

# INVESTMENTS

*Creative thought.*

BY SIMON KEWIN

Evangelina Carter, chief executive of Blue Planet Holdings, stared at her visitor from Head Office. She must have misheard his words. “I’m sorry. For a moment I thought you said you wanted to wipe out civilization.”

Mr Allen peered over his half-moon glasses. You had to give it to them. They had their human mannerisms down to a T. “No of course not. Not *wipe out*. We merely wish to ... subdue humanity. Knock it back to a less technological era. Our projections suggest five centuries should do the trick.”

Evangelina didn’t speak for a moment. They could do it, too. She studied the ancient alien sitting opposite her. In his finely tailored suit and old-school tie he looked every inch the genial investment banker. Allen smiled, awaiting her reply. Beyond him, through floor-to-ceiling windows, London stretched away into a hazy distance.

With an effort she maintained her professional manner. There was a place for panic and terror but the boardroom wasn’t it. “But, why? Is there a problem with output?”

“Heavens, no. We are most satisfied with your stewardship, Ms Carter. Profits from operations on Earth continue to soar. The creativity of this planet remains as phenomenal as ever. But we’ve made projections and the results are clear. Another century or two and things will be different. We have to protect our investments.”

She dreaded asking. Their forecasts were always accurate. “May I know what you foresee? Environmental collapse? Wars? Pandemic?”

“Quite the contrary. Humanity will thrive. Scientific advance will continue apace, ushering in a new golden age of abundance.”

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

Allen looked troubled. It was all for show. His face, like the rest of him, synthesized. So far as she could tell, her masters were amorphous blobs of jelly. But amorphous blobs of jelly with vast technological resources at their fingertips. If that was the right word.

“Ms Carter,” he said, picking his way through his words, “has anyone ever explained why we chose your planet?”

“I assumed you monitored us for millions of years.”

His face twisted into new heights of *troubled*. “Quite so,” he said. “But the truth is we didn’t simply *monitor*.”

“You didn’t?”

“No, we also ... *shepherded*. Guided. *Intervened*.”

“Which is against galactic statute.”

“Yes. But our projections, you see. They were quite clear. Given the right conditions your remarkable species would produce — well, all the glories it has produced. I don’t need to list them. Music, literature, film. The Galaxy can’t get enough of it and we, as rights owners, make a *fortune*.”

“So what did you do?”

“Ms Carter, I’m telling you this because we trust you, yes?”

That was something. “Go on,” she said.

It was his turn to stare through the window. More play-acting.

“Ms Carter, I hope you won’t be angry when I inform you that every other sentient species in the Galaxy is, to all intents and purposes, well, *immortal*.”

“Immortal.”

“Quite so. We don’t die. I myself have been alive for nearly 600,000 years. And I’m considered rather a young gun. A bit of a hot-head.”

“Immortal,” she said again, as if the word was unfamiliar. “What does that have to do with us?”

Allen switched to *deeply sad* now. “Well, you see, here’s the thing. Immortality is lovely, of course, but it can be so ... *enervating*.”

“Can it? How awful.”

“Yes. Oh, we set out to achieve great things. Works of art and feats of literature. Musical masterpieces. But knowing you can set it aside for a thousand years — well, frankly, it’s hard to motivate oneself.”

“I can see that.”

“But humanity, now. You blaze briefly but gloriously across the face of the Universe. Knowing you have only a few years focuses your minds wonderfully. You yearn for the eternal without really knowing why.”

“Are you saying you did this to us?”

Allen took off his glasses and polished them on his silk handkerchief. “I’m afraid so. A few mutations introduced millennia ago. Your cellular

structures decay when they really shouldn’t. A few decades of life and ... *poof!* You’re gone. I really am sorry.”

She was beginning to see where this was going. “And your projections?”

“Well, it’s this damned science, you see. Another century or two and you’ll be unravelling all our work.

Humanity will defeat death, and creativity will plummet. It’ll wreak havoc with our profits, Ms Carter. Havoc!”

“So you plan to return us to somewhere around — what — the Renaissance?”

“Ah, the Baroque,” said Allen. “Such musical glories.”

She considered. “But you’ll still need intermediaries. You’ll need me?”

“Quite so. Our trusted agent.

Someone who understands local custom. We shall, of course, ensure that you’re spared the horror as it engulfs Earth. Your title will have to change, too. You could become an Empress, say. Would that suit?”

What they’d done was monstrous. An evil so vast she couldn’t even think of a name for it. She couldn’t let them get away with it.

Except ... she loved being in charge of Blue Planet. And Empress Evangelina had a ring to it. “These genetic changes. They’re reversible?”

Allen regarded her over his spectacles. “Undoing them would be terribly difficult.”

“But possible?”

“Theoretically. But counterproductive.”

“I don’t mean everyone. I mean *me*.”

“You?”

She smiled. “It’ll be our little secret. I can undergo the treatment while you’re busy knocking humanity into the dark ages, yes?”

He hesitated for a moment, but she had him. For all their godlike technology they were useless at cutting deals.

After a moment he nodded and held out a synthesized hand. “Very well, Ms Carter. Let us shake. Our little secret.” ■

**Simon Kewin** writes fantasy, SF, mainstream and some stories that can’t make their minds up. His fantasy novel *Hedge Witch* has just been published. Find him at [simonkewin.co.uk](http://simonkewin.co.uk).



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