

DISPLACEMENT

RICHARD
DILLAN

Word count: ~137,000

One

Origin Point

Saturday 09 August 2031 - 21:13 Indian Standard Time

The decades of frantic flights through the darkness would be over soon; in one tenth of a minute to be exact. In six seconds, the first and only ship designed and constructed specifically for interstellar travel would leave Earth orbit, destined for the edge of the solar system.

Charon, still representing the unofficial limits of humanity's domain, would bear mute witness to the arrival, six seconds hence, of humanity's first ever craft capable of traversing the gulfs between stars.

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Sunday 30 July 2056 - 10:30 IST

Twenty five years later.

Rebecca Eckhart's good hand flew to the holster on her thigh. She struggled with the pop-stud for half a second, trying to free the weapon contained within. Its location on the right-handed holster was in the wrong position for her left thumb. Her hastened panic did not help, and she fumbled her index finger to the trigger, nearly firing and dropping the gun as she drew it, aimed at her target.

She had not meant her life to end this way, here, at this time. The collective outcomes of her actions so far, their accrued weight on her, had brought her to this place. A generation ago she thought she would have given anything to have been here, but now the price her decisions had led to, her continued existence, was too high.

Supporting the unfamiliar weight of the gun with her splinted and bandaged right arm made her broken limb throb with the effort. The pain in back of her head where it had collided with his nose pushed through to her eyes, displaced all concerns beyond her immediate safety from her mind.

Should she survive the next sixty seconds suffering nothing greater than a headache, the damage to her was nothing compared to his face. A fountain had opened across it, blood flowing freely from his ruined nose. Still he clung to the dangerous, curved knife though.

‘You will not shoot me, I think,’ he said to her, his smile full of confidence despite his injuries. ‘Over the course of my duty I have had weapons of all manner aimed in my direction, and I have seen the eyes of every single person who meant to kill me. And yours tell me that you are not possessed of the will to kill another human being, to take another’s life. So please, lay down the gun and I will give you as quick and painless a death as I am still able.’

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Thursday 20 April 2056 - 03:09 IST

‘So, it has been decided. It is my time.’ They were statements, not questions to the figure who stood in the shadows of the elderly astronaut’s bedroom. ‘If I am to leave this earth then may I see the face of the man they have sent to dispatch me?’

In reply the shadow said nothing, but instead stepped forward into the small circle of yellowy light thrown out by the bedside lamp, illumination where only moments before there had been dark. The old man in the bed looked into the eyes of the man sent to kill him; they

did not look like the eyes of a killer, but then the man in the bed could honestly say he had never knowingly encountered someone who had deliberately set out to end another's life, so had no experience on which to base his opinion.

'Please sit.' He gestured to his uninvited guest to rest himself on his mattress, as he himself sat up to make the accommodation. He remembered his manners and was faintly proud that he had done so. It would be improper to be impolite. 'Will it hurt?'

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The moon of Pluto hung silent and patient in the deep cold darkness of the Kuiper Belt, unaware of any of the spacecraft which had sped past it previously on their gravity-accelerated hurtles across the void. Probes and crafts that could not have stopped even if their designers, engineers and navigators left back on Earth had wished it. The last man-made object to grace the heavenly bodies at this distance from Earth had been the NASA New Horizons spacecraft, which had sped through the surrounding volume of space at half a lakh kilometres per hour, impelled to travel on, theoretically forever, or until it felt the irresistible pull of a gravity well strong enough to capture it for itself.

At this distance the sun was little stronger than the countless other pinpoints of light shining their pale brightness on the objects comprising the Kuiper Belt. It was light that had taken anywhere between six hours and thirteen-hundred crore years to arrive, crossing the empty gulfs between its origin point and this collection of lonely worlds. Among this weak accrual of arriving photons, the sun's wan light barely warmed the slowly spinning globes of rock and ice. This was a part of creation mankind had had little use for before now, save as the nominal marker between what he might consider as his, and the surrounding, endless void.

Until now.

The Vimana was special. It had significant and important differences to every other spacecraft, manned or otherwise that had so far been built for the purpose of venturing this far

from their homeworld before it. It had not escaped the powerful gravitational embrace of the planet of its birth through the use of hugely inefficient and wasteful fuel boosters, and once in space it had not propelled itself by ion expulsion, slowly accelerating away, nor had it relied on skimming round a passing planet, stealing fractions of that body's momentum for its own use to drive its journey.

Its propulsion system was the zenith of the life's work of one man, Professor Rajat Cotts, the Indian scientist who had unlocked the secret of moving things from *here* to *there* almost instantaneously, utilising only a fraction of the energy of conventional engines. It had been named Displacement technology, D-tech for short, and it had revolutionised transport in all its forms on Earth, pushing the already vastly contracted planet much closer together, and, conversely, driving it far further apart than its discoverer had ever envisaged or wanted.

Now, that technology had been fashioned into a craft intended to explore the boundary-less gulfs of space, to reach out into the limitless black and try to touch the stars. The Vimana was all these things, and it had left Earth orbit six seconds ago.

The current position of Charon, in its two hundred and forty eight year synchronous orbit with its concomitant parent had not been chosen idly, nor capriciously. Like everything associated with the mission, there was the practicality.

Charon was the most distant object of sufficient mass to Displace the Vimana to. Although technically, the ship could jump to anywhere in its range, focussing on a heavy, dense body made the Displacement that much more straightforward. A planet or moon provided a larger gravitational target than the handful of hydrogen and occasional helium atoms which comprised the rest of space. So, for the first time since its birth, Charon served purposes beyond its nominal status as the most distant object man felt within his domain.

The remoteness was the first; a vital test run distance, a proving of the Displacement drive. Secondly was its mass; dense and heavy enough to allow the Vimana to get a fix on it as a suitable target destination. Finally was its position; a fitting place to pause, the edge of the

conceptual lattice of concentric orbits that comprised humanity's specific portion of creation.

If any sentient soul had been looking three lakh kilometres earthward of Charon at that moment they would have seen a volume of space, approximately the size of a blue whale, flex and bend as the Vimana neared. The six-hour-old light shimmered and prismsed as the Vimana neared its arrival point, the approaching mass of the ship distorting the reality it was about to manifest itself in.

Then, the illumination was blocked. One moment all there had been was Charon and the weak breath of distant suns. The next, the Vimana, hanging motionless, casting its shadow on the frozen ball of ice and rock; the final speck of matter of any significance for several light years.

Eight year old Becky Eckhart sat bald-headed and rapt behind the screens thrown a metre in front of her, watching the images flick before her eyes. She had programmed the imaging glasses her father insisted she wore with a channel change every five seconds.

But Dada, I'm old enough for my own lenses!

Sorry darling, not if you're going to wear them all day.

Eventually she gave up her protests. Getting to participate in the event was ultimately more important than being allowed to use the more discrete lenses. She would bear the teasing her brother and sister would give her later for it knowing she had been there. The channel flicked again. It didn't matter to her which feed she was watching; every station, site and content provider she had programmed in was relaying their own subtle wrinkle on the same content; the launch of the Vimana in a little under six hours.

In a world of SI-driven content consumption, with any imaginable spectacle able to be rendered on-demand, it may have been the raw humanity of the event, the realness of the people so far away, that made it something which captured the consciousness of people, drawing them together. Becky was marginally aware of this participation; somewhere in the

back of her head she knew she was, and always would be, part of an event larger and more important than its very personal meaning to the young, self-possessed girl in her formative years.

The talking heads, diagrams, real-time simulations, participation forums and SI-driven datasearches she assimilated through sight and sound were all discussing the homing signal InSA was about to start transmitting, and which Captain Srinath and his crew would be in position to receive less than a minute after they departed. To Becky it seemed as if Captain Srinath and his crew were time travellers as well as explorers; jumping forward into her future to catch up with something that wasn't there yet and wouldn't be there until the middle of the afternoon, by which time the signal would exist six hours in her past, right now.

Arrival.

On board the Vimana, Captain Hari Srinath ran his crew through their post-Displacement checks; what would have been standard procedure had anything like this mission been attempted, replicated, perfected and standardised before. However, the maiden voyage of the only D-driven interstellar craft in existence necessitated the instructions he gave his officers were his and InSA's best interpretation of post-arrival operating protocol.

If anything failed with the ship now, they were too far out to expect any form of rescue. Earth had nothing else at its disposal capable of reaching them should there be a system failure this far out, in Charon's shadow; let alone when they found themselves deep in the interstellar void, far beyond the heliopause. So far, the ship had outperformed even its Captain's high expectations of it; the years of planning, testing, revising and re-testing had ensured the initial stage had gone perfectly, and he could not have asked for a more fortuitous start to the mission.

North American Monthly Update

April 24 2056

Sinha MG D-Market Strategy Research

Rebecca Eckhart

Rebecca.Eckhart.SinhaMG

Opportunities in a Re-emerging Market

- As predicted early in Q1 2055, InSA re-enables parts of the long offlined North American Cotts Field (CF), returning limited coverage of the Displacement infrastructure across North America.
- Initial re-entry into the market is the instantiation of a secure CF corridor between the continental seabords by aDventura(TM), the largest D-licence holder for North America.
- We foresee potential for a return of growth in this re-established D-Market for mid and long-range carriers.
- Our forecast of an upward trend of 0.2% m.o.m. (versus -7% in this market previously) converts to potential revenue incomes of Rs3 crore across the next fiscal period.

- In addition, should demand return to the market to any significant degree we anticipate further expansion of the Cotts Field by InSA, creating the potential for a further dozen separate new corridors between the coasts and the secured inland cities over the next twelve months. Our forecast is this will push the growth trajectory to high-single digit percentages by 4Q2057.

The reactivation of a single Cotts Field satellite by InSA, as correctly identified by this publication last year, creating a secured Displacement corridor linking JFK and BHO, has been met with cautious welcome by the majority of the North America licence holders. We feel this is an overly pessimistic reaction to a significant market event representing the first possibility for real ROI in the ravaged North American space for several years. As we have long argued, the majority of the troubles have migrated well inland, leaving the coastal areas open for international peace-keeping forces to be deployed, and along with them, the resumption of orderly, managed trade.

However, we acknowledge the difficulties in operating within the present market conditions. Several current operators have encountered resistance to their presence, and damage and theft to their stock, resulting in significant increases in their insurance premiums. We advise therefore that sufficient provision be made in budget forecasts for security detail and elevated insurance payments. We advise any outlay of more than 2% on these fixed costs be the cut-off point for considering investment.

Challenges to the bold investor

What about the ancillary effects of the civil war?

The evidence of the effects on the local biosphere is an unfavourable pressure on the marketplace, and requires careful consideration for companies with a published ‘Ethical’ Statement. Presently, fourteen species of major fauna have been pushed to extinction, with several more on the UN ‘Most Endangered’ list. Particularly vulnerable are the remaining ‘apex’ predators and large herbivores: namely, the mountain lion, bald eagle, alligator, black and brown bear, coyote, wolf, colt and bison, all of which currently number less than a dozen estimated breeding adults. We advise particular care be exerted when advertising an intention to (re)enter the North American D-market. Be sure your corporate accountability can withstand the scrutiny it will face when operating in an environment which has become detrimental to so much iconic American fauna.

Potential answers include opening a biodiversity-trading position, allowing an offset posture to be adopted. Several life-science providers offer DNA “sample and store” services, with preservation facilities housed at the three Extinction-Event banks at the poles where permanent ice still holds sway. Alternatively, Red Crescent bonds offer an attractive yield. Purchasing these allow you to claim, quite correctly, to be funding their presence where they struggle to maintain a species-survival mission; an attractive proposition in these times of daily negative revisions to the planet's biodiversity index.

Overall we propose an initial investment of no more than 0.05% of total estimated revenues be set-aside for this purpose.

The question you have to ask is: Can your customers afford to be seen to be doing business there?

What about the religious unrest?

It would be derelict not to highlight the recent barbarous and bloodiest conflict to date between the two main rival factions, The Sons of Freedom and the New New Model Army. Their enmity reached its zenith of pointless slaughter in the latest Battle of the Colorado. Raising the stakes in the recent flurry of military engagements in the area to a dangerous new level with the re-introduction of the internationally illegal D-bombers, the Sons seemed on the verge of victory. Desperate to counter the re-emergent terror tactic of martyr-hungry individuals willingly carrying a maxed out weight of several hundred kilograms of conventional explosives and shrapnel who step out of Folds behind their enemy's lines, the Modellers targeted the Sons' local High Command-chapel, and in an effort which extinguished all but one of their number, Displaced the entire structure, estimated at one hundred and fifteen tons, into the suffocating void of a geostationary orbit. In this arena of pogroms, particular care must be afforded to any sentiment or sympathies, latent or otherwise, in the potential customer base. We cannot advise strongly enough full disclosure contracts be drawn up. A one-time fee of approx. Rs1 lakh should be the anticipated outlay for such a document.

Unspent munitions – the costs

Like all good guerrilla armies the Sons have munitioned the land heavily with mines, in an effort to ensure the territory, should they lose it, be a hazard for many years to come. Indiscriminate and unthinking, as all the best military hardware strives to be, these devices kill without compunction or conscience. And like the best military technology, the evolution and development has not stood still despite their putative outlawing in the early Twenty-First Century.

Where their long distant antecedents relied on inelegant but effective explosive charges, these great-grandchildren are infinitely more devastating. Now when tripped, mines no longer shout their presence. Like the best assassin they are nearly silent and deadly; the howl of white light and red-hot shrapnel replaced by the inaudible whisper of electron-flow and a shifting of space, most often in every direction simultaneously, leaving nothing greater than a faint red mist floating in the air.

Unspent munitions represent perhaps the greatest hurdle to potential clients. The reputational and commercial effects of triggering an artefact of the conflict, on the person and the corporate body should not be underestimated. Civil claims have run into Rs1 crore punitive damages for those organisations who were found to be liable. We therefore advocate, in the first instances, a strategy of absolute risk-management be your mantra. While this may seem to run counter to our sentiment that what is needed to fully re-commercialise this space is rapid expansion, we appreciate the fragility of the market to any shock-events. This is the one area we counsel caution. A high-profile corporate manslaughter suit could damage irreparably this nascent opportunity.

Two

Rebecca

Tuesday 25 April 2056 - 07:26 EU Summer Time

The tall office blocks, interspersed with the occasional two or three storey building, cast their long shadows across the busying London streets. The strong early morning light backlit their outlines with bright halos, the sunshine smudging their edges so they would have seemed blurred and indistinct against the sky if anyone had raised their eyes to look.

Rebecca Eckhart strode beneath them, head down, moving with purpose between the patches of cool relief the shadows provided. In the glare of the daylight between the taller buildings she could feel the temperature already rising, despite the earliness of the hour. Coupled with the humidity, this indicated a sticky and oppressive day ahead.

However, the weather mattered little to Rebecca. Behind her sunglasses she hardly broke sweat as she moved through the jostling streets and past people as quickly as she could. Her well-toned muscles and acclimatised physique were more than a match for the walk she was putting them through. Hard hours in the gym were not for nothing.

Her strides were matched by a heavy beat thumping in her ears, overlaid and mixed with a bhangra track. Each footfall set off different rhythms and pulses in the music, Socrates interpreting and encoding her movements as chords, beats and breaks. The result was an individual, bespoke tune that was fed by and influenced her movements, the bassy tempo measuring and matching her pace in a positive feedback loop as she pounded the pavement

toward her desk. Her own personally soundtracked trip.

Her physical capability to the task in hand strengthened her determination to reach her destination as quickly as possible, and get away from the herding jumble of other people. The sunglasses helped; they protected her from contact, allowing her to maintain her distance, both physical and emotional, from the crowds she pushed through. And they served another purpose. Scrolling up along the insides of their jet black lenses was her choice of the latest news updates, allowing her to catch up with what she deemed important as she made her way to her office.

Her attention was interrupted briefly by her spotting a small child desperately trying to gain its mother's attention and show to her the thing he had found and was grasping in his grubby hand. Rebecca did not want the distraction; she was not yet ready to effect her re-entry to the world of other people. After a fortnight in the deserted amber zones surrounding the UN enclave of Manhattan, seeing scant sign of human presence save for the patrol assigned to protect her, the dark lenses were an essential barrier to the mass of humanity that now seemed to teem in London.

Her instincts, honed over a decade of picking out the smallest of human dramas for her to process as both entertainment and occasional insight into the human condition, overruled her conscious efforts to ignore the bleating infant. Her need to check herself against the behaviour of others, their tiny defeats and victories, pulled her out of herself and, almost against her will, she found herself watching the pair.

The boy pulled at his mother's sleeve, the parent distracted by something she had seen on her own lens-screens. Rebecca scanned around the woman's proximity as she passed, vicarious curiosity searching for the source of the feed the woman could be receiving. Socrates opened a dozen separate windows in response to the push-feeds from the a-points in the mother's vicinity; the usual mix of war, murder and pointless death tempered, perversely, by the celebrity commentary on each, the familiar voices salve for the atrocities.

Rebecca focussed on the reporting of a water-rationing demonstration scheduled for later that day, and LondGuard's and MetProtect's actions in dispersing the gathering crowd. She ordered the foregrounding of the window with a flick of her eye, watching, scrolling past the mother in parallax, a five-second replay of the live-feed images. The competing private security forces pulled a man from the crowd, who was shouting at them with an ill-advised American accent, and beat him to the floor. The woman raised her hand unconsciously to her mouth and began weeping.

Rebecca heard too late, chiming through the heavy bass beat pumping in her ears, Socrates' vain attempt to alert her to the impending impact with the man stepping out of the D-livery office. The large box he carried obscured his view, and his more feeble SI was obviously not utilising the same level of tech as Socrates, otherwise he would have known he was about to collide with a fellow citizen. Rebecca, still distracted from the backgrounding newsfeed, at the last moment before impact swerved almost cat-like around the man, who barely saw the form of the woman who avoided him, and had saved him the trouble of having to pick up his belongings.

She watched for a moment only, irritated at having to break stride because of someone else's inability to take her into consideration. The man looked round his parcel trying to understand what his SI was telling him had almost happened, looking for the person he needed to apologise to. But Rebecca had already resumed her forward march.

She turned a corner and sighed at the sight presented to her, past the windows appearing to hang a metre in front of her. Her annoyance from moments ago shifted itself momentarily to herself at her misjudgement, before she transferred it to the people before her. More idiots to have to cope with.

The feeble-minded were out early this morning, earlier than she had anticipated. Rebecca silently wished to herself that she had allowed Socrates to determine her a less toll-free route to her office; she could have avoided these cretins and their rental of the street altogether. The

tithe of a few paise would have been a small indulgence to secure her passage unassailed. Still, this would not be that bad. She had Socrates, and he was good.

He responded to her eyes' saccades, analysing the data from the augfeeds; the perfectly circular gleaming silver **O** on the man's collars and the book in his hand informing his mistress she was being approached by a Cernonite. With the past two weeks of her time in the former United States spent doing her best to avoid encountering the various quasi-religious factions, sub-factions, splinter groups and individual cells responsible for the massacre of almost the entire North American biosphere, she had little time for anybody's version of the truth, however fervently they might want her to adopt it.

Rebecca refused to slow as the gap between the two of them narrowed. Instead she dropped her glasses down the bridge of her nose and deliberately caught the young man's eyes. Hers told him with a certainty his faith could not match, that not only was he wasting his energy contemplating her conversion, he was ill-advised against instigating even an opening gambit. Without waiting for any sign of comprehension from the man, Rebecca pushed her sunglasses back into their rightful place and walked right past him. Fortunately he seemed to be the only missionising idiot out that morning; the other two in the vicinity seemed content to have simple auged sandwich boards, which struggled to open windows with Socrates, who refused. *Better get some upgrades boys*, she thought intemperately.

The streets thinned of people as she made her way. She was making good time to her destination, now less than half a kilometre away despite the odd interruption, and was hardly breaking sweat in the rising humidity of the April morning.

Rebecca right-wheeled through the glass doors, which swished open accommodatingly as she approached, so she barely had to slow as she entered the cool-dry of the air-conned building and straight through the obliging security barrier. Once inside, her pace slowed a little, unconsciously changing her behaviour, as she headed for the elevators. So accustomed was she to ignoring the D-booths, she did not notice that the usual herd of people waiting for

the next upwards slot was missing from around them, only registering the fact when she turned the corner to find herself facing a crowd of several dozen fellow bank employees, all waiting for the lifts.

She frowned as she analysed the situation; normally she would be the only one using the near-obsolete mechanical transport. *What was going on?* Socrates provided the answer as he retrieved and parsed the datafeed from the one of the bank's SIs. While Rebecca had been away the bank's executive board had adopted a policy of corporate-Vedic sacrifice. This, they decided would manifest itself as an alternate monthly disabling of the building's Displacement architecture, meaning each employee would have to utilise the physical and mechanical means at their disposal to traverse their workplace.

Rebecca smiled. *That this also ensured they cut their D-licensing costs in half had nothing to do with the decision of course.* Immediately appreciating this turn of events in her favour, she looked forward to spending six months every year not experiencing the discomfort of being the only person stood waiting for an elevator.

But this boon was not without its own more immediate drawback. She had not anticipated a crowd this morning, especially one so large on her ascent to her office, and the resulting delay in making her 8am appointment with Marcia. She glanced at the clock on the inside of her lens-screens, then back at the slowly dwindling, by no more than six at a time, collection of people queuing ahead of her. *Hagga.*

The conflict rose in her as the lifts continued their crawls, seeming to stop at every floor on their journeys to and from the ground. Her office was on the thirty-seventh floor, easily ten more minutes away on foot. And then she'd arrive not only late, but also showing the physical exertion it had taken to get there. Not a good look.

The tinny *thumpa-thumpa-thumpa* leaked from her earphones, causing a few heads to turn away from their conversations and toward her, before they returned to the topic at hand, shaking their heads. *Great.*

So what the hell exactly was it they were all so engrossed in anyway? Rebecca's eyes searched for the augpoint; Socrates was not blind to his mistress's discomfort, and foregrounded the feed he had determined the others had been discussing, giving her the opportunity to at least appear as involved in the shared event as everyone else while she decided what to do.

On the inside of Rebecca's sunglasses, which she had steadfastly not removed despite the shade of the interior, opened the building info-silo, its SI describing that there had been an attempted robbery in the small hours of the morning. The suspected thieves had D-jacked their way onto the nineteenth floor and had got as far as preparing their escape with what they claimed was their ancestor's sword from Ms Chawla's office, some great great great great grandfather /patriarch of their clan.

Those boys had been twitchy ever since re-unification. It seemed the would-be thieves were either unaware of or had been unable to circumvent the silent alarms; within a second of them triggering, both the building's and Sinha MG's own private security details had intervened to apprehend the felons. When trying to flee back across the Folds they had arrived on, they found the Cotts field suddenly working directly against them. With the perpetrators safely rendered off to a variety of holding cells, both enforcement agencies immediately filed competing petitions with the civil authorities for exclusive arrest rights, and the requisite recompense for their services.

Digesting all of this wasted a precious minute of Rebecca's dwindling time with which to decide whether remaining waiting for a lift was the correct course of action. She hopped from foot to foot with impatience, mentally goading the mechanical gaandu to get a move on. Suddenly the future benefit of greater concealment in numbers was diminished by the disruption to her arrangements; she'd have to factor in additional minutes every other month to deal with the herd she'd find herself waiting for an elevator in from now on.

She was silently cursing her bank's directors for this change in policy, when there was the

chime of a lift's arrival in the lobby. Rebecca checked herself, remembering to look polite, allowing five other people to enter first, watching with some amusement at the singular way they failed to negotiate each other's personal space. Unfamiliar with etiquette around utilising a shared conveyance they hesitated, false-started, stopped, then finally settled on an order of entrance into the small metal compartment that was to house them all for the next few minutes of their lives. Shaking her head minutely at their witlessness, Rebecca followed them inside. 'Thirty seven,' she said to whoever was nearest the buttons, without so much as a glance in their direction.

Three

Promotion

Tuesday 25 April 2056 - 07:56 EUST

Twenty-six floors later Rebecca was finally alone. Unable to stay still even in the confines of the cramped interior, she circumnavigated it in small circles, barely two metres wide, as the lift continued its climb through the floors. If she noticed her isolation she barely showed it, too distracted instead by the draft she had submitted two days ago, and more importantly what Marcia was going to say about it. She ran the likely opening gambits the director of her research desk could present to her, determined the best response to each and the next most probable reply Marcia would come up with for each, then formulated an answer to those also. At the end of her ascent she had a ternary tree, four layers deep with forty nodes on it, each one weighted according to its likelihood to arise. *Should be enough*, she reasoned.

As soon as the doors opened enough for her to squeeze through she was between them, through the RF-tagged frosted-glass information barrier and onto the trading floor. Marcia caught her eye almost immediately, despite the opaque sunglasses she still had on. Rebecca headed over to her boss, who motioned for her to keep pace as she headed back to her office.

Rebecca fell into step with her manager, reviewing Marcia's body language to gauge the likely responses to the conversational openers she had prepared. An outright enquiry as to her thoughts on the work was out; that gave Marcia too much room to mount an argument she would have little defence against. Similarly, any gambit that seemed to close the conversation

down would look suspicious, defensive, and provide her boss with an excuse if she was looking for one not to approve it.

The pair were almost at Marcia's office. If she wanted to begin this conversation while still on the floor, where it could be kept manageable, she had to say something soon. Judging her boss's mood, Rebecca settled on remaining as neutral as possible, wishing to provoke neither hostility nor sympathy. 'So,' she began, 'I think it strikes a good balance between the state of the re-emerging D-market in the areas the war has moved away from, with some context of the effects the conflict has had on the biodiversity.' That was good. A statement, not a question. Positive, drawing attention to the piece's strengths.

Marcia paused and stared at her best analyst, her own reflection filling the dark lenses. 'Take the sunglasses off. Please?' She only turned the order into a request at the last instant. Rebecca complied, the hint of potential trouble to come in Marcia's tone making her suddenly aware that perhaps the news was not going to be positive, and the piece was going to cause her grief. Her mind immediately set to work re-orientating her along a different conversational path to the one she had initiated, detouring down the junctions that held likely criticisms and any possible rebuttals she might muster against them.

'I'm not sure,' continued her director as she stared over the shoulder of one of her junior analysts, pointing out an unsupported assertion from the data of the research piece he had before him, before she was off again. 'Come on, we'll finish this in my office.'

Shit! The bad news that had been on the horizon loomed larger in her immediate future. Marcia closed the plate glass door as Rebecca followed her in, some of the swagger in her step dropped in favour of an air of mild contrition, a conscious change of body language. Rebecca deliberately waited for her manager's opinion, the hope she could influence her boss with her supplication.

Marcia drew a breath as if preparing to deliver a lecture. Or a bollocking. 'It seemed a little ...confused,' she said searching for the right word. 'For you, I mean,' she added as if by

way of a justification. Seeing the expression on Rebecca's face she elaborated. 'Well, maybe confused was the wrong word. Perhaps unfocussed would be a better description.'

Rebecca eyed her boss warily. This was certainly not the brunt of the bad news; there was definitely worse to come. Better to wait to hear it all before giving a reaction.

Marcia sensed the conversation was being ceded back to her, and was more than happy to continue uninterrupted. 'As always, your conclusions from the data sets are irrefutable, but why did you choose to go into so much detail on the civil war going on out there rather than the effects of it on the investment opportunities. And it spends too long concentrating on the wildlife population. That wasn't the brief and you know it. All this makes it jump around; it's lacking your normal incisive focus.'

Rebecca could not help but make a face at this final comment, especially after standing quietly through Marcia's demolition of her work. Her manager qualified her statement with another final placatory observation about the analyses being solid, but it otherwise needing work before it was ready for circulation.

Now she had aired her criticisms it was Rebecca's turn to respond to her boss. She had listened and absorbed everything her desk head had said, altering, expanding then changing how she was going to respond as more information was volunteered, both actual and implied. As Marcia drew to a close Rebecca had formulated her response. She knew the director was at least half-right, but she was not going to allow her points go unchallenged. She had delivered everything within the parameters set out, producing more than enough interpretations and recommendations from the data needed for any investment managers to use. And if she had chosen to exercise her discretion a little in providing some background flavour to the state of that particular part of the world, well it would not be the first time. Anyway, no-one would read past the headline figures, so if anything they were words almost without worth. Marcia would get over it.

Eventually, when Rebecca had run out of things to say in her defence, Marcia spoke again.

'This is exactly why I hired you Rebecca; your innate sense of reason and logic makes you a damned talented analyst. I get a very real sense of that professional detachment I know your colleagues admire and envy.' Rebecca smiled. Maybe she had won some of the argument after all. 'But.' The smile died in place on her lips. 'This piece, you're too involved in it for some reason. It's highly emotive in places and downright explosive in others, and that's not what I needed from it. We are the largest Indian investment bank outside of the sub-continent and I need my analysts to deliver on their assignments. I know we're read in Whitehall as well as the Sansad Bhavan, so you'll understand my requirement for pieces with a specific thrust; and this is not it, it's just too muddy.'

Rebecca had not been expecting this level of criticism. Her mind worked rapidly, contriving a rescue for her and her work. She scooped up the loose leafs of paper Marcia insisted on reading all her analysts' drafts on, tried to neaten them, only to fumble the pages into a clumsy, disorganised pile. 'So I'll re-draft it then,' she told her boss, using the final argument she had held in reserve until now. 'I can have it back to you by this afternoon. Tomorrow morning at the latest,' she proffered, thinking quickly and shifting her self-imposed deadline, trying to buy herself at least the evening to pull the thing apart and beat it into something Marcia would accept.

But her boss's next reply destroyed any chance of that. 'I'm going to give it to Hiro to revise. I've got something else for you to get your teeth into.'

In the totality of conversational-tree traversals she had played out before and during the discussion with Marcia, Rebecca had not anticipated this at all; being removed as the author on a research piece did not happen to people of her seniority. As a consequence she had no prepared response waiting. Instinct made her blurt out before she could stop herself. 'Hiro? But he's barely a junior! And you're going to give him my piece? The one I spent two weeks in the middle of that stupid bloody civil war those idiots are engaged in trying to research?' She realised her voice was rising in pitch and volume during her outburst and drew herself to a

stop, angry at herself for her slip. She eyed her boss. Rebecca had taken Marcia's criticism of her work with as much good grace as she could, but to have it taken away now was intellectually and professionally insulting, and she had let it show. *Chod!*

Marcia, who had not got to her position by not knowing how to handle, and if she was being entirely honest, manipulate people into doing what she wanted, offered an explanation, which was a good approximation of the truth; or at least enough of the truth to placate Rebecca. 'Be fair, Hiro's not bad, but you're right; he does need practice, so a good piece that needs touching up should show him how it's really done. I promise he won't kill it. I won't let him.'

Despite knowing her boss was not going to change her mind, Rebecca still could not help but look pissed off for a moment before she regained control. Marcia knew this Rebecca of old, the inscrutable woman, but now she knew what she was really feeling. Granting Rebecca her earlier gambit, she played her ace, the sop she always held back till the very end of any discussion with one of her analysts when they were being particularly intractable. She was surprised, only faintly, but still surprised nonetheless to realise this was the first instance she had ever had to use the ploy with Rebecca. But it worked like a charm, just like it did with everyone else. Her magic bullet that appealed to the vanity far more strongly than the professionalism each of them sought to defend until they heard Marcia's offer.

'Look,' she started, casually, as if she had just thought of it, 'once he's finished, if you're not happy with it we'll pull the piece. Otherwise if you don't object too strongly to his work you can still keep your name on it when we publish. No co-authorship, just you.'

Rebecca narrowed her eyes in thought. Marcia had to suppress a smile at the small act Rebecca was putting on for her benefit. All her staff did the same routine with their own personal interpretation of it. Hiro, the promising junior she was grooming, for instance, pulled at his wispy beard whenever he wanted to make Marcia think he was even remotely considering the proposal she had made, but which he had already accepted in his head. Now

Marcia could add Rebecca's twiddling of her ponytail to the repertoire of bluffing she could look out for; a dead give-away.

Other than thinking how she should organise a game of teen pathi with her staff, Marcia had had enough of waiting for Rebecca to decide she had spent sufficient time pretending to consider her offer. 'Look, this isn't a firing. I am going to give Hiro your piece to finish, he'll do a bloody good job on it and you'll still meet the circulation deadline. I really do have something else for you, and after this morning's shock, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised.' Marcia paused for dramatic effect. 'I'm incredibly pleased to tell you that, effective immediately, you've been promoted to Director, with responsibility for the InCh desk. Your first assignment is a three day, two night trip to Delhi to meet the Indian arm of the team you'll be in charge of from the start of next week. After that we'll arrange the trip to Beijing for you to get to know the Chinese section. Well don't just stand there catching flies, go on, say something.'

Rebecca closed her mouth, stunned at the news her boss, now her peer, had delivered. After everything Marcia had said about the research piece she had submitted, the best she had hoped for was at least not a demotion, let alone being given her own desk to run. *Get a grip girl.* But the only things that would emerge from her stupefied brain were single word questions. 'What? How? I mean, who?' She stopped, realising Marcia was greatly amused at seeing her lost for words.

Marcia decided to give her former staff a little more time to absorb the news. 'A bit sudden perhaps, but after your long stint in the boondocks following big cats around for weeks on end, avoiding god knows what unspent munitions, natural hazards and restless natives I think someone recognised what you're capable of and pulled some strings in your favour. My advice is go, enjoy the trip before the hard work really starts. All those impossible things you've done up to this point are your everyday job now. You've got one thing to do while you're out there, kind of a preparatory piece for your new position I guess. A former Indian

astronaut has died and we think it'll have a big effect on the D-market. The officer's name was Commodore Mehta.'

Something felt familiar about the name. 'Mehta...' echoed Rebecca, the syllable sounds sparking long repressed and unused neurons somewhere deep in her subconscious. Why did her skin prickle and her palms sweat as soon as Marcia had said the name? Time did that slowed down, sped up thing in her mind as the word flooded her with half-memories and feelings of... of... a sense of loss, of losing something somewhen. Something a long time forgotten, but resonant with meaning and purpose, like a favourite toy or a faded childhood friendship; the kind of bond only a child would think could remain unbroken. Rebecca struggled through the fog of half-remembered snatches of fleeting thoughts, trying to recover memories a quarter of a century old.

'He was pretty famous, back in the day, as Lieutenant Commander Mehta of the Vimana. I'm surprised you don't remember it, but I suppose you would only have been a little girl.'

A flower of comprehension bloomed in Rebecca's mind, a rush of understanding as the disparate fragments of thought coalesced. '*Chod!*' she mouthed. *The Vimana!* Suddenly she was eight years old again; uncomfortably thrown back into her child's body with her childish outlook and naivety. All the stupid things she had said and believed so sincerely, with the fierce and unflinching conviction only an eight year old could possess. She flushed involuntarily at the remembered embarrassment. *The Vimana. Earth's wasted opportunity.* The promise of escape out to the isolation of the stars torn apart on its first mission by... something she couldn't quite remember.

I can't do this. Rebecca began thinking two replies ahead again.

'Why do they want me for this? I've got no experience with staff. I'm not sure I'd be any good to the bank here,' she half-lied, reluctant to accept the promotion and all it would mean, despite her boss's intransigence on her piece, before finishing her argument with Marcia's own phrase for her recent work, 'Unfocussed, remember?'

If Marcia picked up on Rebecca's deliberate attempt to sabotage her immediate career she was not letting on. 'The way I see it your first job on the desk will be analysing another species extinction; only this one was only ever eleven strong. The opportunity is too good to pass up' Rebecca. 'The timing is fortuitous also. The passing of the sixth Vimana astronaut is a watershed moment; there are only five of them left now. They're a dying breed, just like your cougars and bears.'

'Don't be flippant Marcia!' Rebecca snapped back too quickly, emotion overriding her prepared arguments and betraying her earlier dismissal of her suitability. Then, trying to regain control, in more measured tones, 'But what if I say no thank you and want to re-work my original piece? Would this be the part where you threaten me with suspension?'

Marcia looked nonplussed. Rebecca was in no way the most egocentric analyst on her staff, and she had in her time heard pretty much every threat and demand. A little game of professional cat and mouse with Rebecca was nothing really, though she could not help but wonder why she seemed to be going out of her way not to accept the promotion, despite her obvious interest. Marcia decided to push a little. 'I wasn't going to, but I can if it would make you happier,' she replied, her voice a mix of equal parts good humour and don't-push-your-luck. 'I had hoped you'd take it because it was a good move, and you wanted to.'

'And why exactly would I want to do that? No-one cares about what Leapfrogging out to the stars might mean today. We're grown ups now, and that childish dream died twenty five years ago.' Rebecca immediately realised what she had said.

Now Marcia did smile. 'It sounds like at least one person still feels strongly enough about it to remember the term 'Leapfrog'. If I recall, that was the kid's club InSA set up to follow the ship, wasn't it. So, you were in it.' It was not a question. 'You were a...' Marcia tailed off.

Rebecca swore at herself for the slip, not the first one of this conversation. She was letting Marcia run rings around her, and now she knew the deepest, dirtiest little secret from her childhood; the private shame of an adult looking back on the immature actions of a youth.

She had been one of the ‘tadpoles’. Rebecca winced at the barest memory of the word and her eyes blazed at Marcia, daring her to mention it, or even hint at it again.

Marcia could not help but be gently amused at seeing her senior analyst in discomfort for the first time ever. While it was good to provoke an emotion out of Rebecca finally after her years in the bank, Marcia was not heartless, and pushing her on what was obviously unfinished business was too far. What this meant for the team she was inheriting she could not guess, but it might do the girl some good to feel something for once.

Rebecca, for her part, tried to squash the memories, but they came back unbidden, too strong to push back in their box right now. Goddamn it *had* felt good at the time. Mehta, Chaudray, Srinath and all the others had been her heroes. In her child’s eyes they were Gods almost; at play amongst the stars, bringing the chance of a new beginning, a chance to start again and put the past behind her. A fresh start for her; for all of them. *No, don’t think that. There’s no need to drag that back up.*

Marcia could not help but notice Rebecca’s discomfort change into something obviously deeper, well beyond embarrassment at remembered childhood ephemera. What nerve had she hit to bend the woman this much out of shape? She reached out comfortingly to Rebecca who flinched at the touch.

‘Sorry,’ Rebecca apologised instinctively. Then her eyes hardened measurably, whatever turmoil Marcia had provoked in her well and truly being overpowered by her will. ‘I’ll take the position,’ she said flatly, ‘I screwed up and this is my chance to move on. I’ll make it right. Thanks for obviously putting words in the right place for me. I appreciate it.’

‘Are you sure you’re alright?’ Marcia could not dismiss the feeling that Rebecca was accepting the promotion so she could bring the current conversation to a close and forget all about it.

Rebecca drew a breath as the woman Marcia knew re-asserted herself, all trace of whatever had happened behind her eyes gone as if it had never occurred. ‘Ha, I’m cool. It’s been a long

time since I've had cause to think about the Vimana,' she half-lied, as close to a justification as she was going to give Marcia.

'Actually, I think you should probably stay here for a few days. After all you've only just got back from one of the most disorientating places on earth, and now you're on the move again. We'll send your acceptance of the position, but your apologies on the trip.'

'No. I can do this. I want this.' *Perhaps she placed a little too much emphasis on 'want'?* 'I've always complained you were holding me back on your desk,' she joked.

Marcia narrowed her eyes, working out what she might say to Rebecca to make her reconsider the trip, but knew from Rebecca's eyes her former staff member was almost daring her to say something so she could further persuade herself this was the right thing to do. Rebecca was not going to be moved on this, that was obvious. Nothing to do but carry on with the arrangements then.

'OK, then. If you're sure. You leave in six hours. Go home, pack light. You're booked on the next longjump out of Heathrow to Delhi. There's a suite booked in your name in the Taj Mahal Hotel.'

Now Rebecca half-laughed. 'You knew I'd take the job, didn't you?'

'Up until a minute ago I thought I knew everything about you.' Marcia paused, unsure whether to ask her next question. 'Look-' was as far as she got.

'No need, I'm cool. Honestly. Don't worry about me, I'm not going to chod this up,' Rebecca said with a brittle smile.

'OK. So get going then.'

After Rebecca had breezed out of her office, pausing to peck Hiro on the cheek with a 'have fun with my piece', Marcia knew she would get no more ever out of her about what had just happened.