

SAM'S NIGHTMARE

Smack. I swat the mosquito from my arm. Then another and another.

The guy opposite me laughs, then says, "Welcome to Brazil, Sam."

I look around. A river. A boat.

"Um, thanks," I say, surprise in my voice.

"I'm Pablo," the man says. We shake hands.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" I say, trying to place the older man's friendly face.

"We saw each other, recently, but did not properly meet. It was in Paris."

"Aha—I saw you at the Council!" I say, making the connection. "You're one of the Councillors."

"Yes."

I look around to get my bearings. We're on a boat—a big, old ferry, stuffed with hundreds of passengers and tonnes of cargo, riding low in the brown water of what must be the Amazon River. The walkway where we stand is busy with passengers hurrying and pushing up and down the boat. Vendors have set up little shops on board, selling

food and drink, trading wares and playing card games with customers. It's a small floating village, chugging its way along the epic waterway.

I'm dreaming.

"Why am I meeting you here?" I ask, adjusting the straps of my backpack over my shoulders after someone bumps past. "No offence, but you're not who I was expecting."

"I am here to tell you about this," Pablo says, warily taking a plastic-covered map from his bag.

I recognize the map, and I instinctively look up at the staggered decks above us, making sure no one is eavesdropping.

"I have studied this," Pablo says, tapping the map. It is one of the maps I discovered with Gabriella inside the book box from the Vatican library. This is a photocopy or printout, but definitely shows the same familiar lines and shapes. "I'm afraid it is not much help. But . . ."

"But?"

"Perhaps with the right guide." Pablo looks from the map to me.

"And that's not you, is it?" I ask. "So who? Who do I need?"

"I think only you know the answer to that."

"But I—I don't know anyone in Brazil . . ." I reply.

Who could possibly be my guide here?

I absently look at those around me, as if the answer will present itself in one of these faces—faces that all seem to turn toward me.

Why are they all looking at me?

"They sense you're afraid. You are looking for help and searching it out among them. You are starting to . . . change things, to alter them."

I look around again—I can't see anyone who looks like they could help me, although all the faces, old and young, are still looking back at me. The more I look, the more they stare back. The sky suddenly clouds over and the wind picks up a chill.

"This . . . this doesn't feel right," I say, backing away from the rail until I feel the solid wooden wall behind me. The on-board commotion has dulled—they're no longer going about their business, no one is talking.

A panic rises inside me. "Pablo—what's going on here?"

"Sam, it's OK. This is what happens when you start *steering* things. Come, follow me," Pablo says, and we make our way through the subdued crowd to the stern of the big weary boat, above the churning of the paddles in the water. It is so quiet now, we could almost be alone.

"What's going on?" I ask again. "What is this?"

Pablo looks at me carefully. "It is as you thought, Sam," he says. "You are in a dream. Your dream. And you brought me into it. You brought all of this into it—it's your *creation*, where your subconscious mind knows you need to be."

The sun is retreating to the edge of space and the river starts to churn and bubble. The water eddies around the boat like some sort of giant water monster is down there.

If this is my creation, then how do I control it? How can I stop what I know is coming?

"Sam, you need to relax . . ." Pablo says. "Don't fight it—go with it."

I try to calm myself. The world around us returns to as it was before.

But I feel a shiver of fear run through me.

Oh no . . . if I have imagined all this, what else will I conjure up?

Solaris.

"Sam, you need to stay calm and in control, or else this *will* turn into a nightm—"

There is a loud, powerful engine noise from down the river somewhere behind us and Pablo stops talking. I search the horizon and see movement, squinting to make out the details.

"It's a boat," I say, "a speedboat."

Could be anyone . . . but they're sure in a hurry to catch up with us.

"I think . . . I think it's a friend," I say. The sun re-emerges and the birds start squawking again.

"Good, you are not giving into your fear!" Pablo says over the rising noise of the approaching speedboat engine. "Remember, you can control everything that happens in here and just as easily, you can lose control. Either way, it's up to you."

Pablo pulls a small set of binoculars from his bag and

brings them to his eyes.

"Ah," he says, then passes them to me.

I look-focus to find the little craft gaining in our wake. There are nine men in the speedboat-no, eight men, and a woman. The woman I know. It's Stella, the leader of the rogue Enterprise Agents.

"OK, not friends," I say, handing the binoculars back, pleased to see that all else around me is remaining calm and normal.

Maybe I can steer this dream. Stella or not, I can't go until I've got what I've come for.

There's a new sound coming from the direction of the jungle. A small speck has materialized into another boat, smaller, farther away and slower, but also heading toward us.

Pablo suddenly looks anxious. "Sam, it's too late. This must end now."

"What?" I ask, looking away from the approaching boats.

"Wake up."

"Why? How do I do that?" I ask. "How can I make myself wake--"

There's a hollow-sounding cough and then I see a missile streaking up from the first speedboat. It shoots high into the air and then breaks apart, revealing several smaller warheads that all race down toward the ferry.

"Quick, Sam!" Pablo says. "Find us a way out of this before it's too--"

KLAP-BOOM!

My whole world is cloaked by fire and smoke and heat, enveloping me as I am thrown onto my back by the concussive wave. Through the shimmering heatwaves I see a dark figure watching on from the shore, the form as shifting and menacing as the flames that lick at my heels. I cannot see his face, but I sense that he is happy.

No!

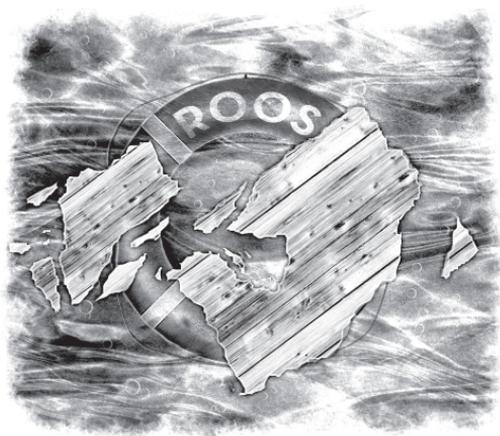
I try to get to my feet. My breathing is ragged, panic rising from being surrounded by flames.

Not this, anything but this.

The fire eats hungrily into the wooden structure of the boat. The wall, the floorboards, the ceiling above, are all cracking and groaning in slow disintegration. We are sinking.

Where is Pablo?

I am in the water, gulping breaths between mouthfuls of smoke and raging water. A lifebuoy floats past, just out of reach.



I am under the waves.

I see hands reaching down for me, twisting fingers searching through the water. I resurface briefly, gasping desperately for more air. Through blurry, water-stung eyes I can see someone reaching out to help.

As my head sinks below the flaming waves for the last time, the small boat drifts farther away and I stare, defeated, at letters stencilled on the lifebuoy as it, too, floats away. The water surrounds me, crushing me as I look up at the fire above. But below there is only—

Silence.