

Stephen
HUNT

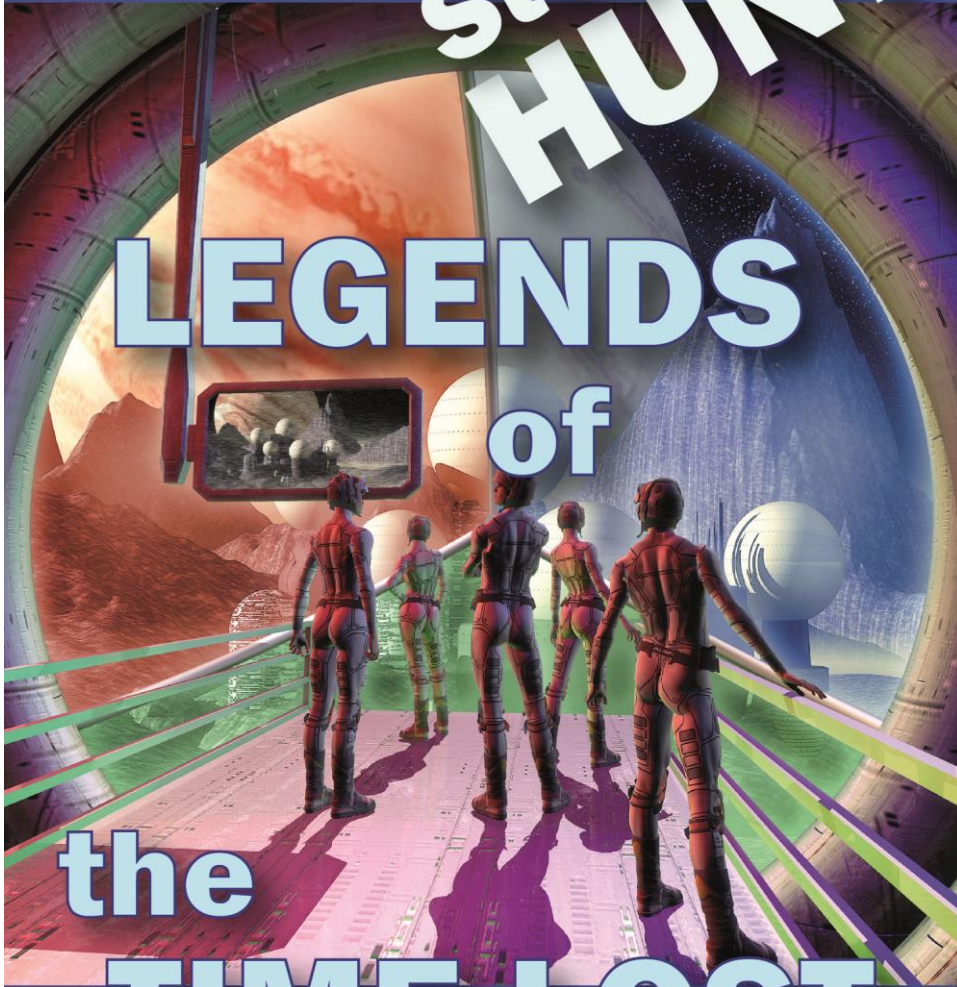
LEGENDS

of

the

TIME-LOST

What You Don't Know Will Kill You!



LEGENDS OF THE TIME-LOST

First published in 2015 by Green Nebula Press

Copyright © 2015 by Stephen Hunt

Typeset and designed by Green Nebula Press

The right of Stephen Hunt to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on a subsequent purchaser.

To follow Stephen on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/SFcrowsnest>

To follow Stephen on FaceBook: <http://www.facebook.com/SciFi.Fantasy>

To help report any typos, errors and similar in this work, use the form at <http://www.stephenhunt.net/typo/typoform.php>

To receive an automatic notification by e-mail when Stephen's new books are available for download, use the free sign-up form at <http://www.StephenHunt.net/alerts.php>

For further information on Stephen Hunt's novels, see his web site at <http://www.StephenHunt.net>

Also by Stephen Hunt

The Far-called series

(Hachette, Gollancz)

In Dark Service

Foul Tides Turning (May 2015)

The Jackelian series

(HarperCollins Voyager in the UK/Macmillan Tor in the USA)

The Court of the Air

The Kingdom Beyond the Waves

Rise of the Iron Moon

Secrets of the Fire Sea

Jack Cloudie

From the Deep of the Dark

The Sliding Void series

Sliding Void

Transference Station

Red Sun Bleeding

The Agatha Witchley Mysteries: as Stephen A. Hunt

In the Company of Ghosts

The Plato Club

Secrets of the Moon (coming soon)

Other works

Six Against the Stars

For the Crown and the Dragon

The Fortress in the Frost

For links to these books, visit <http://www.StephenHunt.net>

PRAISE FOR STEPHEN HUNT'S FICTION

'Mr. Hunt takes off at racing speed.'

— The Wall Street Journal

'Compulsive reading for all ages.'

— GUARDIAN

'Studded with invention.'

— THE INDEPENDENT

'Hunt's imagination is probably visible from space. He scatters concepts that other writers would mine for a trilogy like chocolate-bar wrappers.'

— TOM HOLT

'All manner of bizarre and fantastical extravagance.'

— DAILY MAIL

'To say this book is action packed is almost an understatement... a wonderful escapist yarn!'

— INTERZONE

'Hunt has packed the story full of intriguing gimmicks... affecting and original.'

— PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

'A rip-roaring Indiana Jones-style adventure.'

— RT BOOK REVIEWS

'A curious part-future blend.'

— KIRKUS REVIEWS

'An inventive, ambitious work, full of wonders and marvels.'

— THE TIMES

'Hunt knows what his audience like and gives it to them with a sardonic wit and carefully developed tension.'

— TIME OUT

'A ripping yarn ... the story pounds along... constant inventiveness keeps the reader hooked... the finale is a cracking succession of cliffhangers and surprise comebacks. Great fun.'

— SFX MAGAZINE

'Put on your seatbelts for a frenetic cat and mouse encounter... an exciting tale.'

— SF REVU

— CHAPTER 1 —

Hugo watched with a mixture of apprehension and sick interest as James took out his pen and began to scrawl something on the side of the long silver tube. If there was any limit on his fellow student's ability to vandalize, deface, break and otherwise mangle a perfectly good piece of equipment, then Hugo had yet to discover it. Hugo tugged at Becky's coat and pointed at the other boy with as much subtlety as possible in the increasingly dim hope that she might be able to put a brake on the teenager's behaviour. *Do I really want to involve her in this?* That was a tough call. Hugo considered James a friend, but James' interest in Becky and his friend's unusual willingness to listen to the girl placed the two of them in something of a competitive quandary as far as his own attentions for Becky went. Loyalty just about triumphed against jealousy and rivalry in this particular race.

'He's at it again,' Hugo whispered.

Becky sighed. 'Of course he is. James could be at archaeological site where they'd just discovered the Ark of the Covenant, and his first instinct would be to steal a blade and engrave "James Griffin is Boss" in its side.'

Actually, Hugo suspected that their friend would try to open the box in the hope he might recreate the melting faces scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. And the person whose face most needed melting at the present moment was Doctor Hestakov, the teacher in charge of the school's visit to the Brookhaven National Laboratory in New Jersey. Sadly, the irritable, frequently bellicose teacher's eyes were still fully functional and non-melted and had just caught sight of the vandalism James was inflicting.

'Mister Griffin!' growled the doctor in his thick Eastern European accent, catching hold of James' ear and pulling him away from the expanse of expensive shining steel with enough force to make him drop his pen. 'If decorative effect had been desired on the Very Large Hadron Collider, I am sure the two billion dollars a year spent on maintaining this facility would have included a graffiti artist on its staff.'

'I got rights,' grunted James, rubbing the crimson rim of his ear lobe. He put on a good show of scorn for the teacher, but bluff and bluster is all it was. There were probably crime family hitmen once taught by Hestakov who were more afraid of this teacher than they were of their own mob bosses. Vasily Hestakov was short. He was wide. He was mean. And he was harder than the alloys the army built main battle tanks out of.

'Yes, but the great Vasily Hestakov was born to the bosom of Mother Russia,' barked the doctor, 'and that glorious nation is a famous violator of such niceties. Human rights. Human wrongs. Who is to stand in judgement on such matters?'

One of the other teachers on the field trip, Mrs Canters, came over to try to fill that role. She was thin and mousey with thick-lensed tortoiseshell spectacles that made students feel they were drowning on the bottom of a lake with her peering down at them. 'You need to make better decisions, James. Was that a good decision or a bad decision do you think?'

'Worst decision I ever made was arriving at the New Excellence Academy,' muttered James.

Hugo might have given his friend that one. *Except that none of us exactly had a choice in the matter.* The NEA took in a wide range of students. Some had parents with money who paid wheelbarrows full of it to offload their offspring on the boarding school. Others were dirt poor and counted as the wild turnaround cases that justified the school's status as a charity. But everyone attending the forbidding, remote ranch-like school had one thing in common. None of them were exactly wanted at home, if they even had one.

'Speak up for the teacher,' glowered Doctor Hestakov.

'A bad decision,' said James.

'We punish the behaviour, not the person,' said Mrs Canters. 'If you continue to be disruptive during today's visit, you certainly won't be visiting the amusement park at the end of the trip. Do you have any idea what an honour our school being here today is?'

'A *great* honour,' announced the doctor, as if that fact hadn't already been repeated a hundred times in the weeks leading up to their trip. Hestakov puffed out his barrel-sized chest. It was like watching a grizzly inhaling before an attack. 'The barriers of the universe are being pulled back today, and it is our class which won the National Science Competition to stand here and witness the initial achievements of the Very Large Hadron Collider. At last!'

Yes, Hugo mused, *that is the oddest thing about us being here today. How the heck did we beat off all the other schools to win this?* He glanced at Becky, wondering not for the first time if she had hacked the competition online to make sure their school won the trip. Becky Barrow certainly had the illegal computer skills, as the FBI custody order which had seen her banished to their school clearly showed. But what Hugo couldn't for the life of him figure out is why she'd want to rig a science competition. *I suppose it's always possible we could have won the competition fair and square.* Then Hugo came to his senses. *Sure, beating the rich-kid feeder schools for MIT and Yale.* Students from those places possessed such massive brains they needed to turn sideways to walk into their science labs. Most of the students at Hugo's school thought that the *Very Large Hadron Collider* was the biggest bad-ass vomit-comet fairground ride waiting for them at the end of this trip. And as for *Exotic Particles*, they believed that was a nearby dance club they certainly wouldn't be allowed to visit.

Hugo decided a little distraction might be order. 'Mrs Canters, did you see those demonstrators outside the lab's fence?' Of course, he knew she had. Even if she hadn't, it was kind of hard to miss the stench of old broken eggs hurled against the side of their bus when they had got off. 'Do you think the protesters might have a point? I mean, that switching on the new particle accelerator down here might cause the end of the universe?'

The older teacher hesitated. Hugo suspected her working knowledge of science's long march of progress had halted a decade before the invention of the mobile phone.

'Well, I am sure they mean well,' hawed Mrs Canters. 'But they are operating from their fear, not using their minds and engaging with the science.'

'Such people are decadent ignorants,' growled Doctor Hestakov. 'Enemies of progress and civilization. Every time a newly constructed particle accelerator is about to be switched on they sing

the same old song . . . it will mean the end of the world! There will be artificial black holes created! There will be a singularity manufactured to rip apart reality and all life on Earth shall end. This is the ill-educated brain of the highest form of moron protesting.'

'But they do mean well,' insisted the female teacher. Hugo smiled inside. *Placards and slogans are like catnip to this kitty.*

'Higgs bosons will not become metastable at energies close to 100bn gigaelectronvolts,' barked the doctor, 'and the universe will certainly not be destroyed by catastrophic vacuum decay, with a reality-destroying explosion expanding at the speed of light. This is the purest form of idiot thinking!'

Job done. With the doctor off on his favourite rant and Mrs Canter defending the rights to peaceful protest, tossed eggs aside, Hugo and his two friends slipped off into the anonymity of the other students from their class.

'I'll tell you whose world *is* going to end,' said Becky, fixing James with her glinting blue eyes. 'Yours if you start trying to tag the particle accelerator again.'

'What I heard,' said James. 'Meta-giga-stable-decay-electron-doom-ray.'

'Come on,' said Hugo. 'We've only got half an hour to go, then they fire this machine up, call it a victory for science and we all drive away back to the hotel.'

'Maybe it's going to be like when they shoot the Death Star,' said James. 'Monster laser beams and WHUPPoooo.' He sure sounded hopeful. Like this was definitely the preferred option.

'I guess it depends on which Death Star you mean,' said Hugo. 'They had different power cores.'

Becky shook her head. 'You two are such nerds.'

Hugo looked at her askance. 'Says the girl who can only use internet access on a tablet with National Security Agency spyware installed on it.'

'Only use the surveilled tablet *when they're looking.*'

'Which is always,' said Hugo.

'You're such a redneck, Hugo,' said James. 'Man, I bet you wish you were still in the woods with your uncle and your crossbow and all running around panicky and stuff, waiting for the Black Helicopters to come and land some dudes to smash down the door of your log cabin.'

'Well, they never landed,' said Hugo. Only cancer had arrived looking for his Uncle Matt, but it had been enemy enough. *He's right, though. I do wish I was back there.* There had been a quiet about the woods. A peaceful stillness, especially in the early mornings when the mist burnt off leaving the grass clearings crisp and shining. The New Excellence Academy was isolated enough to count as a rural location, but staying in its clean, clinical, brightly modern rooms felt nothing like living with his uncle. *It's the difference between freedom and captivity.* Hugo would swap warm

radiators in winter and unlimited free broadband for the sweet smell of his uncle's pipe and the sound of the toads croaking around the lake any day of the year.

'Lucky you,' said Becky. 'And as a rule, the "dudes" crash through the window, not the door.'

Hugo suspected that out of all three of them, she knew what she was talking about here.

The three friends drifted around the facility with the rest of their class, but in reality there wasn't a whole lot of interest to see. The scientists and engineers worked deep underground in a massive doughnut-shaped concrete passage about three times as wide as a subway tunnel. The tunnel was filled by the collider's bulk, looking to the entire world like some giant ring-shaped steel water pipe. The tube was lined with instrument stations, snaking cables and smaller pipes, but it still looked like it should have been pumping sewage rather than a channel for particles to be accelerated around the ring, smashed together, and in the resulting explosions, the secrets of the universe exposed. Tunnel and pipe carried on and on for many miles. An earlier ring-shaped collider had been built underground decades before, and this lay in an older tunnel above them - too expensive to remove for scrap. The previous model had been rendered obsolete by the construction of the *Very Large Hadron Collider*. The VLH collider's housing had to be excavated even deeper underground. Hugo's class had used a room-sized elevator to descend down here. Maybe in time there would be another, longer, deeper, wider tunnel complex dug out below them to hold a third collider, an extra circle added to science's bull's-eye. Hugo and his companions milled around the tunnel outside a control centre looking down on this section of the accelerator. After a short talk concerning the massive metal pipe's true purpose, much of which went over the students' heads, they were ushered up into the control centre. Here, Hugo found metal banks of computer consoles and screens manned by scientists with a view of the accelerator through a narrow slit of a window. A low hum buzzed across the room; the clatter of keyboards; the hushed conversational chatter of a church before a service. Off on the console room's side a spectator viewing gallery had been built, a floor-to-ceiling glass screen to observe the particle accelerator below, tiered plastic seating capable of holding twice as many people as had arrived with the school. It was sealed off from the noise of the console room by a transparent glass wall. Everyone filed inside and took their seats. Hugo sat in one of the centre rows at the edge of the room, Becky and James to his left. There was a lectern at the front of the gallery with a microphone, and one of the scientists assigned to shepherd the students around took position behind it. He introduced himself as Dennis Jefferson then started talking about the years of work which preceded the ring's initial firing. He looked young, only just graduated from college. Hugo guessed that the task of nursemaiding their school party hadn't been the most sought-after job on the afternoon's work rota, especially on such an important day, but give Dennis his due. He made the best of it. Hugo's eyes drifted to the corner of the room . . . a screen with a countdown underway to the first firing. *Five minutes left on the clock*. Mrs Canters and another teacher in their party, Mr Urwin, stood behind the government scientist, nodding every so often to show they thoroughly approved of, and perhaps even understood, everything being explained by the scientist. They also quietly scanned the crowd of students, ensuring nobody had their phone secretly cradled in their lap for games and surfing. *So where's the doctor?* It was unlike Hestakov to miss a golden opportunity to catch one of his students disrespecting the school's triumphant competition win by playing on a phone, rather than listening to this boring lecture. Especially since the school party had been strictly ordered to turn off all phones after they stepped off the bus . . . in case their signals interfered with sensitive measuring equipment below. Then Hugo

located the foreign teacher. He was outside in the control room; knelt down, tying a shoe lace. But as Hugo watched, the doctor sneaked a sly glance at the scientists engaged along the consoles to his side, and then his left hand snaked out. He tugged a thumb drive out of a computer port low on the console, quickly dropping it inside the pocket on his tweed jacket, before his hand went down to his other shoe, tightening the laces as if that had been his intention all along. The manoeuvre had been smoothly executed; completed in a blink. All the skills of a pickpocket in action. If Hugo hadn't been seeking the doctor at precisely that second, he never would have seen the act. *What on Earth is Hestakov up to? Copying information, maybe? Is he stealing data? Maybe somebody was lined up to pay for whatever information the doctor had stolen, but this centre was meant to be an open, internationally funded project. Most of what happened here would eventually end up loaded on the centre's web site for free download and analysis by any scientist who wanted it. This theoretical physics research wasn't, as far as Hugo knew, commercially sensitive . . . there were certainly no military applications that made it worth selling. And if he Hestakov was going to steal something, surely the early test data from firing the collider is what he would want? Why bother stealing anything before the first experiment had even been conducted? None of this made any sense to Hugo. He glanced over at Becky and James, but they were staring down at the lectern with the vaguely blank gaze of minds drifting elsewhere. Neither of his friends had noticed the doctor's uncharacteristic act of pilfering. Doctor Hestakov entered the viewing gallery, shut the glass door and coolly strolled down to stand behind the scientist with his fellow teachers. Not sweating. Not nervous. As frosty and as implacable as always. A large, man-sized slab of Eastern European rancour. Hugo had to work to keep from staring at the doctor. Giving away that he now knew something that no other student from the academy knew. *That Vasily Hestakov is a dishonest, conniving thief.**

If before, Hugo could hardly focus on the lecture in front of him, now he really couldn't. *What can I do? Inform on the teacher to Mrs Canters or Mr Urwin? The teachers in the school were as wary of the old bear as any of his students. What if they didn't believe Hugo? Did he expect them to strip-search one of their own colleagues? Or Hugo could inform the complex staff of what he had seen and trust that their internal security, already stretched defending the fence from protesters, would be willing to act against a senior invited guest. How unbearable would Hugo's life be after they shook the doctor down? But is doing nothing really an option? He'd been raised to tell the truth and do the right thing no matter what the cost. Hugo could only imagine what his uncle would say if he had lived. Uncle Matt never took any truck with petty bureaucrats, laws, customs or habits stopping him from doing what he thought was the right thing, and damn the personal or wider cost. Why couldn't someone else have seen this? Why does it always have to be me?* Murmurs in the audience brought Hugo back to the present. The countdown ticked down to completion on the screen. *Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Activation!* The lights in the complex dimmed and flickered, but no cannon-like blast sounded from firing. A massive amount of power had suddenly been leeched from across the state, force-fed into the particle collider. Power stations had been placed on overtime just to make sure there weren't energy outages in New York. From the control room next door wilds shouts and hollers of excitement filtered through, loud even from the other side of the glass. Hugo looked over to find scientists slapping each other's backs and a flurry of high-fiving hands. *You'd think we'd just landed a manned flight on Mars.*

By the lectern, the scientist tapped the microphone and indicated the steel conduit down below. 'Ladies and gentlemen of the New Excellence Academy, you have just witnessed a magnificent moment of history. The first firing of the Very Large Hadron Collider. Some of you will go

on to pursue science as your career, and when you join your laboratories and institutions, whatever your chosen field, you will be able to say—’ His voice cut off with the lights, their gallery and the control centre next door suddenly plunged into darkness. ‘Well, that’s strange.’

Shouts rose from the control room, scientists and engineers worried that the sudden power outage might have crashed their systems and lost all the priceless scientific data captured during the collider’s first firing. They were all still in total darkness, though. Some of the students started to panic. Hugo heard the voice of the scientist at the front of the room, calling to his colleagues next door. ‘Can we go to battery lighting please?’ Then, presumably for the benefits of the students. ‘Nothing to worry about, now. The power grid must have been overwhelmed by the requirements of our new collider. We did warn the energy companies they would need to be exceptionally careful and plan ahead for extra capacity, but obviously they underprovided on the requirements we passed them.’

‘Stay in your seats,’ ordered Mr Urwin’s voice. ‘The people next door don’t need the likes of you tripping over each other while they try to restore power.’

Suddenly little flashes of light switched on across the viewing gallery. Hugo realised that the students were pulling out their phones and activating torch apps.

‘Can we do that here?’ queried Mrs Canters. ‘I saw *No Phone* signs next door.’

The scientist started to answer, but whatever opening words he had planned, they were overwhelmed by a roaring sound as though a storm-surge rushed down the tunnel outside, the hard plastic seat below Hugo’s bottom trembling, lightly at first, then shaking as wildly as if he’d been strapped early into one of his much-promised theme park rides. Phones tumbled out of students’ hands, oblongs of light toppling down the tiered levels towards the glass viewing window. Screams and cries echoed all around Hugo, made worse by not being able to see what was happening. *Has the tunnel been breached by an underwater river?* Hugo imagined the claustrophobic nightmare of trying to claw his way up the emergency stairs next to the lifts which had carried the class down here, travelling mine shaft-deep. He imagined stumbling through a pitch black nightmare while flood waters surged around them.

Someone in the row in front of Hugo screamed, ‘Earthquake, it’s an earthquake!’

‘No, it’s a bomb,’ yelled a student behind him. ‘Eco-terrorists! It’s those protesters!’

Hugo felt a hand cupping his. Becky Barrow’s nervous fingers. ‘What’s going on?’ she said, her voice oddly calm. ‘It can’t be an earthquake, can it? There’s never been one before in New York State, has there?’

‘No,’ was all that Hugo could summon to say before a student fell on top of him, landing between him and Becky, bowling her out of his grasp and knocking the air out of Hugo’s lungs. The impact pushed him into the aisle in front of the glass partition wall. Wood-cracking sounds came from the room next door accompanied by little pops of light, and Hugo realised the consoles were exploding, monitors blowing out in showers of sparks.

Then a hideous crashing sound. Pieces of concrete masonry collapsed from the roof smashing all around Hugo. Debris rained over him as he dragged himself to his feet, trying to remember where the control room door was, recall where James and Becky sat to his side. He breathed hard and fast through gusts of building dust, coughing and choking on the filthy soup of air. Grit itched in his eyes. *Am I going to die here? No, I can't.* But then, why couldn't Hugo? How many young people had woken up in the morning before jumping in their car to drive to see a film or do some shopping in the mall, never realising a car crash was going to make this their last morning on the planet? Or a tsunami. Or a bombing. Or an earthquake. *Or this.* Nobody planned for such things. Nobody knew death was coming for them. It just arrived knocking regardless, stupid, careless and blind.

Emergency batteries finally kicked in, the ceiling's strip lighting returning to life, but flickering and intermittent, large swathes of the roof hanging and swaying from the ceiling. Sparking while broken cables dangled precariously. Hugo navigated spluttering through clouds of dust, searching for Becky and James. He found his two friends rising to their feet from the area forward of the aisle they had been sitting on. Both students brushed themselves down, standing swaying uneasily, gazing around shocked at the scene of carnage. In front of them, the collider and its tunnel lay completely buried by rubble. Anyone working inside the section beneath the viewing gallery would have been crushed to death instantly. On the other side of the cracked partition glass wall, the control room had received a worse battering than their viewing gallery. Some of the consoles had been crushed, engineers lying under mounds of fallen concrete and rock. Their bodies stretched out still, unconscious or dead, it was hard to tell. The students and teachers from the NEA had gotten away lightly. Shouts and cries echoed all around Hugo in what was left of the viewing gallery, cracks from rubble still falling, sending fresh waves of dust up again, pleas for help, prayers, everyone talking at once.

'We need to help the wounded,' said Hugo. 'Dig them out from under the rubble.' He glanced around. There was nothing down here to help them in a rescue operation except a couple of fire extinguishers left half hanging from wall mounts.

'But we don't have spades,' said James.

'Then we'll use these,' said Becky, holding up her hands.

Dennis Jefferson walked unsteadily towards them. The face of the scientist's dark black skin was spotted grey with rock dust and he was blinking blood away from a cut on his forehead. 'We need to get paramedics down here. You move a person as injured as some of the staff over there without the next step being a helicopter ride direct to casualty, it'll kill them.'

They pushed their way from the visitor centre into the ruined control room, a small, desperate crowd of survivors forming around the exit. Their escape was barred by thick double doors sealed shut in their face.

'These are jammed,' grunted Mr Urwin, part of a crowd of people unsuccessfully trying to yank the double doors open.

'This is a fire door with a digital lock,' called one of the scientists. 'The system must have locked us down during the . . . well, whatever *that* was.'

They attempted again and again to pull the double doors open by hand, leveraging it down the middle with a strut of steel fallen from the ceiling supports, but no amount of physical force appeared to have any effect on the heavy, metal-fronted exit.

‘Let me have a look,’ said Becky, pushing forward.

‘I don’t think putting more bodies behind the lever will work,’ said Mr Urwin.

‘I wasn’t thinking of forcing it that way,’ said Becky. She inspected the side of the door and then tore a metal panel back, revealing a cluster of electronics and cables. ‘This is the door’s opening mechanism.’ She poked inside its innards for a minute, examining the wiring like a vet prodding a pet. ‘There’s no power entering the circuit. Pass me your tablet.’ One of the students handed her a dented iPad. She turned it off and pried open the back of the computer, then tugged a pair of wires from the wall, winding them around the tablet’s battery connectors. Another minute of poking the interior of the panel, and when she powered up the tablet, there was a clacking as the metal bolts holding the two doors together retracted.

‘I forgot you’re a member of the Electronics Club,’ said Mr Urwin.

She never learnt that in the club, Hugo thought. But Becky just smiled as though it was the teacher who was the cleverest person in the room. She’s pretty good at that, too. If the FBI Computer Crimes Unit had bought into Becky’s act as smoothly as Urwin, she would never have joined the academy.

They still needed to wrench the doors open by hand. No power for the motors to open them, but at least it was possible now. The doors slid apart with the screech of a dying cat, revealing a wall of darkness outside. Emergency lighting hadn’t kicked in beyond the control room. The underground passages they had followed from the lift lay black and dark before them. Hugo grimaced. *We’ll need torch mode on our phones to get out.* And judging by the state of things outside, they’d be climbing the emergency stairwell, not taking the elevator.

‘Anyone too hurt to walk up the stairs, sit down back inside the control room,’ said Mr Urwin. ‘We’ll find whoever is coordinating the relief effort above ground and have stretcher parties sent down to you.’

‘What if there’s another earthquake?’ asked Mrs Canters, worriedly. ‘An aftershock?’

‘I think we’re safe for the moment,’ said Mr Urwin. ‘The nearest seismic fault line us is a thousand miles away. What hit us was an underground gas pocket igniting, perhaps set off by the collider’s energy burst.’

‘We need to leave in single file,’ said Dennis Jefferson. ‘I’ll go first. Make sure there’s a working torch every few people. If I come across a rubble obstruction, I’ll call out and we’ll stop, backtrack and find another way out. I don’t want to risk cave-ins by trying to dig our way through.’

James reached down to the floor and lifted up a grimy metal sign that had been dislodged by the quake.

‘What are you doing?’ demanded Becky.

‘Just taking a souvenir,’ said James. ‘Hope it says *No Phones*. I’ll hang the sign over my bed and look at it every time I play *Tribes of the First World* on my iPhone. It’ll remind me to never get a job as a scientist. Or as a miner.’

‘Why don’t you just slip a wedding ring off the finger of one of the poor souls under the rubble back there,’ said Becky, disgusted. ‘You’re a ghoul.’

‘Cut me a break. It’s only a reminder of how glad I am to make it out of here alive,’ said James. ‘I’m not looting! It’s for me. I’m never going to sell it online.’ He gave Becky a look that suggested passing it on for profit had barely even crossed its mind.

It took a while to retrace their steps through the darkness. Hugo wondered if the ruptured ceiling had allowed water to leak into the research centre, because the air seemed oddly damp down here now. Thankfully, they encountered no flooded sections or rubble-blocked corridors. As Hugo had anticipated, when they reached the lifts, the power was still out. The doors had fallen off the emergency stairs and lay flattened across the floor. He followed the crocodile line of survivors into the stairwell. Even in the half-light from their phones, Hugo could see the emergency stairs running parallel to the lifts had been damaged far beyond the devastation of the gallery and control room below. The walls had burst and split in places, rubble lay strewn across the stairs, cracks fissuring out in every direction. Oddly, there was none of the cloying dust in the control centre. Perhaps the dust had escaped into the air above, or maybe a ventilation system had rumbled back into operation, clearing it away. Up they went, lights flicking out from their phones, peeling back the darkness in little-revealing grey circles. Hugo didn’t have a phone on him, but he had an old-style watch on his wrist. His legs were aching from exertion after ten minutes. By half an hour of climbing his calf muscles had been transformed into jelly. During Hugo’s ascent they came to a level with a pair of large steel doors sealed shut. A sign next door to the exit read *EDC 10*.

‘This is the level where the old collider is,’ said one of the scientists, making idle conversation as the students trudged ever higher. ‘We’re half-way to the surface now. Be out of here soon.’

‘I don’t remember that sign being on the wall, though,’ said another member of staff. ‘What’s EDC stand for?’

‘Earmarked Decommissioned, maybe?’

‘And this is level five, not ten.’

‘Well, Building Services never could get anything right.’

They kept on climbing. It had seemed to only take seconds coming down in the lift to visit the tunnel containing the collider ring. Walking up wasn’t easy on any of them. *But we’re alive*, Hugo told himself. *That’s enough*. Shouts of joy drifting from above signalled the survivors had found the exit. Hugo followed, exhausted and stumbled into the clean air.

It was night-time outside now. The underground gas explosion had completely totalled the research complex, mounds of rubble scattered everywhere, girders jutting out like bones. Beyond the forest, the silhouettes of apartment building roofs were visible huddled under the sky in the

distance. Their power was out, no lights glinting from the faraway town. Firing up the collider had created a complete power outage, perhaps across the entire state. *There are going to be law suits over this.* There was no sign of rescuers sifting through the rubble. No indication of the mob of protesters who had ringed the facility during their arrival, fences knocked down and the crowd fled for their lives. Their coaches had vanished too, along with all the vehicles from the car park. *Everyone's been evacuated.* It was oddly quiet and then Hugo realised what the sounds reminded him of. *Being back in the woods.* Night birds whistling out there. Toads croaking. A slow cicada chorus.

'This is shocking,' said Mrs Canters, crossly, surveying the scene. 'We've been completely abandoned up here. No fire engines, ambulances or police cars. And they know there was a school visit inside the viewing gallery.'

'I can't see fires burning?' said one of the engineers. 'If that was an earthquake, you'd think at least some of our buildings would be still in flames.'

'Not a quake . . . it was a gas pocket that ignited. There could be danger from fresh gas explosions,' said another technician. 'Everyone is standing back in case this place lights up.'

Hugo scanned the night sky. Plenty of stars and a pearl white half-moon crescent, but no news or police drones, news crews or rescue helicopters circling.

Dennis Jefferson joined them. 'There must be an emergency services' cordon down the road with a police roadblock. We'll walk to it and get the authorities to send a convoy of ambulances back, workers with sniffer dogs to begin digging for people alive under the rubble. They'll send help or someone's going to get sued.'

'What if another gas pocket ignites?' asked Mrs Canters.

'This was not result of a gas pocket,' said Doctor Hestakov. 'This is certainly an earthquake. Look at the rubble around the complex. What you see are patterns from rupture propagation and nucleation zone.'

'You're not a geographer,' accused the bespectacled teacher.

'I visit aftermath of earthquake in Spitak, Armenia, many years ago. Six thousand killed. That was real earthquake.'

A worrying thought occurred to Hugo. *How bad is this disaster if they haven't got to us yet? Still pulling people out of that town we passed outside the forest.* The doctor attempting to dishonestly advance his career by filching the centre's research data seemed like small beans right now.

Students and research staff held phones aloft, trying to locate a wireless signal, but the power outage had knocked out the area's cell towers because nobody could lock onto a network to make a call. Not even pick up stored text messages. *I wish I had someone to phone. Or at least, someone to call who would care.* A few of the people from the academy photographed each other, camera flashes as they grabbed night shots of the wreckage and the survivors. It wouldn't be long before images of this disaster would be spreading across every social network and video sharing site

in the world. But Hugo no longer cared. He didn't care about whether this was an earthquake, gas explosion, or a series of bombs planted by some crazy lunatic protesters who had hightailed it into the night. Right now, a hot shower and a squeaky mattress at their cheap hotel beckoned like the glint of a Five Star luxury paradise.

Students from the academy traipsed wearily into what was left of the car park, squatting across the crumbled tarmac with teachers and the worst-injured members of the centre's staff, while a party of twenty survivors from the facility climbed over the collapsed fence and headed down the main road through the forest.

'I don't understand,' announced James, perplexed.

Hugo looked over. 'What is it?'

'My *No Phones* sign, I don't think it is . . .' He passed the torch light from his phone across the buckled metal plate. The words were faded and hard to read in the near dark, even with the light. 'And it's pretty rusted up. Must be ancient, from the 1950s or something.'

'It's not a sign,' said Becky, looking closer. 'It's made of brass . . . it's a plaque.'

'But what it says, it doesn't make sense.'

James held his phone steady, keeping the light from reflecting off a few spots that had kept their polish. Hugo could just make out the words on the first line. *In Memory of the Victims of the Brookhaven Collider Disaster*. 'Was there an accident with the first collider? Or a tunnel collapse during construction of the new one?'

'Not unless they covered the accident up, man,' said James. 'I didn't hear squat about any of that.'

'Cover up a secret accident by hanging a brass memorial sign on the wall outside the visitor centre for journalists to photograph every time they come walking through?' said Becky. 'That's certainly genius.'

Hugo pointed at the plaque. 'Rub the grime off the last line. What does it say?'

James polished his stolen trophy with the sleeve of his shirt until the words were just about discernible.

First Centenary Memorial Dedication. 2120.

James shook his head. 'Over two thousand people dead, that's a hell of a lot of corpses.'

'I don't think it's a death toll. It's a centenary date,' said Becky. 'A hundred years after the disaster. We went down into the research centre on June 12th 2020. So a hundred years after our visit would be . . .'

'2120,' said Hugo. 'The early twenty second century.'

'What are you saying?' spluttered James.

'This is memorial plaque to *us*,' said Becky. 'Put up a hundred years after we died.'

'We're not dead,' shouted James. 'You're crazy. We're here! Look! This is Brookhaven.'

'Here in Brookhaven,' said Becky. 'But not *when* in Brookhaven.'

'You're not making any sense!'

'They must have believed we'd been vaporized,' said Becky. 'Just a smoking void left when they hung a memorial marker outside the hole. When the collider fired for the first time, our section of the centre jumped out. We leapt forward in time: us, the entire control room and visitor's centre.'

James tossed the sign to the ground. 'But we're still here?'

Hugo didn't know if his friend meant in Brookhaven, still alive, or both. 'No. There has to be another explanation. This can't be the future.' Hugo gazed around the wreckage, hills of concrete still and silent. 'The disaster's happened recently, surely? The centre's been flattened, not rebuilt. There's nobody's here. No sign of life. If this was the twenty second century there'd be people. Flying cars and jet packs and robots and hologram advertising like a damn science fiction movie. The centre would be a museum.'

'The twenty second century is just when that memorial to us went up,' said Becky. 'Look how old and rusted it is. Brass metal rusts really slowly. We could be thousands of years later.'

'There's nothing here,' said Hugo, shocked. *This can't be the future. Where is everybody?* 'Nobody and nothing.'

That's when the frantic screaming started from the edge of the car park, proving Hugo sadly and fatally wrong on both counts.