





PROLOGUE



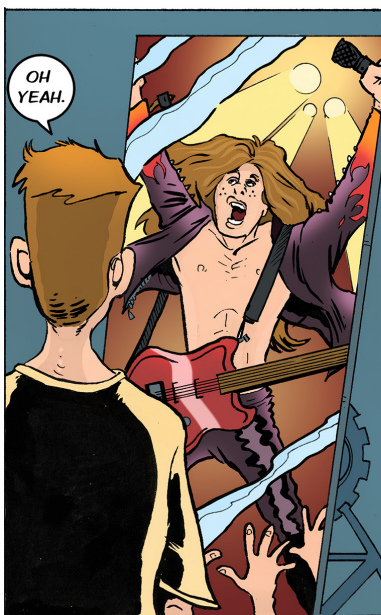
THE DYING STARS



Zach Slade: the most inspirational, talented, creative musician in **Elpis**, the city of hope. His band, The Reality Enigma, has done virtual tours of the world to their fanatic followers, but only the people in our hometown, Elpis, get to see them in the flesh. Despite what the ‘Chippers’ will tell you, nothing beats the transcendental experience of a live band, and I have never missed one of their gigs. On stage, this intense, spellbinding man exorcises the souls of his audience with every note he plays, word he sings, and stare from his brooding eyes. Every gig I see a thousand people falling in love with him, but none of them knows the kind, gentle, and self-doubting man with whom I share my life. I can only dream of affecting people with my research like Zach does with his music. Although he barely registers it, Zach has changed thousands of people’s lives, but none as much as mine when he first spoke to me in our college library ten years ago. He took a shy, lonely girl – estranged from the social world – and connected her; but since we met everything has changed.

Zach and I are children of the Reality Revolution: the first generation born after society collapsed. Before then, everyone believed that they were special, talented, and destined for fame. People blamed reality TV, but perhaps we all need to hope for a bright future to keep us sane. Whatever the reason, values of hard work and collective good were eroded and replaced with self-interest and entitlement. History blames Professor Milton Grey for the revolution because it was his invention – the reality prism – that started everything. The reality prism – a transparent pyramid worn on the head – split reality into the part that is objectively true and the part that is subjective experience. The prism went from an expensive prototype to a cheap mass-produced piece of technology almost overnight, and millions bought them.

The reality prism brought honesty to the world: propaganda and media influence became impossible in a world where people could bisect the objective truth from the subjective spin. Religions collapsed, not because the prism proved them wrong but because it exposed the organizations that profited from them. Everyone could know the truth about anything that they could



look at, but the gift of the reality prism was also its curse. Inevitably people looked at themselves in mirrors through the prism. Imagine seeing yourself stripped of the small, harmless tricks that our minds play to make ourselves feel better about who we are. The prism let people see how intelligent, funny, attractive, and talented they really were, and for most people the truth didn't live up to their beliefs. Most of us are ordinary, and there's nothing wrong with that, unless society tells you that ordinary isn't good enough.

People became depressed and purposeless. They lost interest in everything because the media lost their power to hype anything: bands couldn't pretend that their latest album was their best, you couldn't be fooled into thinking the latest Proteus is much better than the previous one, no one believed that a sports event was more important than a game that would be repeated every subsequent season with very little bearing on anything, and everyone knew that cosmetics could not perform the miracles that they claimed. Advertising failed, businesses collapsed, and political parties ceased to function in a world where they couldn't lie. The revolution itself was over in 5 years, but society has taken decades to rebuild. My parents describe the revolution as killing culture: without self-belief there is no creativity, and without creativity there cannot be musicians, artists, or writers. People abandoned these pursuits because the reality prisms made them believe that they had nothing of value to offer. Instead people looked back to the old world: the musicians and bands from the pre-revolution period of the 1970s to 2040s became revered because nobody believed they had the talent to emulate them. Our parents, who lived through the revolution, lost faith, but to Zach and me it was a story from before we were born, we'd never looked through a reality prism so we'd never seen our limitations. Zach absorbed the music of the past but believed he could use it to inspire something new: songs for our world, not a world of the past. He was brilliant at it.

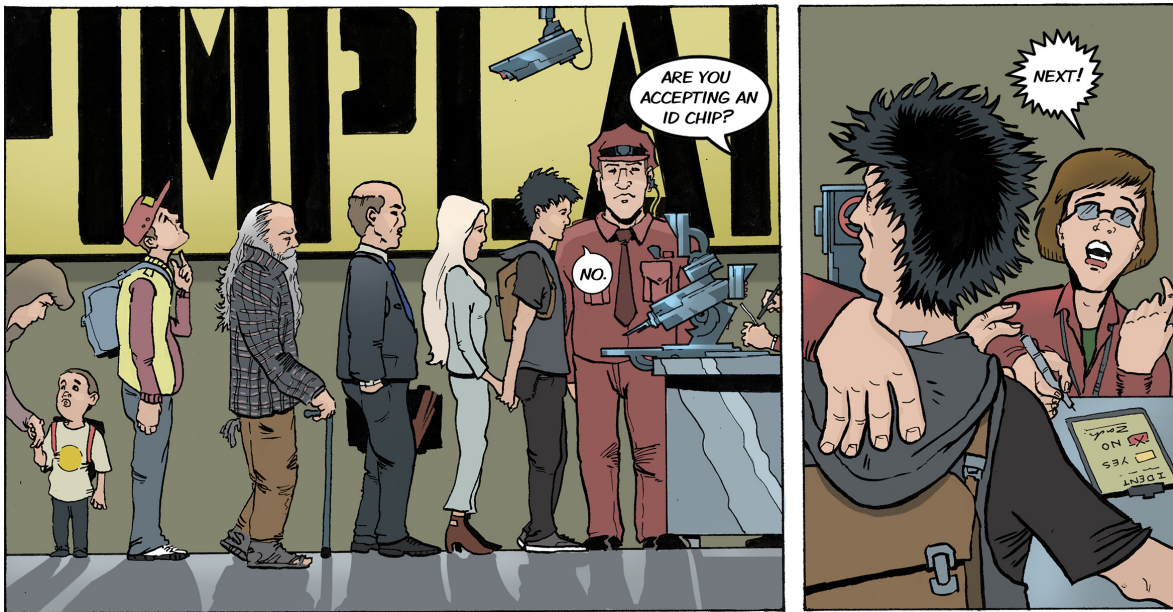
The history I was taught as a child told me that the revolution sent us back to darker times, but I believe it saved us. To me, Milton Grey is a hero, not a villain. In the wake of the revolution, people across the world united in the common goal of rebuilding. Some believed that we should start from where we left off and embrace the technological advances of the pre-revolution, whereas others yearned to return to what they believed were simpler and happier times. As they delved into our cultural past, they fell back in love with the physical experience of books, art and vinyl LPs, all of which were thought obsolete before the revolution. These people were also driven by a desire to reconnect to the Earth through eco-friendly retro-technology: they embraced the pre-21st century culture of clockwork and steam technology. Over time these technologies merged with those of our own generation: clockwork and steam fusion were born.

The World Governance Agency (**WGA**) emerged from the ashes of the revolution: a humanitarian organization that built a new society on foundations of truth. The WGA worked to create order in a fragmented society; their primary goal was to promote community and well-being. It was largely due to their efforts that the different views on the new world were seamlessly merged: under their guidance, scientists developed steam and clockwork technologies to power both retro and modern devices, they built vast repositories to house collections of physical media and provided the space for people to enjoy them. The world became both brave and innovative, but sentimental to its past; it is a strange but beautiful mix of the modern and the antique. Unlike any political party before it, the WGA achieved the impossible: everyone was happy.

That was the utopian world that Zach and I grew up in, it is the backdrop of our early years, but is also an uncomfortable reminder of how things have changed since we met. First, the WGA



started to ‘chip’ people. Small microchips had been implanted in family pets for more than a century, but with technological advancements it became possible to implant WiFi-enabled chips into humans, enabling them to record what they saw, thought and heard in real time. Those who embraced technology raced to be the first to have chips implanted, queuing at the chipping stations to have their minds tagged. We called them ‘Chippers’ and they labelled those refusing the chips as ‘Clocktorians’, a derogatory term to imply that we were backward-looking people stuck in a ‘clockwork, Victorian’ society. Perhaps they were right, but at least we didn’t have chips in our brains.



Next *memoryBank* was launched: a virtual mind where Chippers broadcast their lives to each other as real-time, high-definition streams. With only a thought, Chippers could flag single moments in the video stream as highly significant events (‘highsies’). These events were broadcast directly to the brains of other Chippers in the same network and their emotional reaction to it, their ‘emo’, was automatically recorded and tagged in real time. There was no hiding your feelings on *memoryBank*. Our lives were stored virtually; the pre-revolution idea of the cloud had been taken to a logical conclusion and everyone had a ‘star’: a limitless space to store their digital world. Friends and family could network their stars in constellations; *memoryBank* was the next step – a galaxy of Chippers’ stars.

Clocktorians were ostracized from much of this online world: we had stars, but connected using technology instead of our minds; we retreated into retro-culture. Society was becoming fragmented again, and it felt like a metaphor for Zach and me. As I became more successful in my scientific career I became more reliant on evidence for my beliefs, and understood less his blind acceptance of his gut feelings. The more advanced my work became, the less he understood or even tried to

understand it. The more science drives me towards technology the less I understand why he clings to an old-fashioned world that died more than a century ago. I know that I cannot love anyone as much as I love him so these feelings scare me, but not as much as what's happened in the last few weeks, and that's why I have to leave him. Worse than that, I can't tell him why. I hope he forgets me, and one day forgives me, but never sees how heartbroken I'm about to become.

Dr Alice Nightingale
The Beimeni Centre of Genetics
Elpis

IN THE NEXT CHAPTER, ZACH DISCOVERS ...

The scientific process
How to make a scientific statement
The various research methods
Why we need science

