

GUARDIAN

First Chapter Download

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By Clive Osborne Rapley

Chapter One: The Experiment

Tristan Taylor sat quietly outside of his small cottage. The setting sun was leaving a reddening sky over the edge of the moor. After a warm summer day the air was still. He was just starting to feel the evening chill. He shivered; he could see faint stars appearing in the emerging darkness. His vision suddenly blurred and pain stabbed like a knife in his head.

He held his breath and gripped the arms of the wooden chair as the pain drove all thoughts from his mind. The crushing headache passed as suddenly as it came. Relaxing his grip, he let out his breath and forced his breathing back to normal. His head still ached slightly where the computer implant had been inserted. The sudden pain and aches had grown less severe as time went on, but he still suffered from them, especially at the end of the day.

He felt a wave of regret for volunteering for the experimental weapons program. If he had not, he would be in line for promotion to first lieutenant with captain in reach, if everything had gone well. He sighed; there was nothing he could do about it now. He attempted to force the depressing thoughts from his mind. Tilting his head back he tried to lose himself in the stars appearing above but to no avail. The memories came flooding back against his will and he found himself reliving the fateful day, as he had done many times before.

He remembered the restraining straps biting into his arms and chest. He was in a semi-reclining position so the doctors and scientists could have easy access to the side of his head. His head was clamped so he could not move. The operation they were going to attempt was very delicate and any movement on his part would have disastrous results.

He had been given relaxant drugs but other than those and a local anesthetic, he was fully conscious. During the many pre-operation briefings, he had been told they needed him to be conscious so they could monitor the effects as each neural connection was made.

Tristan sensed, rather than felt, the drill cutting into the side of his head. His eyes watered. He forced himself to think of something else, but was only partially successful. He felt a wave of relief when the sawing stopped.

He heard one of the doctors' say "We are now going to start inserting the implant, Tristan. Remember the button by your hand right hand? Press once for yes and twice for no, do you understand?"

He pushed the button once.

"Right ladies and gentlemen, lets start making the connections."

The doctor addressed Tristan again; "You should feel a slight tingle in your mind as each connection is made. Are you ready?"

Another push on the button.

He felt something; it was more a faint flash in his mind's eye, rather than a tingle.

"Are you alright?" he heard the doctor ask.

Again, Tristan pushed once.

This process continued for over an hour. Tristan was exhausted and beginning to regret volunteering for the experiment when he heard the doctor say, "Right, that is the last connection. We are now going to turn the unit on."

He watched as the Scientists turned to their computer screens.

"Are you ready Tristan?" he heard the doctor ask.

Yet another push. His fingers were aching, and even with the relaxant drugs, his arm was starting to cramp.

Tristan's mind seemed to explode. He arched against the restraining straps. He could suddenly feel the computer in his mind. He could feel through the interface, as though the computer was part of his mind. He felt everything at once. For a split second, he had control of it but it was too much for his mind. It was as if a knife had been plunged into his head. He slumped against the straps and passed out.

His memory drifted further back. He had joined the Navy as soon as he had left school, having been accepted in a University Cadetship scheme. He had worked hard and obtained a first class degree. He remembered deciding to specialise in computer weapon systems.

After a few years he was asked if he would consider volunteering for a post where a new revolutionary weapon system was being developed. Many ships' computer defence systems had limitations, especially the defence control computers. They had problems assessing the threat of attacking aircraft and missiles.

Tristan had first-hand knowledge of the system's limitations. He had been serving in one of a new class of destroyers during an exercise. He was sitting at one of the main command consoles that controlled the forward gun. A line of fighters appeared on the screen in front of him. The system identified them as the enemy and he activated the weapon system. The computer-controlled gun turned to meet the fighters. The gun started to fire at the lead aircraft. He had watched with mounting horror as the gun tracked the craft passing overhead and moving away. Tristan had quickly tried to override the computer, but things had been moving too fast. The computer kept the lock on the retreating craft when it was no longer a threat until the second aircraft was closer than the retreating one. Only then had the gun swung to meet the next craft, but it was too late. His ship was claimed as sunk. Tristan had sat and watched the weapon repeat the same error for each aircraft as they had passed in line over the ship. He had known immediately that if it were real rather than an exercise, they would all be dead.

He had been hauled before the Captain to explain what had gone wrong. There were further debriefings once the ship had docked. Tristan was asked to go over what had happened again and again.

It was after that incident the Navy decided to experiment with interfacing the human mind with computers. The direct connection would

ensure the necessary speed and control required during a modern, fast-moving battle

The ministry scientists were developing a system in which an interface was implanted directly into the brain. Instructions and commands could then be handled at the speed of thought, giving a clear advantage over conventional weapon systems.

His memory skipped back to when he had regained consciousness, after the operation. His head throbbed and felt as if his brain was trying to squeeze itself out of his skull. At times, the pain was almost unbearable. Even the strongest painkillers offered him no relief. The doctors found that they could not remove the device which had somehow overloaded and fused. They told Tristan that taking it out would cause further damage. They decided that Tristan would be better with the failed interface left lodged in his brain. From then on, he suffered severe headaches and was debilitated due to the pain. The Navy, in its infinite wisdom, decided to pension him off. He was of no further use to them. He had bought his cottage with the compensation package and could live comfortably.

He stretched in his chair and looked over the darkening moor in front of him. The reason he had bought this cottage was for the isolation. With the headaches, he did not want to be near other people. The only time he had any human contact was once a week when he made the short journey to the local village to stock up on the week's groceries. The locals had learned to leave him alone and regarded him as a recluse.

He had not seen any other people ever since the devastating argument he had with his girlfriend, Sarah. She was being, in his mind, increasingly difficult regarding his choice of location. She was a city girl through and through, so she really hated the isolation of his cottage. She was becoming insistent that it was time he returned to civilisation and stop moping about feeling sorry for himself. Tristan sighed; she was probably better off without him anyway. He couldn't return to his old life and be the person he was before the accident.

He sunk into a deeper depression after Sarah had stormed out of the house. The phone calls to his parents in Sussex became less and less. A few days after the incident with Sarah, he fell out with his mother. She was taking Sarah's side rather than his. He had slammed the phone down in anger, and as his head throbbed and ached, he ripped the phone from the wall and threw it across the room.

He spent his time walking on the Moors, fishing the local rivers, and watching his collection of sci-fi DVDs. This particular summer evening, he was just relaxing and letting his mind wander. The ache was lessening and he pushed the memories away. There were a few more shooting stars than normal, and he watched them streak across the sky.

His eyelids grew heavy, and he started to think he might just take himself off to bed when a loud whoosh made him jump as something large flew fast and low over his cottage roof. It seemed to slow slightly before hitting the soft ground with a loud thud a few hundred meters behind his cottage.

Aurelia sat quietly in her small fighter. She kept the power to a minimum, barely maintaining life support. The battle had gone badly, and the carrier she had launched from had been totally destroyed. During the battle, she had

fought several enemy fighters and had strafed one of their cruisers. However, the guidance and targeting system had been damaged during the run across the cruiser, and more fighters had targeted her. She had thrown her craft about trying to avoid flying in a straight line, making it difficult for the enemy ships to get a weapon lock. During the chase, she found she was approaching a small planetary system. The stress had started to show. Sweat ran from her brow into her eyes. She lifted the visor on her helmet to wipe sweat from her eyes with the back of her hand.

As she had flown past the outer planets, she noticed on her screen that there was a band of large rocks orbiting the system's sun where perhaps a planet had once been. She dove into this area and found a large one, several kilometres across. She hid behind it and shut down her craft's systems to lessen the chance of detection.

As she waited, a group of enemy fighters passed in loose formation followed by a larger cruiser. She sat and hoped the background noise from the planetary system would mask the minimal energy signature of her reduced life support system. To her relief, they flew by and continued on their course away from her. She let out a sigh of relief after the enemy flew past.

Aurelia derided herself; *A Dacian warrior should not show such weakness! I must try to do better.*

She assessed the options open to her. The small task force she was with had either been destroyed or had managed to escape the much larger enemy fleet. Either way, no one would be coming for her in the near future. Her small Fighter had limited range, and she had used at least half of her fuel during the battle and subsequent escape.

Her only chance was to find a nearby planet with a breathable atmosphere, land, and set her distress beacon. She would then hope to be rescued by her own side and not captured by the enemy. She thought it would be best to delay setting the beacon for a few days to ensure the enemy fleet had passed by, provided she could find a planet before her power and air ran out.

Her ears were uncomfortable in her helmet. She had always meant to get it changed but had never got round to it. The helmet was all right for a while, but it pinched if she wore it for too long. She was not intending to go into combat in the foreseeable future, so she broke regulations and removed her ill-fitting helmet. Her hair fell across her eyes, so she brushed it back with her hand.

She had not seen an enemy craft for several hours, so she increased the power to her computer system and life support. She shivered; the cockpit was getting cold. She waited a while before increasing the power further. Her systems did not detect any enemy ships, so they must have moved away. One small fighter in an uncharted system far from home was not worth bothering about.

Aurelia rubbed the tattoo on her cheek. It was a habit she had when she was under stress, ever since she had been tattooed with the mark of the warrior class. She increased her craft's power so she could run a scan of the system she was in. Her scans found that the third planet had a breathable atmosphere. The down side was that her systems detected a probability that it was inhabited by primitive beings. Still, she was more than capable of looking after herself, and they were probably far too primitive to be of any threat.

She decided it was time to start the ignition sequence for her engines. Of the three thrusters her fighter had, only one fired. This was an unexpected setback she had not bargained for. There must have been more damage than the systems reported. Her craft would be hard to handle, and manoeuvring within a planetary atmosphere would be difficult. However, she had no choice. She would be unable to go to another system with her damaged craft.

Aurelia smiled to herself as she neared the planet she had chosen. The beings that inhabited the planet had a very primitive detection technology that she could easily avoid with her fighter's basic cloaking systems. The only concern she had as she guided her fighter into the planet's upper atmosphere was that her damaged engines would make the landing rather hard. She chose a large island off a much larger continent as a landing site. Her sensors showed that it had some deserted areas. It had the additional advantage of moving into the night, so her descent would not be detected by anyone casually looking up.

Aurelia felt her craft begin to buck as it entered deeper into the atmosphere. The control column vibrated. She strained against it trying to hold it steady she needed all her strength to hold the craft on her chosen course. As she neared the ground, she just missed a small, low building she had not detected during her scans. It was not emitting an energy signature as strong as most of the other buildings on the island. She hit the surface of the planet harder than she had hoped. She was thrown forward against her harness and her head struck the main console, she passed out.

Tristan leapt out of his chair. It must have been a light aircraft in trouble. He hoped that it had not suffered too much damage and that the occupants were still alive. He ran towards where he thought the craft had gone down, nearly tripping over small hillocks in the twilight evening. He felt his stomach churn as he came to the crash site. What was he going to find? He cursed his stupidity for ripping his phone off the wall. If the occupants were in a serious condition, he had no way of contacting the emergency services. Even if one had a mobile it was useless; there was no signal in this local area. The glow and heat from the aircraft was sufficient for him to realise it was nothing he had ever seen before.

There were three large engines under a small stubby tail. The fuselage tapered from the engines to a long pointed nose, which was partially buried into the peat of the moor. Short wings came from the centre of the fuselage with what seemed like weapons projecting from them. Just in front of the wings there seemed to be a bubble canopy, presumably where the pilot sat. The really strange thing about the craft was the markings. They were strange shapes; totally unrecognisable as any country roundels he was acquainted with from his days with the Navy.

There was a glow of instruments from the canopy, and he could just make out the vague shape of the pilot slumped forward over the instruments. The craft was hot to the touch, but Tristan ignored the pain as he scrambled up to the cockpit. He was afraid that the craft might catch fire, and he needed to get the injured pilot out as quickly as possible.

In his rush, he had not noticed a slight tingling sensation in his temple near the fused implant. As he approached the canopy, he noticed that he could sort of 'feel' the craft in front of him. He felt a sudden wave of nausea

that almost pitched him forward against the canopy. He shook his head and it cleared. The continuous ache that had been part of his life since the operation seemed to strangely vanish. The surprising thing was that he felt connected to the craft and the unconscious pilot. It felt very alien. Tristan suddenly realised why he had not seen anything like this before. It was not some special experimental aircraft; it was not from this world at all. He shuddered. The alienness was strange yet oddly compelling. Whatever it was, it was still his duty to help the stricken pilot.

With shaking hands, he searched frantically for a release catch, fearing that the still smoking craft was going to catch fire. He could not see anything remotely like a release catch. He thought to himself, *how the hell do you open this thing?* As soon as he thought of *open* as more of a concept than a word, the cockpit canopy moved up and back into a recess in the fuselage behind the pilot.

Even though he realised in his heart that this was alien, Tristan was not prepared for the pilot of the craft. The person was slumped forward with very long, fair, almost white hair, visible in the glow of the instruments. What he was not prepared for were the ears. They protruded from the pilot's hair from where a normal person's ears would be, but they must have been at least 12 cm long, curving towards the back of the pilot's head to a sharp point.

Tristan exclaimed out loud, "bugger, an elf!" and almost fell backwards off the craft. He grabbed the side of the cockpit to steady himself. He leaned forward and pulled the creature back into its seat. He no longer thought of it as a person. It was an alien! He felt for the harness and found what seemed like a simple catch where the straps met at the creature's waist. He lifted what seemed like a release lever, and the harness came free. *Thank God it was not a trigger for an ejector seat system! That would of made a fine mess*, he thought to himself. He felt a wave of panic; *this thing is controlled by thought*. He cleared all thoughts from his mind. He did not want to set anything off inadvertently! He lifted the pilot from around the shoulders and pulled it from its seat. The creature weighed about the same as a small human, for which Tristan was grateful.

Tristan noted that the being, whatever it was, had arms and legs and a head just like a human. It seemed slim, and nearly as tall as he was. He carried the unconscious form away from the damaged craft just as flames started to lick around what he assumed to be the engine exhausts.

He ran as fast as his burden would allow back to his cottage half expecting an explosion to knock him off his feet. He paused to catch his breath and glanced back. The craft obviously had an emergency fire control system, as it was covering itself in thick foam. The flames were smothered and the fire was extinguished. The creature he was carrying stirred in his arms and groaned. He hurried back to his cottage, carried it upstairs, and laid it on his bed.