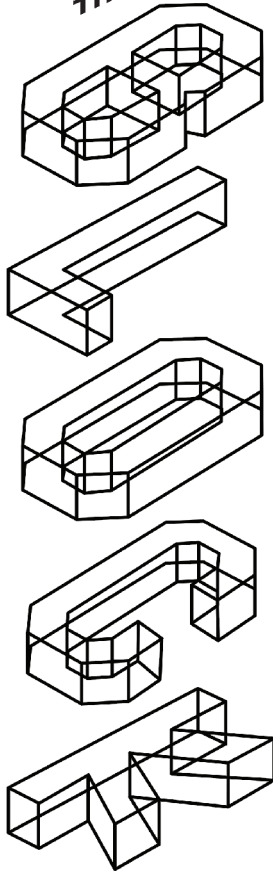


THE



**BEN OLIVER**



2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS

Text © Ben Oliver 2021

First published in Great Britain in 2021

Chicken House  
2 Palmer Street  
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
United Kingdom  
[www.chickenhousebooks.com](http://www.chickenhousebooks.com)

Ben Oliver has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Maeve Norton and Steve Wells

Interior design by Helen Crawford-White

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made  
from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-912626-56-4

eISBN 978-1-913322-97-7

*For Hollie. Books, eh? Who'da thought it?  
(You'da thought it.)*

*Why are we designed to see the world as supremely beautiful just as we're about to be snuffed? Do rabbits feel the same as the fox teeth bite down on their necks? Is it mercy?*

*THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD, MARGARET ATWOOD*



DAY  
6  
AFTER THE WAR

Defeating Happy came at a cost.

As I lie here, staring up the ceiling of my home on the 177th floor of the Black Road Vertical, I can't help but ask myself if we could have done anything differently.

Pander had taken her own life after Happy had uploaded itself into her, Pod had been stabbed to death by an Alt loyal to the AI's cause, Malachai had died in the battle on City Level Two, and Igby had been shot out of the sky while flying to retrieve a keycard that would allow us access to the underground bunker where Happy stored its servers.

But it had been Akimi who had made the ultimate sacrifice, running into the power storage facility with plasma grenades, blowing herself up, along with Happy's life support system. After that, all we had to do was stay alive long enough for the AI's stored energy to die.

'What are you thinking about?' Kina asks, walking into the room and lying beside me.

‘Just . . . everything,’ I reply. I smile because she’s still alive, and immediately feel selfish for it.

‘Me too,’ she says, her hand running through my hair. ‘It feels like it’s all I ever think about.’

‘Do you ever feel guilty?’ I ask. ‘That we survived and everyone else . . .’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘All the time. I dream about it, I wake up most nights and . . .’

She trails off, tears in her eyes.

‘I don’t know what I expected,’ I say. ‘I imagined the end of the war being beautiful, I imagined us all together, all alive.’

‘They died fighting for what they believed in,’ Kina says. ‘Fighting for each other, and for us, and for all of humanity. In the end all of us were ready to die for the cause, so – in that way – their deaths are noble, courageous. They’ll be remembered for ever as heroes.’

‘I know,’ I reply, ‘but I’d give anything for them to be back here, with us.’

‘Me too,’ Kina says, and kisses me on the cheek. ‘Try to get some sleep.’

She lies back in the darkness, and I continue to stare up at the ceiling.

I don’t know how long I lie there for, but before I fall into a restless sleep, I think to myself, *When is it going to happen?*