

CLOTHO

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BY CHRISTOPHER KEITH

Lifeline

Clotho

Balloon: Altitude

Balloon: Solitude

Balloon: Latitude

CLOTHO

CHRISTOPHER KEITH



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Thread of life, controller of fate

1

Equipped with an array of chemical weapons, the 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 wore lots of 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's focus on the drones remained unbroken.

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 virtual 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.

The twelve-carriage, electro-magnetic train glided smoothly above the tracks, turning the view into a streaming yellow blur.

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 heaths. 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.

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 the front.

‘The New York State Women’s Gymnastics?’

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 when you’re transported 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 cityscape of London, leaving behind the scorched trees and dry fields.

‘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 field of solar panels. The panels harnessed the sun’s energy and converted it into power to run the teleportals, banking the excess to ensure the teleport remained energy efficient.

Newark Liberty Teleport in New York, on the other hand, was in the process of having underwater cables added to connect it 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 masked the station and covered the windows in a whitish blur, but it carried the loud chanting of protesters.

A man appeared on the platform outside her window.

His eyes were red with rage.

He hurled a burning projectile at her.

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.

There was more trouble ahead.

2

The train doors opened.

Nova was coughing as she disembarked with the other passengers onto the open platform, instantly engulfed by more thick smoke that stung her eyes and made 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.’

Nova saw a group of protesters through the haze 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 the carriages alight.

Moving through the crowd with the dread rising 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 half-naked man streaked towards her and grabbed her by the shoulder. He was wearing tie-dyed shorts and no top, had a pudding-basin haircut and was barefoot with an ankle bell. He waved a sign that read: *Teleport to Hell.*

‘Don’t use the teleportals!’ he shouted, angrily poking the homemade sign. ‘They’re dangerous!’

Her father pulled her away. ‘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 at her long after she had pushed past him. ‘They don’t work!’

There was a voice in the sky, and Nova saw the first of several drones.

‘You have two minutes to comply.’

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

An old lady with a turquoise bandana blocked her path.

Nova stopped, losing her father’s hand in the crowd. The old lady was holding an acrylic banner, her white hair blowing around 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. 'Fool!'

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 heating up, 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 wear off.

'Bloody Luddites!' said her father. 'Eyes okay?'

'Stinging a lot. 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. '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, preferred the rural lifestyle any day. That wasn't the problem. 'I didn't want to come here. I'm scared 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, put her off. 'It sounds dangerous.'

'Nonsense! Don't pay attention to those technophobic idiots. They like to spread fear and generate hatred, that's all. 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 the mandatory health screening check.

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 and walked on.

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.

From the top terrace, they navigated the crisscrossing aisles, looking for somewhere good to sit. Nova studied the amphitheatre-like dome, a seating capacity of six thousand people. She took a headcount, calculating only forty-five in attendance.

‘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 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 rise of artificial intelligence 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 negative 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 against 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 above her head.

Have a Nice Doomsday.