

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a red halter-neck dress, stands centrally. She is surrounded by a complex digital and futuristic background. To her left is a glowing blue wireframe head. The background is filled with glowing blue and red lines, circuitry, and binary code. A bright orange and yellow light streak cuts across the lower right. The overall aesthetic is high-tech and cinematic.

VYVYAN EVANS

**THE BABEL  
APOCALYPSE**



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SONGS OF THE SAGE, BOOK 1

BY

VYVYAN EVANS

**NEPHILIM  
PUBLISHING**

The future of science fiction writing

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## DISCLAIMER

While this is a work of speculative fiction, it is inspired by events, businesses, incidents, technologies, and theoretical concepts that have some basis in reality. Certain long-standing institutions, agencies, and public offices are mentioned, but the characters involved are wholly imaginary, as is this novel's story.

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*“They who control language control everything.”*

From the *Babel Apocalypse Manifesto*  
by Professor Ebba Black



# CHAPTER 1

My mother's dying wish was to be buried in Wanstead earth. The place of her birth. Near the end of her existence, her skin became veiny and translucent and her memory as frail as her body. By then she had begun to address me by my late father's name. I felt repulsion. *I'm Emyr*, I had wanted to scream, *I'm not him*. I was nothing like him. I was tall, dark, and had a strong moral compass. He was slight, with a ruddy complexion, and lacked scruples. But at least I no longer harbored anger for my mother's betrayal, for my boyhood trauma; that had gone. The solace of time. But I hadn't forgiven her either. And as I hurried away from the cemetery once it was done, I felt only ambivalence.

By the time I reached Manor Park, twilight had become darkness. I walked along the pedestrian corridor, heading back to where I had parked my Skyraider. The cold air swirled around me, so I pulled up the collar of my Napa coat against the chilly November evening. Soft grain leather. Italian design. I loved that fur-lined coat. I hated this foreign city. I wanted to get back to my life, and my job across the water; to get home.

The networked system of LED streetlights slowly dimmed behind me before slipping into darkness, while those ahead flickered on, transmitting my location to one another and

London's communication nerve center, hosted on an aging server in space. The electric glow dappled the walls of the buildings, making the windows appear to pucker in the shadowy light.

I heard a group of drunken revelers behind me. "He always has a line for the ladies," said one slurred voice. The boozy pitch contour wobbled toward me, bouncing along the polycarbonate surface. Then came an eruption of cackling.

As I was about to glance back at the voices, a light flickered in my peripheral vision, drawing my gaze upward to the night sky. A soft white glow, high up in the dark. At first it was indistinguishable from the airway lights. But it persisted, the size of a small disk at first, before shifting to red-orange, getting larger. At that point I realized it definitely couldn't be a hover car. This was farther up, probably low Earth orbit, which explained the initial white. But the shift in coloration—that meant a detonation, producing nitrogen dioxide, which turned deep orange when mixed with air. *A gaseous cloud has reached the atmosphere*, I thought. I was witnessing a chemical explosion in space large enough to be visible to the naked eye. But what was exploding?

As I continued looking up, the orange grew in intensity until it flared across the skyline, illuminating the entire landscape around me with an eerie red-orange. It was only then that I became aware of the newly hushed silence of the drunken revelers nearby. And the silhouettes of other people too, who had also stopped and peppered the pedestrian corridor. We were all now strange red creatures, watching transfixed in rapt silence as the night sky was on fire. And just as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone; the orange light faded back into a deep well of pitch black.

I was pulled out of my reverie by the sight of a hover car descending onto the vertipad ahead of me. A three-wheeler autonomous hackney cab; mass-produced model. I watched in idle distraction as the glass frontage descended level with my eyeline, not twenty meters from me. Inside, I saw a woman, illuminated by the interior safety lighting—late twenties, perhaps, with a small child, a boy of about three or four. The red glow of the vertipad's perimeter security lights bounced sharply off the polymer composite shell, which advertised the taxi company in holographic lettering. The vehicle came to a standstill on the vertipad.

But something about the hover taxi held my gaze. I realized it was the autogyro system. Something was wrong. Instead of self-stowing, it remained deployed. And the vehicle stayed in place where it had landed, in the middle of the vertipad. *Strange*, I thought. It should have taxied away onto the transit corridor by now. Maybe the explosion had affected the landing telemetry circuit. Stranger still, given the passengers were now stuck inside, why hadn't they voice-activated the exit? The gull-wing doors remained closed.

I climbed over the thermoformed pedestrian barrier, ignoring the warning sensors as they flickered on, blinking at me, and walked up the vertipad incline toward the hover cab. The woman peeked out, panic etched on her face. As she glimpsed me through the glass, she suddenly began banging as if in desperate supplication. I mouthed that she should issue her door deactivation voice command into the piloting VirDa. She didn't seem to understand me, so I spelled out Virtual Digital Assistant with my forefinger on the window—*VirDa*; a crude attempt to make her react.

She stared out at me with wild eyes through the gull-



wing window; a look of incomprehension. I realized that her apparent lack of understanding could only mean one thing: she was feral! Her language streaming service was out. She had no idea what I was saying, nor could she communicate with her VirDa. And then she screamed.

Helpless, I watched the terror contained within the soundproofed confines of the plastic hull. The little boy's upturned face shifted to fear and then distress as he witnessed his mother's frenzied panic; the child began to cry. I watched through the glass, witness to the sobs I couldn't hear.

Just then, I heard the roar of VTOL thrust engines. I glanced up. Another hover car was descending, way too fast, dropping directly onto the vertipad, destined for the hackney cab that lay stationary beneath.

I was trained to process details happening in real time with the precision afforded by the slow dilation of protracted duration. With focus, I could unpick the frenzy of multiple rapid events within a temporal landscape perceived with an ethereal slow-motion calm. I observed that the descending hover car was a private vehicle—it had four wheels with expensive alloys that glinted in the marker lights of the VTOL corridor. And as it dropped, I saw that it had air capture ducts underneath and a CO<sub>2</sub> cooling condenser, allowing supersonic flight in international sky lanes. This was a beast of car with a truly global range, an expensive piece of engineering.

There was a man seated at the piloting console. I glimpsed him in the shimmering red of the security lights. To my shock, I realized the descending car was in manual flight mode, which was not permitted in class R airspace, above the city. What was the guy thinking? A collision was now inevitable.

Just before the two vehicles came together, I saw the woman

following my gaze. She glimpsed what was about to befall her, the edge of the other hover car tumbling fast toward her. She made a sudden, startled move for the child. An instinctive shielding gesture, perhaps.

To protect myself, I ran back several meters from the vertipad as the falling vehicle smashed into the roof of the stationary cab. Then came a deafening bang. The impact severed the autogyro blades of the vehicle beneath, which snapped off the roof bearing and spun across the adjacent taxi lane, making a sickening scything sound on the hard plastic surface. I squinted through the darkness as smoke rose from the wreckage. A hissing sound was coming from the tangled mess of the upper vehicle. The hackney cab underneath had somehow resisted the impact. Its reinforced plastic structure appeared largely intact.

I returned to the crash site and climbed onto the protruding front hull, from where I was able to peer into the stricken car on top. The lighting on the piloting console was dimmed, but I could make out splashes of blood on the inside of the cracked windscreen. Some of the ceiling safety lights were still lit; they dimly illuminated the twisted, seemingly lifeless body of the pilot, lying across the front passenger seats where he had been tossed by the collision.

I jumped back down onto the vertipad, searching for the woman and child in the car underneath. My training dictated aiding the most vulnerable first. I turned to a group of onlookers, and called for assistance with getting the injured out.

It was then that I became aware that they were strangely silent, especially given what they had just witnessed—the first hover car crash in years. Each individual was eyeing the others, attempting to mouth something. Only one man seemed still

able to speak. He began talking excitedly. But, to my surprise, he was speaking in a non-Union official language. I recognized it as Mandarin. Others nearby stared at him in startled bafflement. And as he heard the strange sounds coming from his mouth, his words slowly lapsed into silence as a look of darting fear flashed across his face.

I resumed my rescue attempts on the vertipad, picking up a broken piece of carbon-reinforced sidebar lying next to the wreckage. I used it to try and prize open one of the gull-wing doors of the hackney cab, but the weight of the upper vehicle prevented the door from deploying. I ran around to the other side. This time I managed to apply enough pressure to gain leverage. The door hissed as the hydraulic mechanism deployed and the gull-wing slowly opened up and out. The woman and child lay crumpled and still on the floor of the vehicle beneath the concave splintered roof.

As my first aid training kicked in, I checked they were both breathing. Then I lifted the child out, supporting his head, followed by the woman using a shoulder pull. I quickly carried the boy down the vertipad incline, away from the vehicle, then carefully pulled the woman along until they were both a safe distance from the wreckage. The woman's nose looked broken and blood oozed from her nostrils. She had been thrown forward against the glass passenger cabin frontage. I suspected there may be internal injuries, too.

Just as I finished placing them both in the recovery position, a flicker of flame began nibbling gently from somewhere beneath the plastic front of their cab. I smelled the distinct odor of rotten eggs—the toxic combination of sulfur at high temperature that had leaked from the ion-sulfur battery and reacted with hydrocarbons in the taxi shell to create hydrogen

sulfide. The flames began spreading rapidly. Before I could act, they had engulfed the second vehicle. The man, even if still alive, was now beyond my help.

I felt the vibrations of an incoming alert in my ear implant—I tapped my left wrist to activate my holotab. The chip in my wrist glowed briefly green before projecting a holographic screen. There it was—a Europol alert banner scrolling across the small translucent screen floating above my wrist. A red alert status had been triggered.

“Global language outage. Report to HQ.” The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. *A language outage. What does that even mean?*

I knew I had to get help for the hackney cab passengers before responding to the alert. That was the protocol: ensure no immediate danger to life before answering another request.

I scrolled through the menu on my holotab using the eye-tracking sensor tech, selecting the London emergency services app with a blink command. Then I issued an in-app voice command, placing a facecall.

The connection should have been instantaneous. But instead, I heard the distinctive shrill pitch of an unrecognized call attempt. I frowned and tried again. This time I was patched through to a human dispatcher. An actual human! But then again, the Old Kingdom was just a Tier Two state. Soc-ed classification and the United Nations’ job automation agenda didn’t fully apply.

The dispatcher was a young woman with her headset slightly skewed. She appeared surprised to see me through her screen.

She began speaking: “*Toate serviciile de urgență sunt indisponibile.*” I regarded her in surprise. As my auditory nerve activated, my language chip began to auto-parse. I recognized her words as the state official language of Romania. *What the hell ...*



“All emergency services are down?” I asked. She looked at me, both confused and alarmed. It was clear she had no clue what I had just said. I blink activated the language app on my holotab before issuing my voice command.

“Switch to Romanian as default,” I said. The single vibration in my ear implant indicated that my language setting had been changed. I addressed the woman again. “*Toate serviciile de urgență sunt indisponibile?*” I repeated, this time in Union Standard Romanian.

“*Da.*” She nodded.

“*Ești româncă?*” I asked. She shook her head. *If she’s not a Romanian national, then why does she have her language set to Romanian?* I thought. Especially working in the London emergency services center, where the VirDas operated solely on the local state official standard. Last time I’d checked, there was only one state official language in the Old Kingdom. And since Unilanguage’s decision to stop supporting King’s English at the beginning of the year, all official VirDas in London now only ran on the North American Standard variety.

“*Nu mai pot vorbi engleza, nu înțeleg ce s-a întâmplat,*” she replied with a small shrug, tears welling in her eyes. And abruptly, she pulled off her headset and ended the call. She seemed equally shocked at her inability to speak English anymore.

“*Dezactivează limba română. Setează limba engleză ca implicită,*” I said, issuing my voice command into my holotab to deactivate Romanian and return to English. “Facecall Europol SOS.”

I was patched through to the Europol virtual emergency response center. The standard, flaccid face of the dispatcher VirDa appeared on the holographic screen, which projected from my wrist like an ethereal membrane in the dark of the autumnal evening.

“Commander Emyr Morgan,” the VirDa said, addressing me in the Europol default, North American Standard English.

“I’ve received a code red alert. And I have civilians down. The London emergency center is no longer operational.”

“Yes, a catastrophic language outage has been reported,” the VirDa confirmed. “What do you need, Commander?”

“An air ambulance, a paramedic, and direct access to a local ER.”

After a slight pause, the VirDa responded. “I have placed an emergency request. A Union crew is assigned, traveling across the Old Kingdom channel via the South Holland airway.”

“Copy, thanks. End call,” I said. *Catastrophic language outage? What the hell’s going on?*