



The most powerful  
imagination in  
science fiction  
— Ken Follett

PETER F.

# HAMILTON

## GREAT NORTH ROAD

BRITAIN'S NUMBER ONE SCIENCE FICTION WRITER

- 2003:** Kane North injured by IED in Iraqi.
- 2004:** Kane receives honorable discharge from U.S. Army. Moves to Edinburgh. Uses family trust money to recruit geneticists. Cloning program begins.
- 2007:** Brant North born, first clone of Kane North successfully carried to term. Large number of mental and physical defects; lives three years.
- 2009:** Cicero North born. Severe learning difficulties, serious metabolic deficiency; lives to 2022.
- 2010:** Forrest North born. High spectrum autistic, lives to 2065.
- 2012:** Augustine, Bartram, and Constantine North born.
- 2027:** Wan Hi Chan presents his theory of trans-spacial connection
- 2029:** First “connection” made at Princetown, 800 meters across campus. USA forms National Interstellar Agency (NIA).
- 2030:** Europe forms European Trans-Space Bureau (ET-SB). China forms National Interstellar Transport Corporation (NITC). Russia, India, Israel, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Pacific Alliance, North African Coalition, Asian Federation—all create agencies to begin interstellar exploration programs
- 2031:** NIA opens connection to Earth’s moon.
- 2032–2038:** Various national test programs produce twelve trans-spacial connections across solar system. Gateway technology perfected.
- 2034:** Augustine, Bartram, and Constantine found Northumberland Interstellar Corp, using family corporate resources to fund gateway systems manufacture.
- 2039:** NITC opens gateway to Proxima Centauri. Age of interstellar exploration begins.
- 2041:** NIA opens New Washington for settlement.
- 2044:** NIA opens gateway to Orleans.
- 2044:** ET-SB opens New Brussels for settlement to EU citizens.
- 2045:** India opens gateway to Kolhapur.
- 2045:** NITC opens gateways to Taiyuan and Wuchow.
- 2047:** Russia opens gateway to Nova Petersburg.
- 2047:** Israel opens gateway to Ramla.
- 2047:** U.S. senate expanded to take in ten new states from new worlds. Passes Federal Independent Landowner Act. Enforced off-Earth settlement of all long-term welfare recipients.
- 2048:** Japan opens gateway to New Tokyo.
- 2048:** France opens gateway to Rouen; French citizens only.
- 2048:** Earth economy stalling due to investment shift to new planets.
- 2049:** Germany opens gateway to Odessa; German citizens only.

**2049:** USA passes illegals dispersal bill. All illegal immigrants in original states on Earth deported to the territories on new U.S. planets.

**2049:** Saudi Arabia opens Riyadh for settlement; Muslims only.

**2050:** ET-SB opens Minisa for ‘all’ Grande Europe citizens. Subsidized immigration begins for unemployed, later developing to ‘opportunity immigration’ policy, transporting millions of poor and jobless out of GE states on Earth.

**2051:** Northumberland Interstellar opens gateway to Sirius star system, discovers earth-giant planet, named St. Libra. Cleared for human immigration.

**2052:** Brazil opens gateway to Sao Jeroni.

**2052:** North African gateway to Accra.

**2053:** First bioil algaepaddies established on St. Libra. Start of bioil export to Earth. Massive investment into St. Libra algaepaddies begins, establishment of Eight Great bioil companies in addition to NI.

**2055:** The Independencies founded on St. Libra; constant mid-level immigration by GE dissidents and other political refugees from across Earth.

**2055–2070:** Establishment of seven more human-settled worlds. Earth’s population in decline; its economy contracts. Enforced exodus programs of jobless instituted by most nations.

**2063:** Kane North dies, age eighty-three.

**2083:** Rumour of True Jerusalem, reached via a secret gateway from Ramla.

**2087:** Constantine North and Bartram North resign their directorships of Northumberland Interstellar. Company resources redistributed. The bulk remains with Augustine.

**2088:** Constantine North launches Jupiter habitat; 8,000 tons of cybernetic manufacturing equipment, and a 3,000-ton mineral/chemical refinery all delivered to asteroid in Jupiter orbit via Newcastle gateway, plus 25,000-ton life-support hostel. Several hundred supporters and all C Norths follow him there.

**2089:** Town of Abellia established on St. Libra by Bartram. Bartram founds North Biogenetic Institute, begins serious research into human regeneration/rejuvenation.

**2092:** Zanthswarm on Accra.

**2093:** Accra evacuated, gateway closed. Estimated human deaths: 8.2 million.

**2093:** Formation of Human Defence Alliance (HDA) to defend human race from the Zanth.

**2094:** Brinkelle North born.

**2095:** Large-scale transtellar financial instability as HDA budget approved. Bioil price increasing, reducing consumption. Markets falling.

**2096–2111:** Transtellar recession, affecting all worlds

**2111:** Northumberland Interstellar–led cartel releases glut of low-price bioil, bankrupting many futures market speculators. Stability returns to bioil market. Transtellar share prices start to rise again.

**2119:** Zanthswarm on New Florida. Evacuation declared successful, deaths estimated at 108,000.

**2119:** Transtellar market downturn lasts until 2123—officially not a recession.

**2121:** Bartram North and his household slaughtered. Angela Tramelo convicted of mass murder, receives life sentence.

**Charmonique Passam:** vice commissioner for the Grande Europe Bureau of alien evaluation.

**Griffin Toyne:** major, HDA, head of expedition security  
Camp Wukang

**Vance Elston:** colonel, Alien Intelligence Agency (AIA), camp commander

**Antrinell Viana:** captain, AIA, executive officer

Administration

**Jaysukhlal “Jay” Chomik**

**Norman Sliwinska**

**Forster Wardele**

**Bastian North:** observer

GE Legion squad

**Pablo Botin:** lieutenant

**Raddon:** sergeant

**Paresh Evitts:** corporal

**Hiron:** corporal

Privates

**Mohammed Anwar**

**Atyeo**

**Ramon Beaken**

**DiRito**

**Leora Fawkes**

**Dave Guzman**

**Hanrahan**

**Gillian Kowalski**

**Omar Mihambo**

**Marty O’Riley**

**Peace-Davis**

**Audrie Sleath**

**Josh Justic**

Xenobiology team

**Angela Tramel:** civilian adviser

**Marvin Trambi**

**Roarke Kulwinder**

**Tamisha Smith**

**Miya**

**Smara Jacka**

**Iyel**

**Esther Coombes**

**Camm Montoto**

**Zhao**

Pilots

**Lorelei:** CV-47 Swallow

**Garrick:** CV -47 Swallow

**Juan-Fernando:** CT -606D

**Ravi Hendrik:** CT -606D Berlin, ex-Thunderthorn SF-100 pilot

AAV flight team

**Ken Schmitt:** chief

**Davinia Beirne:** technician

**Chris Fiadeiro:** technician

**Mackay:** technician

Medical

**Dr Tamika Coniff**

**Mark Chitty:** paramedic

**Juanitar Sakur:** paramedic

Engineering Teams

Helicopters

**Tork Ericson**

**Erius**

Camp systems

**Olg Dorchev**

**Dean Creshaun**

**Lance**

Ground vehicles

**Leif Davdia**

**Darwin Sworowski**

Microfactory

**Karizma Wadhai**

**Ophelia Troy**

General support personnel

**Luther Katzen:** supervisor

**Madeleine Hoque**

**Fuller Owusu**

**Lulu MacNamara**

**Winn Melia**

Newcastle police

**Sidney Hurst:** detective

**Royce O'Rourke:** chief constable

**Ian Lanagin:** detective, surveillance specialist

**Eva Saeland:** visual interpretation constable

**Ralph Srevens:** special investigator, AIA

**Abner North:** detective, forensic specialist

**Ari North:** constable, data management specialist

**Aldred North:** Northumberland Interstellar security director, legal liaison

**Hayfa Fullerton:** detective, gang task force

**Kaneesha Saeed:** detective, retired, chief of gang crime office

**Tilly Lewis:** Northern Forensics, Grade-A team manager

**Chloe Healy:** O'Rourke's media officer

**Saul Howard:** surfer and store owner, St Libra

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As midnight approached, the wild neon colors of the borealis storm came shimmering through the soft snow falling gently across Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. It was as if nature were partying along with the rest of the city, providing a jade-and-carmine light show far more elegant than any of the fireworks that had been bursting sporadically above the rooftops since Friday.

Detective Third Grade Sidney Hurst watched batches of late-night revelers staggering along the frozen pavement, calling out greetings or challenges depending on how toxed up they were. Ice, snow, and slush played havoc with the smartdust embedded in the tarmac, blacking out whole sections of the metamesh that governed the city's roads and therefore making driving with the vehicle's smartauto a dangerous gamble. Sid was steering the unmarked police car manually, but with the auto managing wheel torque on the slippery road. Their snow tires provided reasonable traction, adding to stability and allowing him to make a decent thirty-five kilometers per hour along Collingwood Street past the cathedral. Radar kept throwing proximity symbols across the windshield, designating a warning for the long filthy dunes of snow that the civic snowplows had thrown off the center of the road.

It had been snowing for two days now, and with the midday temperature spike sticking stubbornly below ten degrees there had been no thaw, allowing the elegant stone Georgian buildings of the city center to become cloaked in Dickensian yuletide splendor. Another proximity warning flashed scarlet, outlining a man running across the road directly in front of the car, laughing and jeering as Sid veered sharply around him. One last obscene gesture, and he was claimed by the swirling snow.

"He'll never last till dawn," Ian Lanagin claimed from the front passenger seat.

Sid glanced over at his partner. "Just another two-oh-one file," he agreed. "Welcome back, me."

"Aye, man, some Sunday-night reunion this is."

It was crazy so many people being out in this weather; though for once Newcastle's traditional nightclub dress code of T-shirt for the boys and short skirt with glitter heels for the girls had vanished under thick ankle-length coats. It was that cold. He'd even glimpsed a few sensible hats, which was almost a first in the fifteen years he'd been with the Newcastle police. Even now—married with two kids, a career that wasn't quite as dynamic as he'd originally envisioned—he was slightly surprised he was still in Newcastle. He'd followed a girl up here from London, where—like every twenty-something law graduate—he'd been arrowing down the smart and fast career path, alternating jobs between police and private security as if he were an electron bouncing between junction gates. To consummate the grand romantic gesture he applied for a transfer to the local city police, where the career track was equally valid for a couple of years, and the nights could still be spent in bed with Jacinta. Now, fifteen years' worth of Siberian winters and Saharan summers later, he was still here, married to

Jacinta (which at least showed good judgment), with two kids and a career that had taken the kind of direction he'd always sneered at during those long-distant university years when he had passion and conviction and contempt for the way of a world screwed up by the current generation in power and the omnipresent lurking evil of the Zanth. Now experience and its associate wisdom had flicked him onto the more rational track of time-serving and networking to make the final career switch that would see him through the last twenty years before retirement. Fifteen years' hard labor had taught him real life had a habit of doing that.

"They'll all sober up by tomorrow," Sid said, switching his gaze back to the road.

"In this town?" Ian challenged.

"We've all got jobs now."

Sid had been as surprised as anyone on Friday morning when Northumberland Interstellar had finally announced they were awarding contracts for five new fusion stations to be built at the Ellington energy complex north of the city. They should have been built years ago, but such was the way with all big projects that decade-long delays were built into corporate decisions as standard. And that was *before* regulators and politicians started to intervene to prove their worth. It meant the aging tokamaks at Ellington that currently powered the Newcastle gateway to St. Libra would have to be coaxed along way past their original design lifetime. Nobody cared about that, though, and euphoric Geordies had spent the weekend rejoicing the announcement. It meant a new surge in the monumental tide of money that already coursed along the city streets, money that was channeled at every corner into St. Libra, to be rewarded by the return flow of indispensable biooil back to the old motherworld. Biooil that kept cars and lorries moving across Grande Europe's still-powerful trade arteries; valuable derivations allowing planes to fly and ships to voyage. This contract was nothing more than a ripple on that tide, to be sure, but even so it promised additional revenue for the ancient coal town's manufacturing and service industries, which would devour the digital cash with clever greed to fuel runaway expansion curves on the corporate market graphs. That meant there would be job opportunities at every level. Happy times were officially on their way.

None knew that better than Newcastle's extensive secondary economy of private lounges, pubs, clubs, pimps, and pushers, who were already salivating at the prospect. Like the rest of the city, they could look forward to a fresh decade of providing a good time to the army of middle-class salary-plus-bonus contractors who would descend upon them. To launch the new era, first drinks had been on the house all this weekend, with second drinks half price.

They had a lot of takers.

"There it is," Ian Lanagin said, pointing through the symbols scrawling across the windshield as they rolled into Mosley Street.

Up ahead, at the junction with Grey Street, the blue and green ambulance strobes were shimmering over the fractured ice, casting weird shadows across the walls as they competed with the light-haze seeping out of club doorways and shop windows to illuminate the scene. The big vehicle was parked at an angle, blocking half of the street. Sid nudged their car left, aiming to park behind the ambulance. Proximity radar sketched red caution brackets across the windshield as the front bumper came to a halt a couple of centimeters from the mound of snow thrown up by the plows. He pulled

his woolen hat down over his ears, zipped up the front of his quilted leather jacket, and stepped out into the bitter air.

The cold triggered a tear reflex that he blinked away rapidly, trying to focus on what he could see. Temperature didn't affect the ring of smartcells around his iris that shone minuscule laser pulses down his optic nerves, overlaying the street with sharp display graphics, correlating what he looked at with coordinate locations for the visual log he was running.

As per protocol, Sid's bodymesh—the interconnective network produced by all his smartcells—quested a link with Ian, making sure they remained in contact. Ian was represented by a small purple icon at the corner of his sight. The bodymesh also downloaded the visual log through the car's cell and into the police network.

It was a NorthernMetroServices agency constable who'd responded to the distress code. Sid didn't recognize him, though he knew the type well enough. His private Electronic-Identity (e-i) running inside his bodymesh performed a face capture image, logging a man barely into his twenties—and walking about with a swagger that was immediately depressing. Give him a uniform and a gram of authority and he thought he was running the city.

The agency constable's e-i identified him as Kraemer. It immediately quested Sid's e-i, which responded by confirming his own rank as well as activating the badge woven into his jacket, which now glowed a subtle amber. "You caught this?" Sid asked.

"Aye, sir. On scene fifty seconds after the report was logged."

Well inside the agency's contracted response period, Sid thought, which would help their stats at renewal time. Of course, it depended when the call was officially logged. NorthernMetroServices also ran the Newcastle emergency response center. It wasn't unknown for the center to alert an agency constable a minute or so before they entered the call into the log, so one of their people could always beat the response time.

"Aggravated thirteen-five. Culprits ran off before I arrived."

"Fast runners," Sid muttered. "Seeing as you were here so quick."

"Thump and grab, man," Kraemer said.

"Victim name?"

"His e-i responded with Kenny Ansetal when I quested it. He was barely conscious; buggers gave him a good kicking. The paramedics have him."

"Okay." Sid walked around to the back of the ambulance, where the paramedics had sat the mugging victim on its egress platform to perform triage. The man was in his early thirties, with facial features that Sid's best estimate placed as a mix of Asian and southern Mediterranean origins—which was going to play hell when he came to filling out the ethnicity section of the case file. Of course that opinion's validity was slightly skewed by the amount of blood pouring out of the large gash on the victim's brow. There were deep lacerations on his cheeks, too, which Sid guessed had been caused by ringblades. That much blood tended to obscure the finer features of a person's skin.

"Hello, sir," he called. "We're city police. Can you tell me what happened?"

Kenny Ansetal glanced up at him and promptly vomited. Sid winced. The splatter just missed his shoes.

"I'll go gather some witness intel," Ian said, already backing off.

"You're a shit," Sid grunted.

Ian grinned, winked, and turned away. Even with the biting cold, the mugging had drawn a small crowd, who were still hanging around. What for, Sid never did understand. After all this time in the police it was about the one aspect of human instinctual psychology he could never get a handle on: People simply couldn't resist watching someone else's misfortune.

He waited for a minute while the paramedics managed to spray clotting foam onto Ansetal's forehead wound; then one was sorting out his cheeks while the other performed a quick body check, acting on the information coming out of Ansetal's bodymesh, fingers probing where smartcells were reporting damage. Judging by Ansetal's responses, he'd taken some blows to the ribs and a knee. Kicked when he was down, Sid decided. Common enough for a thirteen-five.

"Sir, can you tell me what happened?"

This time Kenny Ansetal managed to focus. "Bastards," he hissed.

"Try not to move your jaw too much," the paramedic warned as he sealed up a cheek wound.

Sid recognized the anger and murmured commands to his e-i, which obediently paused the police log using an unauthorized non-department fix he just happened to have in a private cache. "Did you recognize your attackers?"

Ansetal shook his head.

"How many of them?"

A hand was raised, two fingers extended.

"Male?"

Another nod. "Fucking Chinese. Kids it were."

Sid shook his head fractionally, pleased with himself for predicting Ansetal's answers. Of course, they were common enough. Ansetal didn't know it, but an expletive-linked ethnic identification was legally classified as a racist indicator. That would have opened up a whole world of misery for Ansetal in court if defense council got hold of a log with that on it.

"Did they take anything, sir?"

Ansetal juddered as some more sealant was applied to his cheek. "My Apple—an i-3800."

New model personal transnet cell, Sid recalled, and top-end. He was an idiot for carrying it around the city center at this time of night. But idiocy wasn't a crime in itself. "I'm just going to recover your visual records, sir."

"Whatever."

Sid held his hand close to Ansetal's forehead and told his e-i to recover the visual memory. His palm had several smartcells configured for mesh reception, with fixes to handle most formats. The short-term memories from Ansetal's iris smartcells downloaded into the police network. Sid watched what Ansetal had seen, closing his own eyes so he could study the images in the grid. The recording was a blur of motion. Two shadowy figures suddenly appeared, hoods drawn against the cold. Then everything degenerated into smears of motion as the beating began.

His e-i ran a capture, which showed him both assailants had the same face. Sid grunted at the familiar features: Lork Zai, the Chinese zone star who featured heavily on tabloid show hot lists these days.

"All right," Sid said. "Now, Kenny, I'm going to give you some unofficial advice.

Best if you don't speak again."

Ansetal gave him a puzzled look. Sid could almost see the middle-class thought processes clicking around behind his blood-painted skin. *I'm the victim here, why are the police giving me warnings?* The answer was simple enough, though they never got it: Never say anything that a lawyer could gain traction on in court—so just don't say anything at all.

"Have you got full-comp crime insurance?" Judging by the relatively expensive clothes, that was a rhetorical question.

A cautious nod.

"Good. Use it. Call their emergency address. They'll dispatch a duty lawyer to your hospital. Now, the agency constable is going to accompany you there to take a full statement. Refuse to do so until your lawyer is present. You have that right. You also have the right to refuse blood composition analysis. Understand?"

"I suppose ..."

Sid held a gloved finger to his lips.

A now worried Ansetal nodded. Sid heard a female giggle from somewhere behind the ambulance, and managed to suppress a frown. "You'll do okay, Kenny. Just keep everything aboveboard and official. Wait for your lawyer. That's the way to go."

Ansetal mouthed: "Thank you."

Sid murmured instructions to his e-i, clearing the paramedic crew to leave the crime scene, then went back to Kraemer. "I've authorized Ansetal's release to the hospital. Go with him to take a statement."

"Aye, I'll get to it."

"Give him time to get some treatment and recover. That was a nasty pounding he got there." He produced a friendly smile. "It will keep you off the street for a while, too."

"Appreciate that, man."

"Then tomorrow I'll need you to pull all the local mesh sensor memories." He gestured around at the buildings. The brickwork and concrete would be covered in smartdust, some of which might have escaped degradation from the snow. "Forward them to my case file. He has insurance, so we can probably drag a budget from the company to run a track on the felons."

"Right you are, man."

Sid almost smiled—the young constable's Geordie accent was nearly as thick as Ian's. The paramedics closed the ambulance doors, firing up the siren as they pulled away. Ian was still talking to the remaining witnesses. Both of them young and female, Sid noticed without the slightest surprise. He'd been partnered with Ian for two years now—they knew each other better than brothers. As far as Ian was concerned the police force was simply the perfect vocation to legitimately meet girls. Dealing with actual criminals came in a very poor second. With not a little envy, Sid acknowledged Ian was very good at his chosen profession. A twenty-eight-year-old gym fanatic who spent his entire salary on good clothes and grooming, he knew every line in the file.

Both "witnesses" were hanging on to his every word as Sid went over to them. Unlike the other onlookers who were now walking away, they had their coats open down the front, showing off their best nightclub dresses—what there was of them. Sid just knew he was getting old when all he could think was how cold the poor things

must be. “Anything useful in those statements, Detective?” he asked loudly.

Ian turned and gave him a derisory stare. “Aye, sorry about this, ladies, my boss is a being a pain again. But what can you do?”

They both giggled at how brave he was confronting his superior so directly, how confident and capable. Sid rolled his eyes. “Just get in the car, man. We’re done here.”

Ian’s voice lowered an octave or two. “I will be calling both of you for vital information. Like which is your favorite club, and when you’re going there again.”

Sid closed his ears to further outbreaks of inane giggling.

It was wonderfully warm inside the car. The bioil fuel cell produced a lot of surplus heat, which the aircon chewed hungrily to redistribute evenly from the vents. Sid unzipped his jacket as he muttered instructions to his e-i, opening a new case file on the mugging. A subdisplay on the bottom of his iris smartcell grid showed the file data building up.

“Oh yeah!” a delighted Ian said as he settled back into the passenger seat. “I’m in there, man. Did you see those lassies? Up for it they were, both of them.”

“Our medical insurance doesn’t provide unlimited penicillin, you know.”

Ian chuckled. “You know what the world’s greatest oxymoron is?”

“*Happily married*,” Sid said wearily.

“In one, pal. In one.”

“The case is a washout. He was mugged by Lork Zai—two of him.”

“Crap on it, that man doesn’t half get about. Got to be the most popular identity mask there is right now.”

Sid checked the time display. It was eleven thirty-eight. Their shift ended at midnight. “We’ll do one more circuit then park it.” Newcastle’s central police station on Market Street was barely four hundred meters away, but it wouldn’t look good to head straight home from an incident with another twenty minutes left on the clock. Some city accountant would fuss about that.

“What did they take?” Ian asked.

“An i-3800.”

“Nice bit of kit. That’ll be a secondary down the Last Mile by lunchtime, mind.”

“Could be,” Sid admitted. Most of the city’s petty crimes these days were committed by desperate, impoverished refugees on their way to St. Libra through the gateway. In the morning they’d be moving through the Last Mile, looking to barter whatever kit they’d acquired during the night along that huge sprawl of unregulated market leading up to the gateway, where everything you could ever possibly need to begin a new life on a fresh world was for sale. Such incidents were responsible for Newcastle’s permanently dismal solved crimes rating: Within hours of their crime spree the felons had run off to another world far beyond the reach of the city police.

Sid reversed the car away from the curb. His iris smartcells flashed up green text in his grid, a message backed up by an identical readout on the windshield. His aural smartcells also started announcing the incident.

“A two-oh-five?” Ian said incredulously. “Man, we’ve only got twenty minutes to go. They cannot do that.”

Sid closed his eyes for a moment—not that it banished the green text. He knew the night had been going too well, with just a few minor incidents in the whole six hours. Now this, a two-oh-five: a body discovered in suspicious circumstances. The only

suspicious thing here was the timing—along with the location: down on Quayside by the old Gateshead Millennium Bridge, half a kilometer away. According to the alert’s text, the river police were only just confirming it was a body they were hauling from the water. Somebody somewhere was keen to get the incident logged fast. And he was the closest senior officer on patrol. “Bastards,” he grunted.

“Welcome back, you,” Ian agreed.

Sid activated the strobes and siren, then told his e-i to authorize a clean route with the city’s traffic management AI. Not that there was much traffic left now, mostly taxis hauling overtoxed revelers back home.

It might have been a short drive, but it was down Dean Street—a steep, sloping road underneath the ancient rail and road arches, canyoned by dark stone walls with blank windows—which took them down to the riverfront. As such, the car’s auto struggled to keep them from slipping on the treacherous ice. Twice they started to fishtail before counter torque was applied and the snow tires managed to grip. At the bottom, the tall buildings opened up to a broad road junction where the landmark Tyne Bridge cut across the water high above. The big splash of spotlights illuminating its arched iron structure was almost lost in the swirl of snow, producing a weird crescent-shaped smear of luminosity hanging weightlessly in the air overhead. Sid steered carefully past the broad stone support pillar and headed down the deserted Quayside road.

“This is taking the piss a bit, isn’t it?” Ian asked as they drove past the glass-and-pillar façade of the Court of Justice. “This close and all?”

“Suspicious doesn’t mean deliberate,” Sid reminded him. “And this is a bad night.” He jabbed a finger at the dark river on the other side of the car. “You fall in there tonight, you die. Fast.”

They took the right-hand fork after the government building. This stretch of pedestrianized road hadn’t seen a snowplow since the middle of the afternoon. Radar showed the snow on the ground was now over ten centimeters thick, with a solid sheet of ice below that. Sid reduced their speed to a crawl. Up ahead, the twin arches of the Millennium Bridge curved across the river with the elegance of a swan’s neck—the recently refurbished pearl-white surface of the upper arch glowing dimly under the shifting rainbow lights that illuminated it. Strobes on the roof of two patrol cars and a coroner’s van flickered through the snow. Sid pulled in behind them.

It was the silence that surprised him when he stepped out of the car. Even with a waterside pub not forty meters farther along Quayside, there was no sound apart from the murmurs of the three agency constables waiting by the promenade rails, looking down at the police boat below. It was maneuvering up to the Quayside wall at the end of the bridge’s glass-boxed wharf, which housed the axial pivot and its hydraulics that rotated the entire structure for bigger ships to pass underneath. Another constable was interviewing a young couple in a patrol car.

Sid waited until his bodymesh had quested into the ringlink—which the waiting constables had already established—and checked the log was working. A two-oh-five wasn’t something you played loose with. His e-i identified and labeled them, along with the duty coroner’s examiner who was just getting out of his van.

“So what have we got?” he asked.

The one whose Sid’s e-i tagged as Constable Saltz caught a pannier thrown up by the boat crew. “Clubbers walking across the bridge saw something snagged on the

guides out there,” he said. “Thought it looked like a body, so they called it in right away. They’re just kids, nothing suspicious with them.”

Sid went over to the railings. He’d walked along Quayside’s promenade a hundred times. It was a mix of old and new buildings that lined the waterfront, all soaked with money to produce the kind of grace and aura of wealth not seen in northern England since the Victorian era two centuries before. The river here wasn’t something the city council would allow to decay; it was the heart of the town, the showpiece that reflected the status of being Europe’s fifth wealthiest (per capita) city, with its iconic bridges and curved-glass, century-old cultural centerpiece, the Sage.

Tonight Sid couldn’t even see the Gateshead bank opposite where the Sage building dominated the Tyne. All he could make out on the black water of the river was the police boat. On the other side of the boat, just visible in the middle of the water, were two sets of pillars, which supported the deep channel guides: like rails lying flat on the water, they made sure large boats passed directly under the center of the Millennium Bridge’s arches when they were cranked up to their highest position.

“Where was the body snagged?” Sid asked.

“This side,” Constable Mardine said. She gave the two detectives a grim smile. “The tide’s going out, so no telling how far it drifted downriver first.”

Saltz finished tying off the mooring rope. Sid clambered over the railings and started down the precarious metal ladder set into the vertical side of the quay, accompanied by the endless soundless fall of snow. Two specialist agency divers helped steady him as he reached the ice-coated deck. They were dressed in top-of-the-range heated water suits with flesh helmets, perfect for keeping them toasty warm while they splashed around in freezing, filthy salt water, all the while trying to attach a harness to an awkward semi-submerged body. The helmets were peeled open to show off cheerful expressions decidedly out of context to the situation and weather, illustrating just how effective the suits were.

The captain at least was genuine city police: Detective Darian Foy. Sid knew him from way back.

“Permission to come aboard,” Sid said.

Darian gave him a knowing grin. “Evening, Detective. Not a good find, I’m afraid.”

“Oh?” Something was very wrong with Darian’s response. Too formal. It made Sid realize this was an important one—for the wrong reasons. He wished he had some kind of full-comp legal insurance like Kenny Ansetal, and that a smartarse solicitor would materialize at his side to make sure everything he said was court-formal perfect. Instead he just had to focus hard on procedure. Having the last three months off didn’t help ...

“Show me,” he said.

Ian was helped onto the boat behind him as Darian led him around to the rear of the small cabin. The body was laid out on a recovery stretcher that the midships winch had lowered onto the decking. A plastic sheet was on top. Two lights on the cabin roof were shining down on it, producing a white spectrum blaze at odds with the somber night.

Darian gave him a last warning look, and pulled the plastic sheet aside.

Sid really hoped he didn’t say the: “Oh fuck,” out loud.

It certainly echoed around inside his skull for long enough. He suspected he had,

though, because directly behind him Ian murmured: “Aye, you can crap on that.”

The man’s frozen-white body was naked. Which wasn’t the bad thing. The nasty and unusual deep wound just above his heart wasn’t the career-killer, either. No, the one thing that jumped out at Sid was the victim’s identity.

He was a North.

That meant there would have to be a trial. One that ended with an utterly solid—beyond legal and media doubt—conviction. Fast.

Once upon a time—131 years ago to be precise—there were three brothers. They were triplets. Born to separate mothers. Perfect clones of their incredibly wealthy father, Kane North. He named them Augustine, Bartram, and Constantine.

Although they were excellent replicas of their brother-father—who in turn had possessed all the notorious drive, worship of money, and intellectual ability that all Norths inherited—they had a flaw. The genetic manipulation that produced them was a technology still in its infancy. Kane’s DNA was fixed by rudimentary germline techniques inside the embryo. It meant that Kane’s distinctive biological identity was locked in and dominant in every cell throughout the new body, including the spermatozoon. Any woman having a child by one of the brothers produced yet another copy of the original. This was the flaw in the new dynastic order: As with all forms of replication, copies of copies inevitably saw some deterioration. Errors began to creep into the DNA as it reproduced itself. 2Norths, as the next generation were called, were almost as good as their fathers—but there were subtle deficiencies now. 3Norths were of an even lower quality. 4Norths had both physiological and psychological abnormalities. 5Norths tended not to survive very long. Rumor had it that after the first 5s appeared, 4s were quietly and diplomatically sterilized by the family.

Nonetheless, the triplets were outstanding men. It was they who embraced the new development of trans-spatial connection while it was in its formative years. They took the risk and founded Northumberland Interstellar, which ultimately came to build the gateway to St. Libra. In turn it was Northumberland Interstellar that pioneered the algaepaddies on the other side, where so much of Grande Europe’s biooil was now produced. They were the board, directing the mighty company’s direction for over fifty years until Bartram and Constantine parted to pursue their own, separate goals, leaving Augustine to lead the biooil colossus.

But it was the 2Norths who made up the higher echelons of the company management. 2Norths who devotedly ran things for their brother-fathers. 2Norths who had cast-iron links into the very heart of Grande Europe’s political and commercial edifice. 2Norths who ruled their fiefdom of Newcastle with benign totality. 2Norths who would want to know who killed one of their brothers, and why. They’d want to know that with some considerable urgency.

*Think!* Sid ordered himself as he shut his eyes to eradicate the sight of his career-killer lying bright and still under the swirling snow. *Procedure. Procedure is king. Always.*

He took a breath, trying to summon up a smooth rational outlook: the unfazed take-charge man. An imaginary product of a thousand boring management courses, like a stereotyped zone media cop.

He opened his eyes.

The dead North clone stared sightlessly up into the undulating colors of the

borealis-plagued sky. His eyes were ruined. Fish? That was an unpleasant notion. Sid gave the odd chest wound a perplexed glance—as if the death weren't enough, he couldn't work out what the hell had left such a puncture pattern. Still, at least something like that slicing into the heart would mean it was a quick death. The North wouldn't have suffered much. Karma was clearly choosing to spread that around everyone else.

Sid held his hand over the corpse's face and ordered his e-i to quest a link with the dead man's bodymesh. The smartcells embedded in the icy dead flesh didn't care that it was dead. They should still be drawing power from the tweaked adenosine triphosphate (ATP) molecules that made up the core of their energy transfer system; an oxidative process that would continue to utilize surrounding fats and carbohydrates, just like genuine cells, until the human meat finally started to decay.

There was no response. Every link icon in Sid's grid remained inert. The North didn't have an active bodymesh. "He's been ripped," Sid said. Reliving the last few moments of the North's life—watching the killer stab him through the heart—would probably have resolved the case immediately. Sid knew it would never be that easy, but procedure ... He bent over, staring at the corpse's ruined eyes. It wasn't easy in the harsh glare thrown by the boat's spotlights, but he could just make out the tiny cuts in the eyeball's lens, as if an insect had been nibbling away. "More than ripped, actually. Looks like they extracted the smartcells, too."

"Aye, man. That'll be a pro hit, then," Ian said.

"Yeah. Turn his hands over please," he asked the divers with their rubber gloves. The skin on the tip of every white frozen finger was missing. Somebody was trying to make identification difficult, which might make sense for a normal crime victim, but a North ...?

"Okay," Sid said abruptly. "Get the examiner down here to clear and retrieve the body. I'm now officially reclassifying this case as a one-oh-one. All records to be backed up and forwarded to my case file." He turned to the two divers. "Was there anything else out there where you found the body?"

"No, sir."

"Captain, once the body's been taken ashore I want this boat back out there, and the area where you found the body searched again."

"Of course," Darian said.

"Is it worth giving the area a sonar sweep?"

"It's not the best resolution, but we can certainly check for anything unusual."

Both of them glanced back at the chest wound.

"Please do that." Sid instructed his e-i to open a one-oh-one level case file. His iris smartcell grid showed the spherical green icon unfolding. Data from the log and the patrol boat began downloading.

"I want the couple who reported it taken down to the station for a full debrief," he told Ian.

"You got it, boss," Ian said sharply.

"Okay then." Sid went over to the bottom of the ladder and waited until the duty examiner had come down. The man suddenly looked very nervous. "I want every procedure carried out in perfect file compliance," Sid told him.

As he climbed back up the ladder, he told his e-i to retrieve the chief constable's

transnet access code. The icon appeared, a small red star glowing accusingly in front of him. Only when he got back up on the promenade and was holding the rail to make sure he didn't slip did he tell his e-i to make the call.

It took a minute for Royce O'Rouke to answer, which was reasonable enough, given the time. And when the icon did shift to blue it was an audio-only link, again reasonable. Sid could just picture him, half awake on the side of the bed, Mrs. O'Rouke blinking in annoyance at the light switched on.

"What the fuck is it, Hurst?" Royce O'Rouke demanded. "You've only been back for six hours. For Christ's sake, man, can you not even piss properly without someone holding your—"

"Sir!" Sid said quickly—he knew only too well the kind of language O'Rouke used at the best of times. "I've just coded a case up to one-oh-one status."

O'Rouke was silent as he adjusted to the implication: Everything he said was part of the official case record. "Go ahead, Detective."

"A body has been found in the river. There's a nasty puncture wound on the chest. I suspect smartcell extraction, too."

"I see."

"Sir, our preliminary identification is a North."

This time the silence really stretched out as grains of snow kissed Sid's nose and cheeks.

"Repeat please."

"It's a North clone, sir. We're at the Millennium Bridge. The examiner's clearing the body to be brought ashore now. In addition, I have four agency constables with me on scene, two divers and Captain Foy on the boat. The two civilians who found the body are having their statements taken."

"I want a lockdown on the area right away. Everyone on scene is to be taken up to Market Street station immediately. No external communication, understood?"

"Yes, sir. I've ordered Captain Foy to sweep the discovery area again once the body is in the examiner's van."

"That's good, right."

"I'm fairly certain he didn't simply fall off the bridge. My preliminary theory is he was dumped upriver somewhere. Body looks like it's been immersed for a while, but I'll confirm when the examiner gets back to me. I was going to assign Detective Lanagin to accompany the coroner's van to the city morgue. He can ensure procedure is followed."

"All right, that's a good start. Hurst, we do not want media attention drawn to this yet—we have to have a clear field to operate the investigation in. The chain of evidence must remain clean."

"Yes, sir. Uh ... Chief?"

"Yes?"

"How do you want to handle notifying next-of-kin?"

Pause again, shorter this time. "I'll take care of that. You concentrate on securing the scene and starting the investigation properly."

"Yes, sir. I'd like permission and authorization to coordinate with the coast guard. I want any ships sailing on the Tyne tonight identified and searched."

"Good call. I'll have the authorization ready for you when you get to Market

Street.”

“Thank you, sir.” Sid watched the icon flick back to purple, then vanish.

Ian stepped off the top of the ladder, back onto the powdery snow of the promenade.

“So?” Sid asked.

“Examiner doesn’t want to commit himself. Naturally,” Ian said. “But best he can do with the water temperature and exposure is confirm immersion for at least an hour.”

“He didn’t fall off the bridge.”

“No. He didn’t fall off the bridge. Too much tidal current.”

“Does our examiner want to go for time of death?”

Ian’s mouth produced a thin smile. “No. That’s down to the autopsy.”

“All right. I’ve spoken to the chief. You’re going with the examiner back to the morgue. Make sure there are no glitches, procedure to be upheld at all times, no exceptions.”

“Aye.”

“I’m back to Market Street. The duty network staff can lock and download all the mesh surveillance memories from along the river for tonight. I need to chase ships as well.”

Ian pulled a dubious expression. “Nothing sailing tonight. Not in this.”

“We can’t see more than a hundred meters, I can’t even see the Baltic Exchange on the other side. There could be a supertanker out there for all we know.”

“We’d know that, man.”

“Detective, we cover every possibility.”

Ian sobered, realizing how many people—and what rank—would review tonight’s log. “Aye, you’re right.” He went over to the waiting agency constables. “Okay, guys, we have to get the body up here. Hope you cleared your medical—it weighs something.”

Sid watched for a moment as the examiner and divers attached ropes to the stretcher so the body could be pulled up onto the promenade. He tried to work out if he’d missed anything. The basics had definitely been covered. He was sure of it. *Starting the investigation properly*. O’Rourke couldn’t have been clearer. In the morning, senior detectives would be moved in to assume command of the case, no doubt aided by a dozen specialist advisers Aldred North would send along from Northumberland Interstellar’s security division. By lunchtime, Sid wouldn’t have to worry about a thing.