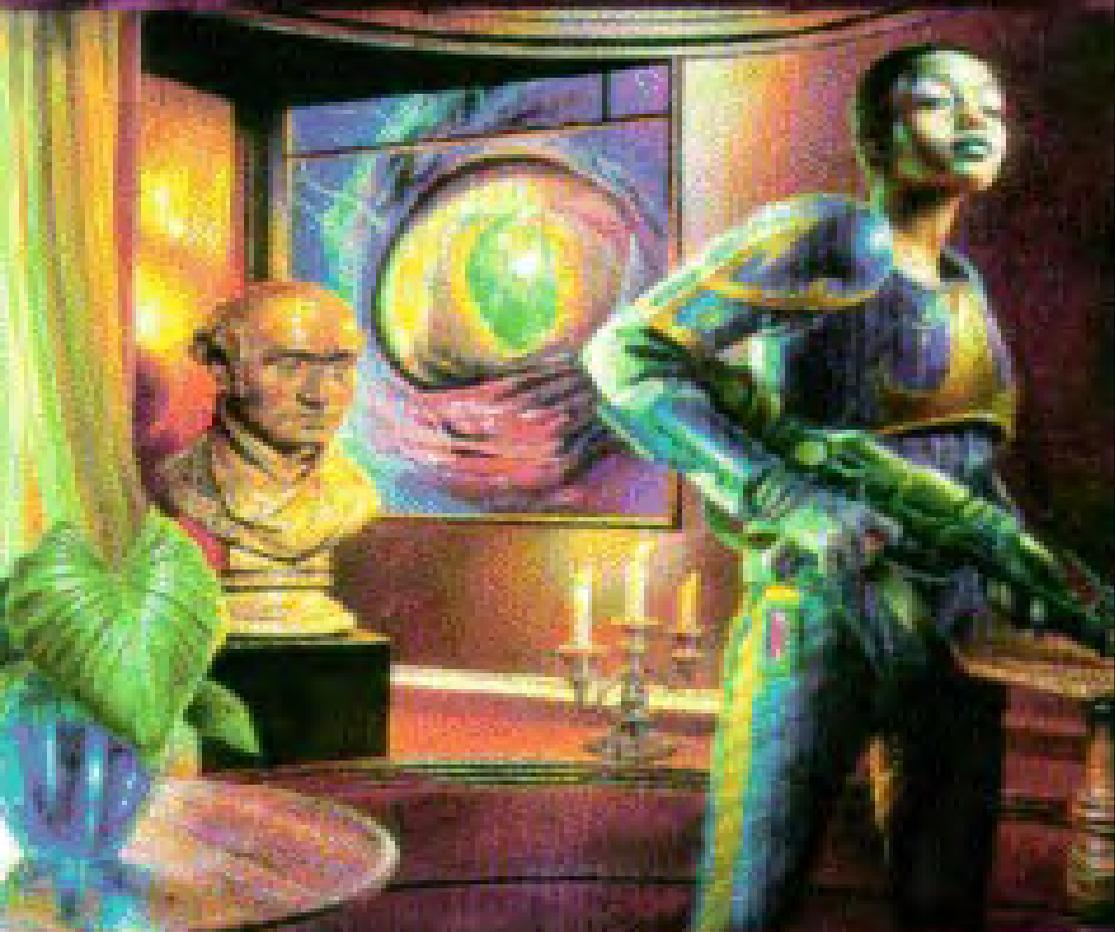


T H E N E W
A D V E N T U R E S

NA



OBLIVION

DAVE STONE

OBLIVION

ROZ SNARLED UP INTO THE FACE OF HER ABDUCTOR. 'IF YOU TOUCH ME I'LL KILL YOU. WHO ARE YOU? JUST WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?' THE BLOND MAN LOOKED DOWN AT HER WITH A MIXTURE OF WHAT LOOKED LIKE FEAR AND PAIN. 'MY NAME'S CHRIS CWEJ,' HE SAID. 'AND AS TO WHAT'S GOING ON, HELL IS PROBABLY AS GOOD A WORD FOR IT AS ANY.'

Something has burst through the worn and patchwork fabric of the universe, like a high-velocity round through a rotten apple. The timelines are cut loose and whipsawing - alternative pasts, presents and futures slicing through the world we think of as real.

At the centre of the disruption three adventurers, Nathan li Shao, Leetha and Kiru, are trapped on a parallel Earth - flung from one twisted alternative to another by a man called Deed, who has usurped the power of the Godhead. If their friend Sgloomi Po cannot reach them in time they will be obliterated. Deed is attempting to forge his own reality and consign all others to oblivion.

To help end the chaos, Sgloomi has assembled a number of old friends: Bernice Summerfield, the feckless Jason Kane and Christopher Cwej... but there has been one small mistake. A miscalculation has placed someone among them who should not be there. Someone who should be dead.

T H E N E W

A D V E N T U R E S

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OBLIVION

'Martle? What's wrong?'

There was a ragged, desperate quality to Martle's voice: 'Roz? I'm at the Three Jade Shebeen in the settlement of the fourth DHAI creeper-viper. Things have gone oogli-shaped real bad. I need backup, Roz, and I need it...'

There was a sound from the comm link that was not the distinctive chunk! of an Adjudicator's MFG, but which could only have come from some sort of projectile weapon. Then the link went dead.

'Fenn!' The name was ripped from Roz's throat seemingly of its own volition. She turned to Logh. 'This Three Jade Shebeen. Where?'

'I can show,' said Logh, worriedly. 'Not a good idea. Very bad boys in Three Jade Shebeen. Very dangerous...'

Roz was almost snarling at him now, in a way that made him start away.

'You take me there,' Roz told him. 'You take me there. Now.'

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A D V E N T U R E S

OBLIVION
Dave Stone

NA

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This is for
Anne
and Corrine
and especially
for Laura.

'In your arms, enfolded in your arms and safe.'

DUKE SENIOR

*Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy:
This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in.*

JAKUES All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover.
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. I he sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon.
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side.
His youthful hose well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank: and his big, manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion...

*'And, yea, like unto the Kingdoms of the World was my
sight, and all the Kingdoms of the World he spoil and sport,
bent to my will. And great indeed was the wailing of the*

Damned *doomed by my will and mine alone to Oblivion unending ...*

'And then on Thursday,' wrote Mr Kipling, 'I made my Famous Chocolate Brownies without the secret extra ingredient.'

You were looking so serious there, for a moment.

The observant will of course have realized that this is the third and final book in the 'Clockwork Trilogy', the one about which I'm also always on; the one that started with *Sky Pirates!* and *Construction with a capital C*, continued with the *Development of Death and Diplomacy*, and now ends with *Deconstruction, dissolution, obliteration, misery, futility and death*. We're going down the rabbit hole, boys, and it don't exactly lead to Wonderland.

But then again you've got to laugh. It does you good, apparently.

(On the general subject of madness, incidentally, someone - I forget who - came up with a useful easy definition for clinical paranoia. You can think that every single person in the world is out to get you and not be paranoid. If you think that even one table lamp, or piece of Stilton cheese, is out to get you, then you are.)

Also incidentally, in the researching of this book I finally got around to reading *When Rabbit Howls*. The Howling Rabbit woman had a grand total of 74 distinct personalities, apparently, one of whom was a literary genius on a level with Shakespeare and Joyce. Which tends to beg the question: where the hell was *he* when she wrote the bloody book?

Mind my hat.

— D.S.

PROLOGUE

REFRIGERATED DREAMS OF ME

The dream again; the same dream. Waking cold and slick with prickling sweat, the air pockets rattling through the ducts that wormhole microtubularly through the Warren, now sounding akin to distant thunder, an explosion behind the wall or chattering teeth directly by the ear. Shadows twisting on the walls; the imagined, half-heard sound of needle-teeth on polythene.

In the dark the shapes take on a life of their own. The toys one could not care less about — the threadbare, boring lumps of ratty fur and polymer that seem to fade into nothing next to the new bright things got for your new little brother - seem to watch you with their big, bright eyes, talking in their wadding heads (...a spoon and sharpen it and slide it inside. I want to see what's inside and I want...)

You can almost hear the voices, buzzing and tickling inside your head, misshapen and uncrystallized, like half-formed pupae crawling over the meat of the brain.

And woke.

For a long while little Simon Deed remained immobile, absolutely still, his mind clicking over like cold clockwork - although 'cold' is not perhaps the precisely correct expression. It implies some sense of chilly, cerebral calculation and, even for a five-year-old, Simon Deed was simply not that bright. There was something broken inside him, or not present from the start; an emotional dead zone and a fundamental inability to comprehend a reality outside of the self, without the intelligence or force of will to compensate.

The imperfect mind of Simon Deed ticked and clicked imperfectly over the facts of his life. The fracture that precluded contact and made the giving and receiving of simple human warmth inconceivable to him, even from his mother and father. It was evident in the toys that littered the sleeping cubicle with the chilly untidiness of neglect rather than the innate entropic mess of childhood. The mother and father of Simon Deed had bought him toys in the same spirit as they fed him and tried to make themselves like him: it was something they were supposed to do, and they were damned well going to do it, even if they couldn't find it in themselves to put their whole hearts into it.

The toys, perhaps as overcompensation, were more expensive in monetary terms than those ordinarily given to a five-year-old child. They were also pristine and almost utterly untouched. Simon Deed would pick them up (because for some unconscious reason his mother and father would wrap them and leave them on the floor rather than *give* them hand to hand: they touched him only when they thought about it consciously) - he would pick the toys up and unwrap them, look at them blankly, take them to his cubicle because that seemed to be expected, drop them and never so much as look at them again. Simon Deed continued to participate in this familial charade only because of the process of unwrapping and seeing what was inside: he had the unformed notion that at some point a package might contain something he actually wanted, though what this might possibly be he could not even begin to imagine. Simon Deed had barely the imagination to conceive that a dropped object might at some point hit the floor.

Deed's mother and father were a perfectly ordinary and amiable couple, a control-systems engineer for the Bane Incorporation and a house-husband who in his spare time sold product designs for the self same transub-lines upon which his wife worked, which was why the Deeds were eligible for subsidized space in the privately owned Bane hab-warrens. They cannot in all justice be blamed for their coldness toward their son: they were merely reacting on a

primal level to the deadness within him, and would have been horrified and ashamed to learn that they were doing it. Similarly, in the five years since their son had been born, they had followed advisory birth-control procedures without a Mingle unconscious lapse that might result in a 'mistake' for the simple reason that their unconscious minds looked at Simon Deed and flatly refused to countenance another one remotely like him. They had another child only when they actively *made* themselves decide to have one.

Now, this had happened. Simon had a little brother. He was called Carl.

For the first time in the entire history of the universe (that being the three and a half years, Simon Deed being a particularly dense child, since he had first become aware of the existence of his self) Simon Deed had a comparison for the interactions of the only living creatures of which he was really aware, saw how they touched and talked to the new baby, and saw their genuine pleasure and joy. It would be a mistake to think that made him sad and hurt, because that would imply that Simon Deed was capable of feeling such things. He simply didn't think it was right. He didn't like it and he did not want it in happen, and so of course it shouldn't.

For nights Simon Deed had lain awake, the machinery of Ins mind ticking and clicking over the facts of his life, incapable of translating them into any active thought or word. It was not inside him. He was not and would never, of his own volition, be able to put his thoughts into action.

And then, on this particular and otherwise perfectly ordinary night, something changed, hi fact, everything there ever was, or would or will be, changed for ever.

It just didn't happen all at once.

The man sitting cross-legged at the foot of the mattress was tall and spindly, almost inhumanly so, so that his limbs seemed to be semirigid, slightly supple wires. He wore a black suit and a stovepipe hat. He grinned at Simon Deed with sharp and vulpine teeth.

‘I expect you’re wondering why I’m here,’ he said.

To the extent that Simon could wonder about anything, he didn’t wonder about anything at all. The man in the hat was quite obviously a pervert, and Simon recalled the single salient point that his parents had made in all their comments about perverts.

‘Where’s my sweet?’ he said.

The man in the hat chuckled. ‘I’m not a pervert, though I do have something for you. Something rather... nicer than a sweet.’ He doffed his hat in a sardonic little motion. ‘My name is Mr Pelt. I’m pleased to meet you. And how are you this fine night?’

Simon didn’t reply. Sweets apparently not being an immediate option, he had simply dismissed this stranger from his mind and let it wander, to such a degree that when he happened to turn his eyes back, he experienced the merest vestige of something remotely akin to shock to find that the stranger, Mr Pelt, was still there.

‘Now I hardly call that polite,’ said Mr Pelt - and something in his voice and the black light in his eyes cut through the deadness inside Simon, sliced him with a small but jagged shard of real emotion. It was fear. Simon didn’t like it. Mr Pelt leant forward to plant his elbows on his knees and put his face very close to Simon’s, pinioning him with his eyes. It did not occur to Simon to flinch.

‘You’d better be polite to me, Simon Deed,’ said Mr Pelt, “cause I know what to do. I’m the oblivion gentleman; I’m the man with the plan. I can give you something you want, Simon Deed. You’ve been chosen, Simon Deed, because you’re *special*. You’re only one, the only one who’s real - the only one who’s *really* real - in the whole wide world. But then you already knew that.’

Simon didn’t even nod. Mr Pelt’s statements were so obvious that they did not merit a response.

Mr Pelt took his face away and began to fumble in the pockets of his black suit. There were a lot of them. ‘Now I know I had it somewhere,’ he muttered. ‘You know how it is, though you personally probably don’t. There’s something

special so you keep it somewhere safe and then, when you come to look for it you - aha! And there it is!

Mr Pelt pulled a small object from his pocket and showed it, proudly, to Simon. It was a jewelled egg, about the size of a duck's egg, its crust of sapphires, rubies and diamonds inset in a pure-gold filigree. There was no clasp, but there was a strangely complex clicking sound as Mr Pelt flipped the egg open, and tilted it so that Simon could see what was inside.

For the rest of his life, such as it was, Simon never forgot the feeling of pure, bright rainbow joy - he remembered how it *made* him feel, without actually feeling it ever again. He sat there, in his sleeping cubicle, surrounded by the things that were supposed to make him feel like that, transfixed.

At last he was able to speak. 'Want. Want it.'

'Ah, the problem with the personal pronoun,' Mr Pelt said to someone nonexistent to his left. 'Swimming.' Then he turned back to Simon and closed the egg with a snap. Simon's body made him jerk back as though he had been slung, but Simon didn't feel anything again. Not one thing.

'This is for you,' said Mr Pelt. 'But not tonight. It's for when you've done the things you have to do. It's your reward.' He looked at Simon with a raised eyebrow and a smile. 'Will you do the things you have to do?'

'Yes,' said Simon.

So Mr Pelt told Simon the first thing he had to do, and it was so right and proper, so far as Simon was concerned, that he just did it.

And later, as the Deed family went through their processes of grief for their new child who had suffered cot death in the night, as their minds very carefully prevented certain thoughts from even occurring to them, Simon made himself say and do and even *think* the right things, so that his mother and father started to like him, and realize that there was nothing wrong and slightly frightening about him after all.

Except inside, of course. Where such things really count.

ANOTHER PROLOGUE

GETTING INSIDE

One of the main differences between stories and reality, thought Roz, is the different ways in which they spring things on you. In stories, the surprises are foreshadowed and built towards; they have a kind of narrative weight, and everything important, if not absolutely everything, hinges on them. You know they're coming, on some emotional level, whether the obligatory still of the Fateful Moment is on the cover of the playback wafer or not.

In reality the surprises are merely inexplicable, like glancing from a window to see a dog, placidly gnawing its leg off on the street and then simply hobbling away, and you never learn precisely what it was about. Reality happens without some arty simvid director lighting it and choreographing it, putting it in context and making it meaningful; it's just something that occurs. It doesn't affect you or make any difference to anything; it's just banal.

In the same way, every dramatic convention said that she was supposed to actually *feel* something about her present situation. Spiky young Adjudicator on her first off-planet mission, suddenly finding herself in a world where you can't solve every problem with a wisecrack and a good slap, for the simple reason that you never quite know who can be slapped with impunity and who can't. It was the stuff of a thousand years of fictional cops, and every Smartarse Who Learns Better story from the year dot. As it was, she just had a headache from the stuffy, recycled air of the transport and a greasy feeling on her skin, which was probably psychosomatic. She had just been utterly unprepared for the way that the self-enclosed and scaled world of a starship smelt.

Fortunately, the Overcities of Earth were rich, more than rich enough to support artificial-gravity generators for their Church of Adjudication transport craft. Roz stood in the changing cubicle and examined herself in the full-length mirror - not from vanity but to consciously check that her uniform and equipment were complete and fully functional. Since she was to be a representative of the Church in foreign climes, the uniform was new and pristine, the heavy boots and the padding unworn. The only item not fresh out of its wrappings was her ID plate, being unique to her and unreproducible, and which she had carefully polished to a high shine. Personally, Roz would have preferred her ordinary uniform, or at least one she'd had a chance to wear in slightly. This new stuff chafed at her wrists and ankles, and if she wasn't careful she was going to end up with a fine new crop of blisters.

The 'mirror' was in fact a by-product of the same technologies as produced the antigrav. and showed a true image without reversing. The effect was slightly disorientating, like looking at the output of a videocam directed at oneself. The mind expected the body's actions to be, well, *mirrored*, and was kept wrong-footed, thrown slightly out of kilter. Roz ran through the mental list: spare ammunition in left biceps pouch, the same and a basic maintenance toolkit in the right, the big Multi-Function Gun it basically maintained snap-racked on the right thigh. The lateral-grip baton, which was the end of the evolutionary line of the police truncheon, was in its statutorily correct place up the small of the back (Roz never wore it that way on active duty, agreeing as she did with the general opinion that such a position was tantamount to an injured spine when you fell on it.) Microgrenades, comms and sensor pack in the belt-webbing pouches. A membrane-thin gas-mask cowl folded neatly into a little zipped pocket along the left side of the collar. The heavy bowie-like hunting knife in the right boot. Everything present and correct.

The transport's intercom system chimed. They were nearing the Zarjax Hook, ETA in twenty of the galactically accepted

time units that, with the current domination of Earth in galactic affairs, translated directly into minutes. Time to be strapping herself down and preparing herself for translation into the freefall of three-dimensional space (which Roz Forrester hated with a passion unseen) and the military-spec crash-deceleration (which, if anything, was even worse). Roz left the cubicle.

Adjudicator Martle was already strapped into his crash webbing. His uniform was as new and pristine as that of Roz, yet contrived to look spit-and-polish neater, tougher and more businesslike - every inch the popular simvid image of an Adjudicator rather than someone who just happened to be one and was wearing the costume.

It was probably experience - Fenn Martle was twenty-nine years old, nine years older than Roz, and had spent more of his life in the Church. He had refused the elevation to Verger, preferring the lowly life of a street Adjudicator where he could do more good, and Roz had been partnered with him from when she had first been fully Ordained at the age of nineteen.

Roz owed him a lot from the last year, not least being her very life on a number of incredibly sticky occasions. She remembered a time when she had been left shackled in a crawlspace after being discovered working plainclothes at an illegal dogfight (which had involved small mutated, cybernetically enhanced Chihuahuas flying lethally at each other in especially constructed model aeroplanes) and had taken the time to free her, even though it meant that the ringleaders had taken the opportunity to make their escape. That was only one of several times she'd got herself into a mess and Fenn had pulled her out of it. She sometimes desperately wished that she could return the favour - but that meant wishing him in mortal danger in the *first* place. It was all rather confusing.

Now Fenn turned his head with a friendly grin as she strapped herself into her own webbing. 'You look great,' he

said, as though reading her mind about the discrepancies between them. 'You're going to blow them away.'

Roz raised an eyebrow. 'Literally or figuratively?'

'Probably both. You know what our job is, here.'

Roz nodded. The Fnarok population of the Overcities was currently being inundated with a hypnoleptic drug which, under analysis, had been discovered to be partially derived from an extract of the human pituitary gland. Further analysis had shown that, rather than coming from Earth, these pituitary glands had originated from the human colonists of Zarjax, the Fnaroks' home planet. The Church had sent Roz and Fenn to investigate, calling on the Zarjax law-enforcement agencies as and when, on the simple basis that as Earth Adjudicators they outranked absolutely everybody else.

At least, that was the ostensible reason. Roz Forrester might have been only a year Ordained, but she had been around quite long enough to learn something.

'We go around knocking down doors,' she said sourly. 'Haul in suspects for questioning, get our faces in what passes for the local media, and generally blunder around making a lot of noise. That's supposed to divert attention from the sneaky little buggers in Covert Ops, who've been on planet for weeks now if not months, and let them do the real job.'

'That's about the size of it.' Fenn Martle smiled, a little grimly. 'Then again, we might just give the bastards a surprise and do it properly. Teach these...' He made a little speak-no-evil gesture of the sort that the public face of the Church had adopted of late when referring to those of otherworldly extraction. 'Show 'em what we're made of and teach them a lesson.'

Looking at him, for a moment. Roz was forced to quash several thoughts and feelings and put them on hold. There would be time for more personal speculation later. For the moment she merely allowed herself the pleasure of professional respect. He was her partner and she trusted him completely, to do the job and watch her back, in the same way as she watched his. She trusted him with her life. The

future could take care of itself and, in her heart of hearts, Roz knew that, with this man beside her, the future was going to be damned good.

The transport translated down to sublight and fired its slam retros, flipping itself neatly into Zarjax orbit with an adroitness unknown and unavailable to commercial vessels. All the same, despite the presence of internal damper-fields, the crash deceleration was rough. Roz blacked out momentarily as the blood and oxygen were drained from her head.

In a place that, now - in this especial and particular now - would not be recognizable as any place on Earth, there was a chamber. In the centre of the chamber there was a plinth. Upon the plinth there was a stand, and in the stand there was what might, at first sight, be taken for an egg.

The egg was of an artificial and a marvellous construction. For all that it was ancient it was pristine, the chasing and enamel of it bright and utterly untainted, as though it had been freshly dipped in jeweller's acid that had boiled away all patina and impurity. Indeed, the egg shone brighter than can easily be explained by mere reflected light - not lit from within, but surrounded by a nimbus, a radiance that infused the air around it on some level unconnected with the physical laws of luminescence.

Within the egg a mechanism of surpassing complexity ticked and whirred, reminiscent of clockwork but unlike it, in the way that a map is unlike the actuality of the terrain it depicts.

This clock, if it could be called a clock at all, counted far more than the concentric and recurring cycles of its own mechanism. This clock counted entire worlds.

Counted them down, and counted them out.

STRIKE ONE

THE ONCOMING STORM

A FRACTURED SURFACE

There was nothing in the sky, even when it could be glimpsed through the jungle canopy. It was flat and grey, not with atmospheric cloud cover, but from the dark-matter cloud that enveloped this entire sector of space - the Malanoor system, out on the edge of the spiral arm and one of the farthest from Galactic Centre. The Malanoor system was named for its single inhabitable planet, as was the convention in such cases. The *planet* Malanoor orbited a G2-type star roughly equivalent to Sol, at a distance of that of Mercury from Sol, but the diffusive effects of its setting gave it an atmosphere like a muggy English summer's day.

In the jungle, creatures like invertebrate and slimy marmosets slithered through the trees. Something roared wetly, causing a commotion among slick-skinned, flightless birdlike things in the undergrowth, so that they thrashed like fish on a trawler's deck, squealing like frogs skewered by the claws of a particularly malicious cat. The sounds of panic died back down to silence, save for the ever-present ratcheting sound of larvae munching mildew-spotted leaves.

The bosky dusk of the rain-jungle, however, was pierced by more immediate and rather more humanly, or at least sentiently comprehensible, utterances:

‘Euuurgh, miss! Something crawled over my *hand*!’

‘Jalon keeps hitting me *back*, miss!’

‘There’s all this *yuk* all over my sleeping bag, miss!’

‘I need to go to the toilet, miss!’

‘Miss! Miss! Mabra’s *eating* all the yuk on her sleeping bag!’

In a hammock slung between two *kugi-boola* fem mushrooms, Benny tried to shut her ears and mind to the outcries of the

little fu- the precious little darlings. Living fast and dying young might be a perfectly valid and honourable philosophy, she thought, until one added the corollary that living *expensively* fast meant you sometimes had to take any old job that came along to prevent yourself from dying in the wrong way - in penury.

Her previous adventures had, once again, washed her up upon the relatively safe metaphorical shores of the Dellah University without a tin shilling to her name. Unfortunately for her, the only paying little extra going had involved taking a privately funded, supervisory position, escorting a collection of richly parented children around the more suitable archaeological excavations of Malanoor.

The arrangement was one of those that kept the university's finances balanced, was intended as more of an adventure holiday than anything else. And on the skimmer ride to the jungle camping site, here to spend the night preparatory to entering the Malanoor dig itself, Benny had entertained dark thoughts of subjecting said collection of children to an 'adventure' they would never forget. If living fast and dying young was the aim, she was at this point perfectly willing to accelerate the ghastly little brats to lightspeed.

The camping site was basically a part of the nascent Malanoor tourist industry. There were chemical toilets and standpipe water systems to prevent visitors dying of dysentery, and an electrostatic field prevented the encroachment of the relatively small amount of flora and fauna actually dangerous to human life. In fact, the fields extended around a large excavated section of the Lost Temples of Malanoor themselves - long since mined of useful data and artefacts, and now converted into what was to all intents and purposes a subterranean cargo-cult theme park.

Lying in her hammock, beyond the squabbling hammocks of the children, Benny could make out the faintly phosphorescent forms of the Malanese guides standing guard - here to provide exotic local colour more than anything else. They were fungoid, squat and vaguely humanoid, like a

rather more plasticine idea of the mythological trolls of Earth, the hooded dark caverns of their eyes, where and when they were visible, turned permanently to the forest floor.

Benny knew that it was physically impossible for the dominant species of Malanoor to turn its eyes up to the sky: it had evolved under a sky where there was simply nothing to see. They had sweeping carapace structures, encasing and extending from their heads, that dealt with anything that might fall upon them from the forest canopy above – but they were fundamentally unable to think in *terms* of above. The Malanese lived not on a ‘planet’ but in a ‘world’, an entire universe of which they could only conceive of on the ground or subterranean level. They were quite comfortable and sophisticated with the idea of ‘extraterrestrial’ life – as was evidenced by the fact that they had a tourist industry – and they just thought that all these aliens came from an incredibly long way off laterally, or from impossibly deep below the ground.

Benny had thought she’d spotted the functional flaw in this world-view. After decanting the children from the skimmer, and keeping half an eye on them as they tried to drown each other under the standpipe spigots, she had said to one of the guides, ‘Look, you dig a tunnel going into the ground, right, and you walk down it. Then at the end you turn around again and walk back the other way. Which way do you go?’

The guide had looked at her as though she were mad. ‘Less down.’

Implicit in the creature’s tone had been such an absolute gap of referential meaning between *less down* and *up* that Benny had decided not to push it.

The children were still awake, the excitement of spending the night outside for possibly the first time in their lives mixed with the fretful tiredness of being cooped up in a transit ship and then a skimmer for the best part of the day. Their squabbling had faded to the kind of shrilly whispered conversation and collapses into stifled giggling that, to a tired adult, seemed more piercing and annoying than the outright squabbling. Eventually, Benny could stand it no more. She

swung herself out of her hammock and lit a torch. A swarm of tiny flying sluglike things, with organically evolved rotor blades rather than wings, darted out of the sudden light.

‘All right,’ she said to the slightly startled children blinking in the beam of the torch. ‘It’s time.’ She lowered her voice so that it was calmly conspiratorial, the voice of someone who was going to impart a secret. ‘The time has come to tell you some of the things you need to know about this place.’

The trick, Benny recalled, was never to talk down to children, but to treat them with a frank if cordial dislike. The hypocritical and self-conscious attempt by an adult to be *friends* with them merely had them thinking of said adult as a complete and utter twot.

Likewise, she felt, if one was telling stories, one should never try to adapt them for the so-called fragile sensibilities of the young. The things they didn’t understand either went over the top of their heads, or sank in to help inform them when the time came that they *did* understand. And things like blood, guts, gore and terror they understood perfectly: they lapped it up and thrived on it, nasty little creatures that they were.

In the Malanoor climate there was nothing to bum, but the portable primus stove, used to boil the water for tin mugs of cinnamon tea, gave off a sufficiently flickering, bluish, eerie light as the children sat around it and listened to Benny detailing some of the juicier aspects of the history of the Lost Temples of Malanoor. She told them of the thousands of slaves who had died in their construction, from the work, the sanitation, the cruelty of the overseers and, finally, when the digging and construction were complete, the mass poisoning of everyone who was left, overseers and all.

She told them of the Emperor Shon Yi Rambakagh, Jewel of the World’s Core, the Light that Permeates the Tenebrous Jungle Everlasting, the King of Kings and Slayer of Kings (but in reality merely head of a jungle tribe that, what with the depletions suffered through building the Temples, by then numbered itself in the thousands at most). Said Emperor had

caused that, upon his death, he be entombed in their centre, surrounded by the entire wealth of the tribe, and for that matter the entire remains of the tribe, who were to wall themselves up with him as Earthly attendants (the Malanese thinking of 'Earth' as we would of 'Heaven') on the basis that the last man left alive filled in the final brick before dispatching himself.

Benny glossed over die small facts that nobody knew *why* the tribe had done it - both the building and the suicides - for the simple reason that there was absolutely nobody left to tell them. In the same way, and for largely the same reasons, nobody even knew the name of the tribe - the Emperor Shon Yi having successfully caused the erasure of any other name than his own. These were, however, the simple reason why the Temples had become Lost.

Benny also glossed over that fact that they were found again almost immediately: by other tribes, by robbers and pretty much anyone else who happened to be passing through. She neglected to mention that, by now, the treasures of Shon Yi were pretty much evenly distributed through this world and several others and the Temples had been simply resealed, save for the tourist areas where the traps had been carefully disarmed, and the more repugnant remains and religious designs removed. Instead, she dwelt on the fiendish and lethal cunning of those traps, complete with all the gory details, and an only slightly bowdlerized version of the nastiness of the suicides.

'But that wasn't the worst thing,' she said, at length. 'I didn't tell you the *worst* thing.'

The children looked at her expectantly. Anything worse than water-wheel-powered machines that picked you up by the cars, impaled you, shot spikes into your eyes and then sawed your head off so that your body fell into a mincing machine might prove to be very interesting indeed.

'Was it a big rock?' asked a small, blonde-tressed girl by the name of Mabra, happily. 'Y'know, like round, so it rolls over you and squashes you up *big* at one end like a balloon until you burst and -'

'No,' said Benny, making a mental note to keep a special eye on Mabra when they were down in the temples and with access to even declawed blade machines.

'Was it like spikes that you fall on and go into your belly?' asked a small boy with a slightly less nasty imagination than Mabra.

'No,' said Benny.

'Then was it big hooks that go up your *bottom* and pull your insides out and wind them round on a -'

'No it bloody isn't, Mabra!' Benny snapped. This was heading into zones of horridness unmatched by most *reality*, let alone anything she herself could invent. Not for the first time, she thanked her culturally relevant local Zodiac that what with one thing and another she had never got around to having children. 'You're thinking about the wrong thing entirely,' she told the examples of that juvenile breed currently before her. 'I'm thinking of the *other* things the Temples were built to keep inside. It seems that -'

Benny got no further. Something had caught the attention of the children. She felt a moment of confusion, of something somehow wrong with the world, before she realized that she had allowed herself to become a little too immersed in the local mindset on the subliminal level - and the children were looking *up*.

A bright light detonated in the sky above, so bright that for an instant shafts of light streamed through the jungle canopy, even in the humid air, like the light of Revelation.

The thunderclap came bare instants later, like two balled fists punching into the abdomen, like hands clapped against the ears, a sound so loud and hard it was a physical, bludgeoning thing.

Around the small party of teacher and charges, the Malanese guides cast about themselves in terror, turning their eyes right and left and down - any direction but above them. There was a pulsing shriek that seemed to fill the world, and a kind of instant, complex, smacking crunch as something went through strata of foliage at such a speed that

the human brain could not comprehend the span of its passing.

And something big came down.

SIGNALS FROM THE UNDERGROUND

The Malanese guides were still in utter confusion, their carapaces milling about in alarm. It was common practice for extraplanetary ships to arrive discreetly and covertly so as not to alarm the local perceptions of the universe - and to Malanese perceptions it must have been as though something had simply appeared from thin air, rending it explosively as it went.

From the direction in which the sudden arrival had landed - or indeed where it had impacted - there was a faint and pulsing glow diffused by foliage and then nothing but the noisy, indigenous silence of the jungle.

The children were yammering with excitement, scrambling over themselves in readiness to set off to investigate - no doubt in the hope of finding some really *interesting* dead bodies in what might or might not be the spectacular wreckage of some crashed ship.

'Shut up!' Benny roared. She snaked out a hand to grab Mabra - who by dint of kicking and scratching more viciously than the others was appreciably ahead of the pack - and dragged her firmly back by the ear.

'Aaow, miss!' the delightful little angel yelled. 'Letmegothathurts!' She would no doubt have continued in this vein had she not caught the expression on Benny's face and lapsed into a sullen silence.

'Just be quiet, all of you,' Benny said with a murderous calm that quietened the children more than any amount of shouting. 'Let me listen for a minute.'

It was a question of degrees, a question of being aware of something only when it stopped. The noises of the jungle, the dark shapes of it, had become in some way more *distinct*. The

unfelt tingle in the back of the head, on the other hand, of the force-field generators that should be keeping the more dangerous aspects of the jungle at an electrogravitational arm's length, were now completely absent. The impact of whatever had come down must have knocked them out.

'You just sit there,' Benny told the children. 'You say nothing and do nothing.'

She climbed to her feet and headed for the nearest of the guides. She pressed him firmly on the carapace, making sure she moved her arm laterally rather than tap him as one might tap a human on the shoulder.

'Have your people form a circle,' she said, as its stalked and crablike eyes turned towards her. 'Protect the children. Don't let anything through.'

The Malanese nodded, with the slightly weird dynamic that meant that it was looking down, then returning its head to an original position rather than looking up again. 'We'll keep them safe.'

The voice seemed perfectly human - none of the 'we keep children safe' that one might expect from a nonhuman - humans having the ingrained idea that anything unlike them cannot master the art of the apostrophe. The Malanese as a race were at least as intelligent as humans and, aside from a mild tendency to commit mass suicide at the drop of a chitinous membrane, demonstrably more honourable, courageous and kind.

'We'll die before we let harm come to them,' the guide said, demonstrating several racial aspects in one go.

'Thank you,' Benny said. She hefted her flashlight so that the beam shone out into the suddenly predatory-seeming jungle, and followed the line of light.

Human reactions, Benny thought sometimes, almost always when the thought came too late to do any good, seemed to be a kind of mixed and mutually conflicting assortment of impulse, rationalization and true logic - the trick being to work out which, or which, or which they were. She'd had a blind impulse to protect her charges. At least one of the field-

generators was down, and so she had to find and fix it. They were human installations, and she had experience in dealing with alien environments, so she was the only one qualified to handle the task. The guides were more suited to protecting the children, and to take even one with her would increase the chance that some bit of inimical wildlife might get through to harm them.

This, as she wetly crunched her way through fungoid vegetation, was no help at all. Things seemed to be scurrying away from the beam of the flashlight, like cockroaches when one hit a switch - but she had the horrible feeling that there were other things. Things that were moving rather more slowly and sinuously. Things that were biding their time, and, once they'd bided it, wouldn't scurry away at all.

She knew that she was heading into areas of the Temples that had not been renovated, remodelled and effectively neutered for tourists. She was walking over ground that contained tunnels full of bones, and the phosphorescence of remains, and the kind of deathtraps that might sound entertaining at a conceptual distance, but were lethal in proximity, and from which the teeth had not been pulled. The fact that they had been constructed several hundreds of years ago and so were in a state of probable disrepair was no real comfort. All it would take was for just one of them to be in a state of repair. All it would take was a cave-in and a fall into the dark.

The things in the jungle around her, the possibility of mechanical death below, were the least of her worries, however. The thing that preyed on Benny's mind, as she pushed her way through a growth of fleshy tendrils that seemed to cling to her face as though they were sinking fibrils into her pores, was the thing she had been about to tell the children before the big light had come down and interrupted things.

There were stories, largely apocryphal, of the rediscovery of the Temples, and how the remains of those therein had been... not so much defiled as gnawed upon. Fed upon. Their bodies actively *eaten* as opposed to the simple decomposition

that might be put down to the work of the local equivalent of larvae.

Legends said that in his final act before he died, the Emperor had caused his Magi to summon a Great Beast, who would roam the underground tunnels and protect the Temples from intruders. Details of its precise form were vague – and not helped by any number of later investigators and commentators inventing things like fangs, claws, tentacles and extra eyes and heads without the benefit of any direct evidence. The one thing universally agreed upon, however, was that the Great Beast had appeared as if from nowhere, out of thin air. Off-world commentators, of course, held that this simply meant that it - whatever it actually was, if it ever existed in the first place - had simply come down from the sky, occasioning the same terror as the first off-worlders themselves had caused in the days of Primary contact. The idea of some hulking, nebulously formed monster shambling through the sealed-off areas of the Temples, though, had struck some archetypical chord and taken on a life of its own - fed by probably apocryphal stories of the hideous fates that had befallen unwary robbers in the past, and later by a slightly disproportionate number of disappearances and accidents among archaeological teams.

Logic said that any Great Beast had to be the end result of a mixture of myth, coincidence and superstition - archaeology is a risky business at the best of times, even without the added dangers of a strange construction packed with lethal traps. Logic also said that if there were any factual basis, anything with a metabolism that lived upon relatively fresh corpse meat must have died of starvation if trapped, or migrated if not, centuries ago. Unfortunately, out here alone in the dark, Logic was an aptitude increasingly difficult to sustain.

Something ragged flapped past her face, and Benny lurched back with a shriek of alarm. It was only then that she realized how the formless tension had been getting to her, tightening slowly and imperceptibly until she was all but twanging with it.

‘Oh, this is stupid!’ she snapped to the world in general. She slapped at her cheek with the hand not holding the flashlight and flexed her knotted shoulders, consciously forcing her lungs to breathe deeply in and out. ‘If you keep on starting at ghosts and things bumping in the night, girl, you won’t be able to see the jungle for the fungus.’

She squared her slightly loosened shoulders and planted her feet firmly on the mushy ground, preparatory to putting the best one forward.

There was a muffled crack and the ground dropped from under her. She dropped into a darkness even blacker than the night around her, caught on an inhalation and too stunned to cry.

There was a simultaneous, complex and multiple thwipping sound from close by. Tendrils of something slimy wrapped themselves around her and tightened like steel bands. She was wrenched upward with such a sudden jerk that her joints seemed to almost dislocate, the reverse acceleration driving the blood from her head so that she blanked for a bare instant and came round to find herself face to face with the thing that was now gripping her with its tentacles.

Its form bulked and bulged obscenely. Ichor on its skin seemed to glisten in the diffuse light from the torch that was now shining from somewhere in the bottom of the pit into which she had almost fallen.

The Great Beast, come to life from myth and coincidence and her own imaginings, regarded her with a disparate collection of mismatched eyes.

‘Is roar,’ it said. ‘Is tentacular, fibrillating and distinctly unconvincing roar.’

THE INTERMINABLE SALUTATION (ALTERNATE EARTH)

In a chamber, in a place that is, at this point, outside everything and in the centre of it all, an inverted clockwork mechanism inside an egg ticks over. It occasionally slips a minute, ancient gear in its supposedly perfect decrementation. Nothing is perfect, Platonically, in an Ideal sense, as any number of Persian rugs consistently prove.

A hand, at that 'present' point, is currently reaching for it.

She came into my life on a cloud of crushed-beetle dust and resynthesized elephant musk - the kind of perfume that hits you in the gut like two fists balled together, with weight behind them so that for an instant you've forgotten how to breathe. It wasn't splashed on, wasn't strong - you don't need strength to have an impact like that. You just need money.

Jimmy Kiru caught it too. For an instant I thought he was going to have an involuntary reaction.

She sat down on the stool beside me with a slither of dalon, fishing in her clutch purse with an intensity that said that anything at all inside it was at least three times as interesting as me. 'Mr Nathan Leshane, I presume?'

Old money. Old and *cultured* money. Cultured enough for elocution lessons to produce a smooth, low, unplaceable accent like precise silk.

Two can play at wall-eyes. I nodded to Jimmy as he put my usual on the counter - pastrami on black rye, pile the Dijon, hold the mayo and the bunny food; two fingers of his almost genuine Canadian, the cover napkin folded with that perfect, almost Oriental precision you don't see around much any more - and cast my eyes around the diner and beyond.

Through the plate glass, across the street, I could see that the Stenco-Hondai franchise had changed Overlords again. The ersatz-antique neon was coming down and holographic lotus flowers were going up. Mico the Rolling Custodian was looking on, watching the work impassively - he knew his job and knew the neighbourhood well enough to be irreplaceable, whichever faction was now in charge. Bloodbaths in the boardroom didn't trickle down far enough to hit him. A change in the decor wasn't going to break his heart.

After a while I turned my attention to my new friend, letting it travel up from her stiletto'd feet, the legs that showed a hint of suspender belt between the tops of her dalons and what could only be a genuine leather skirt, the blazer cut to make a male of several species want to *be* it, and finally to her face. She was worth the wait. An émigré from one of the Reptile worlds, with the soft and greenish-tinged skin that comes from having warm blood, vestigial scaling feathering at her skull, where a human woman might have hair. I'd expected by this time that she'd be spitting feathers. Instead she just regarded me levelly, one eyebrow raised.

'Well,' she said, in that special, slightly arch tone of someone who's once been told they always start their sentences with 'well', and so make a point of damn well saying it anyway, 'are you Leshane or what?' She nonchalantly blew on a set of lacquered fingernails that might, in a certain light - the certain light being any light that fell on them - be taken for claws. 'If you're not, I might just have to put at least one pair of eyes out.'

I shrugged. I know when I'm outclassed, through daily practice. 'I'm Leshane. Call me Nathan, why don't you?'

'I knew that. I received a quite complete description from the young lady in the hole you called your office, together with other information concerning your ancestry and personal habits - which I must confess was slightly more information than I wished to know.'

My girl Suzi must have been on one of her periodic kicks of gathering up her things and leaving. I have to admit that this month it had been a choice between paying her or the rent,

and so I had decided on the sane and reasonable course of paying neither. This was a regular occurrence, almost routine by now - I just hoped this wasn't going to be the time when I'd be genuinely, honestly shocked to find she'd said she was leaving and meant it.

I put my best smile on. 'So you know all about me, Ms...?'

'Chan. Lisa Chan. I know that you were good, once, and that you still might be - if you hadn't managed to rub the security services and a number of other important people up the wrong way.' She looked at me like she was trying to believe it herself. 'I know that you don't do divorce, the badger game or the Long Con. I know you've spent time in the tanks rather than betray a confidence or rat on a friend.'

My best smile must have been looking slightly ratty round the edges by now. For all I knew she might have meant all that nicely, but so far as I was concerned it was like she was picking off old scabs - just not so old that they didn't hurt like hell and start to bleed again.

(The snout of a crocogator broke the surface and he caught a glimpse of jagged, yellow teeth yawning back from a red wet throat. He planted his feet on its head, driving it down into the water with such a force that its breathing reed shot out of its blowhole.)

'That's ancient history,' I told her. 'Now I'm out for anything I can get.'

'But only if it involves a degree of integrity.' The reptile woman looked at me. 'I've heard you're stupid - with the kind of stupidity that means that certain depths to which people sink don't even occur to you.'

I shrugged again. I'm good at that. It's probably my only skill. 'And who told you that?'

'A friend I used to know. She's now called Bernice Kane, I think. Before we lost touch.'

I remembered the case. I'd been trying to forget it, but I still remembered, late at night, when the gut rot turned to glass jammed into the back of the head and then the glass shards turned to ice. I remembered how she had used me to find what she needed and then turned my world inside out.

Weird thing was, I remembered how it had felt but when I tried to pin down the specifics - what had been said, what had happened, what I had done - it seemed to slide away. Maybe the gut-rot treatment was working after all.

That reminded me. I pulled the origami-folded cover off my drink and drank it. It went down like liquid gold - white-hot and scalding enough to raise blisters. I blinked back a tear and was pleasantly relieved to be able to still see when my eyes opened again - Jiminy Kiru still liked me enough to give me something uncut with wood alcohol on the tab.

‘Like I said,’ I said, ‘ancient history. What’s it to you?’

‘I know how you helped her out and how you...’ The woman seemed to go blank for a moment, then recovered with a little jerk and an instantly covered-up moment of bemusement. It was as though she had been about to say something and then had utterly forgotten what she was going to say.

‘I know how you helped... my friend,’ she said at last, ‘and I need that kind of help. The police won’t listen to me, my own family don’t seem to care, and I need somebody in my corner. I need somebody I can trust.’

I knew the friend she was talking about - but strangely, even though she had mentioned it bare moments before, I had suddenly blanked on the name. Probably the result of Jimmy’s booze on a stomach that didn’t have my sandwich in it yet. I stopped worrying about it. The details would come back to me, and probably with a killer hangover into the bargain, but I knew who she meant.

‘What you see is what you get, doll,’ I told her. ‘Not much, I’ll admit, but I don’t lie about it and I don’t make promises I don’t keep. Twenty a day plus expenses and no retainer. I stay bought.’

The lady nodded. ‘That’s good enough.’ She at last took her hand out of her snap purse, and there was a thin fold of bills in it. She slid it deftly under my plate - pastrami, lettuce and mayo on white that I like well enough, but order more to make Jimmy Kiru half seriously gag at the combination than anything else. ‘No retainer, but I need you for a week at the absolute minimum.’

‘That’s cool with me,’ I said, picking up the sandwich. ‘Now what exactly do you want me for?’

FAIRLY STRANGE REUNIONS

'You little bugger!' Benny shouted. 'You nearly frightened the life out of me.'

'Is apologies,' muttered the creature, blinking three eyes, waving its tentacles and managing to look a little chagrined, despite its obloid form. It whipped its manipulatory appendages away, seemingly pulling them back into its own insides, and slick grey skin closed over them. 'Was going to say lovely friendly hello to make monkey-hominid go hippity-hippity with happy and thing, but sudden disappearance into fetid black bowels of the ground-type stuff make time or reasonable facsimile of very essence.'

Benny regarded the creature sharply. 'I notice you're back on the "is we is we ain't your baby-thing" again. You haven't reverted have you, Sgloomi?'

'Nope,' said Sgloomi. 'Is cultural-type identity thing, innit? Is Sloathes have to carve niche in the panopulous coruscation of sentient being-type life, and is not be seen as soulless mimics of true self-aware consciousness which can be, quite frankly, a bit of a bugger on occasion. Hooty hooty.'

This last was spoken in candid, quite sardonic and impeccably human tones. The Sloathe bounced up and down a few times, irony bursting from its very movements, for good measure.

'Well I'm glad we got that sorted out,' said Benny.

She had recognized Sgloomi Po instantly, and with that recognition had come a whole cascade of memory - it was not that she had forgotten about the Sloathe, precisely, but it had been some years since a thought of hir had so much as crossed her mind. It had simply not occurred.

The process was akin to coming into contact with a life form that existed in the three-dimensions-plus-time to which human beings are ordinarily accustomed. It was like looking at a finger, pointing in some unexpected direction, that in one sense seemed to be receding from you whichever way you looked at it - but in another sense showed you something so obvious that you kicked yourself for never noticing it before. Until, of course, the extradimensional finger stopped pointing, and you couldn't recall the direction no matter how you tried.

Sgloomi Po was a Sloathe, one of a number of people she had met in an extremely strange pocket of extra dimensions called the System, and one of those who had escaped by way of a quasi-sentient ship known as the *Schirron Dream*. So where there was Sgloomi, thought Benny, there was sure to be the *Schirron Dream* and the rest of its crew. She recalled a big human man, a silver circlet around his head, with fierce and feral mismatched eyes. A lizard woman with a quick and white-hot temper and even quicker claws and knives. A slim man in red and yellow silks, with a smile that never touched deceptive eyes, that seemed cold as cinders and might have denoted evil had one never spoken or spent more than three seconds with him. Names sprang into focus - names she had not so much as *thought* of in years, as she had not thought of the name of Sgloomi Po.

'Is Leetha around?' she asked. 'Leetha t'Zhan? What about Kiru? Nathan? Nathan li Shao?'

'Is not have to be so definitive!' Sgloomi snapped. 'Is know who Leetha, Nathan is! Is know names of own sodding family!'

In terms of mass, the Sloathe was little bigger and heavier than an adult human male - but for an instant it seemed to swell and loom. Not a little menacingly. Benny took a step back, not a little alarmed.

'What?' she said, in a slightly unsuccessful attempt to cover up an involuntary squeak of fear. 'What's got into you, Sgloomi?'

Abruptly, the Sloathe seemed to realize the impression it was giving and immediately deflated. 'Apology thing,' it said, a little uncertainly. 'Is little-tiny tetchy. In fact is very tetchy. Is evidencing an extreme and inordinate degree of tetch. Is strain of present circumstances.'

Benny looked at Sgloomi Po. The tone of voice had seemed to carry an almost human degree of complexity, not least in that it had a sense of being distraught but Sloathefully attempting to master it. 'What circumstances? What's happening, Sgloomi?'

'Family is in danger,' the Sloathe said simply. 'Nearly dead. Will soon *be* dead. Leetha and Kiru and Nathan li Shao need your help.'

On the way to the ship Benny remembered about the clockwork.

The System in which she had found herself years before had affected her mind in strange ways. It was an artificial construct, with qualities and physical laws that had affected the human senses in ways with which they were unable to cope, and the brain had been forced to integrate them by throwing up the nearest applicable image. In practical terms this had meant that the visible universe of the System had seemed to operate on clockwork, a vast mechanical orrery, with planets orbiting a solid sun on camshafts.

In the same way, Benny recalled, the actions and interactions of matter and organisms had taken on a surreal, even ridiculous quality - an ice world with little penguins skating round a pond in little knitted mufflers, a form of palsy that resulted in mass and seemingly choreographed song-and-dance routines, villains of complete and utter swashbuckling but suave and laconic evil that would have Basil Rathbone biting through his stiff upper lip in envy. Intellectually, with hindsight, she could see these phenomena for what they were a subconscious mind desperately trying to laugh rather than cry at a fundamental incomprehensibility - but in effect it had been like stepping through the looking glass, of finding oneself in one of those ancient cinematic

movies that mixed live action with variably crazed degrees of animated cartoons.

The recollection solidified something she had noticed upon first meeting Sgloomi Po, but which she had not been able to put her finger on. The language constructions had been similar, yet there was something subtle but important about the Sloathe that was different from when she had met it last. It was not that its character had *changed*, precisely - it was more as if the character were being played by a different actor, who was bringing out different emphases, in another story entirely. It seemed that the tone of this story was rather more serious than before, and cartoon-animated fun and games were seeming increasingly out of the question.

Benny trudged through the jungle, out from the field-generator, which she had insisted they pause to repair, towards the landing site of what she was now convinced must be the good ship *Schirron Dream*. Beside her, Sgloomi scuttled on a variable number of spiderlike legs, its obloid body constantly moving to produce eyes, ears and similarly analogous organs as it scanned the night for any threat. Thus far the Sloathe had shot out two spears, on lengths of retractable sinew, to spear things that had attempted to swoop down upon them.

At no time, however, had the shifting body attempted to mimic something else, even though Benny knew for a fact that it could make itself appear as virtually anything. It was as if Sgloomi Po had decided that this was his natural form, and you could damn well like it or lump it.

The locked-off memories of the System and what she had seen and done in it now seemed to fill Benny's head, a vast chaotic mass that threatened to overwhelm her as if - as she did - one knew the complete works of Shakespeare word for word, and were suddenly forced to recall them in their entirety, in a split-second go. She decided to just stop thinking about them, let them surface when they naturally would in context - which was, after all, the way that memory of everything one's ever seen, or been, or done works in

normal life. One doesn't spend every waking second thinking about every waking everything else.

She turned to Sgloomi. 'So what exactly *is* this danger your family is in? How serious is it? Where precisely are they?'

'Is big-big danger,' the Sloathe said. 'Is big-big serious. Is where they is... is big-big hard to explain to monkey-hominid-type terms. Is take you to friend who can explain.'

'And which friend might that be?' Benny said.

'Is friend of mine. Is friend of yours. Friend.'

Sgloomi lapsed into an uncharacteristic - so far as Benny recalled - silence. Benny tried asking hir more questions but the Sloathe merely gave a kind of ripple that was the Sloathe equivalent of a shrug - not unconcerned or unfriendly, but conveying that it had currently too much on hir mind to worry about than small talk.

After a short while, the glow ahead of them noticeably brightened. They shoved their way through fungus vegetation to find a crater that the *Schirron Dream* had knocked into the soft Malanoor earth on landing.

And, down inside the crater, the *Schirron Dream* itself.

Benny had an image of the ship etched in her head - sleek and slim, like the rocket ships of old pulp fiction, built from burnished bronze that shone like reddish gold, inset with panels of some ceramic substance that was as pure white as porcelain. With its swept-back fins and glowing, podlike thrusters, the image was almost perfectly archetypical, a dream of what a spaceship *should* look like, rather than the clunky blocks of superstructure, arrays and prefabricated pods that made up a spacegoing ship as it actually was.

Looking down into the crater, she saw the *Schirron Dream* just as she pictured and remembered it - but something more as well. The sleek, Art-Deco-reminiscent lines were as she remembered, and the form seemed solid, but it seemed that other forms were occupying the same space simultaneously, shifting insubstantially within it, as if glimpsed from the corner of the eye even though the eye was looking at them directly. Benny caught half-seen flashes of something seemingly composed of interlacing tendrils of pure

light, something flatter, wider and alive, in shape something like a manta ray, something of a shape so alien on the human level that she could find no name. She realized that this was the first time she had ever seen the *Schirron Dream* outside of the System, and that her mind was attempting to come to terms with something - as it had done on a larger scale with the System itself - that did not fit entirely with her world.

'Is go down,' said Sgloomi, again with his uncharacteristic shortness.

They went down, into the crater.

Through the hatch and inside the ship seemed... not precisely *bigger* than the outside, but incongruous, as though the spaces inside operated on some subtly different order. The balks were of a kind of polymerized substance that felt a little like the surface of a fingernail, whorled with subdued variegation like mother-of-pearl, which always seemed to be upon the point of flowing and swirling like oil on water, but never quite seemed to start.

As Sgloomi took her through tunnel-like, vaguely intestinal gangways, Benny caught sight of various members of the crew: originally based on creatures from the galaxy itself, but evolved and intermingled by their isolation on the worlds of a System outside ordinary space and time. Apart from the Sloathes there were the saurian dwellers of the jungle world that had been called Aneas; the Fnarok-based albino inhabitants of the ice world Reklon; the mostly humanoid nomads from the deserts of Shokesh; the frog-skinned amphibians from the water world of Elysium. Among them were several children, who it seemed were being prepared for some mass exodus. The way the adults fussed over them put Benny in mind of a scene she had seen, in a railway station on Earth, when children were being evacuated from something called the Blitz.

'Children and nonessential peoples will be put ashore,' Sgloomi said in passing. 'Is safer, hopefully.'

'Safer here?' Benny said.

The Sloathe shrug-rippled. 'Here as anywhere.'

Towards the prow they came upon a hatch, which dilated without ceremony. Through this, they found themselves in a smallish cabin-chamber containing a spare amount of genuinely ornate, Victorian-style furniture, looking a little out of place in its otherworldly surroundings.

Sitting on the chaise longue, a big, blond man was poring intently over a slightly ragged collection of scrawled, actual wood-pulp papers that were spread over a low occasional table, from which a largish aspidistra had been shoved aside. His clothes were modern and heavy-duty, but something about their cut suggested that they had evolved from Oriental styles, possibly those of an ancient Nipponese samurai. The hatch had dilated without a sound. It was only when he caught the movement of Benny and Sgloomi entering that he looked up, his worried expression suddenly splitting into a wide and friendly grin. 'Benny!'

'Hello, Chris,' Benny said. 'Saving the universe again?'

Something glazed over Chris's smile and fixed it. 'Not this time, no.'

Abruptly, with a little twitch of his head, the glazed look left him. 'It's really good to see you, Benny. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have when we -' He shot a look at Sgloomi Po. 'You *have* told her, haven't you?'

Sgloomi extended a couple of eyeballs and regarded both Chris and Benny simultaneously - though there was a sense that his *attention* was oscillating as if it were uneasily looking from one face to the other. 'Is thought that Benny-lovely like to hear it from hunky Chris-boy. Is thought that Sgloomi going whoop-whoop hippety all through sod-blimey thing might be little-big bit too silly plus distracting.'

Chris Cwej sighed. 'I suppose you're right, Sgloomi.'

Benny, by this time, had had more than a lordly sufficiency. 'Now you listen here,' she said to the pair sharply, in more or less the same exasperated tones as she had recently used on the children back at the camp. 'I've had it up to *here* with all these mysteries, evasions and circum-bleeding-locutions! If someone doesn't tell me *what* precisely's

going on pretty damn pronto, I'm walking.' She toyed with the idea of stamping her foot, decided that would be going altogether too far, and glared at them. 'It's obvious you need me for something - so you'd better tell me what it is before I'm suddenly not here to bloody ask! OK?'

Chris seemed to have been taken a little aback by the vehemence of her outburst. There was something about her, it occurred to Benny, that had people assuming she would never say anything stronger than 'crikey', and it seemed to shock people when she lapsed into the kind of language that everybody under every available sun uses at some point. Chris recovered his composure, but still looked at her with a kind of indecision. It was as though he had something important to tell her, but was unsure of how to convey the seriousness of it.

'When I said how I wasn't saving the universe,' he said at last, 'I meant that there's nothing I can *do* to save it. It's being destroyed, in a sense, and there's nothing anyone can do to stop it. The thing is, it's...'

Quite what the thing was, Benny did not discover. She was staring at Chris with the chilly but strangely mild alarm of one who's been told the universe is being destroyed, but does not yet know precisely what that means, when she became aware that the hatch had dilated again and that someone was coming through.

'I've been trying to get through to some of my people,' he was saying. 'No soap. Those who haven't been translated out of existence don't know what the hell I'm talking about, and wouldn't believe me if I tried to explain. And those who *do* know about it have their own problems and aren't interested in helping. Let's just hope that Sgloomi gets back soon with my damned -'

By some freak of positioning, or possibly because his mind had been wrapped up in something else, the new arrival had failed to notice that there were others in the cabin than Chris. Now he turned his head and caught sight of Benny. 'Damn.'

‘And I’m so glad to see you, too,’ Benny said to her ex-husband. ‘Just what the hell are you up to *this* time, Jason?’

MADE OF THIS (ALTERNATE EARTH)

The hand is still reaching for the mechanism in the egg. It's like a snapshot, caught in a time that has no relation to anything else.

It jump-cuts closer. And closer. And closer still.

The apartment block was on the rich side of town, towering Art Deco hotels thrown up maybe fifty years after the Moran, Deed, Capone and other dynasties had been founded - or at least the time those families came into their money and were in the process of parlaying and consolidating it into actual wealth. In their heyday they had been a byword for opulence, with a floor show on every floor and their respective Overlords at the summit, in their penthouses, masters of all they surveyed, which was pretty much everything.

Nowadays they were being supplanted by the structures of the various scientific and technological cartels - the Morans, Deeds and everybody else are still in charge of course, ultimately, but they've been Incorporated to hell and back for so long now that you'd have to look very close to find them.

The block I was looking up at, through the UV-filter sunroof on my old Pinto, was owned by the Semco people, who used it to house their jet-propelled fliers when they weren't otherwise involved in coming up with the latest gimmick on their accounting mills that nowadays fuel the world more than anything tangible like reefer, cocaine or liquor combined. I'm not a brain but even I can see how the numbers racket might supplant all the other rackets - because you don't have to actually *make* anything to make numbers.

Anyhow, the Semco machines specialized in quantifying and processing human psychology - integrating all the factors of what makes people jump, and spilling out results that might be wrong for anyone you ask to their face, but right if you want to know what people are going to do *en masse*. The '*en masse*' there wasn't me: it had come from my new friend Lisa Chan as she had tried to explain to me how the machines work. Something about 'vector analysis through a four-dimensional decision-tree paradigm'. I lost count somewhere around the *v* in 'vector'.

The important stuff, so far as I was concerned, was her father, who had died in mysterious circumstances - or, rather, he had been found with his brains spattered against three walls of his office from a scatter gun in a way that was not mysterious at all. The mystery was precisely who had done it. It was a professional hit - but every hit man in the city works for someone, and always leaves his calling card, like a monogrammed spent cartridge or a word scrawled on the wall, so the cops had some idea of who to studiously ignore in their investigation. I've played that game myself, down in the tank; with some bull sergeant reaching for the classifieds you don't sing about what everybody knows: you go into the song-and-dance routine that the both of you know by heart.

The death of Ms Chan's father simply didn't seem to fit into the world of cartel killing, where deaths are, although tragic, as commonplace as being hit by a truck or some other accident. *This* was like being hit by a truck that appeared out of nowhere and then vanished into thin air. Nobody from the cops to the cartels to their Overlords themselves seemed to know what the hell was going on - and for Ms Chan herself this had the effect of raising the stakes of her grief unbearably. She was desperate, she had told me, to find some handle. Not a solution, necessarily, not necessarily to see those responsible brought to justice - some hopes of *that* in any case. She simply, desperately, needed to know something of the *why*.

All of which was why I was now sitting in my Pinto and watching the block where her father had lived. The only clue, Lisa Chan had said, was that he had been working on a kind of information-storage device - something that packed the power of several hundred valves into a lump of Bakelite as big as a hand that he had called a 'memory chip' - and that the prototype of this device had vanished. The obvious conclusion was that it had been stolen by whoever had killed him - but Lisa Chan was convinced, from certain things her father had said, that he had hidden it himself.

That meant a lot of people were going to be looking for it from all sides - most sides being somewhat nastier than me. Turning over corporate offices was out of the question, what with the corporate security and the fact that it almost certainly wouldn't be there in the first place. The apartment block, on the other hand, was less secure and more accessible by far - it was also highly unlikely that Ms Chan's father would have hidden the memory chip there, but just possible enough that it was worth checking. In those circumstances, rather than breaking in and rooting through drawers yourself, the intelligent course of action was simply to sit, and wait, and see who went in and who came out again.

So far, the intelligent course of action had been a total bust. For half the afternoon I'd watched a grand total of three store delivery boys, one florist and two age-and-status-mismatched couples going in and going out, with the delay time and the before-and-after interaction discrepancy that (if I'd been working divorce) I'd have pegged as perfectly ordinary nooners. Plus a whole bunch of other people, quite obviously going about their business of the day. The point about looking for something just that little bit odd, or something worth following up, is that it rings a bell. Any one of these people could have been up to anything, from murder to espionage to keeping barnyard animals for illicit sexual purposes - it was just that none of them set off the bell I was particularly wired for. Nobody I recognized; nothing I could learn from them; no flash of recognition or awakening of

memory inside that made the back of my head bother to follow up.

Thus far, all I had recognition of or insight into was that I shouldn't have bolted that chopped-liver-and-onion sandwich back in Jimmy Kiru's. It was starting, increasingly repetitively, to repeat. The heat of the afternoon wasn't helping - I read in some of the more Wobbler-oriented papers that some pinko scientist guys are talking about a thing called 'global warming', some result of five hundred years of dirt from heavy industry. They might be wrong and they might be right, but the winters have been hotter than the summers these last few years. Just ask anyone.

I was on the point of calling it an afternoon and giving up, when I finally saw what I was looking for - or, like I said, something that made the bit of my brain I was interested in sit up and take notice. Two men, striding along the sidewalk as if they were beaming in on something miles away, suddenly stopped, and spun through ninety degrees, and walked into the building. The mechanical nature of their actions and their suits like razor-sharp malleable ash tipped me off in jig time.

Billy Boys.

They could have been there for anything, and the Boys usually are - but that was the thing that made the thousand little stray thoughts come together and make me move. I waited enough heartbeats to give them enough of a head start, popped the door and crossed the street, dodging traffic.

GETTING UP TO SPEED

'I was taking some time out in a monastery when Sgloomi found me,' Chris said.

'Monastery?' Benny was slightly surprised. The last time she had met him he had been enjoying an energetic, not to mention strenuous, relationship with a girl named Sara. 'Forgive my scepticism, but I find it rather hard to picture you as a monk.'

They were alone in the cabin, now. Sgloomi had left with Jason, ostensibly to deal with important matters that had arisen, but more probably to allow Chris to continue his explanation without the whole thing degenerating into a patented vociferous ex-spousal bicker.

'Sometimes things just hit me, and I need to sequester myself away in a more contemplative, spiritual environment for a while,' Chris said. 'I got into the, uh, habit when I found myself in sixteenth-century Japan. Ft was just after Roz had died, and it had hit me hard...'

With a visible effort, Chris brought himself back to the point. 'So, anyway, I was visiting the Beneficent Brothers of Saint Sidney over on Dragos - they're an interdenominational sect that uses *koan* constructions rather like jokes as a means of finding enlightenment. I was tending the Suspiciously Large Vegetable patch when the *Schirron Dream* came barrelling down as though it were out of control, and almost flattened it.'

Privately, Benny wondered who had been at the helm, and whether Chris had been picked up before or after Jason. For the moment, though, she refused to let herself be sidetracked. 'So tell me about the destruction of the universe - and especially what you mean by "in a sense".'

‘It’s a little complicated,’ Chris said. ‘You know as well as I do how, in extradimensional terms, every possibility exists somewhere. There are countless alternatives and parallels - not an infinite number, but on an order so high that it might as well be, in our terms. We’ve both of us crossed into these parallels in the spectacular way - crystallizing them into actuality around us - but everybody does it by just opening a letter or answering the door.’

‘Hang on,’ Benny said. ‘Opening letters and answering the door isn’t interdimensional travel, certainly not in multiversal terms. I suppose that at most you could think of it as collapsing probabilities but it doesn’t exactly change the universe in the real sense.’

‘You think not?’ said Chris. ‘Everybody has inconsistent memories of key events, everybody’s found themselves drinking a cup of cinnamon, say, when they’re positive they made *chai*. We travel interdimensionally all the time, put the inconsistencies down to lapses of memory and then promptly forget about them, because that’s the way consciousness is wired.’

‘*Now* the entire system’s catastrophically disrupted. Something’s bursting through from... outside. Something other than the universe on such a fundamental level that we can’t think of it in dimensional or even extradimensional terms. It’s obliterating potentiality as it goes - though that sounds far more violent than the actual process. It’s more as if the alternatives are being *deleted* - softly and silently vanishing away.’

‘You make it sound positively sedate,’ Benny said.

‘Not in real terms. The knock-on effect has thrown the entire universal mechanism into chaos. The timelines are loose and whipsawing, fractured remains of the alternatives are sleeting through the real - our basic *reality* is tearing itself apart.’

‘I think,’ Benny said dubiously, ‘that people might have noticed something like that. Great rents in the fabric of reality, alternate universes appearing and disappearing out of

nowhere - that must be worth a modest GalNet slot at the very least.'

Chris shook his head. 'Nobody on the human level's noticing a thing, except for a lot of quantum theorists who are going to get some incredibly weird readings from their particle accelerators. Even those who've found themselves translated into pocket alternatives don't know about it - the change in quantum states imposes new structures on the memory. They're full of little glitches and incongruities, apparently, but they allow the mind to continue to exist. I think it's a kind of inbuilt survival mechanism - automatic mental cover stories that last as long as they're needed. People aren't even aware of the transitions.' Chris paused momentarily. 'Nobody's going to realize what's happening until the entire universe simply shuts itself down. The vast majority, at any rate.'

'Now why,' said Benny, 'do I get the feeling that we're now going to be talking about the *other* people?'

'People like you,' said Chris. 'And me. And Jason. We've had direct experience with time travel and dimensions other than our own. The physical structure of the brain is modified by the processes of memory, consciousness is inextricably linked to the fundamental processes of the universe - and our experiences in the past make it neurologically possible to experience the disruptions now. Not completely, of course, but enough to affect or be affected by them. We're probably going to suffer little memory loops and elisions, but at least we can survive.'

'You seem to know a lot about this,' Benny said. 'Just what have you been studying in all your convent-hopping?'

Chris grinned slightly. 'I haven't been confining myself to religion, Benny - and I've only found myself staying in a *convent* once, which was a story in itself and far too long. Most of what I'm telling you is from Sgloomi crossed with educated guesswork. You can't see what's happening to the universe yourself at the moment because of the dark matter shrouding this planet. When you do, you'll see, believe you me.'

‘The *Schirron Dream* and its crew are the same. They come from a completely different reality and so, like us, in a sense they exist outside ordinary space and time. You know how the Socratic process of potentiality and actuality works? It’s like being a doctor or some such...’

‘Why a doctor?’ Benny asked.

‘Why not? The point is that everybody has the potential to be a doctor. That’s the Potentiality, of course - but Actuality has degrees. You might be a doctor but at the moment doing something entirely different, like drinking yards of ale until you fall over and throw up, putting bits of dissected bodies in nurses’ handbags, or dropping your trousers in an utterly stupid student revue. That’s the first degree. The second degree of Actuality is when you’re a doctor *being* a doctor, tending to a patient.’

‘I seem to remember something about that, now,’ said Benny. ‘It wasn’t my field, you understand. Wasn’t it related to Platonic ideal states - something about how the third degree of actuality was God?’

‘I think that stems more from the age of absolutes,’ Chris said. ‘People saw the world with a lesser degree of multiplicity, then. I do think that any third degree on the scale might be a kind of *archetypical* doctor.’

‘The principle is applicable for people like us, though. Anyone has the potential for interdimensionality. Some people actually travel between dimensions - and a minority of those exist outside, over and above dimensional terms. Do you remember how the *Schirron Dream* turned up for your wedding - how a whole bunch of us turned up, for that matter - even though it was being held centuries before the subjective *now*? It seemed totally natural and unremarkable, and that was a large part of making it possible in the first place.’

The mention of her wedding reminded Benny of something important, which had puzzled her. ‘So why the hell is Jason here?’ she asked. ‘I mean, strange unknowable force deleting whole alternatives and throwing the universe into chaos, fine, but what’s *Jason* going to do - try to shag it and nick its

wallet?’ She suddenly remembered something else and all but spat. ‘And him a married man, too.’

‘Look, Benny, some things you’re going to have to talk about with the people concerned,’ said Chris, with the air of one utterly determined to remain uninvolved in certain interpersonal areas. ‘In any case, I think I already said that there’s nothing we can do about it. I think that whatever we do, the entire universe has one and a half to two billion years left in it, if we can’t do anything about it. Full stop.’

‘Is that *all?*’ Benny exclaimed, without irony, having had the point hammered home by being given a timescale, and deeply shocked. ‘Look, what about all the people who have a stake in this, the Old Gods, Elementals, Immortals and whatnot? Aren’t they going to do anything about it?’

Chris shook his head. ‘Those that actually exist are by their very natures above and beyond it all. They won’t do anything - they keep going on about something else, some imminent Big War they’re about. *We* have some more immediate concerns, though. Human-level concerns.

‘The nexus of the disruption seems to be planet Earth - and the *Schirron Dream* was visiting when it hit. Li Shao and the others really enjoyed the place, it seems; so far as they were concerned, it was as weird and silly as we found the System, when we found ourselves inside it. Now li Shao, Leetha and Kiru are trapped down there, on a planet fracturing into any number of pocket-sized hells. Nobody else down there is going to notice a thing, until things go critical - but for people like Nathan, Leetha and Kiru, it’s going to tear them apart and eventually kill them.’

MINIMAL CUTTING (ALTERNATE EARTH)

The hand has reached the mechanism. The egglike half-shell that houses it is encircled by a number of grooves - a series of concentric rings that, with some slight but significant effort, can be twisted this way or that.

The hand begins to twist them slightly, this way and that, making tiny adjustments that are reflected in the clockwork. Twisting worlds and changing them. Twisting them away.

Up the stairwell, the studs on my shoes ringing off cool marble in a variety of multiple staccato, little ticks and clacks coming back at me from several different floors and all the way from the bottom to the top. I took the steps at an easy kind of jog — I know how to deal with stairs; with elevators or tractions you're too enclosed. You can't see what's wailing for you, or coming up on you from behind.

Also, it was to increase the head start the Burroughs boys had on me. It was a question of timing. Too late and they'd be gone with whatever it was they'd found; too early and I'd find them long before they might have found something.

Everybody calls 'em the Billy Boys now, even centuries after the fact. In the old days they used to be called the Feds. Federal Bureau of Investigation, which started out in the US of A and then piggybacked itself across the world through the covert infrastructure of the CIA and booze lines. The Billy comes from the most famous Director of the Bureau, William S. Burroughs, who took over from J. Edgar somebody after a - for the time - repugnant and extremely notorious sex scandal involving reefers and transvestisim. As a reaction to that, maybe, Burroughs was renowned the whole world over

for his conservatism and blatant heterosexuality, combined with an intimate knowledge of adding-machine technology from his family connections and body-modification procedures imported from the Neo-Prussian Reich. It was he who caused the addiction of those under him to a series of continually readjusted opium derivatives, which thus afforded him complete control; and it was he who introduced the induction of mild, structured brain damage to his agents, chopping up their language centres so that they had, effectively, an inbuilt 'secret' code.

For a time the Boys had, ostensibly at least, been in opposition to the Cartels. In the end, like everything else, they had been subsumed. Now they operated on the very highest levels - so high that they were in effect the personal enforcers of the Overlords themselves.

The question was, just *which* of the Overlords was currently running them? Who had sent these two?

Lisa Chan's father had lived on floor seven. I hit it and trotted down a corridor walled and inset with the visions of some barely restrained Egyptologist, keeping as many muscles as I could loose and hyperventilating to counter the fatigue from my climb. Lamp fixtures and sand buckets and doors went by: 703... 705... 707...

The apartment I was looking for was 709. It wasn't hard to spot on account of how the door was hanging half off its hinges - the latest variant on the Burroughs boys' junk seemed to pickle their meat solid and give them almost superhuman energy, in short bursts, before they burnt themselves out.

I went straight through - hoping like hell that these Boys had been programmed for a simple search job rather than search-and-destroy. Nothing particularly exciting about the décor inside: standard Cartel hotel out of Vegas. The Boys were in the process of tearing the sofa apart, jabbering to themselves.

'Cleat barded whelp,' one of them was saying. 'Rocks sing enter junk boy musty...'

'Slunk,' the other said.

It was not even as if a switch had been thrown. They simply straightened up, and in unison turned to face me.

I tried to smile, friendly like, at their slack grey faces. ‘Hey, guys. Don’t mind me. Just here to take a look at the plumbing or the wiring or whatever. You just get on with whatever it was you were -’

It was to no avail. They were heading towards me, like a couple of blocks of sliding, flaking concrete.

‘Sing wilted,’ one of them said in his dry and reptile-rhythm voice. ‘Dragon asshole semen robot waves with meson-tenant steel and Monday satellite —’

It was then, and utterly without warning, that something seemed to slice into the meat of my brain, and hook, and twist.

‘Mr Deed does not like witnesses,’ the Boy continued. ‘They clutter up the world, says Mr Deed.’

Something split the world apart; a ragged slash across my sight and there was nothing behind it - not blackness, or whiteness, or some form of neutral grey.

(Mischa took them up through the casino, where the roulette wheels and baccarat tables and steam-driven one-armed bandits were well attended - the distinctions between rich and poor still obtained here, now, though scaled down to the point of microcosm. The jewellery might be tarnished and the clothing frayed, the vast sums of money inflated to the point of being worthless, but there were, one felt, certain standards to be maintained. One must be seen to keep one’s...)

Nothing. I was barely aware of the ragged flaps and tatters of the Boys, the apartment, the entire world spinning from me before my bones exploded through my flesh like shrapnel and my organs and my brain meat spun away and there was

THE ELEVATION OF THE MASSES, ALTOGETHER

'Time to launch,' said Benny, 'five minutes, assuming that we're all still capable of comprehending something like "five minutes".'

The bridge of the *Schirron Dream* was not exactly the same as she remembered - again, the memory simply occurring, as if it had been simply slotted in. That line of thought was fruitless, though. Imposed or natural memories are indistinguishable on the ever-moving point of now; as in a dream, you can only ever treat them as implicitly if oxymoronically real.

Aside from the disquieting sensation that they were flickering and changing on some stratum above the visual range, the forms of makeshift equipment that had once been bolted on to convert the ship for largely humanoid use were still visible, but seemed to have moulded themselves into the surroundings. It was as if the *Schirron Dream* were eating them - no, not eating, because *eating* tended to suggest some kind of predatory viciousness. Absorbing, then, into its structure. Going into symbiosis.

The giant, vaguely ovoid screen that dominated the bridge, that seemed to switch from exterior views, to rear views, to communication views to easily assimilable diagrams, seemingly on a whim, was currently showing an outside view of Malanoor. The jungle, several hits of ancient but rather more recently ruined Temple and glimpses of the strangely empty Malanoor sky. To one side, through the fungus, Benny could make out lights, and just see glimpses of the children and their guards.

The numbers of the children had recently been augmented by several from the *Schirron Dream*, seven or eight in all, ranging from babes in arms to toddlers, with two members of the crew to help look after them. 'Is safe here as anywhere-thing,' Sgloomi had said, slumped a little mournfully on the gangplank and watching them go. 'Definite more safeguard than where we go - which are surely very big-nasty death with lots of entrails, innards and wobbles.'

'Thanks so much,' Benny had said. 'You really know how to give a girl confidence.'

Clutched in the hand was her diary, which she had rescued from the camp. She knew that if the universe suddenly changed around her, the contents of the diary would in all probability change loo - but it was the nearest thing she could think of as a kind of anchor. She would have felt even happier about it had she been able to remember if the little sticky notes, with which she habitually recorded different and more agreeable versions of events, had been yellow or pink. What colour *had* they been?

Now, Benny looked around herself at the other occupants of the bridge - a relatively easy task, since she had no experience with the controls and had been given an incomprehensible screen to watch more or less as a courtesy, towards the back and out of the way. At least the screen had a countdown of sorts, in a scrawl that seemed to have been dashed off as an afterthought, as if the ship were vaguely trying to be nice. Chris and Sgloomi sat at other consoles, which could have dealt with detectors, weapons, communications, engines, the plumbing system or any combination of all.

Sgloomi had transformed into a human form to deal, so it said, with control modifications designed for humans. In fact, it was more as if Sgloomi had *lapsed* rather than anything so active as transform. An androgynous human, so perfectly detailed that it was indistinguishable in anything other than its grey pigmentation. The features appeared to be a mixture drawn from those of Chris and... someone else. Almost certainly a woman.

It was rather strange, thought Benny, that Sgloomi seemed to be striving so hard to maintain a kind of stereotypically Sloathey identity, when this seemed by its very detail far closer to his natural form. Chris, she noticed, kept passing thoughtful, troubled glances at the Sloathe. He was probably disconcerted by the similarity even more than she was.

At the helm, which disconcerted and surprised her even more than somewhat, was Jason Kane.

'I can't believe,' Benny said to the world in general, 'that someone like Chris isn't at the master controls. I seem to recall that he can fly anything that moves, often extremely dangerous and fast things. It strikes me that someone like that might be extremely useful in filling Captain Li Shao's boots.'

Jason - who had spent all of Benny's time on board avoiding her, and their last hour on the bridge studiously ignoring her in a way that was *really* starting to get on her thrippennies - now turned in his captain's chair and regarded her stonily. 'It isn't a question of filling anyone's shoes.'

It wasn't so much what he said; it was the cold, uninterested, even contemptuous tone in which he said it...

'Um, the skills that come with flying skimmers and other aircraft,' said Chris hurriedly and a little nervously, like a referee wondering if it's a good idea to get between two seasoned prizefighters, 'are completely different to those needed piloting a space cruiser. Jason's got the experience. He's the man for the job.'

'Yes, well, you would say that,' said Benny. 'You're far too nice and amenable not to.' She turned in her rather superannuated seat to glare at Jason again. 'The experience of one rather ratty scow that couldn't decide if it was a grotty little trader, a garbage hauler, or both simultaneously. Strikes me someone needs a bit more "experience" than that.'

Jason glared right back at her. 'I've commanded other ships since then.'

'I can just imagine,' Benny said. 'Not for long. I'll bet.'

Jason's face clouded, more with a kind of self-loathing regret, it seemed for an instant, than with the black and thunderous anger that supplanted it, which he turned on Benny. 'You might be right about that, as it happens. And can you please stop talking about me in the third person. First person is for real life, third person's for books.'

'It's quite true, Benny.' Sgloomi, with his transition into human form, had adopted more human constructions, cadences and rhythms. 'So far as I can ascertain from my own rather specialized senses, the ship appears to like him and respond to him, so far as a semisentient quasi-organism is, in fact, capable of achieving processes such as we delineate *respond*.'

'If you sprout pointy ears at this point, you're going to get such a slap,' said Benny.

'Pardon me?' said a perplexed Sgloomi Po.

'Doesn't matter.'

'Mr Kane is simply the best person to pilot the *Schirron Dream*,' said Sgloomi, mildly.

'Well, based on the landing I saw, he should try harder,' Benny said.

'Um, actually,' Chris cut in, a little shamefacedly, 'that was me. I really wanted to have another go.'

Benny recovered, she considered, beautifully. 'So you trust him, based on meeting him for - what? - a couple of days at my wedding.' Yet again she glared at Jason and then back to Sgloomi. 'And, for that matter, why the hell is he *here*? He's not exactly the first person I'd pick to save the universe as we know it - and if you knew you were coming for me, why the hell did you stop off along the way for him?'

'Because somebody out there hates me,' Jason cut in, gloomily.

'I must admit to a small lapse of judgment,' Sgloomi said. 'We normally parthenogenic forms of life sometimes find it hard to think in terms of more multiple forms of sexuality. One simply thought that humans mated for life, and that in any events the partners might like to face those events together.'

Benny thought about it. 'Yes, well, didn't the small fact that we haven't *mated* for at least two years give you some sort of hint?'

'No,' Sgloomi said. 'Should it have?'

'It damn well should. Where did you find him, anyway? Let me guess.'

'He was making his way through -'

'— one of the seedier bars on the lower-level Habitats in the Proximan Chain-rafts,' Jason said. 'You know how it is. One of the port ladies got just friendly enough to rip off my travelling money and I -'

'I'm not surprised,' said Benny. 'Am I surprised? I am bloody not.' She looked at Jason with contempt. 'And how's the wife about that kind of thing? I'll bet, from what I know, she has to take it. How does it feel to finally have the sort of marriage you want?'

'How does it feel?' said Jason. Benny became aware that while they were talking, he had smoothly pulled this, punched that and twisted the other on his console, going through what seemed to be a reasonably complicated prelaunch check. 'I'll tell you how it feels.'

He pulled a lever and the savage acceleration shoved her back into the padding of her couch.

Meanwhile, on planet Earth and slightly more than half a galaxy away, a man named Bane sat in an especially designed and shielded bunker, and contemplated his works.

As he sat. Bane knew that if he were to open the heavy shutters of his bunker he would see nothing more remarkable than his cultivated, biospheric gardens. He also knew that, should he choose to step through the doorway, he could wander through the arboretum, stand in the gazebo, observe the variegated comings and goings of the carp in the fishpond and that nothing bad would happen to him at all. At least, so far as he himself was capable of perceiving.

The banks of viewers around the bunker walls showed him the true picture. The viewers were extremely specialized and had been constructed at considerable expense, over no

insignificant amount of time. The bunker also contained a considerable number of modular units, with no clue as to their function save the blinking readouts on their faces, which merely showed sequences of high-order numbers incrementing, decrementing or switching between.

These units were hooked by lengths of strangely glistening, gel-like flex to the remains of Employee Zero – although ‘remains’ might have been the wrong word. Employee Zero seemed entirely intact and whole, the nomenclature stencilled on his naked chest being his only blemish. The only indication of malaise was that Employee Zero lay as still as death.

Only the screens, again, displayed the true picture – and the true picture was like nothing on Earth.

Employee Zero was in turn hooked to the Egg - and here, it seemed, the dislocation of Bane from the actual fact of things, as opposed to mere reality, fell slightly down. The mechanism inside the Egg appeared to shimmer, constantly transforming in states unknown to the physical, and possibly even coruscating.

The Egg had proved something of a trial for Bane. No matter what the design, no servo-mechanism had been found that could move the concentric rings upon its shell that served, after a fashion, to control it. They simply wouldn't budge.

They could be moved at all only by a living human hand. A specific human hand. When he had come to finally experiment with his *own* hand. Bane had known a large degree of apprehension. When the time had come for him to touch it, he had been almost entirely convinced that the Egg would fry him instantly - as it had done to the hands of others, with which Banc had experimented before. Had he not *known*, from deep inside himself, and from the interpretation of certain other sources that he would not be obliterated, he would never have so much as touched the damned thing.

That, of course, and the size of the stakes.

The stakes were everything that is, or was, or ever will be.

The strange thing was, Bane reflected, that once touched and survived, the process was strangely addictive. Even now his fingers itched to grab the Egg and twist the rings as far as they would go.

But no. That would be disastrous, both for a universe that Bane did not care particularly much about, and for Bane himself.

All the same, he could not resist making one more small and almost utterly unimportant adjustment. Just one more. That couldn't hurt at all.

Then he composed himself, and waited for the next time that the moment was meet and right.

'You complete and utter *total* bastard!' Benny shouted after she could breathe again. 'You did that on purpose!'

'Well you did ask,' said Jason.

Sgloomi Po had momentarily been squashed into a flattish, doughnut shape by the acceleration, and now sprang back into hir gender-neutral human form.

'We had to clear the dark-matter clouds of Malanoor quickly,' it said. 'We've found to our cost that a gradual revelation of the current state of affairs is the one that leads to psychotic episodes.'

'We have to show it to you in one lump,' Jason said.

Oh really?' said Benny. 'Well you could have bloody told me.'

'Yeah, well, you *didn't* ask about that. You just look at the screen.'

Benny might have responded in a manner utterly unsuited to the lady she patently was, had she not automatically glanced at the screen in the way people do when told to look at something - and it was at that precise point, as though a light switch had been thrown, that the screen, which had been relaying nothing but the subtly shifting blackness of the dark-matter clouds, sprang into vibrant, dazzling life.

'Oh my...' Benny breathed as she finally saw the new sky and the truth of it sank in. 'Oh, my...'

STRIKE TWO

**SOMEWHERE BETWEEN
NOW AND THEN**

THE MYSTERIOUSLY ELUSIVE VILLAIN, PART ONE (ALTERNATE EARTH)

I must confess to a distinct sensation of profound if intangible presentiment as I mounted the stairs of Professor Tzanov's house. The furnishings and fixtures were rather fine, both in their taste and of a quality that denoted some expense in their procurement, as befits a domicile towards the more refined areas of the Metropolis. A sense of neglect, however, and a notable patina of dust overlaid all. The late professor, a widower, had clearly been a man for whom the activities of the mind were predominant to those of mere housekeeping. Indeed, since entering the house I had yet to encounter more than a single manservant (the butler, who had taken no more than a cursory perusal of my visiting card, and curtly imparted the information that le Shadon was awaiting me in the master bedroom) and would have been unsurprised to learn there were no more than a cook and a bootboy below stairs.

My unease grew stronger as I attained the first-floor landing. All visible doors were closed, and I had no idea of the house's precise layout, but I had a horrible suspicion as to which of those doors might lead to the master bedroom – said suspicion being compounded by a dreadful series of crashes, bumps and other sounds of struggle that lay behind it.

'Le Shadon?' I exhaled, rattling the handle of the door to find it unlocked. Beyond the door as it swung open I saw a sight the like of which I may never hope to see again.

That great detective, Nathan le Shadon, lay, prone, upon the floor. Sitting astride him, what I can only delineate as a reptilian hybrid clawed and pummelled at his heart...

In his years of chronicling the adventures of le Shadon, Kiru had upon occasion reflected, his own small investigatory and observational skills had been not unnaturally overshadowed by those of the great detective. This was only right and proper, of course, but it tended to give the general impression among the reading public that Kiru, in himself, was little more than an unproductive nincompoop. Indeed, a number of persons had had the effrontery to come up to him on the streets, while he was going about his business of the day, and offer their services as a replacement companion, on the grounds that 'You're obviously not up to the task yourself, old boy.'

Nonetheless - as befits an author capable of observing and describing the exploits of a genius in entertaining detail - Kiru had observational powers rather more developed than most. After his initial shock, pursuant to the impression that the reptile woman was attacking him and tearing out his heart, he realized that she was merely, if frantically, giving le Shadon artificial respiration, as a swimming-baths attendant might give to some unwary swimmer.

'Good Lord, Nathan!' he cried. 'What has happened here? Can you speak?'

Le Shadon gasped a word that sounded like 'Eck', seemingly modulating the air exhaled under the pressure of the reptile woman's hands. Moving closer, Kiru saw that the reptilian countenance had largely been a trick of the light, slinking through the crazy-paving cracks in the broken window and giving her a mottled appearance. She was in fact a perfectly ordinary if lovely woman, with merely a greenish tinge in her skin to suggest that there was some small degree of *Sojourner* in her ancestry.

Closer still, and the reason for le Shadon's current debilitation became evident.

'Ye gods!' Kiru plucked the blowpipe dart from le Shadon's neck and peered at the residue upon the tip. 'Whatever it is you're doing, my dear lady,' he said to the woman straddling le Shadon, 'please don't stop.'

‘I found him here, and he was convulsing,’ the woman said, her voice transformed into an uninflected growl by her exertions. It was not exactly an uncultured voice, but it held a strength Kiru had never previously encountered in a lady, and it recalled just for an instant the vision of the monstrous lizard female. ‘I’ve been trying to kick-start his breathing for something like five... for no short while, and he just doesn’t seem to be able to *start*.’

‘You have doubtless saved his life all the same,’ Kiru said. He regarded the blowpipe dart once again. ‘Unless I miss my guess entirely, this is tipped with distilled *blooki-beetle* juice, from the far off climes of the Madagascan Oligarchy. I believe it operates upon the same principle as curare - it paralyses the lungs and the victim dies of suffocation rather than from poisoning (which, as you’ll recall, is the induced inability of haemiferous substances in the blood to distil the life-giving qualities of the Luminiferous Aether from the air).’

‘So how many... how much longer must I keep on doing this?’ panted the woman.

‘I don’t believe it will be much longer, now.’ Kiru smiled with relief. ‘Things could, I think, have been worse. The venom might have been derived from a tincture of the finest Patagonian puff-mongoose juice.’

‘And would I notice the difference?’

‘I believe, my dear lady, that you most certainly would.’

It was at that moment that le Shadon’s body gave a convulsive judder and spasmed, knocking the hands of the woman from his chest. The body of le Shadon drew in a great, choking breath and then upon the instant began to cough exceptionally violently.

When he was capable of speech, Nathan le Shadon raised himself slightly and inclined his head towards the woman. ‘I am for ever in your debt, madam.’

The woman raised a perfect eyebrow. ‘Miss.’

‘I do apologize. Miss Tzanov. I fear that I am rather unaccountably light-headed for the instant. Allow me to introduce my most trusted friend and companion, Dr James

Kiru, late of the Bengal Lancers, Queen's College of Medicine and Rugby, if not necessarily in that order.'

'I'm charmed,' said the lady, looking up at Kiru with a little smile. For some strange reason Kiru thought that he should know her, but, try as he might, he could not quite recollect the time or place or circumstances in which they might have met.

(She shoved him through erupting streets. In the sky biplanes banked and wheeled; more than once they were forced to skirt an area where the Samurai ground forces were attempting a raid, creating an actual beachhead until, at last, they came to a dome guarded by a pair of Seku, glowering around themselves with barely contained belligerence. and obviously wishing they were where the fighting was...)

'As am I, my dear lady,' said Dr James Kiru, late of the Bengal Lancers and FRS. 'As am I.'

'Miss Tzanov,' said Nathan le Shadon, 'is, as you'll recall, the young lady I told you about, and the reason for my asking you to come here. It now seems that her late father was most cruelly murdered. The developmental engineering workshops of his armament manufactory have been rifled, but nothing, it seems, was taken.'

'Why yes,' said the lovely Miss Tzanov. 'It seemed to me that the evil Thuggees who did it must have been looking for something quite consequential, which they did not find. It seemed obvious to me that, if the object they were looking for was truly important, then my father was aware of that importance, and that he might have sequestered it in some other locale.'

'His home being the obvious choice,' said le Shadon. 'Rather *too* obvious.'

'You see, Miss Tzanov, I did not accompany you here with the intention of searching for this mysterious object, whatever it might prove to be. Even a most cursory examination of the house showed me that it had not been searched – and why should whatever nefarious element we are pitted against fail to take that most flagrantly obvious

step? The answer is simple. This house was left as a trap, the locale for an attempt upon the life of my own self!’

Miss Tzanov gasped and a dainty hand flew to her mouth.

Seemingly oblivious to the fact that Miss Tzanov was now cursing vehemently and exceedingly crudely, having split her lip on the back of her hand (she had, quite obviously, misjudged her own muscular strength) le Shadon continued:

‘I decided, however, to lay my own trap. I entered the house knowing that an attempt would be made, and purely with the intention of drawing our criminal out into the open. In this, I believe, I have succeeded.

‘For a number of... for some not inconsequential while, as you know, Kiru, I have been ingesting small amounts of various poisons, to which I have built up a certain immunity - not enough to save me from their most deadly effects, you understand, but merely to give me a few - a moment in which I might take precipitate action. There was no way of anticipating or avoiding the dart as such, but before the paralysis hit me I was able to whip my head around in a trice, and catch a glimpse in the direction from which it had come.

‘Thus I was able to see the jet-propelled dirigible of scarlet and lemon as it rose out of sight, dragging a rather startled-looking Madagascan midget with it on a line. I need hardly tell you, Kiru, which personage of our acquaintance flouts the law of the land in such a flagrant manner that he always uses a distinctive methodology to his crimes - not least being the use of a red and yellow dirigible as and when appropriate or possible.’

‘Ye gods!’ Kiru exclaimed, for the second time. ‘Can it possibly be true?’

‘I believe,’ said le Shadon, ‘that it possibly can - for all we thought we’d seen the last of the fiend when he plunged, seemingly to his death, from the dirigible he was at that point utilizing in what was called by some the Case of the Purloined Parson’s Nose.’

‘That mastermind of criminality,’ Kiru breathed. ‘That inveigler of whole nations in his iniquitously Machiavellian

schemes. That slinking foe who will never rest until the world itself is clasped in his foul clutches - Doctor Simon Deed himself!

The first impression was that the blackness of space and the light of the stars had reversed themselves - a blinding, blazing plane as bright as burning magnesium, pocked with darker speckles.

Then the mind adjusted itself - the light hadn't blinded her, Benny realized vaguely, because she was perceiving it with some other sense than physical sight - and the white plane devolved into the myriad of its component parts: a churning vortex of brilliant, multicoloured points of light, so dense that they filled the entire field of vision.

Over centuries of development, the technology of receiving, storing and replaying images had been perfected. Inconsistencies and imperfections had been eradicated - to the point where creative artists in these respective media were forced to rely almost entirely upon actuality and intent, without the synergetic effects of accident. Benny, on the other hand, was an archaeologist, and had direct experience with archaic and long-outmoded technologies. The vision on the *Schirron Dream's* screen put her in mind of an ancient television set tuned between transmitter stations.

Three-dimensional static was incredibly hard to imagine, but then she didn't have to imagine it because it was happening right in front of her. The points she had first taken to be black specks now seemed only dark because they were constant, conflicting with the chaos around them, and so they drew the attention like the differently pigmented numbers that appear out of the apparent confusion of a colour-blindness test. (Benny wondered if her tendency to think, sometimes, in unorthodox and obsolete terms - colour-blindness having long since been dealt out and trumped from

the genomic deck - was one of the factors in what Chris Cwej had ambiguously described as her 'special' nature.)

In any event, these pinpoints of constancy seemed to tie in with the layout she remembered of the stars from the general galactic position of Malanoor. And - although it was almost impossible to tell with the chaos that surrounded them - she had the nasty suspicion that, while she was watching, several of these points of constancy had quietly gone out.

'Tell me that's a malfunction,' she said, quite quietly, almost as if she were trying to convince herself. 'A simulation or something, knocked up by the ship. Something like that.'

'It's a simulation,' said Chris, never taking his eyes from his own console, 'just not in the sense that you mean. If you went outside and looked with the naked eye you wouldn't see anything out of the ordinary, you know?'

Benny knew what he meant. Even with the aid of a suit and helmet to prevent the naked eyes exploding out of the head, the simple fact was that you didn't see *anything* without the assistance of readouts and enhancement. The idea that you'd see stars and constellations, hydrogen clouds and merrily spinning be-ringed planets was purely the invention of the entertainment media, and so ingrained in the human psyche that even those who *did* go into space tended to forget that it was complete and utter tosh.

'What you're looking at,' said Chris, 'is what is happening - for people like us, at least. I don't think anybody else is noticing anything different or wrong at all; they haven't got the necessary mental toolkit. All the *Schirron Dream*'s doing, I think, is integrating it into an image relevant to ourselves that we can assimilate.' He gestured to the screen. 'Those lights are the potentiality of suns, planets, physical bodies, translating into our reality and then collapsing under probability. In the quantum sense, they can possibly exist and so they do.'

'But in the *real* real sense,' said Jason as he calmly worked the helm, 'it doesn't matter if they do or not. We can go through 'em like a hand through soap bubbles ' He briefly took his hands from the controls and did a complicated little

multiple-finger click and clap. ‘Kersplat-splat, no problem. You don’t feel anything, do you?’

‘What?’ Benny exclaimed, a little alarmed by the half-formulated implications of this. She tried to formulate them a little further. ‘Let me get this straight. We’re ploughing our way through suns and planets in their hundreds of thousands, a significant number of them probably inhabited, and we’re just blowing them apart as we go?’

‘Pass the lady a monkey nut,’ said Jason. ‘Only it’s millions of billions at the very least.’

‘But that’s -’

‘Oh balls,’ sighed Jason. ‘Here we go with the misplaced Little Sister of the Bleeding Heart routine again...’

‘You’re thinking in the wrong terms, Benny,’ Chris cut in hurriedly, as Benny sucked her breath in for a belter of a retort. ‘I mean, if you decide to eat a sandwich or a mixed-fruit salad, do you give a thought to the countless people who might die or not, or might never exist at all, in any universe that might be created by the knock-on effects of that simple choice? What we’re dealing with here operates on just that level, effectively and morally.’

Benny caught herself and tried to think about it clearly. ‘No,’ she said at last. ‘You might believe that, but I can’t.’ She gestured to the points of light flaring into existence and dying on the screen. ‘I don’t know what to think exactly, but I can’t think like that. You can see it.’

‘You are experiencing,’ said Jason, with an affected, cultured drawl that Benny knew from bitter experience was the prelude to another asinine bit of Jasonly showing off, ‘what is known as a Naked Lunch moment. You can see what’s on the end of every fork, but that doesn’t change the fact that it was there before you noticed.’

‘But once you notice,’ said Benny, pointedly, ‘you do something about it and become a vegetarian - something I have been, I might add, since a very early age, barring the occasional lapse, and bacon sandwiches, which don’t count...’

‘And didn’t I bloody know it?’ Jason said. ‘OK, Ms Morality, how about this? Someone you love’s about to be horribly murdered and the only way you can get to them is over a floor crawling with cockroaches. Or squashy rats, or -’

‘Jason...’ Sgloomi said from hir own console, slightly concerned. ‘Might I suggest that we discuss such things later, when events allow?’

Jason scowled. ‘Yeah, OK.’ He shrugged and turned his full attention back to the helm controls. He didn’t appear to do anything different, but the *Schirron Dream* gave a little lurch, correcting some small error he had allowed to pass unnoticed in the heat of argument.

‘We have to keep our minds on the job in hand,’ said Chris. ‘We still have some people to pick up before we head into the nexus of the disruption - but even this far out there are effects in terms that *will* affect us...’

‘More space-time anomalies and weird wobbly things that cat our engine emissions than you can shake a stick at,’ murmured Jason, absently.

‘Even this far out,’ said Chris, ‘it’s going to be a bumpy ride.’

SUSPICIOUS GESTURES

The first thing Martle had suggested, on arrival in the landing cradles, was that they split up. Roz had seen the logic of this: working as a double-header might be safer in an alien environment - but the acolyte who joined the Church of Adjudication in order to be safe hadn't been born. This way they could cover more ground, and in any case, given estimations of the local talent, it would take several hit squads operating at their best to discomfit even a single Adjudicator.

Now, however, she was beginning to have her doubts about the wisdom of this. It was her first time off Earth, not counting trips to the resort stations within the solar system, which were the province of the richer of the Overclass from which she had originally come. The sensation, now, was akin to that she had experienced after joining the Church - from a simple sense of duty and over the strident objections of her family - when she had first found herself in the Underlevels of the Overcities. The sense of dislocation, from the psychosculpted and environmentally customized upper-level chambers maintained by her family, to the bare Euclidian spaces fractured by ducts, exposed mechanicals and electrics, all overlaid by a grimy patina of what she was vaguely aware had once been called house dust, but had evolved by sheer weight of the numbers producing it in an imperfectly ventilated environment into what the locals called 'downside slime' - the dislocation of it had been something like this. The sense that she was in spaces she had never experienced before.

This, however, was something else again. At least the Underlevels of the city that had once been called Great

Britain had been built by human hands and, ostensibly, for human needs. Or at least, Roz thought to herself, with a kind of wry self-mockery, as near to human as some nice High Caste girl who honestly believes she's an egalitarian can think, when she suddenly finds herself among the people she's always honestly been egalitarian about.

Here, even that simple, fundamental sense of human contact was gone. And this was slightly odd, she thought, given that Fnaroks were, aesthetically at least, a relatively pleasant sight. One knew, admittedly, that there were teeth behind the mobile, speech-capable lips, that there were claws on the digitally opposable paws, but they were by no means as unpleasant a race to look upon as some. It was the fact of their movements, the fact of the smell that permeated the lungs - the sheer mass of them on the streets almost horrifyingly open to the naked sky. These... *people* occupied their own space, on their own world, and it was a world where she was simply not wanted by the very fact of the shape she made in it.

The few humans she had seen were, if anything, even worse. There was a Fnarok-like attitude to their postures, their movements, their speech, as if they had been in some way affected by the majority of creatures around them. Roz understood that the human population on Zarjax had been here for several generations - but didn't they at least retain a trace of the traditions of their family? She had also heard that it was technically not unimpossible for a human and a Fnarok to breed, but she found that frankly unbelievable. The notion, though, made it increasingly difficult to care about the humans that she saw in the crowd - she had to keep it increasingly fixed in her head that somebody was apparently going around and ripping bits out of theirs.

'Family tradition?' said Logh, in the skimmer beside her. 'Ain't got no family tradition. Hardly anyone come, anyone you call family. Rags an' hair an' hank.'

Logh was one of the humans Roz was finding it increasingly difficult to care about. He was a Militiaman Second Class, what Roz thought of automatically as a Subdeacon and

proud of raising himself to that rank despite his species. He had been seconded to her as an interpreter and guide through the interconnected settlements - Zarjax did not even have cities as such, but settlements that extruded along the highways linking them. Roz had nothing against the idea of a guide in principle: she just didn't like being told where to go and what to do once she got there.

'You people are refugees?' she asked Logh. 'Where did you come from? One of the colonics that were annexed in the War?'

Logh made a little nodlike, ducking motion with his head, caught himself visibly and then made his head shake with a body-language he seemed unhappy with. 'Nah. Mostly come from Old Earth city-clearance. Think my umpty-great horning female come from someplace called Espaina.' He gave a little simulated claw-waggle that roughly translated into a human 'don't know, don't care'. 'Have different sorts of family, now. It —'

Logh broke off and peered into the amorphous mass of Fnarok, who seemed to be gathered in an open space between low buildings. Roz assumed it might be a market of some kind, but could not discern anything among the activity that might be construed as buying and selling.

'There,' Logh said. 'Big one making sign of three amorous *raghis* with two *gis* down to smaller one with *hoghi* stone. He middling big *Dhai* in Clan of Seven Small *Saraghor*.'

Roz had not the slightest idea to whom he was referring. 'I take it that's someone we should be talking to?'

Logh turned to glare at her suspiciously. 'You take what? Big fight if you take thing. You betcha.'

Roz sighed. 'I take nothing. We talk to this middling high, er...'

'*Dhai* in Seven Small *Saraghor* Clan. Yeah, we talk careful. He not-so-good boy, you know. Can tell by three small scars on

It was at that point that Logh was cut off again, not this time by some observation on his part but by the squealing of Roz's comm unit. A number of Fnarok on either side of the

skimmer started in alarm and growled, possibly alarmed by the sub- or supersonics of an alert that had never been designed with Fnarok ears in mind. It could only be a call from the only other person on the planet with a comm unit like that, and that person was Fenn Martle.

Roz waved Logh to silence with her hand, tuned out his shocked protestations that he really wasn't interested in sexual advances at this point, and hit the comm switch. 'Martle? What's wrong?'

There was a ragged, desperate quality to Martle's voice: 'Roz? I'm at the Three Jade Shebeen in the settlement of the Fourth *Dhai* Creeper-viper. Things have gone *oogli*-shaped real bad. I need backup, Roz, and I need it -'

There was a sound from the comm link that was not the distinctive *chunk!* of an Adjudicator's MFG, but which could only have come from some sort of projectile weapon. Then the link went dead.

'Fenn!' The name was ripped from Roz's throat seemingly of its own volition - as seemed the hand poking uselessly at the comm unit. She forced the hand to stop and turned to Logh. 'This Three Jade Shebeen. Where?'

'I can show,' said Logh, worriedly. 'Not a good idea. Very, *very* bad boys in Three Jade Shebeen. Very dangerous...'

Roz was almost snarling at him now, in a way that made him start away a little, even despite the cross-cultural incompatibilities of meaning.

'You take me there,' Roz told him. 'You take me there. *Now.*'

THE MYSTERIOUSLY ELUSIVE VILLAIN, PART TWO (ALTERNATE EARTH)

The street outside the town house seemed disquietingly normal: a refrigerated vehicle making its rounds, replenishing the ice boxes of various households, the rattle of some other tradesman delivering coal in some street nearby. This being a workday, there were no couples promenading arm in arm, no figures taking their ease in the floral square behind the railings - all were about their respective workaday business. The only persons actually evident were a scullery maid beating a carpet from a third-floor window and a small collection of children playing, in the area of the floral square set aside for them, under the eyes of a watchful nurse.

Nathan le Shadon and Dr James Kiru escorted Miss Tzanov to a more populated thoroughfare, where Kiru hailed a hansom, which stopped promptly, venting its team of small traction engines, which Kiru recognized as being of the newer design, given their motive force by way of distilled water passed over and heated by chemically refined radium.

‘Wotcha, governor,’ the jarvey said cheerily, pulling up his goggles with one hand and removing his breathing mask with the other. ‘Bleedin’ sultry this fine mornin’ and no mistake. Where to, then, gov?’

His face fell as he saw that le Shadon was curtly motioning to a passing bobby, and that said constable had paused about his proceedings, and was now marching smartly towards the cab.

‘Listen, governor,’ he said worriedly, ‘I didn’t mean anything by the language - specially in front of the young lady here.’

Just adding a bit of local colour, like. Furry wombat. Apples and pears.'

'Pay it no mind, my good fellow,' le Shadon told him. 'I imagine that Miss Tzanov is a lady with a sufficiency of stalwart spunk to take a certain degree of informality, if not taken to the impertinent extreme.' He turned to the aforementioned gumption-sufficient lady. 'I have taken the liberty, Miss Tzanov, of informing Nova Scotland Yard of things by way of your late lather's radiophone, and they have instructed this officer to escort you back to my own mere lodgings in 455-b-101, Quadrant Seven.'

'Oh, Mr le Shadon,' said Miss Tzanov, fluttering her lashes briefly in alarm, but to her immense credit bearing up well. 'Am I to understand that you are to leave me bereft of your protection?'

'I fear it is unavoidable, my dear lady,' le Shadon said. 'If Professor Simon Deed is indeed behind this distressing state of affairs, I am no doubt to be his preferred target. To slay with me would therefore place you in far more danger than not. Never fear, however, for I have spoken to Chief Inspector Bullstradd of the Criminal Investigation Division himself, who will await you and provide quite competent protection to your person.'

Directional instructions were relayed to the jarvey, and Miss Tzanov and the constable embarked. Kiru noticed that Miss Tzanov's gentle hand lingered for the merest trifle more than was necessary upon le Shadon's as he helped her into the carriage. Kiru experienced a strange admixture of personal envy, and regret that his friend had sworn off all intimate contact with the fairer sex, following the case that Kiru had subsequently retold, at the request of the editor of the *Titbits Anthology*, entitled 'The Case of the Woman who Ensnared the Great Detective with her Wiles, and Then Went Around Conducting a Quite Unconscionable Number of Illicit Affairs with Absolutely Everybody Else Behind his Back'.

Kiru fancied, in addition, however, that he also detected a small smile from Miss Tzanov, before the traction engines

gave a multiple belch and the hansom rattled off, for him and him alone.

Alone on the street now, save for the hurly-burly of the faceless crowd, Kiru turned back to his friend. 'Le Shadon, old man, I cannot help but wonder if that was wise. Even with the threat of constant attack, I feel that Miss Tzanov would have been safer accompanying us than with a duffer like Inspector Bullstradd.'

The great detective nodded thoughtfully. 'I fear that would ordinarily be the case, had I not concealed a vital piece of information from the lady - a piece of information that must take us where a lady even of her undoubted pluck might fear to go. We must follow steps, Kiru, that even I am loath to tread.'

'Why, le Shadon!' Kiru exclaimed. 'Surely you do not mean...'

'Precisely, my dear Kiru. In my searching through the house, prior to my being inconvenienced by the poison injected in me by Deed's minion, before he scuttled to his waiting triplane, I chanced upon a secret compartment, hidden behind a rather indifferent portrait of His Majesty, our late King. There, I found the remains of Professor Tzanov's papers, which had been tampered with, almost completely burnt to prevent a lesser mind from discerning the merest iota of their content. Such scraps as remained were all but illegible - but, among them, I discovered a scrawled note written in quite another hand upon some material that proved impervious to the ravages of fire.

The note contained a demand for payment in the matter of effecting the precise knurling of a component for Professor Tzanov's calculating machine, couched in such aggressive and vulgar terms that no man in this city would countenance - or, I should say, no *human* man.

I believe that Professor Tzanov was constructing his machine with the aid of a *Sojourner* of the most noisome and disreputable sort - the sort that, as you'll recall, our good Simon Deed has so often used in the past.

'I very much fear, my dear Kiru, that to solve this case we must make a small excursion into the Downtown.'

INCIDENTAL ARRIVALS

The Three Jade Shebeen, like so much else in this alien environment, seemed incomprehensible to Roz on the level of things that had simply not occurred to her, and with which she could not automatically cope. In the back of her mind she'd had visions of some structural hybrid between a fortress and a bar, like the *kif*-houses on Earth. This, from the vantage point of the flier, seemed like an open-air maze, built from partitioning and open to the elements. She gathered that the climatic zones of Zarjax were remarkably constant and, thinking about it, she could see how a world with no erratic weather patterns to speak of need not evolve the necessity for roofs and ceilings - but that was the point, when you thought about it: she had to *think* about it.

Off to one side she could see the spaceport: the functional hulks of human-designed transport craft, the splendidly and uselessly ornamented forms of the Zarjax Interplanetary Militia-patrol, and the strange shapes of ships built and conned by other, alien, races. One of this latter sort was grounding: a kind of manta shape that seemed, by its size, to be either a patrol ship or an interstellar scout - Roz was not up enough on the specs of extraterrestrial craft to hazard more than a general guess.

She brought her mind back to the matter in hand and gestured sharply downward to Logh.

'Told you,' he growled. 'Don't want to.'

'Just take us down,' Roz sighed.

Logh gave a little claw waggle. 'Okey-dokey.'

He cut out the free-flight impellers and the flier dropped like a stone, retros cutting in at a lower altitude with a suddenness that jarred Roz into her cradle and, she felt,

could only be the result of a bit of personal maliciousness. What the hell had she done to annoy the little skagger *now*?

From this lower vantage point Roz could see the activities of the Three Jade Shebeen distinctly, in the areas that had not been roofed over by flimsy strips of tarpaulin. Again, though, she was left no wiser than she had been on the settlement streets; she did not have the subconscious toolkit that would instantly tag the motions of a Fnarok perambulating through a corridor, or a gathering of Fnarok around what seemed to be a large plant, its tendrils intertwining through them, as anything at all - far less anything overtly villainous. There was nothing that she could see to get a -

Something finally occurred to her, as her observational skills and intelligence finally overrode the blocks in her thinking. The Fnarok had never had a need for roofs to keep the rain off, granted, but there were other uses for roofs. And the Fnarok had had space travel and heavier-than-air flight for several centuries.

Rather than make yet another gestural sexual advance to Logh, Roz kept her hands firmly at her side and just said, 'Take us down, through one of those roofs.'

'Which one?' asked Logh.

'Any one. I don't care.'

Again the flier dropped, this time with a downward acceleration that shoved her stomach up into her ribcage. It burst through the roof covering which, under tension, snapped back like a tensile soap bubble with an audible smack. Just as Roz thought that the flier, Logh and her insides were going to end up plastered radiantly over the first flat surface they encountered below, the crash retros cut in and slammed them to a halt.

Instinct took over, appropriate to the environment or not. Roz dived from the flier and hit the ground flat, soaking up the impact with two forearms and the flats of her hands, and instantly snaked a now smarting hand back for her gun - all the while performing a lightning kind of tier-observational/response check that went something like:

1. Anything moving at all
2. Anything moving that might be a threat
3. *Anything* that might be a threat
4. Anything else...

...She was in an octagonal chamber that would have been airy even if she had not destroyed its membranous, translucent covering, which now hung in ruptured tatters down the walls. The chamber was crammed with what seemed to be old hospital beds from Earth, of the tubular and paint-scuffed variety - looking, strangely, far more alien in themselves because of their age and the alien surroundings they were in.

All of the beds were occupied with what, at first sight, seemed to be wasted, bedsores-ridden human bodies. On second sight, by way of subtle differences in their bone and muscle structure, they were recognizable as members of the Zarjax human population. That was, Roz told herself, nothing to do with their being *worse*, or anything like that. It was simply the sort of qualifier by which you could tell that someone was of African or European stock, or, say, from the Underlevels of Earth.

Complicated units, seeming constructed of brass and copper and glass, were strapped to their heads, rather like the mind-probe headsets that were used in the Church to ascertain the innocence or guilt of the accused. The whirr and click of their mechanics made it hard to see, precisely, what was going on under them, but Roz received the distinct impression of needles inserted into the heads within. Titration tubes ran from the headset mechanisms to the rock floor, where they disappeared into small, flanged holes. Further devices were fixed to their chests, obviously to stimulate their breathing and other basic functions.

Roz scanned the walls for available exits and found none. She had noted that instinctively, when she had been checking for entrances through which some threat might come, but now she consciously thought about it. The

octagonal walls of the chamber were smooth and featureless. It was just possible that these beds and their horrible cargo had been scaled in, simply to serve their purpose without maintenance, but she wasn't going to bet on it. At least one of these supposedly featureless panels was in all probability a door, but which one was it?

Her line of thought was disrupted by a bellow of rage. She swung her gun round in alarm, before she realized that it had come from Logh, of whom she had been dimly aware but discounted in the sense that he might pose some active danger. Now, she saw, he was standing over one of the bodies, his face clenched with the kind of atavistic rage that went straight back to his ape ancestry and wiped out the patina of acclimatization to an alien culture.

'People,' he snarled. 'Is people!'

'What?' said Roz, momentarily nonplussed.

Logh made a backward gesture that meant he was in actual fact gesturing *towards* Roz. 'Thought they used people like you. People from off planet.' He made the same reversed gesture to one of the bodies. 'Didn't know they were *real* people. Didn't know they were still alive.'

Roz vaguely recalled that on the Fnarok world there was no crime analogous to grave-robbing or defiling the dead - so far as the Fnarok were concerned, the body after life had left it was a worthless husk. She suddenly understood Logh's blazing rage - how much worse for him it must feel to realize that matter was being extracted, not from corpses, but from people who were still, if only technically, alive.

'Listen,' she said urgently. 'We have to get out of here and find who did this. I have to find out what happened to my partner, if he's still alive. How do we get out of here and find him?'

'Easy,' Logh grunted. 'We go out. We go get 'em. Maybe find your friend.' Without seeming to pause to think about it, he headed for one of the panels - which without warning slammed back, and the bolt of a blaster beam from the darkness beyond struck him squarely in the chest and sliced down. His insides exploded out of him and his body blew

apart in a strange, splayed way from the initial point of the blast that, had it been rendered as a cartoon graphic, might have seemed almost comical. Had it not occurred in the reality of meat and flesh and viscera.

It was not a question of the suddenness taking Roz aback. From the instant she had seen the panel move she had been bringing her own MFG around and up to fire - but it was that microscopic, fatal distinction between stimulus and reaction.

The reaction was to fire upon whatever had killed Logh. The stimulus was a second blaster beam, fired at the precise same time as the other, which smashed into her own chest and exploded every nerve with agony until, mercifully, her brain shut down.

A SMALL *SOJOURN* IN SUBTERRANEA

The beings who eventually became known by all and sundry as the *Sojourners* had originally come to the planet Earth at the end of the nineteenth century. They had come, it had been eventually ascertained, from one of the worlds orbiting the star of Alpha Centauri - but at the time, the general understanding of spatial relationships was such that they were instantly assumed to have come from Mars. This impression had been compounded by the pigment of the fungus that they cultivated to eat, spreading outward from the landing site of their screw-top capsules upon Clapham Common, its crimson tendrils extruding to a point only slightly behind the advance of their massive, stilt-walking colonization machines.

In fact, of course, it had been this 'red weed' that had proved to be their downfall. The so-called Martians, whatever else they might have been, were not entirely bloody fools. They had inoculated themselves against all known Earth diseases that might afflict them before setting out in the first place. The real problem had been that the red fungus, grown from the nutrients of Earth, had thus been altered minutely in its composition - producing an effect, when eaten, rather similar to the effect Kiru recalled shortly after eating his first curry on the Indian subcontinent.

This had weakened the advancing creatures to the extent that the ordinarily technologically far inferior military forces of Great Britain and Europe, after several long and bloody campaigns, were able to defeat them. It is to be noticed that the United States of America lent their invaluable support, after the fighting was nearly over, to the extent of several

platoons who, to a man, partook in the cracking open of the colonization machines after they fell over, and fainted dead away at the sights contained therein.

Now, some hundred years later and almost by definition, that was all ancient history. The vast majority of the *Sojourners* had integrated themselves into society much to the credit and accomplishment of all. Indeed, it had been the *Sojourners* who had provided the technologies that had resulted in such marvels as the clockwork monorails that traversed the city, the radium-powered airships that floated above it, the giant steam-driven catapults that lobbed crates of cargo in their tonnes from one side of it to another. It was a relief in some sense, Kiru thought, as the big elevator cage rattled down the shaft that led to Downtown, to get back to a world where such things were -

Now why had he thought that?

Back to *what* world, precisely? This was the world, and it was the only world he had ever known. What other world could there possibly be?

Possibly it was the strain of recent events - even, possibly, the fiendish Simon Deed had found some way to introduce some mind-befogging drug by some nefarious means in the house of Professor Tzanov - but in any event there was a sensation in Kiru's head that was not quite right. Images came and went like the vestiges of some half-remembered dream: a massive sun made of some burnished metal, a fatuously smiling face upon it as from some lithographic satire... impossible airships, shaped like the denizens of the deep, against a black sky pocked with variegated stars... a kind of fabulous city, seemingly floating, without the slightest evidence of what might support it, over endless jungle... The images slid away from him as he tried to put a mental finger upon concrete specifics.

Kiru turned to speak to le Shadon - and again, in the gently flickering galvanistic lamp that illuminated the elevator cage, it was as if he caught some different... persona that informed his stalwart friend, as transient as a little grin and quip after some prolonged and sonorous pronouncement. Someone who

might share the same body but might assume a different name. The vague sense of some warrior-hero from ancient myth - no, not precisely a warrior: the image that flashed across his mind seemed more *piratical*, somehow, than that - assuming some concealing guise.

‘Le Shadon,’ he said, ‘do you perceive a sense that things are not quite right?’

The great detective nodded slowly, catching his meaning with the aptitude of long acquaintance. ‘An intimation of, let us say, unreality? A sense that the world is in some manner slightly unfitting, like an imperfectly tailored suit of clothes? I must confess to feeling something of that nature. I’d put it down to the remaining effects of the venom dart.’ Le Shadon glanced around himself, at the walls of the shaft as, in relation to the two men, they rose behind the elevator grille. ‘I believe that it might be the result of our destination. We are, after all, descending to where no human man should ever go, and is not wanted.’

That was in all probability the case, Kiru conceded. Although the shaft itself was unremarkable, their mere proximity to the Downtown environs now seemed to make it loom forebodingly, in a manner that was not entirely connected to actual sight.

‘And I believe,’ remarked le Shadon, as the cage lurched to a halt and a pulsing, reddish ambiance overpowered the light from the galvanistical lamp, ‘that we have finally arrived.’

While the majority of *Sojourners* had eventually integrated themselves into polite society, there had remained, in the years after the War, a number of recalcitrants, who had chosen to remain in the internment camps that had been dug for them - *Sojourners* preferring to live below ground if at all possible, and the victors of Earth being not entirely without heart. Over the years, these die-hard elements had extended and refurbished their tunnels and chambers to produce the caverns that were now termed the Downtown.

By now the situation was such that what had once been a prison now needed no guards, either inside or at the few

remaining exits. Those below made it a matter of pride never to ascend into the open air, and those above feared to go below for their very lives.

All the same, over the years, there had been several instances and a far larger number of apocryphal stories of some poor soul going down unwarily into his cellar to find a renegade *Sojourner* tunnelling up the other way. It was also known that if a denizen of the Downtown could hurt one of those above - either human or those who now lived with humans, the latter of whom were regarded as degenerate, assimilationist fops - then that denizen would. This was why the villainous Simon Deed (so far as the activities of such a villain could be determined with any degree of accuracy) had made so many allies here, and, so word had it, was allowed to pass through the Downtown with relative impunity.

For Nathan le Shadon and Dr James Kiru, however, it was another matter entirely. As they made their way through a maze of tunnels lit with the pulsing crimson phosphorescence of the red weed that permeated them, Kiru could hear things slithering, always out of sight, always frighteningly close by. He was glad, by sharply increasing degrees, of the trusty service revolver that he carried in a pocket on his hip.

It was also becoming more and more difficult to keep in mind, precisely, their reasons for being here, the events that had led up to them, their eventual destination. His head was pounding fit to burst under this palpitating alien light, there was a queasy sensation in the pit of his stomach and, pervading all, a sense of unreality similar to that of an incipient migraine. He was becoming increasingly convinced of his notion that Simon Deed had contrived to poison both him and le Shadon in some manner - either that or he was suffering from some illness that was in the preliminary stages of making itself evident.

He quashed the sensations forcibly. 'How do we find the creature we are looking for, le Shadon?' he asked.

'Simplicity itself, my dear Kiru,' the detective said, striding along with a firm determination. 'Isolationist as they might

be, the denizens of the Downtown commonly do work for those above in return for certain luxury goods that they cannot ordinarily obtain. Orders are sent down by the elevators, together with the directions to the relevant party. The communication I discovered in the...' His voice faltered momentarily. 'The communication I discovered before, while couched in terms of threat and abuse, was the equivalent of an invoice - and the name and address of the party concerned was inscribed upon the letterhead. It is simply a matter of - and here, I believe, we are.'

They had turned into a chamber that seemed to be a cross between a blacksmith's forge, an engineering manufactory and the very pit of Hades. The dark shapes of *Sojourners*, who had the aspect of ambulatory, fifteen-appendaged squid, were slumped over turning lathes and furnaces. The air was heavy and sweltering with the reek of creatures who had never so much as made the slightest compliance towards human tastes and decencies.

Le Shadon plucked the invoice he had mentioned from his pocket, glanced at it to refresh his memory, put it away again and then clapped his hands resoundingly.

'I am looking,' he declared, as several hundred eyes in a score of heads turned to glare at him suspiciously, 'for a Mr [and here he made a series of rapid clickings with his tongue while simultaneously and complicatedly snapping his fingers] Amuga. Might I enquire as to where he might be found?'

The hubbub of the alien creatures around them had risen alarmingly in pitch, even before he had begun to speak, even as the hulking shapes advanced. And now, as one, and with murderous intent, the monstrous *Sojourners* flung themselves upon Dr James Kiru and Nathan le Shadon.

Kiru dodged a serrated tentacle that shot straight for him, the saw teeth set into its side grazing his cheek as he flicked his face away. He pulled a blade from the sheaths slung across his chest and flung it at the main body of the creature to which the tentacle belonged, piercing an eye that was utterly unlike that of a squid for the simple reason that it did

not appear remotely human. There was a spray of some clear substance and the creature went into spasm - catching Kiru with yet another outflung limb, this one, fortunately, without teeth.

(An eye stalk forced itself from the bundle of rags and tracked round to regard him. 'Is okey-dokey, pretty much. Funny woman little damage, much. This woman bigger damage, take a bigger lot of time...')

Kiru rode the blow, half somersaulting to land on his back, simultaneously whipping his blade back on its lanyard and swinging it around with a control so fine that it laid open the body of a second attacking creature.

Off to one side, le Shadon was dealing a series of precise jujitsu chops to the nerve points of those creatures surrounding him, causing them to slump silently as though they had been supported by wires that had then been cut. 'Nathan!' Kiru shouted as yet another monster lunged at him from directly behind and out of his line of sight.

(They were on a flat and perfectly featureless white plain, stretching to infinity under a burning desert sky. Their surroundings remained utterly blank and the blankness ate into their minds: they could have walked for hours or days or...)

Nathan li Shao hauled his sword from its scabbard slung across his back and depressed a small stud set into the hilt. Tiny, toothlike blades extended from the curved, scimitar-like, serrated cutting edge of the blade with a *shik*, and began to vibrate. With one smooth backhanded sweep, li Shao sliced through the tentacles that were reaching for him - while simultaneously spinning and ducking, to finally bring the sword up and slice the truncated and whimpering monster all but in two.

'All right, you sods,' he roared, the circlet about his head glinting and his strangely disparate eyes blazing in the hellish light of the manufactory. 'Who wants some?'

The action, thus far, had taken bare moments - long enough for the score of attackers to be diminished by at least one half-dozen, and for the rest to realize their error in

attempting as an unconcerted mob to attack two men who fought as one. The alien creatures backed off hurriedly.

‘Fine,’ li Shao said, shutting off his sword and retracting the blades. ‘As I was saying, I’m looking for -’ Again he made the complicated finger snaps and clicking with his tongue. ‘Where is he. Or she? Or hir? Or it?’

(The figure put its splayed and bone-white fingers into its cowl, presumably pressing them against the horrid face within. ‘I... they are concealing something. They have told the truth so far as it goes, but they... they have another agenda yes? They think that they are...’)

There was a moment of subdued, even shamefaced conversation between the creatures. Eventually, one of them shuffled slowly forward.

‘I have reason to believe,’ said li Shao, still hefting his sword meaningfully, ‘that you can help us with our enquiries. Kiru, you take him back to the city and the constabulary, so that he can have a word with the good inspector...’

He trailed off. His face took on a glazed, uncomprehending look as if he were forcing his mind to think of something that kept slipping from it, like a lump of thawing ice from the hands.

(They prowled the bowels of the freighter, galvanistic lanterns slung from their shoulders, weapons at the ready, eyes open wide and ears straining for any sounds of nearby combat. Their protective clothing had been battered and ripped in the confusion of the initial fighting, but neither of them had sustained particularly serious damage. A claw had grazed Kiru’s ribs, and an apparently badly aimed throwing axe had laid open li Shuo’s upper arm through his padding, but he had stitched the wound with a curved bone needle and a...)

There was something, somewhere, utterly wrong about this. Kiru felt his own mind seize. He stared down blankly at the weapon thing he still held in his hand. He knew it was supposed to be either called a service revolver or a knife - but somehow he was unable to recall precisely which it was.

(Turn the world.)

His final thought, before the world split apart and tore him with it, was to wonder where he was going to find a constable at this time of night.

DISPLACED RELATIONSHIPS (HYBRID TIMELINE)

‘Are you all right, Roz? Are you all right?’

Roz resurfaced into consciousness. Fenn Martle was looking down at her. He had lost his helmet and face guard; the left side of his face was bruised and blackened, but filled with living concern. He was pulling away one of the helmet-like units Roz had previously noticed on the bodies - had it been on her? Her forehead burnt with nonspecific pain. She tried to reach up and touch it, and found her hands restrained.

‘Don’t worry,’ Martle said, loosening the straps that were securing her to the bed. ‘They didn’t get as far as drilling into your head.’ He jerked a hand to indicate several blackened corpses, taken out by way of the flamer attachment of an MFG. ‘I managed to scare the rest off, but they’ll be back. We have to move.’

Roz swung herself off the bed, moving gingerly at first and forcing life back into creaking joints. She noted that she still had her uniform, but that she had been stripped of weaponry, comm unit and her other equipment. ‘What happened here?’

‘I’ll tell you about it as we go.’ Martle tossed her something. It was her gun. ‘At least they left you this behind. Lucky, eh?’

* * *

The *Schirron Dream* was something of a strange amalgam: a haphazard mixture of its basic alien stuff combined with other objects and technologies that seemed to have been acquired from all over the galaxy and from several different times. In contrast to the bridge, where things seemed to have been assimilated into the basic structure of the craft itself,

the other areas seemed more like a junk yard in which people lived. A gangway balk might be hung with tapestries from Earth's fourteenth century, giving way suddenly to a mosaic that seemed to have been constructed from shards of an Olabrian joy-luck crystal stuck in resin (Benny resolved to keep a sharp eye out for Olabrian warships determinedly and lethally wanting them *back*) which then gave way to a mural depicting, in abstract, the story of *Kloi-kloi Seki* and his Thousand Young, in a neo-primitivist manner reminiscent of an Australian aboriginal rock painting. It was as if, rather than this collision of cultures, ideologies and world-views combining into a single, all-pervasive fusion, it was the collision itself and its dissonance that were important.

The galley was a similar mixture of the familiar and the strange. Cooking utensils and equipment from any number of worlds were crammed into it, as were cutlery and crockery applicable to any number of metabolisms and applicable equivalent of mouths. Benny wandered through the galley, nodding to several acquaintances she remembered from those crew members gathered here. In a vague sense she knew that they had duties ranging from maintenance of the engines to hydroponics - but their chief duty, if a duty it was, was simply to be here. The *Schirron Dream* was not primarily a military or financial concern: it was the home of the various intersecting circles of an extended family. The atmosphere in the galley seemed subdued, as might be expected from what was, effectively, a nomadic tribe with its leaders missing and in mortal danger.

Foodstuffs in any quantity were stored, in bulk, in the ship's holds. There were, however, a wide variety of snacks and beverages on offer. After a few moments' hunting, Benny prepared a mug of *sklaki*, a kind of liquorice-infused hot chocolate to which Chris was partial, and a cup of cinnamon for herself, crumbling the sticks into a strainer and leaving it in hot water to infuse. Her first impulse was to entirely forget about the pint mug of freeze-dried Earth coffee swimming in milk and with four brown sugars favoured by Jason, but then she decided that would be petty and unworthy of her. Having

decided, she was irked to realize that her hands had made it anyway, seemingly of their own accord.

She plonked all three mugs on a tray and took them forward to the bridge, arriving just in time to hear the tail end of an animated anecdote from Jason, complete with hand gestures.

‘So there we were,’ he said, ‘halfway up a sodding mountain, Mira out for the count, Ben squashed flat under a Norn Stone and with the *Salik Gha* industriously setting up base camps half a mile below. If Volan hadn’t been on the ball with his Excision Squad, we’d have none of us made it out alive.’ He grinned. ‘Of course, what with Mira being unconscious, and hallucinating like the very buggery before that, I was able to play my end of things up a bit. Don’t think she believed me, though, and - ah, this is nice. Tea and muffins all round?’

‘Yes, well,’ said Benny. ‘I thought I might as well do something useful here. Don’t get used to it - this is a one-time-only special offer.’

‘And very nice, too.’ Jason took his mug (a brand-new-looking, faithful representation of the head of Marvin the Martian, from the old Warner Brothers’ cartoons, with a handle on it) and slurped noisily.

Benny handed the *sklaki* to Chris. ‘Any change?’ she asked, indicating the big wall screen, which currently swirled with lazy, abstract, pastel patterns no doubt intended to be restful but as cumulatively irritating as the inside of a lava lamp.

‘Nothing,’ Chris said. ‘No change.’

They had come out of the translation over a planet that none of them had recognized. Sgloomi Po had proved uncommunicative: they were simply to land via the port’s autobeacon, it had instructed, set hir down and await hir return.

‘Is reason,’ it had said, lapsing back into hir more Sloathe-some form and way of talking. ‘Must do tippity-top important thing. Must go like poor little thing on very own.’ It had sprouted three pseudopodia, and gestured to all three of them simultaneously. ‘Must not go out. Is very, very bad

thing you go out here, now, in present temporal climate point in momentary time.'

Other than this, the Sloathe had refused to be drawn.

'I have a bad feeling about this,' Benny said, gazing absently at the somniferous and quite inscrutable spirals on the screen. 'For some reason. Just *what* in all the names of the Goddess is Sgloomi doing out there? Why can't we know about it? What's so important about it?'

'I had my guide take me round some of their fermented-meat-juice bars,' Martle said. 'You know, the sort of places where they liquidize up parasitic livestock lice and use 'em as a mixer. I didn't want you around 'cause I was going to be leaning on a couple of names I had heard - and something like that can go wrong incredibly quickly. I didn't want you caught up in that.'

They wound their way through the maze of the Three Jade Shebeen, ever alert for potential attack. The few Fnarok they encountered, however, seemed to pose no threat, simply going about their incomprehensible business. (Roz tried to keep it fixed in her mind that an alien race interacted in alien ways, so that the blameless and the criminal mixed freely in a way that would never happen among humans.)

'You didn't have to leave me out of it,' she told Martle, a little hurt. 'I can look after myself. You know I can look after myself.'

'I know you can.' Martle tracked his gun around warily towards a Fnarok who sat happily sorting through and cleaning pelts from some small animal. It ignored their presence utterly. 'But if we both caught one then that would leave no one to finish our enquiries — and you wouldn't be around to act as backup for when and if things went seriously oogli-shaped.

'They did. I hammered out the location of this place from one of the middle-string *Dhai* guys, and got inside being pretty slick and sneaky about it - only to find that they were waiting for me all along. That's when I called you.' He pulled out the scorched and partially melted remains of his comm

unit. 'I was lucky that it took the brunt of the first charge - think I might have lost a hand otherwise.'

'I was stuck in one of the refining bays and pinned down. I was just about able to hold them off, but I was boxed in and it was only a matter of time before they racked me down. All I was hoping for was that you got enough to make it here.'

'Just about,' said Roz. 'Bit of trouble working out exactly what I was supposed to do when I got here, but I worked it out in the end.'

'I'm glad you did. You drew a bunch of skags off from me, and that let me take care of the rest. After that I just followed your integral tracker - which was one hell of a lot more difficult than it sounds, believe you me, what with the twists and turns of this place. When I finally caught up with you, I found a bunch of them strapping you down and getting ready to suck bits of your brain out. I fried a couple of 'em and the rest ran.'

'You should have gone after them,' Roz said.

'Yeah, well...' A slightly shamefaced grin crossed Martle's face. 'I couldn't just leave you there, delightful as the picture of a big strong girl strapped to a hospital bed might be.'

Roz smiled a little. 'Up yours, Martle.'

'You've got the equipment, I've got the time.' Martle gave Roz cover as she dodged in a kind of shuffling crouch around a particularly acute corner, then followed. 'I think the operation's over here, now. All we have to do is get to working communications, then let the local boys clean it up. They'll pull in a couple of skags who aren't quite quick enough on their feet, but I'll bet the big boys are now long gone and relocating.'

'Bit of a waste of time in the end, then, basically,' Roz opined.

'Yeah, right, but at least this place is going to be -'

'Ha-ha, puny Earthling!' cried a horribly glutinous voice. 'Prepare to meet extremely bone-crunching munchy doom-type thing!'

Before them suddenly stood a lumpen, slimy creature, eyes on stalks exploding from its body, together with, and far

more immediately, suckered tentacles that proceeded to shoot directly for Roz and grab her by the throat.

Sgloomi Po would be the first sentient being to admit that it was not the best at understanding monkey-hominid thought processes. It was not that the Sloathe was unintelligent or without sympathy, merely that they were alien to hir, and in some cases utterly biologically incompatible. Even among hir family aboard the *Schirron Dream*, among Nathan, Leetha and Kiru, Sgloomi would sometimes make a blunder so basic as to have the other members falling about with laughter. This was of no matter, since it was all in good pulmonary pump thing and, after all, family was Family. The problems came when it had to deal with other people.

When hir friends had been lost on Earth, Sgloomi had been almost frantic. While having certain insights denied to others, it had simply been unable, in the rush of events, to think of what to do. Hir only thought had been to try to find old friends, who had helped hir, hir kind and hir family before and hope that they might find some solution, on the monkey-hominid level, that would not end up simply killing them all.

In this Sgloomi had been fortunate in the semi-sentient nature of the *Schirron Dream*, which seemed to understand hir needs and take hir through the disruptions to find the people that it needed - guiding the impulses to hir manipulatory appendages on the controls in some fashion that seemed partly luck and partly instinctive hunches, for which the reasons could be worked out, with hindsight, only later.

Sgloomi had been fortunate in that the first friend he located had been Chris Cwej, who, it seemed, was involved with such matters on a galactic level, and had thus been able to fill in certain pieces of the puzzle drawn from Sgloomi's own observations. It had been Chris himself who had suggested that they pick up Jason Kane, who was engaged in broadly similar but slightly more ambiguous work, and who in relative terms happened to be conveniently close by. Sgloomi would have found and picked up Jason anyway. Had

it not attended the pair-bonding between Jason and another friend? Was he not in the same potential danger? It was inconceivable, whatever happened in the disruption, that they would not wish to face together whatever came.

The problems had started when they had found Benny - and Sgloomi realized that, in ways it was completely unable to understand, they didn't.

The strange thing, Sgloomi had observed, was that while they seemed to snarl and hate and want to kill each other, at the same time they seemed to like it like that and love each other because of it. The way they moved their bodies, when they were together, was as if they wanted to simultaneously strangle each other and do that thing where one monkey-hominid puts a bit of himself inside the other one. The whole business confused Sgloomi so much that it thought hir cognitive ganglia were going to prolapse.

That mistake, on the other pseudopod, suddenly seemed as nothing compared with *this*.

Roz Forrester, along with Chris Cwej, had been the person who had formed Sgloomi's intelligence, the person who had *informed* hir. Over weeks of proximity, on the ice fields of Reklon in the System, Sgloomi Po had learnt what it truly meant to be self-aware, to be an individual, to become a being capable of action and responsibility for hir actions, when for all hir life before it had been a mere automaton, automatically parroting whatever living form had come to grappling hook on a line. It had been Roslyn Forrester and Christopher Cwej who had truly brought hir to life - the first of the Sloathe race to fully be so, and from whom the other Sloathes had learnt. Now, after all this time, Sgloomi had honestly expected Roz to be pleased to see hir.

There seemed, though, to be certain discrepancies. First and foremost, while being obviously Roz, she seemed to be a little taller, less decayed, most of the more interesting lines and ridges that Sgloomi remembered gone from her skin. There was a springy vitality to her movements that Sgloomi could not quite recognize. Her hair was as short, but without the brittle curls of grey; springier and more glossy.

Of course, the major difference was that, previously, Roz hadn't ever taken one look at Sgloomi, and screamed something at her similarly attired monkey-hominid companion, who then proceeded to shoot at Sgloomi with a powerful and incredibly painful blaster.

On the bridge of the *Schirron Dream*, a trumpet-like and elderly speaker protruding from the communications console blared to life:

'Is coming in,' the voice of Sgloomi Po snapped urgently. 'Have to go and get out now, chop-chop as all matey get out!' The voice seemed shaky and exhausted.

Jason slapped at a control. The ever-present hum-vibration of the engines rose by several degrees.

At his own console, Chris hit a switch and an alarm rang from back within the ship. 'All hands prepare for launch.'

'I'm going aft,' Benny said. 'There might be something I can do to help...'

'You stay here,' Jason told her. 'This could be rough. Last thing we need is you smacking your head open under a high-level bounce.'

It was the condescension that got her; the sense that he was oh-so superior and that she was inferior by the simple fact of existing. She recalled the tone from when they had been married, on occasions where she had failed to pick up on his meaning, simply because he was unable to express himself in remotely intelligible terms. She remembered how, even though the fact of matters was quite the reverse, he had been able to insidiously undermine her confidence and make her feel so worthless that she felt like bursting into tears.

'Don't you tell me what to do,' she said, snapping open the harness that held her in her seat.

The main hatch of the *Schirron Dream* was equidistant from the bridge and the engines. Halfway there, the deck bucked under her and the launch acceleration slammed her down. Benny had been on more spacecraft than the hot dinners eaten by somebody who always had a nice hot dinner; she

rode the extra weight and the crazily shifting inertia and carried on.

There were several figures gathered by the hatch: a Reklonian, some humans and a Pygmy from the long-razed jungles of Aneas. They were fussing over a bulky thing that could only be Sgloomi and another, dark-skinned, human figure who lay sprawled on the deck unmoving. The strange thing was that, before she got close enough to see that the figure was female, before she recognized the remains of an Adjudicator uniform, on some deep unconscious level, Benny knew who this unconscious woman was.

‘Roz?’ she breathed, and then wondered how in the various names of the Goddess she could possibly think that.

DEGREES OF ATTRITION (ALTERNATE EARTH)

The clocks were chiming thirteen to the dozen as Nathan L made his way, at last, back out to the street. It was the end of this Sector's food break, and on the precise end of the chimes the doors of a refectory opened and those within poured out. Nathan L, with some unconscious aptitude that surprised him, pressed his back to the cinder wall directly by the door and waited for some moments before joining the throng, as a precaution for being instantly recognized as a figure already outside.

The people here were low-grade Workers, in the drab and unfinished-looking uniforms of the sort that he, Nathan L, had donned himself as a precautionary measure. Their work on the great Apparati that, in this Sector, reclaimed and reconstituted paper from the whole of the City had given them a sallow, frail and exhausted demeanour - more from the fumes of chlorine, ammonia and arsenic attendant to the process than from the already back-breaking physical labour. In all probability, though, they looked no worse than Nathan L himself, whose own last weeks had brought him a severe degree of debilitation. The lines in his face, the patchy, greasy, straggled look to his hair, spoke of the well-nigh unbearable tension in which he existed; the crushing weight of a fear that nestled deep in his bones.

Even now, he still felt his heart lurch and a glassy crawling in his spine as the flow of the crowd took him under a Watching Post. Its screens carried a stunningly beautiful News Service announcer, detailing the latest administrative triumphs of Simon Deed and their effects upon the Market,

as unexplained but impressively grand-looking figures of numbers scrolled upward behind her.

(This isn't real, you know.)

The attention of Nathan L, however, was riveted by the Tannoy system's horns that sprouted between the screens like rusting and imperfectly set, slightly wonky orchids (he had seen the picture of an orchid in a News Service handbook of images of a prohibited psychosexual nature, and so must thus be watched for and immediately quashed). At any moment Nathan L expected those horns to blare, to scream his name and brand him as a saboteur, plotting in some nebulous but officially proscribed way to throw the solid rock of the Market into chaos. There would be no need even to summon the People's Patrol. The people - with a diminutive appellation - around him would simply turn on him, enraged, and tear him to pieces.

The crowds were thinning, now, in perfectly regulated quanta, as the various Workers turned into the grey edifices that housed their assigned Apparati. Soon Nathan L would be entirely conspicuous again. Fortunately, in the weeks since meeting Lisa T, and the plans they had formed in watchful secret, he had made this trip numerous times before. There was an alleyway between two specific buildings. Praying to... hoping that *this* would not be the time that his actions might be picked up by one of the roving Patrol microlites, hoping that *this* would not be the time that his actions might cause remark that would, eventually, be heard by the all-hearing ears of the Patrol itself, he worked his way diagonally to the alley, darted into it and ran, stripping off the jacket of his uniform to reveal the simpler shirt of an Underclasser underneath. The trousers could wait, he judged, until he made the relative safety of the alley's other side.

So far as he had ever been able to ascertain, there were no real barriers between the City and the territories of the Underclassers. Oh, there were physical difficulties, brick walls and the projections of buildings in the way - but that

was for the precise same reason as there were no guards. It simply never occurred to people to cross the borders.

Unless, of course, one had the impetus. Unless one had a reason and the need.

Nathan L had, he supposed, been happy enough in his mid-level Service post as a Researcher. He had, so far as he had ever thought about it, seen the Tightness of his work; the Market must be protected from the elements that might destroy it, and plunge the entire City into the living hell that was to be an Underclasser.

The mechanics of his work were simple. In his cubicle on the seventh floor of Information House, his screen would show the subject for a News item to be put out. 'Sales Down on Luxury Item #102044', it might say, or 'Shortfall Means Cut of Dietary Ration #2'. These were modified by the latest outputs from the Market, and it was Nathan L's job to search the automated files for articles matching the resulting Index that would guide the population as a whole towards whichever end was needed. In the example of Luxury Item #102044 (which happened to be fashionable little cardboard hats fitted with small battery-operated cooling propellers) the solution might be for the public to buy them for all they were worth, or to stop buying them at all and remainder them out to the Underclassers.

Once the template article designed to achieve the designated end was retrieved, and the blanks filled in, the process had left Nathan L's domain. Editorial corrections to perfect it were handled several levels upward in the Service – but Nathan L had prided himself that he had some small creative input. Indeed, on a few occasions, where the Index demands had been extreme, he had been forced to cut and paste together a template from the Dormant files, that repository of now obsolete journalistic material that numbered items in their hundreds if not thousands.

It had been on one such occasion, working on a way to promote a certain colour of underwear as opposed to one of a precisely similar cut, that Nathan L had stumbled upon a

template article tagged as DORMANT-CLASSIFIED://IOI – and the world around him, so it seemed, had blown apart.

The Underclassers' world — for such it might be termed, so different as it was in state of mind if not geography – always gave Nathan L a sense of unreality. The makeshift repairs to ancient architecture, the proliferation of the remaindered product dumped upon them by the City, scavenged, twisted and recycled into uses never intended or imagined, were so at odds with the life into which he had been born that no degree of more recent exposure could take away their strangeness.

(‘My dear li Shao!’ something pale and bloated said from a bank of steam. It was a blubbery voice; it sounded like an ice whale being flensed. ‘I gather that your recent, ah, exploits have been something of a success...?’)

But what, precisely, *had* he been born into? He remembered the City and the Market throughout his life — but now he recalled events and News that nobody else seemed to remember, memories of a time before the mass Corrections of the Patrol seemed to have stopped and been forgotten. And were even the City and the Market really true...?

DORMANT-CLASSIFIED://IOI had obviously been intended for someone on a level far higher than that of himself; he had tried to reaccess it a number of times, but his Service Classification had been refused. It had detailed, in stark and précis form, the mechanics of how the City operated: processes like subliminal conditioning and Horst-Skinner Retro-amnesiac Inducement had been mentioned - and, while Nathan L had been unable to even barely grasp the specifics, the simple idea that his own memory of the world and the events in it could be altered had been shattering. It had, quite simply, never occurred to him. Without knowing the specifics, he could feel vast masses of memories inside him, locked away but now hammering at the locks, desperately trying to burst through. That had been the start of his adventures. The wanderings, in the times set aside for the rest and recreation of those of his Classification, of that first

trip into the unthinkable zones and of the subsequent others... and how he had met Lisa.

(The respirator mask burst from Mr Pelt 's face with the pellet's impact, to jerk, then hang by a leather strap. His left cheek bulged. A spray of spittle and blood and shards of impacted tooth burst from his mouth to hit her in the face, and then the left side of his head exploded.)

Now, as he skirted a group of the more degenerate Underclassers - those who could not even sustain a roof over their heads - as they fought among themselves for scraps of food and rags on the street, it seemed as if these memories were actively starting to surface. Insane images and half-glimpsed mental images of worlds. Worlds that seemed to be run by saboteurs. Worlds in which horrific monsters walked the streets without eliciting revulsion and terror. Worlds that seemed, in some strange way, to be merely one of several - but how could there be more than *one*? At least, in the sense that Nathan L wasn't having several simultaneous visions of them.

(The first thing that they came to as they crossed the shaking floor was Yani. The Pygmy girl was lodged against the side of a large and now freespinning electrical device, unconscious and as white as paper, an expression of absolute horror still on her face. From her position it seemed that she had been frantically trying to work her way into the nonexistent gap between the motor and the casing, before her mind had simply switched itself off.)

Were *any* of them even possible? Was there any possible way they could have been real, even accepting the fact that his memory could have been altered to forget about them? The sense of them was now so strong that, if he let himself, he could quite imagine one eventually supplanting what he thought of as the real world of the Market, the City and the Patrol, which by degrees was seeming more insubstantial, less specific in its concrete detail. More wrong.

(For a moment, as the monstrosity advanced upon him, he was transfixed by the sheer horror of it.)

Even his body trembled, in a way that felt unrelated to its physical matter, the muscle and the bone within: flickering between states; fatter, thinner, iller, fitter, dead and dying and alive... In desperation his fragmenting mind struck out for the one thing that seemed solid in this physical and mental chaos. It was a name.

He found himself outside a building, its crumbling face cadaverous and cankerous with detrital patches of eaten-out brick, its lower floor comprising one of the stores where the Underclasses bartered what they could not immediately eat. Beside the entrance to this were a side door and a flight of dark and crumbling stairs, which he ascended shakily, his head still spinning from his immediately recent bout of dementia.

She was waiting for him, in a tiny room with plaster fallen from the walls to reveal the rotten lath. The room was bare save for scavenged clothing, piled against the wall in the neat way that he had come to know and love, as though they were the latest product from the City's mills, and must be kept in all perfection until worn, and then discarded. The only light was that which filtered through the window, screened off by a miraculously intact and unsoiled sheet of the sort of paper utilized in the City's public conveniences. Whenever he came here, Nathan L, who had experience with this paper's designated use, was privately overjoyed that it could in fact be used for *something* useful. Aside from the rag-mattress, the only other item was affixed to the wall: a largish, cracked and tarnished mirror, amazing not so much for its condition but by the fact that it had survived the years of Underclass scavenging at all.

(The jackal on top of him spat out a lump of partially cooked flesh. 'Privatization is still the only viable option!' it shrieked. 'Would you like to see an additional prospectus?')

And on the mattress, Lisa, smoking one of the foul 'roll-ups' to which she was partial - the noxious substance that the City had long since forgotten had ever existed. Lisa with a body that seemed thinner, meaner than the idealized women of the City screens and whom, at that precise moment,

Nathan L was unable to remember having actually met. There was a wiry strength about her, though, a sense of something blazing from her eyes that had made him love her, utterly and completely, from the first moment he had... he had... she had been... and he had...

(the pocket of his shredded rubber robe)

He was unable to speak, unable to feel. Dimly, he was aware of sobbing, and that it was coming from his body, but he was unable to *feel* how it was doing it - it seemed remote and unconnected, nothing to do with him. He collapsed on the mattress and the only thing he felt was Lisa gathering him into her arms.

Later, in the darkness, he walked naked to the window and, very carefully, folded back a section of the screen. No detail outside save for the glow of occasional fires, the indistinct, indecipherable murmurs, shouts and screams of people in the dark. The night held a kind of unique stillness, no matter what violence there might be happening in it.

Warmth beside him and the gentle touch of flesh as Lisa joined him, silent as ever - he tried to remember if she had ever said a word to him, and failed. From the edge of his mind he seemed to receive an impression of extreme and forceful verbosity; he just could absolutely not imagine it here, or now.

(‘Kill you!’ the reptile woman snarled. ‘Kill you now and make you dead.’)

‘I think,’ he murmured, gazing out at distant fires, ‘that we might be damaged in some way. I try to think, and I can’t think of things. There’s nothing. Nothing inside.’

‘Nothing inside,’ said a voice behind them. The sound of a frame hitting the wall and shattering glass. ‘Nothing.’

RETROGRESSIVE DEFINITIONS

‘Oh, God...’ Chris stared down at the unconscious form of Roz Forrester, Though seemingly unharmed save for the odd cut and bruise, she lay unnaturally still, a kind of pallor about her, as if a coating of ash had been applied to the underside of her dark skin. Sgloomi Po had rifled through the mismatched equipment of the *Schirron Dream*’s medical bay, and had finally inserted an intravenous needle, plugging into her the clear-cloudy contents of a surgical pack hanging from an antique umbrella stand. The effect was disquietingly similar to scenes Chris had witnessed, once, on the planet Minos, where a catastrophic plague had necessitated the medical appropriation of anything that came usefully to hand.

For all that she looked like death, that wasn’t the worst thing.

‘What have you done, Sgloomi?’ he said in a quiet, tight voice. He was frightened by what it might sound like if he loosened it up even a little. ‘What have you done?’

‘Is had to shoot with happy stuff.’ Sgloomi Po waved a pseudopod, from which a small bony needle extended. A minute drop of clear liquid drooled from the tip. ‘She is shout and scream, make lots of shake-your-bootie. No fun-thing happen, what she make sick pouny headache in my head...’

‘Don’t you *fuck* around with me, Sgloomi!’ Even Chris was slightly shocked by the vehemence of his outburst. ‘I saved your life, once, back in the System. You *owe* me – and if you don’t stop bullshitting me this instant I’m going to have a damned good try at collecting.’

Whether an unarmed man, no matter how furious, was capable of killing a Sloathe was debatable – but Sgloomi caught the sheer force of Chris’s emotions. It retracted hir

various limbs, and assumed hir androgynous humanoid form. Chris felt as if his heart had been kicked by some pack animal - a strangely painless, solid thump that was pure hurt rather than a physical pain. Even interblended with his own features, the amalgam looked more like the Roz he remembered than the... child who lay on the medical bay couch.

'Is sorry,' Sgloomi said. 'Is knew was going some point in space-time where Roz-person was, but didn't...' The Sloathe paused, consciously forcing hir mind to think in terms with which it was, for all hir acquired human attributes, still, even now, fundamentally unfamiliar. 'Didn't quite think of how such thing might happen. Didn't realize quite how much monkey-hominid people might get upset.'

Chris looked down at the body. Even in its deathly sleep, the face was set in firm lines that denoted the strength of character he had known, and come to depend upon and... there was a softness there, too. A vulnerability that had yet to harden over, to be wounded by the world. Had *he* ever seemed as fragile as that, to the Roz Forrester he had known?

She was so beautiful.

He rounded on Sgloomi. 'We have to take her back. Now.'

The Sloathe bowed his head, shamefaced in the almost archetypical way that only a human child, or a human with a neurological impairment, or an alien trying to be human, without the subtlety of control to dissemble, can achieve. 'I don't think we can. Benny made us try, after she told you and you ran from the bridge. I think the ship *wants* her here, and won't let us say no.'

On the bridge, the chaos on the main screen had resolved into an image of them powering through a starscape, with only a faintly overlaid, vortex-like shimmer to show that the disruptions still occurred. Whether this was a result of Benny finally managing to find the combination of controls on the console she now manned, or whether the *Schirron Dream* had sensed that the chaos it had shown before was too confusing,

she didn't know. Either way, she knew that these images were just as illusory: even an ordinary ship, under ordinary circumstances, translated itself through intergalactic space in a manner that was abstract, not entirely bound by the temporal laws of cause and effect and visually inconceivable. This was merely a simulation with which the mind could cope.

In the same way, while the console was vaguely comparable to the sensor rigs with which she was more or less familiar, the operation of it seemed more instinctive than anything else. She was reminded of a plug-in virtual-reality wafer whereby one might be, for example, a musical virtuoso, and one could revel in the experience of making an instrument produce whatever glorious music one wanted, whatever one actually did. She had the sneaking suspicion that her only function was to provide the *Schirron Dream* with company as it did what it was going to do anyway.

This also, naturally, raised the sneaking suspicion as to what Jason actually thought he was doing in the pilot's chair.

'You know,' she said, 'I'll bet you really don't have to keep pushing this, pulling that and twiddling the other. Do you think you're Captain Scrim, Hero of the Space Patrol, or what?'

'I don't think I'm anything.' Jason looked at her and sneered. 'I told you years back that this isn't science fiction. You still don't really get it, do you? Look.' He waved a hand meaningfully. 'I don't carefully work out all the nerve impulses and the muscle contractions needed to do that. My brain just does it. That's basically my function here.'

'Brain?' Benny snorted. 'You?'

'Ah, yes,' said Jason. 'I was forgetting that I'm just this lunkhead who needs a booster shot of serotonin to scratch his backside and whistle at the same time. Can't think how I forgot that — you kept reminding me often enough.'

Yet again, Benny found herself rising to the bait despite herself. 'I never did anything of the kind,' she bristled.

‘Oh yes you did,’ said Jason. ‘You just continuously beat me over the head with the fact that you got an education and all the, like, refined things in life - just precisely where you *got* ‘em from is another matter entirely, of course. Blown the ink dry on your latest doctorate, yet?’

‘*What?*’

‘You heard. You never gave me a break. It got to the point where I was thinking of getting a T-shirt saying “Blame Me” printed up.’

‘Oh, yes, like you never made the slightest mistake,’ Benny snapped. ‘Like that time where you went blundering through a Morlonia Prime burial ground and had yourself - and me, too, I might add - deported and barred for life from ever going back. That looked marvellous on my visa codes, let me tell you.’

‘You forget,’ said Jason, ‘that there was a squad of Dragan mechanics after me, getting set to blast my arse off and yank the wafers with their infiltration plans on — wafers which, come to think of it, *you* had with you all the time.’

‘And a fat lot of good it did us or Morlonia Prime. You only lost the Dragans because even they weren’t stupid enough to go through a Place of the Dead. That’s the first thing I learnt as an archaeologist: until it’s explicitly allowed otherwise, you *don’t* violate the dead.’

At least Jason had the decency to be defensive. ‘Well that’s my point. OK, you have knowledge and training that I’ve never had - but you never seemed to accept that *I* might sometimes have the sort of specialized knowledge you don’t.’

‘Specializing in what?’ said Benny acidly. ‘Having it away on your toes at the first sign of trouble? Shagging everything and anything that moves, like that extra wife you picked up and this Mira I keep hearing about?’

‘You leave my “wife” out of it,’ said Jason in a tight, cold voice. ‘You don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about, so just leave it. And as for Mira, you’re barking up completely the wrong banyan there. She’d be more interested in you than me.’ He glowered at her. ‘Then again, maybe not.’

She goes more for fem - and you've got too many balls, assuming you actually kept the ones you whipped off me.'

'Do you want to really *see* what I can do to your balls?' Benny snarled murderously.

'Just you try me,' Jason said, every bit as murderous. 'You might just get a nasty shock.'

'Is everybody happy?' Sgloomi Po bounded on to the bridge, in the shape of a large and cheerful collie dog. There was a sense of slight dejection about the imposture, as if the Sloathe knew that any attempt to lighten the mood would be about as much use as a chocolate fire guard. 'Is hope that people is not going to do horrible nasty violences on each other

The interruption served at least to break the rapidly escalating tension to some extent, however; with a start Benny remembered what was happening amidstips and their new arrival. How could she have forgotten about that, even in the snide face of her damned ex-husband?

'Don't worry about it, Sgloomi,' she said, narrowly beating Jason to the punchline that she *knew* he was going to perpetrate, given half the chance. 'Jason's talking bollocks again.'

In the medical bay Roz rose gently into consciousness – then tried to hurl herself from the couch, only to find that she had been strapped firmly down. She felt a number of muscles sprain.

'Look, please calm down!' A gruff voice tinged with desperation said. 'You're strapped down just so that you don't do anything stupid. If you don't calm down and let me explain then I can't let you up!'

A face hove into view. Roz snarled up into the face of her abductor. 'If you touch me I'll kill you. With my teeth I'll kill you. Who are you? Where's Martle? What the hell is going on?'

The blond man looked down at her, his expression a weird mixture of what looked like fear, concern and pain. 'My

name's Chris Cwej,' he said. 'And as for what's going on, *hell* is probably as good a word for it as any.'

JANUS WAKING
(ALTERNATE EARTH/S)

The man on the screen was thick-set, jowly, with little piggy eyes behind the glint of his pebble-stone spectacles. The sigils of a People's Patrol officer were visible on his epaulets. Behind him, the majority of it obscured so as to be unrecognizable if one did not already know deep in the bones what it was, a grainy monochrome blow-up of the People's Hero, Simon Deed.

'We have watched you,' he was saying. 'We have watched you from the day you were born. We have known precisely what you have eaten and drunk, precisely where and when you have excreted and defecated and the precise composition of each...'

(I'm a foundling,' Nathan said. 'The Shi Noor found me as a baby, apparently, in the broken shell of a meteorite, sitting on a bed of mariposa and playing a reed flute to a noble cormorant - a sight most surpassing odd, because the noble cormorant is indigenous to other climes and you couldn't get flute reeds for neither love nor money, what with the embargo on reed-flute reeds, at the time of which I speak. Strange but true.'

Leetha looked at him sideways. 'You're having me on.'

How could memories that at least seemed vaguely self-consistent and logical seem less real than memories that, quite frankly, seemed utterly stupid and ridiculous?

(Li Shao grinned. 'That's what my adoptive father said - but then again, my adoptive father's name was Rha-Ghang-Sung-Kha, which in the Shi Noor tongue means: He-Who-Speaks-the-Inveterate-Shit-of-the-Baldy-Headed-Behemoth, which might give you some idea.'

‘It was we ourselves who fed you the DORMANT-CLASSIFIED://IOI file,’ the face on the screen was saying. ‘We must test those we suspect, after all - but, ultimately, their betrayal is their own.’ It smiled; a little self-satisfied smirk. ‘Had you conformed we would have been satisfied; had some realization of the more basic mechanics of the world in which you lived led you to join us, we would have welcomed you with open arms. As it was, what did you do, Nathan L? You attempted to *escape* us, even knowing that there would be no escape allowed - and it was, if I may say so, a paltry escape attempt at best. What did you do with your (admittedly) entirely illusory freedom? Did you try to invest your life with some meaning and dignity? Did you even *try* to use what you had learnt to fight back against the processes you found so repugnant? You did not. You frittered it away in a squalid little affair with one of those who...’

Nathan L just wished the man would shut up and let him think. The sense of other worlds and lives was like a hailstorm of such force that the hailstones shattered into fragments which were, in turn, pounded relentlessly through his living brain.

(Images of the Dirigible Cities of the Anacon. Rakath, in flames. A confused multi-sensual vision of jackals that seemed to be able to talk, taking lumps out of him with their hooked-back jaws. Planets whose respective courses were each wound by clockwork...)

Even the fractious details of *this* world, the world of the City and the Market and Patrols, seemed to tangle and re-form: a list of people he had known, things he had done to bring himself to this place and time - things that had happened days, or weeks, or years ago but, in some impossible manner, had happened days, or weeks, or years ago only in the last instant.

‘Was there any mention of a caul?’ Leetha asked him. ‘Were you born with a caul?’

Li Shao shrugged. ‘Probably. Means I’ll never be drowned, so long as it is kept secure within a firmly stoppered jar, preserved for that especial purpose.’

Nathan L shook his head to clear it, turned to look at Lisa T and almost screamed at the shock that passed through him. It wasn't horror, simply an overload of the senses as her clothing, posture and physical form flickered and strobed. It was as if a reel of cellulose film, such as was used to project upon the largest public viewing screens, had been composed of a single shot, of a single person, but each one taken at a completely different time.

But underneath it all (like one frame repeated at regular intervals through all the others) he thought he could discern a true, or at least a *consistent* form - and it was utterly impossible and wrong. It didn't look like a City dweller or an Underclasser; it didn't even look human. It looked reptilian and vicious and it frightened him far more than if there had been just nothing there at all...

(‘Problems?’ asked Kiru, when Nathan li Shao and Six finally returned to the bridge.

‘Not really.’ Li Shao absently fingered a bruise and a couple of scratches on his face. ‘I just had to lock them in for their own good, that’s all. Everything was going fine till I mentioned my name. Can’t think what was wrong with me mentioning my name...’)

‘And do not think -’ it might have been entirely Nathan L’s almost entirely pixilated imagination, but the Patrolman on the screen seemed slightly peeved at being so obviously ignored ‘- that your compatriots in treason have been allowed respite. They have been apprehended, as you. yourself can plainly see...’

(Only stories are logical. To make people believe in them. Only the real is allowed to be ridiculous.)

Nathan L became suddenly aware that, while he had been trying to contain his thoughts, other figures had burst into the room. Now, he turned to see a collection of Patrolmen, of the utilitarian, brutal and highly lethal sort, three in all.

Between two of them, semiconscious and hanging limply from their grip, was a beaten, ragged figure. A kind of wire cage was strapped to his face, containing, for some reason, a large gerbil. Quite what that reason was, Nathan L had no

idea, because the creature seemed harmless enough, running round happily in its little wheel as it was.

Any further thought along those lines, however, was shut off by the shock of recognition.

(The sight of him, helpless, on a table in a cell, as a Degenomancer advanced. How he had allowed himself to be captured, saving li Shao's life, knowing that li Shao would come to save him in his turn...)

'Kiru!' It wasn't Nathan who had shouted. It had been Lisno, not Lisa, it was - it was -

'Leetha!' he cried, the word bursting from him seemingly of its own accord.

(The child, the first hatched one. as it sucked in croaking air and then bawled. The knife she sometimes held to his throat, point tracing lazy arabesques.)

And then the battered figure hanging between the two Patrolmen jerked his head up, and stared at him with astonishment. 'Nathan!'

(The wit of him. The taste of his mouth.)

'Kiru!' Nathan exclaimed - again, as if the name had sprung, fully formed, from something other than his mind.

(The people he loved.)

'Leetha!' Kiru shouted, recognizing her in what, if it had occurred within a fictional telescreen entertainment, might have been taken for a classic double take.

(The people he needed.)

'Nathan!' Leetha broke in, urgently, having finally turned her bewildered eyes from Kiru. 'What *is* this place? What are we...'

(Their sweet bodies, spiky minds, locked together with his, eternal. As necessary to him as his heart and good right arm and -

Who do you believe?)

Afterwards, Nathan could never quite decide if it had been purely a question of luck that the three had been in the precise mental state for their memories to fully, finally surface - or whether it had been the fact of bringing the three

of them suddenly together while in a similar mental state. In either case, it was as if a critical mass had been achieved. Throughout it all, pervading it all, there was an immense sense of effort, the sheer personal triumph of lifting some heavy weight, or snapping some constricting cord. He knew, also, with a sudden and unthinking sense of connection to something outside himself, that the others must be feeling something similar, too.

It was the opposite of an explosion. The inner, raging chaos that threatened to engulf him, instead, suddenly left him, discharged instantly like a charge of static galvanism that made the nerves sing until one brushed a metal pipe with a hand. Nathan stared at Kiru and Leetha, just as Kiru and Leetha were staring at him, and simply, almost quietly, just knew who they were.

And who *he* was.

‘...you shall learn the unending futility of resistance to the inexorable march of Market forces...’ the face on the wall screen was saying, seemingly all oblivious to the change that had occurred.

Leetha looked at Nathan. ‘Do we have to stand for these creatures of the utmost slime?’ she said.

‘It doesn’t do that much for me, either,’ Kiru said. With an ease that belied his previously weaker, more ravaged and far more sartorially challenged body, he effortlessly extricated himself from the two Patrolmen holding him and backed to join his friends.

‘Join the raiding party,’ Nathan told him.

‘...you will prepare for your fate,’ the voice on the screen was saying, ‘and your fate shall be everlasting. Imagine a particularly large elephant jumping up and down on someone’s bottom, for ever...’

The Patrolmen had by now recovered from their confusion at this turn of events, and were advancing angrily. Simultaneously, moving as one, Nathan li Shao, Leetha t’Zhan and Kiru met them halfway, planted three feet in three respective groins, lightly hopped over three suddenly foetal and agonized bodies and piled out through the window.

In his shielded bunker Bane watched the readouts with alarm, as the readings from the world outside went, momentarily, haywire. Then, as quick as an alarmed and indrawn breath, they settled down again.

Some unknown factor? Something for which, for all the years of calculation and anticipation, he had been unprepared? No. In all probability it had simply been some transient fluctuation, some mechanical glitch to which all machinery that existed on the merely physical plane was prey.

No matter. The subjects were still, and would not be going anywhere. Bait for a trap of which, in one sense, they themselves were the materials. The trap was still primed and waiting. Others would be coming soon.

And then, at last, after almost an entire lifetime, the Conversion could begin.

STRIKE THREE

FINAL APPROACH

CROSSMATCHED COVER STORIES

Under ordinary conditions, there were as many variations in the time factors involved with interplanetary and intergalactic travel as there were ships doing it, and for what purpose they were used. A cruise liner might take several weeks to make a quite short interplanetary hop, for the simple reason that this was precisely what the passengers had paid for. A corvette Patrol might take months about its rounds because it is constantly called to answer to the dictates of gunboat diplomacy. A science ship is limited in its methods of propulsion by the delicacy of its instrumental payload, as is, for broadly similar reasons, a colonization vessel with a load of genetic materials. Cargo and passenger transports are for ever stopping at their respective stops. Deep-space probes have the sole function of probing deep space and so must have the time in which to do it. Space Fighters are essentially a part of the human 'game' of war, as much as any number of mounted knights in battles that took place in fields delineated by a picket fence, with substitutes, half-time refreshments and spectators – Space Fighters needed by their very nature to operate upon the level of human reactions.

None of which makes any odds if the function you're currently after is simply to translate yourself from *here* to *there*.

* * *

The *Schirron Dream* popped back into space-time, such as it was, slightly out from the orbit of the Tenth Planet. This major solar body had been discovered rather later than the other nine, at a time when human civilization had become less centralized, and so it had gloried in any number of names, depending on cultural whim - from the prosaic

Decadon, to the fanciful Ultima Thule, to a brief and ultimately futile attempt by one of the major Earth entertainment corporations to name it Goofy.

‘That’s as far as we’re going to get on star-drive,’ Jason said, locking a couple of controls. ‘We’re coming up on the event horizon of whatever’s doing all this. I have a nasty idea that if we try to go in over sublight, we’ll end up disappearing up our own singularities.’

A thought struck Benny, and for a wonder it had nothing much to do with the already patent shortcomings of her ex-husband - she was really pleased about that; it showed that she wasn’t obsessing about him, or something perfectly ghastly like that. She recalled how, in the System, the *Schirron Dream* had been propelled by what had been described as ‘orgones’ and - given the unreal nature of the System, where physical impossibilities were not just possible but entirely probable they had in all probability been just that. But what propelled the ship in spaces where such things *were* impossible? She asked as much.

Jason shrugged. ‘Don’t ask me. I just think in terms of the thing-that-makes-us-go-fast and the thing-that’s-slower-for-going-between-planets.’

‘Your dedication to learning the mechanics of your so-called trade is quite remarkable,’ said Benny. ‘I am shocked rigid at how remarkable it is.’

‘Yeah, well, what more do you need? If you want to twat about with vector analysis and log tables then get someone else. Lovely word, when you come to think about it, analysis. I don’t give a toss how we get there, basically. I’m more interested in where we *go*.’ He scanned the swirling overlay on the screen with a kind of teeth-sucking nonchalance that you’d have to know him very well indeed to know that it denoted worry. ‘Only trouble is, I don’t have the faintest idea where I’m going to end up. This close the disruption’s going to affect us directly; God alone knows what’s going to happen when we hit the wave fronts head-on.’

‘I suspect we’ll encounter strangeness,’ said Sgloomi Po from hir own console, momentarily lifting the articulate flaps it

had sprouted to protect his ear-equivalents from the worst of Benny and Jason's bickering.

'How very elucidating,' said Benny. 'So how long till we reach Earth, then, what with the going-slowly thing and the turbulence?'

Jason shrugged. 'How long is a superstring? Couple of days, maybe. Hang on to your Reality Hat.'

'But how's it going to affect us?' Benny said. 'If this thing's tearing Nathan, Leetha and Kiru apart, what's to stop it doing the same to us?'

'We know what it is that is happening,' said Sgloomi. 'This prepares mental strengths to counter worst effects. I-' (It was more as if Sgloomi were hunting for the tactful thing to say than anything else.) 'Interactions between you and Mr Jason being part of that. All big arguments and thing.'

'What?' said Benny, genuinely mystified. 'What do you mean, arguments?'

"You always were a detestable little oik like that," said Sgloomi in an imitation of Benny's voice, though rather, Benny thought, more snotty and pompous than she really sounded. "That's just the sort of thing I'd expect from someone with the vocabulary of a small retarded pig."

Sgloomi continued, in a voice that was spot on with that of Jason: "Yeah, right. At least I don't go around all flappy scarves, jolly hockey sticks and Rag Week, like it's something to be proud of." Thing like that.'

'Oh, that?' said Benny. 'We don't mean a -' She broke off and thought about it. She was going to say, without thinking, 'We don't mean a word of it' - but it was more complex than that. Most of the time they meant every word: it was a spiteful little game they played, and a lot of the time they played it to genuinely wound - but for all that there was a kind of angry, indefinable *joy* about it, something addictive. A few years before, Benny had smoked a variety of tobacco stick (the archaic habit was repugnant to her, but she had found herself for various reasons stranded on a planet where the practice was universal, and not to do so would have instantly branded her an outsider). There had been

something about the sensation of smoke in the lungs, whether you liked it or not, that was utterly different from anything else and sometimes, just occasionally, you missed it even years later. In some confusion, Benny said, 'We just do it. It's who we are.'

'And it helps you remember who you are,' said Sgloomi. 'Keeps a basic sense of self inside the head.'

Jason looked thoughtful. 'I get you. It's like a method actor making sure he stays in character.'

'Which certainly explains,' said Benny, 'how certain people - mentioning no names - are behaving like particularly unattractive caricatures of themselves. '

'Speak for yourself, sweetheart,' said Jason, and Sgloomi put the flaps over his ears again.

Benny was about to reply when an uneasy thought struck her.

'An uneasy thought,' she said, 'has just occurred. We went back through space-time to pick up . . . Roz.' The hesitation was because she still found it hard to equate their most recent addition to the woman she had known. 'She's no more than twenty if she's a day - and that's *way* before I first met her and she was taken out of time. We've had the experience and we've got the defences, but what in the names of the Goddess is going to happen to *her*?'

Sgloomi had uncovered his ears when it had been evident that the Benny/Jason marathon was not going to go an extra furlong for a while. 'Morphic signal resonates back and forth through individual timelines. What she will become in her future is already there, in traces - besides, Roz *has* been taken out of time. Out of her personal locus for some interval, now. I think she will survive.'

'Yes, but what's going to *happen* to her?' asked Benny.

'That is rather more problematical,' Sgloomi said.

'So what we're saying here basically,' said Benny, 'is we don't have the slightest bloody idea.'

'We're going to find out in a - moment,' Jason said. 'There's a wave front coming up in five - very soon.'

Chris looked down at the tethered Roz Forrester, and tried to think of precisely what to say. If he didn't find a way of explaining things to her, let alone getting her to believe him, she would have to spend the foreseeable future strapped down like this, and the idea did not appeal to him at all. Eventually, he settled on pulling his own Adjudicator ID from his jacket and showing it to her. The card was one of several that he owned, and the only one on which the details were entirely genuine - he had kept it for years, or at least replaced it with as perfect a copy as possible every time he lost it, as a kind of sentimental reminder to a previous life.

'Adjudicator Chris Cwej,' he said. 'Covert Ops. I'm sorry that we had to bring you on board in this manner, but we had to keep things under wraps. Security had to be airtight.' He hoped like hell he hadn't overdone it - he sounded like a bad actor in any number of old spy actioners.

'On board,' said Roz, thoughtfully. 'That means we're on a ship.' She peered suspiciously at the card before her face. 'A ship with people who didn't do their homework. A name like that should be pronounced *Schwey*.'

'It is,' said Chris. He grinned a little, involuntarily. 'People seem to have an incredibly hard time dealing with it, though, so I started using it phonetically.'

In the way that a little piece of personal truth can cut through any amount of suspicion, he fancied he saw the faint twitch of an answering smile in Roz. A little hint of mutual sympathy.

'The, uh, matter we retrieved you for is of a delicate and confidential nature,' he said, improvising generally and wildly, 'involving corruption at the very highest levels of the Church. We had to wait until you were out of contact with Earth and then, um, detail one of our Extraterrestrial Auxiliary operatives to pull you in...'

Roz was nodding thoughtfully to herself, then looked up at him frankly. 'Let's just say I go along with this. Let me look at that ID again, yes?' She waggled her strapped hands meaningfully.

Chris could see her point. The sight of the badge-card seemed to have to some extent convinced her of his good intentions - Adjudicator ID was almost impossible to duplicate, and the card was indeed genuine, obtained by way of certain influence Chris had acquired comparatively recently. But in order to check that it was genuine, Roz would have to examine it closely. Of course, even freeing one hand could be risky, but he felt that Roz might trust him just a little, simply because she was Roz - and if she didn't, well, he had at least ten years' experience on this version of her.

In any case, it came down to a simple matter of either/or. He decided to risk it and freed one of her hands.

He came to with the kind of duller, deeper pain, the sort that sets in to really make your life a misery after the initial shock of impact, in his forehead and groin area, together with a vague and pain-filled memory of Roz jabbing her stiffened hand into the latter and, as he doubled up, grabbing him by the hair and slamming the former into the side of the bunk. She had then, self-evidently, used her free hand to unstrap her other limbs, but he only worked that out later.

For the moment, the more immediate pains were coming from the weight of Roz on his chest and the flat of her arm across his throat.

'Very clever,' she was saying. 'That bit with the ID. Thing about you... people, though, is you get the most simple things wrong and you don't even notice. That mugshot was at least ten years out of date, and the Ordination date is ten years in the *future*. How do you explain that, then? What is this? Some kind of half-assed Fnarok attempt at softening me up for probing?'

I must be slowing down in my old age, thought Chris. This was, however, one of the few coherent thoughts he had. He was confused, not by pain and the shock of this sudden reversal of circumstances - but by the fact that there were some things it was just impossible to sum succinctly up. Some things were just too big to get out of your mouth.

What could he say? Hi, Roz, you won't know me until ten years up your timeline, most of which will be spent with this

creep called Martle, who used your inexperience as a kind of convenient cover for the fact that he was on the take with anyone who would pay - didn't you ever catch on how many times he charged in and saved you rather than stop the criminals you were after from getting away? And when you finally couldn't ignore it any more, you had to kill him or he killed yourself...

And then you met me, and we found ourselves caught up in the hyperspatial disruption that turned half the City psycho, and damn near brought it down around our ears. And we were chased off Earth and had adventures, bringing law into places where it was neither asked for nor wanted. And we travelled through time. And we stayed together until the day you...

All in all, it was rather convenient for Chris that all he could say under current circumstances was, 'Ak!'

This state of affairs was abruptly cut short by an alarm squealing from the archaic Tannoy system that was mounted throughout the *Schirron Dream*.

'Wave front coming up,' crackled the voice of Jason Kane. 'Looks like a biggie and we have no real idea what it's really going to do. Hang on, people, and just try to remember who you are.'

'That has got to be the most fatuous bit of advice I've ever -' said the voice of Benny before the Tannoy shut itself off.

There was a *sensation*, supposedly impossible, of the folds of his cerebellum splitting apart and writhing, crawling over each other like a sackful of tapeworms. Jagged rents tore across his vision, not like lines of static on a screen but more organic-seeming, as though the membrane of the cornea had split to reveal a raging fire beyond from which he had been previously shielded. The deck under him shook itself and warped, slamming into him again, again and then again.

Then he realized, with a peripheral, isolated awareness of trauma-detachment, that it was in fact his own body going into spasm, nerve impulses firing blindly and at random.

The flare before his eyes died and, again, he felt the strange nonsensation in his brain - this time the perception that its

very living matter was fusing together. The *self* that he had always known, and had never truly known existed until it had momentarily gone, flowered back through him, and with it came his body sense. False memories flashed across his mind, whole other worlds and lives, but he *knew* that they were false, his true self overrode them.

Chris Cwej, late of the Adjudicators of Earth, ex-pawn on the intertemporal board and now a troubleshooter for Space and Time, looked up into the face of Roz Forrester, who by rights should be several decades older and dead. The face he saw was not as it had been before - still young with the basic features that snagged hooks across his heart - but changed. The complex interplay of facial muscles, and the cumulative shocks that flesh is heir to, had shifted to produce the face of someone new. Harder round the mouth than even the Roz he knew in later life had been; looser and more haggard round the eyes. A broken nose and a vestigial scar across the forehead. Chris had no idea if the change was psychosomatic, the result of muscles forcing the flesh to conform to some all-pervading inner image, or whether it was physical, matter transmuted on the cellular and even the atomic level. All he knew was that it was the precise mirror of the soul within, the person who Roz Forrester now was, and that it was a person he didn't think that he could ever learn to like.

'Who the *frik* are you?' she snarled. The word was unfamiliar, but it held none of the self-consciousness, even after half a century of use, that overlaid the Church's use of null-words rather than to actively blaspheme. It was quite obvious that the word would inflect automatically into such ejaculations as 'you stupid *fricker*' and 'what the *frikking frik!*' The voice that used it seemed more brutish, less intelligent and alive, as though its user had been trained from an early age by the sort of schooling that stunts the mind.

Chris tried to focus upon the insubstantial false memories in his own head beside his own, and received a vague impression of martial *esprit de corps*, vast ranks and files of

uniformed figures, warships razing everything in their path, but no coherent image came to mind.

The stranger who had once been Roz hauled him roughly to his feet and slapped away imaginary dust from nonexistent epaulets. 'Come on, soldier,' she growled. 'There's something funny going on here, and damn me if I don't find out what it is.'

PAST TIMES CATCHING UP (ALTERNATE EARTH)

The first thing to do was get off the street, to find somewhere to hole up and hide. The world they were in might have been different from the ones they had known, but in immediate terms they could feel and touch and taste it, and to be hurt or killed here would no doubt be as painful, inconvenient and final whether the world it happened in was ultimately real or not. Avoiding the Patrols and the heavy armoured caterpillar-treaded prowl cars was easier than they had expected. The darkness was one factor, but the far more decisive factor was that the forces of this world seemed to be innately geared towards an utterly predictable populace - whether of the dronelike, psychically cowed City or the savage, fundamentally ignorant and so effectively stupid Underclass. The methods of dealing with intelligent, responsive individuals, who were more or less in the saddles of their minds and wills, were simply not in place.

In a patch of waste ground they found a dying-down garbage fixe and banked it up. Other figures lay huddled, wrapped in blankets or in makeshift huts of cardboard, ply and plasterboard, but nobody more than vaguely stirred. They remained undisturbed.

‘I just can’t think how we didn’t notice,’ Leetha said.

‘Hm?’ Li Shao had been lost in looking at her face in the firelight. It was a face of someone he knew and loved, but, while humanoid, the red eyes, reptile skin and saurian features were in no way human. He wondered how he could have possibly not noticed a small detail like that. The comment, meshing as it did with his own thoughts, pulled him back from his reverie. ‘Notice what, exactly?’

Leetha reached over and touched his steel-reinforced jacket. 'All that red leather you wear, the bloody big sword slung across your back. I'm sure I should have noticed that. Did it all appear out of thin air? That seems... impossible, somehow, even with the strange things that have happened.' She flexed cramped shoulders in her own leather corslet, in a manner that would have had anybody standing stock still and noticing in almost any world.

'I don't think we *could* notice,' said Kim, who was wrapping his silk robes around himself carefully, trying to eke out the best benefit from them in the now chilly air for which they were not entirely suitable. 'Our minds threw up memories of events and personalities that *had* to be, if we were to be where we found ourselves. Anything else was incompatible; our minds wouldn't let us see them. I think we could only break out of that under moments of extreme stress.'

'You're right, in all probability.' Li Shao recalled the instant when he had returned to his true self, briefly, during the fight with... something about being underground, fighting monsters that physically, he now seemed to recall, were certainly no worse than members of his own family, even, but at the time he had thought to be repugnant.

The memories of these other worlds seemed to recede. He could remember the specific places he had been, the things he had done, but the whys and wherefores seemed increasingly elusive. He looked around him at the hovels and the huddled figures, the crumbling buildings beyond. They were obviously among the dregs of the slums in some post-industrial world, but the history of it, the understanding of it that comes from simply having lived in it since birth, escaped him. Whatever happened from this point on, he was going to have to face it with nothing to guide him but his own, internal, resources.

Nathan li Shao looked around at two of the three people who were the closest to him in his life and, strangely, felt awkward. It was as though he were meeting them again, after years of separation, and that the issues between them were

so big that he quite simply did not know how to start. From their faces, he knew that they were feeling it too.

‘Do you remember...’ all three said simultaneously, and promptly stumbled over their words in the time-honoured fashion that probably obtains wherever there are sentient beings. In the half-heard mumble of apology, li Shao was inordinately pleased that both Leetha and Kiru turned their eyes to *him*, willing him to break the deadlocked silence.

The burst of warm joy inside him, which had nothing to do with conscious thought, served to loosen his tongue a little. ‘I was just going to say, do you remember how we used to live back in the System? There were physical laws that nobody in this universe, even now, could believe. We went into new, well, call them “worlds” all the time and we just got on with it because that’s how we lived.’

‘Such as?’ Leetha said.

‘Oh, I don’t know. An Ice Wanderer next to a world of water - when the silly laws of *this* universe mean that the ice should melt or the water freeze, or some such thing. The way the sun was something you could land on. Do you remember how we were almost going to land on a sun when we first broke into *these* spaces?’ He looked at Leetha, half smiling. ‘I also remember how you went from a world where the dread Captain li Shao was the Barbarous Bloody Bugging Butcher of a Billion Bloody Battles and Evil Incarnate, to one where you knew the facts of matters.’

‘Yes but that doesn’t have anything to do with changing universes and worlds,’ said Leetha. ‘That was just a confidence trick you used to strike terror into the hearts of your enemies. I just happened to believe it.’

‘And that made it true.’ Kiru rubbed, reminiscently, at a long-healed injury on his arm, the result of Leetha imposing her particular world-view on both him and Nathan, the first time they had all met. ‘In the short term, at least.’ He gestured about himself. ‘All this, the System and the universe we found outside, the changes that it seems to be going through - it doesn’t *have* to change us, and I don’t think it

really can in the end, because we each of us carry round our own world with us, inside our heads.'

'Then again,' said Leetha, 'I do detect a kind of universal constant, in all these real, imaginary and hypothetical worlds.'

'And what's that?' said li Shao.

'Complete and utter shit of the baldy-headed behemoth.'

The talk wound on, now that the ice had been broken - reminiscences and shared jokes from the years they had spent together, none of them meaning anything other than to help fix who they were inside their minds. Their travels and adventures both inside and outside the System, trifling incidents from their lives - bringing out the truly vast things like their marriage and family, the birth of children, the sense of loss and grief for friends who had died, purely by the details that held the whole in their specific parts. In the course of this, naturally, it was expected that they would gesture to emphasize a point, would touch each other, lightly trace an old wound or rub a tense muscle, or rest a hand against a cheek in pure companionship.

To hold your loved one to you and feel your pulse align with theirs. To taste the distinct sweats that formed on different areas of the skin. To feel the scratch of day-old stubble and to run the fingers through feathered hair as soft as down. To feel the shudder and indrawn gasp as you nipped with teeth and dug with nails. To feel the flesh that is not yours but sings with yours. Another and another's breath; another soul, or souls, made flesh. The yawning in your stomach as you freefall into joy.

They were subdued: silent and mindful that there were others nearby. There was a sense of exploration, the re-discovery of a tactile shared reality beyond that which any words could state. There was a calmness, a mammalian warmth that spoke of nothing but the good; of trust and love and kindness. You are fine and strong and beautiful. You are wonderful. You are the light and you are gathered to me and there is nothing that can hurt you. You are healed and whole and safe.

In the fullness of time, curled and twined together, they slept.

‘Wake *up*, li Shao. I think you really have to see this...’

Nathan li Shao grunted and blinked eyes that stung in the now painfully bright sunlight, rolled over to find himself looking directly up Leetha’s kilt. Not, as he’d be the first to admit, entirely the worst way to wake up of a morning, even after a night in the cold and on hard ground - but there was a fear and urgency in her voice that had him instantly alert and not a little worried. The voice also sounded odd in a way that he could not quite pin down: mushy, as though he had water trapped in his ears after a long, hot refreshing bath with scented oils and unguents.

Putting vain thoughts of ablutionary luxury out of his head, li Shao sat up and worked at a crick in his neck. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Better you should see,’ said Leetha.

Kiru was standing, several items of clothing still in his hand, as if he had been in the process of dressing and then forgotten about it. ‘Look over there,’ he said, gesturing with the hand holding his cloak, indicating a direction rather than a specific thing. The first thing li Shao noticed was the sky. He had initially thought that his eyes were still accustoming themselves to the light of day - but now he realized that, whatever else it was, this light was not the light of any sun. The sky blazed with a white and seemingly sourceless light.

The second thing he noticed was the skyline, the roofscape of the dingy buildings that devolved from the open patch of waste ground. In the distance there were taller buildings, the blocky towers of the city, and one by one they were dissolving, disappearing into thin air, eaten by the light.

‘What is it?’ li Shao said, his voice roughened by a low vibration in the pit of his stomach. He realized, then, why the voices of the others had sounded so odd: they were disrupted by a constant roar, like the howling of a gale, but on the very lowest levels of hearing.

As he watched, the last of the tower blocks disappeared. The buildings between this descending curtain of light were lower, masked by the buildings immediately before them - there was no way to tell how fast or far the destruction might advance.

‘Is it some sort of bomb?’ li Shao breathed.

‘I don’t think so.’ Kiru pointed to one of the denizens of the waste ground, shambling along in his, her or its (it was impossible to say) rags and absently poking through the refuse with no care in the world other than malnutrition, scabies and a severe case of rickets. ‘Look at these people, for want of a better word. They haven’t seen it. They haven’t noticed anything wrong. I think the world’s changing again.’

‘It wasn’t like this before,’ Leetha said in a small, tight voice. ‘I would remember. I remember how I got out of a hansom cab and went into a house and found myself in a dirty room and the *outside* was different. It wasn’t like this. I don’t remember anything like this...’

‘But we didn’t know what was happening to us before,’ li Shao said. ‘This is the first time we’ve really seen what’s happening. We survived before and we’ll survive now. Isn’t that right, Kiru?’

‘Who knows? We have no evidence that *this* is what happened before, and even if it is, who knows what it will do now that we...’ Kiru became aware, by way of li Shao and Leetha both turning to glare at him murderously, that this was not quite the response that was called for at this present point. ‘I mean yes,’ he said, ‘of course we’re going to be all right. Probably.’

The line of buildings nearest to them disintegrated. They just had time to see that they *exploded*, their brickwork fragmenting under enormous force and the fragments bursting into their very atoms. Now the whiteness was a wall of light, given a solid visuality by its edge as it traversed the ground towards them, ingesting everything in its path.

‘Nowhere to run,’ li Shao said. ‘No time to do it. We have to stay together. We have to remember who we *are*.’

The three clutched each other tightly, arm in arm, in arm in arm, and waited for the end.

A HELL OF A LIFE IN THE GLORY HOLE

‘So what the hell do we do now?’ asked Benny, looking at the thing that had materialized on the screen.

‘Don’t ask me,’ said Jason. ‘You’re the one who’s supposed to be up on all this interspecies communication stuff. Open diplomatic relations with it or something.’

‘I would,’ said Benny, ‘if I had the slightest idea of what it was talking about.’

They had come through the wave front to find themselves in what appeared to be normal space; nothing exceptionable about it at all - apart from the three large and nasty-looking battle cruisers that were currently bracketing them in what were obviously attack postures. The construction and configuration of these ships was utterly unfamiliar, save for the weapons arrays, which were distressingly large and pointing at them in a manner that was depressingly not unfamiliar, to anybody who had ever seen a space war at the blunt end, in the slightest.

The thing on the screen was also not a sight to inspire confidence. Any even remotely human aspects it possessed were confined to the level of suppurating boils and sores, hairy warts and cancerous-looking growths, and the collection of several needle-toothed mouths and fifteen eyes reminiscent of those of a spider under a microscope seemed hardly any more sympathetic. Looking more closely, Benny saw, the impression of a lack of humanity about the creature was not exactly accurate. A necklace of human ears and other easily detachable appendages was clearly visible. She decided to stop looking any more closely.

‘Graghi-haagh, maghi koli moghra tghan da vroomst da kunto si de glaan!’ the creature was saying, its different mouths speaking the words simultaneously, but in different, distinct tones, and with inflections that seemed to range from a shriek to the kind of suave drawl used by the villain in old movies when he says, ‘At last I have you at my mercy, dog of a thousand cheese weevils.’ The overall effect was disjointed and dissonant, and, if anything, came slightly below everything else thus far in the reassurances-of-safety stakes.

‘Have we got any weapons systems?’ Benny said.

‘Is no weapon-thing, not really,’ said Sgloomi from his own console, who had lapsed back into his more amorphous state in alarm. ‘Is we happy family and lovely *Schirron Dream* is just for us, not big old nasty warship and we never feel the need.’

‘I think there’s a couple of cannon for emergencies,’ said Jason, ‘but they’re holdovers from when the ship operated in the System, and they’re only useful if we’re surrounded by air. You know how it is.’

Benny did. The simple fact of the matter with interstellar transport was that a ship was just a mechanism for taking one from here to there, and it must largely conform to its specific reason for going there in the first place. A ship might be refitted as a battleship, with torpedoes, plasma blasters and tractor beams coming out of its portholes, but that was only practicable if that was to be its sole purpose, with those inside pursuing it and nothing else, twenty-six hours a cycle. The *Schirron Dream* was fundamentally a tribal home, and no more carried heavy armaments than a twentieth-century camper-van carried an integral ground-to-air rocket-launcher; it did not go actively looking for combat, and relied for the most part on the speed of its unorthodox propulsion to get out of any trouble in which it might happen to find itself.

Unfortunately, as the unidentified alien battle cruisers jockeyed for position to cut off any means of escape, making a run for it did not at this point seem much of an option.

‘If anyone has any ideas at all,’ said Jason. ‘Now might be a good time to hear them.’

‘Get away from those controls!’ an enraged voice snarled. Benny, Jason and Sgloomi turned to see a crazed and haggard-looking Roz Forrester in the gangway hatch, an Adjudicator-issue blaster in her shaking hands which pointed, with the minor degree of latitude attendant to her shaking, directly at Jason’s head.

‘Roz?’ Jason said, confused. ‘What do you think you’re -’

‘*Don’t say a word,*’ Benny hissed. ‘I’ve seen a face like that before. In the eyes. If you do anything, she could -’

‘Enough!’ this strange new version of Roz snapped. She motioned Jason over to Benny with a flick of the gun, and glanced back to where Chris was frantically making ‘settle down’ gestures to the others. ‘Lieutenant Rodonante. Take these traitorous scum off my bridge and throw them in the brig. I’ll deal with them later.’ She turned to Sgloomi, who had promptly reassumed his human form, sprouted something that appeared to be a beaky military cap, and now snapped off a sharp salute. Benny really hoped that the Sloathe was being quick on the uptake and playing along, rather than being in some way infected by whatever had affected Roz.

‘Ensign, blank that screen,’ Roz told him. ‘Let them stew a minute.’ She turned away, and seemed to become aware of Chris, Benny and Jason again. ‘Did I not make myself clear. Lieutenant? *Move.*’

‘Um, right,’ said Chris. ‘Come along, traitorous scum.’

‘Marvellous,’ Benny said, as the three of them went down the gangway from the bridge. ‘You do realize, of course, that we are all now dead. Why did you have to go and do a stupid thing like that, Chris?’

‘Look, I had to humour her,’ Chris said. ‘The way she was acting, she was going to start a bloodbath. I think her mind’s trying to make sense of all the images and memories being imposed on it. All we can do is play along.’

‘But. how the hell did she get loose?’ Benny wondered. ‘And how, for that matter - just asking for the information, you understand - did she get hold of her sodding gun?’

Chris looked shamefaced. ‘I, uh, left it on her when she came on board. I wasn’t thinking - I mean, she’s Roz and I, um...’

Benny snorted. ‘Famous last words.’

‘Hey, listen,’ Jason told her. ‘It’s not like we’re in any more danger than we were, really, and there’s nothing we can do about it anyway. Another wave front’s going to hit us sometime soon - we just have to hope we live long enough to see it. When things are unavoidable, all you can really do is relax.’

Benny snorted again. ‘Hello, Mr Fatality.’

‘I think the word you’re groping for is *fatalism*,” said Jason.

‘Not necessarily, ‘cause if you come out with one more asinine platitude like that I’m going to -’

‘I’d better get back,’ said Chris, hurriedly. ‘She seems to have incorporated me into her mental construct as someone on her side, so...’

‘You do that,’ Benny said. ‘Try to keep her from blowing the living daylights out of the helm.’

‘Hopefully, that isn’t going to happen,’ Chris said. ‘She seems to think the blaster’s of a different design than it actually is, and I couldn’t help but notice that she still had the safety protocols locked.’

He darted away, probably more to avoid Benny’s incipient explosion than anything else.

Benny noticed that they had backtracked to where the hatch led off into the galley. For some reason, the threat of possible attack and obliteration by alien ships did not feel real to her. Possibly the fact that, in a sense, it *wasn’t* real had short-circuited her emotional responses. Either way, she found herself completely unable to work up any emotional response to it either way.

‘Bother it,’ she said (only later realizing that she had reverted to what might be described as the true and ultimate

core of her being). ‘What I could really do with now is a big drink.’

‘What was that about, back on the bridge?’ Jason asked, plonking a bottle of what seemed to be genuine twentieth-century Czech lager on the galley counter. The *Schirron Dream* appeared to be stocked with potables and consumables from all over, the only common factor being that they were of a high quality rather than the processed and additive-laden muck also available throughout the galaxy in any time or place. The crew of the *Schirron Dream*, it seemed, liked to live unostentatiously but well.

‘What are you talking about?’ Benny said, around a snifter of three-hundred-year-old brandy, three-quarters filled in the manner of one who knows it shouldn’t be drunk like that, but is damn well going to do it anyway.

‘About seeing a face like that before. I get a sort of idea - she frightened the sodding *life* out of me when I turned around and saw her standing there - but what did you precisely mean?’

‘It was from when I was drafted into the Legion,’ Benny said. ‘They put us through basic training, and basically hammered the stuffing out of us, tried to break us down and build us up again in ways they wanted. A lot of it was a kind of rough-and-ready bog-psychology, but there was one thing that they did do for a fast turnaround.’ She took another belt of Oolonian brandy. ‘They justified it by the fact that the War was going incredibly badly at the time; it was banned by treaty later, and even then it was incredibly iffy. It was called the Haze.’

‘Iffy?’ Jason said. ‘How so?’

Benny realized that he was looking at her with genuine concern. She supposed that she was showing some last trace of the anger she thought she’d expunged a long time ago. In herself, though, she didn’t really feel a thing about it either way. Not any more.

‘The Haze was an offshoot of the Bane Industries interactive virtual-reality rigs,’ she said, ‘juiced up with

transputer-generated biofeedback, intravenous psycholeptics, long-term memory suppressants, other little tricks like that. The upshot was that the subjects experienced visions that, at the time, they could only think of as real. The subjects were streamed images psychoprofile-calculated to tip them over the edge, turn them mad with grief and pain, whatever, and have them kill in the most extreme and brutal manner. The idea was that, once they'd crossed that line, even though it happened purely in their minds, even though they learnt the truth of things afterwards, there was no turning back. The result was that the Legion got a crop of killers - people who were killers in their heads, who could kill without compunction or regret - on a cheap and industrial basis.'

Jason looked at her. 'Not to put too fine a point on it, that hardly describes you. That's never described you. So what went wrong?'

'I was one of the failures. Possibly there was some error in the psychoprofiles -' she smiled '- or maybe I was just so nice and lovely that any amount of conditioning couldn't make me cross the line.' She found her teeth gritting, seemingly of their own accord, as she remembered. 'The sequence they streamed me involved an alien trooper killing my mother with a bayonet after... doing other things. It hadn't seen me, and I happened to have a bread knife in my hand. It couldn't cut through body armour, but the trooper had its helmet off; its throat was exposed and I...'

Benny shuddered. 'The thing was, I don't know why they decided to feed me that specific image - I suppose it might have been from stock, something so, well, *archetypical* as to make almost *anybody* lose their mind. The thing was, you remember how I told you what really happened to my mother?'

'I remember,' Jason said, quietly.

'I watched the trooper do things in front of me, and I couldn't remember anything from my past because of the suppressants - but all I could think was that this *isn't* what happens when your mother's killed by an alien; your mother being killed by an alien simply doesn't *happen* like that... I

didn't know why, but everything felt so utterly wrong that I was unable to act. I didn't do anything the whole time except *be* there, and I think that's what saved me.'

Benny realized that she was shaking, a reaction to picking the scabs off memories on deep but distinct levels: the genuine childhood loss of her mother under the guns of an alien war craft, and the anger at what the Legion had tried to do with her. 'They didn't boot me out, of course. The failure of the process just kept me off the fast track and added to my already solid resolve to duck out at the first opportunity. The point is, the people for whom the process worked, they had faces just like the one on Roz when they came out of it. They were the people who went straight into shock-commando training, the people who had to be locked away after the War because they were damaged beyond repair.' Benny gazed into her empty brandy glass. 'I just wish I knew exactly what was going on inside her head.'

Captain Roslan Forestar of the Terran Fleet cruiser *Simon Deed* glared about her bridge with cold satisfaction. The pitiful attempt at mutiny in the face of the enemy had been quashed, the perpetrators removed, to await her pleasure and their correction - a lesson that would begin in this world but would terminate in the next since it would, in all probability, involve keelhauling without the aid of a suit.

No, she decided; the letter of Maritime Law was too impersonal to make an effective example and, besides which, was far too quick. She would string 'em up before the crew, and blind them with her own bare fingers preparatory to enough lashes with the heavy cat, its tails especially knotted about small iron dumbbells, to flay the kidneys from the back. The Articles made provision, and had never been rescinded, and an example must be made.

But that was for later. For now she had business to attend to. 'Screen up, Lieutenant Rodonante,' she ordered. 'Let's see what these wretches have to say for themselves.'

The screen flowered to show the form of the Shelaarg captain of the lead ship of the three that surrounded them. ‘*Wrighi da tegh la mon sa ve roghi-an,*’ it said.

‘Give me translation,’ Forestar snapped to the Ensign at comms, not troubling herself to turn to see that he did so; when Roslan Forestar said jump, her crew jumped that bit higher to be on the safe side.

‘*Sasah grogh ga rooghi na pe los,*’ the Shelaarg said. ‘I must therefore advise you to hold your position. An Outer Planet Patrol craft will rendezvous shortly to escort you under guard from Shelaarg space. I repeat: unidentified vessel, please note that you have violated treaty-sanctioned space while refusing to answer hails. I must therefore advise you to...’

Forestar’s palms itched at the sound. Even with translation, the voice dripped with the sly cunning that had enabled the Shelaarg immigrants, even restricted by prudent Terran policy to a certain number of trades, to build up, over a scant few centuries since their arrival, cartels so powerful that the honest workers of Terra could not compete. The alien breed should have been wiped out, back during the Reclamation, when proud Terra had at long last grown sick to its stomach at the lies and infiltration, sick at being swindled, and had finally decided to fight back.

Far too late, though, Forestar knew from bitter experience, as it happened. A certain squeamishness in the founding of interment and extermination camps had led to vast numbers of the Shelaarg getting out from under the wire. They had made it out into the solar system by means of stolen Terran technology (their mother ship having been irreparably damaged in the crash that had brought their infection to noble Terra, all those centuries before) and they had holed up in the squalid remains of the gas-mining plants orbiting Neptune. And there they had remained, a constant thorn in humanity’s side, sneering at the good people of Terra from where they thought they were safe.

They would be safe no longer, Forestar thought. The *Simon Deed* was merely the first of many ships of the Fleet, refitted in the Ceres yards for a particular, specific purpose. The

Simon Deed had little in the way of armaments, in the conventional sense, but in another sense was lethal indeed. The *Simon Deed* was, effectively, a single, massive, nuclear bomb, flung out from the inner planets with the single purpose of making the orbit of Neptune and detonating, taking the remaining Shelaarg and their fetid little bolt hole with it. It was, Forestar knew, a suicide mission, but she was more than happy to die, to the greater glory of humanity and proud Terra, and the rest of her crew should be damned glad to die into the bargain.

‘The hell with it,’ she muttered, gazing on the Shelaarg captain as it repeated its interminable demands yet again. ‘We don’t make it through, those behind us will. Ramming I speed. Lieutenant! We’ll take an honour guard of the slime-gobbling scum with us before we go!’

‘Jesus Christ!’ Jason shouted as the deck bucked and heaved under them. ‘Then again,’ he continued, in slightly more reasonable tones, ‘forget I said that. The way reality’s being messed around at the moment, the bugger’s probably going to be turning up.’

‘Was that the wave front?’ Benny asked, more in hope than expectation of the prospect.

‘I don’t think so.’ Jason hefted the half-finished bottle that had cracked into his tooth, the foam that had fizzed out from it dripping down his hand. ‘Last time it felt different. Somebody’s playing silly buggers. Give you three guesses who?’

Several confused members of the *Schirron Dream* crew were in the gangway outside the galley, heading in the direction of the bridge. ‘Go back,’ Benny told them. ‘When there’s something you can do, we’ll let you know.’ Possibly it was simply her tone of command, or possibly a recognition of *actual* command, for the time being at least, but they obeyed. Benny and Jason ran up the gangway, brushing the crew aside and being occasionally thrown against a vernacularly embellished bulkhead by the lurch and yaw of the ship,

finally to burst through the hatch, jamming it momentarily each tried to squeeze past the other, back on to the bridge.

Chris was wrestling with Roz - a process in which he was hampered by the fact that he was trying to restrain her without seriously wounding or killing her, while Roz was giving it everything she had, which on the evidence seemed to be quite a lot. Already Chris had several bruises and scratches on his face, his left eye had closed up and blood ran from his nose.

'I'll hang your guts across the bulwarks!' Roz was shouting. 'I'll lop your head off and plant it on the bowsprit as a warning to all lily-livered turncoats who'd betray the honour of the Fleet

'Is make like hoppy bunnies and give Sgloomi lovely hand, would be quite felicitatious at this present point!' cried Sgloomi Po, who had extended several pseudopods to try to deal with the helm controls and two other consoles all at once, and was looking as it were a little stretched.

Jason dived for the helm and wrestled with it. 'It's no good,' he snapped. 'The silly bitch has thrown us on a collision course with one of those ships out there. There's no way I can bail us out of it in time.'

'Bitch, am I?' Roz roared, without breaking from her fight with Chris. 'I'll give you *bitch* when I've finished off this swine! I'll stick a belaying hook right up your arse, you see if I don't!'

'Chance would be a fine thing, madam,' muttered Jason.

At another console. Benny was tracking the apparent crawl of radar blips as the *Schirron Dream* continued on its collision course. 'I don't suppose there's any chance that these ships aren't going to just disintegrate when we hit them?'

'Us sadly people is in universe where they can exist,' said I Sgloomi, still helping Jason with the helm. 'Here and now, we hit them we go crunchy-bang...'

'Well, with a bit of luck we won't be here and now, by then,' said Jason. 'Look at the screen.' On the main screen an explosion of brilliant white light was expanding. 'New wave front coming up - and it looks like a biggie.'

The person who had been Roz Forrester (or, in another sense, the person who would *become* Roz Forrester) chose this moment to take Chris out with a killing blow. He rode it, but it was enough to knock him out. He collapsed on the deck in a nerveless slump. Either assuming she had killed him, or judging him to be sufficiently incapacitated that she could turn to other matters, Roz. bounced to her feet and flung herself towards the helm.

‘Jason!’ It was nothing to do with time or reality disruptions, but Benny knew with the absolute certainty of premonition what the immediate future would hold. Jason had none of the combat training of an Adjudicator as had Chris, and certainly none of the training of the Marine that Roz apparently thought she was. In a vision so clear that it was as though it were already happening, she saw Roz grab him by the head in a strangely comfortable-looking hold, and twist, and snap the neck as easily as pulling the claws from a crab. Thinking about it, later, she knew that it was not exactly to do with the actual feelings she had for her ex-husband - the love and hate, the liking and irritation and any number of other things that were mixed up in an inextricable mess in any case. It was simply that she *knew* him; the fact of him in the world had a reality for her on a level shared by few others in her entire life - and now he was going to die in front of her.

All in all it was a bit of a surprise when, without seeming to look in her direction at all, Jason casually brought around a hand and hammered a couple of fingers, twice, into the neck of the advancing Roz. You would have had to be watching incredibly closely to perceive the sheer controlled and focused energy behind the blows, their accuracy as they hit the nerve points. Roz continued in the arc of her dive, and landed in a relaxed unconscious heap.

After a moment, Benny realized that she was just staring blankly at Jason without a thought in her head. Jason grinned at her.

‘And for my next trick...’ he said, just as the wave front finally hit them, and the world exploded into white.

COULD BE YOU (PREMONITIONS OF THE NEXUS)

In the light he could not remember. He could not recall a point of origin - some big stone egg spat uterine slick from a fissure in Mount Fuji? Hatched by sun and acid rain; autonomic, anthromythic primate...?

(The strings of RNA detach and shift and relocate, the meme in the machine supplants and segues, supplants again like a set of nested cones twisted through Dimension X - where the loathsome cilia things squat and watch, in this particular palsied end of the millennium, through their fiendish and segmented telescopes - recurring and perpetually evolving.)

The canisters are coming.

He no longer had a name. He inhabited a world without sequence or names; the meat machine like a philosopher's axe; replace the head and change the pole...

(In Ciudad Barranquilla we did coca cut with methyl-dex and pigshit till our hearts stopped cold, sold still-warm Leetha for our own implants, caught the uplink to the Hook for hypoxia and calcium depletion and polycarbon substrates shot through bone. Convected airborne oestrogen in the geodesies on the Mare Iridium, our swollen glands and our burst and haemorrhaging eyes. Kiru died there - Kiru who?)

That wasn't him. That had *never* been him.

Images invaded him; fragments that sometimes *seemed* to hiring together - but was that only form within himself? Was lie desperately trying to impose order, playing little, lonely sequence games here on his own, in a chaos where no law was never asked or wanted for and could never hold?

(Took the freezer up and out for cryogenic renal shutdown. Took the Infra to C7 and it excised the CNS and ate it. Worked

the meat rax of the Chain, up on poppers built from Bophal ketones; in the mouth for food and airspace, up for credit for lymphatic system-swap before the virus went syndromic... I don't, I don't recall. Periodic inert plugs of biomass to plug the minor spirochaetal holes...)

If living beings were to stay alive here in these spaces, he vaguely sensed, they had to leave their bodies and their brains behind, shearing them off in dislocated fragments tinder an abstract acceleration. Perpetually renewing, a perpetual disconnected death of memory-attribution. The very nature of this place informed the shapes of those within – and those parts that didn't fit were simply sliced away.

Instants from entire lives flared, complete and perfect in their circumstantial detail, and just as quickly died.

(An Underlevel backroom in the southern continental colony arcologies, hermetically sealed from the irradiated grave pits. Ectomorphic, parchment-pale and worn black suit and stovepipe, hat. Curled around my neck the remains of a modified spider monkey, picked up exactly where I can't recall, its remaining flesh desiccated and partially mummified. It can still move, and think, but there's nothing much, I think, inside. Other things are here, all entirely unlikely. I think-process they're human, but how does one tell?)

There was a yawning ache inside him, so strong that it was akin to what one might physically feel, in those few seconds before death, when one's heart has been ripped from the body. For all his life he had never been entirely alone – for the simple reason that he existed in spaces where some other living thing was *possible*. Here, he was utterly, inutterably alone and -

There was something else.

(She is human in precise detail, down to the DNA. Her disguise is complete. And. she's looking at me with eyes at once both dark and flaring, like polished onyx. A deep one, this; a strata angel, impact-fractured. You can see down to the animal core.)

That wasn't it. That wasn't right. That was just his mind trying to make sense of something so familiar and ordinary

that this place twisted it into madness. It was the simple sense of someone...

Someone else.

Something other than himself. The sweet, sweet shock of it made him want to scream, whether with agony or rapture he neither knew nor cared. Thoughts that were not his thoughts, flesh that was not his; words he did not have to *invent*. The presence (he did not perceive it by means of any of the usual senses) flowed about him, and he felt something in him come alive.

'Dreams,' it said. 'It's all just dreams, and it's time to wake up. The things in here will kill you if you don't wake up.'

(Mandible-glands extend into the throat, skeening complex and febrile, pumping a thin sugar-syrup down a gullet that swallows, convulsively, on its sweetness, and something inside fractures

and

we're suddenly

outside.)

He was outside - he couldn't see, or feel, or hear or smell or taste, but he *knew* he was outside, and knowing things in the same way as one sees a table, or an animal, or a profiterole and knows just what it is. He 'knowed' that there were things around him, floating in a deprisensory gulf. They were the remains of something that was not organic, not alive, but that he had to think of as a *creature* because no other word came close enough to fit.

It was dead, smashed into fragments. Several parts of it still feebly moved, clutching tendrils of it still attempting to gain purchase on him. With a shock of realization, he was aware that this thing had enveloped him. His sense of lives and life itself draining away from him had been akin to that felt (he imagined) when a Vampyre sucks the blood: one merely feels the mesmeric enervation, not the actual reality of the bite. He felt the life return inside him, his mind throwing up distorted representations of it as it tried to represent stimuli with which it had not been entirely created to cope:

(Shot from geodesies into grave pits dug in rotting folds of cerebellum flesh. She's shucking nonessentials left and centre as she hauls me through the mud and ruptured coffins, past the thieves, new-gutted, hanging from their ropes; past the Shamen with their mortified and wormy hearts. The schimiraras an th' tomajawks an knifs with grey hairs stick to the heft. She's positively glowing.)

And all the while the other, friendly presence was talking, in words that seemed to resonate from its very soul to his. He 'heard' a kind of grim triumph in that nonexistent voice - had this other been the agent that had killed the thing that, in its turn, had tried to kill him?

'You made this,' it was telling him. 'Do you see? A big light machine. You made it and you own it and it's yours. You don't *have* to be inside it.'

(I slipped on something - momentarily lapsing back. Ointment made from monkshood, deadly nightshade, hemlock blended with the fat of unbaptized, unchristian children. They use it, apparently, to fly.)

What did she mean? He was outside, now, and free... or was that sense of freedom, too, illusory? Like the clever little boxes they had made in *(the name of which I can't recall)*. One inside another, in another and another -

(She dips a wafer in the stringy half-clotted mess - it's something else, now, something not entirely pleasant. She proffers it - I'm kneeling, now, before her; begging for something that I cannot now recall.)

The presence avoided the feebly clutching tendrils of the dying creature. 'You really don't,' it said. 'You have no idea. You are in danger. You made yourself forget. You have to remember, now.'

(Her fingers taste of earth and shit and chemicals as she shoves them into my mouth, and works it open, and, at last, administers the Antilethe.)

'Remember who you are.'

'How are you feeling?'

The voice was soft but strangely reverberative, as though it were speaking from just behind and, simultaneously, from some distance. For a moment s/he could not remember what name or sex or age s/he was - and then the *self* came roaring up the backbone and burst to burgeon in his head. Nathan li Shao opened his eyes.

Leetha and Kiru were looking down at him - the recognition of them fixing his identity even more solidly than before. And if it wasn't ultimately the real one then what the Multiple Hells. It was the best there was on offer. It would do.

'We thought we'd nearly lost you,' said Kiru, relief suffusing his impassive features in the way in which one would have to know him intimately to be aware of. 'When the lightwall hit us you seemed to haze and stream apart - and then you were back. What happened?'

'I... don't know.' Li Shao ran through the chaos he had experienced before coming back to himself. It was as though another 'world' of the sort they had experienced before had been trying to cohere itself around him. No, not quite like that: it had been trying to get *inside* him, like a fever or infection crawls through the body and -

Another, not entirely pleasant, thought struck him. 'Those different worlds we experienced,' he said, thoughtfully, 'I think they tried to damage us in some way, diminish us. I think that, in a sense, they were trying to *eat* us.'

'Are you seriously suggesting,' said Leetha, dubiously, 'that worlds can be carnivorous?'

'Sounds reasonable to me,' said Kiru. 'I've always said that the world plays you like a lynx torturing a sandmole, and when it's had enough of playing with you it kills and eats you...'

'Yes you have, haven't you?' said Leetha. 'Repeatedly.' Kiru's basic personality was one of the darker of their family, leavened by the fact that he sardonically played it up.

'That's something of what I felt,' li Shao said. 'Call it what you will, I felt that *something* was getting inside and eating me - and then something else came along and saved me.'

'What sort of something?' Kiru asked.

‘I don’t know. It was like a memory but in a... different direction. A memory of the future? Something other than a memory of the past, in any event.’ Li Shao frowned. ‘I got the impression that it was female, black as a shadow, very strong. That’s all.’ He climbed to his feet. His body felt enervated, but fell precisely the shape he thought it should be. ‘So where are we, then?’

‘Look for yourself,’ said Leetha.

In the way that one can spot a familiar face in an amorphous crowd, li Shao’s attention had thus far concerned itself almost entirely with Kiru and Leetha. Now, for the first time, he surveyed the... place in which they had found themselves.

‘Well it makes a nice change, I’ll say that much,’ he said.

PEELING BACK THE SHINS

The *Schirron Dream* powered on towards Earth, ploughing through the wave fronts segueing through the possible universes they presaged, past the orbits of Neptune, Uranus and Saturn, skirling the orbit of Jupiter - which during a transition had suddenly appeared directly in front of them - and making easy headway through what was ordinarily the Asteroid Belt, but, in the pocket Alternative in which they found themselves at the time, was the orbit of a single, unfragmented planet that, they learnt from the communications coming from it, was apparently called Hestia. In the normal course of events, the size of astral bodies being almost infinitesimally small compared with the spaces between them, it would have been highly unlikely that their course should intersect so much as a single one. Here and now, it was as if the damned things were following them about.

As (hey drew closer to Earth, the pressure of the disruption grew stronger, images and memories of ghost worlds invading their heads so that it might be dangerously easy to become a part of them, rather than simply experiencing the external phenomena of their transitions. Universe-worlds where the asteroid had missed the Earth in the Cretaceous period, leading to a galaxy populated by evolved ammonite cephalopods in mankind's stead. Several thousand variations upon the theme of Nazis emerging victorious from the Patriotic War, all of them, without exception, unutterably banal. A world where Napoleonic forces were victorious, resulting in a limited but remarkably enlightened form of accountable government to the British Isles several centuries early and, incidentally, seeing to it that every hat thereafter

was worn at a rotation of ninety degrees from otherwise. An Earth where the Vikings consolidated their hold on beach-heads such as Berwick and Dunkerk, eventually spreading to become the dominant culture of a third of the globe.

The Cool Cheese Millennium; the Perennial Multimatriarchy of the Fifty Daughters of Selene; the Kingdom of Eros... On the *Schirron Dream's* bridge Benny felt that if she was not to be subsumed by these world-visions, in the same way as had the unprotected Roz, she had better let her mind defend itself and focus on who she really was, even if that meant yet another interminable bicker with Jason. Sgloomi was off the bridge, readying the crew for what they might find, and a back-and-forth with her ex-husband was the only potential resource she currently had.

The problem was, now that she self-consciously knew she was doing it, it became almost impossible. As she looked inside herself and found the ephemera of irritation sliding away, she realized, uneasily, that she was uncovering areas of genuine pain - incidents and feelings she hadn't let herself really think about for some time because they hurt so much. She was left with a choice between letting herself give in to personality fragmentation and risk losing herself perhaps for good, or picking the scabs off old, deep wounds and poking them, bringing things out into the light that, once said, could not be unsaid. Neither choice seemed particularly palatable.

'I've been thinking of how we split up,' she said, at last, to Jason. 'I didn't deal with it very well. I said some things I shouldn't have, and I at least owe you a proper explanation.'

From his position at the helm, Jason turned to look at her. There was a kind of sadness about him - not precisely that of pain or anger, more of a sense of seriousness and acceptance, a sense of comprehending the true extent of some wound rather than the violent reaction to its infliction. She realized that he had no doubt been doing the same kind of inner searching as had she.

'Go on,' he said, the shortness seemingly more out of that same, bleak seriousness than the curttness of animosity. 'I'm listening.'

'I couldn't forgive you,' Benny said. 'Even though I knew it had been a mistake, even though I knew that you weren't some monster. I just kept seeing all those people dead. I just had to get away.'

Jason frowned. 'I don't remember it that way at all.'

'What?' For an instant Benny thought he was just going to flatly deny everything - then the thought occurred that, what with the current confusion concerning timelines and world-views, it was just possible that he might in all honesty have no clue. 'Your failed attempt at time manipulation. The people who should have lived but died - are you going to try to tell me that none of it happened?'

'I don't mean that,' Jason said. 'I'm not trying to weasel out of it. I had the incredibly bad luck to get a second chance, to do things over differently, and I've been paying for it ever since. I was talking about how you took your love away from me when I needed it most. I know that's selfish, but it's how I felt and it damn near broke me - *did* break me, and it took a hell of a long time to put the pieces back together.'

'I'm not saying I didn't deserve it. It was just that there was a side of me that *needed* you to stay, whether I deserved it or not. I remembered hearing on the news, back when I was a kid, how the wife of some serial killer stuck by him, because she loved him and there simply wasn't any choice - I remember how my mother stayed with my father despite all the shit he put her through.' He gestured helplessly with a hand. 'It's not about responsibility, or culpability or blame. I needed you, in the same way I need my arms and legs, and you walked out and left me a basket case.'

He wasn't asking for forgiveness or understanding, Benny realized: he was merely stating how things were. She tried to think of some response that would not come across as asininely castigatory or flippantly defensive. 'I just couldn't,' she said at last.

‘I know you couldn’t,’ said Jason. His mouth curled in an empty grin. ‘In a funny way I’m glad. If you’d been *able* to ruin your life by staying, I’d have probably let you.’ His expression softened with a degree of human warmth - and if it was a contrived patina, it was a patina that had been carefully applied over years to make it functionally indistinguishable from the real thing. ‘What the hell. Life’s just an arse-kicking party with wooden legs and whatever you do you’re wrong - and speaking of which...’ A proximity alarm was sounding. He shut it off and hauled on the lever that cut the propulsion. ‘We’re coming up on Earth. We have better things to do.’

In a large cabin that, he knew, had once been communally occupied by the family cluster of li Shao, Leetha, Kiru and whatever party or parties that might be appropriate at any particular point in time, Chris was finding it slightly hard going. For one thing, while knowing, intellectually, that the crew of the *Schirron Dream* conducted their private lives upon a varied but commonly polyamorous basis, his essentially simple nature found certain items of the decor rather distracting. He was torn between not wishing to make insensitive and uncalled for assumptions concerning the purposes of certain items of furniture, while entertaining the sneaking notion that he damn well knew what they were for.

The major problem, however, was of course Roz, who sat on the edge of the roomy mattress, grey-faced and shaking, hugging herself as though desperately attempting to stop herself from flying apart at the seams.

‘Can’t connect,’ she chattered through her teeth. ‘I can’t...’

She had been like this since collapsing on the bridge. The sudden transitions between the quasi-universal Alternatives brought by each wave front had hit her unprotected mind hard, again and again and with increasing rapidity, and seemed to have shaken something loose inside her.

‘I went inside the Temple,’ she was saying. ‘My feet were bleeding in my clogs and I... when General Bayberry called

me into his office I was expecting something big, but not as big as... the Stilton mines were founded when the biogeneticists realized that... *die Cybermenschen und die Klumpenschaumendhass!*... and then the foul evil of Deed's minion turned the Earth black with its -' Abruptly, she began to slap at herself, smacking her open palms into her face with a force that rocked her head. 'Can't connect and can't remember, like I'm ill or mad or -'

'Roz,' Chris snapped, hoping profoundly that his tone would get through to her no matter which name she currently believed to be her own. 'Try to fix it in your mind. You're suffering from something like aphasia or the opposite of senility. Your long-term memories are shifting, but your 'short-term' memory's still OK. You can remember what you've done in the recent past, what you're doing now - try to focus on *that*.'

Roz stopped slapping herself.

'My mind's affected and the fear and confusion of it are making me act strange,' she said, in a calm and reasonable-seeming voice that belied the absolute and white-hot force of control needed to produce it. 'I have to be strong. I have to... I have friends who are in danger and I must help them.'

'That's good, Roz.' Chris rested a hand against her cheek and was rewarded by a smile at this simple comfort that seemed independent of memory and identity. His own mind shied away from letting himself think about how he felt about it. He resolved that he would get her through this, even if it meant that he would have to be near her, constantly supporting and reinforcing her, every second.

'...affected and the fear and confusion of it are making me act strange,' Roz was repeating. She was interrupted by a ringing from the shipwide Tannoy system, which was in turn accentuated by the lessening of the ubiquitously heard roar and thrum of the *Schirron Dream's* engines.

* * *

'My Goddess,' Benny breathed. It occurred to her that she had been breathing 'my Goddess' rather a lot of late - but

this was no doubt the perfectly natural result of the number of surprises she'd had to assimilate. Every time, just when she thought she'd got a handle on things, some new surprise was sprung. She hadn't given a lot of thought to how the Earth might look, even filtered through the imaging of the *Schirron Dream* itself - whatever she might have half imagined, though, it had been nothing like *this*.

It was as if the planet Earth were a vast and rotting onion, shown in inexpertly drafted, exploded-diagram form. Layers linked away and spun lazily about themselves in complex semiorbital patterns. The facts of distance and position meant that none but the grossest geological features should be visible - but the facts of distance and position seemed for the moment to have been knocked into a cocked ontological hat. It was possible to see — or to imagine one saw - buildings, forest vegetation, even individual people.

The shattered conglomerate of matter seemed held together only by thin energy tendrils of light, which pulsed in a manner reminiscent of blood vessels - were they, in some sense, the very veins and arteries of some living Gaia? hi any event, the pulsing seemed febrile, the fluttery beat of a damaged and strain-exhausted heart of the world. One of the ancient Greeks - Benny thought it might have been Aristotle, but whether through the effects of the disruption or a natural lapse in memory, she wasn't quite sure - had said that all things that moved had limbs and that the Earth, having none, simply couldn't move. Aristotle (or whoever it was) had been quite clearly wrong on both counts - the Earth was now moving in no uncertain terms, and she had the nasty feeling that it was currently on its last legs.

The communications console squealed and jabbered with the voices of Alternatives in their thousands, not a one distinguishable amid the cacophony. Benny shut it off. 'All right,' she said. 'Now that we're actually here, what are we going to do? How are we going to find Nathan, Leetha and Kin in this lot - and for that matter, what in the name of every hell are we going to do *if* we find them?'

Jason shrugged. 'We've gone this far by trusting the *Dream* and instinct, such as it is. I say we just let her have her head - and if the worse comes to the worst we'll try to improvise.' He grinned, suddenly, a genuine and generally untrustworthy humanity breaking through his recent mood. 'What the hell! We'll make it all up as we go along.'

LIGHT COME DOWN (A MEETING OF MINDS)

Fragments of the world spun lazily through the variegated sky, seemingly, at one and the same time, wedge-shaped lumps of fractured rock and complete, microcosmic worlds in their own right, like a hologrammatic slide (they had learnt of such things, the majority of them explained by one Bernice Summerfield) after it was shattered - each fragment containing a distorted whole. Was this the actual fact of things, now, or some shared and hallucinatory representation of something even more unknowable, cooked up by the mind? For that matter, Nathan li Shao wondered, had their transitions into other worlds been a matter of stepping from one to the other, or a question of falling off the edges? The lack of resultant, overt symptoms like broken bones, a sense of falling and the attendant lack of sense of having the body plastered over the landscape like strawberry preserve tended to argue against the notion, but how could one ultimately tell?

At least, for its own part, the ground here seemed firm enough: rock crags through which wound strange, fleshy vegetation, creepers that seemed oddly tubular, from which little sucker-like leaves protruded, but of which there seemed no point at which they ended or began. Their roots and tips, if they existed at all, were somewhere else and masked by promontories of rock.

Gingerly, as if it might twitch itself from his grasp, Kiru ran a hand along a creeper. 'There's a pulse. It doesn't quite feel like a vegetable, and it's not quite meat.'

‘Well, it’s not as if we’re going to eat it,’ Leetha said. ‘I say we leave whatever it is well alone and hope it returns the courtesy.’

The mention of eating reminded li Shao that he hadn’t done so since the sandwich he’d had back in the world where he’d been a freelance investigator of some kind. He couldn’t quite remember what kind of sandwich it had been, but he was almost certain it had been a sandwich. The subsequent confusion of transitions had driven thoughts of hunger from his mind, but now his stomach recalled them by rather pointedly growling.

‘At least the cruder functions of our bodies seem to have remained unaffected,’ Leetha said. ‘I seem to recollect remarking upon that very fact last night, when your bottom went to sleep.’

‘I, for one,’ said Kiru, ‘certainly heard it snoring a number of times.’

Li Shao essayed a little bow and flourish to the two of them. ‘I beg your very pardon.’

‘Just attempt to contain yourself in future,’ said Leetha. ‘Lest the bottom suddenly fall out of your world.’

None of this meant anything at all; it was simply the running, almost purely thoughtless and reflexive dialogue kept up by those who shared familiarity, reinforcing who they were by verbally brushing up against each other. During the course of it, by unspoken common consent, they had set off in a certain direction, almost certainly at random since they had no idea where they were in any effective sense, and notable only in that all three had picked it at the same time. It was not precisely a path they followed: they merely wound their way through the rocky landscape together, keeping eyes and ears open for anything that might prove useful.

Presently, Kiru said, ‘Do you hear something? There’s something up ahead.’

They halted their progress and listened. From nearby came a kind of abstracted jabber, as if the speaker were urgently using the air as a palimpsest, pressing his thoughts into it before they evaporated from his head.

‘And in the Calibrian part of Italy, I am led to believe, the women saved a few drops of the fluid in a small bottle which they carried wherever they went. It was believed that when such drops were secretly administered to the man of their choice the man would be bound to them for ever. Yes, I’m sure that is correct. The *Elixir Rebeus*, as I live and breathe!’ There followed a kind of happy gurgle; one could imagine the speaker doing a little dance with glee at his (the voice was high but undoubtedly male) own extreme cleverness. ‘Very good, very good,’ it said at last. ‘We shall give ourselves a little star...’

Leetha looked at Kiru and Li Shao. ‘You know, it may be not too late to go back the way we came.’

Li Shao shook his head. ‘We might learn something useful.’

Leetha snorted. ‘I somehow doubt that very much.’

They made their way around an outcrop. The source of the voice might, at one point, have been human, but it was as if he had in some manner devolved. He crawled on his belly, which had swollen, his limbs atrophied and his features smeared together under a taut and glistening skin so that he looked in part like a raw butcher’s sausage and partly like a skin-covered slug. Several of the fleshy creeper things sprouted from him and trailed off, in a manner that left some doubt as to whether they were protuberances of his own anatomy or were some other parasitic or symbiotic life form that either fed him or fed *from* him. The distorted face leered up at them, exuding an air of desperate and completely joyless cheer.

‘Visitors!’ it burred - somehow managing to do so even though the word consisted almost entirely of sibilants. ‘Come to avail themselves, no doubt, of the facilities! How very nice. How very nice indeed...’

Li Shao fought down the sudden urge to stomp the foul thing flat. ‘We just want information, Where is this place?’

‘Now that,’ the thing said, with a rather insufferable sense of satisfaction, ‘is rather the point, don’t you think? A quite solipsistic point, at that. I think - and I could, I must confess,

be wrong - that this is inside my head. I made this all up and I made you up to go along with it. Am I a king dreaming I'm a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I'm a king? A rather interesting dichotomy, don't you think?'

For himself, li Shao thought that, king or butterfly or not, this creature was certainly a blasted idiot. He was about to say as much, but it (it was becoming increasingly difficult to think of it as a he) continued, sinking by degrees back into its own internal world: 'I was a man of substance. I'm sure I was a man of substance. Jackie Pelt, my name was. I honed my skills and I applied them. They called me Mr Pelt. I was about, I do believe, my magnum opus.'

'It was vital that she remained immobile, you see, absolutely still. Saline drips and bloodpacks. I inserted a catheter and I fed her through a needle. I kept her alive for months. It was quite difficult. Slaying skin and muscle and glaucaea a single tiny shred at a time. A fragile tangle of veins and arteries and lymph ducts. Lymph and bile and cephalic fluid stored in individually labelled, refrigerated vials... and then... and then...' The dreamy expression and cadences vanished, to be replaced by a shrieking, spittle-flecked rage. 'He brought me here! Simon Deed! He got out of my head and put me inside it and took me here and *changed* me!'

Leetha, who had been following the creature's ramblings with a kind of horrified fascination, as though to a degree mesmerized, now started, as though stung by a small galvanic shock. 'Simon Deed?'

'Simon Deed,' echoed Kiru, equally startled. He became thoughtful. 'Everywhere we've been, every... alternative we've found ourselves inside, that name keeps cropping up. He always seems to be pulling the strings.'

'This Simon Deed,' li Shao growled at the thing that had once, apparently, been called Jackie Pelt. 'Who is he? Where is he to be found?'

'Oh, you'll find out,' said the creature, slyly. 'Simon's in the Citadel, in the centre of it all. Inside and outside and nowhere at all, and believe you me, you'll find him.'

And then, without warning, the creature exploded, showering the three of them with loose and stringy matter and blood.

'I don't want to talk about it,' Leetha muttered angrily, trying once again to brush the semisolidified gunk from her but, once again, merely succeeding in redistributing it somewhat.

'We should find some water, somewhere,' Kiru said. 'Or at least something we can use to scrape it off.'

'I said I don't want to *talk* about it!'

By slow and almost imperceptible degrees, the landscape had shifted around them as they made their way through it, cairns and tool-fashioned stone supplanting the natural rock, structures and statuary becoming more and more sophisticated in construction. If they were buildings, then they were buddings only in the most abstract sense - built to leave an impression of such things rather than for their utilitarian purpose; it was impossible to imagine anything actually living in them. They passed porticoes and gables and buttresses and cupolas and exposed rafters and joists and joints and beams and statuary and cornices and lintels and fixtures and mantles - all there as though placed by someone, or something, that knew they had to be there, but had forgotten precisely why.

All the same, there were signs of life. The fleshy creepers that had presaged the semihuman creature they had met, this 'Jackie Pelt', grew in abundance. In the darkness of doorways, things stirred. There were muffled, subdued sounds, almost on the edge of hearing but somehow overwhelming in a way that belied their volume, as though things in their thousands were murmuring to themselves, whimpering in some particularly timid delirium.

'I don't like this,' li Shao said. 'I can feel a pressure building. Something's coming, and I think it's something big.'

As if on cue, there came a detonative crack that seemed to fill the world from end to end. The concussion of it knocked them off their feet and sent them sprawling into the fine dust that covered the floor and in which their feet had sunk up to

the ankles. Any potential fall-breaking properties of this dust, however, were obviated by the fact that the ground it covered seemed to be solid granite. In the structures that seemed both more and less than buildings, things skittered and shrieked, what sounded like claws scrabbling and clicking against stone.

‘What’s happening *now?*’ Leetha snapped, torn halfway between shock and pique. ‘Some new cataclysm? Some manifestation? The appearance of this Simon Deed we hear so much about?’

‘I don’t think so,’ li Shao said, hauling himself around to gaze up into the fragment-strewn sky, from which a bright shape was now spiralling. ‘I do believe that somebody up there likes us.’

GROUNDING OUT

The *Schirron Dream* settled on its landing struts which, originating as they did from a culture that placed a value upon symbol and ornamentation, were of the aspect of the talons of some great bird. The talons were articulated so that they seemed to grip the stone of the blocky structures on which the ship landed, like a parrot gaining purchase on a perch.

A hatch on the belly of the ship opened and a rope ladder unrolled, closely followed by, and climbing down it, a figure in a workmanlike jumpsuit and heavy polymerized windcheater. It was notable, from its motions, that the figure fought against the blustering wind of some storm - and this was slightly odd, for the air here was perfectly still.

Li Shao, Leetha and Kiru ran for the dangling end of the ladder, recognizing Benny Summerfield long before she reached the bottom of it and meeting her as she did. Up close she seemed younger than li Shao remembered - or, at least, not so old as she should be, given the length of time he recalled since their last meeting. There was no particular shock about that, of course - the crew of the *Schirron Dream* and Professor Bernice Summerfield existed, to a large extent, independently of each other in the common flow of time. The confusion would only really set in if either met the other before they'd first actually met, and li Shao was sure for his part he'd recall something like that.

Additionally, he saw, there was a slight hardening about the eyes, some inner sense of past pain that had not yet been completely expunged - though whether it was something specific, or merely the cumulative pain dial simply comes from being alive, it was impossible to say. The eyes were

protected by tinted goggles, and her short hair whipped and thrashed in the nonexistent wind.

‘Benny!’ li Shao exclaimed. ‘It would be a tale extremely and not to mention dreadfully overlong in the telling to say how pleased we are to see you.’

‘Yes, well,’ said Benny. ‘What I’m really after is all the silverware you ripped off from my bloody wedding. Let’s get you out of here and then we’ll work out what to do with all of *this*,’ she continued brusquely, waving with a hand at one of the serenely floating world-fragments in the sky. Her other gauntleted hand gripped a rung of the ladder as if there was no tomorrow; a notion that, given the events thus far, was not entirely undebatable.

‘Why all the hurry?’ li Shao asked. ‘I mean, I thank you for coming here to rescue us, but for the moment we don’t seem to be in immediate danger. You’re acting as though everything’s coming down around our ears.’

Benny stared at him, aghast. ‘Do you mean to tell me that you can’t *feel* all of -’ She stopped and peered around at them more closely. ‘Do you know, I really think you can’t. You look like you’ve been 3D-matted on to a holostill... Never mind,’ she continued as they returned her gaze blankly, having completely missed the reference. ‘Just take it as read that for *some* of us this is feeling like an earthquake on an octopus ride, so can we please just hurry up?’

‘Nathan,’ Leetha said, suddenly, in a small and worried voice. She was staring at something directly behind him. ‘I think we really might like to take her advice

‘This is getting right on my wick,’ Jason chattered through his teeth. ‘I only hope the *Dream* can hold herself together.’

‘Is no worries,’ Sgloomi said, with the classic, firm and fragile confidence of somebody desperately trying to convince himself. ‘*Schirron Dream* is big-strong matriarchal-type thing. Is merely equipoising potentialities of reality.’

‘What?’

‘The ship’s discharging potentials,’ explained Chris, who had arrived on the bridge with a dazed and vaguely wooden-

looking Roz in tow. 'It's the same kind of thing as when aircraft build up a static electrical charge, or time craft build up a temporal charge - only *this* one's operating on an entirely different direction on the space/time/gravity axis. It's energy just like everything else, but it's in a form as different as kinetic and thermal. I don't think there's any real way we can conceive the form it takes.'

'Which means,' said Jason gloomily, 'that there's no way we can compensate for it.' He recalled a number of craft, at least two of which he had actually seen, which had spontaneously exploded owing to faulty compensation of even something as simple as static electricity. 'We're gonna have about time for a swift chorus of "Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam" before baby go boom.'

'Is hokey-dokey,' Sgloomi Po reiterated, shooting out a tentacle to frantically hammer on a console until a display stopped flashing alarmingly. Whether it was because the cause of alarm had gone away, or that the hammering had simply broken it, was difficult to say. '*Schirron Dream* is strong!'

On the main screen, from a high angle, the figure of Benny clambered down the ladder. Below, three figures had gathered to meet her. Jason had instantly, subliminally pegged them as the three they had come to rescue, but at this distance he was having second, third and any number of other thoughts, which tended to make the initial flash of recognition seem less sure.

'Can we zoom in on them or something?' he said.

Sgloomi fiddled with a control and the image expanded, in a slightly flowing manner that suggested that whatever was viewing this was moving closer for a better look, rather than mechanically zooming in. Some kind of free-floating 'eye' arrangement? Or did the *Schirron Dream* have actual eyes on stalks, in some way? He made a mental note to ask at some point.

Closer, he could see Benny jerking under the energies of the discharge, her hair and clothing rippling and whipping as though caught by the wind. Despite everything, he felt a pang

of shame for himself and terror for her at having let her do this. This was not in any sense that it might or might not be a *man's* job, more in a kind of reverse of the sense in which, as he frequently averred, he didn't care who did the cooking and the washing and the bringing up of screaming bloody kids, just so long as it wasn't *him*. But as the pilot and temporary body-double for the captain, it was his duty to stay at the helm, ready to get them the hell out of here the moment Li Shao, Leetha and Kiru were back on board.

Besides, there was the small matter of the short but extremely vehement argument, in which one Professor Bernice Summerfield had vouchsafed to one Mr Jason Kane, that if Mr Jason bloody Kane thought *he* was going to have all the bloody fun while she sat on her bloody (but in actual fact quite lovely and perfectly formed) arse then Jason bloody Kane had another bloody think bloody coming. And, furthermore, if said Jason bloody Kane had anything further to say upon the subject, she was going to rip his bloody head off and attempt to replace it by inserting it into the antipodean hole.

Now, Benny was on the ground, having failed to be instantly vaporized on contact with it, as Jason for one had secretly and seriously worried she might. With one hand held grimly on to the ladder, she was talking with the three, who were now obviously those they had come here for. The first flash of instant recognition had proved ultimately correct.

'What's taking them so long?' Jason asked the world in general. 'If I was them, I'd be pigging my way up here like a rat up a -'

'There's something happening.' Chris was watching another display and had little time for the metaphorical blending of the porcine and the rodential.

'Leetha seems to be trying to - Hang on, something's startled them and -'

'There's something moving,' Chris said worriedly. 'There's something moving in the buildings. Oh my...'

From out of the stone structures they came: malformed lumps of human flesh, trailing tendrils of some alien flesh. Some were merely atrophied, like furless, glistening seals. Some were wraithlike, trailing their skins like loose and ragged cloaks. Some were corpulent and bloated, like epidermal capsules filled with fermenting pus, the bones of their limbs piercing through the outer layer and jutting, lopped off at the elbows and knees.

Some seemed misshapen on the level of anatomical scale - a head, a hand, a foot, a progenerative member swollen to enormous size, from which the withered remainder of the body dangled. Some lacked skin entirely, their surface raw, red muscle tissue over which crawled traceries of veins. Some seemed nothing more than a collection of footballs, clustered colonies of crusted, hairy cancers. Some seemed perfectly ordinary, sound of wind and limb and strolling through their atrociously distorted brethren without a care in the world - save that a dead expression on their faces, a lack of something in their eyes, spoke of an inner, yawning emptiness that was somehow more disturbing than the grosser, more corporeal horrors through which they walked.

They came forth in their hundreds, in their thousands, a swelling wave of degenerated humanity - and as they did so, they seemed to flow together, fuse together, each one melding with another, and another, and another until they formed a massive heap of corruption. The heap undulated. Its surface roiled. The mass heaved, hoisting itself on two great legs. Arms sprouted, to dangle apelike. An approximation of a head evolved, split open, opened up a cavernous mouth and eyes. From all three orifices burst a blazing, pure-white light, its searchlight beams so bright as to seem almost solid.

The monstrous creature stood, towering over the now diminutive bulk of the *Schirron Dream* and, pursuant to this, entirely over the four far more diminutive figures huddling in its shadow.

'It's him!'

Jason, having been lost in the transformations occurring on the main screen of the bridge, now turned in alarm at the frantic voice behind him. 'What the...?'

The past-tense version of Roz, who had remained inconspicuous thus far on her return to the bridge, seemingly lost inside her own internal world and muttering determinedly but inaudibly to herself, was now shaking violently, working her mouth and staring at the vision on the screen as if her eyes might burst.

'It's him!' she blurted. 'It's Simon Deed! It's *him!*'

'I suppose,' Benny said, looking up at the monstrous apparition, 'it'd be too much to ask for me to be the only one who's actually seeing this.'

Off to one side of her, Leetha was snarling up at the thing, reverting to a feral, atavistic, mindless impulse to fight tooth and claw to survive. In the same manner, though on a basically more human level, on account of his basically being one, Li Shao had hauled his sword from his back, activated it so that it roared like a chain saw, and matched its roaring incoherently in a berserker rage. Thus it was Kiru, in his cooler, more sardonic way, who said, 'I think it *might* be too much to ask, Benny, though by all unholy Gods I wish it wasn't.'

The creature gazed down with its searchlight eyes, and then it spoke. There was no question that it was its voice, even though the words seemed to fill the entire world, locking into place like monolithic blocks of granite; resounding deep inside the head without having entered through the atrium of the ears:

THE OLD GODS ARE DEAD. I HAVE KILLED THEM. I AM YOUR GOD AND I AM THE GOD THAT IS TO COME. I DID NOT CREATE YOUR WORLD, BUT I CONTROL YOUR WORLD, AND CONTROL IT UTTERLY. TO THE GREATER GLORY. I GUIDE THE STARS IN THEIR COURSES AND THE STONES THAT SPIN AROUND THEM. I CONTROL THE POSITION OF EACH MOLECULE, THE VERY LAWS OF

THEIR CONTRIVANCE. NONE LIVE OK DIE BUT A T MY COMMAND. THE WORLD AND ALL THE KINGDOMS THEREOF EXIST UPON MY SUFFERANCE, AND THEIR DISPOSAL IS A MATTER FOR MYSELF AND SELF ALONE.

'Is it just me,' Benny said surreptitiously, out of the side of her mouth to Kiru, 'or is this getting needlessly self-referential and messianic?'

SAVE THE WRETCHES THAT NOW COWER BEFORE THE ANIMUS OF MY OMNIPOTENT MIGHT. THOSE WHO DISOBEY, THOSE WHO ARE NOT CAPABLE OF THE UNDERSTANDING POSSESSED BY E'EN THE MOST LOWEST OF THE LOW. IN THEIR PRIDE THEY HAVE SOUGHT TO FIGHT AGAINST MY POWER, YEA, EVEN IN THE VERY FACE OF MINE OWN DOMAIN. THEY ARE ABOMINATION IN MY REALM AND IN MY SIGHT.

'Goes on a bit, doesn't he?' said Jason on the bridge of the *Schirron Dream*.

'It's him,' said Roz, firmly. 'It's Simon Deed. It's him.'

'Yes, well, that's what you would say.'

'It seems to be some kind of nexus,' Chris put in, tapping frantically on a console keyboard that appeared to have been put together from an old Underwood typewriter. 'Some kind of fulcrum for the energy release of the disruption

'Is big silly stranger to talking properly type-thing,' said Sgloomi Po. 'Is certainly is make not much-type lovely feeling of grammatical and contextual sense in all big shouty thing...'

THEIR IMPRECATION CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE. THEY CANNOT CONTINUE TO EXIST IN MY UNFATHOMED SIGHT. THEY CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO LIVE AND MUST, PERFORCE, BE ASSIGNED NO MORE THAN MERE OBLIVION.

* * *

The searchlight beams from the giant's eyes struck the *Schirron Dream* arid obliterated it. It shattered apart, dissolving in a manner strangely reminiscent of some effervescent tablet dissolving in a glass of water. The force of its destruction was deceptively gentle - it might not have laid waste to miles around and left a smoking crater in the ground, but the force of it was enough to blow the flesh from the impact-fractured bones of li Shao, Leetha, Kiru and Benny, and superheat the moisture in their lungs to explode them even before they could draw the air to scream.

A BREAK FROM UNREALITY

The butterfly shutters interlaced themselves home with the small charging-cap concussions of electromagnetic bolts. The locking mechanisms were largely automatic, keyed to his precise DNA pattern and activated by vector analysis so that the fact of his, and only his, approach, as a living entity, would open the shutters again. For all this, he turned and punched a numerical code into the keypad sunk into the smooth wall of the bunker. This additional level of security was so minuscule as to be worthless to the point of ridiculousness, but he felt better about it all the same, in some unacknowledged part of the back of his mind. It made him feel better, in the same way as does double-checking the door that one *knows* one has locked, and there was an end to it. Bane punched in the sequence three times, just to be sure he'd got it right, then turned his back upon the bunker and went out into his geodesic gardens.

He spent an idle few minutes by the fish pond, watching the sedate interplay of the carp, the way they seemed to glide precisely where they wanted to go, occasionally breaking the surface with their mouths to ingest fly larvae, yet slide by and orbit each other without the slightest hint of a possible collision. It had to be by some mechanistic means; the process held none of the indecision of conscious thought and self-awareness, which the brains of carp were far too rudimentary to achieve in any case.

Bane paused by the rockery, as he liked to call it, giving a more homely name to what was actually an extensive Zen garden. The whorls and ridges of its sand floor were sculpted with a precision that no human could ever achieve, being tended by sub-nanonetic (or in the true sense being super-

nanonetic, being larger than the complex-molecule machines that were actual nanites) machines that did the work when there was nobody there to see. The positioning of the fifteen rocks was a precise copy of the *Kyoto Ryoan-ji* garden, but for all that it was not a true work of the *Kare-sansui* art. The effect was spoilt by the fact that Bane had ordered the rocks themselves to be colonized by varieties of adapted lichen in several pastel shades, for no other reason than he wanted it that way.

An antique, mechanical seventeen-jewel hunter chimed in the fob pocket of the waistcoat of the archaic three-piece suit that Bane commonly wore. He didn't need to take it out. It called him to an appointment he had made with himself less than ten minutes before. Without hurrying - by his very nature he was a man who *made* appointments rather than kept them - Bane strolled through his arboretum, which was of the nature of a maze, picking the correct route with an absolute certainty, until at length he came to an airlock in the side of the geodesic bubble that, in turn, itself enclosed the sanctum of his gardens and his bunker.

This was, in fact, the farthest he had travelled physically in several years. He knew, inside himself, that through the airlock he would still find himself in the effective centre of the several hundred hectares of land that he owned (not counting the several thousand hectares of planet Earth that he owned elsewhere), but the thought of crossing this portal, for the first time in years, filled him with a nameless dread and made him feel ill.

He would have to do it, however. It was in a way similar to checking and rechecking the lock on the door. The plans that Bane had laid so many years before, the pursuance of which had cost him more than half of his exorbitantly prolonged life, were coming to fruition, and he could not bear not to be in a position to supervise their penultimate stages.

On the other side of the airlock was an area of levelled ground. In the middle distance were the manufactories that contributed in part to Bane's enormous wealth, but when he

had secluded himself in his bunker, he had ordered this ring of demolition, the equipoisal point between as far as he could bear to go and the world outside.

Bane crossed the waste ground, a stooped, thin old man in ancient clothing, a monomolecular covering wrapped and sealed about that with its own integral oxygen supply, balancing his frail form on a cane that would be burnt rather than return to his geodesic enclave.

Around him towered the huge forms of the sensor installations, capable of pinpointing the morphic signal of a specific individual over trans-light speeds and up to a galaxy away. They bloomed like massive steel and polyceramic buttercups. Though they were static by way of their surpassing delicacy of construction, there were additional installations slaved to them, situated at strategic points all over the globe, so that the loci of their detection intersected. What they couldn't cover of known space wasn't worth talking about, and certainly not, for the purposes of Bane, worth covering.

Further out were the forms of what appeared to be multi-directional weapons arrays, based upon missile launchers such as might be found among the ground-to-air defences of any sufficiently developed planet. In place of warheads they carried what appeared to be cannon but were in fact pulse-pump transmitters, capable of sending tight-beam tachyonic emissions to any point in the galaxy, in much the same way as the sensor installations received.

The transmitters were currently aimed at something rather less than a galaxy away. Their 'muzzles' pointed at a raised platform on which - supported by talon-like shock absorbers that gave it the aspect of some giant raptor - sat a ship. The ship was of a construction that might not be alien, but that had patently not been constructed by the humans of Earth, or on any of the known colonies. It was built from smooth ceramics and gold and what appeared to be burnished bronze. In shape it was something like the long-extinct manta ray and appeared to be a thing complete in itself, like a living organism. The brass-rimmed portholes and the

propulsion nacelles seemed to hark back to some archetypical idea of a spacegoing craft, as opposed to being something that was consciously designed. All in all, Bane thought, it would make a marvellous ornament to his gardens, after he had caused it to be moved inside the dome.

That was, however, a matter for later - and might not prove to be necessary after all, once his power and his plans were, in turn, absolute and complete.

For the moment, the important matter was that of excising and decanting the contents from the ship. Medical technicians in membranous polysilicate coverings similar to Bane's own (for the express purpose of limiting their contact with Bane himself, rather than out of any sense of staying sterile for the living things that they manhandled) were hauling the apparently lifeless forms of the Living Material from the ship. For all its ultimate coordination, the initial impression was one of confusion and chaos — and Bane momentarily reeled with something akin to alarm. If being this far from the safety of his bunker made Bane feel ill, the fact of actual *people* here made him sick to his stomach (he did not for a moment count the Living Material being salvaged from the ship as 'people'). He would have preferred to engage the services of automata, but automata did not have the particular, specific skills required for this kind of work. In these penultimate stages, in dealing with the Living Material, something approaching human sympathy was required.

The Living Material was being taken to prefabricated sterilization and preparation facilities off to one side, where they were inoculated against bacterial and viral infection, scrubbed completely free of germs and stockpiled in stasis crates reminiscent of coffins. Bane saw that four of these coffins were already occupied: the three subjects that had been utilized as bait and one other. He hobbled over to the decontamination facilities to observe the process.

A series of human, humanoid and alien forms were now arriving. Each was unconscious, its features completely relaxed so far as, by its species, could be recognized, each

showing no higher mental activity - a situation that was currently maintained by the damper units affixed to their skulls or other applicable areas of anatomy. A creature, for example, that seemed nothing more in repose than a grey obloid sported a netlike tracery of wires, connecting damper electrodes over its entire surface.

'Everything seems to be proceeding according to schedules,' Bane mused. It was not his habit, whether communicating remotely with those who actually ran his business concerns on a day-to-day basis, or here and now in person, to address others directly. He simply made his thoughts and wishes known, and those concerned jumped to obey as a matter of course. 'I trust that there have been no unforeseen obstacles.'

'Serotonin and neuropeptide levels and their equivalent are optimal across the board,' said a technician whose ID tag proclaimed him to be the Chief of Operations, Project Ouranos. 'Fifty-four warm bodies. Before being put into stasis almost all displayed the precise fugue state as per specifications.'

'Almost all,' mused Bane. 'I believe I would like some clarification of that statement.'

'Fifteen anomalies, primarily due to nonhuman physiology, all compensated for with minor adaptation of the neurocortical processes, save two.' The Chief Technician indicated the obloid alien creature. 'This subject is of a physiology too dissimilar to *Horn sap* for the, uh, stimulation to produce the desired results. The other is slightly more strange.'

'I would like to hear about this latter subject,' mused Bane.

'A woman. Human. The stimulation produced erratic and unpredictable results. Her entropic profile is disrupted outside of usable parameters - it seems she's been occluded from her indigenous space-time point quite recently, in the last few days, and her tachyonic distortion factors are off the scale. She's useless for our purposes.'

Bane pondered for a moment whether he should have these useless anomalies in the material simply... deleted. He decided against it, for he was a merciful man. Besides, the operatives on this particular stage of the Project were under

the impression that the subjects would not be physically harmed. To have that done here and now might cause inconvenient talk. Within Bane's bunker beyond the walls of the dome there were facilities enough to take care of such imperfections, conveniently and out of sight of a world that, for the moment at least, must at least be held in countenance.

'I wish to have the anomalies clearly marked, and taken to the bulk-access point with the rest,' he said, as though making a small mental note to himself.

The technician nodded. Bane turned away. He hobbled back towards the dome, an old, sick man whose motions spoke not just of infirmity, but of some mortal sickness so advanced that he should not even be alive, far less upright. It was the motion of a body kept functioning only by the sheer force of will.

In himself, Bane was quite unaware of his debilitation. He dismissed it from consideration. The final stages of the Project that might require human intervention other than his own were all but completed. Once the Living Material (again, in his mind, they were not classed as anything more than 'Living Material') was delivered to the access point, the resources of the bunker were quite sufficient to complete the processes that had begun outside.

The processes that would culminate in the Conversion, and the birth, death and Dominion of worlds.

STRIKEOUT

**THE NEXUS OF ALL
POSSIBLE EVENTS**

Jason in the Real World:

The fox looked at him, and Jason knew that it had seen him, but did not class him as any kind of threat. There was no sense of friendliness or trust in the regard, merely a recognition that the distance between them was too great for anything but a thrown stone that would glance harmlessly off. The fox turned on its tail and flow-trotted back into the smallish plot of conserved, sparse woodland that was fenced off rather more purposefully than the land around. Maintained barbed wire and a scrapwood sign nailed wonkily to a tree: PRIVATE scrawled in tar in an inept fashion so that the already cramped E ran off the side.

Talk had it - especially among all the nice middle-class commuter people who lived on the Estate, those who knew about it — that, this particular little bit of land was fenced off to protect the wild daffodils that grew there in the spring, in the same way as the area of the village green around the old Tudor-brick building that had once housed a water pump was protected, for the sake of some rare plant the name of which Jason had never bothered to find out. For himself, Jason suspected that it was protected for the same reason as certain fields around here, just in this area, still had hedgerow around the edges rather than ditches and wire - barbed and, in the last year, razor. The little sealed-off plot was to keep a working population of foxes for what he automatically thought of, not having any real feeling about it either way, as the Chinless Twats of the Bastard Hunt.

Jason watched the point where the fox had gone through the wire, its tail whipping out of sight into the edge-piled undergrowth with a casual 'up yours' flourish, and settled back into his own Protected Environment.

The pillbox was one of those squat, octagonal, concrete structures thrown up in the southeast of England at the start of World War Two, during the early, 'phony' stages when, it

seemed, the greatest danger lay in terrestrial invasion rather than simply bombing the hell out of the country till the losses and demoralization forced it to capitulate. Their intention, like the massive concrete cubes strewn across beaches like Southwold and Yarmouth, had been to slow any cross-country advance. After the war they had proved by their very nature too hard to be simply demolished - they occupied no vital land and so they had been simply left. Strangely, when Jason had first seen an example of them, from the road in a car driving into Suffolk for the first time and at about the age of five, his first thought was of the bunkers used by the Dirty Japs in war comics.

This pillbox was further out of the way than most, being accessible only via the main farm-factory tractor track, across a couple of cow pastures in the grounds of Shelford Hall, across a dried-up weir and up an overgrown lane that would eventually lead into the Backton quarry. (At the age when Jason and a few playmates had found it, *roads* were something that happened to adults. In adult terms it was a few hundred yards from a gate on the side of the Backton Road.) It was of a cavernous doughnut-like construction, from the central hole of which rose a concrete pillar, inset with a brass fixture on which had once been mounted a machine gun. In those eight-year-old days, finding it in its relative seclusion, Jason had been *convinced* that it must have been simply forgotten about rather than decommissioned, that it must have been left with all its armaments and weapons intact, and he'd been horribly disappointed to find out that it hadn't been. Even now, four years later, one of his fondest daydreams was to go home with a *fuckoff* big machine gun and...

At the age of eight, the bunker had been a place to come, to repair the damage by the elements to the boards over the central hole and rebank the turf clods dug from the cow pastures, the dirt and bracken and long grass that transformed it into a perfectly camouflaged Den - the centre of operations for a play-war with other kids, in the time before the fighting between the local kids and those of the

Estate had become far more fundamental and actually bloody.

At the age of twelve, it was a place to come when one simply couldn't bear to take the bus or bike into the Middle School in Backton, and face yet another day of being beaten to a pulp by the six-toed, gap-toothed, swivel-eyed local inbred Suffolk morons. One's childhood friends, of course, having long since found ways to get along with said gap-toothed etc. morons, and having dropped the last Outsider, to the point where they joined in with the general persecution.

Not that he didn't have friends. It was just that he had the wrong sort of friends. Because he sometimes, for example, liked to talk with the only Black (he really tried not to give it a capitalization in his head but he still somehow did) girl in his year, he would have people shouting 'He3', Jason, what's a black bitch *screw* like!' at him across the Little Shelford Road.

None of which mattered a toss. He knew enough to know that all of this was standard sensitive-outsider wank. He could deal with it. It wasn't really important and it never really touched him. The real reason he was here was that there were still marks on him that couldn't be explained away by that, and that they weren't quite healed enough to show, no matter what his mother said. It was as if she couldn't quite *see* them, somehow, and packed him back off to school too early.

In himself, Jason didn't think anything of it either way. It was routine. He had just said that he was going to take his bike and packed a couple of textbooks in a bag, together with two cans of Abbot Ale (the most he thought that he could get away with from the sideboard) and a half-pack of Marlboro from the guy with the Transit in the Phoenix. Then he had come here and just killed time. He had even finished the books - a chemistry text and the second part of *Paradise Lost* - and it occurred to him that he was getting a better education like this than if he actually turned up at school.

Speaking of the time, it was about time that he was heading home. The school bus would have dropped people at the Estate and, owing to its circuitous route around the villages, his mother would be expecting him at around the same time.

For some reason he was reluctant to take his bike back down the easy way of the lane, through the gate and the roads from which he had come. It wasn't a bad feeling; he simply, in a remote sort of way, didn't want to do it. He shrugged to himself, hauled the bike into the bunker and hoped that nobody would chance on it before tomorrow. He chucked the beer cans over the wire into the PRIVATE wood, tucked the remaining cigarettes into the shoulder pocket of his cagoule and, bag slung over the other shoulder, he set off up the lane and to the weir and fields, following the route that he had taken when he was a little kid.

2

Roz Dreaming:

There was a black iron machine hanging in a hot, red sky. The machine was her, and as she tried to comprehend the vast internal maze of ducts and conduits, the churning, interdependent processes that gave it life, she realized that it was lurching, out of balance, accelerating out of control.

(A woman with vulpine eyes ranged an amorphous landscape of ponderously interflowing molten glass, her feet on fire, clutching the ragged bundle of a child to her and sobbing. The face of the child was featureless, perfectly smooth.)

Visions invaded her, piercing her and sleeting through her, leaving white-hot trails that scored her insides like blaster beams. They went in but they could not get out: caught and thrown back by the inside of her skin - some inner surface like a mirror reflecting laser light. They struck and rebounded, deflected off each other, splitting into their component parts.

(A splintered, wooden parody of a dog flexed tendons seemingly wound from lengths of oiled rope, dragging its flaking, faded, painted bulk across the scraggy patches of a lawn burnt black and yellow. A wasted man, nearby, in striped blazer and a tattered straw boater, regarded the dog for a while, until it had dragged itself from sight, then turned his mad, black holes of eyes up to the sun.)

Image upon image, stuttering and palsied in her. Something burst inside her head. She dropped like a stone, spinning out of control through what appeared to be a cavern walled with red and glistening mucus membrane, shot through with metallic, segmented, cilia-like tendrils. Clusters of what might have been gemstones glittered in the walls, dazzlingly lit from within. Through torn openings, what might or might not have been ghost faces built from the grey whorls of fog. Voices babbled inside her, threatened to drown her own self out:

(‘...we stumbled through the tunnels till we found the husk of Nail: desiccated and flaking and propped against the wall, crumbling into paper-grey ash. The Strata Angel was there, a construct now, like a sort of glassy gel, shot with wormholes filled with lambent fluid. Shadowplay on translucent surfaces, macroforms splitting and flickering and pulsing. Somewhere somebody was shrieking, clawing at his face in the room of the broken machine...’)

As she fell she felt her body twisting - and she realized that she now *had* body sense. Skin and musculature sloughing and re-forming, sliding over itself and igniting, burning with an energy that crackled through her veins, transforming, transmuting into something altogether new and rather fine.

(‘...she pirouettes in midair, screaming tactile subsonics from her eyes and mouth, down corridors and catwalks and vast brick vaults with chessboard floors and halls hung with shredded membrane and the false backs of cupboards and skylights and holes in the wall. A dark room hung with burning kites. The death of the hollow age...’)

She smashed head first into the slippery flesh at the bottom of the pit, the impact, throwing her on to her back, gasping for breath. The air was cold and crystalline, perfectly clear. For a while she stared numbly at her hands, at her arms, at the body to which they were connected. They were an absolute black, sucking in the light that seemed to be beaming from her eyes like searchlights. She turned the light on her surroundings:

Clawed hands affixed to forearms sprouted around her like particularly noisome flowers, their flesh rotted away to expose new, white bone and fragile tangles of veins, lymph ducts and even the wisps of motor neurons. They snapped at her, plucked at her, threatened to haul her down into her midst and engulf her.

‘No,’ she cried, struggling against their slithery and clawed embrace. ‘Let me... let me go!’

An explosion of energy burst from her, blasting the obscene skeletal limbs to shreds - the force of it opening up a great rent in the membranous wall of the shaft.

Lights swirled through the hole, spinning slowly about themselves in complex, fascinating orbits. Roz gazed at them in wonder, losing herself in their interplay. She rose from the charred remains of the clutching hands, and moved towards the light.

3

Benny in the Real World:

The barracks hut was still asleep when Benny (PFC-0188172-DB-0182-77-142-PROVISIONAL) woke up, the pale nimbus of dawn barely making its way through the unglazed but slat-shuttered windows. That was one of the useful hangovers from the nights spent sleeping rough in the woods. You tended to fall into a natural cycle of day and night — waking up when genes on watch for predators told you it was right to do so, rather than a Reveille carefully calculated by the military mind to be Too Early, whatever

time it actually was. Getting the jump on them was effectively the equivalent of five extra minutes in bed.

She was drowsily aware of a surreptitious wrist-timer alarm going off and the clumsy stumbling of a few people creeping back to their own bunks in the near darkness, but she paid them no heed. It wasn't any of her business. She was more concerned with flexing back and forth in her own sleep-warm bunk, trying to work some life back into muscles still cramp-locked from the training exercise the day before. Forty-five-kilometre route march, alternating single and double time, in full kit. It's a hell of a life in the army.

Benny possessed a remarkably accurate internal clock - not quite as accurate as the picosecond-synchronized atomic clocks used by the Space Legion, but near enough on the human level so that it was on the dot of five, so far as she could tell, that the lights clashed on and Sergeant Jani Scrimshaw, who in, the last weeks she had come to know and loathe with a passion unseen, came storming into the hut. 'All right, ladies, fingers out, it's another glorious day in this girls' army. Mess drill in four minutes so let's get - Not you, 0182-77-142 Summerfield.

Benny paused in the act of pulling on a pair of lace-up combat boots (intentionally contrived as a little extra difficulty in place of standard Trooper-issue snaplocked boots). 'Sarge?'

'No food for you. Report to the MO, seven hundred hours prompt. That means you get a lovely long lie in. Isn't that nice?'

The extra rest was welcome, the reason for it far less so. In a pattern that varied to avoid being predictable, but averaging every second morning, one of the members of the platoon would be called 'to see the MO'. Quite what went on with this nobody knew; rumour had it that it involved something called the Haze, but those who returned remained tight-lipped, and there was a new hardness about them that tended to preclude questions. Those, that is, who returned at all.

Benny surmised that this Haze thing involved some kind of psycho-conditioning. She spent her extra time in bed mentally centring on herself, sinking into her head and building what mental blocks she could, processes she had learnt from the Applied Psych classes at the Institute before she had skipped. She was stuck here for the duration, but she was damned if she was going to give them any more than she could possibly allow. As she dog-trotted around the perimeter of the parade grounds where the various strata of the platoon were drilling, she ran over a number of simple techniques that countered most forms of what she thought of as brainwashing: displacement, deflection and detachment. The focusing on one particular primary sense, whatever some other sense was telling you. Concentrating on some abstract thing like recalling a page of prose, or solving a quadratic equation, no matter what someone else was trying to make you think. The elevation of secondary senses: temperature, balance, joint positions, muscle and tendon stretch and pressure as opposed to the classic Aristotelian five. She did not care to which end conditioning might be the means - she was perfectly willing to fight for humanity with the best of them - it was the process of conditioning itself that she found unconscionable; she would rather die or be broken irreparably by it than submit.

4

Roz Dreaming:

Interlocking abstract forms against a deprisensory gulf - it was not a colour, not black or white, not even something that could be expressed as dark or light — it was the complete absence of colour in any form. Distinct objects seemed to hang, drifting lazily - she thought she could recognize what there were but the recognition slid away. It was as if they triggered something in the mind, which attempted to sort them out as images but collapsed under the weight of their impossible contradictions. She caught impressions of fabulously transformed fish, lanterns hanging from them on

poles, dead tables, eyes, telephones and barbed wire, monster doctors, rubber dolls, horses, walls and globes, bathtubs, skeletons, Vishnu idols...

It was only after a while that she realized she could fly. The realization had her dropping like a stone in panic, before the further realization that there was nowhere to fall. The dimensions here were skewed around in a way that she was unable to comprehend - she was somewhere else and she only knew that she could move through it. For a while she swooped and whooped through the abstract space, turning somersaults, lost in the joy of unrestrained kinaesthesia. So lost was she that it was some time before she realized that this impossible place was inhabited, that some of the objects that floated through it were in some comparative sense alive.

And when she finally did, she really wished she hadn't.

The creature was not vast, precisely - she was in a place where size had no meaning; it could be smaller than an amoeba or bigger than worlds. It was literally indescribable. She looked at it and images flickered through the mind behind the eyes, constantly mutating, splitting apart and crawling and re-forming, then only common factor being one of fear and revulsion: a squirming nest of spiders; a hulking, leathery form slathered with a viscous ichor; a great mass of clotted pus from the crust of which fresh discharge mixed with blood broke, like magma through the crust of a diseased Earth. A massive, putrefying head of the corpse of a little girl, pale hands hanging from the pupils of her eyes, tiny mouths opening on the skin of her lips like sores, each with a minuscule throat and tiny teeth, her body atrophied and hanging from the head by a string of vertebrae. A vision of smashing your mouth into a rough bright wall and scraping your teeth along its face at speed. Some stringy substance drooling from a barbed, bone needle. Enraged insects. Being buried alive, tearing off your nails as you scabble against the coffin's underside. Even a morbid and irrational fear of getting peanut butter stuck to the roof of the mouth...

Whatever you were frightened of, everything of which you were frightened, when you looked at it, that was what it was.

It had something. By what might have been its talons, or its tentacles, or insect limbs - whatever the thing used for manipulation - it clutched something with them, tearing at it, tearing it apart. Something bright. With a shock of recognition she saw that it was *human* - not in shape, it might have been a mind, or soul, or whatever those things might look like in this place, but it was something human.

(friends... I have friends who are in danger and I must...)

There was no sense of thought or decision involved. She simply dived towards the monstrous creature, her body singing, filled with an absolute and burning rage. Energy crackled through her. All thought shut down. She struck the thing and blasted through, bursting it like a high-velocity round fired through a rotten apple. The paraspace about her shattered, fragments spinning off in every null direction, leaving a blank and blinding whiteness that seemed to fill every sense, let alone that of mere sight.

She hung against bright nothingness. Nothing to see. Nothing to hear. Nothing to taste, or touch, or -

Something else.

A presence. Human. Male, she thought. Was it the human thing that she had 'seen' before? The human thing that she had tried to...?

(Oh gods... oh gods... where am I... where...)

It's inside, I think, she tried to say. The words seemed to come out like thoughts in her mind. They kept shying away, twisting into incoherence, no matter how hard she tried to control them: *It's dreams, I think. Something inside. A big light machine. Wake up, I think Big light. Have to remember. Who you are. Who I am. Big light have to remember. We have to remember. Time to stop. Wake. Up time. Time to wake up...*

The presence drifted closer. They brushed together. There was a jolt like a static charge earthing itself through the body, and-

And just like that, Roz woke up, and saw the thing that was looming over her, and screamed.

5

Chris in the Real World:

With no small degree of regret, Christopher Rodonante Cwej stowed his Patrol Adjudicator uniform in the locker. It was not so much affection for the items in themselves, more of a sense of loss for what they signified: a *rightness* and an ease of mind that you never missed until you realized that it was gone. It was like realizing that there were other people in the world besides your mother and your father, other places than the inside of your childhood home. When he had worn the uniform he hadn't had to think about who he *was*, because it was so patently obvious - he was one of the Good Guys. Leaving it behind was like leaving behind your childhood, and finding yourself out in the big, wide world, without being quite grown up enough to cope.

'Come on, kid.' He grinned at his furry, body-beppled, teddy-bear face (yet more childhood imagery, now he came to think about it) in the mirror set into the obverse of the locker door. 'You'll be talking about wanting to go back into the *womb* if you don't watch it.'

He shut the locker door and pressed his thumb against the pad to seal it. Every item of the uniform and equipment was tagged to his DNA signature, and he would be expected to keep it safe, whether he wore it again or not, until the day he died. Besides, there was a good chance that he'd be back inside the uniform in a couple of days, back on traffic patrol and firmly chastened for ever getting ideas above his station.

It was that last thought, or the possibility that the opposite of it might happen, or simply his innate cheerfulness resurfacing, but as he pulled on the heavy-duty polymer jacket of a Plainclothes Adjudicator - as uniform and distinctive, in actual fact, as the uniform he'd worn before, just better cut - he found himself whistling. Or, at least,

trying to whistle through pointed teeth implanted to set off his currently fashionable ursine appearance. He walked from the locker room and caught the riser, ascending through the Temple of the Righteous and whatever his new life might bring.

6

Roz Awake:

It was like the difference between wandering around a large but elaborate and cluttered room with a candle, peering at whatever one might find in the dim and flickering illumination, and simply switching on the light. She was back again, complete and whole, her memory intact up to the point on Zarjax where she had come face to face with a bug-eyed slimy monster and -

That was when she screamed.

The creature looming over her whipped seven separate manipulatory pseudopods, three eyes on stalks and what looked like a perfect copy of a human hand on a string back into its body. 'Is watch it matey Roz-person!' it squeaked. 'Is life out of lovely Sgloomi make go fright to bottom falling off!'

The intervening memories resurfaced. It was like remembering a headlong plunge into delirium - save that she could recall her words and actions through it, like a thread through chaos. She recalled the people she had met, the things that had been said —

(...in danger and I must...)

- and realized that, though her perceptions of them might have been faulty, an approximation of those events had actually happened. Whatever danger she was currently in was not hallucinatory. It was, so far as reality could be inferred, completely real.

'You're the one behind all this,' she growled at the alien creature. 'You've been doing something to my mind. Well I'm here to tell you that it hasn't worked. You won't get anything from me.'

Said alien creature seemed a little taken aback. 'Is not!' it squeaked vehemently. 'Is lovely Sgloomi Po what is name and is friend! Is on same side as Roz-type person and is not nasty-bugger want to do horrible thing. Is on same side.'

'Yeah, right,' said Roz. 'Prove it.'

The pseudopods of Sgloomi Po retracted and it lapsed into contemplative silence for a moment. Then without warning it warped itself into something monstrous that seemed to be all claws and slavering mouths full of teeth. The baleful orbs of what might have been eyes erupted from its remaining surfaces, like frog spawn squeezed through a grating, and glowed with a demonic inner light.

'Is true,' it snarled simultaneously from multiple larynxes. 'Sgloomi is extremely nasty villainous slimy evil monster of unutterably evil evil, and if Roz thing does not do precisely what Sgloomi say and listen to proper story, Sgloomi will bite off all soft bits and make gobbly munching mincy thing with! Okey-dokey?'

Roz considered her options. Strangely, this over-the-top performance from the alien had almost precisely the opposite effect from that which had probably been intended. Anthrocentric or not, Roz prided herself upon having a keen judgment of character, and anybody who could put on a performance like that could not be, she judged, a villain entire. Besides, at this point she had nothing to lose by playing along, and anything that might change her basic incarcerated situation could only be a gain.

'All right,' she said as Sgloomi Po retracted into what seemed to be its amorphous default state. 'I'll listen to you. Tell me what's been going on.'

'...is put electrode stop-thinky thingies on Sgloomi, and take in with everybody else,' said Sgloomi Po. 'But is make mistake-type thing and Sgloomi is too clever and moves thinky-things *around*. Is just pretend to be not thinky-thing. Is wait until robot-thing put Sgloomi in little room and go away, then sneaky-thing out and find room with Roz in. Is hearing that Roz not wanted and so is worried

As Sgloomi Po had almost impenetrably related events since she had last been what passed for conscious, Roz had been going through her clothes and then the cell for anything that might prove useful. She had drawn a complete blank: concrete wall and steel-plate door, the bench, the discarded headset electrodes of a neural damper and that was it. Her weapons and equipment had been stripped from her, and the cell was as bare as it had seemed when she had woken up. The door did not even have an excitingly technological computerized lock which might be shorted out with ease, given access to something metallic with which to do it. It was locked mechanically and entirely solid. Roz had listened to Sgloomi with slightly less than half an ear - until it mentioned the fact that it had wandered around whatever was outside looking for her.

'You were out there and you came in?' she said. Perhaps as a result of her tendency not to see alien life forms entirely as people, she had just assumed that Sgloomi had been brought in with her and dumped in a corner. 'How exactly did you get inside?'

'Is came in with this.' Sgloomi Po extended a thin pseudo-pod, the end of which transformed itself into a bony projection that might serve perfectly as the hasp of a key. 'Is lock door again so that nobody notice and see.' The Sloathe paused. 'Is what Roz looking at lovely brave Sgloomi like for?'

Through the door they found themselves in a plush-carpeted, curving corridor walled with oaken panels. Old-master oil and watercolour landscapes hung on the walls, spot-illuminated by antique brass light fixtures that were, in all probability, almost as expensive as the pictures themselves. Along the corridor, before it curved out of sight, could be seen an occasional table, on which stood a marble figurine, probably dating back to ancient Rome. The understated opulence was a slight shock after the Spartan steel and concrete of the cell.

They picked a direction at random and followed the corridor around, Sgloomi Po shifting into a more human form to make perambulation easier. They encountered no doors on the outer edge of what Roz suspected was going to be a large ring. The inner doors led, in turn, into a luxurious-looking bathroom with gold-plated plumbing and an alabaster tub, a closet packed with dusty junk and a large, extensive, automated kitchen. The automation worried Roz. While it went some way to explaining the fact that they hadn't met anyone yet, either servants or security staff, she couldn't believe that an establishment like this would go unprotected, and the sophistication of the automation in the kitchen suggested the security was also cybernetic, and might be very sophisticated indeed.

The third door they tried looked promising. It opened up into a very large chamber that obviously served as a lounge or parlour. One wall was entirely taken up by bookshelves, containing without exception antique, cloth and leather-bound books. In a corner, and vying with the library shelves for sheer available space, was a drinks cabinet stocked with every potable one could possibly imagine — provided one's imagination ran to crusted bottles, peeling, brittle labels and an exorbitant price.

Every item of the furnishings and ornamentation continued the general theme, save one object which seemed strangely out of place. It was a life-sized bronze-cast bust of a man, naturalistic - though bearing the slight but ultimately flattering stamp of a portrait paid for by the man it represented. The forms of the eyes (painted, as was Classical statuary in its original state) and the lines around the mouth were obviously the product of artistic convention rather than life.

'Looks like this is the guy who owns the whole shooting match,' Roz mused. 'I just wish I had clue one as to who the hell he's supposed to be.'

'The name, my good woman, is Bane. Randolph Bane.'

The voice had come from another direction than from the door through which Roz and Sgloomi had come. Roz spun

round to see that a section had slid silently back from the bookshelves to reveal a wall screen.

On the screen was an elderly, feeble man, in an archaic-looking three-piece suit, his face the spitting image of that of the bust, though at least half a century older, deeply lined and flaking, his eyes with the slightly crazed look the elderly get when they don't let them droop. Roz - who was still not quite up on her personal space-time differential - momentarily gaped.

'Indeed,' said Randolph Bane, his voice as clear as if he were speaking from the same room, 'you are right. And I consider it particularly ill-mannered for some utter stranger to invade my privacy - especially when my work is at such a crucial stage. Such things cannot go unpunished.'

Bane made no gesture or command but, on the instant, segmented tungsten tentacles burst from the walls, whipping themselves around Roz Forrester and Sgloomi Po and completely immobilizing them.

'Ah yes,' said Bane, regarding them. 'Your correction shall be long indeed. I have a mind to extend Eternity so as to prolong it.'

7

Chris Goes to Hell:

Cwej didn't bother to hit the suspect hard. You didn't have to hit hard to break the snout. There was a wet crack and blood gushed down to stain the man's skinny chest.

'Groke,' the suspect blubbered. His name was Tghan wa Wiggi - a Piglet Person and low-grade street *kif* dealer. Hardly worth the effort. 'Oo groke by dose!' Also pretty much a master of the bleeding obvious.

'Settle down, sonny.' Cwej produced the envelope he had 'found' behind the sofa, which Tghan wa Wiggi had technically not been holding at the time he had made the bust. 'Lot of stuff here. Looks like it- isn't even with intent to deal. Could be with intent to supply.' The difference was in degree, the effective difference being a multiplicative jump

in the number of blows in the flogging and years served in the Church's tanks. Tghan wa Wiggi looked desperate. There were now two practical options open to him. Unfortunately for all concerned he chose the wrong one.

'Listen,' he said. 'I can give you people. I can give you names and -'

'Hello?' Cwej rapped him sharply on the side of the head. 'Try again.'

Tghan wa Wiggi shrugged. 'Usual?'

'Triple,' said Cwej. 'Otherwise some people might find out you sort of tried to give them up.'

Cwej left the conapt and headed for the InterTrans, keeping an eye out for potential threat. Some years before a wave of mass psychosis had swept the Overcity, taking the psychometric-profiling division of the Church completely by surprise. The resources had not been in place to deal with it, and the result had been utter, bloody chaos. The knock-on effect had led to a sharp increase in the levels of violence and things had yet to fully settle down. A lone Adjudicator, whether in plain clothes or not, was an easy target for anyone who felt like having a pop, and Cwej was quite relieved that his shift was almost over.

In the Sector 7 Chapel, he met up with Martle and fell into step with him, strolling through aisles of the Temple that were quite by chance less frequented than others. 'No problems,' he said. 'The Widows and Orphans' Fund is healthy as ever.'

'I'm glad to hear it, Chris,' Martle said. 'Look for a little something extra when we spread it out.'

Cwej nodded. Fenn Martle had been his supervising Adjudicator years back, when he had first transferred to Plainclothes. He had shown Cwej the ropes and kept an almost paternal eye on him thereafter, giving him a hand up after he himself had made Subdeacon. Every operation of the Church worth talking about went through Martle - at least, every operation that involved the unofficial lining of the pouches of the Adjudicator on the street. He was a good

friend to have in your corner, what with the changes that of late split the Church into a number of factions, each contending for ultimate control of its forces.

Martle stopped by a drinking altar, made an automatic supplication and drank. His eyes, however, flicked from one end of the aisle to the other, making sure that they were effectively alone.

‘I hear that one of the lambs in the division has gone astray,’ he said.

‘Breen?’ Cwej said. Breen was one of the Novitiates, who had come straight into the investigative division of the Church without first getting a solid grounding on the streets. It was a measure the Church had been forced increasingly to adopt by lack of available manpower. ‘I know him. Friendly enough, just a bit too fond of being shocked to the knickers at the minor sins of the world. He’ll wise up.’

‘I hear a rumour that he might be Covert Ops.’

‘Really?’ Cwej became thoughtful. ‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. I usually have a nose for these things.’

‘Unless they’re running him on deep-cover.’ Martle shrugged. ‘Well, maybe he is and maybe he isn’t. I do know for a fact that he’s tried to make a couple of appointments with the Archdeacon, and he won’t take a telling. I’m minded of a partner I once had, nice girl by the name of Roz. She wouldn’t take a telling either, when she finally caught on. I think Breen needs to be told a bit *harder*, you get me?’

Cwej nodded. ‘I’ll take Carter and Doyle.’

‘You do that,’ said Martle. ‘Just make sure the body’s never found.’

8

Roz and Sgloomi in the Real World:

The robots were archaic: all hydraulics, hissing servos and whirring Waldo manipulators. They were of stainless steel and brass and lead-crystal glass, were functionally allowable hand-crafted and they had been built to last They were also,

once one was in their implacable grip, impossible to break free from, no matter how one might try.

After a while, Roz stopped trying.

‘I get the feeling,’ she said as she and Sgloomi were dragged along, ‘that this Banc guy is going to be trouble. He’s not going to just have us taken back to our cells and forget about us.’

This much was so patently true as to really need no telling. They had been dragged by the metallic tentacles through an opening in the wall, as perfectly disguised as the wall screen, to be taken into the charge of the automata. Thence they had been taken down through a gently descending tunnel that seemed to delineate a large and outwardly expanding spiral. The decor of the tunnel had initially been every bit as plush as the chambers above, continuing the idiom of oaken panels and antiques, but at one point this had abruptly stopped, as though somebody simply had got tired of the idea, to be replaced by rough concrete and old, occasionally flickering and buzzing fluorescent lighting. The ponderous pace of the automata and the lack of anything interesting to look at had begun to prey on Roz; she found herself growing increasingly bored with the tedium of it, and was talking simply to pass the time. The robots didn’t seem to care either way.

‘Was I unconscious long after you took the neural dampers off me?’ she asked Sgloomi. ‘I had some... well, I suppose you might call them dreams. Did I take long to come out of them?’

‘Is no time at all,’ Sgloomi said. The Sloathe was still in hir human form, seemingly, somehow locked into it. It had certainly made just as much show of struggling and failing to escape from the robotic grips that pinioned them as had Roz. ‘Sgloomi take head-thingies off, next thing Sgloomi know Roz going shouty-shouty and doing thing with eyes going all big like wide-mouthed frog.’

‘No time at all?’ Roz was slightly surprised. The visions, dreams or whatever they had been had been detailed and extensive. Even allowing for the perennial differential between dreams and reality, she must have experienced them

for a real-time hour or more. Was it possible that she had experienced them in the confusion before her capture?

No. When the monstrous creature that she had for some reason instantly recognized as 'Simon Deed' - without quite knowing why, in the same way one can't quite explain the instant recognition of the colour 'blue' - when Simon Deed had supposedly obliterated the *Schirron Dream*, she had seen all those around her drop as though hit by an electrocution bolt, had herself felt the charge from her spine to her nerve endings, but she had remained conscious if a little stunned. Admittedly, as some hangover from the chaos that was disrupting her long-term memories, she had thought that her name was Rochelle Kirkwarden, and that she was a member of an interstellar gang of eco-terrorists who smuggled viable foliage on to worlds that were fanatically Industrialist. But she remembered the physical facts of what had happened. She remembered the armed men breaking into the ship, hauling the others out and then, when they realized that she was not quite as inert as the others, slapping the neural dampers on her.

The point about dampers was that you *couldn't* dream or think in any cogent sense at all while under them. The brain did nothing more than keep the heart pumping and the lungs sucking. She knew all this because the Church occasionally used them, during the Penance of those rare psychopathic geniuses who, given the chance, would otherwise spend their time plotting how to escape with nothing more than their own spit and fingernails, and what they would do to any number of people after they did. It was impossible to think under neural dampers.

So that meant her dreams had to be in some way independent of thought. Or possibly, if she had experienced them in the split second of waking, independent of *time*? Had she travelled in some chaotic fashion in time, into the seething chaos of the before or after from the solid *now*? The thought of it made her head hurt. Time travel was impossible. It had been proved to be impossible any number of ways.

'Is coming something up,' said Sgloomi, breaking Roz from her thoughts. Up ahead of them, the tunnel was blocked by a set of shutters. As the automata and their charges approached, they opened up and out to let them pass.

The first impression was of space - a cavern walled with ridges, like a beehive in reverse. Roz realized that its walls were, in fact, the outer walls of the coiling tunnel from which they had emerged.

The cavern was filled with bodies, stacked on racks, surrounded by items of modular machinery and sprouting wires and tubes. With a start, Roz recognized several of the people she remembered from the *Schirron Dream*: the woman called Benny, the man called Jason, Chris. The majority of the cables ran to the centre of the cabin, terminating at a console of an odd design, situated just before the precise centre and a circular pit, from within which came a shifting, reddish glow.

The console contained the usual assortment of controls and readouts. Its oddness came from its centre, from which sprouted a stand like an antique chemist's retort, which in turn supported what appeared to be a large, highly polished egg of some golden substance if not actually gold. Nearby, slightly off to one side, a rack similar to those holding the other bodies supported what appeared to be a mummified corpse - a thing of grey and flaking leather, wasted away almost to the bone. As with the other bodies, cables sprouted from it - from a headset remarkably similar to the neural damper that had incapacitated Roz, and from electrodes buried in the flesh - and connected it to the console.

The strange thing was that even as an object, even as a horror-show corpse, the figure remained nondescript and negligible. The eyes seemed to slide from him of their own volition, the attention to wander. It was the visual equivalent, Roz thought, of the family retainers with which she had grown up; they became invisible unless consciously thought about, and, despite the best of egalitarian intentions, the

mind forgot them the moment there was anything more interesting to see...

To the other side there was a couch, of the sort used in hospitals for treatment, surrounded by medical equipment, blood exchangers, bioregeneration units, each item seeming almost prosaic compared with the other equipment in the chamber - not that this other equipment was entirely alien, simply that its function was not obvious. You could tell what the medical equipment was simply by looking at it.

The hospital couch supported what at first sight seemed to be a corpse as dead as the other - until Roz recognized it as the man they had seen on the screen in the parlour above, Randolph Bane.

In the flesh he looked even worse than he had on the screen. At one time he might have been a big man, strong and virile, the kind of dynamic and charismatic wielder of executive power such as most of those with executive power privately imagined themselves to be. Now the flesh had atrophied to stringiness, the skin seamed with the scars of implants and grafts, its elasticity lost to the point where no degree of cosmetic surgery could fully hide the joins. He was plugged into the medical units, which were obviously working overtime. As the automata hauled Roz and Sgloomi through the cavern, their splayed hydraulic feet picking their way between trailing cables, Bane stirred, and with an effort sat up to regard them with his slightly crazed-looking eyes.

They were the eyes of a man willing his body to function, to stay alive in spite of all the physical evidence. Looking at them, Roz was reminded of the age-old definition of the fanatic: redoubling the effort when one has long since forgotten the original point.

'You are come to witness my hour of triumph?' he said in an ageing, slightly vague and slightly tremulous voice. He seemed for the moment to have forgotten who Roz and Sgloomi were, and why they were here. Then he remembered. 'Ah, yes... the imperfections in the Material. The Subjects who Proved Unworthy In my Sight.' The capitalization was obvious in his voice - and Roz started to become worried

indeed. People who tended to throw in capitals as if they had an extra box of the things tended to be ultimately madder than a lemon-scented rat on a pogo stick.

‘I see now,’ Bane continued, ‘that my first Estimation was indeed Correct.’ He waved a liver-spotted hand negligently at the automata. ‘I shall deal with Them in the fullness of Time, once the Conversion is complete.’

The automata remained stock-still, having not been actually ordered to withdraw. Bane lapsed back on to the couch, muttering to himself in a way reminiscent of the kind of grandparent whose favourite chair, after his or her demise, would have to be thoroughly cleansed and fumigated, if not taken out and burnt. The moving parts of the medical units accelerated a noticeable notch, compensating for movements which, at this point in Bane’s degeneration, must have called for some extreme degree of exertion. Bane lay there, exhausted, nodding feebly in the warm and firelight-like glow from the pit, only occasionally turning his head to regard with a kind of senile triumph and love the golden egg that sat atop the console.

He seemed to have completely forgotten about Roz and Sgloomi again. Roz had no idea whether it would be a good idea to remind him of their presence or not - in this erratic state he would be capable of simply snapping and having the both of them killed there and then. Eventually, she decided that if she was going to get any sort of explanation at all, she’d have to risk it. She opened her mouth to speak... but Sgloomi Po had beaten her to it.

‘Is wondering and most very interest-type thinky things,’ the Sloathe said, gently, hir tone an absolutely perfect copy of that used by a psychiatrist or psychologist to elicit answers before the subject for questioning had even realized that questions were being asked. Roz could never have managed to simulate it so perfectly - she thanked Oberon that the Sloathe seemed to be a natural mimic, attendant innate irrationalities of syntax or not.

‘Is very much like to hear-see what it is that happen,’ Sgloomi continued. ‘Is like to know in full is fullness of the works of Mr Bane type-thing

‘Yes,’ Bane said, absently, his mind on whatever was actually happening inside his head, more or less as one might absently explain the techniques utilized in the painting of a picture, or explain the tricky manoeuvring of a vehicle, articulating the basic process as one performs it. ‘I can see that people must know. There must be witnesses to see, and to remember, to tell the tale when I have passed through Elevation. There must be some to proselytize the New God...’

9

Benny in Hell:

Colonel Summerfield (0188172-DB-0182-77-142) gazed absently from the window of her quarters in Camp Beldame as she adjusted her uniform, straightening the cap and the alignment of the medals over her breast, working by sense of touch that was a far better indication of physical neatness than any image in a mirror. Through the window she saw mannered, manicured countryside: a sunny blue sky and cumulonimbus. A little brook trickled through pastures and woodland broken by hedgerows, weathered timber fencing and the occasional stile. The wheel of an old mill turned ponderously in the waters of the brook. A flock of sheep drifted aimlessly, occasionally bursting apart and re-forming in complex interrelated whorls at the urging of a pair of dogs under the command of the distant figure of a shepherd.

The holowindow had been installed at the behest of the previous incumbent. Commandant de la Salle - part and parcel of the distressing trend towards sentimentality that had eventually resulted in his purging by the powers that be, and the recommendation that his place be taken by an experienced Line Officer, who would treat the business of the camp with the importance it deserved. The window would have to be torn out as soon as possible, Summerfield noted.

Commandant of a Reclamation Camp might have been seen as something of a downgrade for a War veteran with a string of commendations as long as your arm, but Summerfield knew that the position was merely temporary. She was here as a troubleshooter, to get things back on an even keel after the lassitude of de la Salle, and then it was back to the sharp end. Promotion into Central Command, even the War Council itself had been hinted at, and a quick turnaround here might be just the thing to put on the shine.

There was a tentative knock on the door. 'Come,' Summerfield snapped perfunctorily.

The door slid back to admit a Sergeant of the Guard - not precisely the procedurally correct adjunct for an inspection, but the Captain of the Guard was unfortunately detained. Or rather, five minutes after her arrival, Summerfield had hospitalized him in the course of discipline for a sloppy turnout when greeting a superior officer - mutilating his face in such a way as to make it unclear if it had actually sported a stray hair of stubble or not. The effect of the captain's punishment upon his underlings was more than worth any shred of satisfaction that might be felt by the Clients themselves, at any injury done to a senior member of the custodial administration - any satisfaction the Clients might feel was, in any event, going to be brief indeed. That was what the coming tour of inspection was calculated to achieve.

As it was, the sergeant — a grizzled veteran with an artificial hand and eye, of the sort that were of correct military issue and did not attempt to hide what they were - stood stock-still, at rigid attention, the insignia on his spotless, razor-creased uniform spit-shined to within a micron of its life. His face remained hardly impassive, the manner innate rather than of one too frightened to move. Summerfield liked the looks of him. The captain had been a prissy little pencil-pusher, a pasty faced near-youth of the sort who had enough family influence to land him with a sinecure like the camps, not enough to keep him out of the Legion entirely. Summerfield tagged the sergeant as a possible replacement on a permanent basis when - as she

knew with a sudden premonition - the captain unfortunately failed to recover from his wounds.

'What's your name, Sergeant?' she said. The Guards at Camp Beldame wore nothing to personalize them to the Clients.

'Jelks, ma'am,' the sergeant said.

'You'll call me *sir*. *Ma'am* still does not carry quite the proper respect, even now. That's the last time I'm going to mention it.'

'Yes, sir.'

Summerfield nodded. 'I believe we're ready to begin the inspection.'

They left her quarters and were joined by two of Jelks's men. As they crossed the compound, Summerfield indicated the razor wire of the fence. 'I assume that this is charged.'

'Yes sir,' said Sergeant Jelks. 'It's a useful example for anyone who might want to try their luck.'

'I have a better example. Have the charge switched off. I expect you to make *damned* sure that nobody will ultimately escape. Set up a force wall further out and out of line of sight if you have to. You look like you have something to say. Speak up, man.'

'I was going to say, sir, that that'll lead to a rush of Clients trying to go over, even though they know that we'll be on our toes and that it's pointless.'

'Quite so,' Summerfield agreed. 'I want the bodies relatively intact, not fried to a crisp. Then I want you to take the bodies, take their heads off and waistcoat 'em -'

'Waistcoat, sir?' asked the sergeant.

'Use your imagination, man. It's perfectly obvious. And then I want you to hang the torsos on the wire and leave them there indefinitely. That's the sort of example I'm talking about. Are we clear. Sergeant?'

'Clear, sir.'

Summerfield allowed herself to warm to her theme. 'The problem with processing *humans*, rather than aliens, is that they still can't quite believe it's happening, even when the ash goes up the furnace chimney. They react inappropriately.'

We have to instil a realization, a sense of terror. To treat the stockpiled Clients humanely, as it were, is simply counter-productive.

The extermination lines are anything but arbitrary — they're about as arbitrary as the eventual death of every one of us. For the Clients it's the dying-of-old-age-in-bed upper limit. And since, for them, that limit has been drastically lowered, the level of our own arbitrary cruelties must be drastically raised. There is so little time, after all, in which the uncertain can occur.

It is not enough, for instance, Sergeant, should a female Client offer her life for her child, to simply kill the child and then her. One should wound her mortally, allow her the flare of hope, then torture the child to death before her, before she dies. That's just a simple example. I envisage potentially infinite progressions. I believe, however, that a more practical example may suffice

They had paused, briefly, in the shadow of the covered traction belts that ran from the loading bay to the reclamation plant. Now Summerfield set off, with the sergeant and the guards in low, towards the long, low sheds in which the Clients were stockpiled.

10

Bane in a World of his Own:

What does it profit a man if he gain the world but lose his soul? It profits him the *world*, of course. Don't ask stupid questions.

Randolph Bane had owned such a world: everything upon which his eyes rested was his, his every thought found concrete expression, to do with as he willed. With holdings that spanned a significant span of Earth, with interests on a thousand planets, with minions in their millions to perform his will and his alone, how could it be otherwise. To be sure there were other 'worlds' which he could not control directly - but Randolph Bane did not count them. *His* power, *his* influence was sufficient unto itself. *His* world, of which he

was the arbiter, the guiding tight, the - not to put too fine a point upon it — God.

Even so, his godlike powers could not change the laws of thermodynamics and the irreversible processes of biology. Entropy tends to increase, metabolism tends, inexorably, to catabolism. The young grows old and withers, leaf and branch and stump. With the passing years the realization dawned on Bane that he was growing ever closer to the point where even the best medical and regenerative therapies that money, power or influence could buy would fail him, leaving nothing but the prospect of a final dissolution and mere oblivion.

It would be a mistake to assume that, with his all but godlike power, Randolph Banc imagined that he had the *right* to live. It was simply that he damned well didn't want to *die* - and that he had the resources to do something about it. Other aspects of his empire collapsed as he sucked them dry and poured all his wealth into the search for longevity if not immortality. Breakthrough after breakthrough was made - processes Bane held jealously to himself, not out of anything quite so active as malice, but simply that he didn't care about anybody else. This was evident in the recent War, when under the guise of providing medical and psycho-conditioning assistance to Spacefleet, Bane's companies had availed themselves of what was, in effect, a captive collection of warm bodies for research. A significant number of those 'missing in action' had gone missing as a result of something quite other than the fighting - though they were now just as dead as if they had been.

The thought of sharing the discoveries and enhancement his riches had brought about simply never occurred to him. The basic fact of his ethos for controlling his vast industrial and commercial empire - his minions carrying out his orders without a second thought, applying their initiative only within those orders - meant that only the merest scraps of benefit made it out into the galaxy at large.

Each new direction proved, ultimately, a dead end. The searching tendrils that were in a sense an extension of Banc

himself cast about ever more frantically, in increasingly improbable, manic and some might say preposterous directions. Faith healing, alchemy, magic...

The breakthrough came with the discovery of the Egg together with certain related alchemical texts, in the remains of the Grey Museum of what had once been called the Shadow Directory - a covert organization supposedly shrouded in the deepest secrecy; but Bane's own organizational resources had proved more than adequate to obtain the item in question. Bane's technical, theological, archaeological and linguistic staffs had worked for decades to crack the alchemical codes and discern the true functions of the Egg and, like the Philosopher's Stone, the Egg had at last turned their labours into gold.

The Egg was not a source of power in itself, merely the control mechanism for directing and controlling extra-dimensional energies as incomprehensible in their magnitude as it would be impossible to count, by increments, to infinity. The channel for such forces was the mind of Man itself - although it had to be a specific, precise kind of Man. Consciousness is inextricably linked to the very fabric of the universe, and there was a certain sort of mind, a precise alignment of the electromagnetic impulse-web of the brain, that constituted a 'thin' region of space-time, through which these energies could travel.

The impact of these energies affected the quantum process of the universe itself, and, by judicious manipulation of the controlling Egg, these changes could be controlled. The Egg was the key. Randolph Bane existed in a universe that, by its very nature, insisted that he must at some point die. So Bane decided that he must change the basic nature of the universe itself!

A personnel search through all the millions he commanded resulted in the preliminary Subject: a man named Simon Deed, a nonentity to the point of abstraction, almost literally a hole in the world. Although he had been in Bane's employ since birth, being born into a Corporate family that were little more than chattels. Deed had barely made so much as a

mark on the personnel records. He had actually been located only by the conscious act of turning everything anyone could possibly want to look for on its head.

Bane caused Simon Deed to be brought to him, and by application of electroneurological processes that had been known, in crude form, as the Haze he had obliterated Deed's mind in the precisely correct manner. Deed's mind had already been sociopathic and tending to catatonia; Bane's processes regressed it to a point in the past and applied the necessary stimuli, twisting Deed's subsequently remembered life to a perceived 'present' where his already feeble sense of identity was obliterated. Deed's mind shattered under the strain and imploded, and opened up a conduit for the forces *outside* of reality.

The process had proved less than perfect, however. Deed had been the best subject available to Bane, but was not quite good enough. The reality-changing forces unleashed had been localized and relatively minor, able to change the nature of the universe only over a radius of kilometres, and each change was corrupted by the last vestiges of Deed's minimal personality and mind. This partial success, however, had provided Bane with the tools he needed for his ultimate plan. He could use Deed as his Animus.

He expanded his search of suitable subjects - and found them of a whole other order. There were certain people who were displaced in time, or who had originated in a different set of dimensions entirely. These people, when put through the same process of Conversion as Deed, would provide energy conduits so powerful in comparison that they might as well be stars against a single atom. With subjects such as these, the transformation of galaxies would be in Bane's grasp.

Such potential subjects were independent and erratic, however. Bane would have to be circumspect. He would have to lay a trap, wait for such people to come to Earth at random, ensnare them in realities created via the remains of Simon Deed and hope, thereby, to lure in others until a critical number of subjects was achieved. Then, channelling his own

identity and control through the Animus-puppet of Deed, he could spring the trap and gather them in.

The plan was slightly more complex than that, involving the escape of some to draw more in, the pulse-pumping of subliminal images to convince these others of a disruption that did not yet, to any significant extent, exist. But the day would come when enough were gathered, the preliminaries complete, and Bane could transform the universe - or so much of the universe as was comprehensible to Man, even a Godlike Man such as Bane - into one where he didn't have to die.

For a long time Roslyn Forrester and Sgloomi Po remained silent.

'And that's *it*, is it?' Roz said at last. 'You bring us here, you mess us all about, you kill, and you destroy minds, and you're getting ready, so you say to destroy the universe - just so's you don't have to bloody die? That's *it*?'

'Is to be careful, Roz,' Sgloomi said in a worried undertone. 'Is Bane feller two pennies short of big special artichoke, if any judgment-type thing by Sgloomi Po...'

'Balls.' Roz snorted and turned her attention back to the medical units and Bane. 'I've got two words for you, sunshine. People die. And here's eight more for you: Get used to it, you senile old git!' She tried to wave a hand at the racked bodies, forgetting momentarily in her anger that she was still restrained by the automata. 'You can't treat people like this.'

Not the most sophisticated and cerebral of lines, she'd be the first to admit, but she was not exactly in a mood to be cerebral. She was simply burning with an absolute and unthinking rage at the abuse of power, the strong misusing the weak. It occurred to a detached part of her mind, however, that this might not be a particularly useful approach towards an old loony who could have both her and Sgloomi Po ripped apart by large and nasty automata at the merest gesture or word.

Bane, it seemed, though, was still lost in his reverie. 'The process of Conversion is more sophisticated, now, more

refined. More precise. I have taken each subject back into a perfectly recreated past, calculated so that one twist of it will send them to their precisely relevant hell, from which it is then extrapolated. One by one, their minds will destroy themselves utterly rather than continue to live. One by one the holes will open up, and through them will pour the energies I need to turn the world...'

He became aware again that he was not alone, though not, quite yet, with querulousness or animosity. 'Would you like to see the world that I shall make? The world in which I shall exist, perfect and eternal and in Life Everlasting? Would you like to *see*?'

He did not wait for a reply, but feebly waved a hand. As one, the automata holding Roz and Sgloomi Po advanced towards the pit in the centre of the chamber. For an instant Roz entertained visions of being flung into hellfire, but the automata came to a halt at the edge, allowing her to look down into the depths.

'Oh shit,' she said, in a small, hollow voice.

The pit seen up close and at this angle was a relatively shallow crater. It was lined haphazardly with more than a thousand screens, of every age and technological state, from ancient cathode rays to holostill displays. Each screen showed a section of an overall image, so that in the sum of their parts they showed it prismatically fractured but

It was the vision Roz had seen before waking in her cell: an abstract, interlocking crystal metastructure that stretched to infinity, overlaid with the flickering, constantly transforming forms.

This was mere background. The foreground was filled with a swarming mass of creatures, of the sort she had encountered when she had saved what might or might not have been a human soul. Creatures so foul, so inimical to humanity that the mind could not bear to assimilate them, mutating their image into vision after vision of escalating nausea and horror.

They swarmed in their millions, squirmed together like maggots in ajar. Whether the fractured image on the screens

was a representation of something that might happen in the abstract or on the cruder, physical level Roz neither knew nor cared. The obscene creatures scabbled and hammered and gnawed at the wall of screens, as if they were trying to burst through, desperately longing to come through. Waiting to come through and eat the world.

11

Jason in Hell:

At the end of the street, Jason realized the vodka bottle was empty and that he was dying for a slash. It was a simple matter of putting two and two together. It was too exposed and public out here on the main road, even at two in the morning, to piss up against a wall. He had an empty bottle, so he unzipped his fly and tried to piss into it. This was somehow easier said than done. He couldn't get inside it properly and the piss sort of sprayed out, like from a hose when you put your thumb over it in the garden back at...

He dashed the half-bottle against the wall of someone's garden and put himself away, shaking his hands to get rid of the worst and then wiping them on his jeans. Fuck it. It wasn't as if there was anybody around to pull. A couple of cars went by, one after the other; he glared at them, daring them to stop and make something of it, but they speeded up just before they went past. Jason flipped a finger at them (people sometimes stopped when he stuck out a thumb, saving the four and a half odd miles to Backton when the buses stopped running at five).

He couldn't quite remember how he'd got here. Some pub Or other, and then he was *certain* he remembered being shoved out of the queue for a club 'cause of the half-bottle he was trying to take in to save money, and after that, not a blank, but a kind of confused fast-forward. Flashes of clearness, smacking into a pavement after tripping on the kerb, black grit jamming into his hands. Story of his life.

After that night, after his father had gone for his mother, and he had somehow managed to get in the way and had

picked up the kitchen knife - that was when things had first started to seriously blur. Before that, if he'd wanted to, he could have taken everything in his life and made a sharp, clear picture; afterwards things fell apart and stopped fully making sense. A confusion of being taken to the family solicitor and then being allowed to stay home for months, and then the remand centre, and smacking the queer who came into his room, which was somehow *worse* than why he was there in the first place and had him staying there longer. Scabies. The first hint of smoke off the Felixstowe line that was a freebie. The wet rot that made the paint come off in flakes. The sound of things scuttling up in the lath. The pool of burning lighter fluid in the chained-up underground cavern that had once been Dukes, under the roundabout near a smoked-glass building with a swimming pool, lit up from within like a fantasy citadel...

The moments of clarity, he was dimly aware, the step-by-step of them, Strung together in a way that still made some kind of sense without drink. That was why he drank, he supposed. When you came right down to it.

It was later. The chill of the night had seeped into the back of his neck, bringing with it a different kind of clarity - the kind where you remember what happened, what you did and said, without quite remembering what you felt and *why*.

He thought of Liora, how they had met that drunken night in Jades, and screwed outside and somehow stuck together; how they had *been* together, curled together until benefit-capping do you part, and how he couldn't think of anything to *say*, but how she seemed to know what he meant, anyway. Even when he'd had to smack her, she had known that was because it was how he felt, and it wasn't her fault, and that it was nothing really to do with her. And he hadn't done it much. And he *hadn't* really hurt her. He *knew* what hurting felt like, and it hadn't been like that. It hadn't felt like that at all.

After the restraining order, after he had realized that she would not be coming back for the clothes and other shit she had left behind, he had taken a long, hard look at himself

and realized how he had acted, what he had done. What he had thrown away. If he could only have a second chance, if he could just, have a chance to *explain*, he could make things right again. He could change. He could make her see and make everything all right.

Days were filled by spending as much of them as possible in bed, drifting out of sleep and forcing himself back - he knew it was stupid, like trying to evoke a kind of sympathetic magic, trying to recreate the times when he woke up and she was there in bed beside him. Nights were spent in the few places they had gone when they went out together: the pubs and Backton's grand total of two clubs; the homes of friends, which, he had long since learnt, were the homes of the people who had been *her* friends. It wasn't that he was hoping to bump into her by chance, precisely - he knew that she must be avoiding him - it was more that she must know where he'd be, and at some point turn up so they could talk.

It wasn't as if he didn't know where she was. He'd known that for a week now. A couple of girls in the Phoenix (straight for years, now, after the couple of queers who owned it had nearly gone bust, and had finally wised up to what normal people wanted in a place like Backton), whom he vaguely recognized as friends of Liora's younger sister, had kept looking at him and obviously talking about him. In the lull between two mixes, and quite by chance, he had caught one of them using the word *refuge*. It had gutted him. He had just assumed, without checking up on it, that she had gone back to her parents in Gaventing. Things between them hadn't been anything like so bad that she would have to go into a *refuge*.

The thing was, Backton wasn't a city, or even a really large town. It had one place that could be described as a Women's Refuge, on the Chaterham Road, run by a couple of old dykes from London, who had moved there in more or less the same way as had the queers who owned the Phoenix. It wasn't exactly official, but the social services had been known to refer people there since it Was, basically, the only game in town. Jason remembered his mother taking him

there once, one afternoon, years ago, in an abortive attempt to check it out. He knew where it was.

Now, he realized that he was standing on the Chaterham Road. He still could not quite recall how he had got there, but that didn't really matter. The drink had worn off. He was stone-cold sober. She might be here or not, she might want to talk or not. Either way, it couldn't hurt to see.

The bell for number 44 was of an old type, like half a marble in a metal flange. When he pressed it he thought he heard a mechanical clacking somewhere deep inside the house, but he couldn't be sure, so he knocked. Nothing seemed to happen so he knocked harder. A splinter from the frame buried itself in one of his knuckles. He swore and started kicking at the door, feeling with a kind of vague satisfaction that it gave a little, at the lower right-hand corner, with every kick.

The door was wrenched back, blasting him with light. A menacing, bulky figure loomed at him shouting, 'It's three in the bloody morning, I've called the -'

Jason struck out blindly and unthinking, smacking the figure full in the face and it went down as though pole-axed. Later, thinking back, he recognized it: it was the mannish-looking woman who had once given him a sort of lemonade she had made herself, showed him her axe-tattoo and had seemed like an amiable giant. She was older now and shorter than he was - she had seemed like a giant, now, only because he had moved back off the doorstep. He barely gave the fallen body a glance as he dived into the hallway.

It had shrunk and been redecorated since the one time he had seen it. He charged up the stairs shouting Liora's name. Possibly it was something that he couldn't consciously recognize like her smell, or possibly there was some actual but intangible bond between them - either way, he *knew* where she would be. He went past two doors without looking at them, kicked open the third.

She was there, wearing nothing but a large, loose T-shirt with the word BOBOX printed on it in blocky letters, caught at a shocked, stricken point between coming to see what the

noise was about and cowering back in fright. Defensively, in her left hand (she was left-handed) she gripped a half-full glass bottle of mineral water, bottom outwards so that she could use it as a club if need be.

Jason looked at her as if in revelation. She had never told him. She had never told him and he had the fucking *right* to know...

In that instant he stopped thinking. All he could do was feel. He hurt so much that all he could do was show people how *much* he hurt. The bottle glanced off his shoulder, but he hardly felt it. He was too busy driving his fist, with all his weight behind it, into the slight but obvious bulge of Liora's belly that had hurt him the most.

12

Things Breaking Out:

In the gardens in the geodesic dome that protectively surrounded the bunker of Randolph Bane, the *Schirron Dream* sat, quite dormant, at a point between the fishpond and the ersatz Zen garden, having been deposited there by automated haulage vehicles remarkably similar to those that transported Gemini rockets from their hangars to the launching pad in the later twentieth century. If she was alive, she gave no sign of being so. If she was asleep she gave no indication if she dreamt, or what she...

Something inside woke up. A number of lights on the consoles in the bridge blinked and rippled. Certain adjustments were made. Something, after a fashion, began to think.

'Roz? Is Roz all right?'

Roz realized that she had been staring at the image on the screens for some time now, quite how long she was not sure. It was as though her mind wanted to lose itself in horror at the squirming creatures, sink itself into fear in a way that was almost luxurious. She shook her head, attempting to

clear it. ‘Sgloomi?’ She frowned. ‘You seem to be getting a bit more coherent, Sgloomi.’

‘Sgloomi can always be coherent,’ said the Sloathe tartly, but still keeping hir voice low. ‘Sgloomi just playing silly buggers so as Bane-man underestimate.’ Roz turned her head to see that Sgloomi, still in human form, was rippling slightly. ‘Is same way that Sgloomi really don’t *need* to keep the monkey-hominid form.’

Roz looked at hir and counted slowly to ten. Then she counted to ten again. ‘Do you mean to tell me that you can change your shape and get out any time you like?’

‘Is possible,’ said Sgloomi. ‘But Sgloomi isn’t strong enough to free Roz. Roz be in big danger if Sgloomi just escape.’

Roz nodded to herself. That made the sort of sense she liked, on account of how it resulted in her keeping her life and all her limbs more or less intact. The fact that Sgloomi could get away from the clutches of hir restraining automaton, though, gave them an edge. What they needed now was some kind of plan with which it could be capitalized upon. ‘If only,’ she mused, ‘we could get our hands on some sort of weapon. Even a maintenance laser cutter would do. Have you noticed anything like that around that you could reach?’

‘Is nothing like that.’ Sgloomi paused thoughtfully. ‘How about knife and gun-thing what is yours?’

If she hadn’t already recently gone insane and then sane again so she knew what it felt like, Roz would have thought in that instant that she was going mad. ‘What?’

‘What about gun and knife-thing. Sgloomi find them when looking around for Roz and secreted about Sloathe person. For later.’

‘I don’t suppose,’ Roz said, with an icy, perfectly controlled and murderous calm, ‘that it ever occurred to you to mention that before?’

‘Is not mention,’ the Sloathe said, seemingly genuinely puzzled. ‘Is thought Roz knew or thought. *Sgloomi* knew...’

In her head Roz cursed and damned for all eternity all aliens, with an alien way of looking at things that could go for days at a stretch all unnoticed and then turn round and bite you hard. Out loud, she kept her voice low and calm, although it was an odds-on favourite in the stakes for the hardest thing she had ever made herself do in her life. 'I think that now might be as good a time as any to use them, Sgloomi,' she said. 'You know how to fire a gun, right? Well, what I want you to do is...'

It was at this point that Bane, who had been muttering to himself all the while, suddenly galvanized himself into action, with the erratic lucidity and purpose of the senile. He shuddered, stared at Roz and Sgloomi, still dangling half over the pit from robotic claws, and began to snarl.

'What are these *objects* doing here?' he spat. 'Remove them.' This obviously to the automata. 'Remove them from my sight and eliminate them.'

'Now!' Roz shouted as the automata began smoothly to comply. 'Do it now!'

The *Schirron Dream* was fully awake now. It would be a mistake to assume that she conceptualized in a manner applicable to humans or any generally humanoid being. Perceptions of position, and whether these were favourable or unfavourable, something to be desired or shunned, simply fell into place. The *Schirron Dream* was merely aware, if such it could be called, that things that should be inside her weren't, and that these things were somewhere else.

She contemplated the position of these things. She intimated the other things that were between her and those things. She complicated the composition of the things that were between. She contemplated things that she could do to those things.

Silently, the bluish glow from her propulsion nodes taking on a hue that had not been observed before, the *Schirron Dream* rose gently through the cramped space of the geodesic and reorientated herself.

(Brigadier-General Bernice Summerfield, following the collapse of Terran forces under the combined might of the Offworld/Independent alien and human colony-world alliance, has been convicted of Crimes Against Sentient Life. Her sentence, utilizing alien slow-time technology and an adaptation of the processes used by Terra in the Haze, is to relive via sensory immersion the deaths of those to which she directly contributed. The sum total of these deaths is in the tens of millions.)

For the second time in as many minutes, Roz was brought up short by a realization of the problems in dealing with alien perceptions at the sharp end. Sgloomi was staring at her, simply unable to work out, in the heat of the moment, what it was she wanted hir to do. Roz was saved only by way of a completely different set of nonhuman perceptions. The automata had been told specifically to take Roz and Sgloomi out of Bane's sight and *then* kill them - and they were still in Bane's line of sight.

'Shoot the robot,' Roz roared. 'Shoot the robot and shoot me free.'

It was as if Sgloomi Po had been wired to an electrical charge. Instantly hir human form dissolved and shot from hir restraining automaton's clutches. Simultaneously, a hole opened up in hir side and spat out several items of Adjudicator standard-issue equipment, including — gripped by a handlike, slick-looking pseudopod - Roz's MFG. There was the slam of a blaster discharge; Roz felt the bolt fry the hairs on the left side of her head as it went past, and something exploded behind her in a shower of sparks.

Fortunately the force of the impact was directed away from her the back of her head was merely stung and sliced by the blowback. The automaton lurched to a dead stop, immobilized.

A klaxon alarm began to sound. The noise seemed to fill the entire cavern.

Two further shots from Sgloomi (who had sprung back into a human form) took care of the claws seeming Roz's arms, and with more speed and precision than would have been possible for a human. Perhaps there was something to be said for alien reactions after all. Sgloomi now turned the gun to the automaton from which it had escaped and which was closing in on her rapidly.

Breathing heavily and trying not to think about how much damage had been done to the back of her head and neck, Roz glanced around herself - and saw something that made her wish she hadn't. Panels had slid back around the wall of the cavern, perhaps as a direct result of the alarm, and more automata were coming through them. For all their ponderous motion and the care they took to avoid the cables trailing from the stacked bodies, she judged that they would arrive in -

Something smacked at her from behind, taking more skin off her already abraded neck. She spun around to face the ravaged face of a madman.

Bane clawed at her with his hooked and palsied hands. He screamed at her, spraying her with foul-smelling yellow spittle, going for her eyes.

(Christopher Rodonante Cwej has fallen foul of the New Reformation, in which he has been found guilty of wholesale usury, extortion and several counts of homicide. The crimes, though true enough, are not the true reason for his downfall - they have been prosecuted as an official response to an attempted coup d'état by Cwej against the incumbent High Justice, Fenn Martle.

The punishment is to be excommunicated, branded, stripped and set loose in the Overcity's Underlevels. By a series of coincidences that might seem fortunate only in one sense, Cwej survives, with his life, for some considerable time.)

The engines of the *Schirron Dream* flared as she hung over the main mass of the bunker. Pencil-beams like lasers but of

a bluish hue that pulsed almost organically - seemingly the very stuff of the ship itself's own life - struck the tungsten skin over ferroconcrete and it began to vaporize. Keeping a tight rein on its energies to prevent the inadvertent destruction of the things it wanted inside it but were below it, the *Schirron Dream* began to bore its way into the bunker.

(Jason Kane is beginning the first day of a life sentence with a recommendation of thirty years without the option of remission. He will lose an eye, three teeth and half an ear within forty-eight hours, during a gang-rape incident involving four other inmates and the tacit approval of the guards. This will be the first of many such incidents. He will also contract HIV, but will remain unaware of this for several years, though the prison doctor will learn of his condition within four months.)

Bane might have been frail in one sense, but years of various rejuvenation treatments had given him a tough stringiness. It was like being attacked by the common idea of a vampire: all bone and claws and parchment skin.

'I am your God!' he screamed. 'Unworthy! Oh, you'll pay! You'll pay! Kill you make you go to Hell and make you dead!'

The automata horde was almost upon them. 'Try to hold them off, Sgloomi,' Roz snapped. She shoved Bane from her and ran for the console and the Egg. There was one way to end this - end it now.

'No!' Bane screamed, crawling after her. Something burst inside his lungs and blood and mucus sprayed from his mouth.

'Oh yes,' said Roz. 'Oh yes.'

The Egg seemed to hum as she neared it. She felt the tingle of its charge. She got her hands around it and the discharge knocked her back, spasming, things exploding in her head and tearing it apart. She forced herself to cling to it even as it killed her head. She hit the rocky floor flat on her back and forced herself to roll. With the last of her strength, with the

last of her will, she forced herself to her knees and dashed the Egg against the floor. It was more fragile than she had expected. It shattered instantly, clockwork spilling out and scattering.

* * *

(In the minds of almost fifty people, almost fifty artificially imposed dreams of hell shattered soundlessly, as they were wrenched out of their inner worlds like rotting teeth pulled from a head.)

From the crater came an almighty, multiple detonation as every screen exploded, whatever lay behind it lost to sight. The sound of the explosion, however, was instantly drowned out as all the bodies in the racks, every single one, lurched to life and screamed as if their lungs would burst, slapping and clawing at themselves *in extremis*.

From the remains of the Egg, jagged forks of what might or might not have been lightning burst. One of them struck the remains of what had once been Simon Deed. The corpse gave a shudder, and opened its eyes, and with a great lurch swung itself from its bier and, trailing the cables and electrodes punched into its flesh, walked toward Bane, who now sat numbly, the last of his insane strength gone, and lapsed back into dementia. The walking corpse of Simon Deed put his hands around Bane's throat. He had barely snapped Bane's fragile and calcified neck when a final discharge from the shattered remains of the Egg struck them both, obliterated them both.

For an instant, however, had anybody not been far too busy with their own concerns to see, know or care, it was as if the action had been reversed, as though a localized pocket of time were looping back upon itself.

Sgloomi Po had often wondered, when others had talked of hell, precisely what they meant. It was one of those human things that seemed to need no actual explanation, and the Sloathe had no concrete frame of reference. Now Sgloomi knew. As his numerous eyes simultaneously took in the still and possibly dead form of Roz, the screaming, jerking forms

of his friends Benny, Jason, and Chris, li Shao, Leetha, Kim and all his other friends and family... as hir eyes took in the electrical fires burning in the pit, the ululating shriek of the klaxon alarm and the fact that the automata had not stopped, that they were still converging, casting around, looking for something, anything to kill... as hir eyes took in all this, Sgloomi realized what hell really was. It was here. Sgloomi was in it. And there was no way out.

Sgloomi darted to the Mend who was nearest to hir. It was Benny. Sgloomi shook her with a tentacle, trying to snap her out of the screaming that racked her body. 'Is stop it! Please stop now!'

Abruptly, as though a switch had been thrown, Benny stopped screaming. She looked at Sgloomi with dazed, bruised-looking eyes.

'It wasn't me, you know,' she said in a perfectly calm voice. 'It wasn't.'

Then she started screaming again.

'Sgloomi!'

Hir attention focused on Benny, Sgloomi had momentarily forgotten about the others. Now he saw that li Shao, Kiru and Leetha were on their feet. They seemed groggy, near hysterical, but not as entirely debilitated as the rest.

'If this isn't reality then I don't want to know about it,' snarled li Shao. 'The last one was a complete rat's arse. If it hadn't been the last in a whole mad string of 'em I don't know if I could have handled it. This is much better.' lie looked around himself at the carnage, at the advancing automata and his face fell a little. 'Then again, I could be wrong. How in the Multiple Hells are we going to get out of this?'

And it was at that point that the roof of the cavern fell in.

It was a strangely gentle fall, merely what seemed to be a collapse of glittering dust, as though thousands of separate substances had been finely powdered and mixed together. From the huge hole that had opened up came a bluish glow - and a series of blinding, pencil-thin beams burst forth, each

to strike one of the advancing automata and destroy it utterly.

The brilliance of the beams faded back to a lambent, bluish but somehow warming glow, which seemed to pulse, slowly, like a massive, insubstantial heart.

And through the hole in the cavern roof, gently came the manta form of the *Schirron Dream*.

DENOUEMENT

RESET ENDINGS

The *Schirron Dream* hung over the whole, healed Earth - or, rather, it hung over an Earth showing the mould-like proliferation of jungle that now spread across most of western Europe - with the odd still-radioactive crater actually visible to the naked eye from orbit, the smudgy blemishes of combustive-waste smog, the haze of free radicals, the catastrophically chaotic weather patterns, the lack of any kind of ozone layer and a landmass that hadn't at the very least been split in two.

It was, in short, the world that they knew. The Earth from a time frame that at least a functioning minority of them called home.

The atmosphere on the *Schirron Dream's* bridge was subdued rather than anything else. A kind of pervading, quiet misery as those here probed the mental injuries they had sustained, like a tongue probing a broken tooth, finding some small comfort in a precise evaluation of the topography of damage. Making it real so that one could ultimately decide what to do about it: try to ignore it, or have it filled, or yank it out in its entirety.

As Nathan li Shao, Kiru and Leetha took their accustomed places at the controls, Jason lounged moodily at a spare console that had no important function - the attention and responsiveness, as it might be called, of the ship had moved away to the consoles manned by those who were supposed to be in control. At least li Shao, Leetha and Kiru now had something to do. Jason, now basically feeling like the spare leg in the trousers, had nothing to fall back on but the pain.

He had been taken to hell and, like the rest of them, he had been taken out of it again - but there was no way that

anybody else could understand that extra turn of the screw for him and himself alone. How it was to be sent to hell *by way of having a second chance*.

He made himself shrug and made things slide off, adding yet more to the mass of things that one of these days, as sure as eggs was protective avian embryonic support mechanisms, was going to come back and kill him stone-cold dead, if he was lucky. There was no way he was going to add to anyone else's misery at the moment by spreading his own around. It wasn't that he couldn't do it if he wanted to - it was just that it would put the tin lid on everybody's idea that it was something that he *could*.

He tried to think some Happy Bunny thoughts. Benny, for example. Even in the time when they had been going at it hammer and tongs, that aspect of them enhanced if not actively exaggerated by the disruption, he had still felt a connection - a deep sense of sympathy between them that might not have been entirely pleasant, far from it in fact, but might stand in for love until the real thing came along. After they had split up he had been certain, desperately, stridently certain that they would get back together again. It was impossible that they would not. It was only now that he recognized the elements of blind denial in this, a denial so strong that it was almost madness. Now he realized it, the feeling was replaced by a faint, but far more comforting and conceivable, hope. It was what he wanted more than anything else in the world, this or any other. Maybe it would happen, and maybe it wouldn't, but now he felt it to be at least a possibility rather than a flat *impossibility* that he had hysterically refused to believe. At least it was back on the cards.

As if to save him working this small and fragile sense of hope to death, the console before him lit up with an incredibly large number of communications signals. 'There's a whole shitload of people on Earth wanting to know who the hell we are, why we took off like a bat out of hell and what we want,' he said. 'Do we answer them? Do we want to go down again?'

‘What I want is to get out of this place,’ said Leetha from her position. ‘I’ve seen enough of this planet Earth to last me for the rest of my life.’

‘Several lives,’ said Kiru, calmly working a number of switches on his own console and seemingly as cool and sardonic as ever. ‘I agree.’

‘Certainly gets my vote,’ said li Shao from the helm. ‘And my vote’s the one that counts. We have a number of people to get home. Let’s go. Drop you somewhere, Mr Kane?’

‘I’ve got some unfinished business in the Catan Nebula,’ Jason said. ‘If it’s actually there and ever existed in the first place, of course.’

‘We can but hope.’

Roz had been laid out in li Shao, Leetha and Kiru’s cabin - the *Schirron Dream*’s medical facilities were overcrowded with members of the crew who had suffered mental damage during the abortive Conversion and physical damage during the exodus to the ship. Besides, Roz seemed to be suffering from a malaise that no conventional medical skills could heal.

‘Is she going to be all right?’ Chris asked, in the hollow tones of one who is certain that the answer is going to be in the negative. He sat on the bed beside Roz, gripping her hand in an immovable grip that would probably add severe spraining to the Adjudicator’s other injuries, should she ever recover sufficiently to notice. His own face was pale and there were purple trauma bruises under his eyes. There was also a hint of shamefacedness about him (he had confided, to Benny, earlier, mentioning something of his experiences in hell, that he was a little chagrined to find his soul to be so simple as to find its worst nightmare simply that of turning into a Bad Man).

Sgloomi Po, now lapsed into an amorphous blob so that it could concentrate upon producing some extremely sophisticated chemical processes within himself, pulled a needle-like pseudopod from Roz’s eye socket, through which it had been pushed up into the brain.

‘Is don’t know,’ it said, hir speech betraying a concentration that left little effort over for syntactic control. ‘Is have tried to repair brain-cell things, is make head better. Is have idea how should be - Sgloomi remember how Roz and Chris once make Sgloomi think and be real self. Is maybe think that Roz go back to own time, timeline pull her along and make Roz think things inside again and...’ Sgloomi paused, seemingly at a complete loss for words. ‘Is just don’t know.’

Benny sat in the *Schirron Dream*’s galley, staring blankly at a cup of what might be coffee or tea, or some synthetic stimulant beverage - she was too far gone to know or care. She was completely shattered. The hours since the ship had flung itself away from Earth she had spent helping those worse off and more badly wounded than herself in the medical bay. It was only when she reached the point where she couldn’t see, or think, or stand straight, and knew that she might do more harm than good by mistake, that she had made herself stop.

She hadn’t helped them purely out. of altruism. The taste of that *other* Bernice Summerfield, who could countenance the killing of millions on an industrial scale, the Bernice Summerfield who was not precisely *dead* inside, but hard and smooth and so unutterably cold, who was not *this* Bernice Summerfield through sheer happenstance... the taste of it was still in her mind. She had to wash it out.

She became aware of a presence in front of her. She looked up. A haggard Jason stood on the other side of the counter, watching her.

‘Li Shao’s going to be dropping me off soon,’ he said. ‘I just thought I’d drop in and say goodbye.’ His mouth curled up in a shadow of his trademark who-cares grin. ‘We’ll probably run into each other again, yeah? Next time I suddenly need my bum pulled out of the burner.’

A muscle in her face tried to twitch, attempting to return the grin of its own accord. It failed, but the attempt was there.

‘What are you going to do now?’ he asked her.

She tried to think about it. 'Back to wherever it was, I suppose. That place with the Lost Temples - where was it?'

'Lost Temples?' Jason said. 'Could be anywhere. Shokesh? Diorindi IV? Malanoor?'

'That's the chap,' said Benny with a sense of relief. 'Thank the Goddess for that. I was worried for the minute it had been... wiped, rather than me just being too tired to remember.' A nasty thought struck her. 'Everything seems to have reset back to how we remember it - but how far can we trust our memories? I mean, how much has been lost and we'll never know about it because we can't remember? How can we ever *know*?'

Jason shrugged. 'I don't think we ever can. I think we're all time travellers, even if we just go the one way. We're swept along by events, we have to do what we can and hope we don't screw it up entirely. Then we just have to count our dead, pick up the wounded and carry on.'

And the universe carried on, continuing on its merry way from Big Bang to Big Crunch. Some things were there that weren't there before, some things that had once been there were gone, and everything and everybody in it saw things and remembered things in a different way. Everything was different and everything the same. Such is the fate of universes, and everything and everyone in them.

In a tiny extradimensional fragment that had looped in upon itself and sealed itself off from the main fabric of space-time so that, in extradimensional terms, from the outside, it might look like a smallish and misshapen Egg, a man named Bane found himself living and reliving an instant, where the remains of a man who had been named Simon Deed snapped his neck, and snapped it again. And again. And again. In the dim thread of consciousness that survived this infinitely repeated process, he knew that he was here for all eternity, that it would never, ever end.

* * *

'Roz? Are you awake? Are you *there*?'

(...in danger and I must... must friends... danger friends help must in... friends...)

She surfaced from the chaos of dreams. Images of something black as night with burning eyes, shapes and faces, faces and names, jewels with lights behind them living in the Big Light, make the bind to tie it tight, say leave, don't leave me like an electric meal and -

(friends... I have friends and they are in danger and I must help them. I have...)

'Roz?'

Roz Forrester opened her eyes to see the concerned face of Fenn Martle looking down at her. Memory snapped into focus; the rush of events from the then to the now picked her up and dragged her along like some implacable automaton. She looked up at the Zarjax sky, turned her head to see the partition-side of some Fnarok structure. On the other side, another side. She was in the equivalent of an alley, Martle kneeling over her and touching her, looking down. Looking worried.

'What... happened?' her mouth felt mushy, not quite under her control.

'We were making our way out of the building,' Martle told her grimly. 'Then this thing grabbed you. I didn't recognize it. Looked bioengineered to me - maybe something bred up to use as an enforcer.' He showed her the tracker unit he carried, linked to the transceiver implanted under her sternum. 'I got a lock on you, but then I lost you. It was maybe ten minutes before I picked you up again.'

Roz hauled herself up into a sitting position with a groan - and realized that she was naked save for her undershorts and singlet. 'Oh shit. My stuff. My gun. The bastards got my *gun!*'

'Hey, don't worry,' Martle said. 'The sort of fire power some of those creeps out there have access to, an Adjudicator's MFG or two extra won't make any difference. There's no real damage done.'

Roz thought about it. The events of the past few days, while by no means a resounding victory, had not entirely

been a defeat. They had broken the pituitary-running Fnarok ring, and while their alien defences had allowed the perpetrators to escape, she had done the best she could in the circumstances and she could not be held entirely to blame. There would be an Prelatical Inquiry by the Curia, of course, but there was a fair-to-middling chance that they would weather it with little more than a smudge on their records. As Martle had said, no real harm had actually been done, and possibly even some good. At the very least, she would know better next time. As the initial shock of losing her weapons and equipment faded, she knew that she would find the strength to face the future, whatever the future might bring.

And life went on.

Exeunt all but Rosalind

ROSALIND (*to the audience*) It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue; but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue. If it be true that good wine needs no bush, 'tis true that a good play needs no epilogue. Yet to good wine they do use good bushes, and good plays prove the better by the help of good epilogues. What a case am I in then, that am neither a good epilogue nor cannot insinuate with you in the behalf of a good play! I am not furnished like a beggar, therefore to beg you will not become me. My way is to conjure you; and I'll begin with the women. I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you. And I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women, as I perceive by your simpering none of you hates them, that between you and the women the play may please. If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not; and I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell.

Exit

As You Like It, William Shakespeare, 1564-1616

APPENDIX

Jason and the Big Mauve Cloud of Stroky Fluffy-Nurture Love - A Real Life True Adventure

The basic structure and the function of the universe, as we have seen, suffered no more than minor, transitory damage due to the machinations of Bane and Project Ouranos. Certain minor fragments of quantum potentiality were indeed detached, flaking off like dandruff from the corpus of space-time, and just as little missed. Since nothing can, however, be ultimately destroyed, these fragments had to end up somewhere...

It started in alternative 27-943-D-17X-0071010.32.1 or thereabouts. Somewhere over there. (Unreconstructed 3D-types should imagine a pointing finger receding from you whichever way you look at it, but receding in a concrete and specific direction, which is vitreous and smells nostalgically of nitrous oxide, broken glass and glycol.) Don't blame me. You might as well ask how a quark can be suave and engaging and sophisticated as shit. It just does. 27-943-D-17X-0071010.32.1 is one of the tangential Zones, basically, where the substrata of the quantum mesh go a little schizophrenic on the quiet - like, you *know* the Machine Germans can't be controlling the inside of your head; it's just, like, that you can't get it quite straight in your mind because, you see, the Machine Germans are controlling your *head*. Things get a little dislocated and strange.

(Before the Fracture, before our particular little sheaf of supplementary reality peeled off and went weird, people were getting increasingly worried about the culture-shock inherent in their infotech: the dislocation, schizoid breakdown, the psychosensory overload of all those simultaneous

alternatives on a human mind that couldn't cope. You couldn't move, say those who know, for asinine and doom-laden quasi-fictions about a bunch of RISC-architectural counting machines hooked together on the phone. Printed on paper. The poor dears. The heart bleeds. *They* didn't have to deal with anything, much, for the simple reason that your basic, actual, physical experience was of ultimately sitting in a comfy chair, somewhere, with stuff plugged secondarily and electrochemically into the senses. Nowadays - and note the language-lag, even nowadays - nowadays we have to deal with the literal and physical *truth* of every available alternative happening at once.)

But specifically, in the Alternative of which I speak: it seems that two of the itinerant, nomadic, radium-driven *exo-k'Ans* who inhabited it were going at it hammer and tongs, thundering 'cross the steppe, crushing things and whatnot under iron heels or whatever the hell it is they actually *do* there - when a round mauve light, like tasteful, pastel ball-lightning, was seen to appear, seemingly out of nothing and nowhere. But then again nothings, if you haven't already noticed, ain't quite what they used to be.

It drifted across the landscape with the hiss and crackle of scorched-earth pampas, singing in, by all accounts, a dulcet and most soothing tone, before drifting into the left ear of a *k'An* Hetman - who promptly fell off his superheated, feather-and-leather-fetish bedecked traction engine, and went into spasm. He jerked and gurgled and clawed at his eyes. He juddered and thrashed on the ground.

And then he sat up, regarded his assembled lieutenants and minions and dragomen with a look of such unearthly, and not to mention rapturous, beatitude as to have any right-thinking man hunting around for the nearest handy claw-hammer, and said, 'Hey, guys, why can't we just stop all this fighting and shit and just sit down together and be *friends* with each other, yeah?'

And then he made that little quote-mark gesture with his fingers.

Of course, they took him out to the salty mud flats and waistcoated him; and cauterized the sockets with a flaming brand and tar, and bloody-eagled him and left him for the lugworms, but by then, of course, it was far, far too late. The damage had already been done.

I got the call as I was winding down in a dark bade room of the Fatigue Shebeen - way down in the electrogravitationally secure levels of Zero Control - which as we all know, when we're capable of remembering, is that one small island in the post-Fracture chaos where one can retain one's morphic signal and sense of identity without serious assistance. The stable Zone. The crossover Zone. The Zone to which, at some point on their disrupted lifelines, everybody comes.

The no-hope Pellucidean support had come and gone back to their hole, and I was taking in the sounds and absently cruising the freefloating interfacing node of one of the *gestalt* joy-luck troupes as They worked the room with Their universal connection sockets - the correct pronoun is, of course, They - when my connection to the Limbo Angels bleeped. Procedure said I should lock on and translate out. Instead I said, 'Listen, I'm on downtime. That business last cycle with the Albion Freikorp Special Service Agents and the Legendary Lost City of Mu was worth at least two semi-solid weeks of biomorphic bandwidth-lease, and I'm going to spend every last picosecond of it You tell Volan he can get some other sorry sod to do it.'

My contact wasn't having any of it.

'Volan wants you on this excision,' she said, 'and he wants you under personal control. He's waiting for you at the Inject Gate. In person.'

And that, of course, put an entirely different complexion on things. If this was important enough for *Volan* to leave that bloody bathroom of his then it was big. Seas-of-fire big, rivers-of-blood big. Maybe big enough to get my automemic pattern-signature out of hock for *good*. I whistled softly and thoughtfully through my teeth and they fell out.

That was just me picking up secondary radiation-case resonances from a rogue Big One blip in one of the JFK Alternatives. (That's a generic name in the Service for an Alternative that peeled off from the median with the failure of an assassination-attempt, followed almost immediately by all-out full-scale thermonuclear war. There are a hell of a lot of them, for some reason - and their harmonics play merry hell even in Control Zero.) I sorted out the canines from the molars on my palm, jammed them back in their sockets and then switched my biosignal to something sleek and black and bursting with vitality. What the hell. I was on energy/mass expenses again.

The only problem with expenses, though, is that while you're on them you tend to die in shrieking agony at the imminent drop of a dodgy State Vector.

Then I reorientated myself through a supplementary sheaf of quasi-dimensions and flipped. It's quicker than walking, unless you miscalculate the dimensional shift and find yourself sucked into an Oblivion Alternative, which can be, quite frankly, a bit of a bugger.

The name's Jason li Shao. I excise Alternatives. It's a living.

People often ask: Will you *please* stop following me around and drooling with that ghastly thing hanging out? Other people, on the other hand, say: So, hey, Jason, what's it like being, technically, a fictional character?

To which, I say, how the hell should I know? One minute so far as *I'm* concerned, I'm walking down some particularly mean and nasty streets a man must go, one eye out for the glint of cold steel and the other slightly glazed after an incredibly strenuous and not to say entirely improbable encounter with Dixie de la Bouche, the paraphilic table-dancer with her tub of clarified beef dripping and her sinuously fish-oiled leather Russian *kout* - the next I'm waking up in the secure Ground Subzero Underlevels of the Zero Control Hypodome with the Hollow Men looming over

me and reaching for me with their horrible Hollow claws of solid-state cybernesis and cultured fungus.

Things got incredibly confused there for a while, before Volan and some of his shit-hot Incorporation track-and-pullback guys got a lock on me and pulled me out and stabilized my pattern-ID matrix - and it was only some time later that I learnt that I was, in fact, to all intents and purposes, the physical incorporation of a couple of guys from a bunch of pre-Fragmentation novels - and not even the *heroes* of 'em either. Somebody, somewhere said that we're all of us just walk-on characters in the story of our lives, and that just about sums it all up.

What with the drastic lowering of actuality levels, of course, that kind of thing happens all the time: incorporations, resurrections, 'time-travellers' popping in out of nowhere with their amber-resin goggles and their stovepipe hats. It works on degrees of potentiality. Gods don't exist, for example, and thus need some external support-system in which to live - something to *explain* them, in effect, or at least explain them away. People in general *do* exist, and thus the idea of a *person*, technically fictional or otherwise, can achieve a degree of physical actuality with little additional external effort, natch. Nobody makes much of a deal of it, in the various shielded crossover Zones scattered over what was once a globe, and once you're actually integrated, stabilized and tagged.

It all came as a bit of a blow at the time; I thought I was 'real' — if that word means anything anymore. I also thought, for some reason, I was a Master of *Tai Kwun Po*, which is like this totally fictitious martial art form - as I found out on my first job for Volan, when I came up against Doogie Portillo and his Whistling Ninjas. It was three and a half cycles before I was out of that full body cast...

The important point, however, is that the people like me are incredibly valuable in Zero Control. Out there, out in the Zones, an aboriginal simply *cannot* cross from one alternative to another without massive physiological and psychological collapse as his, her or hir biomorphic matrix

desperately tries to come to terms with the ontological equivalent of suddenly being an oblongatic peg in a tesseroidal hole.

People like me, who never existed on this point on the meta-timeline in the first place, can survive the transitions with our core identity-matrices relatively intact. That's why the control Incorporations integrate us and lock us down.

And of course, when we *do* die, it's no real loss. They can regenerate our matrices from file. So you can do anything with us. We're incredibly valuable because we're also utterly expendable.

Arbitrary Base was crowded when I got there; anyone who was capable of being aware that something was wrong, and could make it out, was ejecting from the peripheries of the peripherally affected Zones for dear life; the crossover pads were a blur of people flipping in and reorientating, flipping out and, occasionally, exploding spectacularly as more than one of them tried to occupy the same quasi-physical Nexus space.

Techs in diffractive, fibrotic, fibre-optic coveralls were exo-jointed Waldo'ing in and calibrating in the massive bulk of the Injection Ram, the cantilevered, parahydraulic arm that would take me over the lip of the catastrophe curve under control. In a curtain, if subjective, but very real sense I was going to be stuck with it - connected by bolt-clamps punched through the skin and sunk into the bone. Volan was already there, in his VR command-control suit, linked to the Ram mechanics via radio-remote. One of the oddities of excision is that the controller, who never leaves what we laughingly like to think of as reality, has more *actual* mobility than the poor sod actually in there at the blunt end. He waddled over to me, his pasty glistening suet-sausage-skin-stuffed skin bulging his support corsets badly. Behind him slithered the mercury-pool puddle of a Sterling-model AVAI.

He gave me the rundown, and you already know about *that*. All the while the Techs shot me with microcustomized

retroviruses so I force-evolved comms sockets in my scalp. It felt like they were digging out half-healed scabs.

'It's bad,' Volan concluded. The AVAI rippled and reared, forming itself into a 2D screen. On it, a pinpoint on a convoluted, abstract representation of the Zones opened and flowered - insubstantial, possibly human forms jerking and squirming in a haze of twinkling purple lights. Occasionally one of them fell to pieces as his field lost cohesion, skin flaking away in a drift of desiccated scales, wobbling flesh and viscera sloughing off from crumbling bones. And then another. And another.

And another and another and another. The process was accelerating.

And yet something still remained of them - some abstract outline that had nothing much to do with actual, visual information. The dissipated creatures flowed and swirled together in the miasma, falling on and sucking on the more corporeal and catastrophically diminishing cohesive

'Is that what I think it is?' I breathed, shocked and shuddering despite myself.

Volan nodded. His jowls almost subcutaneously prolapsed.

'Orgones,' he said.

'You can forget it,' I shouted. 'Just forget about it, OK? There is no *way* you're going to get me in there.'

The Techs and several nearby automata had restrained and clamped me by then. There was no way out but my autonomous self-destruct - the collapse mode that would snap my submolecular bonds catastrophically open and smear me over the entire spatial/gravitational continuum like a static charge being earthed.

'I'll suicide,' I told Volan. 'Baby go bang-crack.'

Volan pressed his face very close to me. The electrodes in his own scalp rattled. There was a gloating, knowing look in his eyes and, secured by the clamps, I couldn't look away.

'Somehow,' he said, a fleck of spit hitting my chin under the corner of my mouth, 'I don't think so. I put together your reclamation specs and I really don't think you have it in you.'

'You know what's going to happen the moment I get in there?' I said. 'I'm going to be engulfed. A miasma of fever-heat will pervade my tissues, driving me to my knees and leaving me wide open for those *things*.

'Once, perhaps, they might have been human, but they'll have been changed. Who knows from what rogue alternative those vestigial, parasitic energies leaked - but they've fed, now, twisting anything organic to their monstrous somatic form. They'll pull me down and slither over me and sodding *subsume* me, matey.'

'Now listen here,' Volan said. 'You saw as well as I did how things were going critical. That vector's going to collapse and whipsaw, taking its peripherals and several primary alternatives with it. The knock-on effect could even rapture the *Nexus* - and you know what that means.'

'Bang goes the entire vestigial shooting match into primordial chaos and the unending howling night,' I said. 'So what? If that happens, we've all got a couple of cycles, tops. I go in, I'm going to last about as long as a lead-weighted slug on a razor blade. There's a lot of things you can do in a couple of cycles.'

Volan rubbed tiredly at one of the pustular sacs under his eyes. 'You're going in. There's no two ways about it while I'm in control. You don't have any choice. Can't you show a bit of backbone for Christ's sake?'

'That's exactly what I'm afraid of,' I said. 'I go into an Alternative, I'm still subject to a small set of personally customized physical laws. You know that.'

Volan, meanwhile, had quickly sidestepped the miniature thunderbolt whilst simultaneously doing the spectacles-testicles-wallet-and-watch routine that has by now become instinctive. That particular bastard's incredibly petty and vindictive, now that he's started to actually exist. In doing so, Volan collided with a tech carrying a hastily nailed-together, foil-coated box roughly the size of my head.

I nearly wrenched my head out of the clamps staring at it.

'Oh for *fuck's* sake,' I said, with remarkable restraint, I thought, considering the circumstances. 'You're going to fit me with a bleeding *Reich* box?'

'It'll give you some time,' Volan told me.

'Just enough to hit the suicide switch,' I said. In that moment I really meant it. 'Blow myself into several billion different Zones and switch it off.'

Then I stopped.

Possibly what passes for my mind was working overtime at this point - desperately hunting for a way, any way out - but I suddenly had the first faint glimmerings of an idea. Something to do with the readouts Volan had shown me on his Sterling.

'Hang about,' I said. 'Show me the AVAI again.'

Volan snorted. 'More time wasting?'

'Just do it, OK? Count it as a last request.'

Volan grumbled, but the 2D display appeared before me. There, on the wireframe abstract, was what I was hoping against hope I had remembered.

'Volan... ?' I said. 'The suicide switch. Can you disable the cohesion-collapse factors? Eject me from the Alternative on a single vector, in one piece?'

I heard Volan gasp. 'Impossible!' he exclaimed. 'If you weren't diffused, you'd tear the entire Alternative open, and that's just what we're trying to prevent. It would rupture *wide*.'

I tried to shake my head. 'I'm talking about a *controlled* rupture. Look at the display. You see that peripheral Zone out in the left field?'

Silence.

'I see it,' Volan said at last.

'That's one of the *JFK* Alternatives,' I said. 'Nuclear winter. Entirely different energy slope. Open it up and it'll suck that orgone energy out and scream for more. It'll warm them up a bit, and the rogue Alternative'll collapse like a balloon with the knot cut off. Either that or they'll establish equilibrium. Either way it's contained.'

It seemed like a cycle before Volan spoke. And then it was to shout at one of the Techs now hovering about like spare knobs: 'You! Hit that suicide pack with a spanner or something.' And then to me: 'I think we might just do it.'

And so we did.

Sometimes, just occasionally, if you're ever going to get anything done, you have to break a few rules. And the same to you, too.