

Death is just the beginning . . .

# GOLDBROOK



TIM LEBBON

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## About the Book

### **THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT HAS CHANGED**

### **THE REASON IS COLDBROOK**

The facility lay deep in the Appalachian Mountains, a secret laboratory called Coldbrook. Its scientists had achieved the impossible: a gateway to a new world. Theirs was to be the greatest discovery in the history of mankind, but they had no idea what they were unleashing.

With their breakthrough came disease, and it is out and ravaging the human population. The only hope is a cure, and the only cure is genetic resistance. An uninfected person amongst the billions dead.

In the chaos of global destruction there is only one that can save the human race.

But will they find her in time?

## About the Author

TIM LEBBON is a New York Times-bestselling writer from South Wales. He's had over twenty novels published to date, as well as dozens of novellas and hundreds of short stories. Recent books include *The Secret Journeys of Jack London: The Wild* (co-authored with Christopher Golden), *Echo City*, *The Island*, *The Map of Moments* (with Christopher Golden), and *Bar None*. He has won four British Fantasy Awards, a Bram Stoker Award, and a Scribe Award, and has been a finalist for International Horror Guild, Shirley Jackson, and World Fantasy Awards.

Fox 2000 recently acquired film rights to *The Secret Journeys of Jack London*, and Tim and Christopher Golden have delivered the screenplay. Several more of his novels and novellas are currently in development, and he is also working on TV and movie proposals, solo and in collaboration.

Find out more about Tim at his website [www.timlebbon.net](http://www.timlebbon.net).

ALSO BY TIM LEBBON

*Mesmer*  
*White*  
*Flesh*  
*Naming of Parts*  
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*The Nature of Balance*  
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*Changing of Faces*  
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*Dusk*  
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*After the War: Two Tales of Noreela*  
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*Mind the Gap: A Novel of the Hidden Cities*  
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*Bar None*  
*The Reach of Children*  
*The Island*  
*The Map of Moments: A Novel of the Hidden Cities*  
(with Christopher Golden)  
*Echo City The Thief of Broken Toys*  
*The Heretic Land*

# Coldbrook

Tim Lebbon



**This one's for Adam Nevill —  
great friend, fantastic writer, wise man.**

**Somewhere, in the infinite sea of universes,  
this is a true story.**



# **Prologue**

**Quantum mechanics: the dreams that stuff is made of.**

## ***Wednesday***

SIX HOURS AFTER forging a pathway from his own reality to another, Jonah Jones closed his eyes to dream. But he doubted that sleep would come. His mind, Bill Coldbrook had once told him, was far too busy dancing. The moment he laid down his head he always knew whether the night would usher in a few blessed hours of rest or a long wakeful period of silence, as he stared at the patterns that darkness painted on the ceiling and thought about what might be.

Tonight he no longer needed to dwell upon what might be. It was time to think further ahead than that.

*We did it!* he thought. *We bloody well did it!* He'd left a night light burning in his small room as always, and it cast a subtle background illumination as he lay with his eyes closed. He watched the arbitrary shifting of his eye fluids, blood pulsing, and wondered just how random anything could be.

He'd wanted to remain in Control, close to the breach. And he'd stood his ground even when Holly sat him down, asked him to drink a glass of water, and mopped up after his shaking hand spilled it. He'd seen the glance she swapped with Vic Pearson – the sort of concerned look a daughter and son might share for their failing, elderly father – and it had galvanised him, driving him to his feet in denial of what he already knew. He had been awake for thirty hours by then, and at seventy-six years old his body was beginning to flag far behind his startling mind. So eventually he had relented and promised that he'd sleep, and dear Holly had threatened to check in on him every hour.

Leaving Control, sensing the staff staring at him as he tore himself away, he'd glanced back one last time. Jonah had smiled, and nodded, and said that he was proud.

*What are they doing right now?* he wondered, but of course he knew. *Looking at the breach. Looking through it at an alternate Earth.* Everett's many-worlds theory suggested this other Earth inhabited the same quantum space as Jonah's Earth, as well as countless others. Another concept was that there were infinite Hubble volumes, each a universe – a number given the name googolplex – and that the similar alternate Earth they could see was so far away that it would take longer than the age of our universe to write that distance down. Both incredible ideas and, for Jonah, both beautiful.

He breathed deeply, ignoring the occasional flutters from his ageing heart, and started thinking about everything that needed to be done. The breach was the culmination of decades of experimentation and centuries of postulation, and now it was time to explore.

He sighed, smiling at the sheer staggering scope of what they had achieved, and experienced a chill of anticipation at what was to come. Sometimes he'd believed that he would die before they succeeded and he would never witness the result. Now, though, here he was at a defining moment in history. One of the greatest days in the annals of science, it would change the way humanity perceived itself in its own universe, and in limitless others . . .

As consciousness faded and Jonah felt himself sinking towards an exhausted sleep, a shadow formed in his mind. It was too vague truly to trouble him, too remote to register as anything more than a shade against the night, but he was aware of it as a weight where there should be none, a presence that had previously been absent. He considered opening his eyes but they felt heavy. He took in a breath and smelled nothing unusual. *Spooking myself*, he thought, and then—

He is in the familiar little North Carolina town of Danton Rock, in the Appalachian mountains a mile north of the subterranean Coldbrook facility. A dozen military trucks are parked in the square, and lines of nervous people are waiting to board. A soldier shouting orders through a bullhorn is not speaking English. Other soldiers are spaced in pairs around the square, each carrying a rifle or sub-machine gun, and there is an air of panic about everyone: soldiers alert, civilians twitchy. Jonah does not recognise the shops – their names are different, and written in a language he cannot *quite* identify – and knows that he is dreaming. He's had frequent bouts of lucid dreaming since his wife's death, and sometimes he can steer the visions, using them to meet dear Wendy again. But though he is aware now, that element of control is absent, as if the images are being projected by some outside agency, onto the screen of his mind. They are not his own.

The trucks are almost fully loaded when a short, attractive young woman slips from one line and runs for an alleyway between buildings. Jonah knows what is coming almost before it happens, and there's a terrible inevitability to the soldier's electronic shout and the gunfire that quickly follows. *No!* Jonah screams—

—and he is somewhere else, a hundred people turning tiredly to look his way, the sad knowledge of what they will see obvious in their eyes. They have the slumped shoulders and defeated gazes of people who will never intervene. The camp is huge, stretching as far as he can see into the distance, a shanty town of polythene, steel tubular shelters, and open sewers. Wretchedness and death hang heavy in the air. It's a sight familiar from disaster areas and war zones around the world, but he recognises Seattle's skyline. Aircraft like none he has ever seen before hover silently above the crowds, their fuselages smooth and pale as bone. One of them is sweeping down, zoning in on the scream even as it comes again. Jonah sees a man, hand clasped to

a wet, leaking wound on his arm. Other people are pressing back from him, and the man is turning in slow circles, his eyes wide and pleading. *No!* he cries. *No, it's okay, really, it's clean, it's clean!* But it is *not* clean, and in this vision Jonah understands that. It is unclean, and requires purifying.

Something whispers through the air and the man is whipped from his feet, borne aloft by a flexible arm slung below the aircraft. As it climbs again the people are still pulling back, the circle of bare ground widening, and—

A wide wall of fire reaches fifty feet into the air, and between it and Jonah – a distance of maybe half a mile – thousands of people are staggering from left to right, silhouetted against the flames in their shambling efforts to escape incineration. He is aware that this is another place that is not quite right. The open fields are painted gold by a familiar barley crop, but on a distant hillside stand several tall, weird structures, huge glass globes at their pinnacles seeming to catch light and haze the air around them with shades of darkness. They hint at a technology he does not know, and close to where that hillside smooths out into a valley a group of vehicles are screaming across the ground, bouncing with beautiful elegance. They each fly a stars-and-stripes pennant, but there are too few stars on them.

The sound when it comes is almost soporific, a series of gentle pops like bubbles bursting in a freshly run bath. The people start falling in their hundreds, and Jonah can see parts of their bodies erupting in gouts of black blood and flesh. It's this death that draws and focuses his attention, because then he realises that not only are the buildings disturbingly unfamiliar but the people being mown down are themselves strange. He'd thought that perhaps they were refugees like those from the previous strand of his dream but their movements are wrong – the way they run, the expressionless faces. Even those as yet unaffected by the attackers' weapons seem to be bleeding, and their mouths

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The man's mouth hangs open as he screams at the woman to run. They're in a modern building, the huge open-plan room well furnished, and one glass wall offers views out across a complex of some kind. There are several large featureless buildings, and a place that might be a power plant. The ground is flat, a few benches dotted here and there in the shade of black oak trees. It is sunny: springtime. Beside one bench, three people in red-splashed lab coats are attacking someone squirming on the ground. One of the large buildings is on fire. And inside the room, something is coming to an end.

*Run!* the man screams again. He is tall and familiar, and it's not until Jonah is mere feet away that he realises why. The man is him . . . although not quite. He's slimmer and fitter than Jonah, his eyes are green rather than blue, and his facial structure is not identical – heavier cheekbones and brow, a longer, flatter nose. But the similarity is shocking, like looking in a subtly distorting mirror. This is not just someone from the same family or even the same parents, but rather a different version of him. *This is what I might have been*, Jonah thinks.

The man grimaces as he raises a heavy pistol and points it somewhere past Jonah, and there is the look of inevitable defeat in his eyes. *Hopeless*. The gun has a small circular magazine and the wisp of a blue pilot light below its barrel, and as the man pulls the trigger the room lights up, splashing fire and heat—

Someone opened his left eyelid.

Jonah's heart fluttered in shock, and his breath locked in his lungs. He clenched his fist and felt sheets crumple between his fingers. He was frozen, motionless, and though the vivid dreams were already fading to monochrome he smelled the rot of dead things, the sweet stench of old decay, and felt an intense heat across his face. *That's what those people on the burning plains smell like*, he thought,

*and the wound on that man's arm, and the heat is fire eating at my flesh.*

He tried to speak, but breathed out only the faintest of gasps.

The thing leaning over him was poorly illuminated by the night light. It was humanoid, with a smooth head and bulging eyes, and a bulky protuberance where its nose and mouth should be. A mist of steam hung around this strange mask. *Protective suit*, Jonah thought, and for an instant that tempered his fear. But then he saw the redness around one swollen eye, the moisture collecting on one edge of what he'd thought of as breathing apparatus, and realised that what he'd believed at first was material stretched across the dome of its head was actually spiked with countless short, thick hairs. It held something, a red object from which a network of slick threads protruded and kissed gently against Jonah's scalp. They might have been wires but for the feel of them there – like cold, dead worms. Still the scream would not come.

It leaned in closer, looking, and Jonah could smell its stale fish-breath.

Then it let go and his eyelid twitched shut, and Jonah exhaled a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Sucking in air, filling his lungs again, he knew he *had* to look, *must* look . . . but for a couple of seconds he kept his eyes squeezed closed. He heard no movement, and intuited nothing in his small room; the shadow he'd sensed while falling into sleep had gone.

Jonah sat up and opened his eyes, letting out an involuntary gasp when he realised that the room was empty. The door was closed, and he would have heard the catch clicking. In his sparse room, with its bed, chair, desk, clothes rail, chest of drawers and haphazardly stuffed bookshelves, there was nowhere to hide.

'Bloody hell,' he muttered, pressing his right hand to his chest and trying to calm his galloping heart. He slipped from

the bed and rubbed his eyes. If that was what sleep brought, then he was going straight back to Control. Holly could berate him all she liked. He wasn't going to shut his eyes again any time soon.

He dressed and paused with his hand on the door handle, thinking of sleep deprivation and how the significance of what they had achieved might take some time to truly dawn. And then Jonah cast this new dancing partner aside and went to gaze once again upon another universe.



# **Part One**

## **SPREADING THE DISEASE**

**The universe is not required to be in perfect harmony with human ambition.**

***Carl Sagan***

# ***Saturday***

## 1

THIS IS THE last of my Penderyn whisky.' Jonah nursed the bottle in his hands, turning it this way and that so that light caught the fluid inside. He swore that in sunlight it was the colour of good Welsh soil, but he rarely saw the sun.

'Been saving it for a special occasion?'

'I have,' Jonah said. 'And in the chaos of the last three days I've been waiting to put it to use.' He looked at the man sitting across from him. Vic Pearson was not someone with whom Jonah would have made friends if circumstance had not thrown them together. He still didn't think they could really call each other friends – when one of them eventually moved on, he doubted that they'd remain in touch – but they were certainly respectful colleagues.

Vic smiled, tapping his fingers on the table.

Jonah turned the bottle again and thought of home.

'So . . .?' Vic said, and Jonah heard the familiar impatience in his tone. Jonah was used to existing far more inside his own mind than outside, and sometimes, so his sweet departed wife used to tell him, it was as though he disappeared altogether. It was said that Isaac Newton would often swing his legs out of bed and then instantly be overcome by a flood of waking thoughts, and that he'd often still be there an hour later staring at the wall, thinking. Jonah had always understood Newton's distractions.

'So,' Jonah said, 'perhaps our first drink should be to Bill Coldbrook.'

Vic leaned forward in his chair, folding his arms on the polished oak desk and looking down. When he glanced up again he was still smiling. But now tears were coursing down his cheeks.

‘Vic?’ It shocked Jonah. He’d never seen Vic as the crying type.

‘Three days since breach. It feels like three years. We’re in the middle of forging history. But when times are quieter, I wonder what the hell have we done down here . . . what have we done?’ He was still smiling through the tears, because he knew well enough that their names would soon be known. Theirs, and Bill Coldbrook’s, may he rest in peace. But here were Vic’s damn doubts again, and Jonah was bugged if he was going to let them spoil the moment.

He pulled the cork and breathed in the whisky fumes. Heavenly. Closing his eyes he tried again to think of home, but Wales was far away in distance and memory. Twenty-seven years since he’d left. Perhaps now he could make that journey again.

‘We’ve made history,’ Jonah said. ‘We’ve changed the world.’

‘Don’t you mean “worlds”?’ Vic’s tears had ceased, and he absent-mindedly wiped at his face, unconcerned that Jonah should see him like this. That made Jonah respect him a little bit more. They both knew that what they’d achieved was much larger than either of them, and that history was being made with every breath they took, every thought they had. *I’ll write a book about this one day*, Vic had said after another failed attempt several years before, and Jonah had smiled coolly and asked if that was all he wanted.

Now he knew that within a couple of years what they’d done would fill whole libraries.

They’d drunk together many times before, discussing the day’s work and speculating about the future. They’d been accepting of each other’s differences, and over time had developed a mutual respect. But Vic’s lack of passion – his

doubts and concerns, which Jonah had always taken as a lack of confidence – had always formed a barrier.

Vic picked up one tumbler and raised it. Jonah clinked glasses with him.

‘A toast,’ Jonah said, ‘to Bill Coldbrook. I wish he could have been here to see this.’

‘If he was, you wouldn’t be.’

Jonah ignored the quip and drank, closing his eyes and savouring the smooth burn of the whisky through his mouth and down his throat. It never failed to warm the depths of him. His eyelid twitched and he thought of the terrible nightmares, the thing he’d dreamed staring down into his face. He opened his eyes again and Vic was staring at him. He hadn’t touched his drink.

‘Don’t you *realise* what we’ve done, Jonah?’

‘Of course. What we’ve been trying to do for two decades – form a route from this Earth to another. We’ve tapped the multiverse.’ He laughed softly. ‘Vic, what’s happened here might echo across reality. Somewhere so many miles away there’s not enough room in our universe to write down the distance, there’s another you, toasting our success with another me, and the other you is pleased and happy and confident that—’

‘Don’t give me that bullshit!’ Vic snapped. And Jonah could see that he was genuinely scared. *He has family up there*, he thought, and for a second he tried to put himself in the other man’s place. Yes, with the enormity of what they’d done he could understand the worry, the tension.

But there were safeguards.

‘Remember Stephen Hawking’s visit?’ Jonah asked.

‘How could I not?’

‘He and Bill admired each other greatly, and he gave us his blessing. Said we were the sharpest part of the cutting edge.’

‘You say that as if you were proud.’

Jonah laughed softly. Vic above everyone knew that Jonah's pride was a complex thing, untouched by fame or its shadow and more concerned with personal achievement.

'He said we were the true explorers, and gave that plaque as Stephen Hawking's stamp of approval. *We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something special.*

'Just because we pretend to understand doesn't mean we're special. Doesn't mean we shouldn't be *scared*.'

'You should be pleased,' Jonah said, sounding more petulant than he'd intended. But damn it, down here in the facility they weren't walking in the footsteps of giants. They were *making* the footsteps.

'Don't tell me,' Vic said, sounding tired rather than bitter. 'It's something I'll be able to tell my grandkids.'

'If you're lucky enough to have them,' Jonah said, 'then yes, of course. You can tell them you were part of the most startling, audacious experiment in history. At Fermilab and CERN they're knocking protons together to look for the Higgs boson particle and mini black holes. Theorists discuss Planck energies, and waste time arguing about Copernican and anthropic principles with those possessing narrow vision or blind faith. But here . . . here, we've made much of theoretical physics redundant. Here, we have *proof*.'

Vic remained silent, turning his glass this way and that, catching the light and perhaps trying to see what Jonah saw in it.

'What were you doing here, Vic?' Jonah asked. 'If what we've done makes you like this, why were you even here?'

'I wanted it as much as everyone else did,' Vic said. 'But the reality is . . . more massive than I ever imagined. The impact of what we've done here . . .' He trailed off, still staring into his glass.

'Will be felt for ever,' Jonah said.

‘We’ve changed the whole fucking world,’ Vic said softly. Then he put the glass down without drinking, stood, and leaned in close to Jonah as if to look inside him.

‘Vic?’ Jonah asked, for the first time a little unsettled.

And before leaving Vic Pearson spoke the stark truth. ‘Things can never be the same again.’

## 2

Holly Wright should have gone to bed hours ago. It had been like this since breach three days before, with her desire for sleep driven out by the unbridled excitement at what had happened. They would sit here together when others were sleeping, her and Jonah, analysing and theorising, speculating and sometimes just staring at the thing. But most of the time Control was buzzing, there was still much to be done, and staring had to be kept to a minimum.

She missed that time. For her, being a scientist was all about dreaming. Which was how she survived on two hours of sleep per night, and why she was here now. Staring and dreaming.

With her in Control were three guards and their captain, Alex. She had trouble remembering the guards’ names – she blamed the hats and short haircuts. They paced and talked, chatting into communicators, and she found their presence comforting. Jonah had once commented that their minds were too small to appreciate what was being done here, but she’d long known that attitude as a fault of his. He never suffered fools gladly, and as he was a genius most other people were fools to him.

Taking up most of the lowest of Coldbrook’s three main levels, Control was laid out like a small theatre. On the stage sat the breach, its containment field extending several metres in an outward curve. And where the seats should have been were the control desks and computer terminals,

set in gentle curves up towards the rear of the room. The floor sloped up from the breach, set in four terraces, and the doors at the rear of Control were ten feet above the breach floor. The walls, floor and ceiling were constructed of the same materials as the core walls, and sometimes Holly felt the weight of everything around her.

Behind Control, the corridor curved around the one-hundred-foot-diameter core until it reached the staircase leading up to the middle level. In this largest level the corridor encircled the core completely, and leading off from it were the living quarters, plant rooms, store rooms, gym, canteen and common room, and beyond the common room the large garage area. The highest level – still over a hundred feet below ground – contained the medical suite and Secondary, the emergency control centre in case something happened in Control.

And in an experiment such as this, ‘something’ could mean anything.

The cosmologist Satpal was working at his station across the room, and though they chatted occasionally he was much like Holly – too excited to sleep, and when he was here, too wrapped up in what they had done to engage in small talk. One thing he’d said stuck with her. *I can’t wait to see their stars*. In an alternate universe where different possibilities existed, it was feasible that those possibilities had extended to the heavens.

Down on the breach floor – and closer than Vic would have allowed, had he been there – sat Melinda Price, their biologist. She had chosen the graveyard shift on purpose as her time to be down there. Since the formation of the breach she had been filming, photographing, and running tests with an array of sensors that had been pushed as close as Jonah would permit, and Holly knew that Melinda itched to go through. So far she’d recorded seventeen species of bird – both familiar and unknown – over a hundred types of insect, trees and flowers, some small mammals, and one

creature that she had not been able to categorise. Her breathless enthusiasm was catching. If there was anyone who was going to quit their post and just run, it was Melinda.

Her favoured instrument was the huge pair of tripod-mounted binoculars. She spent so long looking through them that she had permanent red marks around her eyes from the eyepieces. That never failed to amuse Holly. Melinda used simple binoculars to view across distances that philosophers and scientists had been contemplating for millennia.

The graveyard shift. Holly still smiled when the biologist called it that. After so long working at Coldbrook – and Melinda was the newest scientist here, having arrived eight years before – none of them had ever felt so alive.

Holly glanced at the younger woman now, watched her watching. Melinda was a natural beauty who paid little attention to what God had given her and, even though she rarely made much of an effort, she always exuded sexiness. It was partly her looks, but mainly the intelligence that resided behind her eyes. Some men would have found it threatening. But to most men working at Coldbrook, it was a draw. *Oh yeah, Melinda's my freebie*, Vic Pearson used to say to Holly. Which made Holly wonder whether he'd once said the same about her, Holly, to his wife Lucy.

A blue light flowed from the breach, accompanied by a brief, low sizzling sound. A spread of lights on Holly's control panel lit up, and she leaned forward and accessed a program on her laptop. A few keystrokes and the viewing screen to her left flickered into life. It was a focused view of the breach, fed from a camera set up inside the containment field, and she swept it slowly from left to right until she found what she was looking for.

Melinda was already standing and looked at Holly expectantly.



‘Small winged insect,’ Holly said. ‘I’ll file it as sample two-four-seven – you should be able to access it now.’

Melinda nodded and, without saying anything, turned to her own laptop, propped on a chair beside where she’d been sitting. *Can’t we bring something through alive?* she’d been asking Jonah ever since the stability of the breach had been established. But his response had always been the same. Until they’d run a full cycle of remote tests on the atmosphere beyond the breach, the eradicator would remain switched on.

Holly zoomed in on the dead insect and scanned for any signs of damage. There were none. It gave her a deep sense of satisfaction that her contribution to the experiment was working so well, though she could sense Melinda’s coolness growing day by day. For three years it had been Holly’s task to create a safety barrier that would prevent the ingress of anything living from another world into their own, whatever its size, phylum, composition, or chemical make-up. Her previous work in force-field engineering had seemed like child’s play compared with the task facing her, but she had relished the challenge. Upon detecting something penetrating the field, the programs she had devised took three millionths of a second to establish the nature of the incursion and deliver a delicately measured electromagnetic shock to halt its life. The device would kill anything from a microbe to an elephant, and way beyond, with minimal or no damage to the bodily tissues.

Within the breach, several robotic sample pods took turns collecting these samples, isolating them, then retreating to the extremes of the containment field. They were rapidly filling up.

‘Zapped another alien?’ Vic Pearson asked. He’d crept up on her again, as was his wont. *Ninja Vic*, she’d once called him, when she’d only become aware of his presence when his hands had reached around to cup her breasts. But that had been years ago.

‘Small fly of some kind,’ she said, pointing at the screen. ‘Four wings. See the colouring? It’s gorgeous.’

‘It’s a fly.’

‘From an alternate universe.’

‘Whoopie-fuckin’-do.’ He sat heavily in the chair beside her and sighed.

‘You been drinking?’ she asked. She kept her voice down; with some staff sleeping, Control was a quiet place, and without Satpal’s soft music the silence might have been unbearable. Even the air conditioning was all but silent.

‘Jonah asked me to his room,’ he said. ‘Raised a toast to old Bill Coldbrook.’ He drummed his fingers on the desk, staring at the breach. ‘Night over there, too.’ His voice had dropped.

‘Jonah got you drunk?’

‘I’m not drunk!’ he protested too loudly. ‘And no, he didn’t. We chatted, I left.’ He waved a hand. ‘Had a few on my own in the canteen.’

‘You didn’t argue with him?’

‘No, no. We didn’t argue. Not this time. But he’s completely . . .’ he smiled, grasping for the word ‘. . . unaware, you know?’

‘As you keep saying. I think you’re unfair on him.’

Vic snorted, and Holly knew what was coming next. She didn’t like it when he drank and she never had. Alcohol didn’t suit him.

‘You say that, and you still balance your religion with what we’ve done here.’

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘But my beliefs aren’t tested at all by this. If anything—’

‘Maybe,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Maybe.’ And that was what she hated most about Drunk Vic. With alcohol in him, he’d only listen to himself. He stood and skirted her station, descending two wide steps and standing halfway between her and Melinda. And he just stared at the breach for a while.

One day soon, someone would have to go through.

'You know,' he said, returning to lean on her desk and look her in the eye, 'if your God's on the other side as well—'

'Of course He is. The other side is just another here.'

'Right. Well, if He is, don't you think He'll do his best to stop us going through?'

'Why?'

Vic held out his hands as if it was obvious. 'We're fucking with His stuff.'

'What did you come down here for, Vic?'

He shrugged, touched her hand briefly – a surprisingly intimate gesture from someone she'd once loved – and left Control for his bed.

After Vic had gone and the guards had locked the doors behind him, Holly ran a diagnostic on the eradicator as she did every time it had been activated, checking systems and charges, running three virtual trials and then accessing its automatic log. All the while she tried to ignore what Vic had said. But it wasn't so easy, because she'd been thinking much the same herself.

Diagnostics run, she went down the three wide steps onto the breach floor and stared. Contained within a large hexagonal frame was a window onto somewhere else, the thickness of the window itself mere steps away. *Night over there, too*, Vic had said, but the darkness of that other Earth seemed subtly, beautifully different. There was a glow to the sky that Satpal thought might be due to layers of dust or moisture in the atmosphere. It cast a faint red light across the night-time landscape, painting the triangle of visible sky with an arterial-blood smear. Below that, the hillside was the colour of good port, shadows hiding behind boulders and short, squat trees. They'd broken through (*Eased through*, Jonah would have said, *probed through*, *nothing's broken*) into a small valley, and the hindered view they had of this place gave little away.

There were no signs of habitation. That had disturbed Holly to begin with, but the idea of the multiverse allowed for all possibilities. Just as there were other Earths that would be inhabited by people very much like them, so there would be worlds where life had never begun, or had evolved differently, or where the subtle leap to intelligence and consciousness had not been made. *There are countless possibilities*, Jonah had told them all weeks before. *And we have no way to steer*. What they had accomplished was the crowning achievement in humankind's technical exploration of existence, but Jonah likened it to walking blindly onto a beach at night and plucking up a grain of sand at random. There was no way they could target a particular particle, especially as they had no idea which grains existed.

*This grain, Gaia, might be paradise*, she thought. Soon after making their first observations, Melinda had named the world Gaia and it had stuck. And for Holly, the idea that beyond the breach was just one possible Mother Earth out of a limitless number did not detract from its wonder. If anything, it was *more* wondrous, and it got her to thinking about why they had forged through to this particular possibility.

During the day the distant hillside was a flower-speckled wonderland, with swathes of purple and pink blooms huddled low among the larger bramble and wild rose bushes and the graceful curls of tall ferns. Birds fluttered from tree to tree, and higher up they'd seen larger, more obscure shapes gliding on thermals, barely flapping their wings. Small rodents rooted around in the vegetation. A stream flowed through the shallow valley, turning left a hundred feet from the breach and continuing out of sight. It was beautiful, and though no one had seen anything shockingly alien or unknown all of them could sense a difference about the place. This was somewhere further away than anyone could imagine or even conceive, brought close enough to touch. When Vic had shown a smuggled-out photograph of

the place to his six-year-old daughter Olivia, he said she'd called it 'all wrong', broken out in goose bumps, and started crying.

Out of the mouths of babes.

*It's somewhere else entirely*, Holly thought. A chill went through her. And the familiar conflicting desires arose to tell her father and brother all about this, or protect them from it.

Melinda glanced back at her and offered a half-smile. The biologist now seemed to occupy a state of permanent distraction.

'You should go get some sleep,' Holly said.

'So should you.'

Holly nodded and sat in a swivel chair without taking her eyes off the breach. Staring into a world so far away, yet alongside their own, gave her mind a surprising freedom and focus. As she watched darker colours in alien skies, she thought about Vic and that touch on the back of her hand. However much she tried to delude herself, she could not deny that she thought of him every day. And memories of their affair were elusive things. When they were working together in Control or sharing a meal in the canteen, he was a colleague and a friend, somewhat volatile but marked by genius. His background in military research and development had given him access to the forefront of technological progress, and he was the most brilliant engineer working at Coldbrook. The science might elude him sometimes – even after all this time, Holly believed that only Jonah came close to *really* understanding – but he could strip and reassemble any piece of equipment they used, and make it perform better in the process.

It was when they weren't working together that she dreamed about those two years when they had been lovers. It had ended seven years before when Vic's wife Lucy had fallen pregnant, a mutual agreement that had hurt them both. But Holly had been pleased that they'd remained close friends. That was important.

Coldbrook was filled with memories for them both. They'd once made love in Control behind her work station, a quick, giggling liaison back when the place had been empty at night. And her own quarters still sang with the cries of past pleasure, sometimes breathed again in the dark as she remembered.

*We're grown-ups*, Vic had said when they'd ended it. *And we'll always be friends*. He had been right. But there were times . . .

*Like when he touched my hand*, she thought.

'Holly.'

Her eyes snapped open, she jerked, and the swivel chair slipped a foot to the right. 'Wha—?'

'Wake up, Holly. There's something . . .'

Holly blinked the brief sleep away, looked into the breach – and squinted as she saw movement.

She gasped and felt the hairs rise all across her body. The conviction she'd been feeling for three days pressed on her again: that they were balanced on the precipice of change. She focused, glancing to the left and right to give her eyes time to work in the dark.

There was a weak moon-cast shadow that should not be there, because there was no tree or rock to form it. Once again, it moved.

'Melinda?' she said quietly. 'What do you see?'

The other woman took another step across the breach floor and lifted her binoculars. *No closer!* Holly thought, panic prickling her scalp.

'Something coming,' the biologist confirmed. 'Can't see what. But . . . it's bigger than anything we've seen.' She looked back at Holly and her eyes were alight with excitement.

Holly dashed up the two steps to her desk and initiated another systems check of the eradicator. 'Let's get ready,' she said, louder than she'd intended. She watched the viewing screen, waiting for the shape to arrive. Satpal