

Dragonfly over Kazakhstan

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Chapter 1

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A Primeval Short Story

I was flying over a large plain, somewhere in Central Asia. Somewhere that had once been Central Asia. I'd not seen any sign of life for miles, not even much by way of plant life beyond grass. When they've eaten anything with any meat on it the predators tend to start on the plant life. Very adaptable the predators, but then aren't we all. That was, I presume, the whole point.

I was carrying with me a small crystal map I'd picked up, well stolen, some timeline way back when there was a certain amount of diversity. When it was still possible to meet people who were descended from humans and remembered the fact. Back when there was still some hope that the ruthless processes of mutation and time travel could be stabilised. I should have stayed there really but something drove me forwards and, who knows, maybe everything would have changed anyway.

The map was sensitive to time and place and projected a small globe above it. I could zoom in to the details of landscape if I wished, or look at Helen's notes, though they were mostly minimal and cryptic. The map was invaluable because it showed the one fixed constant in the ever shifting timelines. The anomalies, mapped out for centuries now, my time at least, and mapped out for millennia either side of the 21st century. The hub of the chaos; the changes rippling out from that point wider and wider.

I'd decided to try going back in time. I'd not been back in time for decades. It was a gradual thing but at some point I'd realised that the people who went back had stopped coming forwards again. But now there was no one left, no one who was interested in more than the basics of food, survival and procreation to the extent that I had long ceased to count them as people at all - merely another

hazard to be avoided. A particularly lethal hazard to be avoided. But sooner or later I was going to have to go back, go back and make another abortive attempt to change something, anything.

I was bored, lonely and running low on hope. At some point, hiding out in the Himalayas a few months back, dodging predators and scavenging in the pickings they left behind, I'd decided it was better to go back and face whatever was waiting there instead of endlessly chasing forwards, hoping to find a time when things magically became all right again.

There was an anomaly up ahead of me. According to the map it led to that magical nexus point in the 21st century. Not so long before my own originating time. I was cutting it fine though, the anomaly was not going to remain open for much longer. I swooped low, glad it was in a nice wide open plain. I could see for miles and there wasn't a predator in sight. I levelled off and glided straight for it. I should have gone through but at the last minute something came through the other way hitting me in the chest and taking us both to the ground. The anomaly pulsed and vanished.

My wings hurt terribly. I struggled up flexing them out and trying to fold them back. The translucent sun catching material between the fingers was torn and would need time to heal. If there had been any predators nearby I would have been done for. I'd pushed the man off as I'd scrambled up but now I looked at him closely. He was a genuine human, as far as I could tell without a genetic sampler anyway. He even *looked* human which in my experience was eccentric at the least. He was crying out with his hands clutched to his face. I pulled them back and saw the white sticky strands of the World Mother covering his eyes, already starting to spread out across his face.

The World Mother. The other great predator. Luckily for us there was only a small fragment of her here though it was growing fast. I'd encountered a scientific base once, somewhere in Scotland, some time in the early twenty-second century. Scotland by that stage, in that timeline, was almost entirely swamped by the World Mother, great crystalline shards nestling among the mountains like the glaciers of the ice age. The base had a project to defeat her advance, to "wipe her from the face of time". A doomed project, it transpired. She advanced too fast and their research was too slow. I left before the inevitable but I took some compounds with me, enough to combat a small infestation, if you were unlucky to get some part of her on you but lucky enough to escape being engulfed.

I was trembling with panic as I fumbled through my bags. I might be able to out fly her but I couldn't out run her and I wouldn't be flying for a bit. I dug out the box of capsules. The man was swearing in a Scottish brogue, scrabbling at

his face. I found a syringe. Looking at him, I could see he now had strands on his fingers as well. I should have told him to hold still. He was wearing a T-shirt leaving his arms bare. I didn't bother with niceties, but pinned one down with my feet, standing on the wrist and upper arm. He swore some more and started battering me with his hand. Now I had the stuff on my trousers. Despite his struggles I managed to isolate a vein and plunged in the syringe. Then I gave myself a dose for good measure and poured more of the stuff on my leg. I watched as the strands curled up and dissolved into ash. The man sat up pulling the crumbling remains from his face. Our eyes met and his widened in a way I couldn't interpret at the time but I later realised was surprise.

"And what would you be?" he asked.

"My name is Stephen," I replied. He blinked, slowly, once. One hand reached out for my face but then dropped back suddenly. He said nothing.

"My current form is based on the idea of a dragonfly," I added into the awkward moment, "but with adaptations which allow me to process solar energy to an extent. And you are?"

"Cutter," he said, "Nick Cutter."

"You look human," I commented.

"You sound surprised. Humans are extinct I take it."

"It is hard to tell, but I think not. Although they never like to think so, a lot of humans adopted the predator form. However it is a long time since I met someone who chose the human form. It is not terribly efficient in many ways."

"Chose the human form?" there was a tone of vehemence, or perhaps disbelief in his voice.

I looked at him carefully, unanswering. His reply suggested to me that he didn't really understand what I was saying. This in turn gave me food for thought.

"That anomaly," I said at last, "it led back to the early 21st century?"

"Aye," he nodded.

"But you have never heard of the Shanghai nanites?"

"Never."

"That doesn't make much sense to me, they reached back to the 21st century long ago. In so far as long ago makes any sense when you're talking about time travel."

"Tell me about these Shanghai nanites."

I looked at the sun above us. It was early afternoon. I wanted to be somewhere safe, or at least comparatively safe, before dark.

"I'll explain as we walk," I said, gesturing to the mountains in the distance.

"We can be seen too easily on this plain and there is a city in that direction. There

will be predators after us before dark.”

As we walked he grilled me about the nanites and the anomalies. He was fascinated by the idea that everything became homogenised - as the nanites spread from organism to organism, anything with high enough cognitive abilities to have identifiable desires mutated constantly to fulfil those desires. There was, he observed, no evolution anymore, only mutation fuelled by the nanites interpretation of the host’s needs and desires.

”But,” I explained, ”the nanites got carried back through the anomalies. They’ve been spreading backwards through time. There’s been no real diversity for centuries now, long before your time. I don’t understand how the 21st century can be as you describe.”

”Well maybe, I don’t know, I come from before the nanites got there.”

I was silent.

”That’s a skeptical expression, isn’t it?” he said.

”Slightly.”

”You only have this idea that time has been becoming more and more,” Cutter waved his hand for a moment, ”out of joint because you keep travelling. If you stayed in one time...”

”I’d become a victim as history changes.”

”No, no, you cause the changes as you move, especially moving into the past. I may have fallen into your world though the anomaly, but the time line I find when I go back should be the same as when I left. Going forward can not effect the past.”

”I disagree. The past of this timeline includes nanites well before the 21st century. Clearly by coming forward you have moved to a timeline where that is the case.”

”Oh yes, and you’ve studied extensively the history of this time line to make sure, have you?”

”No, but it is the only thing that makes sense. If I go back I will find a world not so different from the 21st century as I last left it. That is the way time works, but by going back I will find an anomaly to the Permian or earlier and maybe find some way to control the changes.”

”How long have you been trying this?” he asked. Then following my silence, ”Is there any evidence it works?”

”There is nothing left to do but continue trying.”

”It’s a stupid and dangerous thing to do,” he paused looking around the grassy plain. ”Clearly.”

We walked in silence for a bit. Every so often I flexed out my wings experimentally testing the healing as it occurred. I watched Nick Cutter cautiously as we went. He had fixed his face in a grim expression and seemed angry with me, though I could not really tell why. Thinking about it now I wonder if he was also hungry and thirsty. I had offered him no food or drink and it did not occur to me to do so until some hours later.

I was still curious about him though and my last question had been diverted into a discussion of the Shanghai nanites.

I tried again.

"When you came through that anomaly. What was happening? How did you come to have the World Mother on you?"

"The World Mother?" he asked, still sounding angry.

I gestured to my eyes, "The white stuff."

"Why do you call it the World Mother?"

I decided not to be sidetracked this time even though his tone had switched from confrontation to curiosity.

"How did you get it on you?"

He eyed me hard for a few seconds, then seemed to shrug. Or at least his shoulders made a slight movement and he looked away, breaking eye contact.

"Ah well, I was supposed to be meeting my ex-wife. She's," he paused, "she's got some mad ideas about the anomalies much like your own and the determination and skills to make her dangerous. I got a message from her asking to meet up."

"And you went?"

"I was talked into it. Miked up," he extracted a small wire from his shirt, then bundled it up aggressively into his pocket, "for what good it did. They wanted to make a deal with her."

"They?"

"The people I work for."

"So what happened?"

"She didn't show up. I waited around the anomaly for a bit and then this crystal came up from the ground in front of me," he stared down at his hands bringing them up to his eyes. "This stuff then sort of shot into my face. I guess I fell back through the anomaly."

I digested this information.

"And you had never seen the World Mother before?"

"Like I said, who or what, is the World Mother?" he paused and frowned. "It was like I could hear a voice in my head, a woman's voice?"

I nodded, "That was her. No one quite knows who she is or even if she's one person or some sort of gestalt. She was first reported in the Permian, a crystalline growth, with some sort of limited power of movement through rock. Creating crystals before her and rock again behind. But it became clear it was someone, a human, whose nanites had taken a strange turn. At first we thought she was a harmless curiosity but then we realised that she could convert what she touched to herself. Rock originally, and then people, and she grew slowly. She could also stretch across time in some way, cropping up in more and more eras, splitting off bits of herself and then reabsorbing them. I don't think they can communicate across time but they, it, act with the same agenda I think, to grow and absorb more and more. Some fragment of her must have reached your time zone."

"And will grow to consume it?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Sometimes she seems to just crop up, grab something and then vanish back through an anomaly."

"And why do you call her the World Mother?"

"It's a legend; a myth. That she manipulates everything, controls the anomalies, controls the changes, continuously shapes and reshapes the world to meet her ends. Effectively she created the world. The name stuck even though few believe the legend. "

"How do we defeat her? That stuff you had?"

"Works only for small quantities. It's useless on anything larger than a few square metres."

"I'd like to take some back with me if possible. If I ever find a way back."

I flicked on the map showing the anomalies and pointed ahead. "Anomalies tend to cluster - there is another due to open to the 21st century in a couple of days in that direction. It reaches back to within days of that last one," I didn't add that we had no hope of reaching it at our current pace. I hoped my wings would heal, and perhaps strengthen sufficiently that I could carry Cutter the distance. If not... if not I hadn't yet decided what I would do. I did not need to decide yet whether to leave behind my first chance at companionship in more years than I cared to count or miss the anomaly.

It was early evening when I first caught sight of pursuit, over to one side of us where a spur of the encircling mountains thrust forward into the steppe. My eyesight must have been sharper than Cutter's. In fact little about Cutter was truly optimised despite Darwin's theories. I pointed to where I saw the predators streaming down the mountains and onto the plain. He simply shook his head.

"What am I looking at?"

"Predators," I said, "they're an extremely efficient, mostly four-legged form.

They hunt by sonar.”

”About this big,” Cutter indicated with his hands, ”dark blue, grey colour, evolved from bats.”

I nodded, ”Originally a lot of them were bats, but the efficiency of the form proved attractive to other species as well. A lot of people eventually mutated towards them, if they weren’t eaten first, that is.”

I thought of Daniel. ”I just want a simple life,” he had said, once it became obvious what was happening. Once I had spent days with him trying to instill some hope for an intelligent future in him, trying uselessly to change the desires in his heart. ”No complications, just food and sleep. To forget about all this.” We were in a tiny ghost town out in Arizona. I don’t think it had even been abandoned because of predators, or nanite mutation, or the World Mother, or anomalies but it had symbolised the new world order for him. I left him there. Never looked back. For all I knew he was in that pack now, heading for us, all memories of me long forgotten or rendered irrelevant - who could tell?

”We’re in trouble then,” said Cutter and there was the faintest hint of a smile at his mouth. A ‘wry smile’ perhaps or maybe he craved danger?

”We run,” I said. ”The city shouldn’t be far now, assuming its still there. We may find safety.”

And we ran.

Cutter was not an efficient runner. He was slow and gasped for breath. In the end we progressed little faster than a walk. Nervously I flexed my wings. They were possibly strong enough to carry him a short distance. There was a faint gleam on the horizon. I hoped it was the towers of Shymkent. I hoped that in this timeline Shymkent had towers. Glancing behind and to one side I saw the predators were gaining on us, faster than I had hoped. Cutter could now see them too. He glanced frequently over his shoulder as he ran, but his breathing was short and swift. I don’t think he could have commented if he’d wanted to.

The city edged towards us so slowly, but I could see towers, thank the World Mother. Then as the predators came up on our heels I stretched out my wings and rose into the air, lifting up Cutter as I rose. He was like a dead weight in my hands and I dropped between wing beats. One of the predators leaped up catching his foot. He cried and kicked out, instinctively I think. Shoe and predator fell away.

”You left that a little late,” I heard him say.

”I can not carry you far. You would rather I left you behind?”

”Oh no! Believe me, I’m very grateful.”

I flew us as far as I reasonably could to one of the wide circular platforms atop a sheer slender tower. Cutter peered down over the side in the twilight at the

ground hundreds of feet below.

"Why build up in the sky?" he asked.

"The predators never develop wings, no one knows why, though there are theories. People are safe up here."

Cutter straightened up, turning away from the view and facing me confrontationally.

"What people?"

He was right, as the last rays of the sun vanished not a single light appeared in the whole city. I had grown so used to abandoned cities, spread throughout time like the flotsam from a storm that I hardly wondered at the fact any more. The place wore a thick blanket of silence. Until Cutter broke the window of the nearest house, that is, and let us inside.

I switched on my torch and we could see light wooden furniture and cloth coverings on the walls, trying to make the interior of the house feel like a Yurt. The temperature was dropping viciously. What looked like a house control unit stood by the door and I tried switching it on, but nothing happened. Wires led from it and I began to trace them.

"What are you looking for?"

"Some way to turn the heating back on. Hopefully this is solar powered."

"And if it isn't?" I shrugged, I was a long way from out of ideas but I didn't feel like discussing endless back up plans. We'd see if this worked first.

Cutter looked around him, then picked up one of the chairs and smashed it hard against the floor, proceeding to break it into bits.

"You have any such thing as a lighter in that bag of yours?" he asked.

Countless millennia of civilisation, if you take the looping timelines into account, and we squatted in the doorway of the house like savages, while Cutter tended a fire on the terrace. I found some tinned food in the kitchen which we heated up and ate, wrapped in elaborately embroidered blankets. The food had a strong spicy flavour; "Curried Goat" written on the tin in Cyrillic lettering though somehow I doubted it. I thought I might have to get into a long explanation of cultural references to Cutter but the word 'Goat' didn't appear to worry him any. Savagery has its advantages I guess.

"You weren't ever human, I take it," Cutter asked, as we finished it off.

"No, I'm first generation uplift though," I've always been rather proud of that fact.

"First generation?"

"The first generation of my species to be infected by nanites, the first to develop higher sentience."

I could still remember dimly the Antarctic wastes as they had been, not wastes of course to us. My brain structures had shifted so many times since then though that the memories were dim and vague. Like memories of childhood in humans, or so I have been told.

"So what species are you?" he asked. "Were you originally," he amended.

"I'm a Penguin."

Cutter spluttered over his goat and the first real smile appeared on his face since I'd met him. I've never coped with this reaction well. Here was the first sentient non-predator I had met in over a hundred years and he was laughing at me. I put down my empty bowl and walked out on the terrace. He came out maybe a minute later.

"I'm sorry. It was wrong of me to laugh."

Was that genuine or sarcasm? I couldn't tell. I treated it as genuine. It was neither the time nor place for an argument.

"Come, let us sleep."

"I'll take first watch."

I didn't think watches were necessary, but humoured him none-the-less. Just as well as it transpired. He let me sleep for a couple of hours, then woke me and slept himself. We continued in this way through the night. Maybe an hour before dawn he woke me. He had found more wood somewhere which he had added to the fire to create a strong blaze. He had also tied rags made from the wall hangings round some of the thicker pieces. A large tin of something that smelt like oil was open on the table.

"Look," he said.

He lit one of his improvised torches and dropped it over the edge of the terrace. As it spiralled down I saw the predators, no more than a hundred feet below us, climbing the thin tower.

"They've adapted to climb the towers," I said.

"Explains where the people went," he observed.

Did it? I wondered. We saw no sign of a struggle in the whole place. Everything was packed up and locked. I think the people had already gone, the process more religious people referred to as rapture perhaps, or gone back or forward or to some other place in this time zone.

The muscles in my back were already stronger than they had been this time yesterday. Another twenty four hours and I would be able to carry both our weights with ease. My night-sight isn't good, though.

I had wanted to explore this city and, if I am honest, to scavenge for supplies, before making a break for the next anomaly. I had enough food to last for a while

but my clothes were becoming worn and a T-shirt and jeans weren't the most practical garb for the steppe. T-shirts never lasted long anyway, unless they were explicitly designed for winged people - the tear in the back tended to extend until they fell apart.

I circled the platform we were on, seeking inspiration and came to a narrow bridge made of a wood-based compound strung between it and another platform a breath-taking mile away. Dawn must have been close. If Cutter could get across and remove the bridge we would be able to see before the predators reached us again. I flew back to him explaining the idea; gathered my pack and headed across the gap. The new platform appeared to be the housing for a large piece of machinery. I didn't look too closely but dumped my pack and snatched up a barrel of oil.

Cutter was more than half way across the bridge when I caught up with him. He held a flaming torch in one hand and what looked like a flat-bladed paddle in the other. His gait was slightly lop-sided - one shoe off and one shoe on. He hadn't found a replacement for the lost one. I opened the oil and began pouring it back along the bridge behind him. I didn't get far, a predator was already on the bridge. I flew up out of reach as it leapt at me and then headed back, shouting at Cutter to hurry.

At the end of the bridge he turned and threw down the torch behind him. I doused the area in oil and watched it catch and burn, the flames springing reassuringly high. Cutter stood at the end of the bridge clutching the paddle. Suddenly the predator bounded through the flames, screeching with pain but still intent on its prey. To my surprise Cutter held his ground and, as the predator leapt at him he swung the paddle. He hit it square in the face and it rebounded back into the fire. The bridge gave way under the impact and I watched the flaming beast fall to the ground below. Cutter looked appreciatively at the piece of wood he was carrying.

"...and I thought Cricket was only for Sassenachs," he said cryptically.

Dawn revealed a sea of predators below us, some already half-way up the tower. But it also revealed a cable car system, strung between the buildings and then off into the distance in the direction we wanted to go. There had been no cable car in Shymkent the last time I'd been here, but that was in another time line. Big solar panels and storage batteries were mounted on top of the building and miraculously it didn't take long to start the system. I had no idea if it would out run the predators but it seemed worth a try and it minimized the time I might need to carry Cutter for. We debated crossing another of the bridges to scavenge for warm clothes and shoes for Cutter but the predators were uncomfortably close. It was a risk neither of us was keen to take.

The cable car itself was luxuriously furnished with upholstered seats, large enough to stretch out on, and a thick deep carpet. A panoramic window stretched across one half, while the other contained a small kitchen and bathroom. Clearly people had made long journeys this way. Simple controls were situated by the door letting us shunt the car on and off the wire as we passed stations.

We travelled swiftly towards and then over the Altay mountains, then headed out towards the Pacific. We passed through two more cities along the way, both silent and deserted.

"What happened to the people?" asked Cutter.

"Some became predators. Others got eaten. People went through the anomalies and didn't come back. Whole communities become seized by a belief in transcendence. The nanites try to oblige, they all vanish." I shrugged. "As time has become more mixed up there have been fewer and fewer people, but more and more predators."

"What do they eat? When they can't get us that is."

"Each other sometimes, plants, there are some species of fish and insect, even some small mammals and birds, that don't seem to be susceptible to nanite mutation. Eventually packs starve if they don't find their way to better populated time zones. Once there, of course, the time zone ceases to have much by way of a population. If you go forward from this point in time, there is little to be seen. Pretty much all large animal life is dead by about a hundred years from now. Or at least it was, last time there were enough people in any time zone to study that sort of thing."

"But there was someone to build all this." Cutter went and stood at the cable car window, gazing at the lines of pylons, placed miles apart from each other stretching into the distance in either direction. "The human race hasn't unhappened itself yet." I forbore from pointing out that there was a distinction between people and humans and humans hadn't necessarily had anything to do with the cable car at all.

"Not yet, no," I agreed.

He turned his back to the view and stared at me intently. "Do you mind if I ask a personal question?"

"Not necessarily."

"Your name, Stephen, how did you come by it?"

"That's what the woman who gave me the nanites called me." I recalled her standing before me, leaning over, holding out her hand, the nanites drifting across the gap between us, a kind of smoky haze. They must have already been working within me at that point - the image is so much clearer in my mind than others of

my former life.

"She picked me up in the mid-21st century, that's a very dense period for anomalies. She was holed up in an old research station in the Antarctic studying the effects of the nanites as they crossed the species barrier. She was something of a pioneer in that regard. She had to conduct her research in secret."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know, last time I saw Helen was back in the Permian, we didn't part well." When I stole her map and notes.

"Helen? About my height, a little shorter, brown hair," he patted at his pockets. "Ach, I don't have a photograph of her anymore."

"I do," I pulled out a picture of Helen, as I had originally seen her, from my pack.

Cutter took it and then hit it with the back of his hand, "That's her, I should have *known* she'd be behind all this somehow."

"Many have said that," I said defensively, "but there is ample evidence that nanites had already crossed the species barrier before she began her research. Helen at least allowed some understanding of the process."

"Oh, I'm sure she acted all innocent. But believe me, I know Helen, her motives were always far from altruistic."

"I doubt you knew her as well as I did."

"I was *married* to her."

This took me aback somewhat. Helen had never mentioned a husband to me. But she was secretive by nature. She had lost someone in the timelines. Someone I sometimes suspected she was obsessively trying to recover, endlessly going back and forward, tweaking something here, pushing something there, experimenting, she always insisted. I had assumed that it was Stephen she sought to recover. I'd found a picture of him once and even worn his face for a while until Helen called me a love-sick puppy. I wondered, uncomfortably, now how much of that face I still had. I long ago had ceased wanting to look like Stephen Hart but I hadn't particularly wanted to look like anything else either. I'd lost the hair for an iridescent armoured scull cap that projected down my forehead and over my nose. I'd strengthened the bones in the rest of my face which probably changed their shape a bit.

But now I wondered if my name sake had been a side-show. I had been wondering how it was Cutter came from a past so radically different from the 21st centuries I had seen. Ones where the human race was already long gone, in any recognisable form at least. Had Helen somehow, finally, succeeded in controlling the time lines? I looked at Nick Cutter and pondered how much to tell him.

"I knew her for a hundred years," I said in the end. "She changed a lot in that time. This map was hers." The map, with the intriguing red mark around the anomaly Cutter had come through, the mark that had finally sparked my determination to go back. Had Helen been waiting by every anomaly on that map all through history, removing time travellers as they came through? Surely that was impossible, even for her?

Cutter stood up and leaned his forehead against the Window looking down, "Did you love her?" he asked.

"Did you?"

"For a time."

A few things were beginning to fall into place in my mind. Sub-texts of conversations I had had hundreds of years earlier. "You disagreed with her methods."

"Aye, I disagreed with her methods," he was almost shouting. "Time is not a laboratory. It's not a scientist's play ground. You must believe that Helen was never interested in improving things for anyone, just in knowledge for its own sake."

"You think knowledge for its own sake has no value?"

"It's a luxury you can't afford when people are dying."

"Nothing lasts forever, Cutter, everything becomes extinct eventually," even as I said it I knew I was parroting something Helen had said to me.

His face took on a fixed, disappointed look. "There is a value in compassion, Stephen. The heat death of the universe is not an excuse for callousness, manipulation and cruelty."

I looked away from his gaze. I realised that this had been at the heart of my final split with Helen, but still I felt the need to defend her in the face of his anger.

"Sometimes to be truly compassionate sacrifices have to be made. Sometimes the official response is wrong, destructive, driven by collective conservatism and incapable of flexible response. In the face of the collapse of bio-diversity and the barriers between the time zones it is necessary to take a wider view than individual lives."

"Stephen didn't believe that," Cutter said. He shook his head and sat down. "He believed the government approach was wrong, aye. But he never lost sight of the importance of individual lives."

His head dropped into his hands.

"I am not Stephen," I said eventually and realised that, even so long after my split with Helen, it cost me to acknowledge that.

He looked up. "I know," he said heavily.

He stood up again and turned away from me to the window once more, saying something quietly. It sounded like "No absolutism here."

We travelled in silence for some time after that. Every so often Cutter glared at me across the cable car. He was company, and I was still grateful for that after so long alone, but I began to wonder if he was going to be difficult.

As if reading my thoughts he spoke up, "You can't come back through this anomaly with me."

"Why not?"

"I want to get back to my 21st century, not yours, not one where everyone has been used to travelling through time for centuries already. Not one where nanites have replaced evolution."

"Why does that mean I can't come with you?"

"Everything you've told me describes a progression, as you've gone back and forward through time, as your people have gone back and forwards through time, things have got worse and worse. If you come with me, I get committed to that sequence of events. If I go on my own, and I'm travelling backwards, then maybe, just maybe I'll get back to the time line I came from."

As I thought, he was going to be difficult. I had heard a lot of mad theories of time travel in my time and this made less sense than most.

He ran his hand through his hair. "You even look like him when you disagree with me," he said.

I felt myself smile at that. "I didn't agree with Helen so much," I admitted, "not at the end. Too many people were dying. She insisted that we could put it all right once we understood how to control the time lines but the chaos was spreading so fast. I thought it was time to start trying actively to put it right."

He glared at me a moment then his face relaxed and he looked out at the scenery once more. Obscurely I felt he had forgiven me for something, but I couldn't tell you for what. After that we chatted on and off for several hours, comparing notes, circling around the issues of Helen and Stephen. I never did tell him what I thought Helen was doing. He never told me who Stephen had been.

We were somewhere in eastern Xinjiang I judged. I was heating food in the kitchen when I heard Cutter gasp. I came through and looked out of the window. The World Mother stretched ahead of us as far as the eye could see.

I began opening the door of the cable car. I had spent some time earlier working out how to bypass the controls. There was no guarantee the system would continue to take us in the right direction and we didn't want to be trapped in it until we reached a station.

"What are you doing?" asked Cutter.

"She'll try to reach up to us, she's probably infested the pylons. We'll be safer flying."

"How fast can she move?"

"Fast enough," I said. "It's possible to out fly her but she doesn't tire."

"We'll wait. See if she reacts to our presence. Leave the door open so we can get out but I don't want us tired out before its necessary. How far do we have to go?"

I opened the map. "The anomaly opens, is open now, in a cave system near Lanzhou. It stays open for another three days."

"We wait," he said decisively. "Save your strength."

We waited several hours. After a bit I shut the door. We travelled past dozens of pylons rising out of the World Mother. As each one loomed up I watched it anxiously for strands of the World Mother snaking up the struts until Cutter told me to sleep, insisting there was no danger. To my surprise, I did. Cutter sat in the window, the map illuminated in one hand - the expanse of the World Mother stretching beyond him pinkish red and crystalline into the distance as the sun set.

In the morning the we left the car. The line of pylons had started to veer south of our heading.

"At the moment we're just another lump of metal moving around." Cutter cautioned me before we left. "Once we're out there we become something living. If she has enough awareness she'll come after us then."

I took his advice, after all his thoughts had been touched by the World Mother, and it was a good warning. I headed upwards as we left the car and almost immediately crystalline strands threw themselves up, trying to reach us. Fine, filament columns leaped into the air and I had to swerve in between them in aerial twists and turns as I rose higher. Eventually she stopped. Looking back I saw a landscape of looped crystal arches behind us, testament to our flight.

I circled round the mountains when we reached them. They rose out of the World Mother, strangely uncovered in her sea of white. Cutter was fiddling with the map, using its sensors to probe the area. He managed to get it to distinguish between the World Mother and her surroundings showing that the mountains were clear of her, inside as well as out.

"It's a trap," said Cutter.

"Do we have a choice?"

"No."

Cautiously we landed at the entrance to the cave system.

"She'll puruse us," said Cutter, "once we can't fly away."

"How do you know?"

He smiled at me, "It's what I'd do in her place."

I looked down the slope behind me to the World Mother far below and imagined her racing up the hill once we entered the tunnel mouth. I pulled the remains of my precious compound from my bag and shared it between us. It was probably no good, there was too much of her here, but it gave us some reassurance.

We ran, Cutter still limping with only one shoe. It was not long before the anomaly appeared ahead of us. Then Cutter stopped. I realised he was thinking of what he'd said earlier, about what would happen if we entered the anomaly together. We faced each other in silence for a moment and then, with a kind of crashing sound the World Mother rose up through the floor. She hadn't been behind us at all but had come up through the fabric of the mountain, knowing where we were heading.

Cutter threw himself to one side. A spur of crystal stood between us, between me and the anomaly. I ran to leap over it, but was too late, my outstretched wings became caught like a fly in a web as I cleared its top, strands weaving themselves around me.

"Run," I shouted. "Run."

He reached out to me, grabbing a foot and I kicked him viciously, forcing him to let go.

"Don't let her win. Run now. You wouldn't have let me come with you anyway."

He started towards me again. "I'm not losing anyone else," he said.

"Fucking Hell," I said, dredging Helen's turn of phrase from my memory, "you Neanderthal idiot! I'm dead already. What earthly point is served by you dying as well?" I kicked him again for good measure. As hard as I could.

Cutter staggered back with a look of horror. I felt the strands creeping over my shoulders and across my face. But I knew where she was now - racing through the mountain, heading for the anomaly, racing Cutter as he ran.

At last, he finally ran. He had opened the vials of compound, emptying them on the floor. Not enough to destroy her, but it slowed her down, confused her senses at the periphery. Confused my senses at the periphery as well, as she burrowed into my brain.

He was still within calling distance.

"Nick," I cried, my voice changing as the World Mother seized my vocal chords, "Nick, wait! I've got it all planned. I've worked out how to control the changes. I've *been* controlling the changes. I've remade the world. I'm putting it to rights. Come with me. See what I have done. We can live forever. Study everything. Do you hear me Nick? This time you have to come with me. I was

right.”

He did not look back.