

CLOT HO

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BY CHRISTOPHER KEITH

Lifeline

Clotho

Balloon: Altitude

Balloon: Solitude

Balloon: Latitude

CLOT HO

CHRISTOPHER KEITH



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Thread of life, controller of fate

1

Armed with an array of chemical weapons, twelve drones descended in tight formation like a swarm of giant locusts. They hovered in a holding pattern above platform 2, their cameras aimed at the crowd, a click away from deploying a cache of bombs.

Located in the heart of the English capital, London City Station, the last stop on the blue line, was filled with activity and noise from the hundreds of protesters rampaging across the platform. A large bonfire was burning in the centre, and a dozen people in a single file line were hurling old passports onto the flames, rousing the rest of the crowd.

An older lady stood at the front of the line. Her long skirt was floral, and she was wearing handcrafted jewellery. A turquoise bandana tied at the front held back her white hair, which hung over her shoulders like a spiderweb.

She stared up at the sky as if expecting rain and locked on the drones.

The passport in her hand belonged to her late father and was thirty years past its expiry date. Why had he even owned a passport? He had been obsessively patriotic, a dyed-in-the-wool racist, and had never left the country. She could still hear his hate-filled rants and bigoted opinions, venting at anyone willing to listen long enough.

She tossed the passport onto the bonfire, watching it go up in flames and dissolve into ash with all the others.

Sunlight poured over the platform, glazing her wrinkled face as she cupped her hand around a self-rolled cigarette.

A man dropped a beer bottle at her feet. Foam splashed on her sandals. The liquid almost instantly evaporated from the hot concrete by the sun, but the old lady kept her focus on the drones.

One circled above the crowd and dropped its payload.

They exploded in a cloud of blue retardant chemical powder, spreading over the fire and instantly putting it out. All that remained was a charcoal swirl of floating ashes like grey snow.

Two more drones closed in from either end of the platform, ready for phase two: *tear gas*.

The drones spoke in a unified, robotic voice. *'Leave the station immediately!'*

A protester threw a beer bottle. It clipped a drone and sent it pirouetting down onto the magnetic levitation tracks, where it broke into pieces.

Noise swelled from the crowd.

The old lady smiled, and her eyes disappeared into her wrinkled face.

She walked along the platform through the noisy crowd and stopped at the holographic train timetable.

The trains were scheduled to arrive and depart every fifteen minutes. Low passenger numbers saw them running to a reduced timetable every hour.

The next train was due in five minutes.

Onboard that twelve-carriage, electro-magnetic train gliding smoothly above the tracks, turning the view into a streaming yellow blur, was Nova and her father.

The landscape was parched and singed from the UK's worst-ever drought. Rivers had thinned to a trickle, leaving dry beds and feebly flapping fish across the country. Farmers complained they had harvested the worst crop on record, labelling it a natural disaster. Wildfires burnt across forests and heathland. The number of people suffering from heat stress, unable to survive unprotected in the open for more than a few hours, was putting considerable pressure on the national welfare system. There were even reports of another Asian hornet invasion in the north.

'Where exactly are we going?' asked Nova.

Her father was reading the e-book on his bionic contact lenses. He always had his eyes in a book, staring forward in a trance, detached from reality, almost unreachable in his own world. She was used to the spotlight of his attention being turned away from her like the regular bright and darkness of a lighthouse lamp.

He blinked twice to close the book and turned his war veteran eyes on her. ‘Did you say something?’

‘Where are we going?’

He sat up and rubbed his hands together. ‘Okay, are you ready for your surprise?’

‘I’m seventeen, not seven.’

He passed her a graphene e-ticket with her name and citizen number on its screen.

‘The New York State Women’s Gymnastics?’ she asked.

He smiled. ‘The finals. You’ve always wanted to go.’

‘Don’t tell me we’re teleporting there.’

‘I thought you’d be more excited.’

She looked up from the ticket. ‘Will it hurt?’

‘Will what hurt? Teleportation?’

‘No, cosmetic toe surgery.’

‘You might feel a little funny the moment you travel through, but there’s no pain, trust me. It’s all over within seconds.’

She tied her long, brown hair into a bun. ‘How does it work? Teleportation, not toe surgery.’

‘Well, I dare say we’ll find out at the orientation today. From my understanding, the teleportals are powered by solar energy, hydrogen-filled turbines, and electricity. Using gamma-ray radiation and smart technology, the teleportals scan your body to the sub-atomic level. That data is then transmitted to the teleportal in New York.’

The train swung in a wide arc and emerged alongside city buildings. Bands of hot sunlight rolled across Nova’s lap as she stared at the countryside progressing into the high-

rise skyline of London, leaving behind the scorched trees and dry orchards.

‘Don’t look so worried,’ he said.

‘Me? Worried? I laugh in the face of danger.’

‘Teleportation isn’t dangerous, Nova.’

At noon, London City Teleport filled the train windows. The terminal, where the teleportals were housed, had convex solar glass walls leaning out from its base. The auditorium, connected by a skywalk bridge, had a seating capacity of six thousand and was equally photogenic.

Behind the terminal and the auditorium, the airport’s old runways had been converted into a large field of solar panels harnessing the sun’s energy and converting it into power to run the teleportals, banking the excess to ensure the teleport remained energy efficient.

Newark Liberty Teleport in New York, the world’s only other teleport, was having underwater cables installed that connected to solar panels in the Sahara Desert. This was to provide the new network of teleports being built across America with sufficient power.

The dome, doubling as the Museum of Teleportation and a warehouse for the data storage infrastructure, logged the genetic code and neural information of every individual who travelled in the teleportals, translating them into tiny bits of transferrable data. That data was transmitted over to the corresponding data centre at Newark Liberty Teleport in New York.

The driverless train lurched and crawled into London City Teleport Station, stopping at platform 4.

Smoke masking the station and covering the windows in a whitish blur carried the loud chanting sound of protesters.

A man appeared on the platform outside her window, obscured in the haze. His eyes carried the rage of a madman as he hurled a burning projectile at the carriage.

Nova ducked.

Her father dived on top of her as the solar-panelled glass shattered.

A fire broke out on the adjacent seats, and smoke rapidly filled the carriage. In no time, the entire carriage was ablaze, setting off multiple alarms. For Nova, it marked the start of a catastrophic chain of events.

2

The train doors opened.

Nova was coughing as her father dragged her out of the carriage onto the platform. The fire was raging through the train now. More smoke engulfed her outside, burning her eyes and making her throat feel like it was full of glass.

‘Tear gas!’ said her father. He held Nova’s hand. ‘Cover your eyes and hold your breath. Stay close to me!’

Nova saw a group of protesters through the smoke jump down onto the tracks and climb onto platform 4. Others flocked to the underpass and rushed up the steps.

She froze as they streamed towards her, first in ones and twos, then in clusters, wild and crazed.

The unruly mob boarded the train and ran amok inside, ripping upholstery apart, smashing up the interior, setting more carriages alight.

Moving through the civil unrest with dread simmering in her stomach, Nova squinted and raised her hood, wishing to disappear inside.

Local news stations had reporters and cameras at the scene. Even *they* looked frightened.

A man in tie-dyed shorts and no top streaked towards her and grabbed her shoulder forcefully. He had a pudding-basin haircut and was barefoot with an ankle bell on, waving a sign that read *Teleport to Hell*.

‘The teleportals are dangerous!’ he shouted, aggressively poking the words on the sign. ‘Stay away!’

Her father pulled her towards him. ‘Stay close to me!’

He had been an infantry soldier who had spent years in dugouts, bunkers, trenches, and on battlefields, witnessing atrocities inflicted on the innocent by dangerous enemies. His presence gave her some reassurance.

The man went on shouting long after she had pushed past him. ‘They don’t fucking work!’

There was a voice in the sky, and Nova saw the first of several drones. ‘*Leave the station immediately.*’

Hood up and face down, she kept moving, feeling like she had walked into a war zone.

An old lady wearing a turquoise bandana and hippy style clothes blocked her path.

Nova stopped, losing her father’s hand in the crowd. The old lady was holding an acrylic banner, her thin, white hair blowing across her shoulders. When she bent forward, Nova saw her deep, rheumy eyes were different colours. One eye was brown, the other sky-blue. She was a tall lady,

late sixties or older, with a small scar on her brow. She tutted and shook her head slowly. ‘Have a nice day!’

Rooted to the spot, spooked by the scary lady, she just stared into her strange, cold eyes until her father’s hand reached out of the crowd and grabbed her bicep. ‘I told you to stay close!’ His voice was laced with anger as he pulled her away from the lady.

She disliked public places, especially when they were filled with raucous and intimidating people. She wondered if it qualified as claustrophobia.

A crackling sound, like gunfire, exploded nearby. It made her jump, and temporarily deafened her.

Her fingernails dug into her palms.

The protest was boiling over into a riot.

After a few minutes of stop-start progress, they forged a path through the rest of the crowd to the travellers as the ear-splitting firecrackers burnt out, and the drones unleashed a second barrage of tear gas across the platform.

Inside the terminal, her tension and adrenaline started to finally wane.

‘Bloody Luddites!’ said her father. ‘Eyes okay?’

‘Stinging. That was awful. I’m still shaking.’

‘For someone who laughs in the face of danger, that’s a bit melodramatic. Tell me, what should you do in situations like that?’

Nova pulled her hood down, still coughing. ‘Hide?’

‘I’ve told you this before. Stand tall, stay calm. Look at those making you feel unsettled, tell yourself, how dare you threaten me, what gives you the right?’

‘I feel threatened now.’

He frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

She’d never been to America. New York was supposed to be big and exciting. She wasn’t excited at all. Cities were horrible places. She was a country girl and preferred the rural lifestyle. ‘I didn’t want to come here. I’m really frightened of teleportation.’

‘You were the one who wanted to watch the New York State Women’s Gymnastics.’

Going abroad for the first time in her life was quite a daunting prospect and putting that life into the hands of a teleportation machine ... teleportal ... whatever it was called, was a put-off. ‘It sounds dangerous.’

‘Nonsense! Don’t pay attention to those technophobic nutters. They just like to spread fear and generate hatred. Today’s society was built using technology. Either they learn to embrace it, or they bog off back to their caves with their bibles.’

Taking in the majestic interior, admiring the imaginative visual elements, they arrived at the lifts, taking them up to self-processing on the second floor.

They underwent the biometric iris, facial and fingerprint recognition, followed by a mandatory health screening test. The passport and visa checks were all efficiently conducted throughout the biometric scanning process.

Advancing along the skywalk to the auditorium, they passed a young couple, arms linked, clearly together and not afraid to show it.

‘Careful out there,’ said Nova. ‘It’s kicking off.’

The couple pretended not to hear her and walked on with lowered heads.

Nova and her father scanned through the eight-foot turnstiles by placing a finger on the authentication pad to enter the auditorium. Their names and holographic faces projected from a wall-mounted rover.

They navigated the crisscrossing aisles, searching for somewhere to sit. Nova studied the amphitheatre-like dome with its seating capacity of six thousand people. She counted forty-five attendees.

‘What’s a Luddite?’ she asked, once seated.

‘It describes people who are willing to destroy machinery because they believe it’ll threaten their lives and replace them in their jobs. Basically, they’re fighting against the future or their perceptions of the future.’

‘What kind of machinery?’

‘The automation of factories has decimated careers in traditional manufacturing. Automated cars and trains have killed the livelihoods of commercial drivers and chauffeurs. In recent years, prisons and hospitals and other businesses that manage large volumes of people have now become computerised, herding people from one station to the next, processing their data and categorising them by their injuries, crimes, or whatever the nature of the business. The rise of AI will continue to wipe out jobs in many industries.’

‘Why call them Luddites?’

‘The term comes from Ned Ludd. He was the instigator of a famous rebellion and the first to express his concerned views. Since then, his name has become synonymous with

people who disagree with technology. The ATM is full of these ruffians.’

‘ATM?’

‘The Anti-Tech Movement. That’s who we ran into on the platform. They were protesting teleportation.’

‘Are they only in this country?’

‘They operate in several countries but are most active in Europe. They’re a growing demographic, gaining popularity worldwide, and are becoming more aggressive. The worst of them are in America.’

‘They get worse?’

‘Washington is often faced with ATM demonstrations, especially since the arrival of teleportation. They’ve set cars alight, attacked police officers, vandalised buildings. They’re a populist group and will only get bigger and more powerful. Right now, teleportation is still very new and only operates between London and New York. You wait until it’s fully operational in every major city.’

Nova admired her father. He had short, silver hair and a weather-beaten face from years of outdoor combat. His two ideologies were freedom and scientific progress, shaped by over twenty-five years of military service. New technologies not only provided a tactical edge, but they had also liberated countries, saving millions of lives. How many lives he had *taken*, he could only estimate. Throughout his career, at the behest of one prime minister after another, he had fulfilled his duty, completed every mission, and served his country to the highest standard. The fact he was still alive he attributed to technology.

‘It’s about to start,’ he said.

The lights dimmed over the empty auditorium.

It was apparent, just by looking around, that the potential for tele-travel was still largely untapped.

Nova’s father blamed it on anti-commercialism and a generation unwilling to let go of the Jet Age.

Outside the terminal, a heavy police presence moved in on the platform to establish order, the drones having failed to have the desired effect with the tear gas. The officers made several arrests and ushered the remaining protesters towards the exit traveller using their batons and whistles, blowing long blasts.

Some were escaping the police by jumping down onto the tracks and climbing over the barriers.

The old lady cast her eyes over the terminal and threw down her banner. For months, she had studied the layout of London City Teleport, learning about its procedures and protocols, exposing its security flaws.

She lit another hand-rolled cigarette and blew smoke rings into the air.

Behind her, a ruckus broke out between a group of men and heavy-handed police officers. She was still focused on the teleport as she bent down and lifted her banner, which read: *Have a Nice Doomsday.*

3

The Chalkhill Estate in London was under development for more urban sprawl. Old tower blocks painted in repulsive lilac were being replaced with newer homes, half-built and crammed into the tightest of spaces. Some road extensions hadn't kept pace with the planned developments, leaving unfinished construction and dormant heavy-duty machinery everywhere. Protests against the project had been ignored by the local council.

Arthur strolled along the dog-fouled footpath through the construction site with a hand in his pocket. He spat his chewing gum into a commercial skip brimming with rubble and scrap iron. Turning right, the forty-nine-year-old headed towards a row of shops set back from the main road.

Inside a large wine store, selling everything from rare wines to boutique bottles, Arthur passed the staff sitting

behind the counter, who eyed him with a disinterested gaze as he strolled by towards the back of the store.

Arthur jogged down the staircase leading to a heavy, steel door. It led him to a long, dark corridor where his presence triggered a bank of bright fluorescent bulbs.

He punched the pin number into the door at the end of the corridor. As he entered the wine cellar, three men turned away from a building blueprint on the table in the centre of the room and faced him.

One was Travis, owner of the wine store, a man with an enormous gut and an orange beard down to his chest. The two other men he didn't recognise.

Travis threw Arthur a can of beer.

He snapped it open and drank some.

'You look like shite!' said Travis.

Arthur had spent another night on his boat. Marital stress. Long story.

'Who are these grockles, then?' he asked.

Travis held out his palm. 'Meet Theo, and this is my old friend, Nate. Our newest recruits.'

'Where's everyone else?'

'Marching on Parliament.'

Arthur sized up the newbies and folded his arms. 'What's your story, then?'

The shorter man, Nate, had disconcerting features that could unnerve others if they paid much attention to him. He had oily, black hair and wore a grey coat down to his knees.

Theo was a full head taller, broad-shouldered, fiftyish, wearing a designer-label polo jumper and skinny jeans.

Nate brushed his hair back and blew all the air from his lungs. 'I find it offensive that our politicians have allowed technology to take over and govern our lives. I've lost family because of technology. It's beyond rational human control, and it's time things changed. I joined the ATM to make a difference.'

'Ark at he,' said Arthur, glancing at Travis. 'How do you intend to do that, then? Bring change?'

Nate struggled to lift a large drum filled with a pale liquid onto the table.

The strong smell of gasoline, extremely scarce nowadays *and* illegal, piqued Arthur's curiosity. It took the saliva from his mouth.

'Where did you get that?' he asked.

'Friend of ours is well connected. There's plenty more where this came from. I can also get my hands on some bomb-grade chemicals, enough to bring down Teletron, Parliament, a small city block, you name it. One call and we could own a device capable of levelling any location at the touch of a button.'

Travis laughed into his beard, which covered most of his face. 'You couldn't put a battery in a toothbrush without dropping it. How will you handle explosives without getting caught or blowing yourself to smithereens?'

Nate buried his hands in his coat pockets. The sign of a man on guard. 'Piss off, Travis!'

Travis put his hand on Arthur's shoulder. 'I've known Nate for years, and I have never seen him finish a drink without spilling it.'

Nate punched Travis in the arm. ‘Don’t listen to this dickhead. Our contact also has unlimited access to some of the most toxic pesticides in the country. I might even be able to get my hands on some anthrax.’

Travis smiled. ‘This is why I brought these two guys in. They bring something a little different to the table, spice things up a bit. What do you reckon?’

Arthur shook his head. It could have been interpreted as marvel or despair. ‘That ain’t who we are, terrorists. Since when did we become them?’

‘You think I’m a terrorist?’ asked Nate.

‘It don’t matter what I think. If we take down Teletron, we’ll be labelled terrorists. Teletron is a government-funded organisation. Any attack on Teletron is an attack on the government.’

Nate shrugged like he had just proved a point. ‘And?’

There was something in his eyes that Arthur did not like. There had to be a better way to bring teleportation to an end. He thought about this clearly and deliberately, and above all, logically.

‘This connection. Anyone we know and can trust?’

‘Goes by the name the Merchant,’ said Theo. ‘Needs to stay protected.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘Exactly,’ said Theo.

‘If you ask me, it sounds risky,’ said Arthur.

‘No one’s *asking* you,’ said Nate.

‘Come on, Arthur,’ said Travis. ‘We need this, and you know it. I thought you’d be more receptive.’

‘We’ve tried almost everything,’ said Arthur. ‘Petitions ain’t effective because any oaf can set up a phoney online account or add fake names to a petition. We’ve tried picket lines, campaigns, lectures, made political statements. We’ve even published jokes and satirical cartoons. And had pop idols endorse our views. Two weeks ago, a thousand ATM members staged a passport burning event at London City Teleport to draw public attention.’

‘Why passports?’ asked Nate. ‘Passports were replaced years ago by biometric security.’

‘To make a statement,’ said Travis. ‘By burning our old passports, we demonstrated our opposition to travel and what it has become.’

‘Did it work?’

Arthur narrowed his eyes. ‘The institutions we protest against just wait it out, and everyone loses interest, as do the media. We’ve made a name for ourselves. Everyone’s heard of the ATM and what we stand for, but we ain’t never taken seriously. In fact, we’re viewed as a stain on modern society. Truth is, we’re a minority group. We just ain’t big enough yet. We need to change the way people think. Make people understand how lethal technology is and the risks to our humanity, survival, and the world. Teleportation is priority. It’s dangerous, and if we don’t wake up soon, we’ve got no hope as a human race.’

Travis frowned. ‘All that you just said makes what Nate said sound even more credible. As you say, we have tried just about everything. Except we haven’t, and it’s time we *were* taken seriously.’

Arthur decided he would get to know the new recruits over the next few days to better understand them and to keep an eye on them. He would talk to those who wanted to talk.

He looked directly into their eyes, sizing them up. Nate was all mouth, but Theo was harder to read.

‘I’ve been around long enough to know what works and what don’t. I’ve seen lots happen, not a lot change. It’s about managing expectations and encouraging people to fight with the ATM. If you want my opinion, we wait until we’ve got enough bodies with enough social support.’

‘Who says we want your opinion?’ asked Nate. ‘You’re not in charge here.’

‘Travis and I are the founding members, actually. Most people think that the ATM is full of troublemakers. That all we want to do is make trouble. We’re policymakers. We ain’t going to make new policies with pesticides and petrol, only trouble.’

Arthur turned to his partner. ‘Travis, a word. In private.’

Travis glanced at Nate and Theo. ‘Sure.’

Just then, the basement door blasted open and banged against the wall. Half a dozen people piled in.

‘Did you hear the news?’ Claire, Travis’ sister, shouted.

Travis put his hands on his hips. ‘What news?’

‘The government has just announced that London City Teleport will be shut down immediately.’

The news stunned everyone into silence.

The closure was attributed to low travel demand and its financial losses.

Newark Liberty Teleport in America was also going to close.

It was unclear whether the ATM had influenced the decision or if the government had closed the teleport under the guise of its own political agenda. Some voiced fears it was strategic, rhetorical appeasement.

Arthur finished his beer and turned to Nate and Theo. 'I guess that there concludes our discussion.'