

# MINEMOSYNE'S KISS

IRGIN  
WORLDS



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***GREEN***



## **Lannigan**

Two months after she died, Cassandra Lannigan woke up in a hospital bed in Nairobi.

The intervening time seemed very small, little more than a stumble, a flicker of pain. For a moment she thought she was still running, but the pounding rhythm was only the pulse in her head. It faded as she listened.

There was a nurse in the room, a young girl in a starched white uniform. She was standing by the window, her arms folded, face pensive in the harsh light. Her mahogany skin was the only contrast in the whole room: everything else was white, bleached into oneness by the hot Kenyan sun. Lannigan watched her for several minutes.

Suddenly, the nurse turned. 'You're awake.'

Lannigan didn't attempt a reply. She felt insubstantial, unreal, a scribble on the room's surface. If she spoke, she would blow away.

The nurse said, 'I'll fetch the doctor.'

Her contact had been a woman, a Pacifican with mournful eyes and mouse-brown hair down to her shoulders. Taller than she, and thin as a whip: that month's fashion in Tokyo and Seoul.

They had met in London, near St Paul's. Lannigan stood

against the black iron railings surrounding the churchyard, smoking nervously, checking over her shoulder every few seconds. Her hair was itchy because she'd just had it bleached, and the cigarettes – so clear now, in her mind's eye – were black Moonlight Silks with gold bands round the filters.

For all her glances, she didn't spot Kobayashi until the woman was right beside her.

They took the underground as far as Tottenham Court Road, then walked quickly past the Dominion Theatre to a small sushi bar. She smoked incessantly while Kobayashi ordered *ramen* and iced coffee, watching the cranes replace the Dominion's ancient roof with arcing polycarbon braces. 'Even in London, huh?'

Kobayashi took a precise sip of coffee. 'The dictates of safety. Several tourists were injured when a ceiling collapsed during a performance of *The Manchurian Candidate*. It was a featured story for several hours.' The woman gave her a look over the rim of her cup. 'You do not access newsfeeds?'

'Not if I can help it. Besides, the feeds are a little more insular in my neck of the woods.'

'Of course.' Kobayashi finished her noodles, set the bowl aside and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. 'You have the list of requirements.'

It didn't sound like a question. She took the datapad from her bag and handed it to Kobayashi. 'Eighth file.'

The Pacifican nodded and began to scan the list. 'Everything here can be made ready within two days.' Kobayashi paused, tilting her head slightly. 'A question. Now that you have studied the technical specifications, how long do you suppose it will take to perform the test?'

'With the power up, half an hour max.'

'Ah.' The woman looked at her guardedly. 'And without?'

'Well, that puts a different spin on things.' She thought for a moment. 'Two hours?'

The Pacifican nodded. 'That is acceptable.'

'Great.' She stood up. 'One more thing. The advance payment I can handle as you suggested, but I'll need the completion fee in cash.'

'Cash?' Kobayashi used the word as if she wasn't quite sure what it meant.

'Yeah, US dollars or ICUs – your choice. I don't want anyone chasing me down a credit line.'

Kobayashi's mouth quirked up at the corner. 'Oh ye of little faith.'

'That's me all over.'

She was sitting up when the doctor came in. He smiled at her appraisingly. 'Not bad.'

The nurse had been away ten minutes, long enough for Lannigan to start hurting. Her throat was reintroducing itself to her in pulses of raw dryness. She didn't dare speak, but raised a shaky hand to mime drinking instead. Even breathing made her eyes water.

The doctor turned briefly to the nurse, said something Lannigan didn't catch. The girl nodded and walked briskly out of the room, heels tapping faintly on the carpet. 'Don't worry. I won't ask you any questions until we've got you something.'

She tried to smile, but her lips felt like sand.

The nurse came back, holding a plastic bulb, like those used by astros. She bent to slip the tube into Lannigan's mouth. What came out was sweet and mellow and very cold. Lannigan didn't know what it was, but the pain in her throat faded after the first swallow. She grabbed the bulb with both hands and yanked it out of the nurse's grip, squeezing hard, greedily.

The last drops made her cough a little, but even that felt good, as if using her lungs had been something denied her for a long time. 'Thanks,' she croaked.

'Well, your motor function seems yokay, but the medicom told us that much.' The doctor smiled, a warm sickle of teeth in his very dark face. 'If it isn't a silly question, just how do you feel?'



Lannigan considered this for a second. 'As though I've been stepped on,' she said finally.

The doctor nodded to the nurse, who took the bulb away. 'You've made a remarkable recovery, considering.'

'Considering what?' There had been something in the drink. Talking was easier all the time. 'What happened to me?'

The doctor smiled again. 'We'll go into that later. I wouldn't be surprised if there was some temporary amnesia, but it shouldn't last long.' He bent to a panel near the bed, began tapping at it with a fingertip. 'Can you recall anything?'

Lannigan closed her eyes, feeling the past running towards her, rain and broken glass. 'Yeah. Osaka . . .'

They had taken a room at the Nakashima Inn, overlooking the maglev station. Barges hooted and growled their way up the grimy, mud-choked river, weighed down with Chinese spices and stacked sheets of gas-giant composites for the arcologies at Nishi-Kujo. The dummy data was packed into the shell of a chipplayer she had bought the day before. She showed Kobayashi the unit, how to unclip the casing.

'The test rig downloads on to terabyte SRAM. I'll dump half an hour's jazz on first, just in case anyone checks.' Lannigan closed the unit again and slipped it into her bag. 'Any preferences?'

'Shinji Goda.'

'I might have guessed.' She resolved to get some Beiderbecke and throw the Pacifican a curve. 'Where do you want the backup?'

Kobayashi blinked at her. 'Backup? You are expecting something to go wrong?'

She gave the bag a tap. 'Expect, no. Guard against, yeah.'

'That is probably wise.' Kobayashi walked over to the window. 'Still, I would prefer that there were no copies.'

'Dangerous way of working, Kobayashi.' She tore open

a pack of Moonlight Silks and lit one up, the igniter sparking once as she flicked the end away. 'Anything can happen. If the data gets corrupted you'll end up with nothing.'

Kobayashi looked back at her, over her shoulder. 'As will you.'

'Oh right, I'm supposed to look on this as a kind of incentive.'

'You may look on it in any way you please. Get in, do the test, get out. I get the results; you get paid.' The Pacifican almost smiled. 'In my country, we call it business.'

'In your country you call raw fish food.' She mashed the cigarette in a crystal ashtray. 'Doesn't make it taste any better.'

A week after regaining consciousness, Lannigan was taken to the roof. It was her first time out of the room.

Walking was still a talent that eluded her. It was something she had done easily enough in the past, in the brief, almost meaningless, fragments of memory she had been able to regain, but somewhere along the line she had lost the trick of it. Her legs seemed intent on betraying her at every step. It was enough to worry the doctors, enough to necessitate the use of a wheelchair on her trip to the hospital roof.

The chair was a slender, skeletal thing, and Lannigan didn't like the look of it at all. 'What is this, chicken bones? I'll go right through it.'

'You put on a hundred kilos while I wasn't looking?' The nurse, whose name was N'Tele, grinned at her. 'With the food in here?'

They gave her a jacket to wear over her hospital robes. The clear skies over Kenya held little warmth, and once the sun was gone temperatures could drop sharply. As Lannigan emerged from the service lift she felt a coolness on her face and neck, the cloudless green-scented breeze rolling down from Aberdare and the mountains

there. She sniffed warily and drew the jacket a little tighter.

The sky above her was almost completely black, a fading ribbon of purple haunting the western horizon. She looked up as the chair trundled her across the wide helipad, trying to see which of the stars was brighter than the rest, which of them was beginning to move.

N'Tele walked beside the chair. 'You won't see it for a few minutes yet.'

'I've got good eyes.' Lannigan squinted. 'I saw what you paid for them.'

Most of the hospital was up here with her, spread out across the pad in little whispering bunches. Any patient who was mobile had been wheeled out to see the fireworks, more, Lannigan suspected, as an excuse for the nurses to get a breath of air than due to any ideas of therapy. Still, it was good to see something other than white plastic and the facile inanities flicking across her infonet screen. Some secret part of her had been looking forward to the sight for days, ever since it had been predicted.

The chair pulled up a metre from the edge, swung round to face east. N'Tele crouched beside it. 'We'll get a good view. I heard some PANN people wanted to set up cameras here, but the docs vetoed.'

Lannigan found herself taking the sentence apart in her head. '“Docs”? Where did you train?'

The girl looked at her sideways, then back to the eastern dark. 'Mombasa, first. Then Chicago.' She smiled self-consciously. 'Good way of picking up an accent.'

Lannigan's voice was pure American, with vowels as flat and wide as the Midwest. She wondered briefly if she was speaking with the inflections of home or with some polyglot accent accumulated from a life of travel. She remembered Osaka and London - where else had she spent time?

She could feel N'Tele's eyes on her. The nurse said, 'I suppose you haven't -'

'There it is,' Lannigan whispered.

One of the stars was moving too fast.

Nairobi was to the south, a sprawl of glare on Lannigan's right. What she had thought was some especially bright advertising holo or shanty fire at the easternmost edge had detached itself from the horizon and was clawing its way into the indigo sky. She heard a gasp ripple through the assembled watchers, felt a stab of contempt until she realised that she, too, had drawn in an involuntary throatful of cold air at the sight.

Within half a minute the dot had grown enough to have colour: from a speck of brilliance to a distant smear of liquid orange. As it rose it described a shallow curve to the south. Lannigan flicked her head to the right, almost able to see the star's path, a scratch of imaginary fire, before it had moved a finger's width in her vision.

She had thought the meteor might make some sound as it ripped its way through the air. Maybe if she were closer she would hear the thunder of it, but from this far there was only the sigh of the wind across grass, the distant song of the city and the excited whispers of the other patients. Even N'Tele was speaking under her breath, words that Lannigan could neither catch nor understand, a mantra of wonder.

Lannigan couldn't have spoken even if she had wanted to. The sight had caught her throat.

The meteor was a shape now: elongated and shuddering. It looked like a comet, and Lannigan realised that it wasn't just curving across the sky: it was heading *downward*. The ceaseless hammer of atmosphere in its path was battering it back, robbing it of velocity and height. Speed turned to fiery heat as she watched.

'It's not gonna make it,' she muttered, as if the western horizon was a finish line, a sanctuary. She felt N'Tele's hand on her arm.

'You don't think it's going to hit the city?'

'No. Too far north. If any of it makes ground it'll hit

over there somewhere.' She waved vaguely into darkness beyond the edge of the pad, never taking her eyes from the growing speck. 'I think it's a little high for -'

*'It's breaking up!'*

A man with his arm in a complex-looking sling was bouncing excitedly. Lannigan noticed that in his free hand he had a pair of binoculars, the kind with an image recogniser that tells you where to look. She watched him put the binocs to his face then swing his head abruptly upward, as the sensors hunted down the image held in memory.

But she could see it herself now. The meteor was moving faster, perspective giving it a faux acceleration as it drew close. And now it had a companion - a smaller point of light was moving away, curving downward. Lannigan watched it flare and die.

With her eyes on the fragment, she missed the explosion.

When she next looked at the meteor it was a cluster of tumbling stars, a firework, spreading outward in a sky-filling cloud of brilliant fragments. The structure had broken down under heat and atmospheric stress, shattering explosively into unnumbered tiny meteorites. Lannigan watched the pieces whirling over the city, fading and dying, embers in a cooling fire. Within a dozen heartbeats, it was gone.

For a while, no one said anything. Then the people nearest the service lift began to turn and head back inside, into the light. Lannigan stayed where she was, unwilling to move just yet. The death of the meteor had tugged something inside her, something that made her feel old and lost.

N'Tele was leaning against the safety rail. 'Do you think it's true? What they said on *Pan-Africa*?'

'About it being a spaceship?' Lannigan tugged the jacket a little closer. 'Maybe. Yeah, I think it probably was. Something about the way it broke up . . .' She sighed, gazing out over the city, watching the tiny sparks of traffic. Thought

about the people on board the ship, dead or waiting to die, and wondered if she should feel something other than vaguely curious.

'Nice sendoff,' she said quietly. 'Next time somebody kills me, I want one like that.'

She had been in Uhuru Park, Nairobi, when she saw the assassin.

It was a warm night. The sun had dipped out of view an hour before, and the slight drop in temperature had turned the punishing evening humidity into a fat, lazy shower. Raindrops the size of her thumb bounced and splattered, drumming against her umbrella, hanging like grubby gems at the tips of the frame.

The umbrella was black, smoothly expensive, matching the briefcase she held in her left hand. Memory-wire spines arced low over her head like a personal geodesic. Round her slim wrist, a Swiss chrono chirped the passing of another hour, humming against her skin. She nodded imperceptibly, her eyes flicking across the faces beneath the covered walkway as she turned to the gate. In that fraction of a second, she saw him.

And could not move.

It was something indefinable that froze her there: a fleeting change in his expression, perhaps; a surety of movement that was there and then gone. Nothing that she could name about his plain grey suit or smooth features, but the knowledge went through her just the same, and nailed her to the air. In that instant she knew that he was here for her and that she would die on this warm, rain-washed Kenyan night.

She stood in the rain, gazing at him with an odd curiosity.

Thunder rippled across the horizon, hot and slow. Her paralysis fractured at the sound and she began to move, walking briskly towards the west gate. Her mind had already surrendered to the inevitable: even as her body hurled itself forward in a blind and hopeless attempt to

escape, some iron calmness in her soul was calculating how best to use death to her advantage.

Her eyes were grey now, like old steel.

'That was his idea,' said N'Tele. Lannigan was looking at the mirror again, in the bathroom. The nurse had helped her in. 'Doctor Lippincott. He's the worst lecher in the profession, but you've got to admit he has impeccable taste in eyes.'

Lannigan blinked. She was looking at a stranger, a rather sharp-faced woman of thirty or so, her hair a kind of pale auburn, her lips too thin, her nose too prominent. She looked as though she had been built for scowls, not smiles. 'He made this?'

N'Tele looked at the floor. 'Yes. Look, I'm not supposed to -'

'Quit worrying about my mental state, will you? My God, I think I've got a reasonable idea how bad things were.' She glanced at the nurse. 'Was there anything left?'

'Not too much. They didn't have a reference . . . He more or less put it together from scratch.'

'Talented.' She looked back to the mirror, trying to imprint the image on her memory. Cold, she thought. It's a cold face.

I can live with that.

Nairobi had been a live thing, a predator, that night. It stalked her, breathing hot behind a neon grin, snagging at her heels. She could feel the size of it, could hear its silent laughter.

It nearly had her a hundred times: crossings that flipped from green to red as soon as she approached, letting him get a little closer while she waited; automatic doors that stalled in their function; an AI longhauler that jumped a red light to sweep her briefcase away beneath its broad wheels. And each time she slipped its hot and rain-bright grasp she wondered if blind luck was

keeping her alive or whether the city was letting her live a little longer for pleasure's sake, toying with her.

She headed for home. The chase was wearing her down, and she knew that it would only be so long before she felt the predator's talons on her skin. She couldn't run for ever. Back at the hotel room there was a gun, a snub-nosed Honda 2mm recoilless, taped under the toilet seat. Hardly an arsenal, but it gave her a straw at which to clutch.

There was a breath behind her, his breath. He was far closer than she had realised.

Later, in the plastic darkness of the hospital room, she would remember that moment with total incomprehension. It was as though her mind had turned itself round in her head, closed like a fist around the cold and certain knowledge of how to act. At the end of Milimani Road she whipped about and launched herself at the assassin.

He saw her at the last second, the heat in his eyes flying into the shadows, becoming something else, and then she was on him. He tried to step back. She threw the umbrella at him. His hands came up to ward it off and the hard and pointed toe of her expensive Ginza shoe slammed into his groin.

The man staggered. His eyes bulged, still watching the umbrella as it tumbled away. She kicked him again, twice, expert with a sharp and sudden skill, and then, as he toppled forward, drew back her foot and lashed it into his face as hard as she possibly could.

Something gave. The man made a peculiar coughing sound, and stopped moving. She stood above him, breathing hard, watching blood begin to collect under his nose, threading over the wet pavement.

She knew exactly, to the last second, how long it would take him to die.

The hospital was large, a U-shaped cluster of buildings hugging some dark and unpronounceable hill. As she regained the effective use of her body, Lannigan took the chance to explore a little, walking slowly and barefoot



along the warm corridors, holding on to the ever present handrails for support, enjoying the freedom and the feeling of smooth carpet under her toes. She collapsed only twice.

N'Tele walked with her, some of the time. The hospital had a policy of assigning personal nurses to patients, building a supportive bond. Lannigan didn't feel especially supported, but she began to discover that, the longer N'Tele spent around her, the easier it was to use the young woman as an access to restricted information.

She had started slowly, practising with nuggets of gossip, details of home life and history. Within four weeks of waking, Lannigan had reached a point with N'Tele where she could regularly induce her to reveal facts that blatantly contravened hospital confidentiality guidelines. The details of her own treatment, for example.

'Doctor Lippincott wants you in for another week,' the nurse told her, as they stood in the observation lounge watching ripples of wind skate across open grassland. 'I heard him and Ross talking about it yesterday.'

Lannigan nodded, holding the handrail tightly. 'And Ross is . . . ?'

'Resident nanotechnician.'

'Ah.' She knew that, but confirming past data seemed to be part of the process. It made the rest easier.

Lannigan counted five heartbeats, watching clouds gather over the plains. Far in the distance, tiny sparks began to flick from sky to ground. Storms in Africa. 'Well, that's nice to know. I've got no real love of surprises . . .' She left it hanging, and N'Tele grabbed hold, right on cue.

'I'll save you one. The cops are coming in tomorrow. They want to talk to you about what happened.'

'I thought they might.' A fat droplet splattered against the window close to her nose, making her flinch. She blinked, and saw a second, a dozen, a great sheet of stormfront rolling across the plain towards her. 'Wow. More rain.'