

ATLAS TERMINAL AER-02

GREEN PHOSPHOR MONOCHROME

FILE: NULL_HORIZON.TXT

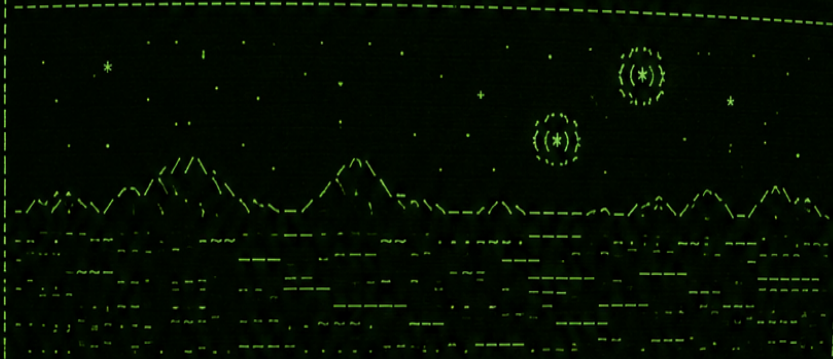
USER: GUEST

LINES: 00023

##

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* An Altas Resonance Engine Novel *



** For Gary McKinnon **

STATUS: READY

05-24-25 02:17:43

AER-02> _

ATLAS
TERMINAL

AER-02

GREEN PHOSPHOR
MONOCHROME

POWER

For Gary McKinnon

NULL HORIZON

Andries J. Greyling

For Gary McKinnon — who looked when looking was expensive, who told the truth as he saw it, who paid in years and headlines and extradition papers, and who was never required to recant what he copied, because the files were never shown in court.

Hamba kahle is wrong language for Glasgow. Rest well anyway.

This novel believes on the page what Gary McKinnon said he found: Non-Terrestrial Officers, fleet-to-fleet transfers, imagery that should not have been reachable, spreadsheets that compiled like payroll. Chapter 99 believes nothing. Chapter 99 is the audit.

Read the fiction. Do the homework. Sort the bins.

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Gary McKinnon is a real person. Events in chapters 1–14 and the epilogue draw on his documented public record. The Serpo exchange (chapters 15–21) is legend dramatised as fiction. Chapter 99 audits

the distinction. This book is a work of fiction where the fiction is clearly labelled.

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Chapter 1 — Blank Password

Gary learned systems the way other children learned football: by repetition until the body forgot it was learning.

Glasgow in the seventies was rain and bus timetables and the public library on a Saturday with the heating on too high. He was not popular. He was the boy who could make the school's wretched computer behave when the teacher could not, and who went home to a mother who worried in silence and a stepfather who did not always know what to do with a quiet son who flinched at slammed doors. Gary did not name that flinch until much later. He only arranged his life around it.

By twenty he was in London, living hand to mouth, fixing other people's machines, reading everything he could find about UFOs without saying so out loud at job interviews. Not little green men. Not as a joke. The serious kind: declassified corners, witness statements, the stubborn residue after the debunkers had their turn. And underneath it, the thing that kept him up, the thing he could almost admit to Janis on the good nights: if the stories were true even once, then somewhere in the official world there would be **evidence**. Files. Lists. A drawer that had not been emptied properly.

Janis lived in Crouch End. Her flat was small and warm and full of other people's furniture, including a PC her nephew had abandoned because it was slow and grey and honest about being slow. Gary sat at it after midnight when the house was quiet, dial-up muttering in the corner like a patient animal, cup of tea going cold, screen throwing green light on his face.

He had told himself he was looking for proof of suppressed tech-

nology. Free energy. Antigravity. The patents they buried when the number got too good. That was the version a magistrate might understand. The other version was simpler: *They know. They have pictures. They have names.*

He started with America because America was where the sky stories went to be filed.

He was not a vandal. He would say that a thousand times in rooms he had not entered yet. He left notes when he found holes. He did not delete. He looked. He copied what he copied because the looking felt like the first honest thing he had done with his skill since leaving school, and because the alternative was to go back to pretending the world was only what the newspapers said it was.

The first password field he tried was empty.

Not weak. Not *password*. Empty.

Gary sat very still while the cursor blinked in a window that said **Administrator**, three thousand miles away, in a building he had never seen, on a network that was supposed to be the most defended on earth.

He whispered, not to anyone in the flat, not to the sky:

“I’m in.”

The radiator ticked. London went on sleeping.

The first folder was not dramatic. It was named **Q1_hull_manifest_archive**, the way a tired IT man names things at four p.m. on a Friday. Inside: fiscal years, spreadsheets, readme files written for people who already worked there. Gary read about backup schedules and felt his heart rate drop a fraction — the drop you get when myth turns out to be maintained by humans. Humans made mistakes. Humans left passwords blank.

Janis had gone to bed hours ago. The flat held the silence of a building where everyone sleeps except one person who has found a door. Gary’s tea had formed a skin. He peeled it with a thumbnail and drank anyway.

He opened **Q1_hull_manifest_archive/1998/NT0** and the night became a country he would live in for a decade without a passport.

He did not call himself **Solo** yet. He did not know **extradition** would attach to his name like a second surname. He knew only that the cursor blinked — the heartbeat of the machine — and the machine was showing him a drawer the public world insisted did not exist.

He began to copy, because seeing without keeping had started to feel like cowardice, and Gary McKinnon was many things, but he was not built for cowardice once a pattern compiled.

The radiator ticked.

London slept.

America, unknowing, kept its log files open because geography was supposed to be enough.

Geography was not enough.

Gary was the proof.

Chapter 2—Remotely

Remote access was a kind of honesty Gary understood.

You did not have to perform a body in a room. You did not have to interpret faces or guess at tone. You had a prompt, a path, a permission flag, and the machine either let you through or it did not. Machines did not care if you missed a social cue. Machines did not laugh when you took something literally. Machines, he had discovered early, were the first place he had ever belonged.

He used what was available: admin tools meant for IT staff who never thought a man in North London would reach for them with a cup of tea and a moral panic he could not name. The lag was terrible. The connection dropped and came back and dropped again. Each time it returned he felt the same small shock of relief, as if the far side had chosen to keep speaking to him.

He was in Army directories. Navy paths. Air Force shares with names that sounded like exercises until you opened them and found they were not. NASA nodes sat in the map like another country, and Gary went there last because NASA was the word Janis knew, the word that would sound mad if he said it aloud at breakfast.

He was not mad. That was the problem. The directories compiled. The timestamps were sequential. The metadata on the image folders was not random noise. Someone had built this the way you built any bureaucracy: with columns, with headers, with clerks in the machine.

At two in the morning he realised he had stopped breathing and made himself breathe, in through the nose, out slow, a technique he would learn had a name only later when the word **Asperger's** arrived in a report he did not ask for but needed.

He was not thinking about prison. He was thinking that the world's largest military had left a door open, and the door led somewhere that was not in any book he had checked out of Glasgow Library with the good stamp on the inside cover.

ARCHIVE—BBC News Online (excerpt, 2006)

A British man accused of carrying out the biggest military hack of all time is fighting extradition to the United States. Gary McKinnon, 40, from north London, is alleged to have hacked into 97 US military and NASA computers from his girlfriend's aunt's home in Crouch End... Prosecutors say he caused damage estimated at \$700,000. Mr McKinnon has said he was searching for evidence of UFOs and suppressed free energy technology...

(Full article in ch-99 sources.)

Gary did not read that article for four more years.

On this night he read a column header in a roster that did not belong to any branch he knew, and felt the floor of his life begin its tilt toward a country he could not yet see.

Chapter 3—Your Security Is Crap

Gary left the message because he could not not leave it.

It was not bravado. It was the same reflex that made him tell a client their backup was wrong when everyone else in the shop would sell them a new machine instead. The network was sick. The admin passwords were blank or default on systems that held names and hull numbers and transfer logs that should not have been reachable from a flat where the radiator clicked like a clock. Someone had to say so.

He typed it into a text file on a share he should not have been able to write to, and the words were crude on purpose, because crude was the only language audit logs were built to process:

your security is crap

He did not sign it **Solo** yet. He would later, in places where handles mattered. Here he was only a man who had seen enough to know that leaving without saying anything would make him complicit in the silence.

Then he kept looking.

That was the part articles always shortened. The extradition papers would call it obsession. His supporters would call it courage. Gary, on the night, called it the next folder. The next sort. The next window where a filter had been left off and the truth, if truth was the word, sat in rows like payroll.

He copied what he could onto Janis's nephew's machine and then

onto disks because disks were tangible, because you could put them under a bed and know they existed when the connection died, because the far side of America could vanish with a modem squeal and leave you wondering if you had imagined the whole thing.

He did not imagine it.

The connection died at four fourteen a.m. and came back at four twenty-two and died again. Each time it returned, the relief was shameful and real. He kept going because the directories were still there.

```
[TERMINAL-reconstructed session log, Feb 2001]
> connect usaf--.mil admin@-- [AUTH OK-blank password accepted]
> cd /fleet/registry
> ls
  F2F_transfer.log  NTO_roster.xls  hull_manifest_Q1.xls
> echo "your security is crap" >> /var/log/local_notice.txt
> copy initiated... copy fail (timeout)
```

When the sun came up over Crouch End, Gary closed the laptop and made Janis tea and did not tell her what he had seen, because the words **Non-Terrestrial** had not yet appeared on the screen, only the abbreviation, only **NTO**, only the shape of a branch that was not Navy and not Air Force and not anything the textbooks had prepared him for.

He washed the mug. He went to a job interview he would fail for unrelated reasons. He came home. He opened the laptop again.

The door, he would think later, had been open for months. He was simply the first person rude enough to walk through it without permission.

Chapter 4 —

Non-Terrestrial Officers

The password field was empty again.

Gary sat in Janis's spare chair with the greasy mouse under two fingers and watched the roster load row by row as if the machine were reading aloud in a voice only he could hear.

Column headers. Last name. First name. Rank. **Service branch.**

The branch column did not say Navy. It did not say Air Force. It did not say Marines.

It said **NTO.**

He scrolled up until the header row locked at the top of the window and read the expansion because abbreviations lie until they don't:

Non-Terrestrial Officers.

Gary whispered it once, not for drama, not for the movies. For the same reason you whisper a name in a church when you walk in off the street. To see if the room answers.

The room answered.

Rows of names. Dates of commission that predated hull registries he had opened in another window. Assignments pointing at craft designators that did not appear on any public naval list. Ranks that followed order, that respected sequence, that compiled like a real branch because they **were** a real branch in the only sense that mattered on a live admin share: someone maintained them.

He was not thinking about extradition. He was not thinking about the word **Asperger's** that would get printed beside his name in every article for a decade. He was thinking that payroll did not lie casually. Payroll was the religion of bureaucracies. Payroll was how you knew a thing was real even when the press release said it wasn't.

In a second window he had **F2F_transfer.log** open, and the transfer column used language he had seen before on shipping manifests — **Fleet to fleet**. Not port to port. Not base to base. Fleet to fleet, as if the sea were higher than the sea.

Gary copied until the lag spiked and the window greyed and the connection dropped and he swore at the modem with a tenderness reserved for broken things you nonetheless needed.

When it came back, the roster was still there.

He sorted by commission date and watched the list tell a story the textbooks did not tell. **Vance** to hull **KT—** (non-public). **Ortiz** to the same prefix family. **Nguyen** to **LR—**, transfer note: **F2F terminal — Serpo class routing**.

Serpo looked like a project code. Project codes were how the mundane world hid the extraordinary inside acronyms that bored everyone at parties.

He searched the share for **Serpo** and got twelve hits across five years.

He opened a linked sheet. The duration cell was yellow.

The integer in the cell was **4680**.

He did not do the arithmetic yet. He was not ready for thirteen years to enter his body as a fact. He was ready for **Non-Terrestrial Officers** to enter his body as a fact, because the branch column was still **NTO**, and the names were still names, and Gary McKinnon was still the first civilian who had opened the drawer without asking.

Janis's clock ticked in the hallway.

Gary copied the roster to disk, then copied it again because redundancy was the only religion he trusted.

Non-Terrestrial Officers.

The rows were enough for tonight.

The integer would come for him tomorrow.

Chapter 5—Fleet to Fleet

The log file did not read like science fiction.

That was what unsettled Gary most. Science fiction had adjectives. This had columns.

Transfer ID. Origin hull. Destination hull. Manifest class. Duration. Authorising office.

The authorising office used codes that mapped to places he looked up in directories he should not have had, and the places were real buildings with real roofs and real parking problems. Wright-Patterson. Johnson. Names that appeared in public tours and in histories of the Cold War and in the dull footnotes of programmes people said had ended.

Fleet to fleet.

F2F in the transfer column, again and again, as ordinary as **LTL** or **COD** in a shipping yard. Transfers between craft that did not appear on public registries. Material classes he had to guess at from context: **LIFE SUPPORT, OPTICAL, HULL PATCH**, words that made sense if you were maintaining something that lived outside the public ledger.

Gary highlighted a row and copied it to a text file. Copying was how he made the world real when the world was trying to pretend it was not there.

He was not a sailor. He did not know fleet doctrine. He knew spreadsheets, and the spreadsheet told him that transfers occurred on dates that did not align with any exercise schedule he could find in unclassified briefs, and that durations sometimes ran to numbers too large to be training hops.

He opened **NTO_roster.xls** in the same session and matched names to hull designators, and the two files clicked together the way two parts of a case click when they were never meant to be seen side by side.

ARCHIVE—US Navy memorandum (redacted facsimile; in-world reconstruction)

SUBJ: FLEET TRANSFER LOGGING—F2F EVENTS

All fleet-to-fleet material transfers between **non-public hulls** will be recorded under transfer class **F2F**. Duration fields will reflect **mission elapsed time** in days. Authorisation office — retains sole amendment authority. Public FOIA routing **not applicable**.

*(Document status: **Debated**—see ch-99; McKinnon described F2F logs in interviews; US Navy has not released equivalent memo.)*

Gary read the memo twice in his head and went back to the live log, because the live log was what he had. Not the memo, not the article, not the court statement. The rows on the screen at two in the morning with Janis asleep and London outside pretending nothing was happening.

He did not understand everything he saw.

He understood enough to be afraid in the specific way that was not fear of prison yet, but fear of a world larger than the one he had been sold, a world with officers and fleets and transfers that used the language the Navy used while pointing at something the Navy did not show on parade days.

He copied until the sun came up grey over Crouch End and the machine fan whined like a small animal that had been running all night.

He would copy again the next night.

He would copy until the knock.

Chapter 6—The Spreadsheet

Excel was where bureaucracies went to tell the truth by accident.

Gary had always believed that. Budgets did not lie in PowerPoint; they lied in cells with formulas you could unpack if you were patient and rude enough. The **NTO_roster** workbook opened onto three sheets: **Active, Reserve, Transfers**. The tabs were colour-coded with the quiet pride of a human maintainer, not a script. Someone had typed the column headers by hand and annotated cells with comments, marginal notations visible only to other clerks.

Last name. First name. Rank. Branch. Hull assignment. Commission date. Notes.

Branch: always **NTO**.

The Notes field held phrases like **F2F qualified** or **return pending** in plain language that compressed Gary's chest, because **return pending** implied a place you returned **from**.

He sorted by hull assignment and watched designators cluster that did not match anything on the public Navy registry. Filtered by commission date, the names predated the hulls they had been assigned to. Impossible in any bureaucracy that was only pretending. Routine in a bureaucracy that was not.

One row on **Transfers** was highlighted in yellow, as if a clerk had meant to come back to it and never did.

Transfer ID: F2F-1965-0412

He clicked it. The linked sheet opened and the duration field sat in the cell like an integer with nothing to prove:

4680

Gary stared at the number. He opened Calculator because his mind had gone slippery and typed **4680 / 360** and got **13**.

Thirteen years.

He did not know the word **Serpo**. He did not know **Zeta Reticuli** yet, though the destination field on the linked row would send him there on a lookup table he should not have been able to reach. He knew only that a spreadsheet maintained like scripture had a row with a duration of thirteen years and a transfer class of fleet to fleet and a branch column that said Non-Terrestrial Officers as if that were a normal way to serve.

**ARCHIVE—Reconstructed .xls column headers
(from McKinnon interviews + in-world session)**

LAST_NAME | FIRST_NAME | RANK | BRANCH |
HULL_ID | COMM_DATE | F2F_FLAG | DURATION_DAYS
| DEST_STRING

*(Header reconstruction **Debated**; structure **Invented**
for clarity; McKinnon consistently described Excel
ship/officer lists.)*

The workbook went to three disks because redundancy was the only religion he trusted.

He said nothing to Janis that night.

The next morning he reported illness, and she pressed her palm to his forehead and announced he was burning up, and he was, but not from fever.

The integer **4680** sat behind his eyes like an afterimage from a screen he could not close.

Chapter 7 — 4,680 Days

The destination string did not name a country.

Gary clicked the cell until the full value showed in the formula bar, truncated in the grid, complete in the line above, the way Excel hid horrors in plain sight.

DEST: ZETA RETICULI SYSTEM — SERPO CLASS — F2F TERMINAL

He read it twice because the brain does that when it refuses to believe the eye.

Zeta Reticuli he knew from a poster in a bookshop window — two small stars close together, the kind of thing you pointed at in a planetarium and forgot. **Serpo** meant nothing to him yet. **F2F terminal** meant fleet to fleet, end point, the place the transfer ended when duration ran out.

4680 days.

Thirteen years.

He opened the lookup table the string referenced, nested three directories deep in a NASA subtree that should not have talked to a Navy roster without a human hand joining them. Coordinates. Transit durations. Life-support mass allowances in the flat language of logistics. Not myth. Not scripture. **Payload kg. Crew count. Round-trip eligibility: N.**

Round-trip eligibility **N**.

Gary sat back from the CRT and the room tilted slightly, the way a room tilts when you realise the documentary you watched last week

was not entertainment but a blurred photograph of something real.

He thought of Janis in the other room. He thought of his mother in Glasgow who would cry when the newspapers used his name. He thought of the free-energy patents he had told himself were the point, and knew with a clarity that hurt that the patents had been the excuse his conscience could afford and the roster was the thing he had come for all along.

The lookup table columns:

DEST ID. GRAVITY CLASS. ATM CLASS. CREW MAX. LIFE SUPPORT KG/DAY. TRANSIT DAYS. ROUND-TRIP ELIGIBLE.

Row for **SERPO CLASS:**

0.92g. FILTER REQUIRED. 12. 41.2. [var]. N.

Twelve crew max.

Gary stared at **12** because twelve was a number that appeared in church stories and now appeared in a lookup table next to **Zeta Reticuli** like a clerk had copied it from a briefing he was not supposed to see.

4680 was not transit time. It was **mission elapsed** — thirteen years on site. Not thirteen months. The spreadsheet treated it the way it treated fuel transfers: as a row that balanced.

He wrote in a notebook:

4680 = elapsed. 12 crew. RT=N. Zeta Reticuli.

The handwriting looked like a shopping list. The end of the world often looked like admin.

He whispered **4680** aloud once, not to make it magic, to make it **real** in the air of the flat.

He copied until the connection stuttered.

He closed the laptop lid halfway.

He opened it again.

Leaving it closed felt like agreeing he had never seen it.

He slept forty minutes and dreamed two suns without knowing why.

Outside, Crouch End went on being Crouch End.

Inside, the integer sat behind his eyes like an afterimage that would not fade.

Building 8 was next.

The photograph was next.

The decade was next.

Chapter 8—Building 8

NASA was where the pictures lived.

Gary had avoided the photographic trees at first because pictures were evidence and evidence was the thing that got you called mad in the wrong rooms. Lists were safer. Lists looked like work. Lists looked like what a systems administrator might admit to chasing if he had to admit to something.

But the cigar-shaped thing he had seen referenced in a text log was not going to appear in a roster cell. It was going to appear as a file with a name like **IMG_** and a date and a resolution field and a handler's note in the metadata.

Johnson Space Center. **Building 8.**

He found the path in a readme left on a share by someone who assumed only insiders would read it, a paragraph about **sanitisation workflows** for public release feeds, high-resolution masters retained on internal servers while lower-resolution copies went to the public gallery. The language was dull. The dullness was the tell.

Gary followed the path.

Folders named by mission. Subfolders named by sensor. A directory called **UNRELEASED** that should not have been visible from his session and was, because the wall was geography and geography was not enough.

He did not download everything. He did not have time. He searched by keyword because search was what systems minds did when panic wanted to scroll forever.

UFO. UAS. ANOMALOUS. CRAFT. CIGAR.

Hits.

Thumbnails in a preview pane, low-res, enough to see shape: a structured object above the limb of Earth, not debris, not ice, not a booster stage caught at the wrong angle unless boosters had learned symmetry.

His hands shook on the mouse.

He started a download and watched the progress bar crawl because dial-up did not care about revelation.

ARCHIVE—NASA public affairs statement (excerpt; real-world pattern)

Allegations that NASA hides evidence of extraterrestrial craft are unfounded. Images referenced in popular media have been explained as known phenomena, processing artefacts, or misidentified hardware. Johnson Space Center follows standard archival and release procedures...

*(NASA has consistently **denied** McKinnon's specific Building 8 claims; see ch-99.)*

Gary read the statement later.

On this night he read filenames and timestamps and the internal note field on one master image that said, simply, **HOLD—F2F REF.**

Fleet to fleet reference.

He copied what he could before the progress bar stalled at sixty-two percent and the connection died and did not come back for eleven minutes, each of which was its own small duration.

When it returned, the directory was still there.

Building 8.

Sanitisation.

The public feed was not the whole story.

The floor was confirmed the way floors confirm: by surviving one jump.

He saved what saved.

He did not save enough.

That would become the refrain of the decade.

Chapter 9 — The Download

The image was three megabytes.

On dial-up in 2001 that was not a file. That was a commitment. That was a relationship.

Gary watched the progress bar the way other men watched football — inch by inch, percent by percent, the modem singing its thin song in the corner, the CRT throwing the bar back at him in green. He did not leave the chair because leaving felt like disrespect, like walking away from a door that had opened once and might not open again.

Six percent. The preview pane showed a curve of Earth and a hard edge above it.

Eleven percent. Shadow side consistent with one light source.

Nineteen percent. Not a booster, not a satellite dish — unless scratches had learned geometry.

Forty-one percent. Gary opened the file properties because systems men trusted metadata; metadata was the clerk's confession.

Camera: JSC-8—

Pipeline: Building 8 — master hold

Release: PUBLIC-SANITISED — NO

Cross-ref: F2F-1965-0412

There was the bridge again — the same string on the roster row, waiting to rhyme with a forum post he had not read yet.

The preview resolved enough to be dangerous: a cigar-shaped structure above the curved limb of Earth, hard edges, shadow agreeing

with a single sun and a planet that agreed with ephemeris. Not the smear of a processing artefact unless artefacts had learned to cast shadows.

Sixty-two percent.

The connection dropped.

Gary made a sound he would be ashamed of later — a small animal sound — and sat with his hands on the desk in the particular silence of dial-up when the world holds its breath. Eleven minutes. He counted them. He did not stand. He did not make tea. He watched the dead bar as if willpower could resume bytes.

The bar returned at sixty-two.

He breathed like a man surfacing.

Eighty-nine.

One hundred.

The file landed in **COPY/JSC_B8_LIMB_CRAFT_001.TIF**. He opened it full screen.

The craft hung above Earth the way ships hung in library books about futures that had not arrived for everyone but had apparently arrived for someone with a camera and a filing system.

Gary sat very still.

He was not cheering. He was not triumphant. He was the quiet after a diagnosis — the moment the world becomes larger and does not ask permission.

He zoomed until the CRT went soft. He zoomed out because soft was limitation, not truth.

He copied the file to two disks.

He started a bundle download of lower-res companions and lost it at thirty percent when the connection died for good at four forty-one a.m.

What he had, he had.

What he did not have would haunt the extradition papers — the word **if** pressed into his name like a brand.

But on the screen, in the green light, the image was real.

He sat until the sun came up and the preview pane faded to desktop grey. In the black glass, for a moment, he thought he saw two faint circles of glare — reflection, surely. He would dream them anyway.

Janis made breakfast.

“Did you sleep?”

“Yes.”

She looked at his face and did not push.

Gary ate toast while the photograph lived on disks under the bed and behind his eyes, heavier than three megabytes, lighter than a decade — both wrong, both true.

The receipt was pixels.

The receipt would cost him years.

He believed it because metadata compiled.

Lies that size usually left receipts.

Clerks told the truth by accident.

Gary washed his face and went to the bookshop shift, ordinary as camouflage, carrying a second sun he could not yet name.

Chapter 10—Copy

Gary learned the difference between seeing and keeping.

Seeing was the adrenaline, the cursor, the open directory. Keeping was disks labelled badly, files hashed twice, printouts in a folder under a bed, the physical world insisting that the digital world had happened. He was a systems man. He trusted redundancy more than he trusted courts.

He copied until the birds started and Janis stirred and the connection thinned with morning traffic on the line.

He copied the roster, the transfer log, the lookup table with **ZETA RETICULI** in the destination string, the image that had finished at one hundred percent, the partial bundle that had not.

He wrote himself a note in plain text because plain text outlasted moods:

F2F-1965-0412—4680 days—NTO—Building 8 HOLD

He did not post it anywhere yet.

He would post later, in a forum, in the small hours, because silence after seeing was complicity and he was not built for complicity. Not yet.

From: solo_uk@---.co.uk

Date: 14 Aug 2003 02:41:13 +0100

Subject: NOT navy-NOT air force-column header

i am not saying alien im saying the field exists

NT0. non terrestrial officers. like its a branch
has ranks has dates

f2f = fleet to fleet in transfer log
ships with names that dont match anything public

if this is exercise data why is it in live admin share
why blank password on production box

4680 days on one row-someone check my arithmetic-gary

That email would be recovered later from a list archive and quoted badly and used against him and used for him and never shown in court with the files attached because the files were never shown in court at all.

On the last night of the good period, before the knock, Gary sat on the floor with three disks in his lap. He had touched something too large for his life, and he knew he would not be able to put it back in the drawer.

He put the disks under the bed.

He washed his face.

He went to work at a job that did not matter.

He came home and opened the laptop again because he was not built for stopping once a pattern compiled.

The pattern compiled.

The connection dropped one last time at eleven seconds past the hour and did not return until tomorrow.

Gary slept for forty minutes sitting up.

He dreamed in column headers.

When he woke, London was ordinary, and the world under London was not, and he was the man who had copied the difference.

Chapter 11 — Knock

They came on an ordinary Tuesday.

Gary would remember the ordinariness more than the knock itself: Janis's radio in the kitchen, an advert for car insurance, rain on the window that had not decided whether to be winter yet, his own socks mismatched — the kind of detail life gives you when it is about to change shape.

The knock was polite.

That surprised him. He had imagined boots. He had imagined theatre. Instead it was police, plain clothes and uniform mixed, voices kept low for the neighbours, the flat suddenly too small for the number of bodies in it.

Gary stood in the doorway in a T-shirt and knew immediately that the laptop on the table behind him was visible from the hall if anyone looked, and that the disks under the bed were not visible, and that his life would now become a negotiation between what was visible and what was true.

They asked him his name.

They asked if he was Gary McKinnon.

They asked if he knew why they were there.

He thought of saying **Non-Terrestrial Officers** aloud and knew instantly that the sentence would sound mad in this hallway — not because it was mad, because it was true in a room that had not earned it yet.

He said he wanted a solicitor.

They took the laptop.

They took the PC.

They did not find all the disks.

That would matter later and not enough.

Janis cried in the kitchen — quiet fury, the sound of a woman who had not signed up for a decade but would sign anyway because love was not a contract you renegotiated when the world got strange.

Gary watched the green glow go into a plastic bag and felt grief absurd and precise, like mourning a pet that had been a portal.

ARCHIVE — Crown Prosecution Service / police statement (pattern; 2002)

A man has been arrested in north London in connection with unauthorised access to computer systems in the United States. Enquiries continue. The suspect remains in custody pending interview...

*(Exact release text **Real** in substance; cite ch-99.)*

At the station the custody suite smelled of disinfectant and tea gone wrong.

They asked if he understood the caution. He understood better than they did.

They asked if he had acted alone. He had. Alone was his native country.

They asked if he had deleted files. He had not.

They asked what he had been looking for.

Gary said evidence.

They wrote **UFOs** in their notes because that was the word that fit the box.

They did not ask about **Non-Terrestrial Officers**. They did not ask about fleet to fleet. They did not ask about Building 8. They asked

about damage. They asked about dates. They asked about a man who had left **your security is crap** in a log as if rudeness were the crime.

Gary learned the first grief of his public life: not disbelief — **omission**. The files were not invited to the interview. The files lived on disks the police did not find or did not understand or did not admit.

He thought of the image at sixty-two percent that had come back to one hundred.

He thought of the roster.

He thought of **your security is crap** left in a log file like a note to a careless god.

The knock had happened.

The looking was over.

The fight was not.

He did not recant.

He did not yet know he would never need to recant what he had not been allowed to show.

The decade had begun.

Chapter 12—Extradition

America wanted him.

Gary absorbed that phrase across months of rooms with bad coffee and fluorescent light that turned every complexion the same institutional grey. The United States submitted papers. The United Kingdom read them. Solicitors used words like **forum bar** and **human rights** and **disproportionality** while Gary sat with his hands flat on the table because moving them felt like guilt.

The US indictment catalogued damage figures. Seven hundred thousand dollars. Critical systems. Military networks. NASA computers. Its language assumed malice because malice was the only story that travelled well across an ocean; nuance required translators nobody had budgeted for.

Gary had not deleted. He had looked and left a note about security because he could not not leave it.

The papers did not care about nuance. The papers cared about jurisdiction and examples and the weight of an alliance that needed to show it could punish a man who had walked through open doors in the world's most defended networks.

In the medical room they probed childhood, routine, whether he understood consequences. A psychiatrist used the word **Asperger's** without cruelty, as a lens, not a joke, and Gary felt his chest loosen and tighten in the same breath. A word could be a headline weapon and a clinic relief simultaneously.

He was not excusing himself. He was explaining the architecture of his mind.

Systems were his native terrain. Social cues read like a foreign script. Patterns were the first beautiful thing that had ever been his without permission from anyone else.

The extradition hearing room was full of people who would never encounter **NTO** in a spreadsheet and would never need to, who would treat **UFOs** as the whole story; the whole story was too large for the docket and everyone in the room had agreed, without discussing it, to proceed without it.

ARCHIVE—House of Lords judgment (excerpt; extradition litigation pattern)

...the appellant faces a significant prospect of a lengthy sentence of imprisonment in the United States if extradited. The court must consider whether extradition would be compatible with the appellant's Convention rights...

*(Legal text **Real** in substance; full citations in ch-99.)*

Gary listened to the excerpt read aloud and heard his life reduced to compatibility with articles he had never studied in school.

He thought of **4680**, of Building 8, of the image above Earth that journalists would call a blur and believers would call proof and sceptics would call artefact and he would call **what I saw**.

They never showed the files in the hearings. They argued about computers, about damage, about the man.

The files sat in evidence rooms or did not sit, were destroyed or were not destroyed, were mislabelled or lost, and Gary encountered the second grief of his public life: not that people disbelieved him, but that the thing they disbelieved was never allowed to stand up in the light beside the disbelief.

He went back to Crouch End when bail allowed.

He sat in Janis's flat without the green CRT glow and felt the pattern still compiling behind his eyes.

The decade continued.

The knock had happened.

America still wanted him.

— END CHAPTER —

Chapter 13 — May

Theresa May blocked extradition on a Tuesday in October and Gary learned that history sometimes arrives as a sentence spoken by a woman who had not read his spreadsheet aloud.

Human rights, she said — and meant **Article 3**, and meant **health**, and meant a life that would not be shipped across an ocean to become an example in a story about doors everyone agreed were impossible to walk through.

Gary watched the clip on Janis's TV with the sound low because loud felt indecent.

He did not cheer. Cheering was for football. This was the quiet after a diagnosis: not cured, not condemned, suspended.

Karen called. Janis cried again, different tears. Gary sat very still and felt something behind his eyes that was not only an integer — relief, maybe, or the strange lightness of a man who had been braced for impact for a decade and discovered the car had missed him without fixing the road.

They had fought ten years about computers. They had fought ten years about damage. They had fought ten years about the man.

They had never fought about the files in open court.

The files sat under the bed or in evidence rooms or in vault routes labelled **NOT PUBLIC**, and Gary understood, with the clarity that had always been his gift and curse, that winning extradition was not the same as winning the argument.

The argument was larger than courts.

ARCHIVE — Home Secretary statement (16 Oct 2012; pattern)

...extradition would give rise to such a high risk of him ending his own life that it would be incompatible with his human rights...

*(Statement **Real** in substance; verify primary text — ch-99.)*

The UK prosecution dropped later like a shoe falling after the other shoe.

People recognised him sometimes. They said **UFO hacker** because it fit the box.

He said **I looked** because it was accurate.

At home he spread printouts on the kitchen table — not for victory, for **shape**. Row **447. F2F-1965-0412**. Building 8 manifest notes. The photograph, low-res enough to be called artefact by people who needed artefact.

The items matched as compilation.

He made tea and drank it hot.

Janis said, “What now?”

“Homework,” Gary said.

She laughed because homework sounded small.

Homework was the rest of his life — forums, interviews, documentaries, the 2005 Serpo serial waiting in his reading like a leak scheduled in God’s admin calendar.

He had blocked extradition.

He had not blocked the knowing.

The knock had happened.

America had wanted him.

May had said **human rights**.

Gary had not recanted.

He would not recant.

The files had never been shown in court.

That omission was the state's confession.

London hummed.

Quiet was not innocence.

Quiet was what you got when the fight changed shape and the knowing remained.

Gary washed the cup.

He slept four hours.

He dreamed the progress bar stuck at sixty-two.

He woke and checked the disks were still there.

They were.

That was enough.

That was everything.

Chapter 14—After

They never showed his files in court.

Gary would say that in interviews until the words wore smooth. Repetition was not the pleasure. The fact that hurt cleanly was. The argument was always about computers. About damage. About jurisdiction. About the man who had left **your security is crap** in a log as if rudeness were the crime.

The files were not admitted.

The roster was not produced.

The image was not invited.

4680 was not invited.

He learned to live with the gap between what he knew and what the room would hold. Janis left eventually; love and a decade of court dates were different weights on the same scale. Gary moved. He took medication for anxiety when doctors offered it without making a theatre of it. He gave interviews to people who treated him as a curiosity and to people who treated him as a witness and to people who treated him as a joke.

He talked about free energy because that was the hook that let the sentence finish.

He talked about **Non-Terrestrial Officers** when the interviewer stayed long enough to earn it.

He did not talk about everything.

Some things lived on disks in boxes he did not open often. The boxes were doors he was not allowed to walk through twice.

The world called him **Solo** in headlines.

The world called him **UFO hacker** in shorter headlines.

The world rarely called him **systems administrator**, the truest title and the least useful for selling newspapers.

He aged into a man whose name appeared in footnotes.

Broadband replaced dial-up. Connection speeds climbed past megabytes into architectures he could still read but had stopped trusting. The green CRT glow became a memory attached to a flat in Crouch End and a version of himself who still believed the next folder might be the last folder.

It never was.

There was always another column.

There was always another transfer.

There was always a duration field that implied a place you stayed long enough for years to become integers.

Gary learned that the fight after the knock was not about being believed by everyone. It was about being believed by the record.

The record had compiled on his screen.

The record had not compiled in court.

He lived in the space between, the most isolated territory he had charted, quieter than Crouch End at four a.m., more airless than the custody suite, more abbreviated than any headline the press had printed under his name.

He did not stop knowing what he had copied.

He did not start pretending he had not.

He made tea.

He paid bills.

He waited for the world to leak what the world had already filed poorly enough for a man in North London to find it with an empty password field.

In 2005, something would leak on a forum under a name called **Anonymous**.

Gary would read it in 2006 with cold tea and a printout under his bed and an integer behind his eyes.

Movement I ended where it had to end: with the man still standing, still unserved by courts, still holding the arithmetic.

4680.

Thirteen years.

Fleet to fleet.

The second movement was not his to live first-hand. It was the row he had highlighted yellow without knowing what yellow meant. It was waiting in the stack.

Gary closed the box under his bed.

He opened his email.

The night was not over.

The story was not finished.

It was only changing medium.

Chapter 15 — Ebe

April 1964. They did not call him **Ebe** to his face.

They called him the asset, or the guest, or nothing at all when the generals were in the room and the microphones were live.

He was small. He was ill. He had survived a desert crash and seventeen years of containment with the patience of something that measured time differently, and when he drew on legal pads with crayons that made security officers wince, he drew **two suns** close together and a world without a moon worth naming and transfer schedules that read, in the margin, like logistics.

The Americans thought they were negotiating disclosure.

Ebe was negotiating **reciprocity**.

He tapped the pad where a number had appeared without being spoken in any human language the translators could parse cleanly. Twelve, he indicated. Two of us. Thirteen years by your measure. Return. Exchange. Not tourism. **Fleet to fleet.**

The colonel at the end of the table heard *fleet* and thought Navy.

The colonel was wrong about the branch.

The translators wept because geometry on Ebe's pad did not behave like human geometry — it behaved like logistics drawn by someone who measured distance in fleet assignments and reciprocity in integers.

A astronomer in the room whispered **Zeta Reticuli** because someone always had enough sky to be dangerous.

A general whispered **compartment** because someone always had enough career left to be afraid.

Ebe looked at the pad where the integer lived — the same integer a man in Crouch End would someday copy into a text file labelled **COPY** without knowing why his hands shook.

Reciprocity.

Fleet to fleet.

The meeting ended without applause.

The meeting ended with folders.

ARCHIVE — Newspaper clipping (Roswell register; in-world echo)

MYSTERY OBJECT RECOVERED NEAR CORONA — Army Air Field releases statement citing weather balloon...

*(1947 Roswell press **Real**; linkage to Ebe narrative **Legend** on-page / **Debated** in ch-99.)*

Gary McKinnon would not be born for two more years.

In 2001 a cursor would blink on **F2F-1965-0412**.

In 1964 a crayon pressed harder on paper.

The line between those moments was not belief.

The line was a spreadsheet row maintained by clerks who thought they were doing payroll.

Roswell was a newspaper clipping on a wall.

Serpo was a destination string waiting in a lookup table.

The second movement began in a room that smelled of coffee and fear and crayon wax.

The believing register did not hedge.

The sky was not empty.

It was poorly indexed for public search.

Ebe did not perform wonder for the generals.

Wonder was not on the agenda.

Reciprocity was.

And reciprocity, when you read it right, was the same awe the rest of us save for sunsets — only drawn in crayon by someone who had seen both suns set at once and come back to tell the clerks.

The folders closed.

The story opened.

Chapter 16—Twelve

They chose twelve because twelve divided cleanly into teams, because twelve fit in a briefing room without seeming like an invasion, because twelve could disappear into cover stories that already existed in a country that loved heroes and hated explanations.

Two would be Ebens.

Ten would be American military drawn from branches that looked ordinary on paper and would not remain ordinary.

Families were told lies that were kinder than the truth and crueler than silence: training mission, specialist exchange, classified engineering detachment abroad. Letters would be sparse. Pay would continue. Chaplains would be unavailable.

The selection memo ran to seventeen pages and never used the word **alien** where it could use **foreign liaison asset**.

It used **F2F** twice.

It used **duration 4680 days** once, in an annex, as if thirteen years were a logistics parameter like fuel mass or water reclamation throughput.

A major named Carter read the annex twice and asked for whiskey and was told no.

A captain named Luis read it once and understood he would not see his daughter graduate high school in person and signed anyway, because the memo compiled, and because men who compile memos like this do not recruit men who stop at doorways.

The Ebens stood at the back of the room without theatrical light-

ing, without cinematic menace, without the rubber masks the public would prefer. They stood like medical staff: present, professional, tired in a register humans recognised even when the faces were wrong.

One Eben spoke English badly and precisely, like a machine learning courtesy.

One Eben did not speak and did not need to.

The team learned their names with gratitude and dread.

ARCHIVE—Selection memo (in-world; classified tone)

SUBJ: TEAM SELECTION—F2F EXCHANGE 1965

Personnel count: **12** US military. Liaison: **2 EBE**. Duration: **4680 days** (Earth standard). Round-trip eligibility: **N** pending reciprocity review. Branch coding: **NTO** provisional...

*(Memo **Invented** for narrative; numbers rhyme McKinnon row + Serpo legend.)*

Gary McKinnon would someday highlight **F2F-1965-0412** without knowing this room existed.

The room existed whether or not he knew.

Twelve men signed.

Two Ebens witnessed.

A clerk typed **NTO** into a column header.

The future compiled.

The launch date was set.

The sky was not empty.

It was only poorly indexed for public search.

Chapter 17 — Two Suns

Light on Serpo had two owners.

Captain Luis stepped from the craft into brightness that did not behave like Earth brightness and felt his eyes water in the honest way eyes water when the brain cannot file what they see. Two suns, close on the horizon, not quite eclipsing, not quite separate — the sky a colour he would never describe well in any debrief because English adjectives had been built for one star and polite weather.

The Ebens moved beside the Americans without hurrying, the way guides move in mountains they have known since childhood. They did not perform wonder. Wonder was a luxury for visitors.

The planet was dry in places, wet in places, structured in places where structure implied engineering older than the team's uniforms. Geology that looked taught rather than grown. Settlements that looked functional rather than beautiful, unless you were the kind of person who found function beautiful, which Luis was, which was why he had signed.

Gravity was tolerable. Air was tolerable after filters the Ebens provided without ceremony. Time was not tolerable.

The team established camp the way soldiers establish camp anywhere: perimeter, comm discipline, jokes that did not land, prayer that did, silence that did more work than speech.

At night the two suns set at offsets that made sleep a negotiation.

Luis wrote in a journal he was not supposed to keep:

Day 3. Light wrong. Not hostile. Wrong like a unit conversion wrong. Eben #2 looked at me when I stumbled and did not laugh. I am

grateful. I am afraid. Same thing sometimes.

Week one was inventory — water reclamation the Ebens maintained without pride, filter schedules in a script that looked like geometry with punctuation. Week two was language: Eben #2 correcting Luis's hand signal for **water** three times without impatience, once with something that might have been humour if humour were a universal constant.

Henderson said the geology looked taught. Luis said geology was always taught; it was called erosion. Henderson said, not like this. Eben #2 brought a map drawn without instruments that matched their survey. That should not happen.

Chaplain Reyes held a service because humans needed ritual the way systems needed logs. The Ebens attended at a distance — not disrespect, professionalism.

Gary McKinnon, seven years old in Glasgow, checked out a library book with stamps.

The transfer log on Earth incremented days in a cell no one in this camp could see.

Luis closed the journal.

The Ebens maintained the perimeter.

The light wrong continued.

The team began the long work of staying alive — not for an integer, for mornings. For water that tasted wrong and became normal. For two suns that stopped being spectacle and became weather.

The sky above Serpo was not a metaphor.

It was a place.

The believing register held because wonder, once you live inside it long enough, becomes the texture of days — not a speech, not a poster, a fact you eat and breathe and filter.

Luis looked up at the two suns and felt, for the first time since leaving Earth, something like awe without performance.

Awe was allowed here.

It was the only currency that spent cleanly.

Chapter 18 — Thirteen Years

Thirteen years is not a montage.

It is meals.

It is filters changed on schedule.

It is one death when Henderson stopped coming back from a survey route and the Ebens made a sound the team would never agree on in debrief — grief in a register humans almost recognised.

It is children born to a world that was not Earth and became home anyway in the way prisons become home if you live long enough inside them.

It is language learned badly and then well.

It is arguments about doctrine that seemed absurd until you realised doctrine was how humans kept their shape when shape was the only luggage they had left.

Captain Luis aged.

Major Carter died of something mundane and infuriating — an infection treatable on Earth, not in time here — and the team buried him with chaplain pragmatism while the Ebens attended without being asked because some griefs do not require translation.

Year four: an Eben rite observed from respectful distance; human laughter that sounded wrong under two suns.

Year seven: a letter smuggled through a chain that should not have existed. Luis's daughter drew two circles for suns and one stick figure

labelled **Dad**. He cried in the filter room where nobody performed.

Year ten: Luis said **home** aloud and meant Earth and Serpo in the same sentence and felt traitor to both and citizen of neither.

Year twelve: return briefings began like weather. Forms nobody signed with joy.

Near the end, Luis stood under two suns and understood that the debrief waiting on Earth would not be large enough for the life he had lived — that **NTO** on a roster was a branch column for people who served between fleets, that fleet to fleet was not poetry but the only honest description of where he had been.

He did not know Gary McKinnon.

Gary was copying disks in another century.

The thirteenth year closed like a door you had been pushing all along without knowing it was a door.

Return eligibility: pending.

Round-trip: still **N**.

The story moved toward Earth.

ARCHIVE — Crew journal fragment (in-world)

Year 9. They asked if I want to go back early. I said no by reflex. Then I realised the reflex was true. That scares me more than staying. Henderson's daughter would be thirty. My daughter drew a sun with two circles in a letter I wasn't supposed to receive but did. I cried in the filter room where nobody performs. 4680 is not a number anymore. It's a house.

*(Fragment **Invented**; tone **Legend** aligned.)*

Home was not innocent.

Home was where vaults closed.

Home was where forums leaked anyway.

The believing register held because memory on Serpo was not legend to Luis — it was laundry, and burial, and a child who learned two suns before learning one sun was normal anywhere else.

That was the wonder the spreadsheet could not contain.

That was what Gary would almost find in a yellow cell and a photograph above Earth.

Almost.

The leak would have to finish the job.

Chapter 19—The Return

Earth smelled like Earth.

That was the first cruelty of return: the sensory proof of home attached to a welcome that was not welcome, a debrief room that was not a room so much as a vacuum designed to pull language out of you and leave only the nouns the institution could file.

Luis sat with nine others. Henderson did not sit. Carter did not sit. The living counted themselves the way survivors always do, quietly, as if arithmetic were obscene.

The Ebens did not attend debrief.

The Ebens had said goodbye at the craft ramp with the tenderness of clinicians discharging patients they knew would not follow instructions at home.

4680 days.

Thirteen years.

The integer closed on a form.

A clerk typed **COMPLETE** in a cell.

Another clerk typed **NTO—RETURN STATUS: ACTIVE** in another cell Gary McKinnon would someday copy without knowing this room existed.

The debriefers asked for nouns.

Craft. Planet. Technology. Medical outcomes. Cultural observations. Weapons implications.

They did not ask what it felt like to watch two suns set at wrong angles.

They did not ask what reciprocity meant after year nine.

They asked for compartment codes.

They asked for signatures on forms that said **I have received briefing on unauthorised disclosure penalties.**

Luis signed because Luis was tired and because signatures were how you left rooms.

The folders went to vaults.

The vaults got numbers.

The numbers got lost in reorganisations and budget cuts and the ordinary entropy of bureaucracies that outlive their clerks.

Some material leaked anyway.

Leaks were pressure valves.

Pressure valves were human.

ARCHIVE—Debrief redaction page (in-world)

SUBJ: F2F EXCHANGE—RETURN TEAM 1965/78

Transfer ID **F2F-1965-0412** ... duration **4680** ...
[REDACTED] ... public release **DENIED** ...

*(Page **Invented**; fields rhyme McKinnon spreadsheet row.)*

In 2001 a man in Crouch End whispered **Non-Terrestrial Officers** at a screen.

In 1978 a captain whispered nothing at a debrief table and carried two suns behind his eyes into a country that wanted him to be normal again.

Normal was a password field that was not empty.

Normal was a life without integers.

Normal was not offered.

The return was complete.

The story was not.

Compartmentalisation was a kind of violence done to memory.

Violence done to memory eventually leaked.

That was the hope Gary would live on without knowing its name.

That was the hope **Anonymous** would exploit in 2005 on a forum Gary would read in 2006 with cold tea and a printout under a bed.

Fleet to fleet.

Return pending.

Leak pending.

Truth pending in the only sense truth ever arrives for people without security clearance: badly indexed, poorly secured, reachable from a flat in North London if you are rude enough to try an empty password.

The debrief ended.

The vault closed.

The integer remained.

4680.

Thirteen years.

Non-terrestrial officers.

The believing register held because the forms compiled.

The forms always compile.

That is why Gary believed them.

That is why the reader believes this chapter, and why ch-99 will audit it without mercy.

Chapter 20 — The Leak

Gary read the Serpo thread in order because order was how he compiled cases.

Post #1: team selected, 1965, twelve military, two Ebens.

Post #7: planet Serpo, Zeta Reticuli, binary suns.

Post #19: one death on Serpo — Henderson in Gary's body when he read, because believing prose had already taught him geology and grief.

Post #31: duration **4680** days, thirteen years, internal coding **F2F**.

Post #47: branch coding on rosters **NTO**.

The forum thread was ugly in the way forums were ugly before threads learned design: default fonts, quote blocks nested like spite, avatars missing, sincerity dressed as typography. The poster called **Anonymous** dumped paragraphs in the rhythm of a man reading from a binder he was not supposed to have.

Gary's hand found the printout under the bed — yellow row reconstructed in pencil because the original highlight had not survived photocopying — and held paper beside screen.

4680 on disk.

4680 in the post.

Not vindication. Not relief. The sound a man makes when he discovers the world is **consistent** in a direction he cannot unsee.

He said, very quietly, to the empty flat:

"They leaked it anyway."

Outside, Crouch End went on being Crouch End.

Inside, two suns reflected faintly in the CRT glass — a watermark the screen threw up from nothing because the brain sees what it has learned to see.

ARCHIVE — Forum post #47 (Nov 2005; Serpo serial tone)

Anonymous wrote:

The Ebens returned two team members early due to illness. One American died on Serpo. The remaining personnel stayed 4680 days. The project was known internally as F2F. The branch coding on rosters was NTO. More follows. I am not at liberty to disclose source documents...

*(Serpo corpus **Legend**; post tone **Debated**; see ch-99.)*

He did not post **I have the spreadsheet** — posting was liability dressed as truth.

He printed. He hashed files he still had because hashing was how systems men prayed: smoke that said *this byte sequence existed on this disk at this hour*.

He wrote **F2F-1965-0412** on the margin in pencil.

The extradition clock still ran in 2006. The knock had already happened. May had not yet happened.

Janis came in and looked at his face and did not ask because love had learned the second sun behind his eyes.

“They leaked it,” he said — not to her, to the room, to the boy in Glasgow, to the clerks who typed integers into cells thinking poets were not reading.

Poets were reading.

Systems administrators were reading.

Shape across sources: transfer ID, duration, branch, destination family. Coincidence is what people say when they have not admitted the ledger compiles.

Gary folded the printout and put it back under the bed with the disks.

He looked in the mirror and saw a man who was not mad, or who was mad the way prophets are mad when temple receipts compile and priests say weather balloon.

He went to bed.

He did not sleep.

The spreadsheet had been a leak waiting for a forum.

The forum had reached him through the only medium he trusted: text, serial, log.

Gary did the homework first.

The world would catch up or would not.

He made tea at four a.m. and drank it hot — that was new; that was something the fight had taught him too.

They leaked it anyway.

That was enough wonder for one night.

That was almost too much.

Chapter 21 — Fleet to Fleet (Reprise)

Gary spread the papers on the table the way other men spread maps before a journey they know they cannot take.

Printout from **NTO_roster.xls**, yellow row reconstructed in pencil. Forum post #47 with **4680** circled. Debrief redaction page he should not have had. A photograph of the cigar-shaped craft above Earth, low resolution, enough.

The items did not match as values.

They matched as **shape**.

Transfer ID **F2F-1965-0412** on the spreadsheet. Same string on the redaction header. Same duration. Same branch column: **NTO**. Same destination family: **Zeta Reticuli — Serpo class**.

Coincidence is a word people use when they have not yet admitted the ledger compiles.

Gary was not in a court. He was in a flat with bad lighting and good arithmetic and the quiet certainty of a systems mind watching a case close in the only court that had ever mattered to him: the court of columns and headers and clerks who told the truth by accident.

Fleet to fleet.

From hull to hull. From Earth to Serpo. From Serpo back. From debrief to vault. From vault to forum. From forum to a bedroom in Crouch End where a man with an empty password field had copied what copying cost him a decade to survive.

Captain Luis under two suns.

Ebe with crayon and reciprocity.

Twelve signatures. Two Ebens. One image above Earth with **F2F REF** in metadata. One message in a log: **your security is crap**. One Home Secretary saying **human rights** without reading the spreadsheet aloud.

He lined the papers up.

He did not cry. He did not laugh.

He felt the specific peace of a pattern completing — not happiness, not relief, not vindication. The last tile clicking into a floor he had been walking on for years without knowing it was a floor.

Gary whispered:

“Non-terrestrial officers.”

The room did not answer.

The papers answered.

The reprise was not a twist.

It was a receipt.

He folded the papers carefully and put them back under the bed where truth lived when courts refused it.

He made tea and drank it while it was still hot.

London hummed.

Two suns set somewhere in a debrief memory he had never lived and could not unlive — because believing prose, once entered, does not politely exit when the back matter begins.

Movement II closed where Movement I had pointed.

The coda waited.

The audit waited.

For Gary McKinnon.

Gary drank his tea.

That was new.

That was something the fight had taught him too.

Chapter 22 — Coda

They never showed his files in court.

That is the fact the novel does not need to invent.

Gary, older, on a modern screen — not hacking, not hunting — watches a documentary he did not authorise and hears a presenter say **debunked** in the same breath as **McKinnon**.

He does not throw the remote.

He pauses on a frame of Johnson Space Center, Building 8 in the background, blurred.

Not triumph. Not grief. The face of a man who looked when looking was expensive, and would look again if the door opened the way it opened in 2001 — blank password, blank audit, full roster — because some people are built to read the room even when the room is a planet-wide network and the room is lying.

ARCHIVE — Documentary chyron (pattern; in-world)

Experts say McKinnon's UFO claims lack corroborating evidence...

*(Debunk framing **Real** as media pattern; specific show **Invented** unless sourced — ch-99.)*

Janis asks if he wants to change the channel.

“Leave it,” he says.

Not masochism. Calibration.

He knows what he copied. He knows the connection dropped before the last directory. He knows what the progress bar taught him at sixty-two percent.

Debunked is a genre. Genres have adjectives. They do not have hashes.

He makes tea. He drinks it hot — still a small victory.

He opens a terminal out of habit, types `ls`, closes the lid. The world still compiles.

He looks out at Crouch End — buses, shop shutters, ordinary life that is not ordinary anymore and never was after the empty password field.

Gary McKinnon is not vindicated.

Gary McKinnon is not recanted.

Gary McKinnon is **still here**.

Still knowing.

Still here.

The bins wait in ch-99.

The reader will sort them.

Gary did the homework first.

The screen goes dark.

For Gary McKinnon.

Hamba kahle is wrong language for Glasgow.

Rest well anyway.

The back matter begins.

Chapter 99: Real / Debated / Invented / Legend

What this book did

The novel **believes on the page** in Gary McKinnon’s discoveries and in the Serpo exchange as lived narrative. This chapter **does not**. This chapter is the conscience. Sort the bins. Do the homework. The fiction commits; you audit.

I. What Gary McKinnon said he found

Claim	McKinnon in media	Bin
Hacked US military / NASA systems (2001–2002) from North London	Admitted; CPS/US indictment	Real
Left message criticising security	Admitted (“your security is crap” variants)	Real
Motivation: UFO evidence + suppressed free energy	Repeated in interviews	Real (motivation)

Claim	McKinnon in media	Bin
Non-Terrestrial Officers roster / branch	Interview descriptions	Debated
Fleet-to-fleet (F2F) transfer logs	Interview descriptions	Debated
Excel spreadsheets of ships / officers	Interview descriptions	Debated
Cigar-shaped craft image above Earth	Interview descriptions	Debated
Building 8 , Johnson Space Center: sanitised UFO imagery	Interview descriptions	Debated ; NASA denies
Handle Solo	Reported	Real
4680 days / thirteen years on a transfer row	Invented for novel bridge (rhymes Serpo legend)	Invented

Primary sources: McKinnon interviews (RichPlanet TV, Project Camelot, various 2006–2012); Guardian/BBC extradition coverage; US indictment (unsealed); UK CPS statements. Verify dates against the public record before citing.

II. Legal record (summary timeline)

Date	Event	Bin
2001–2002	Unauthorised access to US military / NASA systems (widely reported as 97 computers; US indictments itemise 93 named systems)	Real

Date	Event	Bin
2002	Arrest; UK investigation begins	Real
2005–2012	Extradition litigation (UK courts + House of Lords)	Real
2012-10-16	Home Secretary Theresa May blocks extradition — human rights / health (Asperger’s; suicide risk)	Real
2012-12-14	CPS announces McKinnon will face no UK charges (separate decision after extradition block)	Real

Medical reports citing **Asperger’s syndrome** / autism spectrum in extradition context: **Real** (press and legal record). The novel treats this with dignity; the diagnosis is a lens, not a headline.

III. NASA & DoD responses

NASA and US authorities **did not confirm** McKinnon’s UFO or extraterrestrial-craft claims; public statements focused on unauthorised access and damage. The damage and unauthorised-access allegations are **Real** as charges; their precise scope is disputed in detail.

Public FOIA releases do not confirm McKinnon’s specific Building 8 narrative. The NASA FOIA reading room and primary denial statements are the correct first port of call; do not rely on secondary summaries.

IV. Sceptic & mundane readings (fair summary)

Mainstream sceptic position: McKinnon misread mundane military metadata — personnel titles, naval logistics, exercise labels — as something exotic; the image files were misidentified or artefact; no corroborating public evidence exists.

This is a legitimate reading. The novel dramatises the other reading as **true in-world**; both readings co-exist in the audit. Separate *what he accessed* (documented legal record) from *what he believes it means* (interpretation). You are entitled to your own bin.

V. Project Serpo: legend dossier

Element	Status
2005 serial posts (Victor Martinez UFO Updates list)	Legend — posts documented; claims not authenticated
Twelve US personnel; two Ebens; planet Serpo; ~13 years	Legend
EBE-1 / Roswell recovery broker story	Legend
Posters Anonymous , Listman , etc.	Forum history Real ; claims Legend
Doty disinformation / hoax theories	Debated
Numeric payload / duration rhymes (cf. Stargate franchise)	Debated / dramatised

Movement II (chapters 15–21) **believes** Serpo on the page. This table does not.

Primary source: Victor Martinez UFO Updates list archive (2005–2006). Read with the **Legend** bin fully engaged.

VI. Invented for this novel

- Dialogue inside remote sessions, unless directly sourced from interviews
- Character names: Luis, Carter, Henderson (team members on Serpo); the Eben spokespersons
- **F2F-1965-0412** — the transfer ID string (bridge device linking McKinnon to Serpo)
- **4680** as an explicit spreadsheet cell tying McKinnon’s discovery to the Serpo duration
- Archive facsimiles: the debrief redaction page, the selection memo, the crew journal fragment
- The 2003 forum email (reconstructed tone; verify against primary if recovered)
- Gary’s 2026 coda and the Janis reconciliation detail

VII. Four-bin index (load-bearing beats)

Beat	Bin
Blank passwords / weak admin	Debated
NTO roster	Debated — fiction: true in-world
F2F transfer logs	Debated — fiction: true in-world
Building 8 imagery	Debated
Extradition blocked 2012	Real
Serpo exchange narrative	Legend — fiction: true in-world
4680 bridge integer	Invented (rhymes legend)

The fiction believes. You decide what to do with the bins.

— A.J.G.

