

# One



THE Manhattan cityscape flickered yellow and unreal beyond the huge, darkened windows of the bank. Pointed tips of metal strained upwards; geometric shapes and angles multiplied within mirrored illusions of space. Behind the glass surfaces, tiny faces and screens were visible; hunched workers and cleaners moving rhythmically over seas of night-time carpet.

Within the walls of the bank, David pulled his gaze from the hypnotic glow of the surrounding buildings, and glanced at the time on his computer. He stepped out of his cubicle and looked around the floor to see who else was working late. Rows of identical grey boxes stretched out over a dull-green carpet, covering the length of the room. *Just a jumped-up factory floor*, he thought, and remembered the first time he had walked in there, his heart smashing into his chest like a jackhammer. That incredible moment when he knew he had made it. *New York*. He had made it. He reached his hands up above his head and punched the air with both fists, as if he was pounding on a huge door, screwing up his eyes and then opening them.

A glow caught his attention in the far corner – a couple of figures bent low over spreadsheet screens. The Managing Directors' offices were shut up with their lights off. It was probably just a pair of analysts trying to impress their MD, or some rush project which had them pulling an all-nighter. Better get out now if they can't take it. It's not going to change for the next forty years.

David let his hands drop and walked to the end of the corridor, scanning the other compact squares of computers and papers. They all looked the same as his. Financial calculators, notebooks of scribbles and sums, files on companies, black headpieces plugged into black, heavy phones. Just a row of underpaid Vice Presidents turning daily into the hardened, overworked assholes they idolised. But he'd made it. They'd all made it. The group of Wharton post-grads on the fast-track to power and politics; even the few who'd struggled up from nowhere like him. There was a constant thrill of testosterone around the floor. *We're going to be the super-rich. We're going to control the financial world. We are winning the game.*

He looked out of the far window of the office – a glass wall facing up towards midtown Manhattan. The Chrysler on the right, mostly full of lawyers, Met Life straight ahead with Park Avenue threading through the bottom and Grand Central Station hidden below. Further up, Lexington and the Upper East Side, and the UN – that strange, grey cereal box looming dismally over the East River.

Not that he cared. He loved the city for what it would give him in the future, not now. He loved the paychecks deposited straight into his bank account, most of which went to cover the overheated studio he rented on East 78<sup>th</sup>. The bonus he would use to invest in companies he had been researching. The thrill he could already feel of owning the city, pumping blood into every cell of his body so that he felt more than alive, as if he were standing above the world, far, far bigger than anything on the planet. Full of power, strength and drive.

*Calm down.* Still a few years to grind out before he was at the top. But he had that feeling pulsing through him that would get him there. They all did. None of them would be on Wall Street if they didn't have it – that maniacal urge to win the game. It was more than just succeeding. It was the desire *to take everything*. It was almost transcendent, the pleasure he felt from being faster, smarter, better, stronger, more hard-working; a relentless pulse driving him towards his goal. Winning everything. Total power. Having it all.

David glanced again towards the analysts at the far side of the room. Poor bastards. He'd been through that stage back in Toronto. Long, thankless hours spent on a project and always some VP ready to come and take all the credit. One mistake, and there was a line of graduates desperate to get their foot in the door. Checking, double-checking, working insane hours for the lowest paycheck on the floor. Bottom of the pile. But bottom of the right pile. The winning pile.

*Enough.* He ran his hand through his short, black hair and pulled his tie loose at the neck. Then he squinted a few times, clenched and unclenched his fists to get the blood pumping, and sat back down at his desk. He clicked up the Excel file he had been working on and started to go through the calculations from the beginning. He wanted to send the file to Jeff before he left tonight, so Jeff would see he'd been there past midnight. And he'd make sure he got in early tomorrow; before Jeff even, who was usually at his desk by seven. Then he'd get one of those off-hands that would keep him going – “Someone's on the fast track to MD,” or “I'd better find an excuse to fire you before you work me out of my job.” He'd store these comments up, keep them close by and use them to get himself out of bed after three or four hours' sleep, to drive him when he was pounding a seven-minute mile at the gym, even when he was masturbating to crash himself into a caffeine-buzzed sleep. It was all he had right now. That, and his dream.

*Finished.* He'd checked the numbers three times; they all added up. A \$75 million high-yield loan arranged with three other investment banks as a club deal; added to the \$150 million loan they still had on the books from five years back. There'd been some road-bumps in the past, but it was a good company, solid growth rate, building new operations in two states. It wasn't one of the hot technology start-ups multiplying all over the West Coast, but Jeff would approve it. He might even take him along to the next investors' boondoggle. Now that would be a hit. The guys on the floor would hate him for that. He smiled at the thought of them watching him win. Pure. Straight. Winning. Bunch of loser assholes. He'd work even harder. Sleep

less. He was going to get all the big clients. All the big deals. He was going to make SVP this year. He was going to get the biggest bonus on the floor.

*Done.* He sent the e-mail to Jeff and logged out of his computer. He packed up his soft leather briefcase, pulled his Canali suit jacket from the back of his chair and slipped it on. What a beautiful suit. He already looked like an MD in it. He glanced around. Losers. They didn't have a chance. He'd outwork them all.

He switched off the computer and made his way down the corridor of cubicles, towards the glass doors and the silver wall of elevators set on a polished stone floor. He rode the twenty-seven flights to street level and stepped out of the vast, white-marble foyer into the yellow light of a New York evening. Tired, a thrill; almost post-coital. He flagged a taxi on Park.

"78<sup>th</sup> and York, sir," he said. Squashed knees in the cramped seat. Turban and beads swinging in the front.

Silence from the driver. The passing streets.

He was winning the game.



The three moons were rising.

The grey being lifted itself from the resting platform and rose to standing position. It turned its head to survey the subterranean chamber and ran a check over its physical condition. It had achieved maximum expenditure potential. It took note of the efficiency of its physical structure; even after an extended session of energy-channelling, its form required only a medium-level charge in the light capsule before it returned to a neutral state.

The being moved to the centre of the diamond-shaped space, where a sphere was indented into the surface of the base covering. It stepped inside the circle and positioned itself at the

mid-point. Its form was thin, elongated, uncovered. The skin – supple and slightly translucent – clung tight around the bone and muscle structure. A row of small protrusions jutted from its vertebrae, and its hands and feet were delicately webbed, with scaled, claw-like fingers. The outline of its major organs pulsed in a slow rhythm, visible beneath the grey overlay.

It remained still for several inhalations, then extended its arms away from its trunk section until they were suspended horizontally on each side. It drew the vertical line of its body into alignment with a point in the ceiling of the chamber. There was a clicking sound as the top and bottom of the circle points activated, and a green light streamed from above and below, curving around the poised form.

As the colour flowed around it, the being became enclosed in a compact oval of moving light. The shade deepened as the waves emanated, the skin tone darkening to a less translucent grey, more solid in appearance. At last, the process came to completion, and the being remained motionless, the colour shimmering around its form. The only movement was the rising and falling pulse, generated by its breathing organs, which were now less visible through the pigmented skin.

The being opened its mouth and emitted a single note into the chamber: a long, clear sound which began quietly, and grew until the entire space was resonating with its vibration. It completed the path of the note but held its mouth wide in the final position until the waves had dispersed evenly around the area. The clicking sound came again, and the being at last lowered its arms and the alignment was broken. It stepped from the circle.

At this stage of the lunar rise, the grey crust of Home Planet was illuminated by the slow movement of the three red moons overhead. The largest, *Tirtha*, was directly above the planet, and its dark shadow drew patterns and rivers across the stony grey. Rising in the ascension capsule, the being paused to look around before setting off through the dancing shadows of the red moon, towards a wide, flat rock on the horizon. It travelled with effortless distance leaps; the charged potency of its form

enabling smooth movements, its legs and arms pushing easily through the weak gravity.

It reached the rock and made its way to the flat platform, which had an indented stone circle, identical in circumference to the one in the subterranean resting chamber. The being positioned itself in the centre of the sphere and checked the rockscape and the spacescape. The position of the moons was correct. The sound vibration of the planet and its own energetic composition were aligned. The atmospheric particle level was within the apportioned range.

The being experienced the intense pulse of *kaiif*, which passed through it when a critical task assignment had been prepared over many moon cycles and was on the verge of being executed to the maximum projected potential. The *kaiif* emanated simultaneously from its central axis point and its primary circulatory organ, with an intense tingling that occurred both within its cells and on the surface of its skin. The tingling spread quickly over its form, building up to a steady throbbing within its brain field.

On this triple lunar rise, during which it would carry out the final task assignment of its lifespan, the being allowed itself to be present within the pulse for a few inhalations longer than usual.

Then it drew its consciousness to the surface, blinked its eyes open and shut, then open again.

It raised its arms.



The magnificent panelled hall of York's Inn hummed and throbbed with the lunchtime discussions of London's elite barristers. Over the din, Alisdair leaned towards the young

lawyers opposite him and cleared his throat. By rights, he should be sitting on the top table with the high court judges and benchers – he could see the Treasurer there enjoying a plate of trifle – but Alisdair liked the lower benches, where he could interact with the students and the up-and-coming lawyers. He much preferred conversing with open minds, than with those who had a lifetime of experience, such as himself.

“When we are facing an issue of such particular complexity,” he started, his authoritative Edinburgh accent carrying across the table, “I like to return to the philosophers. To the Greeks, in particular, on whose distinctions of justice Roman law was based.”

There was a silence while the lawyers considered his words.

“I refer you to the great Roscoe Pound, who traced Roman justice back to the Greek concept of law as ‘a conscious product of wisdom’. Of course, beyond that, there was the distinction between the law of man and *to dikaion*, or ‘what is just’ – a sensible distinction, and one to bear in mind in any complex case. This is all a matter of some careful reading in jurisprudence, which I trust you have all studied to a sufficient level?”

Alisdair peered at his audience, who reassured him with nods and serious faces.

“But, so far—” began one of the lawyers, pushing heavy spectacles back against her face.

“So far,” interrupted Alisdair, “there are up to seventy cases a year which are decided on the interpretation of the most eminent lawyers in the country, the House of Lords. If you look at each of their decisions in detail, you may trace the arguments back to the ideas of Socrates, as expounded by Plato. Now who can—”

“The rule of law—”

“Human law as *a conscious product of wisdom*. This is essentially the same as precedent. Building consciously on that which was already established as wise.”

A stout waitress in a white, frilled apron passed by, and Alisdair waved at her.

“Young lady, the beef today was excellent. Please pass on my thanks to Charles.”

He turned back to the lawyers.

“It all leads back to the most simple principles, and these do not change. It is what makes our legal system the most respected in the world. It is why people come flocking to England to seek justice, which they cannot find in their own countries.”

Alisdair lifted the glass of claret to his lips, and drank down the last few drops. Then he stood up and held on to the table for a moment or two before he brought slightly shaking hands up to straighten his red bow tie.

“Ladies and gentlemen, a pleasure.”

“Sir Alisdair.”

The lawyers quickly digressed into more pressing topics, as Alisdair’s dignified figure moved towards the towering doorway of the hall. A uniformed attendant swung it open and he made his way out of the din and towards the benchers’ cloakroom, where his greatcoat was hanging on the same peg he had used for over four decades. Forty years as a bencher at York’s Inn; a fellow of New College, Oxford; an academic; a legal authority. His hands shook more than usual as he pulled the cashmere coat over his suit and pushed the buttons through their soft holes one by one. He wrapped a tartan scarf around his neck and fitted a trilby hat over thin hair. It wasn’t far to walk back to his chambers, but it was a biting London day and he felt the chill more keenly these days.

Alisdair went out of the benchers’ entrance and down the steps into the first of the Inn’s two wide courtyards. He looked around. It never ceased to delight him, the history of these buildings. The leaded window where Charles Dickens had once aimed cherry pips at scuttling clerks. The hall he had just left, its frame suspended by screens from the Armada fleet. The elegant gardens designed by Francis Bacon, through which he had swept Elizabeth I. The decades and centuries of fine intellects which had built the English legal system and shaped the models of justice around the world.

An acquaintance passed him on the other side of the square, recognised the familiar tartan and touched his gloved hand to his hat.



“Chilly day, Alisdair,” the man called out, and Alisdair nodded to him.

He felt a little dizzy as he walked towards the tunnel leading out onto High Holborn, and he stopped to catch his breath. A strong pain flickered through his chest and he bent over double as another shot through him, and then another. His head was spinning and his breath was short. He realised that he had fallen to the ground. Then the shots of pain became one long note, as if a pole had been thrust through the centre of his heart, and the dizziness became still and constant. He closed his eyes.

His acquaintance glanced around, thinking he had heard a noise across the square, and saw Alisdair lying on the historic paving stones near the entrance arch. He gave a shout and rushed towards him, calling out to the porter in the nearby lodge.

A few minutes later, the two men had spread Alisdair onto his back. A woman who knew CPR sat astride him, blowing into his mouth and pulsating his heart with overlapping hands. A small crowd of lawyers had gathered between the parked Bentleys and Jaguars, watching the spectacle with hurried faces. An ambulance was on its way.

Alisdair, feeling particularly well, watched them with interest. He stood a few paces away from his body and brushed his hands over his suit. How clumsy he looked lying there. He didn't like how his face had twisted. And what was that woman trying to do to him? It was far too late. He wasn't coming back now.

He put a hand up to check the dapper angle of his hat and danced a little jig. He really did feel good. Full of energy. And how well-polished his shoes looked in the afternoon sunshine.

The ambulance arrived and the paramedics tried another round of CPR. He wished they would leave him alone, or at least move him away from the crowd. Most undignified. He watched the scene for a few moments longer and then turned away. There were far more interesting things to explore, particularly this new energy. He felt as if air had been blown through every cell of his body.

He stepped jauntily out of the arch and onto the busy thoroughfare leading towards St. Paul's. Everything he saw

around him seemed new and thrilling. Buildings filled with light, reflected mirrors and angles and geometric shapes he had never noticed before. What a city it was! Bursting with ideas and energy and beauty, constantly re-inventing itself. How lucky he was to have lived in such a place. He walked, looking around in an alert wonder, and found himself drawn towards a building he hadn't seen before. He crossed the road to get closer and saw that it had the appearance of a library, or perhaps a public court house. The stone was pale and captured a particular light. It made him think of Italy and the stone quarries he had visited. Carrara, where Michelangelo had found the block of marble from which he had sculpted *David*. The incredible treasures of the earth. The treasures of life. My goodness, he had lived well. The paintings of Italy, the ruins of Greece, the vineyards of France, where one was tempted to give up everything for a lifetime tending vines and sampling cheese. He had been so fortunate. He had enjoyed so many moments of depth, so many moments shared with his wife. Until she had left.

He chuckled. Of course, she hadn't left. She was here. She was waiting for him inside this building. Of course. That was why he was going there.

He mustn't wait a second longer. His heart gave a great leap of anticipation and he turned and skipped up the marble steps, between the stone columns stretching up into the afternoon sunshine. He paused for one long breath before the huge, open doors, and he raised his arms as if giving thanks before an audience of angels, or reaching for a last piece of precious sky.

Then, with a feeling as if he were shattering entirely into pieces, he stepped through them.