

sequela /sɪ'kwɪ:lə/ *n*

- 1 the long term effect of a disease.
- 2 any complication of a disease.

Chapter 1

When Farrell opened her mouth to speak, her tongue was black. Kester glanced at the two male members of the interview panel to see if they were wearing the same symptoms, but both had their mouths closed. As he looked back to Farrell, she raised her chin, revealing two lines of sores that stretched down from beneath each ear and disappeared under the band of her broad-knotted cravat. Kester recognised the patterning: she was wearing Emerna-B, a mod of a street STV, cultured in-house to provide a more focused look. It had been commissioned by the MD of V Global in New York and had only been spotted on two or three wearers since. All were internal to V and all were high-worth individuals. It was evidence of Farrell's selective promiscuity and she was wearing it like a diseased peacock tail, her feathers raised and shuddering.

Kester tried his best to look impressed – Farrell was clearly powerful. Within a few months the mod would make it back down the shag chain to the streets, perfect evidence of the desirability and ambition of everyone in its infectious family tree. Along the way it would cement relationships, ease promotions and secure interviews. When the MD's exclusive contract ran out, wearers would rush to buy it from the Pigs in the hope people would think they'd caught it from a prestigious individual, but for now it was the equivalent of a catwalk disease. Farrell was the principal interviewer and Kester's prospective new boss. She would expect him to want it.

Kester attempted a smile. The collar of his shirt was getting tighter. He wasn't used to wearing a suit and tie, and could feel little raw patches developing at the sides of his neck. He pushed from his mind the image of the fukpunk he had seen shooting up under Waterloo Bridge, Emerna-A sores weeping where his studded necklet was rubbing. It was the heat; the sweat. The sun was blazing in from the glass wall to Kester's left and he was trapped in a wedge of sweltering light. The air-conditioning blew over him every few

seconds, but only served to remind him how hot he was. He wanted to bare himself and stand beneath the unit, or open his shirt and press his chest and cheek to a cool, shaded portion of the giant window before him.

The three panel members sat in the shade, protected from the sunlight by a tall partition, backs to more glass. Looking at them was tiring. Avoid their visible skin and he had to look at their clothes. Their corporate clothing line was as busy with adverts and logos as any in the City. Kester wasn't used to holding conversations with people who were dressed this way, never mind who wore, though he saw people who did either or both all the time down by the Embankment. His eye was constantly drawn to the seams, pockets and panels that were given over to advertising: Brinkov, Virgin, Herschel, Sony, Smith & Smith. He shifted his focus to the space between two of the interviewers, a slice of simple clear sky. V's London headquarters was the tallest building in the City and seated as they were on the top floor, there may as well have been nothing out there. They could have been sitting in a skyscraper in the desert.

Kester struggled to remember the questions he had noted down before the interview. Would V be the first company to produce wholly designer STVs? Would they continue to produce street-mods? Where was the growth in what was currently a niche market? How many wearable STVs did they hope to release within the department's first year?

'I'm interested to know a bit more about your motivation, Doctor Lowe.' Mrs Farrell's black tongue flashed as she spoke. 'There's a lot of money being poured into this new department and I need to know that the person running it is 100% behind V. Why do you want to work for us? This is a big move for an academic.'

'Yes, it is a big move. But then V is an extremely...by which I mean to say V is an extraordinarily...'

Kester wished he'd had more time to prepare. This wasn't the informal chat he had been expecting. Department head was a senior role, but he felt like a grad trying to claw his way into an internship.

'I understand that scientists who move from the public to the private sector can sometimes come under scrutiny from their peers.'

'It's true. The truth is, Mrs Farrell, I'm a bit tired of – a bit dissatisfied with the package. I've spent seven years at the Institute and, put it this way, I'm currently working on a research project

developing new viruses and...'

'Exactly what you trained for, I believe.'

'Yes and no. It's true my thesis was on viral design, I'm a virology expert, so yes they're my thing, but the viruses I'm developing now are...' Kester stopped himself. Many of the viruses were destined for the military arena or for social control. To explain his distaste for them would be to break the Official Secrets Act and risk court action or worse. 'They're boring...it's not what I wanted to do really.'

'Boring? Working at the Institute?' The fat man to Mrs Farrell's left finally broke his silence. 'I understand. Discretion is something we prize in our employees.'

His name and the name of the third panel member had slid through Kester's brain without leaving a trail, not a first letter, not a sound. Mrs Farrell, on the other hand, had stuck with Kester from the moment he had seen her image online. She was highly made up so that her age was hard to judge, but her picture was attractive, in an artificial sort of way. In person, in motion, she looked as if she had a stolen sweet in her mouth and was sucking on it, toying with it. If you could see past the logos, her tailored suit flattered her angular figure. From what Kester had heard about interviewing in the big City firms, he had better start seeing the sexy side of her quickly. If the rumours were true – he stopped and reined in his runaway thoughts – the rumours probably weren't true, but at least he had come prepared. And after all her hair was nice; her lips did look experienced.

'I notice you aren't wearing any viruses,' the third panel member said, running his eyes across Kester's visible surfaces. 'Not that I can see.'

'No. It's not really done in academia.'

'I know, I know. Just never understood it. Why wouldn't you? Nice international pool of ambitious people given the perfect excuse to shag.'

'To be honest, most people think it's vulgar to crack your nanoscreens.' Kester watched the thinner man to see his reactions. He betrayed none, just stared. 'And nobody uses the delay function on the latest generation screens. It's just not seen as attractive, so I suppose it's not worth the risks or the looking...diseased.'

This wasn't the right thing to be saying to a panel of habitual

wearers. Mrs Farrell laughed.

'Some people,' Kester said, swallowing.

'Vulgar? To wear a street virus, perhaps, but to wear an exclusive, something that demonstrates that you're moving in the right circles...' Mrs Farrell smiled, shaking her head. 'How, then, would you demonstrate your success? By wearing an expensive suit? Surely that wouldn't be vulgar?'

She must know as well as him that academics couldn't afford to wear expensive clothes – not by her standards. Now that she was facing Kester head-on again, mouth closed, he wouldn't have known she was wearing. He stifled a bitter laugh and looked down into the lap of his weddings-and-funerals suit.

'No. I mean no, I wouldn't wear expensive clothes to show my status. In academia it's all about citations. Some of the super-competitive profs wear citation clickers round their necks – I don't suppose it's really fashion though and to be honest...'

'You wouldn't do that either?' the fat man asked.

'To be honest, sir, it's only impressive once you reach a certain stage in your career. If you find that sort of thing impressive.'

The fat man laughed to himself. He was wearing too. His eye-sockets were dark, purplish, a symptom of one of the newest mods out there. He was completely bald, must have alopecia Kester guessed, and the virus he was wearing had the unfortunate effect of making him look like a corpse, albeit a reasonably fresh one. Kester swallowed a shudder. The virus was too new for the interviewer to have gone to the Pigs to get it, which meant someone down the short chain from the commissioner must have actually slept with him. You had to give it to the new high-flyers – they were blind to beauty where power was involved. Of course he may have paid for it. Kester felt suddenly uneasy for thinking this right in front of the man. Don't judge, he thought, maybe he's a nice guy, a legend in the sack.

'So money is your motivator, Doctor Lowe,' Mrs Farrell said.

'Mostly.'

'Mostly.' She nodded slowly. 'Well, money isn't a bad motivator. It certainly means good performance in my experience.'

'It's not just money,' Kester added and shifted in his seat, drawing himself up, trying again to remember the notes he had scrawled the night before, 'it's the achievement.' All three of the

interviewers seemed to speak only in perfectly-formed, polished sentences and it was making Kester feel like a madman on the rant, struggling with fractured theories. He took a deep breath and tried to explain. 'I've always liked making things, fiddling and adapting the existing to improve it or change it in interesting ways – and it's a big achievement when it works. Even those who are opposed to the current trends in biotechnology and soft nano are fascinated by what we are doing with disease. It may seem foreign to them, even wrong somehow, but that doesn't mean they don't appreciate the science behind it, the art of making it work – their faces...it's like seeing your father's Savile Row tailor looking at the latest Haute Couture Brinkov. They don't "get it" but they can still admire the artistry.'

'You've found your voice, Doctor Lowe. You get quite passionate when you're being honest, don't you?'

'Well, I enjoy success as much as anyone and, you know, the challenge of...creating something new.' Kester tensed. That was a lousy answer. He'd lost it again; he should have just said *yes*. Next time he'd just say *yes* confidently.

'Let's take a break,' Mrs Farrell said. 'I want to make a phone call.'

Kester smiled to contain his surprise as Farrell left the room. He sat squeezing his hands for a few minutes while the interviewers took some lazy notes on the panels in front of them. She wasn't making a call at all: he could hear her small-talking with someone in the open plan office beyond the sliding doors. Was he supposed to be able to hear her? She had him on a spit, had left him over the fire to see what happened. He took a deep breath to calm himself. He had to get out of his seat, had to get to the window. It was the closest he could get to leaving the room.

'May I?' he asked, leaning forward in his chair and indicating the window.

'Of course,' the large man replied with a smile. 'Hot, isn't it? You must excuse Alexis, by the way – interviews are a sort of hobby for her.'

'Not at all.' Kester got up from his chair and walked to the window. 'She wants to make sure I'm the right man for the job. That's fair enough.'

London rose up before Kester. He had never seen it this way

except in pictures and was struck by its geometry: concentric circles of ever taller buildings rippling out from the palace, a pebble dropped in the centre of the city. The buildings rose outwards and upwards from it, shaped into a scoop by line-of-sight laws and planning restrictions, and stopped at their highest point in a ring where the Green Belt began. London was a splintered splash of metal, stone and glass contained in a beaker.

The further out you came, the newer the buildings and the higher the towers. Laid out at Kester's feet was 'the City', London's finance and big business district. Here, there was evidence of frenetic building work, with the effect of the Green Belt multiplied by the constraints of the City's secure perimeter. Cranes leaned out from halfway up buildings, corseted in place, stratifying, building across and on top of existing structures; skeletons of buildings reached spindly into empty space, waiting to be fleshed. Canary Wharf, the Shard, the CloudCatcher had long since been swallowed into the illusion and the building bias towards the City set London on an eerie tilt.

As it extended outwards and upwards, the architecture grew more ostentatious in colour and form, jostling for attention. Each building strove to be unmistakable in the skyline, some crafted into physical representations of logos, others so distinctive that they stood themselves as the company's identifier, many failing and becoming just another ledge in the bowl of construction, empty folding seats swallowed in the crowd. On a cloudy day it would resemble a renaissance vision of hell, but in today's raw sunshine it was a fabulous glittering stadium with towering stands and Kester was standing in the sponsor's box.

'Doctor Lowe.' Farrell was back.

Kester returned to his seat holding the City inside him, enlarged by it. Once Farrell had taken her seat, he smiled his most convincing smile, looking only at her. If he was to signal anything, now was the time. He hoped she couldn't see him bracing himself as he set to unbuttoning his cuffs. The two men craned forward and watched with greedy eyes as he rolled up his sleeves, doubtless expecting to see the symptom of some new virus. There was nothing. Pale, blue-veined flesh on the underside of each arm, delicate fair hair and freckles on the other. Kester was suddenly aware of his relative youth, his appearance – dishevelled hair, left its natural brown, soft-

looking compared to the slick manes of the two hirsute panel members: cold silver, lion blonde, power colours. If only he had a strong nose, less button-like – he thought of his mother.

The second man on the panel looked up and leaned forward. Byron – the name returned to Kester. But Byron what? It was something that fitted with his appearance – Tall, Long, Haggard? He didn't look as if he was wearing, but Kester had noticed him scratching himself under the table from time to time. He had an oddly diseased look about him too. Perhaps it was his lean frame, or the fact that every few minutes he would raise a hand and whisk it around his head as if warding off flies or wafting incense. He slumped back in his chair, his lascivious smile fading as he realised that Kester's arms were bare.

'I may not be wearing anything today,' Kester said, smiling what he hoped was a reassuring smile, 'but I have brought a little something with me.' He rolled his sleeves up further, then clasped his hands tightly in front of him to steady their shaking. 'You can't see it on me because I have my nanoscreen set to suppress but not eliminate the infection. This keeps it present at a level which is useful for our purposes today but prevents it from presenting fully – like I said, I don't wear.' This was it. Kester swallowed and then looked up at Farrell. 'It doesn't present for a good thirteen hours, but I'm happy to share it with you.'

'Your balls are showing, young man,' Byron said, casting a glance at Mrs Farrell, his smile returning.

Kester's hands jerked in the direction of his flies. Diverting them at the last minute to his pockets, he laughed, too loud.

The two gentlemen had seen what they needed and left. Kester managed to shake each of their hands without visible recoil. Back at the window, he tried not to listen to their mumbling as they took leave of Mrs Farrell, talking about the timings of the following interview.

He stepped toes to the glass and looked down. There were few buildings on the edge of the City that were a single piece like this one. Kester knew a couple of people who worked in construction and they were always moaning about how hard it was to get permission to demolish the older buildings. Stratification was often the cheapest and quickest option. The V building was iconic because of its singularity and its prodigious height, not to mention

the cantilever glass shelf that jutted out of the back of the building overlooking the Green Belt and the conurbation beyond. Kester had seen it in umpteen pop videos. He toyed with the feeling of vertigo as he looked down. Shifting his weight forward, he let patterns emerge in the movements of the dots below, people, all uniform at this distance. The glass was spotless, near absent, and the air-con created the illusion of a breeze; he felt at any moment he might fall.

'Well, now.'

Kester jumped. Farrell was right behind him. He turned to face her and she put an arm out on either side, hands against the window.

'Shall we pick a spot?'

He was an insect trapped within glass, against glass.

'I meant a description.' Kester glanced side to side for an escape route. 'When I said I could share it with you I meant I could show you my concept notes.'

'No you didn't.'

'I've got my notes here – if I can just get my Book.' Kester slid his back down the glass, ducked out from underneath her arm and dashed over to his bag. Picking it up he sat back down and put it on his lap, beginning to rummage in self defence.

'Did I get rid of the others for nothing? Why not show me properly? Or would you prefer I call one of them back? No problem. Who's it to be?'

Kester fumbled his Book out of his bag.

'No, thank you, I don't –'

'You don't go both ways? I suppose you think that's alternative do you? Not religious are you?'

Kester looked down at his Book and pressed his thumb to the base panel to switch it on. In the bright light its transparent body was made solid by smears and fingerprints. He ignored Farrell's jibes.

Taking his Book in one hand and wiping it on his trouser leg, he continued, 'I don't think it's a good idea. It takes more than half a day to present and much longer to reach full virulence and you don't want to be waiting around to make a decision. You don't want to expose yourself to something not knowing what it will look like. I could have anything.'

'Come on, Doctor Lowe, this is the '80s. I have a nanoscreen like everyone else.'

Kester felt himself shrink. She said *Doctor Lowe* as if she were a lawyer; the opposition's lawyer.

'Call me Kester.'

'Kester,' she said his name with a kick, violently. She smiled at it as if it were quaint, a nickname. She stalked around the desk and perched on its front edge, directly in front of him.

'With all respect, your nanoscreen can't recognise this virus unless I give you the uploads.'

'Which you will. Which you wouldn't travel without.' Mrs Farrell stared at Kester until he looked away. 'These make you uncomfortable,' she said with a patronising smile, indicating the sores on her neck, and then untied her vanilla hair so that it flowed down over her shoulders, covering them.

Kester clasped his hands and glanced down at his Book. The base part of his brain was taking over. She was older than him, probably knew a few tricks. This was so wrong.

'You'd better not be one of these types who comes in boasting and has nothing to deliver.'

'No, I've just put it on this morning, it's new. But like I said, it won't present on me.'

'We've got other people crying out for this position.' Farrell smirked.

Distracted by his Book again, Kester was caught off-guard. 'I know – but I'm the best. Wait until you see...' He realised that his hands had stopped shaking.

'Oh, finally a bit of real confidence.' Mrs Farrell pulled off her cravat and pinched open the first few buttons of her shirt.

'I don't want to boast.'

'I want you to boast. You're supposed to be boasting – this is an interview. Everyone boasts and most people lie. You're not lying to me are you?' She loosened the tie at the top of her culottes.

'No, I swear, I've done private trials.'

'Private trials!' She giggled at the lewd connotations like a girl, and then turned serious. 'You're not screwing with me?'

'No.'

'Not yet.' Her mood flicked again into aggressive flirtation. The front of her culottes slid down, revealing a flat creamy stomach.

Along the seam of each leg, running up from the corners of her Hollywood to the top of her hips, was the shadow of a line of sores, together making a proud V, a deliberate exaggeration of her shape. 'I'm a company girl.' She nodded at her naked groin.

Kester was burning up despite himself. He forced himself to look her in the eye and left his chair. As he stood, the cityscape rose back into view, its tilt making him feel as if he was falling towards her. With her hair down, Mrs Farrell's face was softer. She batted her eyelids like a cartoon and held out one hand towards him.

'Come closer. You won't see them,' she said. She flicked the crumpled front panel of her culottes down over the edge of the desk, exposing herself completely.

Kester felt his focus narrowing, his mind shutting out all other concerns. He walked forward and felt her hand slide round behind his neck, pulling him faster towards her. The city swelled up, breaking against the skyline. Kester's body was in conflict: sinking stomach, rising erection. This was so wrong. She pulled his head forward and down until her lips were at his ear and his eyes looking straight down the front of her shirt. Wrong in such a teenage way.

'It doesn't bother you,' Kester mumbled into her hoisted-up bosom, 'mixing business with pleasure?'

'At V, business *is* pleasure.'

Kester let out a strangled laugh and lumped his hands to her waist as she grappled with his trousers.

'Damn these old-fashioned flies.' They had ruined her practised routine. She laughed as she undid his belt and fumbled with his button and zip. 'You protecting something special behind this fortress?'

'I hope so.' Kester lifted his head. Committed now to a cause, if not the one he'd walked through the door for, he kissed her hard on the lips.

'Oh.' Farrell started back as if he had broken some unspoken rule of interview, and then recomposed herself. 'Bold.' She laughed, slid his trousers down over his hips and yanked him in close. 'We need to get you down to our corporate tailor for something a little more easy-access.' Reaching down, she found what she was looking for, found she'd had the usual effect and smiled. She wriggled forward, sliding her other hand to the base of his back, kissing him in return as she lined herself up professionally. 'Much more easy

access.' She smiled like a predator.

'That's if I get – oah!' Kester's mouth left him as their hips clattered together. The interview had all been foreplay to her.

'If you get the job,' she finished his sentence, hooking her sinewy legs up behind his back and constricting around him.

-o-

Kester had had sex before, but not under interview conditions.

'That's just it, Mum. There isn't much to share.' It rather cut down on how straight he could be with his mother. 'I think I impressed her – impressed them I mean – but you never know with these things, do you?'

There was rain coming from somewhere. Kester quickened his pace – he was almost at the Bloom. The bulging glass structure would provide temporary shelter from the rain. As he drew closer, his eye was drawn by the dark rocket at its centre; what used to be the Gherkin was now its kernel, a building within a building, completely visible only from one angle, as if the Bloom was a great glass fruit with a segment cut out.

'You know how well you've performed, Kester.' His Mum always voiced a belief in him that went way beyond reason.

'I suppose...'

He paused at the edge of the Bloom's North entrance and gazed down the promenade of shops and bars that curled away round the ground floor.

'And you will have done well. You always do.'

Kester's Book beeped, registering the ad he'd stopped beside. *ALL NEW LADYSQUEAL AT THE BLOOM 55!* Finally, the Pigs were catering to women. Below the tagline on his Book's display popped up a list of eight viruses that were loaded for sale. Some were classics and some were new, commissions for which the exclusivity contracts had lapsed.

'Nobody does well all the time, Mum.'

Kester looked up at the full size ad. A businesswoman rodeo-riding a mechanical pig. The smell of rubber filled Kester's nostrils, an olfactory memory bursting open like a nasty liqueur sweet.

'*You* do, Kester. Don't talk yourself down.'

Kester made a noise. He was back in the branch of the Pigs he had visited as a teen tourist, green from his life outside London: close pink rubber walls, a grubby plasma screen above a hole in the wall, a stack of rubber blocks to stand on, worn grab-handles.

His mother took his silence as the need for more encouragement. 'You're the best at what you do, Kester.'

When he'd visited the Pigs there had been nothing to catch; it was just a quick release for the oversexed and the undesirable, for gentlemen who tired of the palm. Kester snorted to expunge the smell from his nostrils. He had only done it for a dare.

'I said, you're the best at what you do.'

'Mum, I'm not the best – I'm good, but you know. You never know who you're up against.' Kester had a little smile to himself. Mrs Farrell would have liked that one.

'You, Kester, are creative – you always have been – and I'll bet that's what they see in you.'

Kester laughed at the idea that creativity might have anything to do with his success or otherwise. It had been more a case of the classic quickie – pretty functional. Then again, it had been popping up in his brain like a forgotten set of keys ever since. Popping in and out. A sudden flush and he got all muddled; he could hear Farrell's hair, smell her hands. He looked back up at the rodeo-riding executive, then walked on.

'You're not just one of these lab people,' his mum said. 'You've got it all going on up there.'

'Lab people?'

'Like those folk of yours at the Institute.'

'Those are my friends! They're good people.'

'They're good lab people.'

'Oh come on, Mum, apart from Dee you've only met them two or three times.'

'That's right and I thought they were perfectly nice lab people.'

'Mum, I work in a lab – I'm a lab person.'

It's not that calling someone a lab person was particularly offensive. She could have been calling them anything – it was the way she said it. Kester had heard her use it with all sorts of job titles, from sales attendant to managing director, and she could make all of them sound like they were just playing at work. He

could imagine the look on her face, as if she had tasted them and found them sour.

'Mum, some of those lab people are eminent scientists – far better than me!'

Kester was aware of a few passersby looking at him. He thought initially that their attention had been drawn by his tone, but then he noticed that before each person looked at his face, their eyes were darting up and down his body, automatically scanning for logos and ads, and failing to find them.

'Hm. We'll see about that, when you've got a top floor office in the tallest building in the City and they're still plugging away in the old world.' She flitted onto her favourite subject. 'How is Delilah?'

'I keep telling you, Mum, it's Dee now. She hates Delilah.'

'Well, it's the name her father gave her and Lord knows that man knew what was what.'

Kester recalled his mother's admiration for their neighbours' memorabilia collection and the mortification it caused Dee. How her father's judgement had any bearing on whether Delilah liked her name or not was a mystery to Kester.

'Delilah will keep you on the straight and narrow. She's good for you, you know.'

'Mum, how many times, she's just a friend.' Kester emerged from the other side of the Bloom to a fleeting dry spell.

'Can't friends be good for one another?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'So, what will you be doing in this new job?'

Kester toyed with the idea of trying to explain to his mother what it was he was going to do and then dismissed it.

'It's pretty much the same as I do now, Mum.'

'Oh I see, good...that's good, isn't it?'

'Yes, Mum.' Kester knew she had never got farther than the title of his thesis, but it touched him that she wanted to understand.

'Yes, pretty much the same but with better money, better perks, better location, better everything really.'

'Better lab people?'

'Better colleagues?' Kester hummed and hawed. 'That remains to be seen.'

'I'm so proud of you Kester! Give my love to Delilah. Bye, darling.'

The phone call ended abruptly, as they always did. His mother had got what she wanted from the conversation, so that was the end of it. It irked him sometimes, but not today.

Kester's mind wandered, blurring time as he weaved through the streets to the Blackfriars City checkpoint. This morning, walking through the City towards V, he had had a curious shrinking feeling as the buildings around him increased in height almost exponentially. Now it was he who grew as the City fell away, becoming larger than himself, dwarfing the buildings around him.

The checkpoint had been fashioned from an old archway, rescued in pieces from the rubble after the riots in the early part of the Century. It was one of the largest of the City boundary checkpoints, a classic example of the fusion of old and new, stone and glass, that dominated the aesthetics of the City and a neat reminder of why the City had been securitised in the first place. Kester glanced up as he passed under the archway and caught sight of a plaque showing a list of dates: 1840 – the building of the original archway; 2017 – the year it was burned down; 2047 – the year the permanent checkpoint was erected. He passed through the wide glass doors. They would close automatically if there were ever a break in the stream of pedestrians.

Up ahead, there was a scream. There was a temporary hush and everyone looked towards the source – a man trapped in the barriers.

'I've had a haircut!' screamed the man, before launching into a tirade about securitisation.

He gripped the top of the barrier, holding himself up as his legs failed, their muscles disabled by an invisible NTS beam, triggered when the bioscanner failed to recognise him. Two guards, holding Bruzless batons, marched through the crowd to the barriers and dragged the offender to a door at the side of the hall. There was a thick wave of snuffing and humfing and the commuters continued on through the barriers.

Kester readied his Book as he approached the barriers, paranoid that it wouldn't be read. A brief tone sounded between his biometrics being scanned and the barriers registering the pass on his Book, but the two were matched in a split second and Kester passed through without incident as he always did.

Out of the City, Kester headed down to the river and back west towards the Institute. Under Blackfriars Bridge the fukpunk he had

seen earlier was in a deep sleep, crouched, his knees drawn up in front of him, his coloured clothes and hair making him look like a dejected bird, a piece of totem pole sawn off and abandoned.

At the edge of the underpass a few more fukpunks were gathered, a different gang, either more careful or more experienced in their narcotics dosage. Two of the five were bare-chested, showing rashes creeping up from their low waistbands. They looked like twins, had the same side-ways Mohican and bandaged fingertips. The other three were dressed variously in studs and leather with strategically placed PVC windows. They must be hardcore – the viruses weren't even mods, just plain STVs and street mutes that had been going round for donkeys'. Kester shuddered as he noticed a green smear on the window of one boy's transparent crotch-piece. He just didn't get it. They were passing round a bottle of Quicksilver. No wonder. The street drugs they used as painkillers were generations behind those the City wearers used. He looked away as he passed them.

'Fucking nouveau-pox!' one of them shouted.

Kester jumped and took a small skip out of his path as another spat at him.

'What?' he replied involuntarily, hurrying on.

'Where's your pansy bracelet?'

Puzzled, Kester looked down at himself and noticed he was still wearing his V visitor pass.

'Right,' he said, unclipping it and sticking it in his pocket. They'd never do anything to him, but better to walk the rest of the way back in peace.

-o-

Alexis Farrell darkened the glass partition between her office and the rest of the floor.

You'll feel queasy, Doctor Lowe had warned her.

The room was still set up for interview, the desk still in disarray. She walked unsteadily across the floor to the side wall where a concealed door led to her apartment. It sensed her approach and slid back to allow her through. She kept on walking across the wide,

glass-fronted room, closing her arms around her body and squeezing her triceps in her sweaty palms.

The light faded up in the wet-room. Farrell flicked a manual switch by the large mirror above her dressing counter. An arch of old-style light bulbs spluttered into life around the edge of the mirror, creating little white windows in the pupils of her eyes. She looked pale. Did she look pale? She put a hand up to the soft surface of her image and watched the small pressure rainbows pulse at her fingertips. Whatever the virus, this happened – the sudden sideways push of anxiety leaving her dissociated, nauseous. It would pass, leaving the real symptoms behind; she knew that, but she couldn't switch off the fear. She automatically pinched the band around her wrist, releasing a pain-relieving shot, though Kester had assured her she wouldn't need it.

At least this time she knew what was happening to her. Alexis clung to this thought and forced herself to remember.

The virus infects only the cells in the border area between your irises and the whites of your eyes – it can't unlock the neighbouring cells, so it's self-limiting.

Alexis had concealed her horror. Her eyes?

In any case I've programmed in a forced rapid shift which means that any tertiary viruses revert fully to the inert form in which they are unable to reproduce. It's also very stable which means the chances of it throwing up a mutation that can spread further are beyond negligible.

She leaned in to the mirror. Her eyes felt different. Did her eyes feel different? She could feel the muscle movements as her focus shifted, could see her pupils contract as she moved closer to the lights.

You'll only need the uploads if you want to reverse or arrest the effect, or if you don't wish to remain infectious; no more cells will be infected or damaged once the effect has presented. And I only work with tissues that can regenerate fully to their pre-infected state so there's no fallout and no scarring. You may experience a blurring of your vision, but it will pass. It's just your irises recalibrating their muscular movement to account for the altered cells – the body's pretty clever like that.

Was her vision blurred? When would it blur? He hadn't said. She breathed in for the count of four, out for nine, in for four, out for nine, willing herself to calm down.

You'll notice bloodspots first, just around your irises. The virus needs to destroy some cells to reproduce – it uses these first cells as factories, which burst,

releasing more viruses into your system, but like I said, after three rounds, when the viruses reach their inert form, all they do is enter the cell, express the genes we've programmed them to and remain there. It's a small area and a limited population of viruses so there won't be much bleeding. The effect will wear off gradually as your cells regenerate. The bloodspots will quickly be disguised by the effect in most people and will probably be gone within a day or two.

Alexis looked up at her eyes again. The first bloodspots were appearing in a ring around her irises.

'Oh my god.' She shook her head.

This is really a small-scale demonstration of my approach – once the virus gets stuck in, it will do its work very quickly. I just think that viral displays...well they should be attractive, you know, like the displays of birds.

Sleep was what she needed. Sleep, the only thing that could shut down her anxiety and reset her body to its default. She lay flat on her hard mattress and tapped her Book to black out the windows. It could have been her first time; the corrosive whole-head scent of freshly chlorined public toilets gushed into Farrell's mind, taking her back:

Cold porcelain on the heels of her hands, the burn of a rash rising on her thighs and forearms, a deep itch. In the mirror, Gaunt's reflection behind hers, amused; his Sabotage aftershave, scent of the '70s, flowing out of his sleeve and up over her shoulders, warm and sickening against the rough background of chlorine; his hand steady between her shoulder blades, its heat and weight bleeding through her suit jacket, building like that of an iron left sitting at a child's scream. She had let loose at him.

'Whose fucking idiot idea was all this? This is miserable. Getting yourself on the proof pages is fun – screwing on a helipad, seducing an idiot fatcat – that's fun – this is fucking miserable. Some bored alpha-cock thinks it's a good idea to show you he's been screwing by cracking his nanoscreen like a fukpunk and cutting the crotch out of his Armani and a bunch of other alpha-cocks are impressed by his spotted dick flapping in the wind.'

An acid upward trickle in her gullet; a dry-retch.

'And all because some geek hacker teen fuckwit wants to prove to his mates he's had sex.'

Gaunt had laughed and rubbed her back. 'Well you bought into sex is success, Alexis, just like the rest of us, just like that fine young geek. Why would you be screwing fatcats on helipads otherwise?'

Her throat opening like a forced valve; the splatter of half-digested coleslaw.

Alexis shook her head to clear the memory and employed her

breathing again.

Even the enforced night of the black-out couldn't convince her body to sleep. She stroked her forehead, set the bed to vibrate, counted. She pressed her fingertips against her eyelids and watched as geometric patterns pulsed and churned in the red darkness. Each time she checked the clock, only a few minutes had passed. It was hours since the blood-spots had appeared. In her mind they had grown, they had taken over her eyeballs, she was weeping blood.

Eventually, she gave up trying to distract herself, raised the lighting and walked quickly back to the bathroom. As she approached, she could see that something had changed. Her eyes looked dark from a distance. Her heart rattled. It was blood.

She paused as if unsure whether she wanted to see, then closed her eyes and walked on towards the mirror. As she felt herself drawing close, she reached out. Her fingertips bumped gently against cold marble. She dragged them upwards and slid her hands onto the surface, stepping forward until the cool edge of the sink unit pressed against her belly.

I can make these things better. If they're going to make an impact on the high fashion market, or even the high street market, they've got to be different from what you can pick up on the streets.

Taking a few breaths, Alexis opened her eyes.

They've got to be beautiful.