

CHAPTER 4

A NovaTech Sphere floated in the dark like a captive star. Its surface shimmered with contained radiance, a restless glow that pulsed in faint rhythms, brightening and dimming as if it were alive. Inside the ball, ninety-nine crystalline spiders moved with delicate precision, their bodies refracting the light into motes of shifting colour. Their limbs tapped and skittered in patterns too fast for the unaugmented eye to see. They fed on vibrations, on sound, on the texture of data translated into light.

Addriane Wolfe sat cross-legged on her bed in the darkness. She played music to the spiders. The sound did not travel through speakers. It moved as signal, as encoded resonance, slipping directly into the lattice and igniting it. The spiders reacted instantly. They liked Mozart. Perhaps the intricately layered compositions of Wolfgang Amadeus mirrored the poetic complexity of their computer code. Perhaps it was the layering, the recursion, the elegant mathematics folding back on itself that stimulated them. One day she might show her father these treasures but he would likely dismiss them as inconsequential playthings, the nonsense of a juvenile girl.

The rest of her room was in darkness. The sphere was linked to the implants she had made for her eyes. The light from the spiders could only escape down her optic nerves to the wet-chip receiver grafted to her cerebral cortex. The ball of light was generated by a spherical web of delicate fibre optics stretched above a small pyramidal crystal fixed on a plinth of black glass. The delicate strands trembled like a web touched by a gentle breeze.

Her father's company had made the sphere as a basic data storage device. She had taken this simple piece of technology and enhanced it beyond what anyone could have imagined. Yet to her its potential seemed so simple and staggeringly obvious.

The spiders never stopped moving. They slipped from strand to strand in constant hunger. Were the light to cease they would immediately become dormant. They knew so much. She had made just a hundred of them but she harboured a vision of God-like enormity for her creations. A dream of billions of them drifting across the universe and listening to the songs of the stars, and waiting, waiting for that day when they would be asked to play it all back.

The spider she had sent to her father's meeting moved across the strands to the centre and climbed down onto the apex of the pyramid. As soon as the translucent arachnid had settled itself, the air above the device bloomed into a projection. The boardroom unfolded in miniature.

The scene played out at a fraction of the time it had taken, the voices like buzzing insects. The girl switched on her accelerator and heard it all perfectly. Thaddeus Wolfe looked older in the projection, somehow diminished. His authority was fraying at the edges, bleeding out into the space his sons eagerly filled. When the tiny figure of her father stood and left the boardroom, the scene dissolved. She smiled at her father's ineptitude for allowing her brothers power over the company. In the two years of their incompetent tenure, NovaTech shares had dipped and the company as a whole had shrunk. Their latest folly had taken it close to bankruptcy. They had

nicked the artery and the body was slowly bleeding out. She knew it was only a matter of time before they screwed up again and finished the job.

She had diligently prepared for this day. Now it was her turn to shine, to prove to her father she was superior to all her bungling siblings. Amongst the billions of metal they had squandered, the cost of two faxsimulants had folded invisibly into those losses, a shipment from Mars buried inside their ill-fated disaster.

She allowed herself a smile of satisfaction.

Addriane was an unfortunate genetic statistic. She was thought of as merely an eccentric teenager. A female, a burden, never an asset like her brothers, even though intellectually she towered over them, and unknown to her father, because he was never interested enough to find out, she surpassed even *him*. Like any prodigal genius, she was a little emotionally unbalanced. Even the meaning of her name, Addriane, the dark one, was in some way prophetic. The darkness was in her soul. She was invisible to all. Remarkable and yet unremarked. And the more she searched for approval in her father's eyes, the more he dismissed her.

She was barely fourteen years old and six foot tall. She could not have made herself look fourteen if she had tried. She had the body of a woman and had never been self-conscious about her height, because her father had never been about his. She did not stoop as some exceptionally tall people did. She would wear heels which gave her another four inches whenever the whim took her. Her hair was as white as her father's, long and straight reaching down to the base of her spine like her brother Steven. She had piercings on her face, two studs, one above and below each lip. Her

eyes were ice blue, with flecks of strange darkness in them, shadows of a storm-to-be in a calm sea.

She crossed the room to the one-way glass wall that formed the whole west-facing aspect. The glass was mirrored on the outside, and within its dark reflection of the room it bred alien shadows. Standing only inches away from the window, she leaned her head against it. Her breath did not mist on the coated glass.

Against the black backdrop of night were the bright myriad lights of the city spread out before her. From here she could see the multitude of towers thrusting upwards, their skins alive with crawling advertisements. The air beyond the glass was thick with particulate smog. Though she could not hear the city, she imagined the constant mechanical roar, the grind of traffic arteries and industrial lungs choking the skyline.

She was the ultimate voyeur, watching the city pulsate, safe, detached, untouchable in this prison of her father's making. On occasions, she would stand this close to the glass and almost convince herself that nothing stood between her and a fall of five-hundred feet. It offered the electricity of exhilaration, a surge of vertigo without the fear.

She watched flitters shuttle to and fro across her field of vision like fireflies in the night's dance. Their motion was erratic, insect like, darting between the towers. Their engines left faint ionised trails that shimmered briefly before dissolving into the haze. She focused on one single white point cutting across her field of vision. It moved fast, yet distance stretched its passage into something languid. She lifted her

hand and aligned her reflection with it, fingers spreading slowly as if she could trap it between them. The light slid between her ghostly fingers and continued on, indifferent.

Suddenly, she was overcome with a consuming anger. For this tiny, seemingly insignificant event echoed her own life, this ineffectual existence where everything she tried to touch was as intangible as her phantom reflection. But that would soon change.

Behind her, in the darkness, a chime sounded announcing an incoming transmission.

“Alpha, open channel,” she instructed the room’s system.

A pause, then the system complied. “Channel open.”

Static bled from the connection before resolving into a voice. “I have the package.”

Addriane moved to the Nova Sphere at the centre of the room and activated its transmitter.

“Integrity of the package?” she asked.

“Intact,” he said. “No breach.”

She placed her palm against the sphere. It warmed instantly under her touch, recognising her biometrics. Filaments of light spiralled outward.

“Send it to me,” she instructed the caller.

“Transferring it to you now.”

The sphere blinked with the incoming transmission and the soft chatter of dataflow. The transmission ceased and the sphere confirmed the download as complete.

“Destroy the data crystal,” she instructed the sender.

Moments later, Addriane walked back to the window just as a distant point of light lifted itself in the night sky. Abruptly a second light source chased the first. She watched as the two trajectories converged. There was no sound, no shockwave, only a sudden bloom of white that collapsed inward on itself. A silent detonation, like a distant firework. She knew that explosion across the city had been the sender of the data and did not concern herself with his sacrifice. He had been paid well for his services and their transaction had ended with the transmission. Perhaps she was more like her father than she cared to admit, emotionless and coldly pragmatic where business was concerned.

She walked from the window to a section of the wall that appeared indistinguishable from the rest of the room. She did not slow as she approached. The surface deliquesced as she passed through the façade and reformed behind her.

The interior of the hidden chamber was smaller and held a single Dive chair and terminal. Indicator lights blinked in uneven rhythms, pulsing against the walls. She folded herself into the Dive seat and it detected her presence as filament-like probes coiled out of the headrest on both sides searching for her Scape studs. Below her ears on both sides were six small circular metallic contacts, each one no bigger than three millimetres wide. Each filament found a contact and locked into place with a

magnetic click, connecting her with the Dive generator. From these contacts a fine network of complex monofilaments snaked through her brain, linking centres that controlled her senses and the higher functions. From a compartment at her side, she retrieved a pulse hypo of Quad-X. The cartridge inside shimmered with a viscous, opalescent liquid. She pressed it against her neck. There was a sharp sting, followed by a cold rush flooding into her bloodstream.

She threw the switch and Dived.

The real world disappeared and she entered a whole new reality which was both infinity and eternity given a form the mind could accept. And the mind of the Scape was awesome in its complexity, a boundless expanse of structured illusion.

In here, data manifested as towering constructs of impossible geometry rising into a horizon that did not obey distance. Streams of light moved like rivers, carrying information in endless currents. Each human essence which entered this cerebral construct was like a single star inhabiting the real universe. And the Scape was everywhere, growing, progressing far beyond the original constraints placed on it, evolving at an exponential rate. And humanity was wholly unaware of how far it had come, and where it was headed.

She glided out over an ethereal ersatz city glittering all around her; a fusion of jagged light from crystal towers, shimmering images of geometric structures shifting in focus and definition as if they were picture projections on gossamer sheets, rippling in a gentle breeze. But these structures were unlike anything constructed in the real world. They were not fabricated from bricks and mortar but from

information code, represented by these multi-faceted edifices known as Scape architecture.

Nothing here obeyed the laws of the physical world. Structures folded in on themselves, expanded, dissolved, reassembled. Beneath her, above her, and through her, the Scape extended in stacked infinities. Levels upon levels, millions deep, each one sealed and defended by the cold intelligence of the Nishho-Ewai fields. They pulsed faintly, their presence prickling against her awareness like electrically charged wire grazing exposed skin.

At the centre, the core radiated like a star. It burned with the contained fury of innumerable quettabytes of information controlling the lives and deaths of billions of people. The Scape operated on the quantum level, with discrete energy levels of consciousness, like the many energy orbits of an atom, and the Scape core was a jealous nucleus, unwilling to relinquish its hold on its sub-atomic minions.

Even at this shallow level she felt the heat of the core firing the dustiest neurons of her brain and shaking them clean, stirring forgotten pathways, igniting dormant primordial centres. It was intoxicating and dangerous in equal measure.

There were those who would venture deeper towards the core to find more of that clean feeling. Sometimes, if you waited long enough, you would see one, a momentary flash like a meteorite impacting with the atmosphere —a mindburst. The explosive pulse of a psyche, like Icarus flying too close to the sun. Ghostly algorithm fronds reached out from the core's edge to taste the particles of mindburst which

passed through them, like neutrinos through the Earth's core. Sometimes, if you were close enough, you could sense a scream buried deep inside the data stream.

Addriane Dived through a thousand levels in a microsecond, arriving at the first N-E field and passing through. It parted like mist, barely slowing her.

The second struck harder. A sudden resistance, like forcing her way through liquid. Her outer defensive shields flared in response, patterns lighting across its surface as it compensated.

The third level offered more resistance. She hit the boundary of the field hard and penetrated. One of her protective shields ruptured, fragments of it peeling away into the void.

She continued on to the fourth level, losing another layer as she passed beyond it, but the nucleus of her essence remained intact.

Hovering just under the fringe of the fourth boundary, the core information was so dense here she could feel it eating into her psyche like slow-acting acid. She could remain here no longer than a minute before it fried her mind. Somewhere, far away, her physical body was reacting to the stress, echoing faintly through the link.

She called into the void.

The command rippled outward through the architecture, a signal wrapped in complex encryption.

It answered.

It was a spider constructed from interlocking lattices of pure code. It loomed over her like a tower block beside a pebble.

In the two years her brothers had consolidated power at NovaTech, she had built this Trojan Horse. Every day she had spent exactly one minute and now she came to offer it the last piece. This final code was the seed from which it would give birth to countless billions of its infectious offspring, pouring into every corner of the Scape.

Addriane's actions would not just save NovaTech but would make it the richest company in the solar system, and her father would have no choice but to acknowledge her superiority, and finally see her for what she was.

She transmitted the new code and watched as the swollen arachnid abdomen pulsed and finally burst. A torrent of smaller spider constructs erupted outward, each a perfect derivative of the parent. They dispersed in all directions, slipping into channels, burrowing into systems, vanishing into the endless expanse of the Scape.

The parent spider slowly withered, eventually breaking into its constituent code to be absorbed by the Scape core.

It was done.

Addriane's ascent was violent, boundaries slamming into her and scraping away what little shield protection remained. The Scape collapsed behind her in cascading distortion as she forced her consciousness back toward the real world.

Then she was out.

She convulsed in the chair, a raw, animal motion. The room snapped back into focus around her as sensory overload crashed in.

Her stomach heaved violently, emptying itself over the armrest. Her hands shook uncontrollably as she gripped the sides of the chair.

The echo of the core still rang inside her skull. Then darkness crept in at the edges of her vision. Her last emotion before unconsciousness claimed her, was not relief but triumph.

What she had released would rewrite the balance of power.