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The Infinity Code

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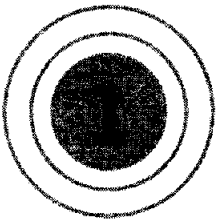
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It wasn't the bang that made Vassily Baraban afraid.

In fact, he'd barely noticed it. At his desk in the small, untidy laboratory at Imperial College, London, Baraban was staring at his computer screen. Around him was a jumble of papers. A journal of astrophysics, with handwritten scrawl in the margins. A manuscript on an unusual gamma-ray burst. A request from a professor at Sweden's prestigious Karolinska Institute to visit London to discuss Baraban's research.

The professor sounded excited. He had reason to be, Baraban thought. His latest work was ground-breaking. Earth-shattering. 'Space-invading,' he muttered under his breath.

Baraban's eyes flicked to a photograph tacked to the wall beside his desk. A spectacular shot taken by the Hubble space telescope, it showed the voracious death spiral around a massive black hole. Baraban shivered. Beneath the photograph was another, yellowed at the edges, marked by creases. A beautiful woman with

cropped dark hair was cradling a baby in her arms. A grand building rose behind them. The Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.

Baraban reached out and touched the picture gently. His son was now fourteen years old. He had never returned to the city of his birth. None of them had been back to Petersburg. One day, Baraban thought. One day, when my work here is done . . .

. . . And then there was the knocking. Insistent this time.

In his first few years in London, Baraban had leaped at every knock. His nerves had been on edge – with good reason. Annoyed now at the interruption, he turned to the door.

Behind a glass panel was the sallow face of the night janitor. Baraban glanced at his watch: 2 a.m. He waved a hand angrily, to indicate he was still immensely busy. Time meant nothing to him. Only ordinary people, he would often tell his son, are governed by the clock. As the janitor shuffled away, Baraban let his eyes return to the computer screen.

His gaze barely had time to settle . . .

This noise was sharp. A scraping. It had come from behind, to his left, and it had sounded like fingernails on glass. Baraban's head shot round. Now his irritation turned to fear. The sound had been made by a glass cutter. The glass cutter had removed a square section from the generous laboratory window. And there, in the room, were two hefty men.

They were Russian. Baraban knew this in an instant, even before they opened their mouths. The first man was well over six feet tall, skin the colour of dirty snow, tiny blue eyes lost in the rough fleshiness of his face. His head was shaved. Even the black stubble on his scalp looked dangerous. From an inside pocket in his canvas jacket, he now produced something that resembled a taser. But while there were electrical sparks, the weapon appeared to have no darts. Baraban froze, transfixed. Sweat sprang from his palms.

'Sergei, I shoot now?' the first intruder asked. His voice was thick.

He was stupid, Baraban decided, but it didn't make him feel much better.

'. . . W-who are y-you?' he managed to stutter.

'My name is Vladimir—'

But the man called Sergei stepped forward and silenced them both with a wave of something more conventional. A black handgun.

Sergei had blond hair, gelled into tiny spikes. There was a tattoo of a laughing woman on his bicep. It bulged as he lifted his arm, and levelled the gun.

'You do not talk,' Sergei said. 'You come with us.'

'That is impossible,' Baraban said quietly. Fear made his voice shake. Only ordinary people felt fear, he reprimanded himself. '*Who are you?*' he said, with defiance. 'What do you want?' And he peered at the chunk of black plastic in the shaven-headed man's hand. Scientific curiosity for a moment overwhelmed his fear:

'Is this a new weapon?' he enquired. 'I do not think I have seen such a thing before . . .'

The man grunted. 'We have no time for this.' He lifted the weapon – and fired.

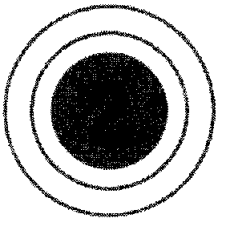
Twin flaring pulses leaped across the lab. Baraban's chest was pierced by a fierce shooting pain. His limbs felt paralysed. His flesh was cold and hot, burning and numb. His vision blurred. He had read of such a thing, after all, in a memorandum from a colleague in the Ukrainian military. But he had not realized the device was beyond the prototype stage. It was intriguing. These thoughts blasted through his mind in a split second.

'Electric bullets,' he murmured. 'Very advanced . . .'

And then the photographs on his wall seemed to merge, his wife into the black hole, a supernova into his son. He began to sway.

'*Pridurok!*' Sergei hissed. 'Idiot! Do not let him fall! Quick, protect his head!'

These were the last words that Baraban heard before he slipped towards the ground – and before he was knocked unconscious as his ample head collided with his desk.



Central London, 28 hours later

It was still dark when the alarm went off. The sound sent shock waves blasting through the sleeping boy. He'd put the clock underneath the duvet, so it wouldn't wake the woman in the room next door. She was a light sleeper and she took a strong interest in his activities. This morning, he had no desire to explain himself.

Will tumbled out of bed but was instantly alert. Within five minutes, he was dressed. Jeans, T-shirt, jumper and jacket, and trainers with the new soles. He pulled a rucksack from the top shelf of his wardrobe and a plastic storage crate from underneath his bed. From the crate, he took the reason for the 6.30 a.m. start: a coiled length of ten-millimetre climbing rope and a harness. In the bottom of the crate, wrapped in a sheet, he found the spear-fishing gun, an old birthday present from his father, which he'd never used – at least on fish. Will stuffed the lot into his rucksack and slung

the device on top. 6.45 a.m. His heart was pounding. He was ready.

The third stair down was the one to watch for. One hand on the banister, he skipped over it. Then he was out of the front door and into the freezing fog of the early December morning. Will closed the door gently. He glanced up at the window of the studio. No light. Natalia was still asleep.

Will knew the way well. Left out of the house, across the square, telling himself to slow down, though his feet were itching to break into a jog. Dawn was breaking. Grey colour slowly crept over the buildings. To his right, a red double-decker rumbled past, spewing out exhaust. Through the dim light, a black cab followed it, veering off towards Tottenham Court Road. Will hoisted the pack higher on his back and pulled his scarf up across his mouth. With numb fingers he reached into the pocket of his jacket and touched the smooth soft leather of a cricket ball. A ball his father had given to him, for luck.

Seven minutes later, he was there. Will paused outside the gates. There were two security cameras. One over the double front doors to the school. The second around the back, overlooking the car park. They were a few years old. And obvious. Will had timed the narrow arc of the front camera from a few metres on one side of the front gate to roughly a metre on the other side. He glanced at his watch – another present from his father. A barometer, thermometer, altimeter, wind

sensor, bug-sweeper and timepiece rolled into one. Ten seconds. Eight seconds. Five seconds. And he ran.

Eight seconds later, he was crouching to one side of the main entrance. The camera had missed him by a mile. He was breathing hard. It wasn't the exertion. It was excitement. There wasn't much that he liked about the school but the building itself was perfect. Three storeys high – an ideal testing ground for the prototype.

Will glanced around the yard, but it was far too early for any teachers. They wouldn't arrive for more than an hour. The cleaners worked at night. The caretaker had Thursdays off.

Quickly, he slipped around to the rear of the building and looked up. The school was old, Victorian. To Will's left, an iron fire escape zigzagged its way up the solid, red brick. The walls seemed to soar. But Will had confidence in his design. He'd been over it countless times. The mechanism would work, he was sure of that. At least, he thought he was sure – but there was nothing like a trial run for throwing up oversights or errors.

Will took a deep breath. He checked his watch: 7.12 a.m. He had plenty of time. He lowered his rucksack to the ground and pulled out the device. It needed a name, but this was Will's only superstition: name nothing until it works. Then he hauled out the rope, and the climbing harness. The harness slipped easily over his jeans. Next came the speargun. It was low-powered, running on pressurized gas. It should be all right, he hoped. Deftly, he tied one end of the rope to a metal

rod to which he'd soldered a grappling hook – a replacement for a spear.

The fog was clearing, but mist still swirled around the roof. Will grabbed the speargun and closed one eye. It was psychological. He felt it would help his aim. The base of the gun close to his chest, he fired. Rope whizzed past his ears. And, to Will's relief, the grappling hook caught in the old iron guttering that was fixed just below the tiles of the roof. He gave a quick tug. The hook moved. Then it held. Two more tugs. He attached the device to his harness, then the rope to his device, and tried his entire body weight. It didn't budge.

Two quick breaths, and he took the device in his hand. Inside the black casing was a motor, powered by batteries, which turned a series of cogs and wheels. How many movies had featured gadgets like this? he thought. How many people knew that all were phoneys. Special effects. All faked. But this . . .

He pushed.

The response was instant.

Excitement flooded through Will's body as it was lifted off the ground. The cogs turned so quickly that to anyone else the sound would have been a seamless whirr. But Will could visualize every turn, every spin of every wheel that was necessary to hold against the rope, to move it through, to pull him up.

He'd intended to time the ascent, but it was too late. Already he was three metres up in the air, and he could

see across the roof of a low house on the other side of the road. He turned back to the wall and blinked up, as the mist parted and the pale yellow sun took the chill from his face. Will could make out the shape of the lichen on the tiles. In an instant, he reached the guttering, and swung his legs up and over. For a few moments, he just crouched there, up on the roof. To get to the fire escape – and so to get down – he'd have to edge a few metres across the tiles. It had been raining but his soles did not slip. Slowly, each muscle in his legs tense, Will stood up. The wind cut across his face, but it did not matter. Nothing mattered. Except that he was there, on the roof, his school beneath his feet. Will clasped the black plastic casing against his body.

'Rapid Ascent,' he whispered to himself.

After two months of creation, at last it had a name.



Will did not know it, but it was his trial of Rapid Ascent that secured his invitation to join STORM.

STORM. A secret organization. A group that would change his life.

He had been wrong that early morning, when he'd believed he was alone. Someone else had been watching. A girl, called Gaia.