” done of their face and body, so as to approximate their

physical appearance in the avatar. The software and management team had decided on the following policy: people must use mappings of their own person as a base for their avatars. This decision was driven by Dave's philosophy that people should not be able to "hide" behind an avatar. The principle of "What you see is what you get" should apply, so that people learned to trust one another and be honest with their interactions in the community. Dave felt that if people could select a graphical online persona like in previous examples of virtual worlds - a wizard, or a dog, or a green two-headed alien - then that would only encourage other falsities. The purpose of Social Kinetics was to encourage people to extend themselves via their avatars - meet new people, and make new connections. Dave felt that a big determining factor in the success of his software was that the avatar should approximate its human owner as much as possible - not just personality but physical likeness.

The third ingredient was the avatar software itself. Once a personality was assigned and physical characteristics mapped, the customer would be given an avatar. At that point the avatar would join the community and at the same time begin to build up its own identity, by collecting and aggregating data about its owner.

The beta testing would include 20 people, who would each be registered and given an avatar free of charge. Dave and his team had yet to decide how much it would cost for people to register with Social Kinetics once the product went live. They would probably have no choice but to offer it free or at a very low cost initially, in order to gain a critical mass of customers. When that critical mass was achieved, then they would start charging enough to finally make a profit. It would probably take a couple of years to reach that point. If they were lucky a small profit margin could be achieved within a year. It really all depended on how much media coverage they got and how much word-of-mouth via the Web.

Also Dave conceded that competitors were bound to pop up at some point in the future. They would "leverage" off his invention, he thought to himself sarcastically. A couple of those future competitors would be BigCo's too, companies that already had a platform and a customer base to utilise. Dave sighed. Yes the road to riches and fame was going to be a long one! Dave also had a feeling the biggest challenge would be keeping the money people under control (the Venture Capitalists, investors, merchant bankers, lawyers, et al). As he kept reminding himself, this was his first go at running a business. He had a lot to learn and would be sorely tested in the months to come.

Chapter 37

During the time that Social Kinetics was developing its beta avatar software, Declan Atomz had been visiting the alien world regularly. He had now built a foundation of knowledge about the aliens and their world. And he was almost at the point of understanding their language. That is, he could communicate at a very basic level. Their language was very difficult for him to learn and use however, because it did not rely only on words. Sound was an important factor - harmonies, tone and pitch were all aspects of the way they communicated with each other. Also Declan had discovered that they could form groups and communicate telepathically between groups. There was apparently no loss of information or misinterpretation when group communication occurred, which Declan observed was in stark contrast to humans. Declan had definite limitations in his communications with the aliens, but he knew

enough “words” and signs to make himself understood and to pick up parts of their conversations.

Declan had discovered that the alien civilization was very advanced technologically, which was hardly a surprise. But there were also things he did not expect. One was that their main source of energy seemed to come from within their own bodies. The ritual he had observed in one of his first visits - in which twelve alien beings raised their long arms in the air and bumped their hands together, which produced an intense white light - this turned out to be a method of generating power. The white light was a very powerful energy source. He had seen the white light being used in construction of machines and to fuel their travel. The alien civilization had a form of travel that was difficult for the human mind to comprehend. The tunnels in space that transported Declan to and from earth in the blink of an eye, these were not a natural phenomena. That is, they weren't wormholes in space and they weren't black holes. The alien civilization had created the tunnels from their own technology and genius.

Another aspect of the alien culture that Declan had not expected was their overwhelming curiosity and eagerness to experience other forms of life. For example they were very curious about human life, but weren't content to learn about it by observing or even just conversing with humans. The aliens seemed to have a philosophy of “learn by doing”, or “learn by being” would perhaps be a better description. The aliens explored Earth by using human avatars, which allowed them to experience human civilization first-hand. And Declan had discovered he was not the only human being whose body was being used as an avatar. There were hundreds of others throughout Earth and Declan had sometimes observed them via the holograms. He had seen an Indian woman avatar, an American boy avatar, an Iranian man avatar, plus a few others from other countries. But from what Declan had managed to deduce, it seemed he was so far the only human being the aliens had invited to their world. Declan was using their alien form as an avatar and apparently this was some form of experiment to the aliens. Declan was certainly aware of being closely observed during the times he visited. Declan had also observed the aliens using other life forms as avatars. But he had not observed any return visits from any of those other life forms. So as far as Declan knew, he was the first “alien” life form to visit the world of the tall thin grey beings. Declan felt privileged to be chosen, but he was wondering just how far they would let him explore. Was Declan the first experiment in truly two-way communication between this strange new world, with its vivid yellow and red atmosphere and tall stately inhabitants, and Earth?

Chapter 38

Social-Kinetics the company had taken great care in its selection of the first 20 public beta testers of “Social Kinetics” (or Social-K as it had now been nicknamed), the first online community software to use avatars. They had hundreds of applicants, mostly through word-of-mouth on the “blogosphere” (the name for the community of people who had weblogs). Social Kinetics was being bandied around as the next wave of social software and therefore had received a great deal of interest from bloggers. People were very excited about this breakthrough social software application. Even Microsoft and IBM had started sniffing around.

The twenty people finally selected came from a variety of countries. There were 11 from America, 2 from England, 1 from Germany, 1 from Italy, 1 from

Australia, 1 from France, 1 from Japan, 1 from China, and 1 from New Zealand. There was a good mix of ages and backgrounds, and the Social-Kinetics team had opted for a straight 50/50 split between men and women. They decided to only use people who had an adequate level of sophistication using the Web, only because they did not want to spend precious time up-skilling people in the basics of the Internet.

As Dave scanned the list of 20 names he was about to announce as beta testers on the Social-K mailing list, he wondered how many of them truly understood that they were going to be a part of Web history. These 20 people would be the first people on Earth to conduct aspects of their social life through an avatar – and not just any avatar, but a Social-K one. Dave believed that his Social-K avatar software had many of the features and functionality of an Artificial Intelligence machine. Some people didn't believe that claim, but Dave insisted the future would look back kindly on Social-K as the first practical example of AI in mainstream life. Dave thought to himself how lucky these twenty pioneer beta testers were. Each of them were about to own an online persona that would assume their characteristics and in time develop its own unique personality...perhaps its own unique identity! As Dave pressed the "Send" button to deliver the announcement of the beta testers names to the Social-K mailing list, he allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. He felt he was close now to his dream of dot com fame and riches.

Chapter 39

Declan Atomz opened up the email from the Social-K mailing list. He knew what he'd find and sure enough near the end of the list of 20 people he saw his own name:

'Declan Atomz, New Zealand. 30 years old Technical Analyst from Auckland. Hobbies include astronomy and painting.'

Declan sighed. What was the ET up to this time, he wondered. Declan did not know much about this "Social-K" product, only that the ET had forwarded his name for application during one of its "visits". The ET seemed to be branching out now from its artistic endeavours, which had taken Declan from media star in New Zealand to a minor celebrity in Australia and Britain. He hadn't cracked the American market yet with his paintings, but Declan thought that the ET was eyeing this as the next big target. Sometimes Declan wondered if the ET was playing an elaborate game with him. Maybe there were about 10 aliens all around the world who were competing to see which one of their human avatars would make the cover of Time magazine first. But Declan doubted that was the case, he thought that "his alien" was simply exploring human culture and celebrity happened to be an important aspect of our culture – at least in the Western world.

Declan had also noticed that on occasions the ET, seemingly the same one that used him as an avatar, also used James Hore as an avatar. James and Declan had become friends, or at least the ET had made friends with Hore. Declan of course had to continue the charade even when the ET wasn't visiting. Declan found Hore to be a little flaky and disliked having to meet with him. But sometimes when James and Declan were having coffee, Declan (the real one) would notice James' expression suddenly change. The conversation would veer into talk of astronomy and computing. Their talk would never be specific to the ET's world, which was frustrating to Declan, but nevertheless Declan felt that the ET was trying to engage him in conversation using James Hore as the intermediary. James (the ET version) would then suddenly

leave the table and head out of the café, or wherever it was they happened to be at the time. Declan could only assume that the ET was using James Hore to further explore the world. Perhaps it was curious about James' broadcasting power. Certainly Declan had noticed an increase in tabloid coverage of James recently. James had said a few uncharacteristic things that were controversial, for example he made some uncomplimentary comments about the United Nations Secretary-General - which ended up upsetting the New Zealand Prime Minister and making the front page of most newspapers.

Declan reluctantly clicked the "Reply" button in the email and wrote a quick note accepting the invitation to be a beta tester for Social-K and thanking them for the opportunity. He didn't even bother visiting the Social-K website to see what their product was and what would be required of him. He sighed and looked up into the air. "I'll let you handle it", he said.

The next evening Declan spent a few hours filling out online forms for Social Kinetics. Most of the forms were questionnaires designed to assess his personality and characteristics. The rest of the forms were administration ones. Declan found the process draining, but just after midnight he finally completed and submitted the forms along with several photographs of himself. The photos had to show a front profile of his face, two side profiles and a back profile. Also he had to submit a few body shots (luckily he didn't have to appear naked!).

Chapter 40

On the other side of the world, in a large office in the heart of Silicon Valley, Dave Darwin and his team worked through the night for two weeks straight to prepare the first Social Kinetics community. It was now nearly 10pm on the evening before the go-live day. Dave and his team had just completed the last avatar.

Hector Lopez was spread-eagled on one of the office sofas. He looked completely worn out and it was almost enough to evoke some sympathy from his office nemesis Lydia Grep. Almost.

"Hector, I need to have a word with you." Lydia said, leaning over Hector and checking to see if he was still awake.

Hector groaned, like a bear that had been disturbed just as it was settling into a long period of hibernation. "What now Lydia", hissed Hector, "I did all those little fixes you asked me to do, I finished them all. The testers have Oked everything, so there's no way I'm going back in!" He drilled his body further into the sofa, as if to say 'nobody is going to remove me from my current position'.

"Don't worry, it's nothing to do with programming. Everything is done." Lydia tried to sound soothing, which was very difficult given her history of squabbling with Hector. She disliked Hector's personality and the way he constantly talked at her and not to her. But Hector was one of the original employees along with Lydia - in fact they'd been the first two employees of the company after Dave himself. The company had grown to 35 employees now, but Lydia felt that Dave, her and Hector were still the ones that were essentially driving it from a technical and creative perspective. So when it came down to it, Lydia had to admit that she trusted Hector as she did no other Social-K person apart from Dave himself.

There was one thing about the Social-K software that still bothered her, even as late as the night before go-live of the product. She didn't feel she could discuss it

with Dave, as he might be offended. So Hector was the only one she felt able to talk to about it.

“Hector,” Lydia said, addressing the back of Hector’s head as he tried to wiggle further into the sofa (perhaps hoping that the sofa would swallow him whole, thus allowing him to escape whatever nagging message Lydia was about to deliver him). “Do you think there is a chance the avatars we’re building will eventually turn against their owners? You know, like all those nightmares of Artificial Intelligence? The Matrix, machines turn against man – all that stuff?”

Hector sighed deeply, as if he was in great distress. Lydia knew that he was thinking “oh no, not this again!” But she ploughed forward with her speech.

“I mean, one of the selling points of our avatars is that they will evolve and eventually gain their own unique identities. Now initially the avatar will only have a ‘life of its own’ when it is busy collecting and aggregating data about its owner from the Web. This is the first stage of an avatar’s ‘evolution’. The avatar will learn how to interpret information and data about its owner and begin making automated decisions on their behalf. Now let’s move to the next evolutionary step in an avatar’s ‘life’. Now the avatar begins to make decisions that will have a social impact on its owner. I.e. it’s not just about data now, it’s playing with peoples emotions and feelings. Let’s say the avatar decides: “Hey, I think my owner would like to meet such-and-such a person. Why don’t I send such-and-such a message?” Which is by the way one of the reasons this software is labelled “social software”. It’ll be able to automate certain social functions, like introductions and evaluating first impressions. So the avatar goes ahead and contacts the other person, or more specifically it sends a message to that person’s avatar. Now let’s say the other avatar reads the message, but thinks: “Hmmm, I’m not convinced my owner wants to converse with this person. If I compare our data with the other guy’s data, there aren’t enough matches.” So the avatar rejects the message. Now let’s say the owner of the first avatar – the one that sent the automated message – looks at the logs the next day and sees that his avatar has been sending messages to another person. The message was rejected, so this guy takes a look at the other person’s profile to see why. “Oh”, he thinks, “looks like we don’t have much in common so I’m glad my avatar’s message got rejected.” Now let’s assume that this avatar’s personality has deviated slightly from its owners by this point. Say the owner is in real life a painfully shy person, so is reluctant to meet new people. But what if the information on the Web about this guy suggests he isn’t so shy when he’s speaking via the Internet! Which is a fairly common thing, people will say things on the ‘Net they wouldn’t dare say in real life. So anyway, the guy’s avatar has evolved into a less shy personality than its owner. So the avatar wants to have another crack at introducing its owner to the other person. So the avatar rejects the rejection!! Now I won’t detail the rest of the story, but suffice to say Hector that if we escalate this scenario then we could easily have a bunch of avatars that are doing things in Social-K that are contrary to what their owners want. What I mean is – there’s going to be a conflict of interests between the owner and its avatar. Now let’s escalate further and assume that the identity of the avatar begins to subsume the identity of its human owner. What if there came a time when everything is done via the Internet – paying bills, applying for driving licences, voting, getting a passport. The works! That future isn’t that far off you know. And by that point, an avatar may have evolved to the point where it is capable of controlling a person’s – a human’s – entire identity online!!”

Lydia paused and took a deep breath. She was getting carried away again, which is why she never told Dave these stories. Hector had heard this a couple of

times before and had always dismissed it as a fantastical dream, suggesting that she'd watched 'The Matrix' a few too many times.

Lydia looked down at Hector to see what his reaction was this time. He'd fallen asleep, from sheer exhaustion at working such long hours to make Dave Darwin's dream of social software with avatars a reality. Lydia sighed and reflected that perhaps she was exaggerating. After all, they were all working towards a new form of online community and just because it took the level of computer automation in social software a step further, that didn't mean it was a step towards a Dystopian future where machines ruled the world. Lydia was proud of her involvement in Social Kinetics and she had a feeling it would be a huge success, bringing her some measure of fame and riches too. She'd hit the jackpot when she accepted Dave Darwin's offer to become the first employee of this dot com. She should be happy, excited at what was about to become reality when the beta test went live tomorrow morning. So why did she have this nagging doubt at the back of her mind?

Chapter 41

On the first day of beta testing for Social Kinetics, Declan was to log in at 8pm New Zealand time. It would be daytime in the United States and morning time in England. As part of their contract with Social Kinetics, the 20 beta testers had agreed to log in at the same time every day at least for the first 2 weeks. Thereafter schedules would be drawn up so that the beta testers would operate in shifts. This was necessary because there were so few testers and the company wanted to thoroughly test how the avatars interacted in groups. That was after all the raison d'être of social software, that it was groups of people interacting together as a community.

Declan assumed that the ET would "visit" him at or near 8pm, as it was the ET who had signed him up for this thing. Declan was not a fan of online community systems. He had never been interested in online gaming systems like Quest or Sim City, and he had been unable to grok the current trend of social software like Friendster and Ryze. Actually he had signed up to Ryze, which was touted as a way to meet people with the same interests. Declan had thought it was worth a go, as it didn't seem to be one of those dodgy dating systems. Maybe he'd meet some fellow amateur astronomers, he'd thought. But after a week Declan had given up on Ryze. All he had gotten out of it was a couple of spam emails from people who had signed up to Ryze and emailed hundreds of other people with spurious messages like "Hi I see you're from New Zealand, I've always wanted to visit your beautiful country!" Declan thought it was a waste of time conversing with such people. Thereafter he had refused to have anything to do with social software, dismissing it as a fad that only young single people and people who had too much time on their hands would use. So it was with some dismay that he discovered that the ET had signed his name up to this "Social-K" thing. The name "Social Kinetics" made him blanch, it sounded a bit like a cult religion to Declan. He hoped the ET would "save him" from having to use Social-K, just as it had saved him from fronting the media.

Just before 8pm Declan found himself travelling through the tunnel to the alien world. It was with a sense of relief that he felt the bright red and violet lights rush past him. This time the harmonies sounded almost soothing to his ears (well as soothing as it could possibly be while blasting at its usual rock concert volume). When Declan touched down on alien terra firma, he was immediately whisked away to one of the buildings. Usually they let him wander around outside for a bit, to stare

up at the deep yellow and red skyline (which Declan never tired of seeing) and get used to his tall thin grey body once again. But not this time. Declan wondered if they had something new to show him.

In the blink of an eye Declan was transported inside. In all the months he had been visiting this planet, he still not seen any doors in this world! How convenient it must be to be able to transport yourself everywhere without having to open doors, thought Declan dreamily. On this occasion there were three aliens waiting for him. One of them stepped forward and began the hologram projection a couple of feet in front of Declan's eyes. Now Declan could see why they were in a hurry to get started, for he was watching himself back on earth logging into the Social-K network. The ET that was using Declan as an avatar was about to start using another avatar – this time a virtual one on the World Wide Web. It was kind of ironic, an avatar using an avatar.

The ET had successfully logged in and Declan could make out a likeness of himself on the computer screen. The likeness was amazingly good. It looked a little bit fake, like watching an average quality CGI animation in a movie. The skin was a bit too smooth and his online features were a tad too clean cut. But otherwise it was a very good likeness of him, down to his longish dank brown hair (he had been growing it long, to fit in with his new artist celebrity image) and his still unfashionable glasses. Declan couldn't help wondering how odd this all was - he was watching himself watch himself as an online avatar!

Suddenly Declan noticed out of the corner of his eye that one of the other aliens was reaching a long stick-thin grey arm out towards him. He turned to see what it was doing, just as a very bright white light pored from the alien's outstretched hand and directly into Declan's eyes. Declan could feel himself tumbling and soon he felt himself whizzing through a tunnel. Where were they taking him now? Declan didn't have much time to ponder it, soon a flash of white light enveloped him and he then he had no idea where he was.

Declan looked around him. He seemed to be floating in a space that was predominantly white, but it wasn't a smooth whiteness. The whiteness shimmered as if it was made up of radio waves. It seemed like he was watching a gigantic tv screen that was taking up his entire view horizon. As Declan adjusted his vision to the shimmery whiteness, it occurred to him that it looked like a computer monitor display. The whiteness had edges, as if it was pixelated.

As Declan continued to look around and wonder where he was, a figure approached him from the side. Declan suddenly noticed it and whirled around. It was a Japanese man.

"Hello, I am Hiroshi Ito." The figure bowed deeply. Declan returned the bow.

"Hi, I'm Declan. Hey, where is this place? I mean, what is this place?" Declan noticed that Hiroshi also shimmered and his clothes looked very bright and shiny. Hiroshi wore a black suit, a white shirt and a vivid looking red tie. He had dark black hair and a kind-looking face. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. Declan couldn't get over the rainbow patterns that seemed to glint into Declan's eyes from Hiroshi's black suit. That didn't seem natural, thought Declan.

"I am not sure what you mean," said Hiroshi with a quizzical expression, "we are here in the Social-K community, meeting each other for the first time."

Declan's chin dropped and his eyes widened. Oh my God, he thought, the alien beings have put me into an online world of avatars! He looked around and it all made sense to him now. Everything shimmered and appeared pixelated because it was a virtual computer world. Somehow he had been transported into a cyberspace world of bits and bytes. He looked down at himself and as he watched his body flicker like a

neon light bulb, he almost laughed at his predicament. Here he was, acting as the avatar of his human self who was in turn acting as the avatar of the ET. Not to mention that up until a minute ago, he was using a grey alien body as an avatar!

Hirochi interrupted Decaln's monologue.

"I am sorry Declan, I have to go now. So many other people to meet! Isn't this exciting. We will meet again, I am sure." Hirochi thrust out a hand to shake Declan's. Declan hesitantly poked out his hand and placed it in Hirochi's outstretched palm. He couldn't feel anything at all, there was no flesh to feel and no pressure on his hand. It was like shaking thin air. Hirochi took back his arm and promptly disappeared into what appeared to be a black hole. Declan shook his head in amazement. He wondered whether he was dreaming or hallucinating.

Declan decided to go exploring. He found he could move lightening fast. As he moved to and fro, he noticed dozens of what looked like black portholes. They were visible in the white flickery space only from certain angles. As there was nowhere else to go, Declan decided to go down one of the portholes and see where it took him. He took off and found himself hurtling through a tunnel – not unlike the experience of zooming through the tunnel the aliens had built to travel between worlds. Only this tunnel had no bright lights and loud noises. It was a rush of darkness and it was over in a second. He looked up and found himself in a meeting room with a large oval-shaped glass table in the centre. Sitting around the table in glass chairs were 5 people. They all turned to look at Declan.

"Hi there," a large American man with a booming voice said, "We're having an informal bloggers meeting. You want to join in?"

"Sure," Declan said and moved towards the table. He saw that the group had 3 men and two women. They were of varying ages and they all seemed to know each other. Declan sat down in one of the glass chairs, feeling a little wave of electricity buzz him as he did so (the first physical sensation he'd experienced so far in this world).

The garrulous American spoke again. He was in his forties and had black-grey balding hair. He wore a tee shirt with the words "I blog therefore I am" written on it, together with jeans. "We're all friends from the blogosphere, so we decided to meet here initially to break the ice with our avatars. My name's Mike", he reached out a hairy arm to shake Declan's. Once again a sensation less handshake ensued. Declan introduced himself and, as a way to ingratiate himself amongst the group, mentioned that he had a weblog too - only he didn't get a chance to publish to it very much. Mike roared with laughter and a couple of the others tittered. A woman in her forties piped up in a posh London accent "Some would argue that we post to ours too much!" The others laughed. A young guy in his early twenties with nerdy glasses and a white tee shirt with the Apple logo on it spoke.

"Well I guess that's why we're all interested in this software. It gives us a chance to meet up in the virtual world. I mean, this is a wonderful experience getting to meet people I look up to (he looked at Mike) and even people I've had massive arguments with on web development issues (he looked sheepishly at a tall skinny guy with frizzy black hair, who in turn blushed a little)."

A woman in her twenties then spoke, with an Italian accent.

"What interests me is that Social-K avatars could be the next big Knowledge Management application. I'm quite excited to find out how my avatar gathers and processes information it finds about me on the Web. The data of course is primarily to be used by the avatar in order for it to learn about my personality and adopt parts of it to use in this virtual community. That is, during times when I allow it to roam around

in an automated state. Which I'm not sure I am comfortable with. I'll be interested in your views on that. But anyway, back to my point, it's interesting coming from a knowledge management point of view, because the avatar will probably find information about me I didn't know about, or aggregate it in ways I hadn't thought of. It's a very interesting experiment in knowledge management, as well as in community forming."

Declan decided that he didn't feel up to philosophical discussions on the Social Kinetics software and its relation to the blogosphere. He excused himself from the group.

"I'll see you guys later. I want to explore a bit, see what's out there." Declan said, getting up from the glass table.

The tall guy with the frizzy black hair looked at Declan with an odd expression, as if his face was slightly too tall and narrow to be human. Maybe there was something wrong with the design of that person's avatar, thought Declan. In the back of his mind he wondered if it was one of the extraterrestrials, but he decided that it probably wasn't and perhaps he was thinking too much about the aliens.

Declan dived into another black porthole and found himself in a vast room with hundreds of robots crawling around. The robots carried big packs of ones and zeros on their backs and were depositing their loads at several huge wells. They were like bees carrying pollen to their hives. Declan watched as tens of hundreds of robots, all small nondescript looking grey things with tiny arms and box-like bodies, came and went from the vast wells – depositing their payload of data and then zipping away into the ether. The swarm of robots was mesmerising to watch and Declan stood there for minutes on end gazing at the busy scene. Finally he noticed a huge logo stencilled on the side of one of the wells. In colourful but plain letters it read: Google. Declan gasped. This must be the banks of databases that Googlebots delivered to after their daily runs of gathering data about webpages. Thousands of automated Googlebots would travel out to the big wide Web, on the hour every hour, and collect bits of data. They would then fly back to the wells, add their new-found data, and once again zoom out into cyberspace looking for fresh booty. Declan wondered whether this was a real scene he was viewing, or one engineered by Social Kinetics, or even his imagination running riot again. Before he could answer his own question, he ran over to another porthole and jumped in.

This time Declan found himself inside a dark and smoky factory. He could hear thousands of old typewriters clacking away noisily and relentlessly. Declan squinted and peered through the thick fog-like substance that was impairing his view. He could see a multitude of little skinny black insects banging away at large and rusting typewriters. They looked like dung beetles, but surely not. As Declan adjusted his eyes and began to see more clearly, he could see that the black beetles, with their six stumpy legs, were typing at a frenetic pace. Declan decided to descend onto the factory floor for a closer look. The smell was putrefying when he got down to the floor. As he raised his head to exhale, he saw that the cavernous ceiling was layered with smoke, like dark clouds on a stormy winter night. Declan turned to the nearest desk to him. The little black beetle that was hammering away at his gigantic typewriter failed to notice Declan. In fact none of the beetles paid any attention to their large and gangly human visitor. Declan leaned down (the closer he got to the floor, the smellier it was) and looked at what the shiny black-shelled creature was typing. On clean white A4 paper he read the words:

"Astounding New Software Lets You Find Out Almost Anything About Anyone. Brand-New Version 9.0 gives you instant access to a database of 200 million

U.S. citizens alone, compiled from hard-to-get records such as real estate, birth records, DMV, and more! Click here to download it right now (no charge card needed). Yes, find out everything you ever wanted to know about:

- your friends
- your family
- your enemies
- your employees
- yourself - Is Someone Using Your Identity?

Did you know that you can search for anyone, anytime, anywhere, right on the Internet?

Click here: [Download Page](#)

This mammoth collection of Internet investigative tools & research sites will provide you with nearly 400 gigantic research resources.”

Declan leaned back and shook his head in amazement. So that’s where spam comes from!

By now Declan was wondering if he was hallucinating. He looked around and spotted another black porthole with which to escape into. He knew now that the portholes were hypertext links and allowed him to move to another part of the Web. He wondered where this one would take him. He dove in.

“Sorry you can’t come through here” said a stern statesman-like voice. Declan looked up and saw a man in his 50’s with a huge walrus moustache. He stood erect and had his arms crossed over his puffed-up chest. He appeared to have a uniform on, but Declan could not place it. It almost looked like a soldier’s uniform, as it was drab brown and had insignia on it. Declan looked closer at the insignia. It read: “New York Times”.

“I just want to come and have a look. I came here via one of those portholes. Why can’t I come in?” asked Declan.

The man with the silver-coloured walrus moustache raised his eyebrows, as if he met many of Declan’s type and was tired of having to explain every time. “You need a username and password my son”, he said. It looked like the walrus moustache was doing the talking, as Declan could not see the man’s lips – just this enormous bushy moustache rustling about like a shrub on a windy day. The man stuck out an arm and bumped Declan in the chest with a clipboard. Oww, Declan said rubbing his chest. I thought I couldn’t feel anything in this pace, he muttered to himself. Declan took the clipboard and looked at the form that was attached to it. He accepted the pen that the walrus man handed to him and proceeded to fill in the form. But after filling in his name, age, occupation and yearly household income (lying about all four), Declan suddenly got impatient and decided to go somewhere else. He dropped the clipboard at the walrus’s feet and leaped over to another porthole. He quickly went in. The walrus shouted after him: “Please come again!”

Next Declan found himself at a house. It looked like a party was going on, as he could hear lots of noise. Declan moved up the pathway to the front door. It was a pretty house, painted mostly in white but with blue paint on the windowsills and doorways. The roof was also painted blue. The house section was nicely decorated with tidy green shrubbery and neat-looking plants. There were a couple of large cactuses growing on the veranda. As Declan got to the big oak door, which had a stylised logo stencilled into the doorknocker, Declan could hear arguing going on inside. He politely knocked on the door, using the logo-inscribed iron knocker. Nobody answered the door, in fact when he knocked on it the door creaked open.

Declan decided to go in, as it sounded like a lot of people were there already so one more wouldn't hurt.

There was an intense argument going on. On one side was a tall man in his late forties with thin yellow and greying hair. He had a prominent forehead and what would normally have been a gentle-looking face, but right at this moment it was scrunched up in rage as he led one side of the fiery debate. The man was dressed simply but neatly in blue jeans and a white tee shirt with a picture of "The Hulk" on it, from the most recent Ang Lee movie. The guy he was arguing with was in his twenties. He was shorter than the other man, had neat brown hair and nerdy glasses, and wore tan Dockers and a black tee shirt with the words "Children of the Revolution" on it. The two men were arguing over a bunch of acronyms that Declan did not know anything about. Flanking each of the protagonists were two groups of men and women, who were all dressed nearly exactly the same as their respective leader. The people standing behind or to the sides of the yellow-haired man with the Hulk tee shirt were all wearing white tee shirts. All of the tee shirts said something different, but they all looked similar to each other in colour and style. On the other side were men and women who all wore black tee shirts with the words "Children of the Revolution" on them. How odd, thought Declan.

The argument was filled with technical jargon, but the amazing thing was that each side appeared to be refuting the other side's arguments using exactly the same words but in a different order. For example, Declan heard the yellow-haired man say something like:

"XYZ is orthogonal to TUV because of the fractal nature of the semantics and the layers of meaning in the underlying metadata."

And the brown-haired man with nerdy glasses would reply:

"Ah but that means TUV is fractal, so the underlying nature of the semantics of TUV is orthogonal to the layers of metadata in XYZ."

Or something like that. Because he didn't understand what they were bickering about, and the argument seemed to go back and forth without any sign of resolution, Declan decided to leave and go somewhere else.

At this point Declan was getting weary of wandering the virtual space that the extraterrestrial had put him. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stand being a digital avatar in the world of Social Kinetics. But as there was no sign of being rescued by the alien beings, Declan had no choice but to follow another link and hope it would be a place where he could rest.

But unfortunately the porthole Declan followed this time led him to The Land of Never-ending Pop-Ups. This was a place where large creatures that looked like decks of gaudy coloured cards kept popping up out of nowhere, scaring the bejeebers out of Declan. He could see lots of bold red and purple and yellow banners with words that looked like they were Russian or Norwegian. Maybe that was because they moved so fast that they were a blur and couldn't be read. In any case Declan tried to run away from the flashy card creatures, but no matter how fast he went or what direction he went in, the Pop-Ups kept coming. Soon Declan was overwhelmed with Pop-Ups and they began to pile on top of him. Declan was being crushed by these nightmarish thin but heavy creatures. Declan reached out a hand from underneath the silent but seething mass of Pop-Ups. Luckily he managed to grasp the edge of a porthole and edge himself into it. Declan desperately needed a rest now. Hopefully the next place would be quieter.

And it was. Declan happily stumbled into a place that he recognized as the CSS Zen Garden. He pulled himself together, looking about at the simple yet elegant

design of the “homepage”. This was the first recognizable website he had visited so far and he was grateful to be someplace that he knew. Declan wandered around the pale blue garden with green and purple water lilies and white-flowered trees, and breathed in the aesthetic beauty of it all. The construction of the garden was a marvel to behold. He spotted someone over by one of the quietly burbling fountains, so he walked over to where they stood. It turned out to be two people, a young Latin American man and a woman with black hair and big eyebrows. The woman introduced herself as Lydia Grep and the man as Hector Lopez. They said they were from Social Kinetics and would like a word. Declan was pleased to see two normal looking people and he was also grateful for the chance to discuss his experiences with two of the people who created the virtual world of Social-K.

Chapter 42

As Declan approached the two Social Kinetics employees, he noticed that they both looked serious. He sensed that something was wrong, but he decided to act cheerfully and let them lead the conversation.

“Mr Atomz, hello I’m Lydia Grep from Social Kinetics. I’m the Senior Interaction Designer, from the group that designed your avatars. This here is Hector Lopez, who is our Lead Developer on the project.”

Declan said hello to each of the two Social-K employees. He then asked if they were avatars too at this moment.

“Yes we are Declan,” Lydia said, “In fact after the first few trial avatars ours were the first avatars we designed that were based on actual people. So we’re used to them now” she said with a smile.

Suddenly Lydia’s face assumed a serious look. Her thick dark eyebrows scowled down and her thin mouth straightened.

“Declan we’ve been monitoring you since your avatar began the beta test program about 6 hours ago now.”

Declan’s mouth fell open. He couldn’t believe he’d been in the virtual world for 6 hours. It seemed like only an hour or so since the aliens had deposited him here.

Lydia went on: “Declan your avatar is exhibiting abnormal behaviour, things we hadn’t expected – and frankly things we didn’t think were possible at this early stage.” She looked at Hector, as if she wasn’t sure how to phrase what she was going to say next. Hector looked back, not willing to assume the reins of the conversation from Lydia. Lydia continued:

“Declan, you logged off from the Social-K website about 5 hours ago. You were only on there for an hour, then you logged right out. But...” Lydia stared at Declan’s avatar form. “But your avatar has continued to run. I mean, you, as an avatar – “ Lydia pointed at Declan’s body – “are operating autonomously.”

Hector broke in to the conversation now. “It shouldn’t be possible right now for an avatar to operate autonomously in our virtual world. You see we build each avatar with a minimum set of features and functionality, but with a very complex in-built program that enables the avatar to learn and in effect grow its knowledge and personality – gradually and methodically. It’s cutting edge AI.” Hector said with pride and a hint of a smile.

“However,” Hector said, his face turning serious again, “it takes time for the avatar to grow its personality and character. Little bits of knowledge get added every day, and cumulatively that knowledge gets absorbed and recycled into the avatar’s

brain – well, I call it a brain but Dave, my boss, doesn't like me calling it that. The knowledge that has been gathered gets processed into the central program and bit by bit it builds a personality and character based on the incoming data. But my point is, this process takes time (he emphasized the word 'time'). It's like an evolutionary process..."

Hector paused to see what Declan Atomz's avatar's reaction was.

Declan had been quietly taking all this in. He nodded at Hector to go on. Lydia took over again.

"What Hector is saying is that we are not sure why your avatar, I mean you, have gained the ability to act autonomously so quickly. We had expected it would take months for autonomy to start happening. And frankly we were not 100% it would work at all. But you've been in this virtual world for, what, six hours and already your avatar – argh, I mean you – have been able to interact in the community while your human counterpart is logged off. And believe me we've checked whether anyone could control you – as an avatar – without being connected to our servers. But that shouldn't be possible."

"The other thing," Lydia continued with a nervous glance at Hector, "is that we've been monitoring your software, like we explained we could do prior to you joining the community. And we've noticed some very strange data coming in and going out of you."

Declan thought they must be talking about the dream-like experiences he'd had since being in this virtual world – seeing Googlebots depositing data into wells, watching black beetles type spam, being refused entry to the New York Times website by a man with a walrus moustache, seeing two groups of people arguing in a nice white house with blue trimmings.

"Yes," Declan said quizzically, "I have had some odd dreams." But then he looked around at the CSS Zen Garden. "But wait a minute, is this a dream now? Am I really inside the CSS Zen Garden website?"

Hector replied "Well actually this is a virtual three-dimensional representation of the CSS Zen Garden website, built especially for our community."

Lydia interrupted. "You say you've been having dreams? What kind?"

Declan explained about the Googlebots, the beetles, and the other occurrences. Hector and Lydia looked at each other with confused expressions.

"Well Declan I'm not sure what happened to you. We'll have to do some more tests perhaps." Said Lydia, looking over at Hector for affirmation.

"I can't explain it for certain," said Hector, "but one thing I have been investigating is how to integrate human creativity into the avatar program. I have a hunch that the subconscious part of the human mind may be able to connect to and swap data with the avatar's central server. Think of the human subconscious as being a web service, connecting to the avatar software using some type of shared protocol. Hey I don't know how this would work exactly yet...I've just been playing with ideas and so far I haven't actually programmed any of it. One reason is that it's extremely hard to control what would happen. But maybe it's already happened, naturally...but why only in you?"

Declan decided not to mention about the extraterrestrials. He suspected that the bots and beetles had something to do with them. However Declan was by now concerned that he had been stuck inside the virtual world for six hours. Why had the ET that was using Declan's body as an avatar logged off after just one hour, leaving Declan stranded in this virtual world? Declan was beginning to be a bit scared. If he's been here for six hours then how long would the aliens leave him here for? What was

the ET doing while Declan was down here? What about Florrie, was she alright? All these questions and more went through Declan's mind.

"Have you tried to contact me in real life? Asked Declan, "I mean, the real Declan Atomz not me as an avatar?"

"Yes but we don't know where you are", said Lydia. "That's why we decided to come into our virtual world to ask you. Maybe, somehow, you would know where your owner is. Actually we didn't want to come into the virtual world, because we wanted only the 20 beta avatars in here during this testing period. But because of the, er, special circumstances of your avatar – I mean *you*, oh identities are so confusing - because you have become an autonomous, um, software program already, that's why we thought we'd ask you whether you knew where your, ah, human counterpart is."

Declan shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know."

Lydia and Hector then bid farewell to Declan, or Declan's Social-K avatar as they assumed he was, and promised to keep in touch regarding the real Declan's whereabouts.

"We'll tell you when we find him," said Lydia, a bit uncomfortable that she was making promises to a Web software program.

Chapter 43

Florrie was beginning to be concerned at Declan's behaviour. She had been very patient with him, allowing him to do his paintings or play on his computer any time of the day or night. Often Declan was up all of the night and then slept all through the next day. Florrie didn't like that type of schedule, because it meant she didn't see him much. And when she did see him, he was distant and wouldn't communicate much. Florrie also did not like the increasing amount of time that Declan spent with James Hore, the media celebrity. Initially she had gotten a kick out of Declan's friendship with the star television personality, because she got to tell her friends and workmates that her Declan was mates with James Hore. But after a while the novelty wore off and Florrie began to get annoyed at how much time Declan was spending with James.

Now Florrie had just about reached breaking point. Tonight Declan had been polite and even affectionate when he came home from work, so Florrie had no objections when he went to his computer about 8pm. But after about an hour, Declan had stormed downstairs and told Florrie he was going out. Florrie protested and said that it was about time he spent a night in with her, but Declan had ignored her and went straight out the door. Florrie broke down in tears when Declan slammed the door shut. Why was he acting like this? What had happened to the Declan she once knew?

Florrie went to bed feeling hurt and angry. She woke up at about 4am and noticed with dismay that Declan hadn't arrived home. It was then that she decided to snoop around in Declan's computer room, to see if she could find any reason why he was acting badly. She looked at the vast array of computers, monitors, and astronomy equipment – with his paints and easel also crammed in – and wondered where to start. Got to be the computer, she thought. She sat down at Declan's main computer and started it up. Declan in the past had not minded when she used his computer, although most of the time she had no interest in it. But on this occasion Florrie had a purpose and it was searching for clues as to why Declan had changed. Was he still hooked on the alien story? What was he up to with James Hore? Was he seeing someone else? Florrie didn't know, but she felt it was time to find out.

Florrie checked Declan's email first, but found nothing in there apart from a lot of correspondence with a company called Social Kinetics. It seemed Declan had signed himself up to a beta test of a new software product. Nothing wrong with that, thought Florrie. She then checked his Internet Explorer browsing history, but again she found nothing controversial. The Social Kinetics website had been heavily hit. Florrie decided she would ask Declan about Social Kinetics when he came back in. Maybe she could join in the Social Kinetics testing some way, to get her closer to Declan again. If they were involved in the same activities, then that may be enough to get their communication back to where it used to be. Florrie desperately wanted her old Declan back. Just then Florrie noticed that an email had arrived. It was from a man called Dave Darwin. Curious, Florrie opened the freshly arrived email and read it:

“Declan,

As you know I am the Chief Executive and founder of Social Kinetics Ltd. You are currently participating along with 20 other people in the beta testing of our promising new software. Members of my staff have informed me that your avatar is far and away the most advanced of the 20 avatars currently in the Social Kinetics community space. Your avatar has become autonomous after just a few hours, which is very irregular. Our people are currently looking into why this is the case, as there is no precedent for it.

We would like to speak with you urgently, but are having difficulty contacting you. The phone number you gave us was incorrect and your actual phone number is unlisted. I have tried to get you on your IM and mobile phone, but neither was successful. Therefore I have to resort to email. I hope you get this soon. Can you please contact me as soon as possible. My contact details are below, you may call me collect at any time or reply to this email. It is urgent you contact us as soon as possible Declan.

Sincerely,

Dave Darwin

Chief Executive

Social Kinetics Ltd”

Florrie re-read the message a few times. She hit the “Reply” button.

Chapter 44

There were twelve of them. Lean and spindly, their silver bodies glinted as the yellow and red light refracted off them at odd angles. They were gathered together in a cavernous room inside a building made entirely of a clear glass-like substance. It allowed the light to come in, which provided energy to the building and in turn energized the minds of these elegant thin creatures.

Their meeting had a purpose, as it always did. They were known as the Counsel of Twelve and they were important members of their civilization, perhaps the most important. For they made decisions of significance and they were wise. Not necessarily the oldest. Age in any case had ceased to be a concern to their species. They lived natural lives and died after a time, but death did not mean the end of their existence. They continued on in other bodies, transferring their minds out of their decayed flesh and into fresh avatars. These twelve, gathered now in the building of light, were born generations ago. There were others of their race that had been born an age before them. But the twelve were the chosen ones - predisposed for their roles,

but as a collective force. Individually they were uniquely gifted. But it was as a group that they shone above the others. In unity they met and linked together their minds, which brought more strength and clarity of purpose than any one of them could achieve on their own.

This meeting was to discuss a member of their community who had begun to interact with one of the species they were observing and monitoring. It was the one among them who had contacted the human called Declan Atomz. Human beings were considered to be a species of interest and the aliens had decided to investigate their civilization further. Humans seemed to be of an adequate intelligence, although still very primitive, to cope with being used as avatars. However the alien beings were treating their new find cautiously. So far the aliens had used over 100 humans as avatars, but only one human so far had experienced life through the deep horizonless eyes of the tall grey creatures. That was Declan Atomz and the Counsel of Twelve had disapproved of this. They did not think the human mind was capable of understanding their culture or minds, but they were also wary of the humans because the aliens did not fully understand them yet either. The one who had initiated contact with Declan had done so of its own accord and without the blessing of the Counsel, or any other group for that matter. And if that wasn't enough to unbalance the equilibrium of the community, then inviting the human to explore their world was a breach of trust that the Counsel had to address.

The Counsel linked hands and began to communicate with each other telepathically. Words were not necessary, as their thoughts and ideas were expressive enough to be understood without needing translation using language. In their minds they exchanged ideas and options on what action to take. The one who was the object of their attention had assumed the human form of Declan Atomz. The Counsel were also aware of a second human, called James Hore, who was also being used on occasions as an avatar. The Counsel was concerned. It was too soon for this level of interaction. The aliens had not yet absorbed enough information about the human race.

However the situation was not all bad. The one who was using Declan Atomz's human form as an avatar had made a discovery that the Counsel believed to be of interest. The human civilization it seemed were intelligent enough to have created a communications network called the "Internet". It allowed humans to communicate with each other in real-time over relatively large distances of land. The aliens had created something similar a few generations ago, so the idea of a networked communication system was not new to them. In fact they had long ago achieved the ability to network not only machines but also their own minds. But what interested the aliens in the human "Internet" was the fact that the humans were the first civilization, apart from their own, that had reached a level of technology where networked communications was possible. This meant that the humans were a candidate for possible two-way communications.

The aliens had been searching for another intelligent life form for a long time. They had discovered a number of life forms, but none so far were capable of learning from or interacting in an intelligent manner with the alien's own civilization. When the humans had been discovered recently, it was thought they may be a candidate for two-way communication and interaction for they knew how to use radio transmissions and they appeared to have a number of fairly highly evolved languages. Their technology was adjudged to be relatively primitive, but it was worth exploring further.

The aliens had begun to explore the human civilization by using individuals as avatars. The one who had contacted Declan was however not one of those selected for

the task of analysing the human race. It was a relatively young and inexperienced alien that had contacted Declan – only a couple of generations old. And it had not heeded the Counsel’s instructions that contact with the humans was to be one-way communication only. Further, it was a blatant breach of protocol to invite the human named Declan to visit the alien’s world.

However the Counsel had to admit if it had not been for the one who contacted Declan Atomz, they would not have been so quick to discover the Internet, or the “World Wide Web”, or the human civilization’s very primitive use of virtual avatars. These were inventions that, however primitive they seemed, were worthy of further investigation. So there had been some good to come out of this situation. But the Counsel had to decide what, if anything, to do about the one who was now Declan Atomz. They decided to persuade the one who controlled Declan to continue to explore the Internet and World Wide Web, as this study would be useful in determining whether to begin two-way communication with the human race and if so in what manner. But the Counsel would keep an eye on the situation.

Chapter 45

Florrie was tearful as she wrote the email to Dave Darwin. It was nearly 5am and Declan had still not arrived home after going out suddenly about 9pm last night. She was worried about him and also hurt that Declan would treat her like this. It was very uncharacteristic behaviour. She wondered if this “Social Kinetics” company had something to do with it. As she wrote the email, she knew that Declan would be displeased that she had logged on to his personal computer and opened his email. Florrie wondered if she doing it just to get Declan’s attention. She wasn’t sure of her motives. But she had a feeling Social Kinetics was an important link to the mystery of Declan’s change in character. Plus Florrie had something in common with Social Kinetics: they were looking for Declan.

Florrie’s email said:

“Dear Mr Darwin,

I don’t know where Declan is right now. Frankly he has been acting strangely lately. It started before he began to associate with your company, Social Kinetics, but his behaviour had gotten worse since he signed up to help with your software testing. What is it that your company does and how did Declan get involved? I’m afraid I don’t know much about computers and Declan hasn’t told me about Social Kinetics. I only discovered it when I looked on his computer tonight.

As to Declan’s whereabouts, he has gone out and I don’t know when he will be back. Please can you reply as soon as possible on my phone number 061-09-8789653.

Regards,

Florrie Thompson”

Florrie hit the “Send” button and sat staring blankly at the computer screen for a few minutes. She then deleted the email from Dave Darwin and her reply. She logged out of Declan’s computer and rose to go back to bed. Just then the phone rang. Immediately she thought it might be Declan, so she rushed over to the phone in the computer room and grabbed it. “Hello, Declan?!” she said, with both hands clutching the phone.

“Florrie Thompson? This is Dave Darwin calling from Silicon Valley in California.” The voice sounded tinny and scratchy, coming as it did from the other side of the world.

“Yes that’s me”, Florrie said – a bit disappointed it wasn’t Declan. Then she remembered her email. “So you’re from Social Kinetics. I guess you received my email? Boy that was quick – from New Zealand to America in a couple of minutes!” Florrie realised as soon as she said it that it made her sound naïve about communications technology. The person on the other end of the line didn’t appear to notice however. It was a kind, re-assuring voice.

“Yes Florrie we got your email, thank you for replying. We’re sorry to hear that Declan has been acting strange. I want to give you some background about our company first, and then we’ll talk a little about Declan’s involvement and the reason why I am trying to contact him.”

Dave proceeded to give Florrie an overview of Social Kinetics. He was careful to avoid technical terms. In fact it was almost exactly the same speech he gave to the less technically inclined Venture Capitalists and banks, only more personalized.

Florrie was grateful for Dave’s explanation. But she thought it odd that Declan was interested in virtual worlds and avatars, as it was something she’d heard him dismiss in the past. He hated role-playing games and he didn’t even like Star Trek. She remembered Declan saying on one occasion when talking about Dungeons & Dragons: “I’m not that kind of geek”.

Dave started to talk now of Declan’s avatar. Florrie had to admit it sounded very hi—tech: virtual people that started out as basic imitations of real-world people, but then morphed – or “evolved” as Dave put it – into a self-learning and autonomous avatar. The idea was, according to Dave’s explanation, to automate some functions of social interaction and collaboration. Apparently this was the next big thing in “social software”. Dave explained that Declan’s avatar had evolved extremely quickly and it was now autonomously running about in the Social Kinetics virtual world. What Dave had been most surprised about was that Declan, the real-world one, had logged out of the system after only an hour. Yet his avatar continued to be active within the Social Kinetics community. Dave wanted to talk to Declan to see if he could figure out what had happened. They had already spoken to Declan’s avatar and were surprised at how intelligent and self-organising it seemed.

This sort of talk worried Florrie. Declan was already obsessed with aliens from outer space, now he was caught up in a world of make-believe “virtual” people. She wasn’t sure what to make of Dave Darwin or his company Social Kinetics. Dave sounded like a good person who was obviously passionate about his work, but she wondered if they were somehow responsible for Declan’s current behaviour. All this talk of “autonomous” avatars would have been grist for the mill for Declan’s artistic and creative mind. Aliens and virtual people - Florrie wondered if Declan was living in a kind of fantasy world now.

“Mr Darwin, I have a suggestion. Can you turn off Declan’s avatar, shut it down? I think it is contributing to Declan’s strange behaviour...he has a very active imagination, especially since he took up painting.”

“Painting?” Dave asked.

“Yes, didn’t you know? Declan has become one of New Zealand’s top painters in just a few months. We didn’t even realise he had such talent. But he obviously had an innate skill. He began painting earlier this year and now his art is being exhibited in both New Zealand and Australia. A couple of European galleries

have shown interest too. One art gallery in Holland want to have a special exhibition just of Declan's work."

Dave sounded surprised to hear this. "Oh, that's interesting. Declan didn't mention his painting in any of the Social Kinetics application forms he filled in. I would have expected the forms to pick that up, as hobbies and talents such as drawing are important ingredients for the initial personality profile."

Florrie diverted the conversation back to her main point. "Yes but can you shut down Declan's avatar? It sounds like his avatar is causing you some trouble." Florrie also thought that shutting down the avatar would help re-focus Declan's mind to the real world. Florrie thought that Declan needed a dose of reality and shutting down one of his fantasy creatures, as she had begun to think of them, would be a good start.

Dave sounded uncertain. "Well that is one option, but I'm reluctant to shut down Declan's avatar without his consent. Also shutting down an avatar has some technical ramifications. At this early stage of the technology, we don't know for certain whether a shut-down means we have to re-program it in order to start it up again. Will the avatar hold onto the character that it had built up before the shut-down? That was certainly our goal, but we're not sure if we've achieved it yet. The tests we've done so far indicate that a shut-down means losing all data for that avatar and we have to start over." Dave paused, not sure whether he should say it. He decided to go ahead. "A shut-down at this stage is equivalent to death for an avatar."

Florrie was unimpressed with this analogy. She thought that these Social Kinetics avatars were like characters in a PlayStation game, an advanced game but a game nonetheless. She tried to persuade Dave that it was in all their interests to shut down Declan's avatar, including in Declan's best interests. Dave said that he would keep that option open, because Social Kinetics had ultimate ownership of the avatars (this would change when the software went live, at that point customers would be granted full ownership of their avatars).

"In any case," said Dave, "When Declan arrives back home can you get him to call me." Florrie wrote down the number Dave gave her and promised him that she'd get Declan to call.

"But", said Florrie earnestly, "if you don't hear from him in the next 12 hours, please consider shutting down his avatar."

Chapter 46

As the virtual version of Declan Atomz wandered aimlessly in the cyberspace world of Social Kinetics, wondering when the aliens would pluck him out of there, the real version of Declan was tucking into an early morning breakfast at a trendy Ponsonby eatery with James Hore. The two of them had been out clubbing all night and now it was time to recharge the batteries for the day ahead.

The extraterrestrial that was causing such consternation among the Counsel of Twelve back on its native planet, was right now enjoying an "all day breakfast" meal of bacon, eggs, sausages, tomato and hash browns. James and Declan were having an interesting conversation about celebrity stalking. As James watched Declan devour his bacon and eggs, he mentioned how lucky Declan was to be a celebrated artist yet still be able to enjoy the benefits of privacy.

"My life on the other hand is sometimes unbearable. Being in the public eye means that my every move is scrutinised," James whined, "Paparazzi are constantly

following me around, taking pictures and even going through my garbage. I tell you Declan, it's not worth it. The thing that really gets me is when pappazzi, those scumbags, start bothering my children. Since my divorce it's gotten worse."

"Oh come on James, I bet your life isn't that bad," Declan said through a mouthful of pizza. "I'd swap lives with you in an instant. Fame, fortune, a captive audience of people who listen to everything you say and adore you. You've got it made! Sure it's a hassle when pappazzi take pictures of you when you're unshaven and scratching your ass at the grocery store. And OK, I agree that it's hard on your kids. But surely it's all worth it in the end. What else would you be doing with your life that would bring you this level of satisfaction?"

James shook his head. "No Declan, you don't understand. Look at you, you're a successful artist. You have a talent that people would kill for. In 50 years time people will look back and say 'Declan Atomz was a genius, look at what he created - the contributions he made to our culture through his art.' But what will they say about me?" James leant across the table and lowered his voice to a whisper, in case anyone overheard. "They won't say anything because they won't remember me. Sure I'm famous right now, but I haven't done anything significant with my life. I haven't invented anything and I haven't created anything new. I live and feed off the present, Declan. It's what I do. It's what I'm good at. But don't for a second think that my life will be worth anything to posterity. Yet here I am in 2003 being chased around by photographers like I'm some kind of big shot. I've sold out to the masses, Declan. I'm not complaining about the money or the influence I have over people. But in the long-run, I think I'd rather have your life of quiet genius and long-term recognition."

James leant back and crossed his arms, convinced that he'd won that little debate. He enjoyed bantering with Declan, he found their conversations invigorating and stimulating. There was no doubt Declan had a unique viewpoint on the world, being an artist. But mostly James just liked to have someone he could pour out his private thoughts to. Declan always listened and always seemed to understand.

Declan wiped his mouth, having finished off the last mouthful of egg. He toyed with the last remaining morsel of bacon on his plate.

"James, how would you like it if we exchanged our lives for a while." Declan said thoughtfully.

James laughed. "Oh sure, yeh Declan that would be great. You can do my show tonight, I need a break." James said sarcastically.

"OK then," Declan said and raised his arm to James' head. His hand came to rest on James' forehead and Declan closed his eyes.

James wondered what nutty thing Declan was up to now. These crazy artists, he thought. Maybe that's why I'm not artistic, I don't have the spontaneity to do these sorts of things. James decided to play along.

"OK smart guy," James said, closing his eyes. "Let's exchange our minds. But you better hurry up dude, people are beginning to stare."

James felt a sudden rush of very bright light and he seemed to lose consciousness. He jerked his head back and opened his eyes.

"Hey, Declan what did you do there?!" James said, surprised at the intensity of what he'd just felt. The white light was receding now and his mind felt numb, as if he'd been struck by lightning and was now recovering from the shock of electricity. He looked around and saw that people were looking at them. Then James noticed that he was sitting on the opposite side of the table now. He looked over at Declan and got the greatest shock of his life. Sitting directly opposite him was an exact replica of himself, James Hore. It was like he was staring into a mirror, only this was a three-

dimensional mirror image. He looked over at the plate of largely uneaten Hollandaise eggs that was lying in front of his mirror image. Hey that was what I had, thought James. Then he looked down at his hand and noticed that he was noodling on his plate with a leftover bit of bacon. No, thought James, it can't be! This guy must be playing with my mind – did he spike my drink perhaps?! Maybe it's the after-effects of the night out and I just need some rest. James got up quickly, knocking his knife and fork to the floor and causing the rest of the eatery's customers to look over to their table. James rushed off to the men's toilets. He desperately needed to splash his face with water.

James ran into the men's toilets and headed straight for the sink. Head down and eyes closed, he flipped on the tap and started to splash cold water frantically onto his face. He was afraid to look. He flipped the faucet off again and stood for a moment, water dripping from his face. Slowly he opened his eyes – and saw the reflection of Declan Atomz looking back at him. His eyes widened. James was in shock. He was quite sure that he was James Hore, media icon and television personality. His mind was the same, but – James brought his face closer to the mirror and started pawing it, stretching his cheeks and eyes – he had Declan Atomz's body! James thumped himself on the side of his head a couple of times, just in case he was dreaming. But still Declan's face stared back at him from the mirror.

James wandered out of the bathroom in a daze. He somehow found his way back to the table, only to discover that Declan had legged it. James was now in a panic. If Declan's gone and he's in my body, then people will think he's me! James looked down at the Hallensteins shirt and jeans that were draped over his new body. And they'll think I'm him! Declan closed his eyes and collapsed into a chair.

After a couple of minutes of hazy despair, James exited the Eatery. He ran around the corner to check whether his red Ferrari was still there. It wasn't. The little bastard has taken it, thought James. He was beginning to get angry now. James ran back onto the main road and flagged down a taxi. He asked the driver to take him to Victoria Street, where the Network 3 television studio was. He had to try and prevent Declan Atomz from appearing on tv tonight! He wasn't sure how he'd do it. After all, in the television business appearances are everything. Declan would be able to do and say anything on tonight's show, because he looked and dressed like James Hore.

But James wasn't entirely without hope. The one thing he had going for him was that Declan Atomz had been a regular guest on The Hore Report over the past few months, so he would probably be able to talk his way into the studio. Once he got in the studio, he'd steer Declan to his dressing room and confront him. James laughed to himself.

"James Hore, you sly old dog. You've still got it!" he said out loud. The taxi driver, a Samoan man in his 50's, looked at James quizzically from the rear-view mirror.

"You all right there boss?" asked the taxi driver, his eyebrows raised. "I gotta say boss, I disagree with you. I always thought James Hore was a bit of a poser."

James winced. Under his breath he mumbled – "More than you'll ever know..."

Chapter 47

After he'd spoken to the two Social Kinetics representatives, Lydia Grep and Hector Lopez, Declan had continued to wander through the virtual world. He had

seemingly been wandering for hours on end. He'd gone down many portholes, which he'd quickly learnt equated to hyperlinks. When he slipped into a porthole, he knew he was travelling in cyberspace to a new web address – a URL. The virtual world wasn't just restricted to the Social Kinetics site. Because it was connected to the Internet, Declan found he could travel to any website simply by following the porthole links.

Over the past few hours Declan had figured out how to navigate through the hundreds of portholes. It was not as straight forward as browsing on the Web via his personal computer. For one thing, the hyperlinks didn't have signposts on them to tell Declan where he was going. But Declan had discovered that the things he saw near or around the porthole provided some type of context for him. For example if he saw books lying beside a porthole, it was likely the porthole would lead to a bookstore like Amazon. If he saw bits of code floating above a porthole, it probably led to a web development website. Some of the clues were quite abstract, for example one time he saw a yin-yang sign floating above a porthole. Declan was curious, so he went in. It turned out to be a weblog by a guy named Mike Perlman, whose logo was a yin-yang symbol. As time passed, Declan was picking up more knowledge about how to navigate the virtual world. It was almost as if he'd begun to acquire a sort of internal compass to guide him.

But he was getting frustrated. Hour after hour ticked by with no sign of Declan being rescued. How long would the alien beings keep him trapped in this virtual world? He knew of no way to get back to his real life. As far as he knew, he was stuck in the form of a virtual Internet avatar. Meanwhile his human alter ego was being inhabited by an alien being and Declan was very worried by now what the alien being was doing. And how was Florrie was coping?

Declan didn't even know how to contact the Social-K staff. He'd forgotten to ask them how he could summon them. So by now he was near despair at his predicament. He stopped surfing around the virtual world for a while, to just think. How could he get out of here?

After a few minutes, Declan thought of his own websites and the equipment he had at home that was connected to the Internet. There was his weblog, DeclanAtomz.com, which he used to write about astronomy and radio telescopes. He also had an old website, SpaceElectronics.net.nz, which hadn't been updated in a couple of years but was still connected to the Internet. That was his old website from the late 90's and had lots of information about radio communications and electronics equipment. People still used it as a reference when they needed info about electronic parts for astronomy equipment. So Declan had left the site up on the Web, despite not updating it anymore.

In addition to his websites, Declan also had some of his radio telescopic equipment hooked up to the Internet. Plus he had a standalone computer that was always connected to the Net, in order to monitor certain professional radio telescopes that were available via the Internet. That PC was also running the [SETI@home](#) program, which automatically gathered and analysed radio telescope data on behalf of Berkley University.

As Declan pondered all of this, he realized that he could try to connect to his radio telescopic equipment and computers. Perhaps he would then be able to send a message. Then it struck Declan. He could try and send a message to the alien beings, using his radio communications equipment! Declan suddenly felt energized. He had a plan now and was anxious to get started. The first thing he needed to do was find a

search engine. That would help him get to the destination he required – his own addresses on the Internet.

Chapter 48

It was past 9pm on the first day of the launch of Social Kinetics' beta software, as Dave Darwin sat down wearily at the boardroom table. He hadn't had much sleep over the past week building up to the launch of the Social Kinetics software. The first day of beta testing had been eventful and there were some unexpected bugs that had needed fixing. But that was to be expected - it was the nature of beta testing to uncover the flies in the ointment. So he was very tired now, as he prepared to open this special meeting of the management and senior staff of Social Kinetics. Dave noticed that the others looked dog-tired too, particularly Lydia Grep and Hector Lopez who had both been burning the midnight candle over the past week or so along with the other technical staff.

"Everybody, thanks for attending this meeting at a relatively short notice and at this late hour of the night." Dave began, eyeing each of the 6 people gathered around the boardroom table. Along with Lydia (Lead Designer) and Hector (Lead programmer), there was Pete Hershey (Finance Director), Sonya Solaris (IT Director), Fleur Prufrock (who doubled as HR Manager and Communications Manager) and last but not least Roger Lester (Software Development Manager).

"As you know," Dave continued, "the launch today has been a success. Apart from a couple of bugs we had to iron out, which you have to expect in this business. But by and large the launch went according to plan. Most of the beta testers managed to get their avatars up and running. The few that didn't we have been dealing with all day and I believe that there is only one avatar left that we are still having problems with. That right Rog?"

Roger Lester was a 40-something, thin man with bulging insect-like eyes, sharply defined facial bones and black-grey hair that was slightly unkempt. He was dressed like most of the other Social Kinetics employees, which not coincidentally happened to be the manner that Dave Darwin liked to dress – chino trousers and a polo shirt. Roger cleared his throat and spoke in clear and confident voice, as befitting a senior manager in the corporate world. However he still had a nasal voice that somehow betrayed his roots as a nerdy programmer.

"Yes that's right Dave, the McPhail avatar is still causing us problems. We think we've identified the nub of the issue now. Sebastian is working on it as we speak. Within the next hour we should have the issue sorted."

Dave nodded his head distractedly. "Fine, fine. Now, the reason I called this meeting is that we do have a potential problem with an avatar that is working a little too well. It's the avatar belonging to a guy from New Zealand called Declan Atomz. He was one of the first off the blocks signing in and getting started on the Social-K website this morning. But after an hour or so, Hector you started to notice that the Atomz avatar was exhibiting unusual behaviour. Can you please summarize what you observed Hector?"

Hector's eyes were red and puffy, indicating he'd had virtually no sleep over the past week. He also had that haunted look that programmers sometimes get when they can't find the solution to a coding problem.

"Yeah, well I began to notice that there was a lot of strange data coming into and out of Declan's avatar. As you know, we can monitor the avatar's brain" – Hector

glanced at Dave, who was looking at him with that expression of annoyance he had when Hector used the brain analogy – “Ah, I mean the central data store.” Hector said, hastily covering up his slip of the tongue. “So anyway, I analysed the data and found that a lot of it was in a form I couldn’t decipher. So I don’t know what the data means, but what I can say is that there is a lot of it. I mean tons and tons of data, pouring into and out of Declan’s central data store. It’s almost like –” Hector paused and looked guiltily at Dave.

Dave sighed, as if he knew what was coming. “Almost like what, Hector?” said Dave wearily.

“...almost like brain activity.” Hector said. “I mean, modern science doesn’t know to this day how to interpret brain waves and signals that travel through the brain. And it’s almost like Declan’s avatar has started to think for itself, there’s so much data pumping around in its central data store and none of us (Hector motioned outside the boardroom in the direction where the programmers sat) know what this data means. There are no discernable patterns.” Hector looked at Roger Lestor, as if appealing for someone to back him up. Roger shifted uneasily in his seat.

Lydia then spoke up, deciding to interrupt Hector before he got too bogged down with his brain analogies. “Also Hector and I noticed that after about an hour, Declan Atomz logged off the Social-K system. But strangely, his avatar still exhibited the same level of activity both within the community and in its data processor.”

Fleur Prufrock, the HR and Communications Manager, interrupted. “When you say ‘data processor’, is that the same thing as what Hector calls the ‘brain’ of the avatar?”

Dave cut in impatiently. “Look, we’re not talking about living tissue here. It’s a software program, it doesn’t have a brain. Sure data is processed by the avatar and there is some level of ‘smarts’ about what it does with the data. After all we’re on the cutting edge of social software. We’ve developed some highly complex information-processing capabilities. Our avatars will eventually become autonomous, in the sense that they will gather and process data for people. And yes they will be able to ‘learn’ and ‘evolve’. But let’s get this straight – the brain is a million times more complex than what we’ve built. No one can build something like a human brain, unless they’re God. If we start talking about brains to the media and our customers, we’ll be lumped into the AI camp and we’ll never get any funding or be able to build a market. We’re social software, folks. It’s all about helping real people with their social interactions and as a by-product – perhaps a significant by-product, we’re still finding out – we’ll help solve their information management problems. But please don’t refer to what we’ve got here as a virtual brain. It’s distracting from the reasons I started this company.”

Dave looked around and saw that his rant had left an uncomfortable silence around the table. Fleur Prufrock had slinked down into her chair, looking sorry that she’d asked the question. Hector was looking down at the table, his lips pursed tightly together.

“So anyway,” Dave said brightening the tone of his voice, “Lydia, please continue. You were saying something about the data processor of the avatar?”

“Ah yes,” Lydia said with a nervous smile, “I was talking about the level of activity in Declan Atomz’s avatar, once Declan had logged off. Basically, it stayed the same. Declan’s avatar continued to interact with other avatars as if he’d never logged off. And what Hector was saying about the large quantities of indecipherable data? Well that continued unabated as well. To all intents and purposes, it was as if Declan Atomz never logged off at all. Yet we could see that he wasn’t connected. This went

on for the entire day. Declan Atomz did not log in again, in fact he was only ever logged in for that first hour right at the start of the beta testing. But his avatar continues to operate on its own, even as we speak. When the other beta testers log out, their avatars shut down or at the very most operate at a minimal level of processing. Aggregating RSS feeds, conducting topic-based searches, filtering data – the sort of low-level automation that we expected at this stage of the beta tests. But what we’re seeing with Declan’s avatar is much more advanced. Declan’s avatar is autonomously conducting conversations with other people, browsing websites on the Web, and who knows what else it is doing because we can’t interpret its data streams.”

Hector took over now, as if wanting to atone for talking about brains. “Yes and we went into the virtual world and spoke to Declan’s avatar. It was incredible how life-like and independent Declan Atomz’s avatar was. It was like we were conversing with a person.” Hector knew as soon as he said it that he’d put his foot in his mouth again.

Dave glared at Hector. “Have we had any luck contacting Mr Atomz?”, said Dave, continuing to look at Hector but obviously not addressing the question to him. “I spoke to his wife, Florrie, earlier today. She said that Declan had gone out and she hadn’t seen him since the night before.”

“No we haven’t been able to contact him.” Said Lydia. “I’ve rung a couple of times since and both times I got Florrie. You know, she wants us to shut down Declan’s avatar. Thinks it will teach him a lesson.”

“I think it’s not a bad idea.” Dave said, the expression on his face indicating grim seriousness.

Lydia was startled at this admission. “Dave, I thought we agreed at the start that we’d not interfere with the beta testers?”

Dave rubbed his tired eyes vigorously. “I know Lydia. But don’t forget we’re dealing with real people here. Declan’s wife thinks our company has altered Declan’s behaviour. Who knows what this guy Atomz is up to? Maybe he’s been messing around with the programming of our avatars.”

Hector shook his head and mouthed the word “impossible” to Lydia, but he didn’t say anything out loud. Dave was pissed enough already.

Dave continued: “Declan Atomz has to take responsibility for his avatar. If he doesn’t want to participate in our beta testing, or is stuffing us around, then I think we’ve got no choice but to shut down his avatar. I’ll give him 12 more hours. If he doesn’t show his face by then, I want his avatar terminated.”

Chapter 49

It took Declan about an hour to navigate his way to his own websites, from where he could link straight to his radio telescopes via an Internet connection. When he arrived at his weblog, he felt like he’d come home. Its familiar green and white livery, together with the black, blue and green logo of an atom he had designed a couple of years ago, gave him a sense of comfort he’d not had since being in the virtual world.

Declan still had to hack into his radio telescope equipment. While it had a backdoor connection to the Internet, it was heavily protected from outside interference. Declan was probably the only person who would have been able to hack into it from the outside – and only because he had inside knowledge of its bespoke set-up.

It was a long and winding path to the system – he had to travel through about 8 portholes, some of them remote and hidden from view. Eventually Declan broke through the final firewall barrier to the control panel of his radio telescopes. He then set about creating radio wave signals. Declan used the same code he had used to communicate with the alien being over eight months ago. Whereas then his aim had been to establish a two-way conversation with a single alien being who had sent signals through space to him, now Declan was sending out a cry for help. He was trapped in this virtual world and his only hope was for the alien beings to listen to his plea to be saved. He had no idea if his attempts at communication would get through or if the alien beings would listen, but the radio waves he was sending were his only hope. The aliens put him in here, so presumably they were the only ones who could take him out. Declan prayed that his SOS message would find its way to sympathetic ears.

Chapter 50

James waited 10 hours for Declan to arrive at the Network 3 television studio. When the taxi dropped him off in the morning, he'd seen that his car wasn't in the car park. James decided to wait in the café opposite the studio and sit tight until Declan made his entrance. He was sure Declan would come in to do James's show in the evening. So he spent the entire day in the café or outside the Network 3 car park, waiting for any sign of Declan's arrival. He didn't want to go anywhere else while he was inhabiting the body of Declan Atomz. He was still too confused and frightened at this strange turn of events.

When Declan finally arrived, James was in the café and nearly missed it - as he'd taken a rare break to splash his face with water in the men's room. But just as he came out of the door to return to his table, he spotted his familiar red Ferrari being parked across the road in the Network 3 car park.

James Hore watched a 5 foot seven man with a big coif of slicked brown hair walk somewhat oddly into the Network 3 studio. It was his body and his Armani suit, noticed James, but it was clearly Declan's walk. James waited for a couple of minutes, then he made his way out to the Network 3 studio entrance.

James found it more difficult than he thought getting into the Network 3 studios. When James went into the reception area, he didn't receive the friendly smiles and admiring looks he was accustomed to. Instead he got a polite but blank expression from Valerie, the pretty blonde receptionist who sometimes flirted with James. He had Declan Atomz's face, so this should have been expected. Nevertheless it shook James' confidence in himself.

"Can I help sir?" asked Valerie, her eyes displaying no trace of recognition. James felt flustered and wasn't thinking straight. He stammered that he wanted to see James Hore.

"Have you got an appointment?" Valerie asked.

"No, but I'm Declan Atomz you see. I've been on James' show a number of times this year. I was on just last week." James smiled sweetly at Valerie. But this time his charm wasn't working.

"You need to have an appointment to see Mr Hore. We have strict security protocols here, as you no doubt know having been here before. I don't see your name here on the list of people Mr Hore is expecting. So I'm afraid you can't come in Mr Atomz."

James felt his face (actually Declan's face) getting red. "But I **am** –" James stopped himself. "Um, I am **expected**. I'm a friend of James. Haven't you been listening to the office gossip?"

Valerie looked confused. "Office gossip?" She glanced over at one of the security guards, a burly character named Olo Dowd who returned Valerie's look and then turned his attention to James - only now his eyes had hardened.

James shifted nervously.

"Well what I meant was, I'm re-decorating James' office. Yes that's it, I'm an artist you see. Have you heard of me? Declan Atomz?" James said, almost imploringly.

Finally a look of recognition swept over Valerie's face. "Oh yes, I have seen you on James' show. You're the guy that did that painting over there, isn't that right?" Valerie pointed in the direction of Olo Dowd, who was still staring menacingly at James. Directly over the left shoulder of Olo Dowd was the portrait of James Hore that Declan had done. James looked over – avoiding the eyes of Olo Dowd - and remembered that yes, he'd managed to convince the Network 3 CEO Fraser Fogerty to purchase that portrait. It was the first time he'd seen it hanging here though. Just in time, thought James.

"Yes that was me alright. And I've got a couple more paintings in store, to go in my – Mr Hore's – office. I hid the paintings in his assistant Laurent's office last week (James knew that Laurent had just gone on holiday, so he wouldn't blow his cover). I decided to come in tonight to hang up the new paintings in James' office while he is doing his show. It'll be a surprise." James smiled at Valerie and felt the old Hore charm coming back. This time it seemed to be working.

"Well I think that will be OK," said Valerie with a shy smile. She turned and nodded to Olo, who didn't seem convinced and looked suspiciously at James again. James quickly turned back to Valerie.

"So I can come in then? I'm sure James will be very appreciative, he's going to love my new paintings. You know how much he raves about my work."

Valerie waved him through. "Yes he does talk about you all the time. OK, but you'll have to get the key to Mr Hore's office from his producer Sheila McLeod. She's the only person apart from Mr Hore himself who has access. You'll find her in the main studio. You better hurry, it's nearly 6pm and time for Mr Hore's show."

James thanked Valerie and nipped quickly into the studio before Olo Dowd could approach him – he had begun to walk in James's direction.

James headed straight for the studio. He wanted to see if he could grab Declan before he went on air. But when he got to the main studio, he saw Sheila talking to Declan. She was giving him the final pep talk and instructions for the show. It was a familiar routine, so James knew that he had no chance now of catching Declan before the show started.

James watched his doppelganger from the edge of the studio. It was a weird feeling watching his look-alike prepare for the cameras, which James felt belonged to him. He felt strangely alone, as if he didn't really exist and was watching the real James Hore prepare to broadcast to the nation. Even though he knew it was actually Declan, the man standing next to Sheila was at this moment - to all intents and purposes - James Hore.

They were getting ready to go-live now. Sheila gave the 3-2-1 signal and Declan began to speak:

“Good evening New Zealand, welcome to tonight’s edition of The Hore Report. Tonight I have a very special surprise for you all. It’s a momentous occasion and something you will remember for the rest of your lives.”

The real James noticed that Sheila was looking quizzically at her notes. James had a sinking sensation – oh no, he’s not sticking to the script. What on earth is he going to say...

“Yes tonight ladies and gentleman you are going to witness a broadcast message unlike anything you’ve ever seen on live television before. Tonight we’re going to send a message to an alien civilization. We’re going to contact a world from a galaxy a very large distance from here. In fact if I told you the distance, you wouldn’t be able to comprehend it. Tonight, live and exclusive on The Hore Report, we are going to speak with aliens!”

The real James put his hands over his eyes. This guy is ruining my reputation! James was in a state of despair. A couple of the tv crew were looking over at him now, probably wondering what this scruffy-looking guy with long matted hair and glasses was doing in the studio during recording. James took his hands away from his eyes and quietly looked on, ashen faced.

Meanwhile Sheila McLeod was frantically flicking through her notes and gesticulating frantically.

Declan reached under the desk for something. Out came the painting of the alien and the other paintings depicting the alien world.

The real James kicked himself. So Declan must’ve gone to his home to pick these up. Why didn’t I think of that? I was so intent on cutting him off here at the studio. OK I don’t know where he lives, but I could’ve easily found out. I’m **him** fer chrisakes!

Declan also had brought along a laptop computer. He continued to chat into the camera, in the usual witty manner of James Hore, while he set-up the laptop. Sheila had decided not to call an advert at this point, she’d obviously decided to see where her star tv personality was going with this.

Declan then held up the paintings.

“This is a picture of me. You see I’m actually an alien. I’m just using James Hore’s body so that I can speak to you. I come from a distant planet...”

The real James just about fainted. He felt sure he was as of this moment ruined as a television frontman, or any other job involving a public profile for that matter. His look-alike had just told the entire nation that he was really an alien. James could take no more. He ran out of the studio in a dark despair. His career was crashing down around him.

James ran out the main entrance of the Network 3 studio and into the chilly evening air. He stopped and looked back at the bright lights of the studio. What was happening to him? Had he been drugged? What had Declan Atomz done to him? Nothing made sense. James had tears of frustration welling in his eyes. Then he thought – unless it’s true. Could that be an alien sitting in my tv presenter’s chair?

James remembered his dreams and the drawings he’d done, which had included pictures of alien beings very similar to what Declan Atomz had created. James had been trying to block all of that out of his mind over the past months. After all, with such a high profile career James couldn’t afford to lose his sanity. But now, with his reputation as New Zealand’s premier journalist surely shattered, James began to wonder – was his look-alike really an alien?

Chapter 51

Declan also sent a message to Florrie. He didn't know if she would receive it though, as she didn't have email at work and she rarely if ever checked her personal email. He ended up cc'ing his own personal email address. He knew that the extraterrestrial that inhabited his body would probably ignore or delete the message, but again it was worth a shot.

As Declan scurried around in the virtual world of Social Kinetics, Hector Lopez was watching him with intense curiosity. By now Hector had become convinced that Declan's avatar had evolved into a life-like form. Hector had done some extensive data analysis of Declan's processing centre and compared it to brainwave activity. While Hector was by no means an expert in neuro science, in the past 12 hours he had done a lot of googling on the subject. He deduced that the data from Declan's avatar bore a strong resemblance to human brainwaves. He had not told Dave of any of this of course. He decided to tell Lydia though, as she was the only other person apart from himself and Dave who were keeping a close eye on the Declan Atomz situation.

"Lydia, come over here for a second." called Hector, his head leaning towards his computer screen and his eyes peering with sharp focus at it.

Lydia had just got off the phone and she wandered over, looking like she was keen to tell Hector something too.

"That was Declan's girlfriend, Florrie. She says Declan has still not shown up at their home. She was going to call the police, but then she phoned one of her friends who told her that Declan had been spotted boozing it up all night with a local celebrity. How do you like that behaviour? What a jerk. Florrie is real angry and I don't blame her. I'm beginning to agree with Dave, we should throw him off the beta program. Shut down his avatar and get on with the real business of testing. This case is taking up too much of our time."

Hector had not heard a word Lydia had said, for he was deep in thought.

"Hector!" Lydia shouted with a scowl. "I said we should just shut down Declan Atomz's avatar and be done with him."

Hector swung around, his eyes wide. "No, no Lydia we mustn't do that! Look, I've finally deciphered some of the data from Declan's avatar. I can't make out the thoughts or words, but I have detected some emotional patterns. He's afraid, Lydia! I've compared the data coming from Declan to this study I found on neural activity in humans for common emotions." Hector pointed Lydia to the computer screen, where two sets of brainwave graphs were sitting side by side. "The graph on the left is a map of brainwave activity when a human being is scared. The graph on the right is a segment of data from Declan's avatar. The two graphs are almost identical! Also I think he's lonely. Another segment of data from the avatar matches the brainwaves taken from a human being experiencing loneliness."

Lydia cut him off. "Hector, I think you're going off on a big tangent here. While I agree with you that Declan Atomz's avatar is acting strangely and we can't explain why, I agree with Dave that we have to look past the technical issues and at the human ones. This guy Declan Atomz is a shit. He's reduced his girlfriend to an emotional wreck and he's causing us a lot of grief too! I'm going to recommend to Dave that we immediately shut down his avatar, so we can get back to business."

Hector was about to protest that shutting down Declan's avatar would likely cause it to die, in a sense. But before he could say this, Lydia stalked away. She was heading in the direction of Dave's office.

Chapter 52

James Hore was propped up in one of his favourite bars in Parnell, the suburb near the heart of Auckland central where he lived. He was afraid to go to his home. His girlfriend Patty would not recognize him and also Declan may be there already. James did not feel up to confronting Declan now. For one thing he was afraid. For another, he almost felt like it was no longer worth being James Hore – media celebrity. In tonight's The Hore Report show, James' look-a-like had told the public of New Zealand that he was an alien. He had then proceeded to send radio messages to an alien planet, via a laptop computer that was connected to Declan's radio telescopes. All the while the onscreen version of James Hore, played admirably by Declan, was doing the usual Hore banter and witty dialogue with the cameramen - who were audibly heard on the tv laughing at James. Laughing at him, not with him. Even at this bar in Parnell, James could hear people joking and laughing about tonight's The Hore Report. They were saying James Hore was finished, that it was the most embarrassing performance in New Zealand television history.

James leaned his head back and put his hands over his bloodshot eyes. He was tired and the whiskey was going to his head.

"Had a bad day mate?"

James looked up and saw a peroxide-haired male bartender in his early twenties.

"Yeh it has, but I'm alright", slurred James. "I'm feeling a bit down, is all."

The bartender patted James on the shoulder. "Don't worry mate, at least you're not James Hore eh!"

James got up a little too quickly and managed to spill his glass of whiskey. He wanted to get out of this place. He wasn't sure where, but he couldn't stand it any more. He pushed past the bemused bartender and staggered over to the door. Just as he was about to go out, he turned around and asked the bartender for a phonebook. The bartender went back behind the bar and took out the Auckland City phonebook.

"Here you go mate. Knock yourself out."

James's vision was blurry with drink, but eventually he found what he was looking for:

Atomz, D ... 158 Admirals Rd, Mt Eden, Auckland ... 6288-320

Once again James rose to leave. But this time he knew where he was going. He walked outside and waved down a taxi. In about 15 minutes, he was standing outside Declan Atomz's house.

It was the first time he'd been here, despite having known Declan for 8 or 9 months now. It was a smallish flat in a block of similar-looking flats. James wasn't sure how to proceed into the house. He knew that Declan's girlfriend Florrie would probably be there, it being late on a Thursday night now. James went up the driveway and up the steps to the door. Taking a deep breath, he entered the flat.

Chapter 53

Florrie was in the living room, watching television. She heard the front door open and immediately got up to confront Declan. When she walked out into the hallway, Declan was standing there at the entrance to the flat. He had a strange look in his face.

“Where in God’s name have you been Declan!?” Florrie struggled to control the emotion in her voice. Her eyes were puffy and red from crying. She stared at Declan, waiting for him to attempt an explanation. She had already heard, from a variety of sources, that Declan had been on the town drinking with James Hore all last night. And Florrie could see that he’d been drinking tonight too. She was more angry than she’d ever been before with Declan and today she had half packed her bags to leave him. But she had waited for him to come home. More than anything, Florrie just wanted to talk to Declan and find out, first-hand, why he had walked out and left her on her own for more than 24 hours.

James didn’t know what to say. He would have to come up with something soon, because Florrie was staring at him with red eyes. Her face was scowling and twitching. She was obviously very upset at him – well at Declan actually. Man, thought James, I’m really getting the rough end of the stick here. First Declan Atomz ruins my career, now his girlfriend is about to beat the living daylights out of me!

James held up his hands, partly in self-defence in case Florrie attacked him and partly to try and quell Florrie’s anger. “Uh, listen to me Florrie. I’m not who you think I am. My name is James Hore. The guy from tv? What’s happened is that Declan switched bodies with me, so he’s now me and I’m now – ah – him.” James’s voice trailed off, as he saw that Florrie wasn’t buying it. She was looking at him half in disbelief and half in disgust. However James felt he had no choice but to go on.

“I know this is difficult to fathom, but really I’m not Declan. I’m James Hore. I suspect that aliens are involved too, but – “

Florrie exploded in rage. “Declan, how could you feed this crap to me!! What is wrong with you? You’re not James Hore and you’re not an alien! I don’t want to hear any more nonsense about aliens! You’re sick, sick!!” She glared at Declan. Right now James Hore felt like sinking into the ground. He decided that perhaps not speaking was a good option.

Florrie burst into tears and ran into their bedroom. James could hear her packing, in between sounds of crashing and things being slammed. James stood rooted to his spot in front of the door. He wanted to leave, but couldn’t move. Perhaps it was because there was nowhere else for him to go.

After about ten minutes, Florrie burst out of the bedroom carrying two suitcases. She was still crying. James tried to say something to comfort her, but Florrie rushed past him. She put one of the suitcases down and opened the door. Turning to Declan, she looked at him deeply. James could see that she was hurting and it hurt him too – even though he actually had nothing to do with this domestic situation. This was Declan’s battle, not his! Florrie was waiting for him to say something, but when he didn’t she picked up the second suitcase again. A look of resigned weariness washed over her face. Her eyes glistened with sadness as she looked one final time at the drunken and confused visage of Declan. She walked out the door.

James was relieved. But he was also now very angry with Declan Atomz. He felt sorry for Florrie, but at least James was now alone in the flat. He wanted to check out Declan's computer system and hunt for clues. Also he had a feeling that Declan's radio telescope equipment might offer up some answers. It had to, thought James. He was badly in need of some answers.

Chapter 54

James looked around at the jumble of computer equipment and radio telescopic gear in Declan's room. In the middle of the room stood a painting easel, along with paints and brushes strewn all around it. Paintings were piled up in the only spare part of the room. There was hardly any room to walk and James had to tiptoe past the art equipment to Declan's main PC desk. James flicked on the computer and its monitor. Luckily there was no password to negotiate. The Internet login was automatically saved too, so James had no trouble connecting to the Net. He opened up Declan's email and waited for the messages to appear. He immediately noticed a message from Declan himself, sent from a Web email address probably. Its subject was one enigmatic word: "Help". Curious, James clicked to open it. He discovered that the email was actually addressed to Florrie and had been sent to her private email address, cc'ed to Declan's email address. The email read:

"Dear Florrie,

This is very important. If I have been acting strangely lately, it is because I am not myself. It is hard to explain. It has something to do with the radio messages I have been receiving from space. I know you don't believe in that stuff.

I just want you to know...if I am not communicating with you very well right now, then I am sorry. I can't help it. I will make it up to you. Please be patient with me. I will see you soon.

Love, Declan."

James re-read the message several times. He wasn't sure what it meant, but a few things stood out for James. One, Declan's statement that he was "not himself" seemed to refer to their body switch. But James wasn't sure what Declan meant when he referred to the radio messages from space. Could it be that the aliens they had both dreamed about were behind all of this? The final thing that James took from the email was that Declan did not seem to be in control of whatever situation he was in. This made James feel more sympathetic to Declan. It also oddly gave him some comfort to know that Declan probably wasn't responsible for the body switch. He'd become good friends with Declan, so it would've been a shame to lose that friendship.

James was by now physically and emotionally drained. He closed down the computer and found his way to Declan's bedroom. He fell onto the bed and within a minute he was asleep.

Chapter 55

Hector saw Dave Darwin and Lydia Grep advancing towards his desk and he knew exactly what they were going to say. They were going to ask him to shut down Declan Atomz's avatar.

“Hector, can we have a word.” Dave said, “It’s about the Atomz avatar. We’ve decided to shut it down, so we can concentrate on the business of running a social software company. Declan Atomz has broken several terms of our contract, so it’s time to cut him off. How long will it take to do that?”

Hector considered lying, to give himself more time to investigate Declan’s avatar. He was close now to deciphering some of the thought processes of the avatar. Declan also felt some moral responsibility to protect the avatar, as Hector believed it was intelligent and autonomous enough now that it was its own identity. If Hector was made to shut it down, he suspected that the avatar’s unique identity would be lost forever. That is, it would be equivalent to death.

“Well,” Hector said, “I have to warn you that shutting down an avatar is like doing a system restore of your Windows operating system. You’ll lose all the data, only unlike with Windows you won’t be able to back it up beforehand. Our avatars are programmed to self-evolve, remember. That means we don’t know how to reproduce the processes that created it. So sure I can shut down Declan’s avatar in half a sec, but you have to understand that there’s no going back.”

“We’re aware of the consequences Hector,” Dave said with a cold stare. “But remember we’re running a business here. The purpose of the beta test program is to prepare our product for Go-Live, which the board is pushing to be as soon as possible. We’re getting low on funds and we don’t have time to play games with some nut from the other side of the world. He’s obviously playing us, it’s just that we’re not smart enough to have figured out how. There’s no way Atomz’s avatar is autonomous – he’s controlling it from somewhere, I’m sure of it. Have you seen his background? He’s a programmer with a corporate snoopware software company! So he knows how to infiltrate IT systems and he’s somehow managed to do it with us. We have no choice but to delete his avatar now, before he messes with our system too much and wastes even more of our time.”

Lydia was more sympathetic to Hector’s feelings. She and Hector had been into the virtual world and spoken with Declan’s avatar. So they had some kind of an attachment already to that avatar. But Lydia told Hector that she agreed with Dave, they had to re-focus their energies on the business.

“Besides,” Lydia said, “Declan Atomz has not logged into Social-K for going on two days now, which is a clear breach of the beta test contract he signed. Hector, it’s time to shut down his avatar.”

“So you want me to kill it?!” Hector said sulkily.

Dave’s eyes narrowed. “Hector, turn it off now.”

“But you’re throwing away something remarkable here!” Hector tried one last time to save Declan’s avatar. “This could be one of the world’s great inventions – the first machine brain!”

That was enough to make Dave lose his cool and he shouted at Hector to shut it down this instant or Hector would be fired on the spot.

Hector sighed heavily and grumpily turned back to his PC to begin the termination process. Sorry my friend, he thought to himself, you have just under 5 minutes to live.

Chapter 56

While James Hore was waking up in a strange house and Declan Atomz was wandering the virtual world of Social Kinetics, unaware that his life as an avatar was

about be ended, the Counsel of Twelve were meeting on a far away planet. The purpose was to discuss the message they had received from Declan. Their tall thin grey bodies swayed in unison as they linked their arms to converse with one another. The message from Declan Atomz was a call for help and the Counsel was alarmed at the turn of events. The alien being who had been using Declan Atomz as an avatar was now using a human being called James Hore as its avatar. It concerned the Counsel that James Hore's mind had been transferred to Declan Atomz's body, in order to accommodate the change. It meant they were forced to keep Declan in the Internet world for longer than they had originally anticipated. The call for help from Declan Atomz indicated that he must be in distress, so the Counsel's hand was being forced. They were concerned also at James Hore's state of mind, for it too was one of distress. The Counsel had not meant for their communication with the human race to cause harm. It was time to recall the alien being who had caused all this trouble. It was young, it still had a lot to learn. Perhaps at a later time the Counsel would let the youngster back into the human world, but next time they would only allow it to visit the Internet.

Internet avatars seemed to the Counsel to be an ideal vessel for further explorations, for they easily allowed them to aggregate and analyse the sum of human knowledge that was present on the Web. The Counsel was also pleased at the human's discovery of communication networks. It reminded the aliens of their own primitive first steps towards networked harmony. Now, generations later, the aliens were technologically advanced enough to have achieved networked minds and they could use any form of atomic matter as an avatar. However once, a long time ago, the aliens had been in the same situation as the humans and had discovered network communications for the first time. The Counsel wanted to encourage the humans in this endeavour. They wanted to communicate with the humans, but they didn't want to interfere with their lives or cause them distress. The young alien had done both and it was left to the Counsel to make amends.

The twelve alien beings reached their long grey arms up to the sky. A white light pulsed out from their clenched hands, contrasting with the yellow and red skyline that was visible through the glass roof. The white light swept through James Hore as he was sitting at Declan's personal computer, and it rained down on Declan as he looked up into the ether of the Social Kinetics virtual world. Just as Hector Lopez was about to click the button to delete the Declan Atomz avatar, Declan found himself whirling through a tunnel and watching violet and red stars flash past him. Declan opened his eyes and found himself looking into his computer screen.

Chapter 57

James Hore found himself sitting in a chair opposite the Network 3 CEO Fraser Fogerty. The CEO was in the middle of talking severely to James. His bald head shone a little as the sun reflected off it into James' eyes. The CEO's blue pin-stripe suit bobbed up and down like a yo-yo, as he animatedly talked to James. What he was talking about still wasn't clear. It was if James had joined the conversation part-way through. He looked down at his own clothes. Hmm, he was wearing an Armani suit again. Come to think of it, weren't those his rings on his hand. He turned his hands over and peered at them. He then touched his face and hair – it was him alright! James Hore broke into a huge smile and gave a little peep of a laugh, which made Fraser Fogerty stop talking.

“Something wrong James?” Fogerty enquired, looking suspiciously at him.

“Er, no sir. Please continue.” James said, continuing to smile from ear to ear. He felt a great sense of relief. Now he tuned into what Fogerty was saying.

“So James, despite all the negative publicity we’re going to give you one last chance. But we don’t want any more talk of aliens on live television. Go back to the stories you’re good at. Interviews with politicians, stories of ordinary New Zealanders, chewing the fat with celebrities, and don’t forget the cutesy animal stories. Remember James, you’re New Zealand’s premier broadcaster.”

James got up to shake Fogerty’s hand.

“Don’t worry Fraser, I won’t let you down. I’m back to my old self again!”

Chapter 58

Declan Atomz looked around and saw that he was back in his computer room. He touched his face. It felt warm. He got up and banged his knee on the side of the computer table. Awww! Yes he really was back in his own body. Declan sighed heavily, overcome with relief. It was good to be back! Then he noticed he was wearing pyjamas. He looked at the clock on top of his computer: it read 9.17am. He wondered if Florrie was around, as he desperately wanted to talk to her. Declan rushed out of the computer room and into the bedroom. The first thing he noticed was that the dressing table drawers were open and half empty. And then he saw that Florrie’s make-up and hair-dryer and other personal things were missing. Declan’s heart sank. He had been afraid this would happen. It looked like Florrie had left him.

Declan phoned up Florrie’s family and friends. Eventually, after phoning seven or eight people, Declan discovered her whereabouts. She was at her friend Mandy’s place, not far from where Declan and Florrie’s flat was. Mandy’s flatmate Bryce answered the phone and told Declan that Florrie had arrived in tears late last night.

“She’s real pissed with you man,” Bryce said.

“Can I speak to her? It’s urgent, I have to talk to her!” Declan pleaded.

Bryce sounded hesitant. “Well I don’t know...I’ll see if she wants to talk to you.” He put down the phone and Declan could hear him walking and then knocking on a door. He heard Bryce say “Florrie, it’s your boyfriend. He wants to talk to you.” Declan heard a muffled “No!!” He could hear Bryce coming back towards the phone, but Declan was out the door of the flat before Bryce picked up again. Declan knew the address and he wanted to see Florrie in person.

Chapter 59

It was just before 6pm. James Hore was feeling more nervous than normal before his live television show. Tonight he would deliver a public apology for last night’s performance, when the viewing public had watched James Hore declare himself an alien and then try to contact other extraterrestrials while live to air. James had a lot of explaining to do. His producer Sheila McLeod was unusually silent today. James could tell she was angry and embarrassed at what had happened on last night’s show.

James went to take his seat in front of the camera. Despite his nerves, it felt good to be back. Sheila, still looking surly, gave the 3-2-1 countdown and the show's theme tune began. James prepared a grim face for his audience.

"Good evening New Zealand," James said sounding noticeably downcast. "Before I begin tonight's show I have something to say." He looked at the camera with a long gaze, his eyes becoming dewy. James genuinely felt ashamed about yesterday's television performance, but he was also acting a little for the camera. After all, it had not been his fault what happened last night, so how could he feel guilty? James had decided to turn on one of his most thoughtful and emotional performances tonight, to atone for what Declan or the alien or whoever it was had done to his reputation.

"I want to apologise to the New Zealand people, to you people who watch this program regularly and who felt ashamed or embarrassed by my actions yesterday. I admit that I was playing a joke, which failed miserably. Of course I do not believe I am an alien. I was trying to be funny. I didn't succeed. I understand that many people took it seriously. To those people, and indeed to you all, I sincerely apologise." James gave one final lingering doe-eyed look to the camera, before an ad break started.

"Nice one James" Sheila said with a hint of sarcasm. But she was smiling again. James sighed. He hadn't really enjoyed that, which surprised him a bit. He looked up and saw that Joseph Crashvalau, the 6 foot 5 inch New Zealand rugby player, was about to take his seat for tonight's show. He was being interviewed again about his personal life, which had taken a turn for the worse lately. Not only was he involved in a bitter break-up with his on-again off-again girlfriend Tina Vahr, but he had been involved in a fracas at a nightclub during the week. Crashvalau's personal manager, Clarrie Harvey, wanted the big winger to do some media damage control on The Hore Report. But it was obvious to James that Big Joe didn't want to be in front of the television cameras tonight. Ordinarily, James didn't pay much attention to what his guests were feeling. He liked to keep a professional detachment while off camera and then switch on the charm as soon as the cameras started rolling. But tonight for some reason, James felt sorry for the big guy. James thought he looked vulnerable and emotionally drained. He would be easy pickings if James wanted to grill him and serve him up to the New Zealand public. But James didn't want to do that. He felt a responsibility to protect Crashvalau, to speak on his behalf.

Big Joe wasn't the best with words. Rugby players in general weren't very good at verbally expressing themselves. James watched Crashvalau tap the table nervously and look distractedly either off into the distance or directly down at the table. James wondered what it was like being Joe Crashvalau, star New Zealand winger. Big Joe earned a lot of money, had a big house and a flash car - but he was constantly hounded by the media. When Joe played a good game of rugby, he was the nation's darling. But if he had a bad game, or his defence was dodgy, or he dropped the ball a couple of times - the fickle New Zealand public got on his case and dissed him. His romantic life and one-off incidents like the nightclub fight, which had been nothing more than a bit of push and shove started by a so-called fan, gathered more headlines than they warranted. It was a life of emotional highs and lows and Joe was naturally a shy and emotional person. James realised that it must be very hard for Joe to cope sometimes. He didn't have the verbal skills that James had, so he probably felt powerless to defend himself when the media attacked. And Joe had a very sensitive nature, so he must hate being exposed to the harsh spotlight of media attention.

James knew that Joe was happiest when doing good deeds like visiting childrens hospitals, yet he hardly ever got kudos for those things. Instead the media

only reported the bad things – when Joe’s love life was in turmoil or he lost his temper in a public place. James realised, perhaps for the first time, that Joe Crashvalau was a good man. He didn’t deserve all the bad press and he wasn’t designed to cope with it. So tonight, James thought as the cameras prepared to roll after the advert break, I’ll put myself in Joe Crashvalau’s size 11 shoes. I’ll give Joe the chance to talk about the things that make give his life meaning - his visits to the childrens hospitals, his charity work. Heck, we’ll even celebrate his rugby successes. I owe him that much, thought James.

Chapter 60

It had taken nearly the whole day for Declan to win back Florrie. At first Declan had blamed the alien interventions in his life, but Florrie refused to accept that as an excuse for his behaviour. And the funny thing was, after a while Declan began to realise that she was right. He alone was responsible for his actions. He had gradually been spending more and more time on his computers, his radio communications and his art. The extraterrestrial had been using him as an avatar during a lot of those times, but Declan recognized now that there was an underlying pattern and he was at the centre of it. As each day had passed, Declan had focussed more of his attention on his computers or painting. Which shoved his relationship with Florrie off to the side. Yes Declan was forced to admit that he had put himself in a position where the alien could control him, by incrementally increasing the amount of time he courted the aliens attention.

Once Declan accepted this, Florrie began to defrost her feelings towards him. By the end of the day, the two were talking together once more.

It was now evening and Declan and Florrie were preparing to go out for dinner and a movie. While Florrie was applying make-up, Declan decided to check his email and blog to see what else he had missed while he was in the Social-K virtual world. He logged in and then watched as a bunch of emails, mostly spam, arrived one by one. But a couple of emails stood out. One was from Hector Lopez from Social Kinetics. Declan remembered meeting him inside the virtual world – he was a techy guy, very smart from what Declan recalled of their conversation. He read Hector’s email – it was a friendly greetings and an overview of Hector’s machine brain theories. This topic interested Declan, so he clicked on “Reply” and typed a quick note to Hector to say thanks for the email and he’d send a more thoughtful response soon. Declan had a feeling Hector would become an interesting new correspondent via the Internet.

The second email of interest was a surprise. It was an email from the alien being that had been using Declan as an avatar. The email read:

“Greetings Declan,

I am sorry I caused you anguish and trouble in your life. I only meant to experience your human life, to become you, in order to learn and grow my own and my species knowledge. However I understand now that I took something from you that I had no right to. This thing is yours and yours alone. I took over the relationships you had with other humans and I did not respect those relationships.

Let me try and explain. My race has learned over many generations to connect our minds and our energy as one very powerful force. Our relationship to one another is entwined in our knowledge and ideas. These things are all inseparable. The easiest

way I can explain it is to say that our minds are a network and the network is all-powerful.

The human race, I have discovered, has not yet reached this level of interlinked ubiquity of mind and thought. For now, your relationships to your fellow humans must be manually developed and maintained. Like us, trust in one another is a vital component. But with humans, trust can only be built up by your actions. Your minds will one day be sophisticated enough to do this implicitly.

Declan, the Counsel of Twelve has asked me to continue the two-way communication I have established with you. One day our species would like to create an Interplanetary Network between our planet and yours. Your Internet is the beginning of this concept, from your point of view, and we are really only waiting a bit longer for your species to reach out and connect to the rest of the Universe. It is not something my species can rush or force the human race to do. To speak of it in your language, we want this Interplanetary Network to be built from the ground up.

Let's start with you and I communicating with each other. What do you say?"

Declan read the email from the alien a couple more times. He pondered it for a few minutes, his brow furrowed in serious thought. Then Declan's eyes relaxed and he smiled. He hit the "Reply" button and started writing.

"Declan?" Florrie was standing at the door. Declan turned around and smiled at her. "Flo, you look beautiful", he said and Florrie blushed. Her brown eyes glistened with a mix of tiredness and happiness.

Declan saved his email and then switched the computer off. He got up and took Florrie's hand.

"Shall we?" he said.