

RETURN TO THE FRACTURED PLANET



DAVE STONE

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I GAZED UP AT THE SMOKING HOLE THE BOMB HAD MADE - AND THEN I REALISED SOMETHING WAS WRONG. BENNY LAY BESIDE ME, SLACK AND TANGLED LIKE A DISCARDED RAG DOLL, UNNATURALLY PALE, AND UNBREATHING. SHE WAS DEAD.

Nothing is ever simple, and nothing ever ends. Feed some drugs to laboratory rats and, two hundred generations down the line, the monsters start being born.

The fragile stability of the Dellahan quarantine has been compromised, and something has escaped.

Now, a man in the incipient stages of identity-collapse and a dying Bernice Summerfield have to search the byzantine cities of the Proximan Chain for an entity that killed his lover and her friend - an entity that will turn the Chain into its own version of hell.

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

DAVE STONE lives in London, writes books and is in no way whatsoever connected with white, straight, right-wing evangelists from Tennessee.

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Bernice Summerfield was originally created by Paul Cornell

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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CONTEXTUAL NOTES:

In reconstructing this text we have taken, so far as is possible, our model from the data file currently in general circulation as *The Mary-Sue Extrusion*, the most complete document on record by the same hand - and it is, unquestionably, despite certain inconsistencies, the same hand. That is, we have attempted to collate the material extant into the form of a novel, integrating such additional, supplementary and bridging material as seems related and, indeed, necessary. In this, we have erred on the side of caution and literary conservatism: we make no great stylistic claims, the intention merely being to produce a work as self-contained and comprehensible as possible - presenting the information in what our unnamed writer, in *The Mary-Sue*, terms 'an easily assimilable lump'.

The material extant primarily consists of two separate but related narratives, each dealing with a different series of events, both of them, so far as can be ascertained, written at around the same time, though under different circumstances. The first, more circumstantial and longer, narrative appears to have been based upon material written, if not under duress, then at least not of the author's active will, though whether under a process of debriefing or what might be termed 'interrogation-and-confession' it is not possible to tell internally.

The second, shorter, narrative appears to have been based on reports written some years before. Although separated, subsequently, for many years, it seems to have been rewritten with the first in mind, containing nascent linkages between the two other than the immediately and contextually obvious. To the extent that we have tampered with these linkages, we have restricted ourselves to merely reinforcing them as and when it seems most obvious to do so. Our most

audacious step in this area, some might think, is in our decision to interleave the narratives, but we are of the firm opinion that this goes some way to repairing the severance between the two, and further believe that this is what the author would have done himself, had circumstances allowed.

Quite what these circumstances were, at this late date, it is impossible to tell with any great certainty. The author quite obviously survived the events of these accounts to write them, but no further records of him subsequently appear. Given the length of time involved, and the upheavals in the wider galactic sense, and his anonymous and somewhat secretive nature in the first place, it is impossible to draw conclusions either way. If he's still alive he could be anywhere, quite frankly. We mean, he could even be putting on an incredibly poncy voice and dictating the preface to a half-arsed, knock-off and entirely bog-standard compilation of old toss in a quick attempt to cash in on the unexpected popularity of *The Mary-Sue...*

We are greatly indebted to the estate of Ms Elanore Vita Hydrant Summerfield-Kane for permission to quote from the diaries of her illustrious ancestor. While being tolerably well known in their own right (and, incidentally, quite firmly within the public domain), these excerpts provide vital information of which our author was not aware, but without which the events of the text would not make any reasonable kind of comprehensible sense.

Certain inconsistencies, lapses and statements at variance with established historical, scientific and biological facts remain. We have decided to leave them so, on the basis that we are concerned with the author's understanding and interpretation of events, and that the mistakes one makes say more about one, on any number of levels, than the correctitudes.

- *The Compilers*

QUOTATION

[Found among the original material and marked 'Use This'.]

"In science - in fact, in most things - it is usually best to *begin at the beginning*. In some things, of course, it's better to begin at the *other* end. For instance, if you wanted to paint a dog green, it *might* be best to begin with the *tail*, as it doesn't bite at *that* end. And so -"

"May I help oo?" Bruno interrupted.

"Help me to *what*?" said the puzzled Professor, looking up for a moment, but keeping his finger on the book he was reading from, so as not to lose his place.

"To paint a dog green!" cried Bruno. "Oo can begin wiz its *mouf*, and I'll -"

"No, no!" said the Professor. "We haven't got to the *Experiments* yet. And so," returning to his notebook, "I'll give you the *Axioms of Science*. After that I shall exhibit some *Specimens*. Then I shall explain a *Process* or two. And then I shall conclude with a few *Experiments*. An *Axiom*, you know, is a thing that you accept without contradiction. For instance, if I were to say 'Here we are!', that would be accepted without any contradiction, and it's a nice sort of remark to *begin* a conversation with. So it would be an *Axiom*. Or again, supposing I were to say, 'Here we are not!', that would be -"

"- a fib!" cried Bruno.

"Oh, *Bruno*!" said Sylvie in a warning whisper. "Of course it would be an *Axiom*, if the Professor said it!"

"- that would be accepted, if people were civil," continued the Professor; "so it would be *another* *Axiom*!"

"It might be an *Axeldum*," Bruno said: "but it wouldn't be *true*."

“Ignorance of Axioms,” the Lecturer continued, “is a great drawback in life. It wastes so much time to have to say them over and over again. For instance, take the Axiom, ‘*Nothing is greater than itself*’; that is, ‘*Nothing can contain itself*.’ How often do you hear people say, ‘He was so excited he was unable to contain himself.’ Why of course he was unable! The *excitement* had nothing to do with it!”

“I say, look here, you know!” said the Emperor, who was getting a little restless. “How many Axioms are you going to give us? At *this* rate, we sha’n’t get to the *Experiments* till to-morrow-week!”

“Oh, sooner than *that*, I assure you!” the Professor replied, looking up in alarm. “There are only,” (he referred to his notes again) “only *two* more, that are really *necessary*.”

“Read ‘em out and get on to the *Specimens*,” grumbled the Emperor.

“The *First* Axiom,” the Professor read out in a great hurry, “consists of *these* words, ‘*Whatever is, is*.’ And the Second consists of *these* words, ‘*Whatever isn’t, isn’t*’ We will now go on to the *Specimens*. The first tray contains Crystals and other Things.” He drew it towards him, and again referred to his notebook. “Some of the labels - owing to insufficient adhesion -” Here he stopped again, and carefully examined the page with his eye-glass. “I ca’n’t read the rest of the sentence,” he said at last, “but it *means* that the labels have come loose, and the Things have got mixed ..

- Extract from *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Lewis Carroll

BACKGROUND ZERO (SUPPLEMENTARY)

I opened my eyes.

That was the first surprise - the fact that I had eyes to open. The second surprise was how utterly *well* I felt. I mean, I don't mean I felt well after being some kind of disembodied and prototypical AI construct - if I could believe the Voice and it hadn't all been just some incredibly complicated interrogation technique. I mean that I had never felt this sense of physical strength and lack of pain in my life - and certainly not for the years of chronic malnutrition, lice and hard knocks of the Birmingham EMG Zone.

I was flat on my back, lying on something almost impossibly smooth-feeling and soft, in a cool white room. The air tasted weird, until I realized that it just tasted fresh. Somewhere I heard the distant sound of air conditioners.

A face loomed over me. Female, quite possibly the most beautiful face - and certainly the most healthy-looking - I'd ever seen. There was a vague sense of disorientation about it, though - look, given the tenor of my times, I was slightly less of what used to be called racist than otherwise, and the self-enclosed, blockaded life within the city meant that what in my day was called mixed race, and in these days is called hybridity, wasn't much of an issue. But even so, the face of the woman just seemed *wrong*. Little things happening at the edges of her eyes and mouth, a skin tone that had a slightly greenish tinge - it wasn't that she was some saurian monster with scales and claws or anything. She just seemed somehow fundamentally *wrong*.

Panic reflex cut in. I tried to lurch away, found that my forearms and shins were restrained - and then I saw

just what, precisely, these forearm-and-shin-restraining restraints were restraining. '*Jesus fucking Christ!*'

'Listen!' the rather nice but fundamentally wrong woman cried as I struggled in vain against the straps. 'Just listen, please! We're here to help you through this. Please, try to be still and I'll try to explain...'

- Extract from *The Mary-Sue Extrusion*

CHAPTER 1

The Habitats of the Proximan Chain are a kind of three-way cross between the various ideas of space stations, colonies and planetary settlements. That is, the physical space they occupy is spread out over those locations, linked together by a series of mass-transit pads, taking you from one to another instantly, so that the end result is that of a single and coherent environment.

“Coherent”, though, is probably not the right word. If you’re one of those who divide environments into low- or hi-tech, then the Proximan Chain takes the “high” to the extreme. It’s a kind of tacitly agreed playground for the greyer areas of the Big Boys involved in anything from body swap, mind sculpting, AI-envelope pushing, tailored-pharmaceutical pushing, weaponry development and anything else with an easily assimilable acronym or hyphen you can name.

I love it, frankly, in the same way I love my arms or eyes - it’s my natural environment, simple as that. The Word on the Street might limp around in other places, but here, in the Proximan Chain, you can’t make a move without *everybody* knowing instantly - if they happen to feel like pulling it out of the informational chaos of what everybody else is doing as well - and you *know* that, deep inside, deep in your guts and your implants.

The feeling of hooking yourself in and moving through is impossible to describe to those who don’t know it, any more than a medieval peasant could describe the minutiae of the experience of walking through a tithe plot and being aware of every single plant in it, knowing that each was special and had any number of uses and aspects. It would take hours to list the mere specifics of a single minute. The Proximan chain is, quite simply, *home...*

I wrote that a while back in some other thing, and every word is true. The thing I neglected to mention was that having a *home*, spiritual or otherwise, can be incredibly dangerous. You invest things in it on any number of levels, put out these invisible roots that hook you into vast systems of association, without ever quite knowing that you're doing it.

Stay in the same place for too long and you become sedentary, a sitting target. People start to get to know your name. And where you live.

The gravmetrics caught me as I hit my floor. I stuck out a hand, snagged a couple of fingers round the safety bar and hauled myself out of the tube, breathing slow and easy, like my subconscious hadn't suddenly noticed I'd been hanging halfway down a two-kilometre shaft and had started to panic. The warren in which I was currently living was cut into the living rock of one of the planetary Habitats, operated under something like Earth-normal gravity, and I had to force firmly out of my mind images of what would happen if the power cut out. The fact that the drop tube's field was solid-state didn't do much for a back of the mind that still thought power, as such, came from spluttering gasoline or methane generators which worked for less than minutes on the trot if they could be coaxed into working at all.

This was a relatively low-rent Habitat, without the constantly live-labour interior-redecorated spaces of the richer areas, or the mood-mimetic fixtures of the more bourgeois, which meant that things could tend to change a little when your back was turned. The walls of the communal access tunnel were of the same communal-architecture design as I'd left them - a sort of poncey quasi-low-rent-bohemian splattering of rag and flockwork. Bit of a pity, really, since I really hate poncey ragwork and flock.

A squeaky was hanging outside my door on its flotation sacs - a kind of miniature, triocular blimp, bristling with manipulatory attachments and appendages that seemed part organic, part cybernetic. Squeakies were originally

force-evolved in some design lab or other, but have since become so prevalent that they've evolved on their own, and they serve the inconspicuously useful function of benign bacteria but on the macroscopic scale. This one shrittered at me from an octopus-like beak, enquiring as to whether I'd like my chambers set to rights in return for any dust particles, grease deposits or inextricably lodged dead pararats it might find.

'Piss off out of it,' I told it. What with one thing and another I wasn't in a cheery mood. A few days ago, Kara and I had had one of those arguments that start over nothing in particular and escalate into that mutual, cold, back-turning spite that hurts more than any amount of shouting for the simple reason that it hurts you both as much. Since then she hadn't even answered, far less returned my calls.

I'd see her again, of course, and we'd talk, and touch, and carry on as though nothing had happened - but for the moment I was going through that stage of miserably replaying what we'd said, coming up with pithy little things I *should* have said, and just generally plotting how I could pay her back in horrible and nasty ways. And, while squeakies and their ilk are pretty much harmless, their bumbling and wobbling around, the little cries of glee as they find a particularly tasty bit of refuse and the happy sound of high-speed chomping can get incredibly irritating.

Besides... ubiquitous, inconspicuous, useful little creatures who wander in and out of people's homes present a, shall we say, *interesting* prospect for certain forces on both sides of the conflict. I can't use the word *law*, of course, on account of how the Proximan Chain hasn't got one. We had one once, apparently, but the wheels fell off.

The upshot of all this is that, if you let a squeaky in, then you'd better be damned well ready to run some extensive diagnostics for implants and, nine times out of ten, you might as well save the time and effort by grabbing a mop and doing the floor yourself. The squeaky looked at me with three soulful little eye-analogues, realized eventually that I *really* wasn't having any, gave a little snort calculated to show

precisely what it thought of a man who lived worse than a Piglet Person, turned and sculled off down the tunnel. I kept half an eye on it until it had rounded the corner, then stepped towards my door.

Absolutely nothing happened - and this was where I started to worry.

Ordinarily, I carry an extensively customized package of cyberbiologics wrapped around my left forearm. I call it Box. When I had decided to stick around in the Chain for a while, though, I had converted it into a static installation, linked to the perfectly ordinary, cellular comms unit that took its place. On the plus side, this had allowed me to go to serious town with the integrated processing power, but on the minus it meant a breaking of absolutely direct contact - something, I was starting now to realize, that might have been a mistake.

Approaching the door should have triggered a signal from Box to the comms unit - a happy little chime rendition of 'Grandad's Flannelette Shirt', and the equivalent of those hoods you see in the holomovies, fiddling with their tie knots for a hidden camera as a signal that nobody has a gun to their backs. The lack of this meant that Box was off line - and that was what worried me so. I'm not a complete idiot: sensors, backups and security fail-safes were in place. Anybody clever enough to get inside, physically or figuratively, and shut a minor-deity-grade AI transputer mesh down before it could so much as alert me, was playing on a level so far out of my league that we were talking a completely different game. And one that quite possibly involved a completely other use for the halls.

I don't like projectile weapons. They might be all right - as I think I might have mentioned, somewhere before - for waving all heroically about if you're inclined to look the complete tool, but ninety-nine times out of a hundred they're a liability. But then again there's always that one chance in a hundred, so I carry one - something big and multifunctional, on the basis that if you're gonna do something then you do it as hard as you can. I had the thing made up to my own specs, at quite a bit of personal expense, I might add, and it

doesn't have a name you could ask for even if you knew where to ask.

I hauled out the Gun and worked the door on manual release, sidestepped with that kind of fluid motion you can learn that fails to trigger danger signals, and scanned the chamber in the ambient light from the doorway. It wasn't quite enough for your basic human type to see by, but more than enough for my somewhat special optic ganglia to see as clear as day. (It's a hell of a job getting used to that at the start, incidentally, and it can wreck your sleep in anything other than pitch-darkness for months.)

Nothing out of place by so much as a micron. Nothing gone. The only raw note was the translucent sphere of mimetic gel depending from the ceiling, in which idiot and random Mandelbrot-like generations swirled. Box was out for the count. Someone or something had severely gone and dormanted it.

Now, in a completely automated, hermetic and micro-climatically controlled environment like an incorporate hive, that might have been a catastrophic, even terminal problem. Then again, those who think it's a neat idea to slave anything and everything, from the lights to the comms to the air supply, through a single processing unit, deserve everything they get - and, like I said, I'm not a *complete* and utter idiot. In some respects, at least.

The lights and the landline-basic comms were on their own systems. I left the former off and switched the phone to playback. If anyone was still here then they'd have known that I was too from the instant I opened the door - I just wanted the audio and the visual flicker from the phone to mask my movements in the dark a little, and give me that little potential edge that we all of us need sometimes to get through life. Thus masked, I slipped over to the niche containing Box's backup controls, popped the cover and fired up the LCD display. The problem was obvious in an instant. Person or persons unknown had used the backup controls themselves to put Box into deep self-diagnostics, and the

process still had some several hundred thousand cycles left to run.

I could think of any number of ways that would work well enough, for long enough, to do this - and afterwards you could have danced the tango naked with a pig under your arm. The problem was, any of those ways that didn't involve being *me* were so expensive, in terms of both time and resources, that they could be practicably handled only by one of the *heavy* outfits. I tried to think of any of the Big Boys I might have offended recently and drew a complete blank.

You don't cancel out of deep diagnosis in the same way as you don't yank the bleep machines and bloodpacs in the middle of exploratory surgery. I left the alcove and prowled the chamber, stretching my sensitivity to the utmost, looking for any clue I might have missed the first time and listening to the messages streaming through the phone with half an ear: ZipCo had been raiding the unlisted registers again, and was treating me to a half-hour long presentation, informing me of the various joys bestowed by the ownership of anything from the hand-crafted head of Tutankhamen in force-injected mica gel, to a genuine reproduction of an antique vinyl inflatable woman. I made a mental note, after Box was back on line, to reciprocate with a small infobomb that would make their incorporate head explode.

The droning perkiness of the voice from the phone was just one of the specifics I was taking from the environment, and integrating on some subconscious level that might fire up something useful as I let my feet go where they wanted to and my eyes rest where they felt like resting. This detached but also, in some sense, completely focused state of mind is a particular skill you learn in my line of work, and, though I say it myself, I'm rather proud of the ease with which I can achieve it. It's one of those things inside, integral to you on such a basic level that it's one of the things on which you can truly count.

All in all, therefore, it was a bit dispiriting when my feet took me out of the living chamber and into the kitchen, and my eyes didn't notice a thing until I felt the cold burn of a dermic spray against the side of my neck, and the world went suddenly away.

The people who want me to write this are just interested in the facts, and I'm pushing it a bit even to set down my *relation* to them - so anyone expecting one of those disjointed and discursive dream-vision sequences that add a spot of visual interest and, coincidentally, help bulk up a narrative like nobody's business, are going to be disappointed.

The world came back again. There was no sense of transition: I was simply and suddenly there and functioning again. Face first on something flat and hard, cold polyceramic pressing at my cheekbone - that would mean I'd been here no more than seconds as opposed to minutes, or my body would have warmed it. (Refrigerating polyceramic surfaces just so's to confuse the Cytoplasmically Enhanced who happen to be lying on them would, in the general scheme of things, be going a little bit too far.) I tried to work out if the pain in my nose meant I had *really* broken it on the way down.

My eyes happened to be closed, so I left them that way, lay still and took stock from the inside out. Bodysense, he say nothing missing from the body, nothing constricted and nothing, apart from the nose, apparently broken. That was always a good sign. The deep and relaxed feeling in my muscles told me I'd been hit with some kind of neurasthenic - which I suppose was a good sign as well, neurasthenics being commonly nonfatal to the point where you'd sort of notice the truckload it would take to overdose.

Apart from the feel of the floor - and believe me, I'd woken up on it enough times to recognize it - the general subliminal pattern recognition of various electromagnetic hums, air-conditioning mutters and the glonking groan of a slightly faulty refrigeration motor told me I was still in my own kitchen. A hard, sharp-edged and somewhat painful lump

under my groinal area told me I had fallen on my Gun, concealing it or at least lodging it where only the brave might dare to venture. Either that, of course, or I win presently going to try to shoot someone with a handful of loose credit plaques and a set of keys.

I strained my preternatural hearing to its limit. No sound of breathing, no sound of those little moves that clothes make when they move. If my recent and unwelcome visitor was simply gone, of course, then all bets were off - but he might just be in the other room.

The way to go now, I decided, was fast. Subtlety and caution had failed thus far, and failed miserably, but speed and recklessness might just carry whatsoever there was to carry off. Up on to flat-soled feet in a bouncing roll, scooping the Gun up as we go and boosting our momentum in a flat dive to end up -

‘I wouldn’t have done that if I were you.’ The voice had a flattened-out, second-hand quality: some kind of voder-synth that conveyed the words and intonation, but bleached out anything that might identify the signal, even on the level of sex or age. It was also coming, more or less precisely, from directly behind me. ‘You’re going in the wrong direction, anyway.’

I looked rather sheepishly back from where I’d ploughed into the carpet of the living chamber, at the figure lounging against the breakfast counter. Just my luck. The guy was wearing a Suit of Lights™.

That’s something of a misnomer. A Suit of Lights™ can range from those mood-suit recreational by-products of the basic technology that project graphics and writing over you, depending on how you feel at the time, to the military-spec ones that deflect anything from the visible and otherwise electromagnetic spectra, sound and even the gravmetric pulses of sensors. It’s not quite a cloak of complete invisibility - you can see the wearer if you look really hard, and know precisely where to look - but it’s as near to it for all practical purposes as dammit. And, to achieve the effect in a place as generally sensor-and-surveillance-packed as the

Proximan Chain, you'd need the sort of money to jack military-spec off the *scale*.

That explained how my unwelcome visitor had slipped past my defences for long enough to disable Box, and how I'd missed him even with my biological enhancements. Now that inconspicuousness wasn't so much of an issue, the guy had collapsed the field to present a kind of two-dimensional silhouette look of utter blackness, covering him from head to toe and wound with the tracery of golden wires that powered the output units. Actually being able to *see* the guy now was not that great a comfort, though, on account of the fact that I could now see the gun he was holding, and pointing at my gut, which was of the sort of general size and nastiness as to suddenly make my own Gun feel very small, insignificant and not a little put-upon.

'You know,' he said, lightly but still in that synthetic and flattened-out voice, 'for an enhanced Stratum Seven, you're not exactly doing very well.' The jet-black head looked pointedly at my Gun until I finally got the message and lobbed it back to clatter across the kitchen floor, coming to rest by his boot. (Note to self: get around, one of these days, to implementing that idea of turning a Gun into an impromptu fragmentation-grenade, should the need arise.)

'I'm having a bit of an off day,' I said, trying to keep my voice from sounding like it was *trying* to keep level. 'You know who I am, then.'

'I know *what* you are,' said the guy. 'Which is more to the point, I've read the file.'

And then he mentioned something I keep *utterly* locked off. Something that I know, for an absolute fact, never has and never will be known about me. Something that I'm certainly not going to give so much as a hint of here - but, believe me, there was simply no *way* anybody could know it, no matter how much power, money or influence and any number of resources they might have. My blood ran cold.

My visitor noticed my shock. 'Oh, you'd be amazed at the kind of stuff we can get hold of for our files. Slice of Battenberg. Piece of piss.'

‘What a lovely turn of phrase you do have,’ I said, more or less to slap a bit of cover on the fact of how genuinely shaken I’d been. ‘You must be the life and soul of the Spook Central office party. So who’s this *we*?’

‘You’ll find out. For the moment, all you need to do is be more than slightly afeared.’ My visitor jerked his head inwards the comms unit strapped to my wrist. ‘Take that off.’

I unsnapped the clasps and took it off. ‘I hope you realize that this fail-safe triggers several varieties of transputronic shitstorm. Box is gonna come out of AI navel-gazing at some point or other. I stay out of contact loo long, and several terabytes of interesting info blanket-bombs the GalNet. Who knows who or what might be hit by the fallout?’

My visitor shrugged. ‘I think I’ll risk it, rather than take my attention away just to blow up your rig. Besides, anything you have won’t hurt. We wandered through your God Box, two seconds after it ever went on line, and excised anything that had so much as a whiff of us.’

Party (not to put too fine a point upon it) pooper.

We went out through the access tunnel, my visitor still holding his gun on me, not quite closely enough for me to do anything about it, and seemingly unconcerned about anybody we might meet. This is more professional doctrine than otherwise, incidentally. In the holomovies you can’t get one step without some passer-by noticing, having hysterics and screaming the place down, until armed cops miraculously appear and a jolly spectacular firelight ensues - but in real life you can take someone down a crowded street like this, if you do it smoothly, people being generally rather slow on the uptake.

In any event, we reached the drop and jump tube without meeting anyone at all. Shooting upward at something approaching Earth-normal gravity in reverse, I had a bit of time to think. Somebody quite obviously wanted to talk to me, and they expected me not to want to talk to them. They didn’t just want me dead, it being just as easy to load an ejector with a neurotoxin as a neurasthenic, and even simpler just to give someone the ol’ Teflon-coated polyceramic

enema by way of a gun. This wasn't necessarily a heartening sign - I could think of several nasty things, offhand, that needed the subject alive at the start - but it was better than most. Whatever might be waiting for me, my unwelcome visitor clearly had orders to keep me alive and intact until then, but just how far could I push this?

I was very carefully *not* thinking - so as to avoid telegraphing it in any way - about the state of the gravmetics in my particular Habitat, that particular shaft, and the small fact that they tend to do this little faulty stutter at the top. The only problem was, as in so much else, that the effect was erratic. Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't; I couldn't even count on the communal facilities to be *completely* crap.

They did. We lurched to a stop and dropped like a couple of stones for a couple of metres before the field hit us again. I was ready for the kick of it, but my unwelcome visitor was not; he landed heavily against the charge, momentarily winded. So, out of the kindness of my heart, I helped him out by relieving him of those heavy guns he was carrying, and planting a couple of fingers in his solar plexus for good measure.

By that time the tube had spat us out, into the lobby of the warren. Outside, through plate-glass windows, I could see the city lights of the Habitat exterior itself and its sub settlements, this one being a Habitat on a planetary body with an atmosphere capable of supporting carbon-based life. With one of those snap judgements you make so quickly that you can't even call it a decision, I ignored the doors leading to the outside and hustled my visitor down the ramps that led to the warren's transit racks. If he was counting on taking me somewhere, after all, he'd have had to have transport and a place to park.

As I'd known there had to be, a sleek-lined floater sat unracked with its gravmetics idling: one of those flashy, mean-looking jobs that are used by the people who know that a vehicle bending over backward to look nondescript and drab just screams out *cop* or the locally applicable equivalent. The way it sat in the air told me that my unwelcome visitor

hadn't brought along a little friend, so I dragged him over to the floater and shot the doors, sort of counting on any reaction he would have had to tell me if they were booby-trapped or not. I shoved him inside, motioned with the gun for him to slither over to the shotgun seat and got in behind him.

In passing, I noticed that the autodrive had been set to a preprogrammed destination, no doubt for effecting a speedy exit under conditions of stress. What the hell. I decided to push it and see what happened.

Now at this point the attentive reader will no doubt have a number of questions. Isn't it obvious, he or she will ask, that the autopilot will promptly take our chap right to the very lair of those who wish him harm? Just what, he or she will further enquire, does our chap think he is playing at? Has our chap not, in short, the attentive reader will reflect, suddenly and for no apparent reason transposed the contents of the cranium and colon?

The answers to which are: simple, obviously, and don't you take *that* tone with *me*. Whoever my unwelcome visitor was working for was out to get me and, given what he had let drop back in my apartment chambers, they were operating on a level such that I'd never find them if I tried. The simple solution was to go where they, by definition, had to be waiting for me - and dust the fact of what you might call the redefining of relationships with my would-be kidnapper to get me out of it alive.

All of which seemed reasonable and logical at the time - but, as the flier hurtled through the trackways and transit gates that cross-connect through the Habitats of the Chain like the microtubular substructure of the human brain, I began to have my doubts. The windows of the floater were polarized to maximum, and I couldn't seem to find a way to switch it off; there was no way to see out. I could end up almost anywhere. I began to get the distinct feeling, what with one thing and another, that I'd merely been

participating in some elaborate charade that had me actively kidnapping myself.

Abruptly, the floater slammed to a stop, throwing both me and my unwelcome visitor against the crashbars. After I could breathe again, and had decided that half of my ribs weren't really broken, I broke open the gun I'd liberated from my visitor, pocketed the charges and tossed it to him, keeping him covered with my own Gun all the while.

'Now what we're going to do is this,' I said. 'You get out and stand there looking all mysterious and butch and in control of things, which should give me the chance to see what's going on.'

I reset the floater's autodrive to scam if what was going on turned out to be nasty, keying in the destination of a *kimu* bar to which I was partial, simply because it was an address off the top of my head. Then I shot the shotgun hatch and shoved my visitor out, slid myself into the seat he had formerly occupied and stuck my head out on a low level from which one wouldn't ordinarily expect a head to be protruding from a car.

I snapped my head back and considered the image etched on my mind: standard transit-rack space, more or less the same as that we'd left save for the little unimportant details of its condition that told me we'd come to a slightly more expensive area. The only important detail was a scan-activated security-access door, such as you'd expect to find in the spaces of the rich. Armed men waiting to jump on me or automated blaster packages in the walls were conspicuous by their absence.

I decided to risk it, climbed out of the car and shoved my unwelcome visitor towards the security door. Take us in. And you go first.'

He shrugged, his silhouette-like body posture, apparently, unconcerned. 'I'm going to have to take my mask off for the scan.'

'So do it,' I said, keeping him covered with my Gun. My unwelcome visitor did so.

‘Well fuck me sideways and stick me on a pole,’ I said, putting the Gun away. ‘You could have fucking *told* me.’

‘I suspect the correct reply would be that you didn’t fucking ask,’ said Bernice Summerfield, archly, ‘but words such as that shall never sully my lips.’

BACKGROUND 1

You know, when I hear people saying how they feel ambivalent or in two minds about something, I get this sort of inappropriately cheery urge to laugh up my sleeve. It's a bit like watching old propaganda material about a war you were actually in with all those chaps going off to do their bit, or listening to the sort of moron who believes a population armed with guns is a good thing, without having the slightest clue of what a gun actually does. To go off on one of my famous peripheral tangents, I think that anyone who even so much as *thinks* of carrying a gun ought to be shot to death by one and see how he likes it - and that's not, in my case, quite the *reductio ad absurdum* it might seem.

The point is that you simply can't understand how some things feel if you haven't gone through them. I mean, in my case, on the one hand I have a full and complete memory of a childhood, adolescence, years spent in the hell of a city under martial law which culminated in a bunch of hollow-points exploding through my guts... and on the other hand, in a completely different sense, I know who, or rather what, I really am.

Now I can go over the traces any number of times - and, believe me, I have, in my head - wondering just what was true, what wasn't and just how much of what I've been told by people was ultimately a lie, and we'd be no nearer to the end of it by the time the Sky Wolf eats every applicable Sun. Certain facts check out, so far as I've been able to check them, but the problem with thinking in terms of bluff and counterbluff is that there's always at least one more level of possible misdirection. In physics this is known as the Catastrophe of Infinite Regression - you have to calibrate one measuring device with another, which needs to be calibrated itself, and so on.

The loop is broken only by the conscious and subjective choice of the observer, and so, in the end, it's probably better to just let it lie, and go with the explanation I got, all those years ago, on waking up in a hospital bed to see a beautiful but wrong-looking woman...

'My name's Kara,' the woman said as I tried and failed to fight against the restraints holding me, noting in passing that they seemed to be constructed from smooth bands of thick ceramic, held along the seams by some kind of electronic bolts. 'Kara Delbane. And *you* are an APE – an Artificial Personality Embodiment - built up for us in the Catan Nebula, and you've only just this minute come on line. Remember that, that's important.'

I stopped struggling as some detached and utterly rational part of my mind realized that struggling wasn't doing any good, and made myself relax. At the time there didn't seem anything difficult or remarkable about it, but I would later find that from the outside it was as if a switch had been thrown, switching me off so that I went instantly and utterly limp. This instant switching of emotions, I further learnt, was one of the enhancements my new body had over the basic human form: a degree of conscious control over brain and limbic and hormonal functions that would make an Indian fakir sick.

'Waking with a new body is entirely outside of your range of experience,' the woman, Delbane, was saying. 'You've been prepped, posthypnotically, but it's still got to be one hell of a shock. Those restraints are there to stop you damaging yourself while you go through it.'

'OK,' I said, perfectly calm, and reasonable, and not buying any of this for one instant. 'I'm not in shock now. Could you take the restraints off?'

'You know, I'm not sure whether to envy you or not,' Delbane continued, seemingly oblivious to my heartfelt plea. 'Every other APE is fitted with a back-story cobbled together out of old parts - I mean, I was this Warrior Princess wandering around Ancient Greece, with tits of death and this

incredibly horny sidekick with a quarter-staff, till a daughter of hers who was actually the Spawn of Hell sent me into the Country of the Amazons and then into the future...'

Delbane realized I was looking at her as if she had gone round the twist.

'Well, anyway,' she said a bit self-consciously. They give us these memory-construct stories to stop us flipping out the minute we're switched on, but you're a special case. You have to be treated a little differently. If you take a look at this, it should give you the skinny better than I ever can.'

As she spoke, Delbane was pulling down a globular monitor unit on a kind of pneumatic and articulated arm attached to the ceiling. She switched it on and a 2-D logo flowered on the phosphor coating: one of those ineptly nasty and overblown images you find on fighter-plane fuselages and military-personnel tattoos, which contrive to suggest that those involved have listened to far too many bands made up of fat, pig-ugly and long-haired old gits from Birmingham with a predilection for spandex. A grinning skeleton with ragged, batlike angel wings and a flaming sword.

'There's a trackpad under your right hand,' said Delbane. 'You'll get the hang of it.'

I felt around with my right hand and the graphic dissolved to a menu. I looked at it impassively for a moment, then turned my head to Delbane. 'Is this,' I said, keeping my voice neutral, 'what I think it is?'

At least she had the grace to look a little shamefaced. 'Yeah,' she said. 'It's what it looks like.'

It's one of those things you simply will not get, quite frankly, if it's never happened to you. Well it's happened to me, so let me just say this about myself, and you just keep this in mind for if and when you ever come in contact with an APE and think that he or she might have a chip on their shoulder about certain things. I came with a *manual* - can you believe that? *I* can't, and I'm the person who it came with. I've still got a copy of the damned thing, somewhere - but you're never gonna get so much as a sniff of where it is, for the simple reason that the last thing I need is people

knowing precisely what makes me tick down to the last designers' specification. Let me just run over the immediately relevant points of it here:

The common or biogenic-vat APE is basically built from scratch, the blank template of its mind being stamped with specious memories that allow it to function in the world it wakes up into when it's activated. A space pilot who spent five hundred years cryogenically frozen due to a life-support malfunction, a warrior sent from one world to another by an evil wizard, a feisty young kid picked up by an eccentric time-travelling alien to serve as his companion as he adventures through time and space, that sort of thing... all of these stories complete bollocks, of course, but all of them designed to come up with an at least halfway consistent explanation as to why this APE has suddenly woken up somewhere strange.

The procedure ranges from the low-end and disposable APEs, intended for suicide missions and the like (who exhibit nothing but psychosis, or an absolutely fanatical religious fundamentalism that holds well enough for long enough until the hi-ex strapped to their bodies or the car bomb they're driving goes boom) to the top-of-the-range units, with maybe thirty-five or more subjective years of more-or-less self-consistent material inside them – people of a certain, specific and preprogrammed character type, whom the various factions and powers of the galaxy place at certain times and places as a part of their more involved and complex machinations.

Now the low-end disposables simply don't count, and the high-enders are indistinguishable from real people anyway, save for the fact that they've suddenly appeared from somewhere, at a certain place and time, out of the blue. The interesting thing is those in the *mid*-range, those APEs who are used and reused for high-risk but sustained work. The soldiering and slave work in those areas where a real human is needed but no human in their right mind would ever go. APEs who need to be intelligent, and with broadly human emotions and responses for the work they do. It's just not cost-effective to fit them with the kind of detailed virtual lives

that the top of the range has - and so at some point, if they survive long enough, they realize that their so-called lives and memories have so many holes in them they could give Swiss cheese a run for its money.

This is the point that these mid-range APEs begin the process of realizing who they are, and begin the long and tortuous road to being truly self-aware. This is what's known in the Catan Nebula manufactories as their 'breakout lifetime', and every APE sold has a breakout rating. There are one hell of a lot of horror stories about the buyers simply disposing of them when that happens, but the general consensus is that, once an APE breaks out, he or she becomes a Sentient Being in the legal sense, and, In theory, enjoys the same rights, privileges and freedoms as most other beings in the galaxy have by way of being born. In practice, though, these broken APEs have the freedom to go into a certain line of work, most human occupations being barred to them, or starve.

The reason I've gone into the background details here is to make the point that I don't fit in with any of them. I'd had childhood experience with intuitive computer interfaces, and, as I navigated my way through the manual, I became aware that it was detailing the specs of a custom job, a one-of-a-kind limited edition.

The false memories with which the Catan Nebula manufactories implant their product are in fact derived from a cache of units from what was known as Think-Tanking, a prototypical process used by various military powers on Earth, five hundred years ago, for interrogational purposes. The process involved mapping the synaptic pattern of a subject into a clock of biographic gel, destroying the subject's brain as it did so, to produce a working model of the subject's thought patterns, personality and memory with a complexity and specific detail that has never been bettered before or since. A stockpile of these prototypes was uncovered around a century ago, and has since, as I said, formed the basis for the manufacturing processes of the Catan Nebula.

One of these Think-Tank recordings, however, was used in an abortive attempt at longevity research – mapping the engram *back* into an APE-based, humanoid host brain in its entirety, via a procedure that destroyed the Think-Tank storage medium in much the same way as was the original brain to make the recording in the first place. The idea was, I gather, to eventually market the procedure to the dying rich as the ultimate form of transplant, a complete body swap with even a spanky new brain included.

The idea failed for the simple reason that the dying rich - who might be dying, but weren't bloody fools or they wouldn't be rich - spotted the fatal, as it were, flaw. This was not, they pointed out, some means of somehow magically transferring the soul - or whatever you wanted to call it - into a new and healthy body and brain. This was a way of getting your brain sliced up, then having some complete stranger running around *thinking* he was you, while you yourself were in fact deader than a three-week-old turd.

So the project was canned. The stock of Think-Tank engrams was too valuable and irreplaceable to monkey around with finding alternative applications for the procedure, so all that remained to be dealt with was the prototypically implanted APE. Fortunately for me, if nobody else, they'd sunk enough cash into me that they were looking for a way to recoup some of it, rather than just write it off and dispose of me. My body itself was top-of-the-line, with the kind of physical resilience, reflex actions and repair factors that put me off the human scale, and the designers had taken the opportunity, since it was just there and lying around, to try out certain improvements that years later would become industry-standard, but which at the time were cutting-edge like you wouldn't believe. All of these factors made me valuable in and of myself, so they just wiped a few memories of the experimental period here, added a few psycho-conditioning blocks there, stuck translation implants and whatnot in my paracerebellum and knocked me out as a collectors' item. And, given the uses to which some

'collectors' put their APEs, I count myself luckier than otherwise that I ended up where I actually did.

I've since wondered just how many undocumented 'features' made it into the mix of me, in the way that such things do, but the specs in the manual were impressive enough. My bloodstream stores enough oxygen to survive fifteen minutes of strenuous effort in a vacuum, for example, and at a pinch, in an appropriate environment, I can bypass my primary respiratory system entirely and spend a couple of hours breathing through my skin. Natural immunity to various toxins and antigens, a digestive system like a chemical-cracker and a cardiovascular system that might not actually include what the promotional literature calls a 'second heart', but does have something that serves as the equivalent of a fuel-injection pump. My brain has at least six levels of physical redundancy, six duplications of the synapse map that cross-connect and allow the personality to survive severe damage. On the whole it was almost worth getting shot, dying and having your brain sliced to wake up and find you've stolen the best body in the shop.

As I flipped through this information with one part of my mind, though, another part of it was interested in something else, and very busy indeed. My Catan manufacturers, I realized, had supplemented my original memories with certain other things: direct knowledge of several languages, including the Galactic Basic – which was an evolved variation upon English in any case – and a general knowledge of the current state of the known galaxy, so that I knew what a Slorg was, for example, and what it looked like, without ever having seen one. It wasn't as if this knowledge popped into my head or anything: it was integral to me, to be called upon when I happened to need it, in the same way that someone might still know what a lemon is, even if he just hasn't happened to think of a lemon for weeks.

One of these little additions was a working knowledge of the transputer-based informational technology of the time. From the instant I'd accessed the manual, I'd known it was a

file loaded into a program over the quasi-autonomous operating subsystem of the monitor unit, which was in turn semi-slaved to the overall administrative operating system of some large installation - possibly a building, possibly a ship. With my Catan-implanted knowledge, I'd been able to open up an unobtrusive little command window of my own - and, by the time the other part of my mind was reading about how my skeletal structure had been enhanced by way of long-chain carbon molecules, I was rooting happily around in the security systems, looking for the proper set of protocols.

By the time I was reading about the microcustomized rods and cones in my eyeballs, I had them.

'Oh my God...' I said, in a frightened tone of voice. 'Is that right? Does that mean what I think it means?'

'What?' said Delbane, who had been growing bored.

'Look at this,' I said.

Delbane walked over and craned her head so that she could see the monitor. I triggered the proper set of protocols, the restraints holding me to the bed snapped back, and I hit the exposed side of her neck with the side of my hand. I didn't clip her hard, just enough to put her down for a couple of seconds - and there was no conscious thinking about this: I just knew precisely how hard to hit her and where.

Off the bed and out of the door I'd seen off to one side, the existence of which had been on my mind for quite some while. My *real* thoughts and memories were in command now, the thoughts and memories of the man fighting the guerrilla war against the Emergency Military Government who had declared martial law upon his home, and they had decided on the strategy of speed. I didn't have clue one about what was really happening here. There could be any number of ways it was set up, and the only way to go was to keep moving as fast as I could.

It was a setup, of course. I got two paces out of the door and caught a glimpse of bulkheads, gangways and hatches reminiscent of a twentieth-century naval vessel, before a bolt of some energy weapon blasted me from above and drove me to the steel-plate deck. I hadn't caught so much as a whiff of

the existence of something like that outside the door, of course, in all my rooting around in the security systems, on account of how my rooting around in them had been a part of the setup in the first place.

I lay there twitching for a while, flat on my face, every nerve in my body febrile with what felt like a static-electrical shock that seemed to want to hang around either than discharge itself, until Delbane hauled me over, being none too gentle about it. I looked up at her impassive face - and at the monitor unit some way past it, depending from the ceiling in much the same way as the one in the hospital chamber, but this time with a face made up of crude symbols, almost exactly like this:

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‘Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me,’ I said through chattering teeth.

‘I never kid,’ said a voice from the unit, cheerfully, unless it’s a really, really funny joke.’ The voice seemed perfectly and unremarkably human, if with a kind of childish, grating quality that I just knew was going to have me wanting to hit the owner with a claw hammer in about two minutes flat. The image merely jiggled with every word, the little ‘>’ symbol of its nose switching direction couple of times.

‘Well, you seem to be up and functioning,’ said the voice, ‘within your basic parameters. I’m ARVID. I own you. Welcome to the Oblivion Angels.’

CHAPTER 2

There are basically two ways you could know the name of Bernice Surprise Summerfield. The first is through the Adventures of the New Frontier - those story-data packs that turn up on the newsstands and spaceport lounges throughout the population centres of the galaxy, purporting to tell, in sensational and excruciatingly badly written form, about what life is supposed to be like everywhere else. Benny is a bit of a star in these on the quiet, her life being apparently that of a cross between a lady adventurer, amateur detective and a space pirate with a heart of gold, roaming the universe with her wicked little throwing knives, an impossibly dumb Willie-Garvin-knockoff sidekick by the name of Jason Kane and getting into far too many sticky situations for her own good.

I'm here to tell you, naturally, that the New Frontier Adventures are complete and utter toss. I've appeared in a number of the things myself, and the last I looked I've never been a sadistic mercenary/assassin minion for some galactic villain, with so many interesting little sadistic peccadillos it's a wonder I don't implode up my own arse, and a knack for seeming to die two-thirds in, only to come spectacularly back and be dispatched for the sting in the tail. The fact that I've killed people in my time and got paid for it - or the fact that I actually *have* died, once - is beside the point

The other way is to know her personally. I'd met her some months back, on a job for Pseudopod Enterprises that had taken me to the blockaded world of Dellah. She had not been feeling herself at the time, for various reasons, but she had rallied by the end of things to help me expose the fraudulent machinations of the Pseudopod local representative on nearby Thanaxos and, incidentally save the entire galactic

sector from Fiendish Entities from the Dawn of Time or some such.

Benny Summerfield was and is, ostensibly, an archaeologist in the same way Mata Hari would have been, if Mata Hari had known the first thing about archaeology. It's not a front, precisely, in that she's fully if indeterminately qualified and with the practical learning, skills and published work to prove it - it's just not the centre of her *life*, if you get what I mean, which has led her into connections and entanglements that the New Frontier Adventures couldn't even begin to touch upon without a pocket-singularity suddenly appearing in their offices and wiping them out by courtesy of the Reality Police.

To cut a long story short, we'd gone through quite a lot together in a short period of time; I'd liked her and pretty much trusted her. This made all the stuff with the gun and the Suit of Lights™ all the more puzzling and not a little hurtful.

'What the hell are you playing at?' I asked her, after she had shown her face for the scan and we were waiting for what, by the sound of it from behind the doors, was an actual elevator to arrive.

'There are certain factors involved,' Bernice said. 'Suffice it to say that he had to contact you circumspectly. I'm supposed to be taking you to someone who can explain - we're not trying to kill you or anything like that.'

The use of the word 'kill' reassured me somewhat - it was a word that someone trying to reassure someone they really *were* going to kill would consciously avoid like first-contact syndrome. I re-evaluated the balance of trust a minor increment in favour of the Summerfield party, while making a mental note to be sure to count the teeth and the number of legs on each end.

As we travelled up in the sort of brass-and-red-plush elevator cage that some designer had probably thought to be a thematic evocation of the elegance of the nineteenth century, I looked at Bernice Summerfield closely, trying not to be too obvious about it, now that I could see her face.

When I'd met her before, she had been on the ragged edge between malnutrition and terminal starvation; now she had filled out again and the light was on in her eyes. All the same, though, there were a number of new lines tinter them and I got the impression of - not illness, precisely, but more of a kind of exhausted determination one gets when one is determinedly holding some illness off.

Bernice caught me looking at her and shot me a mock glare that, momentarily, infused her face with a kind of gleeful *joie de vivre* that had informed the stills I'd first seen of her, researching the background for the Dellah sector job, before we'd actually met.

'There's nothing wrong,' she said, in answer to my unspoken question. 'There's nothing wrong with me.'

Since she obviously almost believed it herself, I let it drop and squirrelled it away for consideration later. It wasn't any of my business.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened on to a spare and smallish, pastel-surfaced anteroom, the only items of furniture being two unoccupied, matching, antique rococo chairs, one on either side of mahogany doors, on which a couple of footmen in full periwigged costume might sit at idle moments. I got the impression - here and later - of being in the sort of setup you see in those surviving 1930s Hollywood cinematographs, where the Wealthiest Tycoon in the World swans around his plush apartments running his global business concerns by way of drinking martinis, smoking from ebony fag-holders, playing the piano and marrying peroxide blondes who think he's a gas-pump jockey, without doing a stroke of actual work.

Bernice left the elevator and headed straight for the two doors. I let her go first on the not-being-born-yesterday principle and followed somewhat more cautiously behind. Beyond, a chamber more or less confirming my Hollywood impression: Art Deco forms and a terraced floor, sparse and dated-looking Futurism (the point about Futurism being that it's *supposed* to look dated, whichever date it happens to be in), a sweeping curve of wall space that presumably housed

windows, over which the drapes were drawn - I never did discover where this place really was, in purely positional terms, and positional terms are all relative in the Proximan Chain in any case.

Standing amid this, as though waiting for his cue, was an elegant man in a razor-sharp suit. He turned, as if on cue, as Bernice and I entered, and smiled with what appeared to be genuine delight.

‘Ah, Benny,’ said Irving Braxiatel, ‘I see that your endeavours have been not entirely unfruitful.’

Yes, *that* Irving Braxiatel. The one with the New Collection where you can witness the whole vast panoply of galactic history, in twenty minutes flat, by way of a photophosphic dome and a little cart on gimbals and some really dodgy animatronics; where you can research the records extant from a thousand worlds if you can go through the machinations of getting a pass card, wander through the serried and terraced halls packed full to bursting with the items they’ve decided to let out of the vaults, consume hideously overpriced *chai* and biscuits in the tearooms and come away with a stuffed Hairy Rolf the Collection-going Possum and a badge saying I’VE SEEN THE PLTHOI.

Braxiatel was the sole and freehold owner of this concern, and had been one of the guiding lights within the now-destroyed University on Dellah - and this made it all the more worrying, here and now, because I knew all of the above to be a front There are certain... powers in the universe, factions of opposition that stand as to the multiplexal, civil, social and criminal factions of my world as do mythological gods and Titans to man - and Braxiatel, on all the evidence, was hooked directly into them. Whether on one side or the other I had no idea and couldn’t care less. The nearest I’d ever got to being involved on that level was when I ‘d got mixed up with the Dellahan situation - and that had been more than enough for me.

‘Good evening,’ Braxiatel said to me.

‘Whatever it is,’ I said to him, ‘I’m not interested. Let’s get that clear from the start.’

Braxiatel smiled slightly. ‘I had the feeling you might be reluctant, initially. That’s why I’ve taken the liberty of transferring certain funds into your...’

He trailed off and his smile slipped uncertainly. Whether he was looking at my expression or Summerfield’s, I was too busy controlling myself to tell for the moment.

‘Oh you *idiot*, Irving,’ Bernice snapped, off to one side. ‘I told you *not* to do that.’

Now, listen, if you really could boil life down into the good guys and the bad guys like they do in the holomovie crap, I suppose I’d be one of the latter. You know the sort of thing I mean: one of those mob enforcers who try to put (he pressure on Our Hero’s friends, the hit man against whom Our Hero has to protect some grass, the guy from the Evil Corporation who bumps off the inventor of a car that runs on cheese, working for the highest bidder, whomsoever it might be, and with the moral sensibilities of the same size and general constitution of a rat’s squit.

In real life that just ain’t so. I’m a licensed security operative with a Stratum Seven clearance and that might not sound like much to *you* but, believe me, it’s tied up with deep and highly formalized codes of honour and conduct. We do not sell ourselves and can’t be bought. We *choose* to give our loyalty, to a strict contract of agreed parameters, in return for what it’s worth. The more abstruse and contractual complexities of this are beside the point, here - but the upshot was that sticking money into my accounts unasked for, assuming that would buy me, was perhaps the worst insult imaginable a man could give to someone in my line of work.

‘Get this guy away from me,’ I said to Bernice in a flat and neutral tone, and had the pleasure of watching Braxiatel blanch a little with the reaction that tone always seems to provoke. ‘Get him out before I do something he’s going to regret.’

‘Go and see if you can cancel the transfer,’ Bernice told him. It was only later that I wondered about the fact that she seemed perfectly at home with ordering one of the richest and most powerful men in the Sector around – it didn’t seem to be about power levels and so forth, more of a momentary dispute between friends. ‘Bring us the stuff he needs to see as well.’

‘I told you,’ I said to her, as Braxiatel hurriedly left by way of a small side door, ‘I’m not interested, whatever it is. Doubly uninterested, now. Can I go home?’

‘Look, I’m really sorry about that.’ Bernice sighed in a manner reminiscent of a parent apologizing for the antics of a bright but basically naive child. ‘Irving knows more about almost everything than you or I’ll ever know, but he hits this occasional blind spot when it comes to people things. He really didn’t mean anything by it.’

For a moment she looked down tiredly at the carpet, the overall brownish-neutral tone of which comprised interlocking, primary-colour, abstract shapes suggestive of saxophones. Then she looked up again, the tiredness I’d noticed before more evident in her eyes. ‘OK. You don’t want a job - but there are things you really need to know. If you don’t know what we’re doing here, and how it might affect you, you could be in serious danger.’

‘What, more serious danger than normal?’ I said. ‘Why do I get the feeling people have been monkeying around behind the scenes and screwing my life up? What have you gone and dropped me in?’

Bernice sucked at her bottom lip with a little non-committal expression. ‘Probably nothing you need worry about, unless you’d actually decided to work with us. I just don’t want you to walk away now and be completely unprepared. For one thing, you have to know that your apartments are being monitored.’

‘Is that so?’ I shrugged. ‘That’s nothing out of the ordinary. We’re in the Proximan Chain. People wander through the systems and pick stuff up by the truckload.’

‘I mean *actively* monitored,’ said Bernice. ‘We know that because we were the ones who set it up.’

Braxiatel had returned by this time, clutching a sheaf of hard-copy printout and a bulky and archaic dossier folder made of actual pink cardboard. Bernice reached out and look some sheets of printout from him and handed them to me, and I flipped through them in desultory fashion. Text transcripts - physically *typed* on genuine wood-and-rag pulp paper - of oral conversation which sounded vaguely like me, given that nobody can really know what the hell they sound like when they’re just wandering around and muttering to themselves on their own.

‘OK, so I’m being actively monitored,’ I said. ‘Stay tuned for some eardrum-bursting sonic pulses in the near future.’ I wagged the transcripts meaningfully. ‘This all seems to be a little bit of what you might call *low-tech*, if you don’t mind me remarking.’

Bernice smiled slightly. ‘Doctrine of contextual reversal. The more hi-tech an environment is, the greater the chance that simplifying things and doing them the good old way slides underneath it and remains secure. I learnt that from an Artificial Personality Embodiment a bit like you I once knew, a woman who called herself the Cat’s Paw, but that’s neither here nor there. Also -’ she shot a glance to Braxiatel ‘- it’s all a bit of a part and parcel of Irving’s frankly idiosyncratic way of doing things.’

‘Is that so?’ The mention of an APE like me had put me on the defensive, somewhat. My unique and special status, so far as things like the process of building Artificial Personality Embodiments goes, means I could be either considered one of them of the most extreme kind, or not one at all - the upshot being that I tend to catch the flak from both sides. ‘So where do you get off sticking a bug up my personal arse? Just what are you doing here that you need to keep tabs on me?’

‘We’re here because there have been some alarming developments in the Dellah situation,’ said Braxiatel.

‘What?’ My blood ran suddenly cold to the extent that I forgot I was supposed to be ignoring him with a lofty *hauteur*.

‘Don’t tell me *Prince Jimbo*’s risen from the lead-lined coffin or something.’

‘Nothing like that,’ Bernice assured me, ‘or, at least, so we think. The last thing we heard on that matter, the Thanaxon Council had voted to build a quite extensive seven-thousand-tonne monument on top of it. Possibly due to some unconscious fear of that very thing happening – or some other abstruse but locally relevant reason, of course.’

Braxiatel was now absently busying himself with a lacquered drinks cabinet, mixing a stiff cocktail – almost exactly of the sort I’d imagined in the anteroom – in a chrome shaker and pouring it into a brace of crystal tumblers. He handed one to Bernice, who took it gratefully, proffered the other to me, and when I refused kept the glass held negligently and unregarded in his hand.

‘As you know,’ he said, ‘the godlike entities that caused so much trouble are now, supposedly, hemmed in on Dellah by the blockade, but it’s impossible for the forces of Earth, however admirable they might be, to be everywhere, and things slip through the cracks. We’ve attempted to monitor the situation up on Dellah itself, making use of certain... items of equipment in the St Oscar’s Department of Advanced Studies, which escaped the general sacking of the university somewhat intact – but a few months ago all contact with the department was suddenly lost. Almost simultaneously, certain incidents, that led to rumours, that led to reports of which we became aware, began to occur here in the Proximan Chain. Murders of a certain sort. Monomaniacal behaviour of a particular kind. The pattern is entirely distinctive...’

‘Which means,’ Bernice cut in, ‘that we don’t just *think* one of these entities escaped from Dellah and is at large. We *know* an entity is here, somewhere, building up its influence and on the point of going overt big time. We’re now talking about a matter of days, unless we find it and stop it, before the Proximan Chain is hit by a Belief Quake as big as the world.’

‘To this end,’ said Braxiatel, ‘we’ve been conducting an investigation, utilizing the talents and skills, primarily, of

Artificial Personality Embodiments like yourself on the suggestion of Bernice - who realized from her previous association with yourself that the synthetically imposed nature of your consciousness presented something of a blind spot to these entities, thus allowing us to work with some degree of secrecy...'

'Now hang on,' I said, the importance of the situation overriding my initial resolution not to get involved with it in any shape or form. 'Why wasn't I brought in on this from day one? I've got the background and the experience with these things that would have put us on the same page at the start. Are you going to tell me that I don't have the skills or something?'

'I wanted to,' Bernice said, 'but Irving thought you might pose a security risk. You've been *on* Dellah, physically exposed to the gods en masse, and were instrumental in setting back their plans on Thanaxos. They know who you are.'

'Besides which,' said Braxiatel, airily, 'your little sojourn in the ruins of the university exposed you to a healthy dose of the emissions from the Advanced Studies block yourself. Who knows what sort of contamination you might have picked up from *that*.'

'So we decided to leave well enough alone,' said Bernice. 'We kept an eye on you and stayed clear.'

'So what's changed now?' I asked, making a little mental note to find out just what sort of 'contamination' they were talking about as soon as possible, if necessary at gunpoint. 'Why did you decide to contact me now?'

'Because security's been busted wide open,' said Bernice. 'One of our APE operatives has been murdered. One of the people keeping an eye on you, in fact. Her name was Kara Delbane.'

BACHGROUND 2

The Oblivion Angels were one of those slightly ambiguous concerns that by the unkind would be called mercenaries and the more kindly disposed would refer to as troubleshooters. Originally set up by an incorporate consortium, in a fit of galactic gunboat diplomacy, to look out for their common interests in the galaxy at large, they broke away from their patrons by way of being too heavily and lethally armed to make it worth the incorporations going against them directly. It was simply easier all round to agree to the Angels' politely worded request that they be granted autonomous and freelance status.

Functionally, however, there was no real change. The Oblivion Angels roamed the galaxy in their mile-wide Ship, doing in a big and paramilitary way what I myself would do, in later years, in a small way - working for the multiplexes on commission when the application of direct military force was applied. Their personnel were drawn from human and alien ex-soldiers, APEs who had achieved breakout (this being one of the few jobs they could get) and APEs bought in directly from the Catan Nebula. Over the years the command structure within the Ship - which had no other name, incidentally - had evolved into a quite complex society in its own right, a kind of hi-tech warrior clan.

I knew some of this in general from my Catan-implanted knowledge, and learnt more of it in particular some time later - but I have to say that, in the course of my first job for them, I didn't get to see any of it except for a couple of bare compartments, and never met one of them but Kara Delbane, a couple of technicians and ARVID. The implanted knowledge in my head dropped in the useful item of information that this stood for Artificial Viral-based Intelligence Destabilization - a process that produced cheap AIs at the

cost of a short lifetime and a somewhat erratic approach to interactive behaviour.

‘We bought you for a one-off job,’ it said, after Delbane had marched me down a gangway from the recovery room to a set of Spartan living quarters that consisted of a bunk and an ablutionary stall, like a prison cell. ‘You’re equipment and that’s all you are, chum.’ The crude symbol face in the ubiquitous ceiling monitor somehow contrived to make itself sneer without changing at all. ‘I’m not exactly a quality product, like you supposedly are, but I’ve got more status than you’ll ever *dream* of, let alone ever have.’

‘And I have more status than *you*, ARVID,’ said Kara, who had hung around after bringing me here, and now instantly earned herself a small note in my good books by her somewhat angry reaction. ‘Such as it is. What’s got into you? Why are you coming it like the little Pinochet?’

‘Look, I’m just trying to give him the score, Kara,’ the voice said. ‘The guy’s been out of the packing crate, what, five minutes, and this is the best way to tell him he’s been screwed completely before he’s even got a proper *go*...’

(The mention of ‘five minutes’, incidentally, gave me one of those little insights to which I’m sometimes prone. Without an external benchmark, with it just being two APEs together, both I and Delbane had fallen into our own rhythm and pace and not noticed. To a basic human type it would have seemed that we’d been jittering and jabbering away together in the recovery room like a holomovie on fast forward, fitting maybe half an hour’s worth of conversation and interaction into a few minutes. The sort of zippy shorthand you can use with someone who, by their very innate nature, simply gets what you mean.)

The tone of ARVID’s voice now changed into something slightly friendlier, and obviously directed at me again. ‘Listen, I’m just one of the minor administrative automemes of the Shipwide System, and I’m supposed to give you some clue as to what’s happening before they send you in. You were bought by the Angels a few months ago and stockpiled for this one particular job, left in cold storage until they were

ready for you.’ The face of symbols jiggled a bit in a way that reminded me of those expressions people get when they punctuate a speech with a little pause. ‘Now, personally, I’d have given you the run of the place and let you get your bearings for weeks - but the Hetmen don’t think like that. As it is, I’m supposed to just wind you up and let you go. And if you don’t there’s people who are gonna *make* you, and kill you if you don’t. You got all that?’

Now, I’m quicker on the uptake than most, and I like to think that I can do the poker face good enough for the full set of fire irons. Basic human types, I’ve noticed, really *do* need to have things explained into the ground - need those weeks wandering around that ARVID had mentioned - before they get up to speed. But I’d got the basic situation from the moment I’d been zapped, and revised my strategy - which was to go along with this shit, hold it back with the witty comebacks, and get the hell out the first chance I got.

So I shrugged unconcernedly. ‘I’ve got it. So what is it I’m supposed to do?’

‘You’ve been primed with most of the background already,’ ARVID said. ‘This is just to fix it in your conscious mind...’

My policy of holding it back with the witty comebacks was, of course, subject to change. ‘Look, are you going to sodding well *tell* me or what?’ I said.

‘All right,’ said ARVID, ‘here’s the skinny. The planet our Ship’s now orbiting is called Sharabeth, and it exists in a state of fractured time.’

‘Fractured time?’ I said, my being incredibly quick on the uptake momentarily deserting me.

‘Temporal physics,’ said Kara. She started making illustrative little movements with her hands. ‘The guys on the science deck can give you the specifics, but, in general, it seems that while we once thought the universe was travelling through time at a second per second...’

‘It is, in fact,’ cut in ARVID, ‘*accelerating* at a second per second per second, falling towards some inconceivable end that’ll probably smash it like a collection of glass balls on a rockcrete floor - reality being all balls, basically, in any case.’

‘And Sharabeth,’ said Kara, shooting a murderous little glance at the monitor unit, ‘seems to have hit something on the way down. Sometime in the future, the science guys say, maybe ten or twenty years from now. The shock and the shards of it, however, are extending back as well as forwards - and now it’s hit *our* point on the subjective timeline. Physically, it still looks and acts like a planet, but it’s utterly disrupted down there. All contact has been lost.’

‘Which wouldn’t really matter,’ said ARVID, ‘except that Sharabeth was a nexus planet - post-galactic-contact, heavily industrialized and commercialized, the focal incorporate point for this entire galactic sector. There are contingency plans to relocate these ties, of course, to some relatively nearby planetary body like Dellah, say - but that’s a last resort. For the moment. this is a reconnaissance mission. We need to find out what’s happening on the Sharabeth surface and what, if anything, can be salvaged.’

‘Well, good luck,’ I said. ‘Sounds to me as if you really want an investigator or one of these “science” guys. What the hell has it got to do with me?’

‘The Hetmen won’t send in a human,’ said Kara, sourly, and I got the distinct impression that she was a bit contemptuous about that. ‘Apparently the temporal stresses would rip their poor little human minds apart.’

‘It’ll to do with the fact of consciousness,’ explained ARVID, ‘and how it’s linked to the fundamental nature of the universe itself. It’s what that mind *believes* on the deep subconscious level that counts. We need to send in someone who is as near to truly human as is possible, but with a mind that’s *already* dislocated in time - and that’s you, quite frankly, chum.’

I mulled this over for a moment. That has got to be the biggest crock of shit I’ve ever heard - even if, as you say, I’ve only been awake and alive for ten minutes. You want someone who’s as near to human as dammit, so why don’t these Hetmen of yours take a human and brainwash him so he thinks he came from another time.’

The procedures to make that deep a change, in the limited time we have available, would render the precise, uh, *human* qualities we need unusable,' said ARVID, slightly glibly for my taste.

And plus, you wouldn't catch the Hetmen doing something like that to a *human* type,' said Kara. It seemed all this had touched a nerve of resentment inside her slightly more than somewhat.

'Well, OK,' I said to her. Then why not just send someone like *you* in. I'd think the Warrior Princess would be in her element.'

'Yeah, right,' said Kara. 'Who do you think's gonna be piloting you?'

I never got to see what Sharabeth looked like from space, but then again I never got to see the Oblivion Angels' Ship from the outside, or even what the drop craft that was actually going to drop me looked like. I feel a bit obscurely cheated about that.

What I *did* get was Kara Delbane leading me through steel-plate gangways to a vaguely egg-shaped polyceramic canister cradled in some hydraulically controlled apparatus resembling a massive claw. A pair of bored-looking technicians installed me into power armour, wrapped me up in crash webbing and sealed me into the canister.

'There's a two-way communicator by your ear,' the voice of Kara said, naturally enough by my ear. 'I'll keep in contact with you until we hit the drop point. Don't worry about the chutes opening and stuff, it's all automated.'

I stared off miserably into the pitch dark. They could have bothered to supply me with a light or something, even if all I'd have to see was a tangle of webbing.

The canister was gimballed up into the drop craft, the drop craft blasted away from the Ship and began a spiralling, suborbital descent towards what, in purely physical terms, had once been the location of Sharabeth's major population centre. The local name for it was 'Wiglixix' or something, but, so far as the broader interstellar community was concerned,

it was just basically still Sharabeth. And, if you're waiting for a second-by-second account of every rattle, lurch, shake and yawn of free fall in the course of all this, you're talking to the wrong guy.

Kara and I just generally chatted, when she wasn't too busy piloting the drop craft. I suppose we should have been saying gritty and heroic things while we headed into unknown peril, but instead she told me about how she liked to collect recordings of ^{early-}twentieth-century musicals, which she knew more about than I did, even though in one sense I came from the nearer time.

Something, however, had been nagging at my mind. Not wishing to be rude or anything,' I said into the two-way, 'but how the hell am I supposed to get out once I've seen whatever it is I'm supposed to see?'

'Don't worry about it,' said Kara cheerfully. The topography boys have worked me out a vector. I'm gonna ground this thing behind you, after you drop, somewhere that looks relatively safe. Then I'm just gonna set up a defence shield and wait for you to come to me. There's a little microtracer in your skull that should tell me where you are.'

'Do you know,' I said, 'it's a wonder my head hasn't fallen off, all this extra weight it's carrying. And why do I get the distinct feeling I'm the only one who's doing the actual *work*?'

Kara snorted. 'Hey, listen, if you want to come up here and fly this thing through catastrophic metatemporal rifts that could make us go *kasplat* like a frog with a straw up its arse, you're quite, quite welcome to try it.'

So when do we hit these metatemporal rifts?' I asked.

'We've already gone through three. Just be glad you can't see what I can through the canopy.'

I tried and failed utterly to discern any internal change I might have experienced in the process of going through forces that, so ARVID had said, would have torn a normal human mind to shreds. I was about to say as much, when Kara cut in again: 'We're in the lower stratosphere, now, drop point coming up and - Oh *shit*, we've got a bogey. Two bogeys. Talk to you later...'

For nearly thirty seconds I was thrown around like the bearing in a shaken spraybomb, then Kara said, 'It's no good. They're still on our tail and closing. I'm gonna have to lose you, now.' There were a couple of clanging sounds from outside, a *whomph* of acceleration that mashed my spine against the shell, and then I was in free fall.

Almost instantly the concussion from some massive detonation hit the canister and I tumbled.

'Oh shit...' I said. 'Kara? What was that? Are you -'

'Don't worry about it,' said her voice in my ear. 'I ejected.' Her voice seemed harsh, the rasp of someone recovering from exertion, fear and shock. 'Hopefully, the little bits of landing craft are gonna mask us on the way down. I *really* don't wanna do that again, with nothing but a backup chute for company.' I later learnt that she was in full sky-diving free fall at this moment, the sound of the wind rushing past masked by the helmet of her flight suit.

'So what do we do now, then?' I said. 'Correct me if I'm wrong, but you were my lift out of here. What's the situation now?'

'The situation now,' said Kara, 'is that we are completely stuffed. For the moment you just sit tight. I can control my descent and I'll stick close. Maybe we can work out what to do when we're on the ground.'

'Sounds fine by me,' I said.

And so we fell.

CHAPTER 3

Braxiatel smoothly put the drink he'd been holding in my hand, just like he'd been waiting to do it on cue. I gulped it down in one, through that sharp and sort of clicking pain you get when you try to swallow at the same time as some other, random, physical impulse tries to close your throat up - the pain then spreading out into the upper chest and sternum in that miserable, chronic way that's strangely similar to a hefty smack in the groin but half a metre up. Some detached little part of my mind noticed that, despite the glass having been held in a hand for quite some time, the liquid had still been freshly chilled. It was just a tiny observation, without any sense of connection or emotion either way.

'Look, I'm sorry to simply drop it on you like that,' Bernice Summerfield was saying, a little more back-pedal hurriedly than I think she'd meant, 'but you had to know. I mean, psychologically speaking, it's the best way to -'

'Fuck your speaking psychologically,' I said, 'and fuck you.'

I walked over to the drinks cabinet, set the glass down and turned back. 'Appropriate emotions have been felt, responses are now duly made, so let's talk business. I take it, from your clumsy attempts before, that you *were* intending to offer me an actual commission?'

'Why, ah, yes. Yes, we were.' Braxiatel seemed momentarily nonplussed for some reason.

'OK. My transputer systems should be back on line by now, so have one of your secure negotiation packages contact it and work something out. I want an unlimited, no-questions expense fund keyed for my personal use, and a lump sum of at least five hundred per cent over my "friend-to-stranger" scale on termination of contract.

‘Contract to be terminated upon undeniable physical proof and/or my registered and express statement that all those directly and actively involved in the death of Kara Delbane have been located and neutralized, and that *you* -’ this to Braxiatel will indemnify me personally against any action, civil or otherwise, brought against me as a result of my pursuing said contract to its legitimate end.’

I paused for breath and shrugged. ‘The transputers can sort out the specifics, but those are the basics of what I want, and if I don’t go home to find them waiting for my chop then all deals are off.’ I gestured to the folder still in Braxiatel’s hand. ‘I’m assuming that most of what I need to know is in there, right?’

‘To a degree of factual certainty...’

‘Fine.’ I pulled the folder out of his hand and headed out. ‘I’ll be in touch if I want any more.’

At the polished mahogany double door I turned back to look at Bernice Summerfield, who was still just standing there and regarding me a little strangely, her expression slightly vacant as though some unseen hand had temporarily switched her off.

‘Get a move on,’ I told her. ‘Are you coming with me or not?’

Box was indeed back on line when I arrived back in my apartment with a still slightly dazed-seeming Bernice in tow.

‘Everything’s just tickety-boo with me,’ it told me, not knowing the specifics of who had set it on to diagnostics mid-hazarding the most reasonable guess. I didn’t bother to disabuse it - there was no point in blaming *Box* for something I hadn’t anticipated and wasn’t its fault - and just made a mental note to devise the core routines to stop it from ever happening again.

‘I think you should also have a deal for me,’ I said.

‘I’ve got a deal,’ said Box. ‘Party by the name of Braxiatel.’

‘Is it a good deal?’

‘It’s the best I’ve ever seen. Who’ve you been blowing on your nights off? I’ll bet this guy has ran you ragged.’

‘Nobody in particular,’ I said, reminding myself yet again to add some supplementary interaction into Box for when I had company. I scanned the specs as Box streamed them to me over the monitor hanging from the ceiling. Braxiatel had given me everything I’d wanted, and then some. ‘Go for it. Confirmed?’

‘It’s confirmed,’ said Box, without any sense of time lag that might be noticeable to the human ear, and which I caught only because I was listening for it. I have the unprovable superstition that you can tell if somebody’s listening in on your transputer-based communications by the way the time lag feels.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Back up the files and then set up a security field for us, will you? Active and across the board.’ I watched the visual readouts on the monitor hanging from the ceiling as the lockouts fell in place: a globe of ‘hard’ light unfolding to encapsulate the apartment, strobing through various levels of the electro- and gravimetric spectra on a random cycle to disrupt any kind of eavesdropping sensor trained on it. Active disruption stands out like a sore thumb, of course - anybody who might happen to be monitoring the activity inside my apartment would realize I was on to them like a shot - but at least it would mask what was actually happening, inside the field, for a while.

Bernice was still standing by the door where I had left her, still wearing that dazed and somewhat slack expression she’d had when we had left the chambers of Braxiatel. At the time I’d put it down to human-level startlement at my apparent sudden change of emotional tack, but now I started to wonder. I hadn’t had any particular thing in mind *myself* when I’d simply assumed that she was going to come along with me - it just seemed to fit the general dynamic of the situation, if you get what I mean - but it occurred to me, now, that she hadn’t even questioned it, that she had simply done what I’d told her to do, when I’d told her to do it, had responded to my voice when I spoke, but had done so with the automatic reflexes of someone on a kind of mental autopilot. This was sufficiently unlike the Bernice

Summerfield I remembered that it was starting to worry me. I peered into her blank, switched-off face, then took hold of her shoulder and shook her. 'Are you all right?'

Benny snapped out of it with a shudder, glanced around herself with brief puzzlement and then relaxed - I got the impression that she had been desperately trying to work out why she was suddenly *here*, had worked it out by cold logic and was damned if she was going to admit to the extended lapse of awareness that had led to her disorientation in the first place.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I was miles away for a moment. I'm fine. Why shouldn't I be fine?' She stalked over to my sofa with a kind of spiky, controlled anger that seemed more directed at herself than at me. 'Shall we make a start?'

The pink cardboard folder contained a mismatched selection of papers, ranging from the hard-copy transcripts of the sort I'd encountered earlier, to sheets of what I recognized as actual vellum due to temporally ambiguous aspects of my nature, but which I'd be surprised if people knew about these days, covered with neat and calligraphic writing in what looked suspiciously like dried blood without the platelets that would make it clot instead of dry, but which I later learnt to be cold tea. I skimmed through the papers as I pulled them out, one by one, holding them up for Box's interface to scan them before passing them to Bernice:

A SecServ™ preliminary report - that being the private security concern who happened to find her, a neighbour in Kara's warren who was under their wing having noticed an 'unsavoury character' coming and going and who had called them out of sheer busybodiness. A uniformed operative had been dispatched to show visible-presence willing, had knocked on Kara's door to find it unlocked, and had subsequently found her body in the bedroom. Probable cause - pending the more extensive autopsy for which someone would have to pay - asphyxiation.

Distribution of blood and free histamines in the body placed the time of death at around thirty-six hours ago - just after, it occurred to me, the last time I'd seen her. And I

didn't need a diagram to work out who the 'unsavoury character' had been.

The body, when found, had been tied to the carbon-composite reproduction of an old iron bedstead that Kara had affected in life, wrists and ankles secured by lengths of fibre-optic cable, each of an equal length, which seemed to have been cut for the specific job. Somebody may have miscalculated the forces and tensions slightly, because the cabling had been supplemented by strips of torn and twisted sheeting from the bed.

There were minor reflex and constrictive injuries on the ankles and wrists themselves, as opposed to the multiple and more extensive injuries that would have been caused by someone consciously trying to work their wrists and ankles out. There were bruises and contusions around the mouth and neck and upper shoulders. There were a number of localized burns - originally tagged as the work of a solder probe, but heavily corrected by someone, who seemed to know, as cigarette burns - on the inner thighs and along the side of the left breast.

Clipped to the report, which had been copied in some weird and slippery process like mimeography, were a couple of two-dimensional stills, one showing an incredibly sappy-looking Kara playing with one of the licensed-character toys she tended to collect with a kind of gleeful irony, the other a still from a SecServ™ helmet-cam of the body itself. Additionally, there was a copy of the posted notice, saying how the body of Delbane, K, would be held at the Grid Nine recycling plant for seventy-two standard hours, should anyone feel the need to collect it, and that Security Services SA (Prox.) would be more than happy to investigate this suspicious death, at reasonable rates.

The next item was one of those sheets of tea-written vellum. I'd tentatively pegged these as having been written by Braxiatel himself, but, if so, it didn't exactly give a lot of insight into the writer, being merely a condensed précis of Kara's known life. Dates and facility codes of the APE process that created her, dates and details of when she 'broke' - that

being the point where an Artificial Person realizes what he or she really is and becomes a *real* person rather than a thing, if you get me, in the effective sense. Details of her work with the Angels, the trip to Sharabeth, that sort of thing... I didn't pay it much attention on account of how I pretty much knew the details of it anyway.

Stapled to the sheet, though, was something slightly more interesting. A printout from a standard and, on the face of it, incredibly banal textmail, sent by Kara to a drop box, an hour or so before she died:

It was wonderful to hear from you again, Lucy - and do I have some news for you (!!)

You remember when you suggested I look up our old friend, and, well, I did, and he was just *so* different from the way I remembered. You know, one thing led to another - and I really think he could be the one, you know? I'll drop by tomorrow and we can have a proper talk about it. Until then, though, remember what I said before about the colours in the bathroom, I really think that green's the way to go, and give my love to Benny...

I wasn't interested in the free-encoded information about me, and far less in the plonking way that comes across when you're *trying* to do something that sounds like girl talk rather than just doing it. 'This colours-in-the-bathroom code,' I said to Bernice. 'What does *green* mean on the scale?'

Bernice raised an eyebrow. 'I haven't the slightest Idea of what you're talking about. It's not a code we've used, when we ever feel the need to use codes at all. I mean, Braxiatel's my friend, but it's not as if we're part of some covert force of conspiracy or anything like that. Sending something to *Lucy*, on the other hand, means that someone's stumbled on something relevant, but in a completely different area from the one he or she's been sent to investigate, and needs to come in and talk about it.'

'Yeah, well,' I said. 'That was going to be my next suggestion.'

'I'm sure it was,' said Benny.

The final item was a sheaf of transcripts from the monitoring, I assumed, that Braxiatel and his little friends were keeping on Kara's place, in the same way as they seemed to have kept it on my own. As had mine, transcripts were written by way of an old typewriter, but the flow of them seemed semiautomated in some idiosyncratic manner - I had visions of a Remington hooked in some abstruse Heath Robinson fashion to a phonograph with a horn:

--- GRID 40/45/9 - 5.1 ---

[2H19M NO SOUND]

DOOR OPENING, EXTERIOR (?): Y

VOICE (MALE): good thats very good [indistinguishable] gota
[?] green light yet

VOICE 2 (MALE): hang on hangon [?] yes thats it the cameras
and infrasensors are out yes but what about the audio
clamp mikes and inductance

VOICE 1: never fear such things shall be dealt with at the
appropriate

VOICE 2: you say so im just worrying yno f?] is this gon work

DOOR CLOSING (?): Y

VOICE 1: what going to work precisely

VOICE 2: yno [?] shes one of those ape things and they don't do
stuff like we do yno [?] is it gonna work an can she
even feel [?] pain

VOICE 1: i can handle that particular side of things just
you concentrate upon using you nasty little talents as
required [indistinguishable] feel pain

DOOR OPENING, INTERIOR (?): Y

VOICE 1: now

DOOR CLOSING, INTERIOR (?): Y

[0H24M NO SOUND]

DOOR OPENING, INTERIOR (?): Y

VOICE 2: [*expletive*]

VOICE 1: [*expletive*] indeed well it seems our little trip
amongst the lower classes has been in vane

VOICE 2: so what do we do now

VOICE 1: retrace her footsteps of course either she simply didn't
know she had the item on her or shes blocked it off in some

way but either way the little f *expletive* racial derog.] ape
doesnt ha
(0HI2MNO SOUND]
GLOBAL POSITIONING DEVICE (?): N
DEFINE (?): COMMUNICATIONS UNIT ALERT,
INDIVIDUALIZED
DEFINITION PRESENT. ADD TO DEFINITION
PARAMETERS (?): Y
FX: 'click'
FX: click'
|4H27M NO SOUND]

* * *

--- GRID 40/45/9 - 5.2 ---
DOOR OPENING, INTERIOR (?): Y
VOICE (MALE): now
DOOR CLOSING, INTERIOR (?): Y
VOICE: what do we have here i think we
ZIP FASTENER (?): N
DEFINE (?): CLOTH TEARING
STORED
VOICE 2 (FEMALE): mn I?] [indistinguishable] wha [?JVOICE 3:
cmn [?] |*expletive*] tie those 1*expletive*J
sheets
COMPLEX COMPOSITE BREAKDOWN (?): N
FX: 'slap'
VOICE 3: [*expletive*] still [*expletive*]
VOICE 1: and thank [*expletive*] for that as it were tie her feet
two we dont want any more unfortunate occurrences do
we
CLOTH TEARING (?): Y
VOICE I: now wake her up
VOICE 2: [indistinguishable]
VOICE 1: hallo kara [?] remember me
VOICE 2: [indistinguishable]
VOICE 1: hit her
FX: 'slap'
VOICE 1: where is it kara [?]
VOICE 2: [*expletive*]
VOICE 1: now im going to let that go for the moment kara [?]
because underneath it all i am a remarkably civilized
and tolerant man where is it kara [?]

VOICE 2: [indistinguishable] what
VOICE 1: again
FX: 'slap'
VOICE 1: where it it kara [?]
VOICE 2: wheres what
NO NEAR REFERENCE (?): IGNITING OF
SULPHUR MATCH
STORED
NO NEAR REFERENCE (?): LIGHTING OF
CIGARINO
STORED
VOICE 1: where is it kara [?]
VOICE 2: wheres what
VOICE 3: where it it [*expletive«]
VOICE 2: where whu [?] [indistinguishable]

And that was it. 'Shit!' I threw the sheet of transcript away from me with such force of anger that it was a bit disheartening to see it catch the air wrong and flutter wonkily to the ground a bare metre away. I searched through the pink-card folder, just in case I'd missed anything left in it, and then pulled it apart at the joins just to be sure. 'A whole section's been lifted from the end. Either your friend Braxiatel has been incredibly sloppy in his typing, or you people have been got at more than you thought.'

'Maybe there was nothing useful to be learnt from it,' Bernice said, looking at me with that weird little look of concern again. 'Maybe it wasn't included to spare the sensibilities.'

'Well, the thoughtful little dear.' I snorted. 'How frightfully considerate. Please pardon me if I'd have liked the chance to decide what my delicate sensibilities could take or not for myself. Oh well. Other than that, conclusions, anybody?'

'The people swore a lot,' said Box from the ceiling monitor.

'Ho bleeding ho. Any conclusions other than that?'

'Well, I read through the file before I came to pick you up,' said Bernice, 'and my basic conclusions haven't changed.' She counted off the obvious on her fingers: 'There were two assailants; they were looking for some particular item and

they didn't find it. They have contacts within myself and Irving's associates, close enough that they were aware Kara's apartment was being monitored - and they were good enough, technically, to do something about it to a certain extent. This worked well enough, for long enough, to let them get away with questioning, torturing and killing her - if we'd been *actively* monitoring events, those transcripts would detail two people breaking in and a jolly exciting rescue. All of this,' she concluded, 'may or may not be tied up with the textmail she sent to Braxiatel, saying how she wanted to come in and talk.'

'Why do I get the feeling,' I said, 'that you wouldn't admit you'd crapped in your hat without solid evidence and stills of it from three sides?'

Bernice shrugged. 'Data stills can be edited and I don't wear hats.'

I climbed off the sofa and picked up the sheet of transcript I'd thrown away in pique. 'I notice that, after the assailants left, somebody called. I'm assuming that call didn't come from somebody on your end.'

Bernice shook her head. 'Not that I'm aware of.'

'OK. It's worth checking out. The Security Services guys are gonna keep the crime scene intact, more or less, for their window-of-retainer, so we can check that out tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' Bernice said. 'I really think we should start tonight. It's not as if we have a lot of time with which to play about.'

'This isn't combat, Bernice,' I said. 'It's an investigation. Something's going on and it has a deadline - but, deadline or not, we haven't got a hope in hell of *stopping* it until we work out what the hell it is. For that we need to be sharp.' I looked into her eyes, letting her know I could see the bloodshot, utter sense of exhaustion that she was barely holding back. 'It's late, I've had a hard day and I'm shattered. You're probably feeling none too fresh. We both of us need to catch a few hours' sleep before we do thing one.'

'Well, all right,' Bernice said dubiously - and I got the impression she was caught in that point of desperately trying

to push herself, but privately relieved that somebody had given her an excuse to give up and go limp for a while. It hadn't been what *she* wanted to do, after all. 'All right. But just for a few hours.'

'Then it's settled. Spare room's over there. Anything to add before we turn in for a bit. Box? Might as well put all those expensive new volatile processor bubbles to some use.'

'Just an observation,' said Box. 'It can't be dignified with the word conclusion, because it's so obvious. Kara Delbane was an Artificial Personality Embodiment, with the kind of biological modifications broadly similar to yourself.'

'This is true,' I said. 'Your point being?'

I lie point being, what's one of the few things in this galaxy that are human-shaped and can restrain an awake and fiercely struggling Artificial Personality Embodiment?'

Now, you, reading this, will have seen that coming a mile off, and wonder how anybody could be so inexpressibly dumb not to see it instantly. All I can say in my defence is that I'd had a trying day, and I was too close to the subject in general, on any number of levels, so it was one of those woods-for-the-trees things. I simply hadn't *got* it, consciously, in the same way as the punchline to a joke is obvious after you know, until now.

'You're right. Box,' I said. 'It is obvious. Kara was killed by another APE.'

I hadn't been entirely honest with Bernice about being tired, in the physical sense at least. With my enhancements, physically, I can go without sleep for a month. But there are other kinds of fatigue, other kinds of sleep we need. I left Bernice to her own devices and went into my bedroom, carefully triple-locked the door and finally let go of the control I had been keeping clenched around me like a tungsten band ever since Braxiatel's chambers, where Kara had suddenly become dead.

Now, it's not my place here to go into the particulars of the grieving process in all its interminable and miserable glory, but there were one or two things that surfaced from the chaos of rage and anguish and loss, to be recognized and

dealt with by the diamond-hard thread of detachment running through it, that I feel I have to mention in the interests of basic context.

The first was the deep emotional-level impulse to think of Bernice, and Braxiatel for that matter, as the murderers, on account of how it was through them I learnt of the murder in the first place. I'd clamped down massively on it at the time, of course, and gone into business mode like was on automatic pilot. I couldn't leave it like that, though - it was just the thing to come out at a crucial moment and have me making some unconscious mistake that would have Bernice, Braxiatel and probably myself killed into the bargain.

So I let it out for a while. Fortunately, it wasn't the sort of mental state that coped very well with three rather complex locks, or I think I would have hunted Bernice through the house and torn her limb from limb. The thread of detached consciousness - I can't in all honesty call it *me*, it's just the bit I like to think of as me - let it run around for a while before bringing it to heel, like a trainer taming some feral dog, by effectively telling it to stop acting like a bloody idiot and pull itself together.

The next impulse to be dealt with was that old chestnut about blaming the *victim* for leaving you like this - the sort of state where you could quite happily murder them yourself for doing it. I diverted that fury on to a kind of mentally constructed animus, a kind of bog-archetypical Murdering Villain like you'd find in the holomovies based on Box's comment that Kara had been killed by an APE. This was the real Bad Guy here, and I focused all the rage I felt upon a kind of revenge fantasy concerning Him. The details aren't important, save that I wouldn't have liked to meet the guy down some dark alley in real life - and *you* wouldn't like to see what I imagined doing to him on a full stomach, or even a glass of *oogli* juice and a croissant.

It was at that point that the detached superegoistical thread pointed out, in reasonable terms, that life was rarely like the holomovies. It was highly unlikely that the party or parties behind the death of Kara Delbane would, in fact, boil

down to turning a ten-foot-tall and cybernetically human/arachnid hybrid into steak-and-arthropod puree. The death of Kara Delbane was tied up with a mystery, and, if one was to bring summary justice to its instigators, one might be in with a better chance if one actually *solved* it.

Fair enough, said the part of me that thirsted for revenge, I'll just go out there and...

Beating up everybody who so much as looks at you in a suspicious way, like some third-rate lead in a holomovie pulp, said the superego, is just going to get you pulled down and shot by Security Services and every other faction out there, let alone the people who murdered Kara. If you want to do this then you'll have to do it to the full extent of the skills at your command.

Well OK, yeah, if you put it that way...

And furthermore, said the superego, while you entered into a contract with Braxiatel with quite specific terms, remember that there are larger factors operating, more at stake than personal revenge. If you find yourself with a choice between putting one over the other, I'd suggest you...

I was of the opinion, on this point, that the superego could piss right off.

All right, I will, said the superego.

I came out of the fugue in the kind of still slightly disassociated state that had me wondering, briefly, what kind of bomb had hit the room. I can't imagine that anybody else would be interested to learn that I once owned a lava lamp, a Rickenbacker semiacoustic guitar, a Nob lamp with documentation that proved it was a genuine twentieth-century Ikea, a William Morris wall drape and so forth. Suffice it to say that my nature gives me a taste for a certain kind of horrendously expensive antique, and in my state of mindless rage I had smashed, broken and torn it all apart. My hands and forearms were bruised and bleeding and I had lost a couple of fingernails even with my bioenhancements it would take a week or so to grow them back.

The anguish that had threatened to tear *me* apart, though, had gone, leaving behind it a kind of cold hole that I could

feel the edges of and which, I knew, was never really going to close. There was a stillness inside, a calm that let me remember Kara properly. How we had met and the time we had spent in the Oblivion Angels. The chance meetings afterwards and the abortive attempt at living together in Aeon Flux on Mars: two weeks of shagging so constant that the entire sub-warren complained, followed by an icy crust of indifference that neither of us wanted to break because we both knew what that meant. Meeting up again here, quite by chance, and talking, and meeting again, and the slow building up of something inside that seemed so natural and *right* that as the tendrils of connection bound us closer together we knew where things were going without using the words. The tiny lines that quirked up at the corner of her mouth. The way she shivered when you touched a certain point on the back of her thigh. Her hair.

These images wandered by me with a kind of very quiet clarity. They were happy and alive, so I decided to leave my body where it was on the floor curled up and with the face and mouth working, and gave myself up to them.

BACKGROUND 3

The sky was just this kind of formless, boiling, multi-coloured mass - the result of atmospheric gases and various suspended pollutants reacting against the inter-dimensionally disruptive forces of this place rather than those forces themselves. It's impossible for us to actually see time as we accelerate through it, or rebound wildly off in some other direction entirely: we just see the secondary effects.

On the ground there was nothing but ruins and rubble, packed with the ragged forms that were the final remains of a populated, crowded city after some final and devastating catastrophe. There was a kind of stillness here, not even a breeze - the only sound that of the shrieking sky, washed out and distant, like a radio receiver badly tuned to some broadcast with the volume cranked down low.

The drop capsule had gone through the process of deploying its various chutes, hit the ground and split open. A little speaker unit had then informed me that there were weapons and other useful items hidden in the lining - I guessed that this was because the Oblivion Angels were wary of telling me about weapons and other useful items when I was actually on the ship, and could use them to create enough problems to maybe escape. Kara was currently hanging off the carbon-compound superstructure of a wrecked building and hunting around with one useful item, a little binaural subsonar-bounce rig. Fortunately, whatever else was happening to the atmosphere, it didn't seem to stop such signals from bouncing off its inside edge.

There's a big structure over the skyline,' she said, clambering down, the helmet of her suit clattering on the clips where she had fixed it to her belt, her boots crunching

in something vaguely calcific that I was trying not to think about at this point. 'Nothing else of the size showing up.'

'That's something to head for, anyway,' I said. 'Whatever, I don't think we should be hanging around *here*. We were shot down. Somebody's taking an active interest, and I don't want to be around when they come looking for us.'

Now, listen: the name Sharabeth has nowadays become one of those watchwords for evil, like Belsen or the Golgotha Skull Maze. You've seen the footage and the stills, whoever you are, the grave pits frothing with a mulch of decomposing matter, the twisted strings of dehydrated offal hanging through the ruined streets, the little tableaux of fire-blackened bones. You probably think you can get a handle on the true horror of the place, but I was there, and I'm here to tell you that you can't. You just *can't*.

I don't want to talk about it much. What I will say, though, is that it's tied up with the fact that it wasn't the result of a single event like a bomb blast or something. All these ruins, all this death had been created on a piecemeal basis. Someone or something had done something to these people, then done it again, and yet again, so that every step you took and every corner you turned presented you with some new bit of inexpressibly abhorrent inventiveness.

The reactions to it built up in you cumulatively – and after a few kilometres I couldn't stand any more. I stumbled over a pile of debris, stuck my head through the window of what, I suppose, had once been a storefront in a structure broken off like a rotted tooth, and vomited copiously. I'm just an old softy at heart, basically.

In some detached part of my mind, I wondered at the fact that there was something to throw up in the first place, what with only having been unpacked for a few hours and all, and not having eaten in that time. I later learnt that I'd been decanted with a stomach full of a kind of long-life bulking nutrient mush that was the APE equivalent of packing some item of electrical equipment in expanded polystyrene beads. All I can say is, if the taste of it coming up was any

indication, I'm glad I wasn't self-aware when it was going down.

I became aware of a hand on my shoulder. I tried to flinch away, and felt the cold burn of a hypoderm on my neck.

'It's just a blocker,' Kara said. 'Help you to function without it hitting you so deep.'

I don't know if the hypo did any real good, but at least I stopped dry-heaving. I turned to see that Kara was administering a similar shot to herself. There were bruised-looking little trauma circles around her eyes and, without knowing what I was looking like myself, I got the feeling that she'd been hit even harder by all this than I. We held each other until we'd stopped shaking - nothing Iffy involved, you understand: just for the simple feel of something that was there and alive. At the point where we were climbing to our feet to press on, though, I heard a sound that told me there was something else alive, here. And so there was - at least, in a sense. It sounded mechanical.

Kara didn't appear to have heard it. I slapped her down under the lee of the debris I'd so recently clambered over to give us a bit of cover. She started to struggle about thinking the gods alone know what - and then she heard it, too, and was still. The sound grew louder, then louder still, and then one of the most innately ridiculous if not actively insane things I've ever seen in my life lurched into the ruined street.

It seemed to be nothing but a mass of whirling pistons and ball joints and greasy smoke on caterpillar treads. From somewhere inside the smoke I could make out a huge copper-and-verdigris boiler and an exhaust chimney, but I couldn't make out any overall, distinctive shape. Possibly, it was constructed under physical laws slightly different from those I thought I knew, but, in any event, I couldn't quite seem to get a fix on it with my eyes.

What I *did* see, though, was that it was coming to a stop. I pulled the gun I had salvaged from the capsule lining - a big, multifunctional thing that seemed to fit my hand perfectly and which, I knew, I knew how to use without consciously thinking about it. Either those Catan info-implants again, or

I had a little customizable weapons-recognition slot somewhere that the Angels had obligingly filled. By my side, I was aware without looking, Kara had produced a similar weapon from her suit.

The contraption came to a gear-spinning stop and blew its stack. Figures spilt from it, monstrous figures, each roughly the size of a man. Indeed, each seemed to have been warped from a basically human base, but it was as though some other hand had played with them like plasticine, pulling and twisting them into grotesque shapes, The eyes in their misshapen faces burnt redly, like laser sights. These basically human monsters cast about themselves, seemingly mindless and at random. One of them, however, carried an archaic-looking wooden box with a circular grille in the front, and seemed to be casting about more purposefully. The box tracked around, and ended up pointing directly towards Kara and me. The basically human monster shouted something out in a glutinous and shrill voice which my translators couldn't handle - and the rest of them boiled towards us at a run.

Like I've said, I'm not entirely slow on the uptake. I took down several of the basically human creatures in a variety of entertaining multifunctional ways, and Kara followed suit. What with the fact that she'd actually *fired* a gun before, and for all my Think-Tank memories I actually hadn't, I think she took down more than I did.

It didn't do any good. I have no idea how it was possible to pack that many basically human monsters into an insane steam-driven contraption, but there didn't seem to be any end to them. The last thing I remember before plunging into the fever-dark was an elongated, spurlike, basically human fingernail slashing for me as they overran us.

I woke to find myself hanging in a wire cage, suspended over the globular copper boiler of the vehicle. It didn't look any better or comprehensible from this angle and, quite apart from that, my feelings about the world in general were not improved by finding that I was now completely naked. My

skin was sizzling gently on the wire. In a kind of slow-fry way, in the transferred heat. There was a puncture wound in my side, and if I started fingering it to see how deep it was I'd only make it worse, but it didn't seem too bad.

Kara was there with me, and naked as I was, but she hadn't been so lucky. She was still out for the count. There was a deep gash across her ribcage and some basically human thing had bitten a large chunk out of her arm. The wounds were clotting, but she appeared to have lost a lot of blood. I lifted her up in my arms, tried to keep as much of her body as possible away from the hot wire of the cage, and tried to get my bearings through the miasma of smoke.

A form resolved out of it, ahead of us, where we were presumably being taken. I judged that we were close now to the structure Kara had picked up on the sonar - about a thousand kilometres too close.

There are things that are big, and are built that way because they're big things. Then there are things that are big because they've been built up out of other things - and this particular thing was *vast*. It had been cannibalized from the materials of the surrounding city, the piled-together complexity of it seeming to draw the eye and rivet it. If you imagined some malevolent ogre-spawn, in the truly vicious way that children have, tearing an ant-sized city apart and using it to build a house as though out of playbricks, you'll get the general idea. In the shifting, tortured light from the sky above, it seemed to have been coated and crusted with dried blood. It might have been my pure imagination, but to this day I'll swear that it emitted this kind of soundless, disembodied scream, like it was somehow the repository for every soul on Sharabeth who had died.

As the contrivance churned and lurched towards the structure, I saw that across the face, picked out in materials of a lighter hue than those around them, were some words that from this angle seemed to have been scrawled across the edifice in a childish hand.

The words read: SLEEd iNCOPRORATeD.

SUPPLEMENTARY EXTRACT

Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield:

After *[section deliberately defaced on source]* had gone to bed, I just basically wandered around the apartment for a while, looking at the furnishings and ornamentation, generally trying to get a handle on his mind:

The vinyl-covered sofa we had sat on while poring through the file, big enough for someone to sprawl out sybaritically if one so desired. A selection of lithographic prints on the wall, under glass and cleanly framed: Duchamp, Miro, Robert Crumb from his *Eggs Ackley* period, a couple of technically proficient and quite moving photomontages which I think *[section defaced on source]* had made himself. A yellow-painted steel filing cabinet. An unconnected Bakelite candlestick telephone... I tried to work out if *[name defaced from source]* just had an eclectic love of antiques, or if he was unconsciously trying to re-create the surroundings of what to him was his childhood, constantly thwarted by the unavailability and expense of the objects in question or his inability to recollect the precise details.

'The spare bedroom's just on your left,' the AI unit, Box, said, rather pointedly, after a few minutes.

'That's fine,' I replied. 'I'm just going in there now. Peek-a-boo.'

Box might have been pushing the AI envelope so far - in so far as AI technology was available to private citizens, in this time and place - that the stamp fell off, but it was no match for technology and methods that were not, in the precise sense, from this place and time. When I'd disabled it the first time, so I could wait for *[section defaced on source]* unobserved, I'd taken the opportunity to introduce a one-shot transputronic polyfractal virus analogue, keyed to a

trigger word. At the mention of it (the word itself wasn't significant, I'd just remembered it from somewhere as the last word anyone would think of) Box's interface shut down, it reversed its real-time counter and experienced a sensor-construct of me going into [section defaced on source] spare room, climbing under the duvet, writing in my diary and then falling slightly fitfully to sleep.

I now had around forty-five standard minutes before I'd register on the sensors again. I went into the spare room anyway, pulled off my clothes and got into bed, just to be on the safe side. In the pocket of the shorts I'd been wearing under the Suit of Lights™ was a small translucent cube of a substance resembling jade. I pressed the faces in a certain manner and order, and it kindled itself to life: a communications device, several centuries more advanced than anything the Proximan Chain had to offer, its interfaces ramped down to connect to the local network via an effectively untraceable link - the technology that might trace it not having even been invented.

My first call was to the man who had given the cube to me in the first place.

'It's me, Benny,' I said as Irving Braxiatel's face unfolded in a haze of ionized air particles, instantly, without any lag that comes from normal people getting out of the bath, or out of bed, or off the toilet to answer the phone. Just another one of those little, subtly wrong things about him that tend to disconcert the mind on some level.

I noticed that I'd identified myself verbally, when he could see perfectly well who I was without being told - and *that* was one of those redundant hangovers from the days before communicators had visuals, which people still do without thinking and which hang around like the cultural equivalent of an appendix. It wasn't a big thing, and I don't want to make a big thing about it; it was simply one of those things you notice for the first time and then wonder how you couldn't have before.

That's the effect Irving Braxiatel has on you. He isn't human, much as he affects the form and manner of a human

being. If you spend much time in his company, you realize that he operates upon completely different levels - and that focuses your *own* mind back on your own. The proof of this, dear diary, lies in how I've just spent two and a half paragraphs detailing every little thing that went through my mind on the basis of his answering the bloody phone.

'And what are your opinions?' he asked without preamble. 'Do you think it's possible that [section defaced on source] killed her or not?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I was watching his face when I told him, and the shock and reaction, denial and acceptance were psychologically correct and seemed genuine, if incredibly accelerated. But I honestly don't know.' I made that little hand-shrugging gesture for the screen, which has only comparatively recently started to occur but which is already beginning to supplant those vestigial audio-phone manners I talked of earlier. 'I know that people like him are still *people*, and [section defaced on source] identity is so advanced as to be precisely that of a human - but the fact remains that their *physical* brain processes don't work in quite the same way. There's a level of control in there that we'll never be able to experience or understand.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Braxiatel, with a slightly and sardonically raised eyebrow. 'And then some.'

'My point being,' I said, a little coolly, 'that he's quite capable of faking those reactions so well that a human of even *my* renowned astuteness couldn't tell the difference. Rather like dealing with you, sometimes, as it happens.'

'Quite.' Irving chuckled mildly. 'And as for myself, of course, not being able to notice certain human minutiae if my life depended on it - as you've told me upon numerous occasions - it leaves me doubly in the dark.'

'I'd have thought it would have given you a clearer picture of what he was thinking than I -'

'A lemon is no more human than a three-toed sloth,' said Braxiatel, 'but I doubt you'd ask it what the three-toed sloth was thinking.'

‘Be that as it may,’ I said, ‘I’d like to bring in a specialist to help. Would that be all right?’

‘I trust your judgement completely. If it’s possible, though, I’d like you to come in tomorrow for a posthypnotic briefing. Everything you’ve seen of him and his environment, the subconscious connections that you might have made but might not consciously know, that sort of thing.’

‘I can do that,’ I said. ‘I came here without a change of clothes, so I’ve got an excuse to come back. Can you have a bag ready for me?’

Irving smiled. ‘I’m certain that can be arranged.’

‘And, when you do, please have somebody *human* pack it for me - I can’t stress that enough, Brax. I don’t want to end up running around the Proximan Chain in a pair of spandex jogging shorts, rubber flip-flops and a wimple.’

‘You have my word on it.’ Irving started to do that little motion someone does to turn away and break the connection, then turned back as if remembering something. ‘And Bernice, be careful. The man is potentially lethal, whether he in fact killed Kara Delbane or not. Treat him with extreme caution.’ He frowned. ‘You’re not looking well, Bernice.’

‘I’m still on top of it,’ I told him. ‘It’s not going to be a problem.’

‘Just don’t let it cloud your judgement,’ said Braxiatel.

After I had broken the connection with Brax, I sat and had a bit of a think. The suggestion from *[section defaced on source]* that security had been compromised hadn’t rung any internal alarm bells, precisely, but it had me wondering. *[Section defaced on source]* thought of me in terms of working for some cloak-and-dagger organization that might be infiltrated, and, while the truth of matters was nothing like that, it was true that I didn’t really know or trust that many of the people I was currently working with at Irving Braxiatel’s request. I don’t mean that as a slight against Artificial Personality Embodiments, who I know have over the past few years become targets for that mindless lynch-mob mentality of bigotry that seems to be endemic to humans of a certain type, but - Oh bugger, I’ve just remembered what

[*section defaced on source*] said about it having to be an APE that murdered Kara. Something to think about a bit later.

Anyway, I tried to think of people who were active in the Proximan Chain, who could give me what I needed, who I personally knew and trusted - and in the end there was only one choice. I set the jade cube to produce a virtual dialler (yet another semantic cultural appendix, yes, I know - stop the going off on stupid bleeding tangents, Benny!) and punched in the code. I could only hope they were in.

This time there was some wait before the call was answered. Eventually, a sleep-mussed-looking, foxy female face blinked at me from the subatomically vibrating ether: 'Dead Dog in the Water Preproductions. How can I - oh.' The face fell momentarily and then glared at me with barely restrained hostility. 'It's you.'

I have to confess to being puzzled, sometimes. I know that she shares some deep and incredibly important bond with him, but I know for a cold hard fact, for various reasons, that it isn't the immediately obvious. It's a bit like those nonsense riddles of Carroll, or a Zen koan: the mind keeps churning around and around, desperately trying to find some clue to an answer that simply isn't there, and that hurts in a kind of low-grade, back-of-the-mind way that never goes away. 'Hello...' I began.

'Whatever it is, you're not going to talk to him,' she said, shortly. 'And I mean *whatever* it is, you're not getting through. You don't know how much you hurt him when you went away again, and I'm not going to let you do that to him again.'

There was something of the voice of a child running towards some oncoming freight train, determined to beat it back with her fists before it hit someone it loved on the track, somewhere back down the line, and...

[The following section of the source is covered by an adhesive yellow note, the writing in the same hand but with signifiers showing a different and ambiguous mental and emotional state. It reads:

‘I told her simply that I did not need to talk to J, and that I needed her help tomorrow for something that might turn out to be very important. She was only too happy to agree.]

...forty-five minutes of privacy are almost up, now. Judging how long calls are going to take, before you make them, is incredibly difficult, but I erred on the side of generosity just to be on the safe side. I’ve spent the rest of the time getting this down - and, yet again, I’ve put this down in all its tedious circumstantiality to be safe. You never know what you’ll never remember when you wake up.

The blanks are getting worse. The one today really worried me: closing my eyes and opening them again to find myself somewhere completely *else*. The thing inside me has kindly given me several months in which to set my affairs in order - and here I am, several months later, living on the dregs of borrowed time.

So, quickly now, here at the end, again. Just to be on the safe side, just in case.

Just to be safe.

You are Bernice Summerfield and you like to be called Benny. You are a fully qualified archaeologist, whatever anyone says, and you have written a book about it. You can be really clever and funny and you have friends who love you - remember that, wherever you find yourself, you’re far more likely to find yourself with human and alien and other kinds of people who want to *help* you rather than hurt you, whether you know them or not, because in the end, wherever you find yourself, people are fundamentally decent wherever you find them. Believe that and, if you have the choice, try to live like that above all else.

You have a husband and a father and several *really* special friends and you have done great and good and marvellous things. There once was someone so important to you that he was your

I think he
can’t

You have a condition of the brain, similar to Alzheimer's, and probably the result of a backstreet mind-altering process, called a Mary-Sue, which you had done some months ago - a disease that exhibits certain signs of being *alive*, in the cohesive sense, as opposed to the purely mindless operation of bacteria and viruses, but in the end remains unclassifiable and, ultimately, incurable.

All you really need to know is that it's eating into your mind, proliferating through it with quasi-viral tendrils, preparing to go symptomatic and overt - and, when it does, it will eat your mind and your memories out from the inside, everything that makes you what you are. One of these days you're simply going to wake up and not know who you *are*, and you only have a little time left, now, to decide what you want to

[extract ends abruptly]

BACKGROUND 4

The steam-driven contraption drove through dark and slimy tunnels, streams of water spattering through the cage to make the wire sizzle, and then to hit the boiler and evaporate with a spattering hiss. I caught some in my mouth - realizing that the crawling physical need I'd felt Inside me for a while now was thirst. The gods only know what contaminants I ingested along with it, but I've never tasted something so inexpressibly wonderful, before or since.

As we rattled through the intestines of this 'Sleed Incorporation', however, the physical smell of death, concentrated several factors over and above what I'd experienced in the city outside, became too much and I threw all the water I'd drunk up again. People who don't *know* think that the phrase 'the smell of death' is merely figurative, but I'm here to tell you that just ain't so.

The contraption emerged from the tunnels into a large, mismatched-brick-walled chamber lit by banks of flood-lights. Some of them had blown, and the general erratic buzzing of those that survived gave me the impression that these lights had been switched off and left unused for some while, only to be switched on again for this special occasion. The cage was lowered on a ratcheted device and we were hauled out. A number of basically human creatures held me down while others dragged the still unconscious Kara into a brass elevator cage, which then rose jerkily out of sight on a line. Whatever was going to happen to Kara, I surmised, it wasn't going to happen to me.

The basically human creatures pulled me to my feet and dragged me from the chamber and through a network of foot tunnels, sporadically lighted by feebly glowing biofluorescent strips. In a kind of cubicle, walled with white tiles that seemed to be a parody of the idea of 'sterile conditions', they

shaved my hair (which growl only a few millimetres in any case, and then stops dead) with rusting blades that pulled some serious lumps of flesh out of my scalp.

And then they skinned me, flayed me alive. I don't really want to talk about that, much. The techniques themselves were strangely sophisticated, though, and strangely precise: they even managed to do it to things like my scrotum and my face.

A slimy hood of some kind (I never learnt quite what it was, but I have the horrible suspicion it was made out of some of the removed bits of *me*) was pulled over my face, and the basically human creatures dragged me off again. After a dark and seemingly endless journey, I was shoved into what I later learnt through touch to be a lightless cell with old, dried shit smeared on the walls. A steel-plate door was shut behind me and I was left alone. I never did learn just what function, precisely, the skinning of me was supposed to serve.

I was left alone, so far as I can judge, for about seventy-two standard hours. I can't be sure, as my still basically human thought processes and those of an accelerated APE operated on different response-time scales, and without some external factor with which to compare them it was impossible to tell which, if either, was right. In any event, I was left alone for more than enough time to come up with some interesting personal theories about the relative and comparative values of roundabouts and swings.

On the plus side of things, my enhanced repair factors wore kicking in like nobody's business and just as advertised. I could feel the damage healing by the minute. On the minus side, accelerated biological processes in the current conditions were a bit of a mixed blessing, to put it mildly. You could have boiled a pot of ice-water on my head and I seemed to be positively *spraying* septicaemic pus. All part of life's rich tapestry and stuff, basically.

At indeterminate length, the basically human creatures came for me again. They took me to another room In which there was a notched, stained table, behind which sat two

figures. Despite the specifics of their physical deformity, the basically human creatures had seemed more or less indistinguishable and interchangeable as any worker insect in a hive. These new people were slightly different, retaining their human form to some extent but twisted into what looked like unpleasant-minded caricatures. Both were diseased, encrusted with filth and other, even less palatable, matter. One was gangling and twitchy, wearing a once-white smock with scalpels and the suchlike in the breast pocket and, from what I could make out, much as I didn't want to, nothing else. The other was corpulent and sluglike, dressed in the remains of an archaic-looking pinstripe business suit, of the sort that has me thinking, now, of those old Soviet cartoons of Capitalist Pigs who should be put up against the wall and shot. They were like parody images made flesh, without quite enough thought from whoever had made them as to the physical practicalities of it, and in my mind I instantly tagged them as the Surgeon and the Manager.

While the basically human creatures bracketed me, the Manager peered at me with puffy, crazy-looking eyes behind a pair of cracked wire-frame spectacles. Then he pushed a sheet of printed paper and a writing stylus across the table. 'Sign.'

This was the first comprehensible word I'd heard from the basically human things. I'd like to say it sounded monstrous and full of insane maniacal glee, but in fact it seemed a perfectly normal voice, the worst you could say about it being that it was a little croaky from disuse. The Surgeon, on the other hand, spoilt the effect by doing a mad little giggle into his sleeve.

The basically human creatures on either side of me started to growl, so I picked up the paper and read it. Strangely, given the surroundings, it was utterly pristine. This, and I tell no lie, is what it said:

I the undersigned hereby apply for gainful employment under the auspices of Slead Incorporated SA, hereinafter to be referred to as the Incorporation, and

further agree to submit and perform to any such requirement as a duly appointed officer of the Incorporation may see fit. I fully and without reserve indemnify the Incorporation against any loss or personal injury such as might be pursuant to such requirements.

(Signature/Date)_____

Quicker on the uptake than most I might be, but I stared at the thing dumbfounded. Unless I was very much mistaken, I was being asked to sign a release form.

‘I don’t think it can read,’ said the Surgeon, in a high-pitched, innately petulant-sounding voice that was if anything worse than the giggle. He snapped his fingers and a basically human creature grabbed my hand, picked up the stylus in it and forced it to scrawl a ragged cross on the paper. The Manager examined the result critically, then put it away in a drawer and looked me up and down again.

‘Not what you’d call proper material,’ he mused disparagingly. ‘Not what you’d call properly alive, but I suppose we could find a use for it. Could you find a use for it, Dr Finley?’

This to the Surgeon, whose face lit up in a radiant smile. ‘Oh, can I really. Administrator Skinner?’ he said with childlike eagerness. ‘Oh yes, I can. I’ve got a new experiment it’d be perfect for. I just thought it up, all by myself...’

I didn’t like the sound of this one bit.

A pair of basically human creatures secured me to an operating table by way of thick leather straps. I seemed to have been secured a disproportionate lot like this, since waking up on the Ship, but if I’d had the choice I would have plumped for the conditions there. The conditions *here* looked like the surgery of some mad doctor from an old horror movie, after several impromptu mad-doctor surgical procedures had been done with a chainsaw and a bacon slicer, with the walls never being cleaned up afterwards.

The Surgeon, Finley, loomed over me, grinning happily. He was clutching a little bronze statue to himself, that of an elderly, patrician-looking man leaning on a cane. I didn't see how he thought he was going to inflict much damage on me with it, but then again it all depended on where he stuck it.

'Do you know what this is?' he said to me, chattily, caressing the statuette in a manner that had me suspecting that what he really wanted to be doing was licking it.

'Why don't you surprise me?' I said, and instantly regretted it. The simple fact of talking split open my skinned and only partially healed lips in several places. I mastered the pain with the manfulness and self-control that is my watchword: 'Ow! Fuck! Shitfuckshitfuckshitfuckfuckfuck!'

The Surgeon made a little moue of disapproval, and held the little statue closer to him, as though to protect it from the language. 'It's the Slead Award for Extremely Advanced Experimental Sagacity,' he said in a slightly hurt tone of voice. 'I was awarded it for the procedure I invented for excising the intestines of a subject and making them into three entirely separate balloon animals before he died.' His eyes misted over reminiscently. 'Of course, that was in the days when there were more subjects than I could count...'

'Yes?' I said, just for the sake of keeping up my end of the conversation, you understand. "What happened to all these subjects then?"

'All gone,' said Finley the Surgeon, sadly. 'All subsumed or gone.'

'Oh, you poor thing,' I said.

'Well, it doesn't do to live in the past, though, does it?' said Finley the Surgeon, tossing the statuette aside and assuming a new sense of purpose. 'Let's begin, shall we?' He pulled on a pair of rubber gloves that seemed more suited to washing up than surgical procedure, and started rooting around a tray of old, encrusted hammers, hacksaw blades and other hardware appliances. Tell you what: we'll whip off the old meat and two veg first, and then we'll see about swapping over your hands and feet and sewing them back on...'

Things had now, in my humble and considered opinion, gone quite far enough. The straps had been designed to hold your basic human type, so, while I didn't exactly snap them with no further damage to myself, I was at least able to do it and get out. I grabbed hold of Finley the Surgeon's head before he could so much as begin to meet, got my finger in his eyes and pulled his head apart. This was what, I later learnt, the manual I'd read on the Ship had referred to as Full Combat Mode. I didn't recognize it at the time because I'd thought of it as something I had to consciously *trigger*, and I'd been trying ever since, when it was in fact just one of those things you go into when you need to.

The basically human creatures who had brought me here and tied me down were now coming for me, so I threw the scalpels from Finley the Surgeon's pocket and several of the sharper items from the tray at them until they went down. Though I still couldn't spot the distinctions, I now know that, so far as those creatures went, they were as low on the scale as you could go – the equivalent of foot-soldier cannon fodder. If they hadn't been, I'd have died in about three seconds.

I looked down at the body of Finley the Surgeon, then pulled off his filthy and now freshly and catastrophically stained coat, purely to hold the various blades and other items I could scavenge from the room and use as weapons. In my current physical state I had no hope of passing for anybody, but I had the vague idea that the basically human creatures operated on a kind of pattern recognition and, if and when I encountered them, it couldn't hurt to try.

Then I left, out into the dark and mismatched tunnels, looking for some way out and up.

CHAPTER 4

In the sense of albedos and the planetary rotational physical specifics, day-and-night cycles in the Proximan Chain are meaningless. On the other hand, the humanoid body tends to operate upon a deep, diurnal level so fundamental that biomodifications can't touch it. I woke up the next morning feeling a hell of a lot better than I had the night before. The loss of Kara was compacted and vacuum wrapped inside me, to be brought out and examined later, when I had the time to do it properly, but it wouldn't keep me from doing the job in the here and now.

I climbed up off the floor and slapped the inset panel in the wall to start the music. No half-arsed ideas of 'recapturing my childhood' involved: I just favour the recorded music from the later half of the twentieth century because it was the era when they still produced and recorded some of it in the analogue rather than the digital - it hits you in the gut, on so many levels that you don't consciously notice, even after going through the processes of archival through the centuries. Everything else just seems somehow lightweight, sterile and stale - like the packaged 'relief products ZipCo tries to sell you night and day compared with the real thing. Mr John Lydon informed me that, fuck, he couldn't remember the words.

Fortunately, during my mindless episode of destruction the night before, I'd pretty much missed the refresher alcove. I showered off on a stim-cycle, pulled on a robe and messed about with my face and hair. I don't use make-up much during the day: liner, mascara and toner in black, blue and gold respectively, and I left it at that. My lips are naturally darker in a way that would suggest tattooing on your basic human type, so I didn't bother with the lippy, on the grounds

that I didn't intend to leave my mark on anybody today. In that sense, at least.

The music switched to something cheerful from *The Magic Flute*. I wandered out into the living chamber and to the kitchen. 'Anything I should be aware of during the night?' I asked Box in passing.

'I had a weird little time lapse,' Box said. 'Forty-five standard minutes. Extrapolation from various known factors suggests that our guest used it to make some calls. Do you want me to pin it down precisely?'

I thought about it while I put together breakfast and stuck some mocha in the filter. 'It's probably not worth wasting the cycles. Let's let it go for the moment. Is our visitor awake?' My own bedroom is soundproofed and I don't allow Box's extensions inside it, balancing off the potential risks from any number of different areas against a sense of privacy. I don't extend that privacy to the spare room, however, on account of not being a total bloody fool.

'Still out like a light,' Box said.

'Wake her up, will you? Try it gently and then escalate. The point is that I want her to be *up*.'

'Up what,' said Box, 'particularly?' I was really going to have to change those interactive routines for company.

The coffee finished running through the filter and I poured a couple of cups, left the food under the grill to keep warm and took the cups out. The door to the spare room opened on a wake-up alarm on the level of a stratospheric flier going through the sound barrier with a backbeat.

Bernice was hauling herself into a sitting position and swearing like a trooper who had stubbed his toe and taken a course in swearing, advanced, lower ranks, for the use of, besides. She looked like someone coming off a three-day bender - I wondered how much she'd been drinking before I met her. The glass or two she'd had in Braxiatel's apartment didn't count.

'Have some coffee,' I said.

Bernice did that look you get when you wake up with a hangover and are trying to remember who you are - then did

a little so-so, satisfied expression and leant over to toss her diary, unopened, on the small pile of clothes she had been wearing under her Suit of Lights™. She's the sort of person who, quite frankly, gives off the impression of wearing a chic little singlet in bed even if she isn't, which she wasn't now. She took the coffee, reaching out for it as careless of her nakedness as a girl in a certain kind of old French cinematograph, as opposed to, well, another kind of European movie. She downed half the cup in one gulp.

'You can't get the staff these days,' she said, her voice still slightly dry in both senses of the word. 'The well-trained valet does *not* come into a lady's bedroom, especially if the lady is a yummy little knockout like me.'

'Oh, be still, my beating prostate,' I said.

I stirred the pile of worn clothing with my foot. I got the impression that they had been worn for rather longer than the day before, in the manner of one who decides to change the wardrobe only when the items in it physically stick to the wall. 'Are you going to go *out* in these?'

Bernice shrugged. 'They'll last another day.'

'Not without giving you some nasty chafing along the crack lines,' I said. 'Those jagged edges where the crust breaks don't half take off the skin.' I wandered out, spent a happy five minutes rooting through the wreckage that was my own bedroom and then came back with some undershorts, an all-purpose stretch suit and a yellow chamois jacket I'd fallen in love with in the store, and then got home to find it was two sizes too small - that subconscious feeling that I should be inhabiting a different body than the one I wear still comes back to haunt me, sometimes. I had also picked up another personal-keyed little comms unit, a twin to the one I was now wearing again. The vagaries of an investigation might mean we would lose direct contact with each other, and we needed a relatively secure way of talking over distance.

'There you go,' I said, tossing her the bundle of clean clothes. 'All part of the service.'

Bernice fingered the jacket dubiously. 'Is this genuine?'

'Price I paid, I bloody well hope so,' I said.

'I have to tell you that I don't wear products from some defenceless animal,' said Bernice, 'if I can possibly help it'

'Well excuse me while I go out and staple it back on the sheep. Wear what you like, it's your business.'

Bernice considered the jacket for a moment, then shrugged to herself and started to get dressed.

We didn't use the floater that had conveyed us on our jaunt the night before. I picked a random hov-car from the charging racks and, by way of certain skills and a large helping of black-market technology, set it down on the hydraulics and broke in. This is part and parcel of the process in dealing with potential surveillance. You don't get anywhere if you treat anyone and everything you see and touch with paranoid suspicion on the basis that it or they might just possibly be in on it. You adopt a random strategy, mixing changes to your routine with following it just as though nothing was happening - the exponential cost in time, resources and effort involved in second-guessing and covering all the bases means that you'll break free from any traces or tags put on you by sheer force of attrition. This leaves you, personally, calm and relaxed and ready to deal with any threat when it actually comes.

I patched a garbage ID into the car's transponder, which would work well enough for long enough, and punched in our destination. We blipped through the transit system in the same way we had before, the only difference being that we could see out - which made no effective difference at all, what we saw being merely speed-blur and the stuttering flashes as we went through the actual transmats.

The waste-disposal and recycling systems of the Proximan Chain were relatively centralized, in the way that such things seem to be - the rather-not-think attitude of people contriving to give the blanket idea that some disaster taking out the only rubbish dump would not be too great a loss. The disposal plant was located on an airless and, in spatial terms, out-of-the-way moonlet packed with the various

apparatus to deal with anything from the extremely toxic to the mildly unpleasant. If you saw it from orbit you'd see a tangled ball of piping, superstructures pocked with the explosions of escaping methane gas.

The disposal of dead bodies, on the other hand, was a slightly different matter. As with planetary politics or sausage-making, the more you know about it the worse you like it, and so far as the Proximan recycling plants go the latter analogy is particularly appropriate. (I've just reread that, incidentally, and it comes across as though the plants were in the business of doing a kinda Soylent Green. It's not as bad as that, there being several more environmental food-chain steps before the organic matter makes it back into the population itself. You just wouldn't want to see it happening in front of you.)

In any event, this particular area of operation offers a number of slightly more salubrious front ends, ranging from the tasteful (you should pardon the expression) funeral parlour to the pathologically clinical. We left the car and went through an access hatch into the antiseptic whiteness of a hospital-like reception area. A bored-looking girl of around seventeen, in a nurse uniform so archetypical that it could only be a costume, buffed her nails behind a desk and absently watched a viewscreen set to one of the local-subsidiary GalNet shopping channels: a guy from ZipCo, accent, was demonstrating a pair of polymerized overshoes that, apparently, inflated to cushion your feet while picking up dust from the floor with their adhesive soles, all for an only excruciatingly exorbitant and exclusive price. Various other people were here on their respective business.

Somebody was waiting for us. A thin woman in her early twenties with a tough, pinched face under straggle-ragged hair, dressed in a voluminous coat of tissue-thin leather over something skin-tight, black and shiny. I recognized her instantly.

'Morning, Mira,' I said as she stalked over to us in a manner that might seem actively furious if one was unaware of her innately spiky nature. I've never learnt any other name

she might have other than Mira. I think she might be one of those people who don't *have* other names.

I'd met her back when I was working on the job that eventually brought me into contact with Bernice. The body under the black polypropylene was packed with so many superconductive sensors and mind scanners, hooked directly to her brain, that she was the nearest thing you could have to the old sci-fi idea of a telepath in a universe where the old ideas of telepathic powers simply don't exist. If Mira was here, I thought, then certain other contacts couldn't be far away. I looked around again with the idea of locating Benny's ex-husband, and drew a complete blank. The idea that someone can disguise himself when someone is *actively* looking is complete holomovie bollocks in any case - and there was nobody, here who could possibly be him, however he might be disguised.

Mira gave an absent little hiya-wave to me, then turned to Bernice. 'Lovely to see you again, darling.' The zero-kelvin way she said it, and the way she fingered Benny's borrowed jacket like she was going to have to wipe her hand afterwards, told me that there were other things going on here than simple innate spikiness. There had been a shifting, if not a fundamental change, in their relationship since the last time we'd all met.

'That's a little bit of a *young* look for you, isn't it?' Mira said. 'You carry it off very well, though, for a woman your age.'

'Why, thank you, sweetheart,' said Benny. 'Tell me, have you grown hair you can sit on yet?'

Pleasantries out of the way, Mira explained matters to me, while Bernice cleared, claimed and ID'd things with the receptionist:

'I'm gonna go in and do a deep scan - not just the brain core but the vestigial traces of nerve impulse, factor in the external data, that sort of thing. See if I can't construct an integrated real-time model of what was going on in her head when she died. Face-of-the-killer stuff, you know?'

I recalled the old myth about the last thing one sees before dying being etched into the eyes. I looked at her dubiously. 'You can really do something like that?'

'I'm one of the few people who can. That's why I make the big shillings.' Mira waggled a hand. 'Twenty-five to thirty-five per cent probability, though. Maybe on the upper end of that since we're dealing with an APE subject. The dendritic pathways are physically stronger, the pattern more pronounced. At the very least it helps to eliminate the extraneous factors.'

Benny finished working out the access privileges and we headed off down guide-lit corridors for the viewing room where Kara's body was laid out. Mira's scan would apparently take some time but, as for myself, I went in, had a look and came out again.

I had to see the body for myself, of course, just to make sure that there were no clues associated with it that only I could pick up on, that the identifying of it hadn't just been some ghastly case of mistaken identity - and even to make sure that the whole thing hadn't been some carefully contrived hoax, on any number of levels and from any number of directions, with no body actually there at all. The short answers to these questions were respectively that there weren't, it hadn't been and it hadn't - and after I'd got them I didn't feel the need to stick around.

Anything else I might or might not have been feeling has no real place here, not having any effect on the facts of matters either way, and I don't really want to talk about it.

Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield:

After [section deliberately defaced on source material] had left us alone with the body, I turned to Mira. 'So what do you think.'

'Well...' Mira did a thoughtful little teeth-sucking, tutting thing that I found incredibly irritating on the spot. 'He's changed since the last time I met him. He's going through a

bit of an identity crisis, for one thing - focusing on the fact that he's technically an APE even in the face of his true impulses. The problem is that his life memories and identity are *real*, if you get me: fully formed and complete, and not some cobbled-together back-story with the holes you can stick a fist through like your average Artificial. He has all the same little insecurities, ambiguities and conflicts as you or me, but channelled through a physical neurotechture that amplifies them, jacks them to a point that we - you in particular, that is - can't properly imagine. He's stuck between two worlds in an almost literal sense at the moment, holding things together under that carefully maintained, detached and cocky surface that only lets the deep stuff out by implication, and he's not quite sure if he can cope...'

I was feeling very tired, and I knew that Mira could continue in this quasi-psychobabble vein for an hour if I let her. If you're to have any chance of thinking of yourself as good and kind and living in a civilized manner then you must try to have sympathy for others, treat them at least twice as well as you might privately think they deserve, try to see the other person's point of view and give them the benefit of the doubt, even in the privacy of your own head. Now, I just gave in to all the confusion and little vaguely hurtful feelings and flashes of anger I tried not to feel when I thought about Mira - for any number of reasons - and I imagined giving her *such* a slap.

She snapped back as if I'd physically done it. Then she looked at me strangely, focused on me in a way that had me suddenly trying to think about nothing at all.

'He didn't do it,' she said simply. 'There's no possibility, even, that he did it in a psychotic episode that he's blanked.'

She paused, thoughtfully, and then said something else with a little edge of wistfulness. 'Remember how I said he felt things on a level we can never really understand? Well, quite apart from anything else, what he felt for *her* - Mira gestured to the body on the slab '- words can't touch. I can't say the word strong enough to make you feel it.'

I must admit that I felt a kind of overwhelming relief, as if a truly close friend had narrowly escaped an accident, or had miraculously recovered from what was a supposedly terminal...

I mean, in any life there are people whom you *know*, for good or bad, for one reason or another - people who, whatever you might think or feel about them, stand out from the mobile scenery of life's walk-on extras, sharp and distinct. Artificial Personality Embodiments, by their physically enhanced nature, circumvent that process and stand out by a kind of default.

In one sense I had simply met [*section defaced on source*] and vaguely liked him, but in another I had *really* met and vaguely liked him. I'm not expressing that properly. It's like what Mira said about not being able to use That Word. I know what I mean but I can't...

Anyway, that's just why the first thing I felt was relief, rather than annoyance, at what might, just possibly, have been a promising lead coming to a complete stop.

'So Brax's first suspicions are groundless,' I said. 'Oh well.' I gestured to the body. We might as well do what we said we were going to do in the first place.

[Extract ends.]

I walked out into the reception area and breathed deeply again. I'd had a kind of phobic impulse in the morgue corridors to try not to suck too much of the death around me into my lungs - which was complete bollocks of course, but I hadn't thought it worth the effort to try to counter.

Reception was as I'd left it: the same girl at the desk, watching the same dismal ZipCo infomercial or one very much like it, the same people sitting or standing around waiting - with one particular, and not particularly nice, exception. He must have been waiting somewhere private, waiting and monitoring us, because I knew for a fact he hadn't been there before.

'I'd like a word with you about certain matters, sunshine,' this exception said, laying a hand on my shoulder with the

kind of gentle but insistent pressure that suggested he could press my shoulder a lot harder if he wanted to. I swear to the various applicable gods that those were the precise words that he used. All things considered, it was a wonder he hadn't said, 'What's all this that's occurring? You're nicked, my son, and you're going down for a ten stretch.'

It was a SecServ™ officer. Now, I've mentioned that the Proximan Chain doesn't have a *legal* system as such - how can you have a blanket and inclusive law in the face of several thousand different species, let alone all the various and multifarious subcultures of them that set their own personal definitions on what is actually a crime or not?

The short answer is that you can't. The slightly more complex answer, that being the one you have to live with in the real world, is that various concerns have set themselves up as enforcers of 'law and order' on an individual basis - whether being funded on the intercorporate level to look after some incorporation's interests, or as what, on other planets and in other places, would be called vigilante squads or private security companies.

In the ultimate and abstract sense, these people were no more than one set of factions among any number of others, with no more actual *right* to perform their mission in life than I might have to smash a glass bottle across somebody's face just because I don't happen to like it. But, by that token, any so-called authority you can name in the galaxy operates in the precise same way - they do what they can get away with, impose their will upon the masses by the strength of their consensus, and get away with it only so long as the masses will stand still for it and not stick the bastards, en masse, up against the wall. In the practical sense, in the here and now of the Proximan Chain, these policing services perform the nearest function to a consensually agreed-upon authority we have - and I was uneasily aware of the fact that SecServ™ had laid their claim upon the body of Kara Delbane.

This particular officer was in the bulky, padded and reinforced SecServ™ trenchcoat that has evolved over the years into a distinct *uniform* as opposed to the 'plain clothes'

from which it originally came. The uniform of the sort of copper who's supposed to solve murders, as opposed to those who direct traffic, or stand outside hab-domes in the hopes that someone might try to break in. He was shorter than me but wider, stocky in a way that suggested an innate brute physical strength rather than simply being fat. His hair was dark and short, dragged back and slicked from a blocky, nondescript face that could have been anyone, provided that this anyone spent his entire life being surly with a face like a smacked arse.

'I believe you're one of the party who came here to view the body of one Kara Delbane,' he said, in the sort of friendly manner that in real terms translates into an active threat.

'I might be,' I said. 'What's it to you?'

He pulled a little card out of his trenchcoat and flashed it - that's just a part of the ritual for these people, incidentally, and it doesn't mean a thing at all. 'Investigator Roland Forrester, SecServ™ Security Services,' he said. 'Just what is your *connection* with the deceased?'

I didn't see any reason to lie. 'I was a friend.'

'And the two... ladies you were with?'

'Her employer and a specialist.'

On the receptionist's viewing screen, I was peripherally aware, a news item had come on to break up the advertisements. Something about how the GenCorp™ Incorporation were still denying that they'd mislaid three separate interplanetary tankers of raw mutagenic materials, even after two of them had turned up. Then the receptionist changed the channel on to more adverts and I filtered them out again.

'A specialist?' The Secman was glaring at me with sudden investigatorial fervour. 'What kind of *specialist*, precisely? I really hope you're not thinking of taking the law into your own hands...'

'I've had enough of this,' I said. 'We've claimed the body, produced evidence to the effect of prior right of interest, and the services of SecServ™ Security Services are no longer required. You will, of course, be paid the standard finder's fee

by usual channels - and that's all you're getting, you slimy little corpse-chaser.'

'What?' The Secman seemed taken aback for a moment, then he recovered somewhat. 'I don't think you understand the situation, chum. There's been a murder here, and the last thing you want to do is -'

'The last thing I want to do,' I said, 'is listen to your sales pitch one second longer. Word of advice, you sorry little shit. Don't try to do the you-could-be-a-suspect line with someone who loved her and could rip your spine out if he felt like it.'

(I have to mention something here, just for myself. I've only just realized that this was the first and only time I used *that* particular and unnamed word about Kara and I have to make a note of it, and call it to attention, even if the only attention I'm calling it to is myself. And if *you*, who wanted me to write this out, have a problem with it on some circumstantiality-is-everything basis then you can fuck right off.)

There is something I call my 'better-dead' list. I don't mean that I'm burning to actively *kill* everybody on it: I just mean that, as you meet people and get to know them in general, you sometimes ask yourself if the world would be a basically better or worse place if they just suddenly dropped dead. It's just a part and parcel of the process of living and meeting people. Sometimes you really feel that strongly, in the sense that if there's some old bint in the queue in front of you (for whatever you happen to be queuing for), arguing for ten minutes about the point five of a credit that she thinks she's been short-changed, you could cheerfully stick a bolt-blaster to the back of her hairy-mole-encrusted neck and kill her.

I'd felt that way since 'Investigator Forrester' had importuned me with his posturing SecServ™ I'm-investigating-the-murder scam, and had consciously forced myself not to evidence it for the simple reason that, with Kara dead in the morgue rooms behind me, and how I felt about that, I had the nasty feeling that if I let those feelings out I would have killed this 'Investigator Forrester' on the spot.

The upshot of all that was that he'd misinterpreted my restraint as standard bereaved-friend irrationality at anyone

offering the practicalities of help. So he tried the alternative pitch: 'Listen,' he said, with that curious blend of conspiratorial menace that people *think* sounds threatening. 'It could have very easily been *you* who killed her. We can make it look like that whether you did or you didn't. If you know what's good for you, then you'll -'

The thing about going into what, I suppose, I have to call Combat Mode is that you go into a state where you pull in every other stimulus and integrate it instantly, and act upon it in accelerated time, whereas your basic human types are dealing in slow-motion human reactions. Thus it was - so far as I was concerned - that I heard the hatchway to the morgue rooms behind me open, and saw the change in manner on Forrester's face, long before the hand I was bringing up had so much as a chance to hit his nose and drive the cartilage up into the brain. I dropped down several mental gears and turned the motion into simply bringing my hand up to fiddle with my hair.

Forrester backed away and turned. 'Just you wait,' he snarled, trying to cover up his belated reaction to my flash of killing anger with bravado. 'One of these days you'll find yourself on *my* patch, and then we'll see what's what...' He headed for the exit in a kind of scuttling run. I turned around to see that Mira and Bernice were coming out from the morgues. Neither of them seemed exactly happy.

'Who was that?' Mira asked me, jerking her thumb in the direction the Secman had gone.

'Nobody important,' I said. 'Just one of the SecServ™ people trying it on. Why are you out so soon? I thought you'd take more time than that.'

'There was nothing,' said Bernice, dispiritedly.

'What she means,' said Mira, 'is that there was *literally* nothing. Just a random pattern. Everything in the brain pan was wiped, catastrophically and from the inside. From the feel of things, it seems like she did it herself.'

I remembered my time in the Oblivion Angels. We were each of us fitted with ail imposed mental construct that could trigger total and complete identity collapse as the sort of last-

ditch equivalent of a suicide pill. Later, for various reasons, I'd had that construct yanked so that I couldn't trigger it even if I really wanted to.

Obviously, Kara hadn't. This tied in with what I'd read in the surveillance transcripts, people asking her questions and coming out with nothing - I hadn't made that specific connection at the time because, with an APE, in a certain line of business, your or somebody else's particular Killing Thought is one of those things you simply don't think or talk about.

'So there's nothing more we can learn from the body or the mind,' I said. 'So, working from the inside out, the next best bet is where she lived.'

'Count me out,' said Mira. 'I've done my job, and I don't have any expertise with the inanimate.'

'Suit yourself,' said Bernice, icily, and it seemed that Mira's involvement with this particular job had come to an end.

As we left the disposal complex, though, Benny and I to our appropriated car and Mira to whatever mode of transport she was using, Mira touched my arm and held me back while Benny went on ahead.

'Give me a call,' she said, slipping a little business-contact plaque into my pocket. 'Any time you need to.'

'I'm not that kind of guy,' I said.

'Now, if I thought *you* thought I wasn't talking about the job and weren't just being facetious for the hell of it,' said Mira, 'I'd give you such a smack your ears would ring. But you know that *I* know what you're thinking, and you're not, so I won't.'

Abruptly, she became utterly serious, looking at me with eyes filled with a deep and strangely indefinable concern that I thought - being able to tag physical identifiers, rather than having the talent to read anybody's mind other than my own - that she was not even fully aware of herself.

'Treat Summerfield carefully.' she said. 'I don't mean treat her with suspicion: I mean treat her gently. The gods alone know I don't like her much, but there's some things you wouldn't want to wish on a dog.'

'What do you mean?' I said.

'There's something inside her,' said Mira. 'I can't quite get a handle on it, and I can't give you a clinical diagnosis or anything, but it's inside her head and it's killing her. She's dying.'

BACKGROUND 5

Up through the unlit tunnels, up through twisting, barely illuminated corridors, up cast-iron spiral stairs winding through chimney shafts, and staircases winding around great brick vaults. The output from the little tracer unit in my head hadn't been noticeable when I'd been with Kara, mostly on account of the fact that I could see where she was anyway, but since the time we'd been split up I'd found that I could pinpoint roughly where she was if I wanted to, in the sense that she was above me and over to one side. The best bet at this point was simply to go up, working my way laterally when I could, and see what happened. I wasn't feeling particularly heroic, just possessed of a kind of bloody minded determination that, if she was still alive, I was damned if I was going to leave her in this place.

I encountered surprisingly few basically human monsters, and managed to slip past those I did. I got the disquieting impression, though, something like the way you know when there are people in a house even though you can't directly see them, that there were thousands of the things, scuttling through the dark places of the incorporate structure. Even so, whether there were thousands left or not, I got the distinct impression that this place had once housed millions.

I had no doubt in my mind that it was these basically human creatures who had been responsible for the devastation outside - but just where had they all gone after? The best theory I could come up with, at this point, for their depleted numbers, was that, after they had killed everyone they could, they had turned upon and started killing each other. (Everybody who knows about Sharabeth now, of course, knows that the processes that made these creatures included a form of self-destruct, but at the time I didn't know that.)

At length, I clambered up through a kind of skylight and found myself on an expanse of roof, the various tiles and slates and strips of waterproof sheeting - as had been everything else in the incorporation - cannibalized from the city below and stuck together every which way. Overhead, the variegated sky still boiled. Everything's relative, and I have to say that coming out into the open air - even open air such as this - was like finding yourself back in the world of men after a trip through the furnaces of Hell.

Kara, my little subcranial tracer told me, was approximately fifty metres off in one direction and maybe ten or fifteen down. I crawled across the rooftop, keeping my centre of gravity as low as possible and my weight spread out as much as I could. Even so, and more than once, some fragile bit of tiling fractured under me, or a slate worked loose to skid off down the incline. I have no idea if any of them actually fell off the edge, being slightly more concerned with trying to stop myself from doing that precise same thing.

There was a distinct lack of skylights, access hatches or trapdoors around the area I judged Kara to be in, so I braced myself so far as I could, smashed a smallish hole through the tiles, got a grip on what felt like a carbonized joist and hauled myself through before the surrounding area of roofing fell away in the equivalent of a small avalanche. If there'd been a basically human creature or two below me, they'd have been on to me like a shot, but fortunately there wasn't. (I wonder, sometimes, if the fact that, in the real life I know, I've hardly ever made one of those dramatic entrances where I have to disable a bunch of guards and the suchlike isn't down to the fact that my accelerated APE brain factors in all the subliminal cues of such things, and just flatly stops me from going into those kinds of situation in the first place. If there *had* been basically human monsters waiting for me, I'd have simply waited till they'd gone, or found some other way to get in, without really thinking about it.)

I hung from the joist and, in the shifting light from the sky above and the stuttering fluorescents ranged around, I saw that I was in a big chamber filled with surgical couches

rather more hi-tech than the one I'd so recently been on myself in the company of Finley the Surgeon. Almost all of them were occupied, but not with anything alive. There were other items of equipment.

Fixed into a table almost directly below me was Kara. She was now, at least, alive and awake - but my first reaction was to wish that she wasn't.

Now, look - everyone now knows what happened, what was done on Sharabeth in what have become known as the Engenesis Rooms. The special and particular horror of it... We all know about it, so far as such things can be known, and I'm not going to retread the details of it here. At the time, the secondary evidence of the... well, the remains on the tables was sickening enough. I noticed, though, with a kind of shuddering lurch of relief that seemed an almost physical thing in my heart, that Kara didn't seem to have been put through the worst of what I suppose I have to call the procedures.

I didn't think I was quite up to a ten-metre drop, APE bioenhancements or not, so I monkey-swung through the diverse selection of joists and beams supporting the roof and shinned down a support pillar that seemed to have been fashioned by taking a large stone statue of some alien creature with most of the more interesting appendages knocked off. As I walked back to Kara, she stared at me in panic and a kind of pure hatred. From the look of it, she was trying to fight against the restraints encasing her, and failing miserably due to the fact that they were contrived to render her almost utterly immobile. I was a little hurt by this reaction, before I belatedly remembered my flappy Surgeon's coat and the state of the body inside it.

'Look it's me, OK?' I said. 'It's me.'

Kara stopped straining against the restraints and looked at me dumbly for a moment. Then her face sort of collapsed in on itself in that way people's faces do when they are about to burst into tears. Abruptly, she took control of herself, and let out a long, shaky breath.

'Ye gods, but you look a mess,' she said.

‘And don’t I just know it?’ I started fiddling with the restraining units, looking for the trick of them. There was something I needed to ask, but didn’t quite know how to other than to just come out and say it: ‘What did they do to you? What happened?’

‘Nothing, much.’ Kara’s face and voice were perfectly controlled, but it was with the control of one who was consciously forcing herself to be it. ‘I mean, those creatures went through the motions, but it was like they were on a kind of locked-in program, going through the motions. They kept trying to do stuff with things that didn’t work or weren’t there at all. That went on for days, so far as I can work out. I kept drifting in and out. It was like this kind of slow torture of waiting, knowing that at some point they’d hit on something or other that still worked...’

Kara seemed to shudder a little, inside her restraints. I glanced around at the remains again, and at the items that in one way or another had reduced them to that state, towards an end that was later confirmed but which I could work out here and now simply by looking, and I repressed a little shudder myself. If the rerun mockery of those procedures had gone on for days, though, just where were the things that had been doing it?

‘So where are they now?’ I asked her, peering into the dark shadows at the edges of the chamber that now suddenly might or might not contain any number of basically human monsters waiting with murderous intent.

‘They just stopped,’ said Kara. ‘A couple of hours ago, I think. It was like they were all listening to something I couldn’t hear, and then they went. I have no idea what it was about, but I got the impression that it was something out of the ordinary.’

A couple of hours ago would have been just about the time I was dealing with Finley the Surgeon and a couple of basically human guards. ‘You know, I think they might be looking for me,’ I said.

‘Oh yes?’ Kara raised an eyebrow in a kind of mildly ironic way that, in contrast to the situation in which we’d found

ourselves, made me suddenly want to giggle like a child. “What did you do to annoy them? I mean, you seem so nice.”

“This and that,” I said. “I think it’s just my pretty face.” Not the wittiest of comebacks, I’ll admit, but I think it was quite good given the circumstances.

I finally worked out how to release Kara’s restraints, which were secured with a kind of interlocking system of thin metallic filaments, which I had never encountered before, and which were opened by pulling on a certain number of them in order. The restraints racked back in three big sections, and Kara sort of lurched up and started working some kind of life back into her cramplocked limbs. The gash across her chest now looked severely infected, and she was covered in injuries left by certain items of equipment here, that may not have been powered up but were nasty enough even in themselves, but she still seemed basically healthy enough to walk. She’d better be.

“I think it might be an idea,” I said, over the muttered litany of ouching, damning and cursing common to those trying to work life back into cramplocked limbs, “if we followed the example of your basically human friends, and just went.”

CHAPTER 5

The doors to Kara's apartments were strung with a yellow cat's cradle of sticky tape, through which could be barely read a sticker with a SecServ™ decal, saying how this was a secure crime scene, and that visits could be arranged for a small fee on this contact number. The security-sensor package that had once been lag-bolted to the wall had been smashed off, and the doors' physical locks had been circumvented by the extremely subtle measure of a fourteen-kilo sledgehammer down one side.

'That's how they got in,' I said.

'What, the killers?' said Bernice, dubiously eyeing the damage. 'That doesn't tic in very well with the transcripts.'

I mean the private security boys. Nothing like 'em for eradicating every single bit of usable evidence without noticing.' I stripped off several handfuls of tape and the door swung freely open.

I was surprised the apartment hadn't been stripped clean, the time it must have spent with the doors unlocked. Maybe the SecServ™ guys had posted someone out front, to be recalled after I'd made it clear that they could go and attempt to fructify their own persons. In any event, Kara's place seemed relatively intact and pretty much the same as the last time I'd been there, the only damage being the general boot marks and breakages of blundering free-enterprise plods.

The comms installation was still there, and appeared to have been liberally dusted for prints by the look of the thing. I very much doubted that any kind of testing for residual DNA had been done - I wasn't about to start mopping up skin cells and dried spit myself, of course, not being that kind of investigator. I found a solid-state carbonizing writing stylus in my jacket and used it to access the controls.

The SecServ™ people had played the messages through, so I went back to the most recently stored files. One from me, just checking if she was asleep, or up and around to pick up. A steady stream of standard ZipCo crap - and one call that seemed slightly more intriguing than somewhat. The time readouts placed it dead on the money for the call we'd noted on the transcripts:

'Kara? Hi. It's me.' A male voice, thirtyish-sounding and kind of friendly-acquaintance rather than close-friendly in tone. Nothing particularly interesting or distinctive about the accent; it was just that null accent you hear on GalNet broadcasts, the default setting for one whose first language is Galactic Standard but who has spent one's life moving around. 'I'm here on the Chain for a few weeks on business and I thought I'd look you up. I'm in the Connaught Transit nearest to the Commercial Hub. Give me a call there if you feel like it. Talk to you later.'

'Do you recognize the voice?' Bernice asked me.

'Not a clue,' I said. 'Other than the fact that the guy seems to be going for the record for the galaxy's most innocuous call.' I copied the stored messages over Box's link.

Kara's bedroom was a mess, as opposed to being completely wrecked. Various items scattered and broken, a new-looking crack in a closet door. Just the level of violence and struggle that the surveillance transcripts had suggested, filtered through an awareness that a number of expensive items had in all probability been half-inched by various SecServ™ people on the quiet. The bed's undersheet was wadded in a corner. The strips that had been torn and twisted from it to tie Kara up were missing.

'OK.' I pulled the transcripts from my jacket and prowled the room, skimming through the papers and running through the sequence of events. 'They come in quiet enough not to wake her, then they *wake* her and there's a struggle. One or both of them are strong and fast enough to smack her down - or possibly one holds her down while the other belts her. They tie her hands while she's in shock, and her feet when she's completely out.'

‘Once she’s secured they wake her up again. I can think of any number of nasty ways to do that, none of them particularly important here and now. They ask her questions. She refuses to answer. Back-and-forth for a bit with the occasional slap to try and jolly her along. Then they use a cigarette. Still no soap. That’s as far as the direct evidence takes us, so far as the interrogation goes.’

‘So what happened then?’ Bernice asked. She was sitting on the bed, now, and I got the impression from her manner that she was caught between distaste for doing so and needing to get off her feet. Even the short walk to Kara’s apartments from the car had tired her - and now, after what Mira had said, I could see how weak she really was. She’d been in this state, I realized, ever since I’d met her in my kitchen with her Suit of Lights™ and gun - she’d just been masking it incredibly cleverly with her body language and little tricks like this.

I decided that the polite thing to do would be to ignore it. ‘Well, from what we know, I’d say that the interrogation went on for some time before they knew for sure that they weren’t getting anywhere. So they maybe tried something else, maybe just pentathol, or one of the engineered nootropic hybrids, either by way of DMSO or running a needle up past the eyeball. I’m assuming you didn’t see any visible dermal marks on the body.’

‘Nothing like that,’ said Bernice. ‘Then again, something like that’s easy to miss. I’ll get on to Brax, have some people check the body for vestigial traces of any foreign compound.’

‘Whatever it was, though,’ I said, ‘it didn’t kick in fast enough. Kara realized what was happening to her in time to cascade-wipe her mind. Whatever it was she didn’t want them to know, it was important enough to do that. It left the automatic processes still functioning, but she was effectively dead - so why go to the bother of *killing* her?’

‘Possibly they just enjoyed doing it,’ said Bernice.

I thought about it seriously. ‘No,’ I said at last. ‘That doesn’t quite fit. What they did to her was considered and professional rather than otherwise. If someone was getting off

on it, he or they'd do it in a completely different way and... well, they'd do other things to her than just kill her.' I scowled. 'The brain was dead. Suddenly turning around and killing the body for no reason is the sort of thing you'd expect some holomovie villain to do. It simply doesn't happen in real life. It doesn't fit.'

Bernice raised an eyebrow at me. 'Are you sure you're not just transposing your own mentality on to that? Not everybody thinks the same as you.'

'Yeah, well.' I shrugged. 'What are you gonna do?'

I started to feel depressed. Checking out the crime scene was professional doctrine, a simple gathering of the data that might at some point take shape, and logically I knew that. The illogical part of me, but of course, had visions of something happening here that would wrap up the case like a shot. Thus far, however, murderers returning to the scene or letters saying 'X has just come into the room and he looks like he's going to - aargh, aargh, aargh!' had yet to make themselves evident.

I sat down on the bed beside her and let my gaze fall absently about the room, trying to put myself in the state of mind where I could integrate the data and come out with something new, some telling and specific particular that might serve as a key to unlock the shape of things. The problem was that it was a delicate process to achieve that state, and, while I'd dealt with the various emotional factors of the case enough so I could function, I still wasn't in a completely sanguine state of mind. Instead, I found myself thinking about Kara in this context, what she had said and done in this room, when I'd had occasion to see her do and say it.

Aside from the immediately obvious (and you should be ashamed of yourself) I thought of how she liked to arrange things just so. I don't mean she was neurotic-compulsive or anything, just that she liked to keep things neat - I've noticed this about a lot of post-breakout APEs, incidentally, and don't share the trait, but if it means anything at all I think it comes from the fact of having to build your own life from

scratch and wanting the things in it to be just the way you like them.

Kara was, in short, the sort of person who every night before she went to bed would clear her pockets of the detritus of the day and arrange credit chips, jewellery, crystal-meth case, the things she was going to use tomorrow, on the dresser. The dresser itself had escaped the struggle that had taken place here and was still upright. Anything that might have been on it was gone. I tried to imagine where I'd be if I were things scattered from a dresser during a struggle and not subsequently nicked by the plods, and my eye naturally lighted on something sticking from the crack between dresser and wall. I'd have probably seen it anyway - or maybe I'd already seen it, filed it away somewhere and had to go through the process of consciously working it out to make me look properly. I climbed off the bed and pulled it from where it had been lodged. It wasn't exactly Kara's personal organizer packed with interesting notes, names and addresses, but at least it was something.

'Anything interesting?' said Bernice from the bed.

I wagged a hand noncommittally. 'Prebooking slip for a club in one of the night-time Habitats, date-stamped late this cycle. Zoo Kunst.'

As I've mentioned, the nature of the Chain makes literal day and night all but meaningless, but it was easier to think in those terms. 'Could be business or she might just have felt the need to kick back and relax for a bit,' I said, 'Either way, that was where she was going to be.'

'Kunst?' said Bernice, dubiously. 'That sounds positively vulgar.'

'It probably is,' I said.

You'll find a Connaught Transit hotel in almost every city on every planet in the galaxy capable of accessing a star drive, each of them almost precisely the same and interchangeable. The incorporation that runs the franchises requires extensive if ultimately superficial remodelling, however, on a half-standard-yearly basis, so you can never

be quite sure, on stepping into one, just what you're stepping into.

For the moment the designers had gone for a kind of bastard cross between a Chinese pagoda and a dream of Jules Verne, a layered series of silk-effect canopies running down its exterior, giving it something of the aspect of a truncated red-and-gold Solstice tree. Inside, it was all oak panelling and polished brass and antimacassars, fake portholes and archaic-looking lever installations that did absolutely nothing. I noticed that, in a potentially ruinous bit of designer overreaching, a bank of fully functioning pneumatic mail tubes had been installed behind reception.

The process of investigation, as I think I've said before, is not a question of assembling the carefully laid clues, assembling the suspects in a room and then fingering one of 'em for his or her nefarious, complicated and utterly contrived schemes in a jolly exciting climax. In fact, in one sense, it really *is* like the sort of lower-order pulp scenarios that has one wandering around and knocking several shades of shite out of people until somebody cracks.

Several shades of shite not being on the menu, being the sort of thing that has one getting to be talked about, the real-life process is to wander round, pick up on the possible leads and just generally hope that something turns up - which might sound a bit *like* your standard murder-mystery plot, but isn't really, on account of all the real-life confusion and farting around involved. A ticket stub to a particular holomovie, the glimpse of a stranger in a fedora or a Mysterious Voice on the Phone can't even be elevated to the point of a red herring, like as not. It just means someone saw a movie, you saw a man in a hat or someone phoned somebody else up and you didn't know him.

What I'm trying to convey here is that we didn't look at our so-called clues and go, 'Aha! I fancy that our fiendish murderer is residing at this address! We must away to apprehend the foul fiend upon the instant!' The guy on the phone in Kara's apartment could have been anybody. It was just worth checking out.

As we walked through the lobby to do it, my body clock told me it was nearly time for lunch, so we repaired to the ground-floor restaurant (this being one of the open-air, ground-level-based Habitats) to do that first. The restaurant was one of those prepressed rustic affairs that call themselves 'butteries', but was more of an artificial-polyunsaturated-fat-based spreadery, with a healthy dose of chemical-yellow colorant.

'What are you thinking of ordering?' Benny asked as I pored over the sealed-laminate menu.

'Well personally, I think I'm going for the Olde Earth Traditional Burger made with Genuine Ground Beef, Three Kinds of Cheese, Choice Rashers of Crispy Creamery Butter-Fried Bacon, Fried Egg, French Fries and a Side Salad,' I said.

Bernice, it seemed to me, went through one hell of an internal struggle, and finally came down on the side of the angels. 'What the hell. Me, too. You only live once.'

As an incorporate concern, the Connaught hotels do things in a human-labour-intensive way. While we were waiting for Hi, I'm Sandii (who was our waitress, apparently, if you could believe the name tag) to fill our orders, I activated my comms link to Box. 'Can you access the commercial-zone Connaught accounts system?'

'I can do that,' said Box. 'Do you want me to do that?'

'Do it. Run the sample we made off Kara's phone and try to pinpoint a guest that matches it.' ID systems in the more populated areas of the galaxy commonly work on an individual gestalt of voice print, DNA, retinal pattern, fingerprints, pheromones, extrapolated diet pattern from the various bodily effluvia, interesting body-language quirks, and any amount of other stuff - and in the Proximan Chain that jumps several other levels of complexity from a standing start. This is an utter pain in some areas and a good thing in others. Here the odds of it were working in our favour.

'I've got a name,' Box said almost instantly. 'One Khristoff Ramon Praetorian, bonded intercorporate courier and with a whole life on file to prove it. The files are just that little bit too

clean and complete for my taste - but you know how these things work. Something doesn't ring at least a few alarm bells then you *know* it's been manufactured.'

'Indeed I do,' I said. 'Where is he now?'

'He's booked into Room 329,' said Box. 'There's no active trace on him I could find, so current and actual whereabouts are unknown.'

'Good enough,' I said. 'Just let me know if he surfaces.'

Hi, I'm Sandii came back with our order, so I put Box on hold until she was clear again. I doubted that anybody would be that obvious, but the whole point about double-and triple-bluffing is that you can never quite be sure. Benny looked at the contents of the plate before her, then started wolfing them down like they were the first meal in months for a starving man.

'Don't mind me,' she said around a mouthful of extruded beef-product burger. 'You go right ahead.'

'Any thoughts on that other matter?' I asked Box.

'Well, there are four thousand, five hundred and thirty-two registered or otherwise known Artificial Personality Embodiments currently in the Proximan Chain,' it said. 'Given the parameters you set me, though, the only two who fit the profile of being at the murder scene within the specified time are Kara Delbane and yourself.'

I was uneasily aware that anybody else who might be interested could have run those same parameters, and come to the same conclusion. 'Doesn't look so good for me,' I said. 'Oh well, at least *I* know I didn't do it.'

'I know you didn't do it, too,' Benny said, mopping up the meat juice from her plate. 'For what it's worth, Mira gave you the once-over and I trust her judgement.'

Now, having read some of the additional information I've interleaved through this, you'll have known that already, but it might be worth recording that this was the first time I became aware that I'd even been a suspect, so far as Summerfield was concerned.

'Thank you so much,' I said indignantly. 'Trust is such a wonderful thing.'

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Bernice said. ‘If the worst comes to the worst, I’ll feed you through the bars alternate Fridays, if I’m spared.’

As I said, the Connaught was an incorporate and labour-intensive concern, which made the process of surreptitiously getting to some specific floor slightly different from that of doing it via automation. Bernice and I linked arms and marched up to a stony-faced receptionist, who had noted the total lack of baggage and jumped to the completely erroneous conclusion.

‘And that would be a room for just how long?’ she enquired. ‘Mr and Mrs...?’

‘Smith,’ we said, simultaneously, and both stifled giggles.

‘One standard day/night cycle,’ I continued, gazing lovingly into Benny’s eyes and method-acting like crazy that we were a married couple spicing up the old love life and feeling very naughty about it.

‘And could we have Room 315?’ asked Benny, simpering back at me in a manner that I thought was overdoing it something rotten in the processed-pork department. ‘For it was in that very room that we spent the happiest fortnight of our lives, all those years ago - isn’t that so. Piglet Poo?’ She handed over her own credit chips to further redefine the apparent social dynamic.

‘Why so it is,’ I said. ‘How clever of you to remember, Snooky Woo-wums.’

The receptionist then promptly lost any respect I might have ever possibly had for her as a person by not gagging on the spot, and checked through her readouts.

‘Room 315 is free,’ she said, which I already knew, having checked that it was half a minute before via Box. ‘Have a nice stay.’

The lack of luggage necessitated nobody coming up with us, by way of the rattling brass elevator cages that seemed endemic, no matter what redesigned face the Connaught was currently showing, but a single bellhop. I carried Bernice across the threshold of Room 315 and tipped him, and he left

us to it. Twenty seconds later we were out again and heading for the room in which we were interested. I clamped a little induction mike to the door and listened through the earpiece for a while. 'If there's anybody in there, he's not moving around or breathing. Nothing but background. Shall we enter, Snooky Woo-wums?'

'After you, Piglet Poo,' said Bernice.

The nature of hotels means that the locks on the doors need to be individually keyed, but with an override for the cleaners and security. This gives rise to an incredibly easy and basic trick that *[method for picking hotel locks removed]*. On the whole, it was probably fortunate that getting into Room 329 was so simple and basic, because if it had been *hard* it wouldn't have been worth the bother.

Khristoff Ramon Praetorian probably owned three identical suits, counting the one he probably had on at the moment. Nothing interesting in the two hanging neatly in the closet wrapped in vegetable cellophane. He didn't drink, smoke, eat or inject any kind of potable - or at least he didn't drink, smoke, eat or inject any kind of potable in hotel rooms: the refrigerator cabinet and the various courtesy packages hadn't been touched. The bed hadn't been slept in either, but that proves nothing in a place where labour-intensive cleaning staff come in every morning with blatant disregard for the poor investigator.

Apart from the suits, there seemed to be no personal items of any kind, none of the half-read datapacks, old socks, cosmetics, depilatories or any of the other things that naturally accumulate after even the briefest of stays. The soap in the washroom was still in its little origami-paper wrap.

'Do you know,' said Bernice, 'I really don't think we're going to find anything...'

The archaic-looking but fully functional mail tube clunked, but, by the time it actually ejected its package, I had picked up Bernice and jumped for the window. I then recalled that, even on the lower floors, hotels and similar structures put in suicide-proof windows as a matter of course. This didn't seem

to be the case here, though, and we crashed through in an explosion of polysilicon shards to land on the narrow balcony outside.

The blast from the room threw us off it. We dropped through three sets of brightly coloured canopies as insubstantial as tissue paper, but which slowed our momentum enough for me to get myself under Benny and cushion the impact when we hit the ground. Fortunately, the availability of space that comes from building in the Proximan Chain meant that the hotel was surrounded by an area of turf, so I was driven into it a little as opposed to being spread a little over some compound-surface street.

I shoved Benny off me and looked up for a moment at the smoking hole three floors up. 'Now what the hell was that all about? If I didn't know better, I'd think somebody had it in for -'

I became aware that something was missing, namely the spluttering and cursing that I'd have felt appropriate from some other party who has been unceremoniously picked up, pulled through a window and dropped three floors. I hauled myself up on one elbow and looked at her.

Benny lay there slack and tangled like some discarded rag doll, unnaturally pale, completely still and unbreathing.

BACKGROUND 6

I'm going to gloss over our escape from the Slead Incorporation. I've mentioned how my own life doesn't often contain the sort of things that dramatic convention always seems to require - but I suspect that those exciting running escapes with hails of blaster bolts and suchlike, all to the sound of alarm bells and klaxons, don't really happen to anybody. We just made our way down, through the passages and spaces, avoiding basically human creatures - who I'm certain were looking for us in their droves - at the first sign of them, backtracking or hiding or waiting them out so that we never came in contact with them directly.

That was just fine by me. Despite Kara's own enhancements, the last few days had hit her hard and left her severely weakened. If we *had* encountered said basically human creatures in their droves, it would have been up to me to try to sort it out, and I wasn't exactly feeling that chipper myself.

Like so much else in this account, the specifics in all their complete and tedious, deep-hypnosis detail can be found in my debriefing transcripts and those of others, complete with blueprints, flowcharts, schematics of the galvanistic wiring conduits and suchlike ultimately unimportant bollocks, put together by AI processors with too much cycle time on their slaved servomanipulators and a liking for complete and tedious detail. I have to mention one thing in particular, though, because it became important later.

We were in a wide corridor that, when the incorporation had been operating at its full capacity, was presumably something of a major thoroughfare. Now it was dimly lit by the ambient light from some blinking light source (an advertising vapour sign for some alien consumable taken from what might have been the window of a bar, as it

happened) around the bend of the corridor before us. It was almost too dark even for my own optic nerves, but I was dimly aware that we had passed a large archway with what might have been a stairwell, leading upward, behind it. Going up was of no interest, but as we passed the archway I stuck my hand out quite by chance - or it may have been one of those deep-level flashes of insight I'm always going on about - and felt something.

'Hang on a minute,' I said to Kara, and stopped to investigate. It was a metal plaque fixed discreetly to the wall with what appeared to be letters cut into it. I ran my finger over the plaque to feel the shape of them. They read, in Galactic Basic: EXECUTIVE BOARDROOM.

'Anything interesting?' the dark shape of Kara said.

'Nah.' I shook my head. 'It's nothing important.'

We headed downward, following more or less the same route I'd used on my ascent. One of the minor detours took us through a series of chambers far larger than those we'd either of us encountered before. They had conveyor belts in them, and slaughterhouse hooks and racks that seemed to have been designed to fit the basically humanoid body. At length we came to one of the chambers housing steam-driven vehicles of the sort that had brought us here, more than a hundred of them in this chamber alone. We picked our way through them, noting that a lot of them were idling on a kind of steam-driven quasi-perpetual motion, made our way into the access tunnels and thence, following a tortuous route, out into the open air beneath a boiling sky.

Four hours later we were slogging through the death-strewn, ruined streets. The devastation around the Slead Incorporation seemed to run on degrees of gradation, so that we went from what was basically a blasted plain, from which the materials had been cannibalized, to where the city had been left undisturbed - but only in the relative sense - without quite realizing we had done it. Here were artefacts strewn among the dead, things of which, if we could think of something, we might make some use.

Things seemed to rise before us and gibber at us, insubstantial ghosts that seemed in some sense to be always just out of line of sight - we were both of us slightly delirious by then, I think. The adrenaline high of escape had long worn off, and our exertions had opened up any number of partially knitted wounds for us both. It felt as though I were walking on two bloody stumps - which I later learnt to have been true, at this point, effectively. I began to feel that we were nothing but the walking dead ourselves, conjured up by this place in some vague attempt to try to comprehend itself.

'We can't go on like this,' I said at last. 'Isn't there any way out? I mean, those buggers up on that Ship of yours must have noticed by now how we didn't make it back.'

'It doesn't work like that,' said Kara. Breathing seemed to be an effort for her now. It was like that utter exhaustion a sprint runner gets after the kind of race that uses up every single internal resource, but, rather than recovering, she seemed to be in a constant state. Time works differently here, runs in totally different directions. I suppose they could punch a kind of miniature wormhole to where we are, but there's no way they can pinpoint us from the outside unless we do something active. I had the kind of transmitting gear we could use for that in an emergency, but we lost all that when we got captured.'

'Isn't there *anything*?' I recalled the little tracker things in our heads, the things that had allowed me to pinpoint Kara within the incorporation itself. 'Don't they at least keep some sort of trace on us?'

'Yeah, but it's a dead-man's-handle thing. The trackers are hooked to our brain functions, but from the outside they just show up as a couple of solid blips. They blip out, they know we're dead - and if we're dead nobody's going to send people in to recover a couple of APE bodies.' Kara tried to spit bad temperedly, but her mouth was too dry. 'We're the canaries in the coal mine, guy, and I think we're just gonna expire.'

Now, maybe it was the cumulative desperation of Sharabeth finally building up into something I just couldn't take any more, or the fever, or some innately suicidal

tendency that was just waiting for the chance to come to the fore - whatever it was, I now must have taken that final leap round the twist and plunged into the sort of madness that, in any reasonable world, would have had me put away in a nice cool room and kept away from sharp, blunt or any other kind of objects. Here and now, however, I had the first stirrings of an idea - and it was a measure of my madness that it seemed to be a good idea at the time.

The tracers are hooked up to our brain function...' I said.

'Yes,' Kara said uninterestedly, concentrating upon putting one foot in front of the other.

'But you can disrupt brain function without killing yourself, or at least without killing your body...'

'I suppose so,' said Kara.

I started taking a more active interest in my surroundings. 'Listen,' I said at last. There's stuff around here we can use. This was once an industrialized society. There must be something round here we can use. Power packs from hov-cars, batteries from mobile communicators, backup cells from transputer units, there must be something we can find around here which had some independent power source.' I tapped the left back of my head where I (erroneously) believed the tracer implant to be. 'All it would take is for someone to crack open the skull to get at the implant, then keep zapping at it, and zapping it again to make it blip in some sort of SOS pattern. It might get somebody's attention at any rate, allow them to pinpoint us.'

'Yeah, well, you're not gonna crack open my skull and -' Kara stopped walking and looked at me strangely. 'You're talking about *you*, aren't you? What do you think? You think I'm going to do that to you?'

I realized that I'd stopped walking and, without quite being consciously aware of it, if you get what I mean, had focused my attention upon looking around in the ruins for something that might serve as (a) a zappy power source, and/or (b) a little pickaxe. Now that I was aware of stopping, however, I became aware of what was happening behind me. Little

clouds of dust were rising in the distance, and my mind did another one of its integrating things from available data.

‘Whatever we do,’ I said, ‘I think we have to do it quickly. Somebody’s on the ball in Slead Incorporated. Things are coming after us.’

Kara got a kind of stubborn look. ‘Do what you like. I’m not gonna help you.’

‘Oh for *shite*’s sake!’ I raised my hand and was about to slap some sense into the silly bint, then saw the way she sort of kicked-dog flinched, and dropped it, feeling obscurely ashamed. There are some things you simply do not do, however much and for whatever reason you might feel like it at the time.

‘It either works or it doesn’t,’ I said, in slightly more reasonable tones while Kara regarded me warily. ‘Either way, one of us is stuffed - but if it works at least somebody gets out to tell people what we’ve seen. Now are you going to help me, or do I have to go and try to brain myself on a rockcrete piling or something?’

CHAPTER 6

The mechanics had been simple enough: a package arrives at the Connaught for Khristoff Ramon Praetorian, the precise size and shape for their spanky new mail tubes, and so they send it up through them without a second thought - they'd probably been pleased that someone had finally sent them a package of the right size and shape. I'll bet they had been just dying to try them out. The mail drop was triggered by voice, leaving it in the system until somebody came into Room 329 and said something, then the package was delivered, and *whammo*.

The intended target for the device was slightly more problematical. Personally, I thought that it was simply intended to deal with anyone at all who might get curious about our Mr Praetorian - but it was just possible it had been intended for the man himself. At least, that last was what I told the various emergency, medical and security services when they finally turned up. I'd spent the intervening time trying to give CPR to Bernice and I didn't feel in the mood for complications.

Benny had been finally put on a respirator paid for on my expenses, and I'd given the paramedics Braxiatel's contact codes. I'd decided that it might be better to fade than travel along to the med centre with her - somebody had to be out and working the case, I would have just been in the way, and I didn't think she knew enough or was dangerous enough for anybody to try murdering her in a secure hospital room even if she revived.

Now I was back in my apartment, and I was beginning to have my doubts. The pointless way in which Kara had been killed, even though it served no active purpose, was preying on my mind. Somebody, somewhere had a penchant for acting like a hokey old villain from the holomovies - and one

of the hokiest old holomovie scenarios is said villain dressing up as a doctor and dispatching the comatose material witness by way of a lethal addition to the IV tube. I decided to put my own call through to Braxiatel.

He appeared on Box's display instantly - and I *mean* instantly. I doubt if the other end had time to so much as bleep. He didn't look happy, though whether that was because of seeing me or something else I couldn't guess.

'Where's Benny?' I asked him, without preamble.

'She's safe,' he said, equally perfunctorily. Sometime later I learnt precisely what Braxiatel was, so far as something like that can be defined precisely, and was able to identify the feeling that I got in our interactions. He wasn't human and, unless he consciously reminded himself about the human niceties, he simply didn't do them. At the time I merely put it down to the fact that I didn't like him and he didn't like me - and the fact that one of his friends had been nearly killed while under my supposed care and protection might have had something to do with it.

'How safe, exactly?' I said. 'Where is she safe and what's her condition while she's being it?'

'Her current whereabouts are on a strict need-to-know basis,' said Braxiatel, 'and you don't need to know.' Abruptly, his manner became warmer and more relaxed. Not exactly friendly, more like some incorporate manager putting a subordinate at ease. The impression would have been perfect, and I'd have fallen for it completely, if I hadn't seen the cold remoteness beforehand.

'Rest assured, though,' he continued in this warmer vein, 'that Bernice is receiving the very best of medical care - the conditions of secrecy are merely to be on the safer side than otherwise, rather than a slight on you. As for her physical condition...' The true face under the bland managerial mask briefly flashed out certain signals of concern - always assuming that those little flares of empathy hadn't been laid there just for my benefit. 'She's still comatose, but I'm told from those who know that it's more a question of psychological rather than physical trauma. Bernice has been

rather ill of late, I'm sure you know, fighting battles on several levels other than the merely physical. She survived recent events, the explosion and the fall without injury - due, I gather, to the admirably prompt actions of your good self - but I believe they gave her mind the excuse to construct a scenario that would let itself give up. She's still *there* and alive, if you take my meaning, but she's retreated deep into the safety of her head.'

Braxiatel frowned. 'I need hardly remind you that the term "psychosomatic" is not synonymous with fakery on any level. To all intents and purposes, Bernice Summerfield is now brain-dead and, barring some miracle, likely to remain so until her body itself dies.'

I didn't quite know how to feel about that. Benny's state, if it was as Braxiatel had said, was sufficiently ambiguous so as to make getting a mental or emotional handle on it more difficult than if she was simply dead or had suffered some physical brain damage. In practical terms, however, the only way to go was to leave the ambiguities for later and concentrate upon the fact that, for the foreseeable future, Benny was out for the count.

'I take it,' I said to Braxiatel, 'that you're still interested in my pursuing this case?'

'I couldn't fire you if I wanted to,' he replied with bland inscrutability. 'Our contractual responsibilities were remarkably specific, if you recall, and can only be terminated by specific circumstances or yourself.'

'I know what the contract says,' I snapped, annoyed despite myself. I got the nasty suspicion, while I knew the working basics and knew the rest was safely stored in Box, that Braxiatel had the whole four hundred-odd virtual pages of quasi-legalese memorized word-perfect. 'I'm going to find Kara's murderer. I want to know if you're gonna play the technicalities or give me your confidence and support.'

'You have my complete confidence,' Braxiatel said, dropping the genial facade, 'and you'll have my personal support in anything you see fit.'

‘OK.’ I gave him a rundown of events thus far, not aiming for some abstract, rounded overview but concentrating on my own actions and reactions. The point was to give him all the data I had, rather than edit out the stuff that might become important, but whose significance I wasn’t aware of at the time. ‘Use whatever resources you have to track down this Praetorian guy,’ I finished. ‘Whatever’s happening, he’s in it up to his neck, and I want to know what he’s standing in. Also,’ I added as an afterthought, ‘have some people dig into one “Investigator Roland Forrester” working for SecServ™. Crossmatch it with anything that’s been found by my own system and download it. I want to know who the players are, here, however walk-on and iffy they might ultimately be.’

I made another couple of calls, one of them relevant, one of them just part of the dead-man’s-handle procedures that are part and parcel of the life I lead - keeping a certain storage locker rented for another week before it lapsed, was opened up and whoever opened it found something rather more interesting than somewhat inside. Then I repaired to my trashed and decidedly unrepaired bedroom and spent a happy hour in front of the undamaged section of mirror with various cosmetics. If you’re going out for the evening, there’s no excuse not to go out looking the best you can. I settled in the end for something low-key and elegant, the effect relying on the subtle delineations of the detailing, and set it off with a couple of mismatched zirconium-inset rings in one ear and an equally cheap-looking stud through the nostril. You can’t get the right effect without a bit of tasteless flash somewhere.

I was deciding on my outfit, and had narrowed the choices down to something basic, black and off-the-shoulder, or something in bulked and layered silks that might not be the most practical item in the world if you’re even halfway expecting rough stuff, but balanced this up by looking incredibly good.

I was saved from this heart-rending dilemma by Box announcing that I had a visitor. I checked the specs, wandered out and opened the door for Mira.

Mira had been the other and more immediately relevant call I'd made. I still wanted someone on the case other than myself, someone I could trust, and on one slightly memorable occasion I'd trusted her with my life in a firefight and it had come good. Besides, in a case like this that seemed to be dealing with the ambiguities and subtleties wholesale, her particular and special mental talents might come in very useful.

Mira was looking decidedly fem, in a little cocktail number cut from an incredibly strange kind of tartan, which managed the astonishing feat of still looking tartan without looking incredibly sad and wanky. She had bulked out her hair with what may have been extensions, or may just have involved the process of reversing the hours spent into straggling it. I have to confess to having a bit of a blind spot about hair, and I'm a bit unsure of the technicalities about it. In any case, whether it was just the change from her old look, or whether it was this new look in itself, the effect was startling to the point of being spectacular. And the fact that she was still wearing her perennial hobnailed boots made it all the better.

'Very nice,' I said. 'I'd contract-bond with you on the spot if you'd let me.'

Mira shrugged. 'It's just something I threw on.'

This was very possibly true. It's a sad fact, in a world without any justice, that, while a man has to spend hours if he wants to look even passable, a woman can pull on the contents of her laundry basket and look fabulous. Oh well.

'This had better be good,' said Mira. 'I was in the middle of a very interesting exploratory procedure when you called.'

'I didn't know you did medical work,' I said, on account of sometimes being able to recognize a feed line when it's handed to me on a plate.

'Who said anything about medicine? So where's this place we're going to, then?'

'It's a place called Zoo Kunst,' I said.

'Sounds positively filthy,' Mira said promptly, being no small shakes in the recognizing-of-feed-lines department herself.

'Kunst,' I said, 'is a German word for "art". I think it's supposed to have an umlaut in it, but I doubt if they know that.'

'Oh yes,' Mira said dispiritedly. 'One of *those* sorts of clubs.'

'Very probably,' I said. 'Let me go and get some clothes on and we'll get it over with.'

* * *

Zoo Kunst, with or without the umlaut, was the kind of joint you'd find in any place or time in the galaxy where there's a basically human population big enough to have a public-transport system - even if said transport system involves the horse and buggy. Your basic dive structured around bar, bandstand and dance floor, the affluence of the market it was aimed at leading to the addition of a restaurant, waiter service and private gallery boxes as opposed to half-hearted packets of peanuts behind the bar and backrooms. The only changes these places go through are in the superficiality of the specifics. I'd done a little checking up on the place via Box before we'd left for it, and the various listings and reviews boiled down to the information that it was the place to go if you wanted to find an 'artistic' crowd - meaning, of course, it was the place to go if you wanted to find a crowd of raddled old has-beens, wanna-be-but-never-wills from the periphery of the various media and a healthy dose of incorporate-hive kids being really bohemian and rebellious and getting away from their respective multiplexal daddy-figures.

The archetypically comic-book bouncers (the window-dressing front end of security systems that checked for weapons and unfashionable drugs invisibly) took Kara's prepaid ticket and grudgingly allowed us in for a surcharge - we'd have got in anyway, since these places can maintain any notions of true exclusivity for only the two-fifths of a second where they're the place to *be*, and thereafter retain the postures of it merely to get the punters through the doors. Inside, Zoo Kunst was even worse than I'd feared.

Actually, I'm being a bit uncharitable. It was just about exactly what you would expect from the name Zoo Kunst.

Grainy, high-contrast, mono blowups of Arp woodcuts and Ernst collage and Heartfield montage all over the walls, over which were projected continuous, disjointed loops of Fassbinder and Pabst; the random stutter of strobe lights, the waiters and the waitresses all in boxy cardboard uniforms, shuttling back and forth with the kind of 'robotic' motion that centuries of cybernesis still hasn't shown for the complete and utter bollocks it truly is; the live band hacking their way through something they'd learnt off a recording of Brecht, corruptions in the recording included - all the superficialities of the specific combined to produce a cumulatively grating tone that, on the balance of probability, made the place slightly less cheerful to be in than Buchenwald on an off day.

I manfully reined in my repugnance, and we headed for the bar, which was shaped like an Art Deco cruise liner, no doubt left over from the time before the last refit, but renovated into a vague approximation of the battleship *Potemkin* - historical or artistic consistency being, of course, the last thing on any good club owner's mind.

'I fancy a drink,' I said. 'Do you fancy a drink, Mira?'

'I fancy an absinthe,' said Mira, archly. 'A cool absinthe with a mouthful of wormwood and the dribbles from the pouring just clinging to the inside of the glass...'

'Cor blimey, you're sophisticated. Do you want ice and lemon in that or what?'

'Fuckin' right I do,' said Mira, happily.

I handed over the tokens I'd exchanged credit chips for at the door, and an ersatz and rather overdeveloped *Metropolitan* robot woman eventually gave me Mira's drink and the three large, neat, grain vodkas I'd bought for myself. It takes a lot of ethanol to affect me, and, even then, the effect is more like a minor cortical suppression of the sort that has someone saying 'it was the drink that was talking', when what he actually means is that the drink made him say what he really thought. I knocked back a couple of the tumblers and the world in general made a minuscule increment towards a sunnier aspect. I glanced about myself

again at the activity and the clientele, just to see if I still thought they were the complete and utter tossers I had thought them to be on walking in – and stopped dead. I didn't actually stare, but a couple of pattern-recognition alarms had gone off.

Towards the other end of the bar, leaning against it, dressed in a cheap blue off-the-rack suit, clutching a half-finished glass of some sort of fizzy yellow beer and glaring about himself with a sense of barely restrained belligerence, was the SecServ™ investigator I'd met at the disposal complex, Forrester.

'Guy over there,' I said to Mira. 'Looks like he'd stick the entire Proximan Chain in jail on account of it not being round like a proper planet. Can you pick anything up on him?'

'Not a chance,' said Mira, who would have known to whom my attention was directed even without my oblique identification. "There's too much background. If I get in closer then I'll try - just remember, anything I do that he won't notice, it'll just be general.'

'Fair enough.' I decided to forgo the subtle approach and just shoved my way through the crowd. 'What the hell are you doing here, Forrester?' I asked, merely adding a bit of spin to the distaste I already felt for the guy to my voice. 'I thought I told you your services were no longer required.'

His reaction was somewhat other than I'd expected. The Secman turned around and regarded me as if he'd just blown me out of his nose, and then his whole manner changed to cold-voiced anger. 'Get away from me,' he snarled. 'Just get the hell away.'

The change in persona startled me enough that I briefly let my anger go overt. 'Is there a shop somewhere that does suits specially for off-duty coppers? Did you park the SecServ™ bacon-buggy outside or something? I thought a lot of the usual crowd were missing tonight.' I had no idea who the usual crowd were, but it was a dead certainty that at least one or two members of it would have been out of the door

sharpish at the merest whiff of pork, however synthetic it might ultimately be.

‘Just piss off out of it,’ Forrester said, suddenly appearing to loom a little, despite the fact that he was physically shorter than me, ‘before I break your fucking legs.’

The atavistic rage I thought I’d dealt with was making something of a minor comeback, and if anyone would have been improved by a major twatting it was Forrester. I felt myself slipping into combat-mode - and then caught sight of Mira standing behind him and making a little cut-throat gesture.

‘Well, it’s been nice,’ I said, smoothly slipping down a gear. ‘We really must do this again.’ I turned from him with the kind of dismissal that’s an active insult, rejoined Mira and we wandered off through the crowd.

‘So what did you get?’ I asked her.

‘There’s one hell of a lot of mental blocking, but he’s a *cop* through and through. If this was the sort of place with an official policing force, he’d be one of those characters the GalNet police-procedural docu-cams follow about.’

‘No offence,’ I said, ‘but I could have worked that out without you.’

‘Hey.’ Mira drained her glass unconcernedly. ‘What I feel is what you get.’

The live band changed tack, and started playing something atonic and reminiscent of John Cage, and which left you wishing for their extended version of ‘4’32’’. A table became free in the restaurant area and we took it. I’d half expected to find various half-arsed attempts at surrealist cookery like pureed daffodil bulbs and tin-tack sandwiches on the menu, but Zoo Kunst seemed to have decided on your basic *kimu*, on which no expense had been spent. There’s very little you can do to ruin *kimu*, though.

‘Don’t let yourself go hungry, whatever you do,’ Mira snorted as I stuffed my face with a plateful of something tentacular and purple in a pastry shell.

‘I’m a growing boy, me,’ I said, ‘I need the vitamins.’

Out of the corner of my eye, over to one side of the club, I noticed a Flying Eyeball working its way through the crowd on flappy membrane wings. These things are more or less of the same engineered breed as squeaky-cleaners, but modified to push their secondary surveillance usage right up to the fore. I looked around to try to pinpoint Forrester the Secman, who was now noticeable by his absence. He was probably in some quiet corner, monitoring the signal from the Flying Eyeball's implants.

The perpetual Habitat-local evening wore on, and the live music was replaced by club-generic, layered, white-noise structures, underlaid with low-level, subsonic dynamics operating directly on the limbic system. Mira and I moved on to the dance floor. The point of this, like all our actions upon entering the club, was just to blend in and keep our eyes and ears open for whatever may occur - whatever Kara may or may not have been expecting to happen here. There was still the possibility that she'd been coming here on her own time and simply for her own enjoyment, of course - Kara liked several things I would have blown dead rodents rather than experience, and Zoo Kunst may have been one of them.

Despite myself, however, I found that I was starting to enjoy myself. This was almost entirely due to Mira who was flatly uninterested in me in any sexual sense, and the fact that I am physically not interested in people, of any sex, who aren't interested. It's a pheromone and secondary-sense thing, wired directly into my somewhat unusual biology - which also means, quite frankly, that I can't get off on recorded visual and aural stimuli, as I remember being able to do when I inhabited a basically human body, without quite being able to recollect the feeling, if you get what I mean. It takes a living, breathing and basically *interested* person to do it.

There's this sense of pure and unalloyed *fun*, on the other hand, about being with, and bouncing off, and sharing a friendly regard with people where there's no other and hidden agenda in being, doing and sharing it. In my dealings with Benny, for example, our interactions were clouded by the tiny

possibility of seeing her in her underwear, at some point, and in a certain sense. With Mira I could just kick back and relax...

As we spun through a basic ambulatory frug routine, however, my vague musings on the nature of a certain stimulation versus fun were interrupted. It was just the sound of a voice, indistinguishable from all the others in the normal course of things, but it cut through the background and stood out in the same way as a word in Galactic Basic stands out on a page-slate of Rakrathese. It was a voice that at least one area of my brain had been listening out for. I snatched a glance in its direction and examined the image with a mental eye: a mid-sized man in a dark, sharp suit that matched the size and cut I'd seen in the Marvellous Exploding Hotel Room perfectly, heading from the bar clutching a tall, clear drink which had that overeffervescent look of a drink with no alcohol. In searching for our Mr Praetorian over the GalNet systems, Box had been unable to supply a visual image - unusual, but not suspicious in and of itself - but the circumstantial evidence was good enough for me.

I stuck my face smoochily into the small of Mira's neck - the nice thing about her special talents being that I could do so without worrying about her getting the wrong idea and wasting time on explanations. 'I think I've put a name to a voice on the phone.' I'd run through the background with her back at my apartment, and I specifically refrained from using any names now - a *name* is something that draws the ear of the one it belongs to in much the same way as hearing a voice you're specifically listening for, and I didn't as yet know if our Mr Praetorian had or had not the same kind of enhancements as I had.

'Bit of a coincidence finding two players in the same scene,' Mira said thoughtfully. 'Forrester and this guy...'

'It is that,' I said, and then I said quite possibly one of the dumbest woods-for-the-trees thing I've ever said: 'It's like this place is selling tickets. Do you know, that's quite possibly one of the dumbest things I've ever said.'

‘And I may quite possibly never forgive you for it,’ said Mira.

‘Well, anyway, I still want to talk to him. Follow my lead.’

We left the dance floor and headed through the crowd in that apparently random but guided manner that fetched us up close to our Mystery Man. At the point where we were going to pass him, I kind of smoothly turned and laid a hand on his suited arm as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

‘Khristoff Praetorian?’ I asked with that complexly uncertain falsity that would sound really unnatural in a holomovie, when someone tries to introduce themselves to somebody else, but which is far more true to life and unthreatening than what comes across in the holomovies as natural with a capital N. ‘We, uh, have a message for you. Kara Del bane sent us.’

The trick to dealing with a sudden explosion of violence is to stop it cold before it starts. It’s a complex thing, knowing that precise point - a certain change in posture, a certain change in the set of the features that is and was entirely different from the kind of territorial bullishness I’d picked up on and reacted to with Forrester the Secman. I could take pages to go into all the little physiological und sensual details but, in short, the overall pattern is utterly distinctive - and with our mysterious Mr Praetorian I caught it just at the point where Mira was drawing in breath to shout out her own warning.

All of which is to say that I had smacked out Mr Praetorian in the head and caught his poleaxed-falling body long before he even had a chance to make his first overt move.

Nobody around us so much as noticed, in the same way as someone standing next to you can drop down dead without warning and it’s a few seconds before you notice. I used those seconds to shift my own conscious posture and Praetorian’s unconscious weight into those of a friend holding up a drink-or-other-substance-incapacitated friend, which would let other eyes simply slide off before they registered something sufficiently suspicious to have mouths commenting.

‘Brilliant,’ Mira said, coldly, using similar method acting to imitate the attitudes and postures of someone spoiling for the sort of argument that has everybody but the poor sod the animosity is aimed at hastily clearing the blast area. Or, then again, maybe not. Imitating the postures, I mean. ‘Just in case it’s never occurred to you - and I know for a *fact* that it hasn’t - we don’t even know what side this guy’s ultimately on, and now we won’t for the foreseeable future.’

‘So run a deep scan,’ I said.

Mira snorted. ‘Fat chance. His mind’s out for the count and you’ve probably scrambled his *brains*. Did you have to hit him quite so hard?’

‘And what would you have done?’ I said with an indignation that, in retrospect, I think was slightly guilty and defensive. What with bottling up a lot of negative feelings over the past few days, I really had hit him a little bit harder than I’d intended. ‘You knew he was going to try something as well as I did.’

‘I’d have smacked him into something like the next day as opposed to the next century,’ said Mira. ‘Ever thought of joining SecServ™ yourself? I reckon they’d go for someone with your delicate and gentle touch like a shot.’

Hurtful though this was, it wasn’t the association of ideas that had me glancing off to one side, where a certain party had left some dark corner and was purposefully making his way through the crowds towards us, brushing anyone who was in his way aside.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘we can continue this charming repartee later. That Forrester guy has a bead on us and he’s coming this way.’

Fortunately, and quite by chance, the Zoo Kunst doors just happened to be nearer to us than to the purposefully approaching Forrester. We got Praetorian out with appropriate comments to the world in general that if we didn’t, right away, it would be far the worse for the club’s expensive carpet. The bouncers got sharply out of our way.

The air of the Habitat-local night was warm, but it hit me like a hammer after the packed heat of the club. I felt a little light-headed as I shoved Praetorian into the back of the car, climbed in after Mira and hit one of the automatic destinations programmed by its original owner. Looking back, as a figure came out of the doors at speed and ran off through the parking lot, I saw that Forrester really did have a marked SecServ™ skimmer waiting for him.

There's a little trick of cycling a vehicle's transponder system that confuses the very bollocks out of the sort of low-rent rigs used by the private security services. I did this now, then turned my attention back to the autopilot as it blipped us through the transmat nodes in cruise mode. I picked a spot at random and flipped us out.

We found ourselves in another open-air Habitat, operating on a day/night subcycle by the look of it and in its local night, a couple of largish and impressively swirling variegated planets in the sky, one of them with rings. This seemed to be one of the commercial zones, a street network of manufactories of various sizes and kinds, only occasionally lit up from within in a way that suggested they were mostly automated rather than containing workers on shift. Little private traffic, a few autopiloted road trains, a lot of static bulk-transmat installations for goods and a few *pneumatique* stations for living beings. I set the autopilot to collision-compensate and let it bumble through the network of streets at a sedate hundred and fifty kilometres per hour.

'That should buy us some time,' I said to Mira. 'More than long enough for anyone in SecServ™ to lose interest.'

'And let's be thankful for small mercies.' Mira sourly jerked a thumb at the unconscious Praetorian. 'I hope you're fully aware of how you screwed things up completely back there. I'm letting you subcontract my services as a personal favour here, and you do one more thing like that and I'm out.'

'OK, OK,' I said. 'I'm contrite as all get-out. Hitting people too hard is nasty and bad and I won't do it again. Happy now?'

Mira snorted. She was doing that one hell of a lot, I thought. 'Yeah. Right.'

The smoothly random motion of the car was strangely relaxing, lulling the eye and the mind in the same way as the motion of a boat drifting on a river, and for almost precisely the same inertial reasons. It was lulling me into a kind of semidoze that was similar to that hypnagogic mental state I'd tried and failed to totally achieve in Kara's apartment, the state where you may not see things more clearly, but are allowed to see them in a different way, put them together in ways that would not ordinarily occur...

And this was why, as my eyes happened to rest on the rear-view monitor, I saw the vehicle that was following us and, I realized, had been following us ever since we'd left Zoo Kunst.

'Oh shit,' I said, on account of being still too semihypnagogic to come up with something more original. I switched the systems to manual, took a small side trip down and along a couple of side streets crawling with heavy-bore pipes, cut the automatics back in, and checked the monitor again, now fully alert but knowing what I was looking for.

It was still there.

We may have shaken off any putative SecServ™ tail, but somebody had tagged us from the word go and was on the point of counting us out.

BACKGROUND 7

In my darker moments I think of life as a kind of perpetually recurring Chinese water torture. You get up, you do stuff and you drop, and then you get up and do it all again. Planetary cultures do it all the time: some faction loses a war and gets resentful, so some ridiculous and tinpot little dictator gets 'em all fired up with the Idea of their Manifest Destiny and they go at it all over again. Children are abused, and grow up to become the abusers themselves. History just keeps repeating itself, with nasty little variations, and, however you might want to break the cycle and get off, you find yourself continually retreading the same old ground.

What I'm trying to get at, here, is that after everything we went through on Sharabeth, everything that was done to us in the Slead Incorporation, we more or less ended up having to go through it all over again...

I opened my eyes to see Kara looking down on me. My last memories had been not exactly coherent, being in effect nothing but a continual series of agonizing explosions behind my eyes, so it was a bit remarkable that I could recognize her at all. It was frankly amazing that I could put two thoughts in order, for that matter.

'You've just spent fourteen hours in a regen tank,' Kara said to me, cutting through all the usual what-happened questions without my having to ask. 'Convincing your body to grow a new skin and stuff.'

I rubbed at the short and scratchy hair under my arms? - and as a complete tangential aside, here, why is it that those who don't know think of APEs as hairless and smooth? Body hair serves a physical and biological function.

'Sod the skin,' I said. Fourteen hours of biologically accelerated disuse had left my voice feeling dry and cracked.

‘What about my brains?’ I had the horrible feeling that the inside of my skull currently looked like the end result of a firebomb in a semolina factory.

‘Don’t worry about it.’ Kara smiled a little, reassuringly. ‘Your brain cells are quite capable of healing on their own. The regen tank just accelerated the process.’

‘Hang on,’ I said, remembering something from my human childhood. ‘That can’t be right, can it? Brain cells can’t repair damage to themselves - you wouldn’t remember who you were from one minute to another.’

Kara shrugged unconcernedly. ‘APE physiology, remember?’ She reached over to the med couch and tapped my forehead. ‘There’s six copies of the synapse map in there, and your ego shunts around from one to another, and integrates them comparatively. That counteracts the corruption brought in by the cells repairing themselves, apparently.’ She shrugged again. ‘Biology isn’t my strong suit - all I know is that, basically, you’re up and running again.’

‘And let’s be thankful for small mercies,’ said another voice. The globular interface monitor of ARVID racked itself down on its server arm. The unit had been there all the time, of course, but dormant, and I’d just assumed in some basic sense that ARVID hadn’t been there. Some hopes. The voice seemed slightly different from the one I’d heard earlier more serious, less chatty. I later learnt that this was merely part of the ‘maturing’ process in these short-life AIs, the effects of it noticeable even to unenhanced human beings.

‘We can always use another warm body, I suppose,’ ARVID said. ‘The Hetmen aren’t exactly pleased with you, chum - even under hypno, the details you brought out of Sharabeth are partial to say the least. You’ll have to do a lot better than that, if you’re going in again.’

‘Yeah, well,’ I said. ‘I’d like to see you do better in the - Hang on a minute.’ My attention finally caught up with what my ears had heard but I’d missed. ‘Did you say going in again?’

‘Pretty damn hooty, we’re going in again,’ said ARVID. ‘Whoever or whatever this “Sled” is, he, she or it is taking

the incorporate name in vain and bringing it into disrepute. This situation has to be resolved.'

'Now let me get this straight,' I said, not quite sure that I was hearing this. 'You're not so much concerned with the fact that Sharabeth's been turned into a Belsen as big as the world, as with the fact that some sort of copyright's been infringed?'

'Not at all,' said ARVID smoothly. 'That's just one factor among many, including the fact that our patrons lost a lot of their people on the planet itself. Whoever's responsible must be found and brought to justice.'

'Justice, right,' I said. 'I can see you're really hot on that round here. So what are you going to do about it, then?'

'Your sojourn on Sharabeth,' ARVID said, 'inconclusive though it was, allowed us to get a precise fix and set up a direct and relatively stable portal. This allows the advanced deployment of relevant materials and personnel...'

'The angels are going in mob-handed,' Kara said. She seemed angry. 'Direct military intervention. And, since ordinary humans still can't stand the place, guess who these "personnel" are going to actually be.'

I thought about this. 'So, I take it me and Kara are going to be included in all this?'

'We might as well get some use out of you,' said ARVID, a bit snottily for my liking. I was going to tell the AI precisely what I thought about that, when something struck me. It wasn't as if I had any feelings either way about these putative APE people who were going in – the fact that I'd been almost completely isolated since first waking, before we even went into Sharabeth, meant I could hardly imagine, let alone sympathize with, them. It was more to do with the fact that I, and Kara, were being taken along for the ride and the whole scenario just seemed somehow *wrong*. There was some detail of my stay in the Slead Incorporation that was on the tip of the mental tongue and I couldn't quite shake it loose...

'You're thinking of this in the wrong terms,' I said. 'You're thinking of it like we're two armies in a war and doing -' I realized that, either from my APE design specs, or from the

fact that my 'real' memories couldn't see soldiers, full stop, as anything other than an Enemy to be fought against, that I didn't know a thing about being a soldier per se. 'Well, you know, doing soldiery things. The Slead Incorporation seemed to be run on a kind of *business* dynamic, killing people almost literally on an industrial basis. They talked about employees and products, even bloody performance-related awards...' I almost had it, then. 'If you just go in mob-handed, treat this like a purely military situation, you're just going to get your collective arse kicked. It's like the difference between subtlety of concept and subtlety of execution - you've got to go in with armed force, but you should be *thinking* incorporate-takeover politics, and for that you need hard and detailed information.'

'Hard information,' said ARVID, 'that you singularly failed to obtain.'

'Yeah, well,' I said, as the memory I'd been looking for finally surfaced. To this day I'm not sure if the idea I was about to propose was my own work, or whether I had been psychologically led by the nose towards it in some hope that I would volunteer. 'I think I just might know where we can get it.'

CHAPTER 7

Take a good look at the next few hundred vehicles you see anything from a gasoline-powered automobile, to a hov-car, to a motorized rickshaw full of whippets. Look at them closely, *force* yourself to examine each and every one as if it were the most important thing in the world and your life depended on it. At some point, you'll see one, instantly dismiss it as completely unimportant and move on - and *that's* the one you should be watching for. The things are designed psychonomically to deflect the attention in the same way as a fractured-prismatic flier deflects radar. They work only on a basically humanoid neurology, and occur only in the more developed population centres of the galaxy - but since Mira and I were at least halfway human, and in a developed population centre of the galaxy, this was hardly a lot of help.

Apart from that psychonomic shell, these vehicles are basically nothing but a chassis, engine and a guidance system, the remaining space packed with a liberal quantity of high explosive. Basically, they're mobile bombs, and were once used heavily by the various incorporations, when the power struggle between them was one hell of a lot nastier than it is now. They can cruise around for years on autopilot, wandering the transit systems unnoticed, until one of them is streamed a target by whoever has its access codes. It then latches on to the target and follows it, waits until it stops and then happily converts its payload into quantities of heat, light and kinetic energy, which is not, unsurprisingly, one of life's great thrills.

'Take a look at the monitor,' I said to Mira.

She glanced at it, then peered closely. 'Oh shit.'

'My sentiments precisely,' I said. 'Also, while you're at it take a look at our power.'

Mira looked at the readouts showing how the car, only partially recharged when I'd appropriated it, was now approaching empty. 'Oh shit again.'

'So what we're going to do is this,' I said in my best let's-take-charge voice. 'When I give the word, you boot our Mr Praetorian out and jump after him. Get him away from here and get in contact with Braxiatel, see if he can't have someone bring you in. I'll stay with the car and try to deal with the thing behind.'

'Bollocks,' Mira said. 'You're coming with me.'

'Not a chance,' I said. 'Listen, we're talking tactics here. That thing might be tracking the car - but for all we know it might be locked on to some implant in Praetorian. Splitting up gives at least one of us a chance to get away with what we know.'

'What we *know*, of course,' said Mira, 'being about as much worth as a tuppenny toss. And that's utter bollocks and you know it. That's your basic tail-and-destroy drone back there and - unless there's been some whole new advance in their systems that we've never so much as heard a sniff of - it's tailing the car. You're gonna die and you know it.'

'So let's just make sure I don't take you and our Mr Praetorian with me. As you said, we still don't know which side of the conflict he's ultimately on.' I slowed the car to a fast-run crawl and shot the left back door. 'Now, if you don't do it in the next ten seconds I'm going to slam on the brakes and we *all* go boom.'

'Oh for *fuck's* sake.' Mira sighed the sigh of every woman in the entire universe at the intransigence of universal man. 'What the hell. It's your funeral. Memorial service, I should say, 'cause there's not gonna be enough of you left to bury.' She clambered into the back and grabbed hold of the still unconscious Praetorian. 'OK, let's do this.'

The moment she was out I hit the acceleration, not bothering to check back and see if she was OK. She'd either made it or she hadn't, but, either way, there was nothing I could do about it. After a while, I checked the rear monitor to make sure the drone was still following me, experienced a

moment of panic when I saw that it wasn't, then recalled the whole point about these drones, checked the monitor in sideways-squinting fashion and breathed a small sigh of relief.

Not a big sigh of relief, though, because, when you came right down to it, I was still being followed by a psychonomically sculpted, guided bomb on wheels that was at some point going to blow my arse out of my ears.

I drove around for maybe four minutes, with the half-formed idea that this might give Mira and her charge a bit more time to get safely out of the area - as if, in the real world, you'd send a single drone after the people you want to kill and that's it. The readouts told me I was operating on the last of the emergency reserve, though, and from here on in it wouldn't matter a toss what I did. What the hell - the odds weren't going to get any better. I locked down the controls and jumped, leaving the car to carry on dead ahead and plough, not particularly spectacularly, into a series of streetside skips.

I hit the ground in a slightly misjudged roll that pitched me flat on my back, bounced to my feet in overdrive and prepared to run. I didn't have a hope in hell of escaping the blast envelope, but you've gotta keep trying, the gods help them as help themselves, faint heart never won fair lady and any amount of other vaguely relevant platitudinous crap. That is, I made ready to run - and then I noticed through the slow-motion sensorium of jacked-up senses that the attention-camouflaged vehicle behind me had slowed to a stop.

And something came out of it.

It was roughly the size of a man, but bulkier and more ragged. A reddish light pulsed and flared in its eyes, its hands were jagged claws and it was coming for me faster than a man ever could.

Now I'd had my Gun on me ever since I'd left the club. The thing about suddenly finding yourself in a situation stickier than somewhat, however, is that you go with your impulses, whether they're right or wrong, and you keep on going with

'em just as hard as you can - and my impulses were currently set to flight rather than fight. The monstrous, semihuman form slashed its claws across the precise space in which I no longer was, having turned tail the moment I saw it and just pigged the bastard out. I'm capable of running on the level of a high-end basic human athlete for quite some time, and in this case I put in a little bit of extra effort - which shows how brave, courageous and generally dauntless I am, in my opinion, because I didn't worry about getting a stitch in my side.

I headed for the lights of the nearest transit station, the creature almost literally on my heels, purely on the basis that it was somewhere to go - though the little bit of my mind that concentrates on pure survival had the idea that there might be other people there, and maybe the creature behind me would go for them instead of me. Some hopes. I vaulted the turnstiles to find myself on the narrow platform of an empty tube, and subliminally noted from the station displays that it would be at least a minute and a half before the next transit capsule arrived.

Stuck in a corner, now, I had only one option. I pulled the Gun and turned to see the creature right behind, tangled briefly in the turnstiles I'd negotiated, on account of how it had simply smashed its way through. I selected blast bolts with a high yield and fired.

I then spent a happy minute and a half letting fly at the creature - and if that doesn't sound like a long time then I'd invite you to try. The bolts and rapid-fire microgrenades damaged it, but nowhere near enough; it seemed to be possessed of some utter and ferocious madness that rendered it impervious. The best I could do was knock it back, again and again, but each time it would get up again and *lunge*. And each time it lunged closer.

The sweat was pouring off me, certain other kinds of liquid were making themselves uncomfortably evident, and the Gun was almost entirely depleted by the time the capsule finally came. I think that if I hadn't by pure luck had my back directly to the doors when they opened, the creature would

have eviscerated me with its final swipe. As it was, I stumbled backward, receiving a nasty gash across my left shoulder in the process, and turned the stumble into a backward dive while simultaneously triggering a highly dangerous and, if not illegal, generally frowned-upon, modification that let the Gun expend everything it had in a single go.

The multiple concussion flung the creature back against the transit station wall. It didn't stay there long. It reared up on its hind legs and charged, shrieking with absolute and unstoppable rage. As it did so, though, the doors of the capsule slid smoothly shut, the pneumatics cut in, and the last thing I saw was the creature's distorted, damaged face before we were away.

* * *

It being late in the local-Habitat night, the capsule was almost completely empty: the only thing I saw that might have been another living soul was a slumped and dirty bundle of a dosser in one of the corner seats, who I think was dead. I certainly wasn't going to prod him, her or it to make sure, and merely kept half an eye on him, her or it in case he, she or it suddenly started doing anything that might have been dangerous to me.

As the capsule shot through stations towards some ultimate terminal with access to a transmat, I let my other one and a half eyes gaze absently at the public view screens, set to alternate advertising and news channels behind their cold-cast cages. A slightly anomalous series of solar flares had increased seasonal temperatures across seven different Habitats of the Chain, resulting in an increase in projected per-capita deaths due to heat prostration by eleven point five per cent. The paracholera epidemic that had thus far killed one hundred and thirty-four people over the past few weeks had finally been traced to a contaminated batch of a variety of snowcone, which had now been removed from the market. Mister Meaty Foods, a subsidiary of the ZipCo incorporation, had announced a complete and thorough investigation while at no time actually admitting a thing. On a lighter note, a six-year-old fnarok named Humphrey had been trained by his

proud owners to play the bagpipes while tap-dancing underwater...

My one-and-a-half eyes might have been watching this stuff, but my attention itself was decidedly elsewhere. It was focused on the image of the barely humanoid creature still etched on my mind. If you examined it like this, now that evisceration by way of its horrible jagged claws wasn't so much of an option, you noticed that 'barely humanoid' was not, precisely, the right description.

Physically, the thing was *human*, probably down to its last chromosome. Something had informed it, possessed it, however, twisted its body into monstrous proportions and postures, warped its mind to something completely and utterly else. Birds and insects were our brothers and cousins compared with what this physically human thing had become.

It wasn't like the cases of possession I'd seen on Dellah and Thanaxos. The entities that subsumed their living hosts to become embodied gods operated in a different way. But the thing was, I *had* seen something like this creature before. Rather longer before. Ten years before, to be exact.

I thought back over the events of the past few days, what I'd seen and thought and done, and they began to take on the aspect of a maze, some cardboard rat-maze in a psychology lab through which I was being run.

The thing was, I was starting to realize, the Big Cheese was probably in another laboratory entirely.

My comms unit bleeped reassuringly as I neared my apartment door. All the same, I backed up against the outside wall before I opened it. Nothing actually jumped out and tried to tear me limb from limb, so I decided to risk it.

'Hello, Box,' I said as I entered. 'Any nasty people in here I should be aware of?'

'Not that I'm aware of,' said Box.

The gash across my shoulder was closing up, but throbbed with that kind of burning ache that suggested I'd caught some kind of infection with which my physiology couldn't

instantly and automatically cope. I switched the phone to replay in passing and headed for the kitchen and my stash of the more abstruse antibiotic and antibiogenic compounds - and then I pelted back on overdrive. The voice on the phone had been distorted and garbled, but recognizable with such an utter clarity that it sank hooks into my heart.

It was Kara.

I fumbled with the controls so much that I ended up backtracking too far and catching the end of the previous message (*'...sent under plain cover, discretion assured. So call ZipCred seven seven oh one four seven...'*) before I found it:

'I'm sending this on blind-delay. It should bounce around the Chain systems for a couple of days before it reaches you, and if all goes well I'll kill it long before then. I just hope you never get this, basically. I know how you get about people touching your things, but I've got inside your AI and I - Oh shit, gotta go. I'll call you back in a few minutes.'

(Click, click.)

'Something exciting is happening in the world of consumer durables. ZipCo™ -'

ZipCo™ was going to receive the nasty end of a dirty-delivery mutagen bomb if I had anything to do with it. I blipped through fifteen minutes' worth of the crap and this time ended up overshooting.

'...what I know. You're gonna have to put the pieces together yourself, but I don't have the time now.' Kara's voice was rougher, harsh with the rasping breath of over-exertion and desperation. 'The file name is ARVID. It's encrypted, and I can't say the password over the phone, but it should be obvious. Remember, the name of the file is ARVID. I have to go. There's no time left, I... Listen, whatever else happens, don't forget that the thing with Ranok T'ma and the lami, it wasn't your fault. I really think we could have - No time. Goodbye.'

(Click, click.)

Did you ever lose something small, like a cigarette lighter or something, and you look all over for it, picking things up and moving them around, and then you realize that you're

picking things up with one hand because there's something in the other? Over the past few days I'd known that people had been monkeying around in Box, but there was one question, an incredibly obvious question, that it had never occurred to me to ask.

So I asked it now. 'Any new files stored in you, Box? Files that haven't been put in by me or the background stuff from Braxiatel?'

'Yes,' Box said, instantly and simply. 'I have a file tagged ARVID, stored via remote protocols by an anonymous user.'

'If I asked you to run a trace on the source,' I said, with great restraint, I thought, given the circumstances, 'would that anonymous user turn out to be Kara Delbane?'

'It would,' said Box. 'Do you want me to do it?'

There was no point in blaming Box. AI installations over a certain point mimic human interactions to such an extent that we can sometimes forget that their thought processes work in a completely different way. The plain fact was that I could be dying in front of Box for lack of the file in question, and, while it would try to help me in every way of which it was capable, it was simply incapable of giving me so much as a hint of the file's existence unless I actually asked. Besides, at the moment, I was too busy trying to find a clean data wafer, pulling off the wrapper and slamming it into one of Box's removable drives to blame anyone.

'Give me a copy of ARVID,' I said.

'Access is password-protected,' Box said. 'Do you have the password?'

Given the name ARVID, and everything I knew about Kara, and everything I'd learnt on the case, there was only one possible choice.

'Password incorrect,' said Box. 'Access is password-protected. Do you have the password?'

So I gave it my other choice. The drive sizzled to life with that sound you get like a million amoebas frying bacon. 'How long is this going to take?' I asked.

'There's a lot of corruption,' said Box. 'Random electrical noise and intrusions of what seems to be a GalNet

advertising broadcast for a spanner that undoes the bulbs in hand-held torches. I'm having to extrapolate the meaningful data. One minute, thirty-two seconds.'

I whistled through my teeth. Even factoring in the processor time involved in cleaning it up, that was a hell of a lot of data. The gash in my shoulder was still hurting, so to take my mind off it I flipped through the various GalNet newscasts of the day, filtered and stored via Box's secondary functions to tag keywords and images of interest to me. Almost immediately I hit on a face I recognized, on account of the fact that I saw it in the mirror most mornings. Apart from that subtle wrongness that comes from seeing a still when you expect a mirror image, other things had been done to it; little changes here and there that, while it was still recognizable as me, turned it into something slightly brutish and nasty-looking. I cut in the soundtrack:

'...denounced by a conclave of incorporate representatives and administrative officials, this man had been declared an Open Target with a level-fifteen bounty. Caution: this man is armed and combat-trained. If you do not have the requisite training and experience, do not, repeat, do not attempt to -'

Ever have one of those days? The time stamp showed that this item had been in circulation for something like four hours by now and I'd completely missed it.

Declaring an Open Target is not done lightly, involving as it does a firm consensus among a working majority of all the myriad factions in the Chain. It takes some Crime Against Life so horrendous that these factions can agree on how horrendous it is, and I was pretty sure I'd never done anything quite so horrendous as that. The only answer was that, never mind my worrying about all the people getting into Box, someone had got into the core systems of the Chain itself and had used them to finger me. Fraudulent or not, though, the upshot of it was that absolutely anyone who felt like it, and thought they had the means to do it, could have a pop - and I started thinking uneasily of just how many ways these people could find out where I lived.

The copying of the ARVID file still had almost half a minute to run. I had to force myself not to simply pull the wafer from the slot and start running - telling myself sternly that another twenty-odd seconds wouldn't make a difference either way. It seemed like an eternity, though, before Box spat it out. I grabbed the thing, stuck it in my jacket. Out of the door, straight for the tubes - and right into three figures coming out of them: the SecServ™ investigator, Forrester, and two bulky Secmen in full armour, their riot-control weapons already drawn.

I just had time to remember that the Gun I was reaching for had been fired dry before they zapped me. Forrester walked over to me and loomed over me, as the charges from two different taser attachments did interesting and conflicting things to my nervous system.

'I'll have to ask you to accompany me to the station to help with our enquiries,' he said with nasty satisfaction. 'You're fucking nicked, me old son.'

BACKGROUND 8

Kara flipped the readout back from her eyes. 'There's a secondary blip maybe five and a half kilometres from the Incorporation itself. I think that's where all the ground-to-air stuff came from.'

'So we'll avoid it,' I said, fiddling with the weapons-control board and wishing like hell I'd spent a bit of time practising with it rather than just trusting to the fact that I *knew* how to operate it from my implants. I know how to wear shoes, if it comes to that, but you don't go out dancing in a brand-new pair.

I was also kicking myself for having suggested this Idiotic exploit in the first place. It'd seemed like a good Idea at the time - the Angels' main force sets up and fortifies a beachhead at the portal we had opened, and fights off the obvious reaction to that, leaving Kara and me to scoot on ahead in a high-powered, overarmed and heavily armoured flier at ground-zero, and hopefully under the defence net that had taken us out before. As the only operatives with direct experience of Sharabeth, we knew the score, and the pair of us had been kitted out with total-sensorium broadcast rigs to pump back everything we learnt and when we learnt it, depending on what I hoped we'd learn if it was actually in the place I hoped we'd learn it.

(It's just occurred to me that it might seem a little strange that we hadn't had all this high-end stuff the first time we entered Sharabeth's spaces. Well, all I can say is that nobody had clue one as to what we were dealing with the first time. This time we had some vague idea - and so we were going loaded for armour-plated ursine, though, like I said, at the time I was too busy kicking myself to think much about it.)

'We're coming up on the main mass,' Kara said, in that absently chatty kind of way people like pilots get when the

majority of their mind is concentrating on their job. 'Pretty soon now, we're gonna smack right into the side...'

'Let's ditch, then,' I said. There's a largish clump of moving things down there on the ground coming up. I say we just land on them.'

'Fine by me,' said Kara, and she ploughed the flier, through a bank of rubble and a collection of basically human creatures who I assume were some kind of guard patrol. I was ejecting a couple of fragmentation clusters to take care of any survivors, when a subsidiary system on my board started having a small but insistent fit.

There's contamination trace out there,' I told Kara. 'Not much of it, but it looks like some kind of mutagenic gas, Fifteen per cent chance one of us would breathe in a still-active molecular chain.'

'OK.' Kara tossed me a gas mask and, while I was sealing myself into it, busied herself setting the flier's security devices. 'Active or passive?'

'Oh, go on,' I said, 'live a little and make 'em active.'

I detonated a couple of concussion charges to shift some of the rubble and other items that had piled on top of us when we hit, and shot the canopy. The weight of the flier had ruptured what appeared to be an underground sewer main, and it was from this that the gas had escaped. I shone a light down the hole and saw a tangled mass of bones and canisters in a slurry-like pool of some decomposing mush. I'd forgotten the immediacy of the conditions here on Sharabeth; saliva spurted in my mouth, but fortunately we had come prepared this time and had been fitted with a beta-blocking compound on IV, so I didn't mess up the inside of my mask. We circumnavigated the rupture and pressed on. Some time later, we heard a quite impressive detonation as some surviving basically human creature no doubt got a bit too inquisitive about the flier.

The fearful pile that was the Slead Incorporation loomed ever closer, but the sheer size of it together with the vertiginous effect of the boiling sky made judging the distance awkward.

It was almost an hour before we were directly in its shadow - and found ourselves presented with a small problem.

‘Are you getting all this?’ I said, switching on the voice-transmitter pack of my power suit, more or less to test it

‘Oh yes, I’m getting it, you bastard,’ said the voice of ARVID. One of the key points of the plan I’d suggested was that ARVID’s central processing unit must be physically stationed at the beachhead - purely in the interests of communications efficiency, you understand. ‘How many of these things did you say there were? A few thousand? Well, I’m here to tell you that we’ve killed ten times that many and they just keep coming...’

It was impossible to hear any background noise behind the voice, of course, since ARVID spoke through a voder unit, but the distinct impression of nervousness in the voice itself gladdened my heart and made me feel slightly better disposed about the world in general.

‘Can you see what I can see?’ I asked him.

‘I can see what you can see,’ said ARVID, a little sulkily.

‘Any suggestions?’

‘Yes,’ said ARVID. ‘Jump.’

I cut the connection and gazed miserably down into the dry moat that separated us from the incorporation itself - too wide for any grappling line and so deep that any bottom was completely lost in shadow, even to my eyes. I fired up the snoopers in my suit, but the point about something being pitch-black is that image enhancement just enhances how pitch-black it is.

‘I don’t remember that being here the last time,’ I said.

‘Yeah, well,’ said Kara gloomily, ‘we went in and out through the tunnels last time, remember? So what do we do now? You *know* nasty things are gonna be waiting for us to try that way again.’

‘You’re probably right,’ I said. I considered the options, pulled the little flashlight I’d used earlier from its biceps pack and pitched it into the moat, aiming so far as I could for the far side - it may seem a little odd that I had to *consider* this, incidentally, but one of the things about armed combat is

that you have only the limited amount of stuff that you happen to be carrying. You *have* to consider the pros and cons of losing something and not being able to get it back.

The torch bounced sooner than I thought it would - which wasn't saying much as I'd half expected it to keep on falling for ever. 'Seventy, seventy-five metres,' I said, working it out from the trajectory - nothing impressive about that, since it popped into my head via routines that I think are the implantational equivalent of the crappy little virtual calculators you got on computer systems in my childhood. 'It's shorter than it's wide, which is probably the story of my life.'

'And when you grow up you want to be a *double* entendre,' said Kara, sourly.

'Quite so,' I said. I fired up the snoopers again and peered across the great divide, trying to pull some kind of meaningful information from the modest light of the torch below. 'There seem to be openings in the other side, below ground level. God alone knows where they lead. What do you think.'

Kara unclipped the climbing gear from her belt. 'What the hell. It's doable, and if it's not we can come back up.'

The climbing gear was based around the principle of a monomolecular filament, with servo assisted carbon bearings so that one could be raised and lowered without slicing off one's fingers. Kara lowered me into the moat, on the basis that a monomolecular filament with servo-assisted carbon bearings was yet another one of the things I knew about but had never actually used. My feet crunched into loose gravel; I unclipped myself from the line and checked things out - the light from the torch now being close enough to turn the pitch-dark into at least a dusky twilight.

There was not a lot to see. The moat ran off laterally for maybe a kilometre and a half in either direction, its bottom patchily flat with either gravel or loose concrete, the only irregularities being a sporadic scattering of little ragged-looking hummocks that I assumed were just your basic

debris or the mortal remains of people who had fallen in over the years. I watched these little mounds just long enough to assure myself that none of them were moving in a threatening manner, then turned my attention upward to check on Kara's descent - and something hit me from behind.

I was thrown flat on my face and felt the tearing smack of gravel impacting into it. One hell of a lot of weight crunched into my spine and intense pinpricks of what I thought at the time was heat slashed across my shoulders. Something started chewing my skull with that kind of *grunk-grunk* sound you get when you hear a dog gnawing on a bone. Somehow, I managed to get my hand up over my head, and my fingers brushed against a clump of warm and matted, soggy hair. I got a hold and pulled the thing that was attacking me from my back. It hit the ground in a kind of small explosion of steel and meat and other somewhat more liquid substances - and I realized I'd gone into that Combat Overdrive thing again.

For the moment, though, I didn't feel like doing anything much except to clap a hand over the blood spurting from my neck. Above me, I heard the sound of gunfire. Something hit the ground heavily beside me and lunged for me - I nearly went for it to the same spectacular effect as with the creature that had attacked me, until Kara shouted, 'Keep still, you stupid little sod!' and shoved me back down and stapled the torn artery in my neck.

Kara rolled me over and shot me with compressed haemoglobin gel that would at least bulk up and help me stay on top of catastrophic blood loss. She started slapping at my arms and legs until I could feel them again and was perfectly capable of shaking them uncontrollably myself. All the while, she was tracking and popping with her gun. I was a bit dazed at that point, and dimly wondered what she was shooting at.

Kara waved her free hand in my face. 'How many fingers am I holding up?'

'Holding up what?' I asked.

She nodded to herself. 'You'll do. You'll be all right. And, after a line like that, I don't care if you'll be all right or not.'

I hauled myself up groggily and looked at the remains of the doglike creature I'd killed. So far as I could judge after it had been so spectacularly exploded apart, its bone structure had been replaced by steel and on to its back had been grafted large and fleshy flaps that I first took to be wings until I realized that they could be extended to cover the entire body mass to produce the impression of a slightly ragged but unremarkable hump. I came to this highly perceptive conclusion by way of the fact that, looking further afield, I now saw that all the other humps I'd noticed strewn across the floor of the moat had transferred into large and nasty doglike creatures and were heading our way.

'Look, are you just gonna sit there all day or what?' Kara said, still tracking and popping at the things with her gun. 'I could use a little help here...'

I flexed the muscles of my shoulders experimentally, and found that surgical staples hold you together better than skin, sometimes. I'd felt better, but then again, given the events of the relatively few days since I'd first been woken up, I'd felt one hell of a lot worse. 'I think I can make it,' I said.

We headed for the far wall of the trench, shooting any of the doglike creatures that came too close. I only hoped that I'd been right and there really were openings in the side, and that, in the end, they actually led anywhere.

CHAPTER 8

I've mentioned how SecServ™ and their ilk had no ultimately official remit, but they operated in the form if not the fact of a planetary-based policing service, and there are certain agreed protocols that must be followed in a certain line of work in any case. These protocols should have had me formally charged, and the details of the charges posted, but none of that happened. It's my guess that the bounty for apprehending an Open Target was the biggest score SecServ™ had had all year, and they wanted to keep me under wraps for as long as they could to prevent any of the genuinely heavy people laying claim to me. In any event, I was simply dragged into the holding cages and left there.

This was fine by me. The longer I stayed out of the quasi-official records, the less chance there would be of everybody and his dog getting a lock on me the instant I escaped. I didn't have any fear that I couldn't escape the moment I felt like it, of course: a Mickey Mouse outfit like SecServ™ operated on the same level in the law-enforcement stakes as, centuries ago, a US Savings and Loan did compared with a real bank.

The effects of being zapped by a couple of tasers was wearing off. I hauled myself to my feet and looked around the holding cage and took in the standard low-level mix of petty-criminal and civil-action detritus. One large guy with more tattoos than skin surface, who I instantly pegged as the Bull around these parts, caught me looking at him, considered making something of it and then thought better of it when I smiled at him in a certain way. I sat down on a bench that had been hurriedly vacated by the occupants when I walked towards them smiling in the same way, and began to formulate my plan for escape.

The plan was so audacious, so brilliant and such a work of genius that could only ever have been come up with by an utter, utter genius, that I hesitate to detail it here. It was so good that Papillon, the Prisoner of Zenda and the Count of Monte Cristo would have turned green with envy and turned themselves back in again in shame. It was a plan, in short, that was worthy of going down in the annals of intergalactic history under Plans, Most Inconceivably Brilliant Ever, and that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

All in all, it was a bit of a pity that the door of the cage chose that moment to swing open, and a uodier armoured Secman chose to zap me again. A lower charge, this time, just enough to leave me weak and dazed.

'You. Out.' The Secman pulled me out and shoved me down a corridor, bouncing me occasionally off the walls. 'You're a lucky boy, you know that?' he said, in the restrained-anger tones of someone who would have liked to bounce me harder if he could. 'Friends in high places. They sent a car for you.'

Even in my groggy state, I knew that this was complete bollocks. Nobody knew I was here - nobody who mattered - and one of the more distressing things about being an Open Target is that those who want you tend to prefer you somewhat deader than alive...

I was suddenly in bright sunlight that seemed to cast no shadow - the substation in which I was being held was under a power dome, which captured and stored available sunlight, outputting it over the entire inner surface of the dome during the local 'day'.

I was in the substation's internal parking lot, just the place to stick some poor sod up against the wall and administer law 'n' order at the blunt end by way of the judicious application of a blaster bolt in the back of the neck. I tried to make a fight of it, preferably with the option of putting in a bit of distance first, but my muscles just weren't working right.

'Take it easy, sonny.' The Secman pushed me into the back of a waiting hov-car, giving me the flat of his boot for good luck. The door gull-winged shut behind me and I lurched

around spastically in some hope of getting a look at the driver. The basic physics of my reaction time and the way my brain's connected up mean I can pull an identification out of back-of-the-head clues, integrating the data to peg a man or woman I've barely glimpsed before and come out with some quite startlingly extensive insights.

None of that was needed though, since I recognized the driver like a shot. It was Investigator Forrester and he was holding a gun.

'Look, take it easy!' he said hurriedly, even before I belatedly realized that he was holding *the* Gun - my Gun - the wrong way round and offering it to me. There was something about the lines of his face: harder, but more intelligent, and with a sense of buried humour somewhere deep inside. It was as if he had dropped an act and become, in some sense, more *alive*.

'I don't expect you to believe me on the spot,' he said, 'but just so you know. My name isn't Forrester, it's Cwej. Chris Cwej. I'm helping Benny and Braxiatel for the moment and I'm here to bring you in.'

* * *

'You could have *told* me Forr- I mean Cwej was on the team,' I said. 'Ouch! Mira, you have the heart and soul of a Torquemada in training.'

'And I know just how much it hurts,' said Mira, dropping the surgical stapler into a chipped, antique tin-and-enamel kidney dish. The gash inflicted on me by the creature in the transit station had been slightly deeper than I'd thought and had opened up again. 'And hey, I didn't know about it till a few hours ago.'

'And you didn't ask,' said Irving Braxiatel.

Apart from the injury, which hurt like hell, I felt one hell of a lot better by now, slightly more on top of the game. Braxiatel's suite was precisely how I'd left it, as though the man himself went and locked himself in a cupboard or something when there was nobody else around. Now he stood there in his pristine suit, watching Mira's impromptu

doctoring with vague interest, as if it was something he had known about in theory, but never actually seen in practice.

‘It would have served no purpose to, ah, “blow his cover”,’ Braxiatel continued, savouring words he had in all probability never said aloud in his life. ‘As it is, we only did so now to take you from the field of operation. You’ve annoyed quite a few people, apparently. Quite a few people are roaming the Proximan Chain with your description and “shoot-to-kill” orders.’ He proffered me one of the ubiquitous martinis that he didn’t touch himself.

‘Why what an exciting life I do lead,’ I said, sourly, taking it. ‘So where is our Mr Cwej now, precisely?’

‘He’s off dealing with the data wafer you had on you when you were apprehended,’ Braxiatel said. ‘Apparently, the application of taser charges garbled the data it held, but he has high hopes of reconstructing it. Thus far it appears to be the organizational archives of some long-defunct paramilitary concern. They seem, however, to have been heavily annotated, and a large supplementary file appears to have been attached.’

‘Any idea what’s in it?’ Mira asked.

‘I just might,’ I said, ‘and I’m surprised you don’t know from looking at me.’

‘How many times do I have to tell you,’ said Mira, ‘my stuff don’t work like that. All I know is you’ve had a bright idea.’

‘OK, then.’ I climbed off the kissing chair on which I was sitting, kissing not being much of an option at this point, and paced the room a bit, counting points off:

‘OK... you call me in and give me a specific amount of information for the job. That could be for any number of reasons, including but not necessarily due to the fact that you may or may not have some double agent working with you, who cut out certain things for his or her own ends. Nothing conclusively suspicious about that either way. Benny and I investigate Kara’s murder, start with the body and then her home on the start-in-the-middle-and-work-outward basis, and find enough leads to suggest further avenues of investigation - again, nothing out of the ordinary at all.

'This is where things start to not quite add up, though. We go to a room in the Connaught hotel, and a bomb explodes in an incredibly contrived fashion involving a mail chute. But, if the idea is to kill someone nosing around in there, why not just rig the bomb to the door? A clue leads me and Mira to a club, and at the precise time we leave it, a hunter-killer drone latches on to us, or so we think. It is in fact the carrier for a lethal, and not a little monstrous, biological organism - but, again, why go to that kind of overelaborate trouble? Why not simply send a hunter-killer after us in the first place? Come to that, why do anything even remotely like that at all? Someone killed Kara, knew I was associating with her, must have known what my reaction would be to that whether you offered me the job or not - so why not just avoid the complications and kill me the first chance they got?'

'It occurs to me,' said Braxiatel, 'that any of the things you mentioned would have killed a human being. And you, in a number of senses, are not.'

'That's the point,' I said. 'The people behind this know precisely who and what I am. And, knowing that, they knew that, if they went up against me directly and I survived, I'd be on to them like a shot. They knew that, if they tried overtly and failed, nothing would have saved them from me.'

'Don't you think,' said Braxiatel, a little dubiously, 'you might be overplaying your capabilities slightly?'

'Yeah, well, whatever. The stakes I think they're playing for, they simply didn't want to commit to an absolute either/or risk like that, however unlikely the negative result for them. Instead, they've been running me through a carefully constructed maze, a process made possible by the fact that they're inside the various systems of the Chain and can control them to a certain extent. It would be a nice little bonus if I *did* die by some chance, but the primary function was to keep me running around and not *thinking* properly. And it worked, mostly, the sequence of events being pitched just to the point of obfuscation to slip under the mental radar and let me see how ultimately *contrived* it all was.'

‘Thing is, processes like that can never be one hundred per cent, no matter how much processing power or how many resources you throw at them. These people made mistakes, little things like replacing the suicide-proof glass in the Connaught room with the ordinary kind – and one so big and blatant that it can only be one of two things, like that absolute either/or choice I talked about. Either it was set up purposefully to confuse me further and I really don’t have clue one what’s really going on, or I have to believe that it was a genuine, innate mistake in their thinking and I’d rather believe that.’

‘So what’s this so-called big mistake?’ Mira asked.

‘The creature that was in the hunter-killer and attacked me in the transit station,’ I said. ‘It’s a pattern-recognition thing. I’ve seen something that triggered that precise sense of recognition before.’

I turned to Braxiatel. ‘There’s something here, like you thought, but it’s not what you’ve been looking for. It’s something with some superficial similarities to the entities on Dellah, but it’s completely different - and I’ve encountered it before, on a planet by the name of Sharabeth.’

‘Sharabeth?’ Braxiatel seemed slightly taken aback. ‘I’m not sure I’m aware of any such -’

‘Check out the name in the GalNet archives,’ I told him. ‘I don’t think you’ll need to, though. I think that, when you ungarble the file in the data wafer Box made, you’ll find anything you need to know about it - and I think that, when you decode the mysterious attachment, you’ll find the preliminary logistics for setting up an approximation of those conditions right here in the Chain.’

Whatever structure housed Braxiatel’s establishment, it must have been big, something roughly on the equivalent of an incorporate hive. I counted three floors and any number of rooms and corridors before I came to what appeared to be a state-of-the-art medical facility capable of looking after the health of a small community.

Mira took me down. In the few hours she'd been here, she seemed to have been given the run of the place and seemed remarkably at home - whether by virtue of her connection to me, her connection to Benny or of simply that Braxiatel knew of her and trusted the reports, I couldn't tell.

On the way we met a smattering of people, none of whom I recognized, and several people whom I recognized from their movements and musculature as APEs. Each was intent upon some business or other, probably related to the case on which I was working myself, but there was no sense of the cohesion you find in a military or paramilitary group, no sense of working within a specific command structure towards some unified end. I already knew that Braxiatel's concern was not an *organization* in that sense, being for the most part groups of loosely connected friends pitching in where the circles of the Venn diagram intersected, but this distinct lack of a couple of hundred ground troops ready and waiting go in and pull respective nuts out of the fire made me vaguely uneasy. Braxiatel was operating, if not on a shoestring basis, then with a crew so skeleton you could shine a light through the ribcage.

The med centre itself was likewise entirely automated. The first thing I saw, hooked to bleep machines in a chamber behind an observation window, was the body of Praetorian.

'He's still out,' said Mira. 'I told you you shouldn't have hit him so hard.'

'Yes you did, didn't you? Anything show up on his bioscans?'

'Nothing, so far as I know. Physical medicine isn't exactly my field of expertise. From what I can gather from the idiot-readouts, Praetorian is just your basic, unmodified human.'

I shrugged. 'Could mean anything - if I'm right about things, any danger he might present won't show up on a purely physical scan anyway. I'm assuming he's seriously sedated?'

'I think so,' said Mira.

'I'd find out if I were you,' I said. 'I have a nasty feeling that if he ever wakes up we're going to end up with another

creature like the one that attacked me. Either way, the guy is one too many random factors at this point and I want him totally out of the game.'

In a private room we found Benny, motionless on a hospital bed in old-fashioned-looking, stripy pyjamas and hooked to bleep machines similar to those attached to Praetorian. She seemed thinner and smaller since the last time I'd seen her, and there was a sense of vulnerability about her - the vulnerability of being utterly defenceless against, and dead to, the world. Her face seemed in no way peaceful, merely blank and slack, everything behind it that might animate it simply switched off.

Cwej was in there with her, sitting on a fold-up chair and looking at her with something of the air of a lost child - it really was this guy's day for evidencing new and superficially conflicting emotional states, which is part and parcel of being a real person rather than somebody playing a role.

'Is there any way we can shock her out of it or something?' I asked him.

He jumped a little, startled from the morass of his own thoughts, and regarded me bleakly. 'I don't know. Braxiatel told me that she was very clear about refusing heroic measures if something like this happened. She's been very ill and in a lot of pain these last few weeks ...'

Refusing something 'heroic' didn't quite tie in with what I knew of Benny. 'Yeah, well,' I said. 'If you're very ill and in a lot of pain, you sometimes aren't thinking straight and you say things you don't mean.' I turned to Mira. 'Is there any way you can go in deep and dig out what she *really* wants?'

Mira looked at me coldly. 'That's just the kind of invasive procedure she said she didn't want. I'm not gonna do something like that on *your* say-so.'

I sensed the edge of the kind of system of professional ethics that, in me, regards the offering of money unasked as an insult. I let the matter drop and turned back to Cwej. 'I understand you've been trying to crack the data I brought in. Any joy so far?'

‘Not a lot.’ Cwej indicated a remote data-display pad lying on top of one of the bleep-machine monitors. ‘The archive material is easy enough to reconstruct from available sources. As for the rest, it appears to be a sheaf of operational logistics - but the thing about logistics is that the *object* of them is a given. If you *know* what the various operations are supposed to achieve then you don’t need to note it down, and if you don’t then you can’t work it out from just the logistical processes in themselves.’ He snorted with a degree of pique. ‘You could probably get more hard information out of GalNet news...’

Now, I’m going to break the flow here a bit and say it was at this point that I had a really bright idea. Everybody’s allowed one or two of them per lifetime, and this was one of mine. I didn’t stick the finger in the air and shout ‘By crikey, I think I’ve *got* it!’, but a number of vague thoughts bubbled up from the bottom of what I laughingly call my mind and connected - and, having made the connection, I knew with simple clarity what I had to do. Mira caught wind of it and stared at me. She started to say something but I silenced her with a glare.

We left Cwej to his vigil and headed back the way we had come. When we were far enough away for me to be sure that the transmissions wouldn’t interfere with various bits of medical equipment, I activated my comms link to Box.

‘Have you done any thinking on your own time about the ARVID file?’ I asked.

‘A fair bit,’ said Box. ‘You didn’t ask me, though.’ I’ll swear that it managed to inject a vaguely hurt tone into its voice.

‘Sorry, Box,’ I told it. ‘I should have asked. What I want you to do is correlate your thoughts on the matter with every death of more than two people at a time logged into GalNet over the last week. Concentrate on the stories where actual figures are given, but make an educated guess where not. Bum the results into your firmware and lock it down. Access keyed to my physical presence alone. I’ll be there to pick it up in an hour. Got all that?’

‘I’ve got it,’ said Box.

‘So do it.’ I turned to Mira. ‘And what are you looking at me like *that* for?’

‘You idiot!’ she exploded. ‘Moron! I knew you had something cooking in that so-called head, but that was just plain moron.’

I let myself feel angry at her hurtful words. ‘I know what I’m doing.’

‘Oh no you don’t, you arrogant little sod,’ she said. ‘You think you’re so much cleverer than these people and you’re not. You don’t have the first clue what you’re doing and I’m not going to let you do it’

‘Oh yeah?’ I did a looming kind of thing over her. I felt a bit bad about using my relative size and strength to intimidate her, but in this case it really had to be done. ‘And what are you going to do about it? Run off and tell your new friend Braxiatel if you like, but you’re not going to stop me.’

Mira looked at me, saw what was on my mind, and wisely decided not to try. I wasn’t quite thinking rationally at that point, after all.

If I’d expected to learn the true location of Braxiatel’s establishment by way of driving out of it in a car from his personal garage, I was disappointed. The garage had its own transmat, which deposited me neatly at a major nexus, with no immediately obvious way of getting back. Oh well, unless anybody felt it worth their while to come after me, I was on my own and that was fine by me.

The local day was angling to night as I reached my warren. Assuming I hadn’t laid it on too thick over the comms link and with Mira, I still had around forty minutes before people were expecting me to be in my apartment. I used some of the time searching the car interior for stuff that might come in useful. There was a lot of really sexy hi-tech equipment, the problem being that it was all bolted down. In the end I just took a couple of things from the glove compartment.

The apartment directly over mine was owned by an old lady, Mrs Gooley. When I say ‘owned’, I mean that she was a kind of forgotten-about squatter of whom none of the

constantly rolling-over landlords of the warren had ever had the heart to ask for back-rent or eviction. Mrs Gooley lived alone, apart from a number of large and nasty pararats which she thought were some variety of cat - *Mr* Gooley didn't count, of course, on account of having died in some time out of mind, being stuffed by an obliging taxidermist and kept around for the company. I'd cultivated my relationship with Mrs Gooley over the months I'd been living in the warren, and she was under the impression that I was a member of one of those cross-incorporate-funded charities that in the Chain take the place of social services.

'Who are you?' she said suspiciously, glaring up at me through cataracts and near-terminal senility. 'What do you want?'

'What a card you are, Mrs Gooley!' I exclaimed with the forced jollity common to all those who deal with the elderly, and would even touch the buggers with a ten-foot pole when it *wasn't* strictly necessary. 'You know who I am, of course you do.'

'They've cut me off again,' she told me, truculently.

God alone knew what they'd cut off this time. The water, probably, judging by the smell coming through the door. I started to say something, but she'd long lost interest, wandering off to start some incoherent conversation with her dead husband propped up in the comer. I shrugged to myself, went through the door, picked my way through the pararats and plates clotted with mould and fungus that was probably more sentient than Mrs Gooley herself, made my way to the main bedroom closet and pulled up the flooring. Some nine months before, I'd surreptitiously knocked a hole in Mrs Gooley's floor, leading directly to my own apartment below. I swung myself down.

I strolled out of the closet and looked around: my bedroom was still in the same wrecked mess I'd left it in, and nothing had been touched. The sweat- and bloodstained, grubby and unshaven mess that looked back at me from the remains of the mirror, on the other hand, gave me pause for thought I still had a bit of time left, so I decided that checking out

Box's conclusions could wait and what I really needed was to shower off. I really wasn't thinking rationally at all, you see.

I came out of the bathroom dripping and considered my discarded clothes. There was no way I was going to put them on again, so I headed for the closet from which I'd made my slightly unconventional entrance and pulled it open. I was barely aware of a pale and distended form grinning up at me, a hand reaching for me, before the needle-like claws plunged into my throat.

BACKGROUND 9

The openings in the face of the Slead Incorporation led into vaults containing vast arrays of refrigerated thermos canisters. Their contents are well documented, being a homogenized mass of material used in the feeding of basically human monsters - the specific constituents being scavenged and blended from the food supplies of the city outside, in much the same way as the city's building materials had been scavenged for the construction of the incorporation itself. Strangely enough, given the nature of the place, relatively little human and sentient-being material had been added to the mix.

Neither Kara nor I could care less, at the time, what the canisters contained. We just went through the vaults and headed upward, looking for somewhere that seemed familiar so we could catch our bearings and head for our ultimate destination. The last thing I want to do at this point is detail the three painstaking hours it took, so let me just say two things:

The first is that, on our first visit, we had grossly underestimated the sheer number of basically human creatures running around on Sharabeth, and within the incorporation, by at least a factor of ten. ARVID and the APE operatives at the beachhead were now learning this, as wave after wave of the things threw themselves against the Oblivion Angel encampment with no sign of stopping. On the plus side, this meant that the forces within the incorporation itself were stretched thin - so far as Kara and I were concerned, the place seemed to be even more lightly populated than before.

The second thing is about the nature of our plan. Now, rereading the last few virtual pages, I seem to have given the impression that we were involved in what might not be a full-

on military assault, but still smacks a bit too much of the sort of holomovie all action climax where our heroes go back in with all guns blazing to get their own back, lives or deaths hanging in the balance, that sort of thing.

It wasn't like that. The Oblivion Angels were going to take control of the ruins that had once been Sharabeth and mop it up whatever happened. The function of Kara and me was to simply gather information and feed it back to the logistics boys to keep the operation as neat and clean as possible, and prevent as much loss of life on our side as was possible. Saving the Day was not in fact an option, the day on Sharabeth having been long since lost under its perpetually boiling sky. We were merely in the business of cleaning up the mess, with the minimum of toxic fumes and fallout.

The idea I'd had was simply this: I'd recalled the little form I'd been made to sign before Finley the Surgeon had abortively attempted to perform his unconventional surgery on me, and realized that whatever the Slead Incorporation had done, however extreme it was, it had been couched in the postures of a commercial bureaucracy. Every process, every killing would have been lovingly projected, detailed, indexed and filed away somewhere. I envisaged a transputer system, packed with everything the Oblivion Angels needed to turn a fight into a walkover, just waiting for me to stream all that info back to the logistics boys to feed through their strategy models – and there was only one completely obvious and logical place that such a transputer system would be...

The reason I've gone into this here is that, in one sense, I was completely and utterly wrong. Oh, there were informational and transputronic systems here, and they were here in abundance; it was just that they were doing a somewhat stranger and entirely different job.

'Shit!' I said, with a remarkable sense of restraint, I thought, given the circumstances. 'What the hell *is* this shit?'

I'm not quite sure what I expected to find in the Executive Boardroom. The kind of plushly functional meeting room that the name historically suggests, maybe, or even the sort of

transputerized and viewscreened Lair where the Villain gloats about how at last the very world is in his grasp. What I hadn't expected was a vast space piled with a mismatched collection of filing cabinets and boxes, each crammed full of paperwork - and I'm talking about real and actual papers, here. I now know just how much space it would take to contain, in physical form, every requisition form and docket for the means to kill two billion people - I know it for the simple reason that I've *seen* it.

I opened a cabinet at random and pulled one of the papers out:

I the undersigned hereby apply for gainful employment under the auspices of Slead Incorporated SA, hereinafter to be referred to as the Incorporation, and further agree to submit and perform to any such requirement as a duly appointed officer of the Incorporation may see fit...

'Shit!' I said again. This is even worse than useless. How in God's name are we *ever* gonna pull anything meaningful out of this lot?'

'Here's something that might be useful,' said Kara, who had spent the time a little more constructively by looking around rather than blowing her top. Along the wall of an inset alcove was a collection of folders and bound books, printed in four-colour litho on slick, expensive-looking paper. The spines read 'Annual Report, Slead Incorporated SA - *working for a bright new dawn!*' The dates are meaningless now, being only locally relevant to Sharabeth when it was alive, but I saw that these reports spanned at least fifteen local years.

Kara was flipping through one of the earlier ones. 'This is where it starts to get interesting,' she said, tossing the book to me. I flipped through a copywriter-promotional preamble that told me that the Slead Incorporation, under the leadership of Absolom Slead, was an up-and-coming player in the multiplexal world, a holding company with interests in everything from microengineered polymers to fast food chains

to what was discreetly described as a 'wide range of specialist items for the discerning consumer'. It further went on to say that, since the unfortunate but unclassifiable disaster that seemed to have cut Sharabeth off from the galaxy at large, the Slead Incorporation was ideally positioned to take advantage of what was termed a radically slimmed-down marketplace.

I flipped through the various bar charts and puff pieces without much interest - and then I came, without warning, upon this:

Brief #4775.2 / Paracholera Epidemic (prop.)

Vector: 'Mister Meaty' proprietary brand donkey burgers

Application: Culture (C12) applied to burger by hand
at point of sale

Projected Conversion: 57 units/day exp...

That was just the first - there was a hell of a lot more: children's toys with monomolecular filament stitching, heater units that gave off toxic fumes engineered to produce the precise symptoms of anaphylactic shock, comms-link units that cumulatively fried the humanoid brain with microwaves... I put the Annual Report back in the case with a little shudder. I had the unconscious and uneasy feeling that it might by itself have introduced toxins into my system.

'Didn't people notice?' I said. I suppose I sounded shocked and puzzled, but so far as I can recall what I was feeling I just sort of wanted to know the answer. 'I mean, how could people not notice something like that?'

'You'd be surprised,' said Kara. The greatest advance in mass murdering over the last five hundred years was when the mass murderers stopped telling people they were gonna do it.' She shrugged - and I don't know to this day if that was her way of dealing with the shock, or whether she simply couldn't bring herself to be concerned over the deaths of human types. 'After all, it's just a minor variation on what planetary governments have been doing since the year dot - just think how many big wars start immediately after the sort

of technological revolutions that mean a shedding of large parts of the workforce.'

For my part, I couldn't match Kara's casual unconcern, whether it was pretended or not. I gazed across the shelf of annual reports - and noticed something odd. The last and locally most recent consisted of a single copy, as opposed to several identical copies grouped together. The title on the spine was different, too. Instead of '*working for a bright new dawn!*' it read: '*Welcome to the House of the Dead.*' Now, my conscious memory and pictorial proof tell me that, apart from the wording, this book was in no way visibly different from the others - but something, possibly the knack I like to think I have for integrating data from the most peripheral of sources, had me reaching for it, drawn by something I could not tangibly name. I just *knew*, inside myself, that it was ultimately important.

And because you know this story, and probably in far more detail than this partial and personal account, you'll know that the book swung down on a hinge, and the entire bookcase slid down into the floor. There have been any number of abstruse and complex theories advanced as to why, in the end, things came down to such a hokey old clichéd contrivance, theories of bluff and counterbluff that chase their own tails until they disappear - but I personally think, knowing something of the nature of the party involved, that such a contrivance or something very much like it was a flat-out inevitability.

Beyond the bookcase was a tunnel about five metres long, its sides plastered with some crumbly substance like quicklime or chalk. Kara and I gazed at it dubiously.

'I reckon,' I said at last, 'that if there's anywhere left to go it's here...'

'You realize,' said Kara, 'that in all reasonable probability this leads into an incredibly nasty trap.'

'Yeah, well, what the hell,' I said. 'You only live once. Or twice if you're lucky.'

I walked through the tunnel, counting on my reflexes to deal with any threat if it came - and found myself in a space

that might not have been actively threatening but was horrible enough in its own right. A chamber that, if I'd sat down and thought about it, would have been precisely the kind of Villain's Lair I'd have thought up. Screens stuttered and strobed across the walls, each showing what was presumably the point of view from some basically human monster. Tubes and cables snaked across the floor in complicated tangles.

The chamber, however, was dominated by the huge, arched stained-glass window sunk into the wall, a figurative, Pre-Raphaelite-looking thing depicting an elderly man over which hung a ragged and skeletal Angel of Death, placing a Eucharist wafer in the mouth of a naked and kneeling human supplicant. I recognized the elderly man from the statue Finley the Surgeon had been so proud of winning.

I said that the stained-glass window dominated the room, but that wasn't the thing that truly drew the eye. What drew the eye was the... thing that was slumped before it

Its flesh was gangrene-black and swollen so that the membrane-thin skin took on the aspect of a sausage skin on the point of bursting, save for the face where the skin was leathery and long-dead. Plates of glass had been sunk into its skull to reveal the shredded, rotting brain matter, suspended in its cranial fluid, within. Artificial lenses had been punched into its eye sockets, the areas around them callused and crusted with old ichor. Tubes trailed from its abdomen, secured with ancient strips of old sticking plaster to snake off across the floor. Its penis and one testicle had been removed with a strangely neat and surgical precision, the remaining item of anatomy hanging by a twisted string of sinew. From all this anatomical wreckage, it was just possible to make out signifying features, and the fact that this had once been the same man as was depicted in the window and Finley the Surgeon's prized statuette.

None of that was the worst of it. The worst part was that it was still alive. It twitched, feebly. Its mouth worked.

'Muh,' it said. 'Muh...'

I wasn't consciously aware of having drawn my gun. The first thing I knew of it was when the thing that had once been Sled danced to the window in a hail of blaster fire and fell through it with a crash.

Bit of an anticlimax, basically, in the end.

CHAPTER 9

I said before that if you're looking for entertaining, narrative-padding descriptions of hallucinations then you're looking in the wrong place. I have to say, though, that, in the days or hours I spent unconscious after the thing in my closet stuck me with its claws, I experienced some beltors. Images of men with stunted parasites, spectrally roaming blasted landscapes, infants with faces smooth as wax clutched to them. Animated contraptions that looked like dogs, lashed together from paint-flaking driftwood and rope. Clockwork monkeys, bloody-fingered gods with luminous faces and eyes filled with inhuman love that had no trace of pity, horses under walls, fish on stilts, flying marmalade sandwiches - the usual drill, basically. And behind it all an utter, deprisensory gulf that terrified me, shocked me back into the time when I was nothing but an electrostatic lattice in a Think Tank, alive and aware and going through my own private version of Time Travel...

It's difficult to tell when I became properly conscious. Images still streamed across my eyes, disjointed and horrifying - but I realized they were hypnagogic, excessively strong and distinct in the same way as a candle seems inordinately bright in the dark, and this was because I was lying in utter darkness. I slowly realized that they were being prompted by the voices in my head, streaming me with free-association keywords via what felt like bead-plug earphones that, in all probability, were also feeding me a healthy dose of the kind of electromagnetic pulses that made people who slept next to clock-radios think they'd been alien-abducted. I looked up blankly at a self-generated image of Kara's face, superimposed over what appeared to be a solid wall of tangled intestinal tubes. The face dissolved and re-formed

into another, that of Benny Summerfield, overlaid with hate symbols...

I decided I'd had quite enough of this.

The thing that had drawn me back to consciousness was a sore ache in my shoulder, where the creature in the transit station had gouged me. I concentrated upon it, built it up in my mind until it was pure shrieking agony and then let it expand - travelling down my arm to the hand and filling it to bursting. The pain might have been psychosomatic, but the *feeling* of it was real, if you get what I mean, and it hurt like hell - but at least now I knew precisely where my hand was, and broke that disconnection you feel when you can't quite remember how to move. Then I reached up and pulled the earphones out, leaving them to buzz and splutter in that tinny little way that was probably even more irritating than when they were in.

The images my mind was throwing up shut off as though by a switch, leaving me alone in the dark. I lay there and took stock, working with the secondary senses that help to counter the removal of the standard-issue five. I was floating in some viscous, oily liquid at blood heat, which tended to confirm what I'd worked out long before - I was in a sensory-deprivation tank of some kind.

I reached up and ran my hands around the inside surface, then shoved against it with that absolute explosion of bodily energy that, in any reasonable world, should have had the top flying off spectacularly. I then spent a happy few minutes in the entirely unchanged dark, trying to work out if I'd really sprained every muscle in my body or not. Then I felt around the inside of the tank again, found and ran my fingers along what seemed to be a locked-down seam.

The time had now come to do something I had hoped I'd never have to do in my life. Years ago, while I was working for the Oblivion Angels, along with the brain-shutdown switch similar to Kara's that I'd had yanked, I was implanted with certain items as a last resort - not a suicide kit or anything like that, on account of how I'd rather kill myself than go around with a suicide kit implanted in me.

One of these last-resort items was an eighty-five-millimetre-long polyceramic tube in my left arm flush to the bone, utilizing more or less the same techniques as the skin of a hunter-killer drone to make it undetectable short of actual exploratory surgery, and containing one or two long-lasting and potentially useful items. So I bit a large chunk out of my arm, trying to avoid as much muscle and tendon as was possible, got a couple of fingers into the hole and pulled the tube out. Being able to shut down pain when you *don't* want to feel it is one of the few things I know of that make life worthwhile.

Item one was a pipette of surgical adhesive, which I used to seal the hole as well as I could working by touch, Item two was a little needle-light, which I clipped to my teeth. I didn't feel like examining the mess I'd made of my arm, so I turned my head around and focused all my attention on the seam of the tank. It was impossible to tell what kind of locking device was being used; there were three regularly spaced bulges down one side that I took to be the housings for hinges. Oh well, at least I had something to aim at.

There were several other items in the tube, from micro-frag and neurasthenic concussion caps to a spool of mono-molecular wire, but the most important at this point was a little lasercutter, about as big as the first joint on my index finger, cell-powered and good for about twenty seconds of use. I couldn't bend to get at the hinge nearest my feet in any case, so I used it on the first two and, coughing and hawking like nobody's business at the toxic fumes released, I wrenched the lid open to find myself in a chamber walled with steel plate, containing several coffin-like tanks similar to the one I was in and crawling monsters.

They were basically human, but that made it all the worse. And it wasn't like the slow, invisible and perfectly natural transformations of evolution - it was as if the human base of these things had been injected with some fluid that turned their human base malleable, and they had been twisted into these grotesque forms like silly putty, shattering the bones and setting them in splintered clusters as they went. Their

skins were nothing but corruption, welts and ulceration. Their eyes burnt redly. Each was individual, and horribly distinct, but each reminded me of the thing that had attacked me before - and the things I'd seen ten years before.

They fell upon me. One of them -I don't know which it was in the confusion and my panic - struck at me with talon-like nails similar to those of the pale thing that had taken me in my apartment. It really didn't seem to be my day for staying conscious.

There was a noise behind me like compressed air going through warm lard. I tried to turn my head and found that I couldn't. From the feel and taste of it, my head was blocked on either side, secured by way of bolts punched into my cheekbones. I didn't feel very happy about that. I tried to move my body and found it securely restrained by heavy straps.

Now, in the holomovies, when the hero finds himself in such a situation, the first thing he has to do is find the strap with the most amount of give, drag the appropriate limb out of it heedless of how much skin he loses, beat off the nefarious hordes with it and use it to free himself in the nick of time before the lasers hit the bits that mother's seen before. The holomovie hero, in my informed and considered opinion, can go and fuck himself.

There seemed to be no light beyond my closed eyelids. I opened them - and big Kleig lights came on with a clash that might as well have been the sound of the shattering glass shards jammed into my eyes that the light felt like. I screwed my eyes shut in genuine physical agony, as the lights beyond the lids clashed off again, and, as yellow and purple splotches exploded across my inner vision, the couch or whatever it was I was on spun through one hundred and eighty degrees. I then spent half a minute aspirating, before unseen hands broke a tooth getting in a metal suction tube and sucked the vomit out. I then lay there glumly, at what seemed to be a slight head-upward incline, probing at the broken tooth with my tongue and blinking furiously in the

dark because I knew damn well what was going to happen next.

It did. The bank of lights clashed on again. A figure hazed in front of them, but I was still too dazzled to make out any real details.

‘Why did you kill her?’ a voice asked, in conversational tones, probably from a speaker and in my left ear. The lights shut down again.

‘What?’ The sudden pointlessness of the question had startled me into simple automatic response. ‘What are you...? I didn’t kill anybody -’

The lights came on. ‘You have directly killed one hundred and fifty-seven sentient beings. Why did you kill her?’ The lights shut off.

Well, I might have questioned the actual figure but I couldn’t argue with the basic point. ‘Kill who, exactly, then?’ I said.

The lights came on. ‘You have four hundred and twelve associations of varying degrees, seven close associations and no intimate associations. Why did you kill her?’ The lights shut down.

I could see where this was leading, and I’d had enough of playing along with it. I groped for something to say, any old thing that came into my head:

‘Set in the stormy Northern sea,’ I said.

‘Queen of these restless fields of tide,

‘England! what shall men say of thee,

‘Before whose feet the worlds divide?’

The lights came on. ‘Why did you kill her?’ The lights shut down.

‘The earth, a brittle globe of glass,

‘Lies in the hollow of thy hand,

‘And through its heart of crystal pass,

‘Like shadows through a twilight land

The lights came on. ‘Why did you kill her?’ The lights shut down.

‘The spears of crimson-suited war,

‘The long white-crested waves of fight,

*'And all the deadly fires which are
'The torches of the lords of Night.'*

.

*'Yet when this fiery web is spun,
'Her watchmen shall descry from far
'The young Republic like a sun
'Rise from these crimson seeds of war.'*

The lights came on. 'Why did you kill her?' The lights shut down.

'Look, this isn't going to do you any good, you know,' I said. 'I can keep right on going through the Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, then Shakespeare, and then I'm gonna start on *Finnegans Wake*.'

The lights stayed off. Above and behind my line of sight, halogens flickered into life. From what I could see by swivelling my eyes, I seemed to be in a room maybe five metres on a side and walled with the same steel plate as the chamber in which the basically human monsters had pulled me down. In front of me was an inset panel of black glass, beyond which an emaciated wretch sat strapped to a surgical-appliance-like chair with a wire dangling from his ear - I realized I was looking at my own reflection.

From somewhere off to one side I heard the clunk and hiss of a pressure door. Presently, the figure of a man moved into my field of vision and just stood there before me, regarding me. He was bald and fat and smelt of accumulated, long-soured sweat. His body trembled, constantly, a kind of default-setting spasm that suggested the very lip of the collapse into complete nervous breakdown at the very least. The armpits and crotch of his archaic-looking three-piece business suit were stained and crusted with matter that I could only hope was the source of the *sweat* smell rather than anything else. A thick, vulcanized tube depended from his right eye socket and snaked around to disappear somewhere inside the folds of the jacket of his suit. The skin

under the socket was flecked with solidified pus. Apart from that, in comparison to the basically human monsters, he looked relatively healthy.

I'd never seen this particular figure before in my life - but the very shape of him, his posture and his stance, the thousand little things that integrate into a perceived and distinct identity, set off a pattern recognition to something I knew like the back of my hand. And I knew, precisely, who he was.

'That fall through the stained-glass window seems to have agreed with you,' I said.

'You didn't think my *mind* was in the body you shot, did you?' the man said, suavely through the innate breakdown-tremor in his voice. Then a real spasm of what might, in an ordinary man, have been a burst of laughter made him lurch. The vulcanized tube detached itself and fell from his eye. Absolom Slead forgot me for a moment, scrabbled frantically for it and shoved it back in.

I waited politely until he had composed himself and then said, 'No. The body I saw you using in the Executive Boardroom was on its last legs - I don't think they end up lasting very long, do they?'

'Not very,' Slead said, amiably enough. 'Gangrene, lice and suchlike, you know how it is...'

'Quite,' I said. 'So how did your *mind* escape from Sharabeth, then?'

'Your people - you called yourselves the Angels of the Void or some such, didn't you? - took away a lot of equipment for further study after the destruction of my sinecure. A lot of equipment of which they didn't understand the purpose. To cut a rather tiresome and convoluted sequence of events short, it was only a matter of time before someone activated the particular item of equipment in which, you might say, I was contained - and since then I've never looked back.'

'I can understand that,' I said. 'Looking back could make your head break off, if your current body's any indication.'

'I believe the pleasantries have now been dealt with to the satisfaction of all concerned,' said Slead, putting his face very

close to mine. A thread of fresh blood from his eye socket drooled on to my face. Steeling myself against the pain in my cheekbones, I clamped my teeth around his nose and tried to bite it off.

'You're only hurting the brain inside this body, you know,' Sled said, mildly, after a while. 'I can't feel a thing.'

I stopped biting his nose. Sled stepped back and regarded me with what, but for the perpetual twitching, would have been a level gaze. 'Why did you do it?' he asked.

'I told you,' I said. 'I never killed any -'

'I *meant*' Sled said a little pointedly, 'why did you go back to your apartments? Why do that when you clearly knew I was behind events? You must have known I would have set my minions waiting, purely for the eventuality that you might do such an inexpressibly foolish thing.'

I shrugged inside my straps. 'Simplification. You of all people should know about that. I wanted to cut away the extraneous matter and head straight for the centre. I personally couldn't give a shit about the specifics of how you've been sewing poisoned razor blades into children's toys, organizing the production of viewscreens so they put out dirty-level radiation - and what the hell are you doing now?'

Sled had pulled a small notebook from his jacket pocket and was writing in it with a stylus. 'Making a note of the viewscreen notion,' he said. 'That hadn't occurred to me.'

'Yeah, well,' I said. 'Just remember I get a royalty on every unit sold. In any case, I needed to simplify things fast, and, once I knew who you were and what I was up against, I knew that meant thinking in a different way. You're clever, and cleverer than me in most respects, I'll grant you that, but you're also the nearest thing I've come across in real life to a holomovie Villain - I mean, you can even use the word "minions" with a straight if somewhat rotted face for fuck's sake - and on a certain, fundamental level that makes you a little bit inept. I knew that if I set myself up blatantly you wouldn't be able to resist playing the game, so here I am.'

Sleed had listened to my explanation with slightly palsied impassiveness. 'And now that you're here...?'

'Do you know,' I said, 'I really didn't think that far ahead. I just hoped something would turn up. It hasn't. Oh well, are you gonna kill me or what?'

'Oh, you'll die,' said Sleed, 'but not quite yet. I have certain plans for you first, plans that will remove another irritant in the same breath. Thus two more obstacles will be removed, simultaneously, in furtherance of my greater end...'

'The greater end?' I said. 'What do you *get* out of this greater end? Sharabeth or here. I mean, when you come right down to it, what's the point?' I had no real interest in what the point was, or not by now: I was merely stringing Sleed along because engaging him in conversation was marginally preferable to the nasty things I had the distinct idea were going to come.

'Why, *control*, of course,' Sleed said, as if it were the most simple and obvious thing in the world. He waved a hand vaguely, encompassing the whole world. 'You people think I'm in the business of indiscriminate killing, but that is not the case. The ground must be prepared, undesirable elements weeded out, the correct medium for control established. That pure medium for control is all my kind have, ultimately, ever wanted...'

'Your *kind*?' I exclaimed, despite myself, as certain things that had hitherto remained obfuscated became clear. I was kicking myself mentally for not having seen the ultimate truth of matters long before now - and kicking myself even harder for my outburst, which I had instantly realized was a mistake.

'The kind of man I am,' said Sleed, barely fumbling the catch. 'A man with fundamental clarity of purpose.'

'A complete and total loony, you mean,' I said sourly. Sod stringing him along and prolonging the conversation. 'You can do what you like to me, Sleed, but I'll never help you. I'll find a way. You really ought to kill me now if you're going to.'

Sleed gave another one of those spastic lurches of laughter. 'Oh, as I said, you'll die. I, however, am not going to kill you,

and neither are my minions, as such, much as they might enjoy the treat. You'll be tried by the full weight of Proximan consensus law and then hanged, injected, electrocuted or shot, depending upon which concern has the honour of doing it.'

Two of Slead's basically human minions, moving like puppets, retracted the surgical chair so I was lying flat and checked the bonds that were securing me, tightening the bolts in my cheekbones with little spanners so that my head was even further immobilized than before.

'This is by no means a lobotomy,' the voice of Slead said from somewhere behind me and off to one side. The microsuture appliance is omnidirectional, with a variable level of cauterization. Properly controlled, it can restructure the brain at a rate of seven million synapse reassignments per standard second.'

'The breath do catch,' I said. 'The heart do pitty-pat.'

From behind me, something cold was pressed against my forehead, and then I felt the even colder burn of something shooting through it.

'What the *fuck* was that?' I shouted. I felt, under the circumstances, that I was allowed a small and uncouth shout.

'Your prefrontal lobes are being saturated with a magnesium suspension,' Slead explained, somewhat chattily. 'The restructured cells are physically dead, of course, and thus I need an electroactive medium for when I insert a portion of, shall we say, my *essence*, and subsume certain parts of your identity.'

'Magnesium?' I said. 'Charming. Anybody lights a match and I'll end up feeling somewhat light-headed.'

'The bloodstream will flush the magnesium from you in a matter of days,' Slead continued, consolingly, 'and my influence will dissipate with it, leaving you, unfortunately, in a vegetative state - but, of course, you'll have been executed long before then in any case.'

‘Thanks for reminding me,’ I said. ‘I don’t suppose you want to lay bare all the intricacies of your Master Plan in detail while you’re about it, do you?’

The sound of yet another lurch-chuckle. ‘I really don’t think that would be appropriate,’ said Slead. ‘I’m mindful of what you said about my being a true Villain - and we all know what happens to Villains after they do that, do we not?’

‘Oh, go on,’ I said. ‘You know you want to. Have a good gloat and get it out of your system.’

Slead made what was presumably the equivalent of a sucking sound with his teeth. ‘I’ll tell you what,’ he said, ‘I’ll tell you certain minutiae, such as concerns you personally, as soon as we’ve sawn the top of your head off.’

Now, listen, the above comes across as though I was lying there, cool as an *oogli* fruit and not giving half a toss what was happening to me. Outwardly I was calm and making it with the witty banter because, in the circumstances, there was absolutely nothing else I could do. On another, inner, level, my mind was scrabbling around in agonized horror, desperately pawing through itself, looking for something, anything, that could comfort or save it. I could feel the bare shape of a memory as my mind clawed at the edges of it, a tip-of-the-tongue thing that seemed somehow important, but I couldn’t quite get hold of it for the life of me. Something about holding your breath underwater, or schizophrenia, or something like that...

‘...more strain, in the cumulative sense, than you fully realized,’ the voice of Slead was saying. ‘Over the course of months, the strain simply became too great and you underwent a severe mental and emotional collapse. In that fugue state, four days ago, you broke into Kara Delbane’s apartment with the intention of having it out with her, lost control of yourself and brutally murdered her.’

(Schizophrenia? Duality? When I was one, I’d just begun. When I was two, I was nearly new...)

This set a psychotic pattern. The emotions of romantic intimacy became confused with the urge to kill. This,

combined with a reversion to an adolescent mental state, led to any woman who associated even marginally close to you becoming the focus of your rather squalid, atavistic fantasies...'

(When I was three, I was hardly me.)

'The first such woman was Bernice Summerfield - ironically, perhaps, because of her assistance in your so-called investigation of the murder of Kara Delbane. Four days after that first murder, you sexually assaulted and murdered Bernice Summerfield...'

(When I was four, I was not much more.)

'In your confused and regressive mental state, you thought you should report this murder. You went straight to the nearest Security Service station and confessed outright. You fully expected to be congratulated upon and admired for your honesty. Instead, you were summarily tried and executed.'

(When I was five, I was just alive.)

Talking is slightly more difficult than somewhat when you're trying to stop your brains falling out and slopping on the floor by sheer force of will. 'Is that the best you can do? There's holes in the story you could drive a road train through.' I thought about it. 'Then again, I don't think the Secman's been born who'd quibble about it with a signed statement in front of him.'

'There'll be more evidence than that,' said Sled. 'You left more than enough DN A material and other evidence in Kara Delbane's apartment to place you there. And, of course, there will be the recorded evidence of you actually *committing* the murder of Bernice Summerfield.'

'I'd like to see how you could possibly arrange that,' I said.

(But now I am six, I'm as clever as clever. So I think I'll be six now for ever and ever.)

'Oh you will,' said Sled. 'You'll see it from the inside.'

There was no sensation. A vague blurring of my vision just expanded it to fill it with the kind of grainy static you get when a mistuned viewscreen is putting out white noise, and then there was nothing at all.

BACKGROUND 10

There's really not much else to say, so far as my direct involvement with the events on Sharabeth goes. The occupation of the planet took around three standard days, the process being made somewhat easier than otherwise due to the fact that, with the death of Slead, the basically human monsters that were his creations fell into confusion. They were still dangerous, could and did kill several of the invading troops, but they lacked a sense of mass cohesion on any level higher than an animal pack.

The methods by which Slead had transformed basically human monsters - methods that, apparently, involved ergotropic drugs, nanonetic cytoplasmic modification, mutagenic chemical treatments, certain items of equipment in the Engenesis Room and something else, some essence of Slead himself, that remains ultimately unclassifiable - the methods by which Slead had transformed them had destroyed their brains beyond any hope of their being recovered as the individuals they once might have been, so they were put out of their misery wholesale. What with my own deep-seated confusion as to what constitutes 'humanity' or not, I have absolutely no idea what to think about this.

The basic facts of how Sharabeth was transformed after being dislocated in time slowly came to light upon examination of the records in the Executive Boardroom. The long version of that would fill thousands of virtual pages, but the short version goes more or less like this: under the auspices of his incorporation, Slead flooded the Sharabeth commercial marketplace with lethal items designed to winnow out the population on an exponential basis that, by the time people realized what was happening, had weakened the population to such an extent that it was possible to finish the job overtly with wholesale slaughter by the basically

human monsters. The surprising thing, however, was not the basic fact or scale of it - such large-scale 'cleansings' have happened at certain times and places throughout the galaxy. The unique factor here seems to have been the absolute lack of any kind of motive - there were certain complexities, as there always are in real life, but what it seems to have come down to is that Slead (and no other name for him exists in the records) set it all in motion because he *could* - like the sort of holomovie Villain who acts villainously for the sole reason that villains *do*.

As for myself and Kara, after the dust had settled, I learnt something of how we had been manipulated - me, in particular - in what was in effect a bit of experimental temporal engineering. Again, there were real-life complications involved, but in basic terms the idea was for us to provide a fix for the miniature wormhole that allowed the Angels' ground forces access to Sharabeth, two days before we went there in the first place. Indeed, during a large portion of our time on the Ship, there were duplicate versions of us on it, too - in large part that's why I in particular was kept completely isolated, so far as is possible, while still being prodded through the maze into which I'd been sent. The technical specifics of the process are left as an exercise for the reader - i.e., it's late and I can't be arsed to work it all out on paper for myself.

After the dust had settled on the Sharabeth affair, of course, I was properly inducted into the Angels proper, and learnt that everything Kara had said about APEs being treated like shit was true. For some years after, I was put to work, the details of which aren't important here and now - until I started to intimate something of the true nature of my masters, and what with one thing and another became instrumental in the sequence of events that ultimately tore the Oblivion Angels apart. Half the populated galaxy knows about that, and was affected by it, and if you don't know then you can count yourself lucky.

In the end, so far as I knew at the time, the events on Sharabeth were just a set of incidents that were the first

among many to be finished with and put away. And life went on.

CHAPTER 10

Sleed had me taken to one of the access points of Braxiatel's establishment on autopilot. It was one I hadn't seen before, a portable transmat arch behind the fake wall of a public restroom cubicle that deposited me inside the complex itself.

An APE was waiting for me, one of the few with whom Sleed had infiltrated the Braxiatel organization to provide him with information on its workings, and for situations such as this. They hadn't been conditioned like the other people Sleed controlled; they were simply doing a job and being paid for it. APEs work for anyone who pays them.

I could tell by the way he was looking at me that this APE was one of those who'd broken their programming and think they're alive. I hate that, the way they run around demanding rights and privileges, and simply not getting the fact that, however much they might pretend they think and feel real things, they just will never be as *good* as a real man. The materials might not be steel and silicon and polymer, but they're things made by us to serve us, and they should damn well act like that.

'My name's Craven,' he said, as if what he'd decided to call himself made any difference at all. 'I'm here to take care of you. I've knocked out the security systems on our route, so there shouldn't be any trouble getting you where you need to go.'

That was very good. I remembered that there were other people here, though, people I had to avoid at all costs. 'What about Braxiatel?' I asked him, trying to keep the contempt out of my voice. These things can get touchy if you insult them, and for the moment I needed this 'Craven' on my side. 'What about Mira?'

'You won't bump into them,' Craven said. 'Braxiatel never leaves his apartments that I've ever known about, and that

mind-reader girl's off site.' He gave what he thought was a chuckle but was in fact an incredibly fake and put-on parody of a human laugh, because he thought that was what a real human should do at that point 'She's out looking for you, as it happens, everywhere other than here...'

I got the feeling that this Craven was now going to try to chat, just like he thought real people did, so I cut him off. 'That's all I need. Take me to her.'

Craven sniffed in a snotty and affectedly camp way - these things, not having any real feelings of their own, have a kind of sexual ambivalence about them that I find repugnant. They just don't seem to *get* that real people are straight or gay and nothing in between. It's a basic depth of feeling that they'll never understand.

'I'll take you there, then,' he said.

As I followed the APE through the corridors, I rehearsed in my mind all the things I was going to do to Summerfield. The bitch had it coming to her, after all the things she'd done to me, and she was finally going to get what she deserved. I touched the scars on my head and arm. She'd done those, her and those little throwing knives of hers, in some weird way I couldn't quite at this point put my finger on - but that hadn't been the worst of it. I'd been hurt in other ways by that snobby, snotty, oh-so-superior little bitch, and now it was payback time...

We reached the med centre. Praetorian was there, as I'd known he would be, feeding in commands to the console that monitored the various rooms.

'No problems,' he said, not bothering to turn around and look at us as we entered. 'I was able to counter their active sedation long enough for them to go away and let me change the settings.'

That was the reason Slead had used him, I knew. While being fundamentally human, Praetorian had a certain genetic mutation, augmented by the influence of Slead, that allowed him to control consciously and absolutely the physical processes of his body, up to and including the basic impulses of his brain. This had allowed him to produce a state of

unconsciousness within himself, to evidence all the physical symptoms of brain damage, even in the face of advanced medical monitoring and the mind-scanning capabilities of someone like Mira. This had allowed him to be placed here, until the time was right for him to be activated.

‘I’ve dealt with a potential complication,’ Praetorian said, nodding a head absently to where the form of Chris Cwej lay slumped in the corner of the observation room. ‘He was good, and fast, and I think I’ve got some internal injuries that might need treatment when I let them happen, but he won’t give us any trouble for a while.’

‘He’s not dead?’ I said. I didn’t care either way, but I didn’t want him waking up and charging in while I was giving Summerfield what she deserved.

‘I’ve sedated him,’ Praetorian said. ‘The same compound they were going to give to me. It seemed a shame to waste it. It would be better if he stays alive, though, I think, to find the recorded evidence of her when you... I’ve given him a neurasthenic to wipe an hour out of his life. He’ll come out of it, see what’s on the screen and assume it was you who incapacitated him.’

Praetorian finished his work on the console, and finally turned around to face us directly. I saw a couple of livid bruises on his face, no doubt given to him by Cwej in the struggle to subdue him.

‘I’ve cut the output to all other systems and set up a camera at the right angle,’ he said. ‘The recording will show precisely what we want it to. You’re ready to go.’

I became aware that the APE, Craven, was still in the room. The things I wanted to do to Summerfield felt obscurely personal and private, and, whether they were recorded or not, the last thing I wanted to have was some APE see them. ‘Can you get this thing out?’ I said to Praetorian.

‘I think you should go about your other duties, now,’ Praetorian said to the APE. ‘He’s primed and fixated and I don’t want anything that might break it. I should be perfectly safe while the scenario plays out.’

The APE left. Praetorian led me to the room where Summerfield lay.

'You know, I certainly don't envy you,' he said. 'Dealing with such cold and unresponsive material.'

'You like them live and wriggling?' I said.

'Oh yes.' A degree of heat infused the mind behind Praetorian's eyes. 'The woman Delbane, for instance, she was a fascinating study. I knew from the moment I saw her that I had to... process her, just to see how she would react. It was easy to slip her just enough information that our master would decide to have her summarily removed.' His face fell a little. 'Of course, she managed to cheat me, shut down her own mind just as I was warming up...'

I'd had enough of Praetorian's ramblings. They were keeping me from doing what I needed to do. 'Stay here,' I told him curtly. 'I have a job to do. And believe me, when I get through with her she'll be responsive as anything.' I went into the private room.

Summerfield lay there, to all intents and purposes dead to the world. The little bitch wasn't going to get away with it that easily - I knew that there was something alive in there somewhere. There's a nerve just under the earlobe that, with the correct pressure, produces the kind of utter, shrieking agony that cannot be ignored if so much as a shred of conscious awareness remains. I dug in my thumbnail and twisted it.

Summerfield screamed and spasmed violently, began to flail weakly around in that disjointed, uncoordinated way that people have when coming out of sleep. I gave her a couple of slaps, hauled her up off the bed and flung her at the wall. She hit the bracket of the security camera, bent it at a sad angle and ended up in a tangled, moaning heap on the floor.

I strode over to her and slapped her again. She was awake now, her eyes open and tracking me with blank terror. Her mouth worked slackly, trying to make sounds, as though anything she could say at this point might save her scrawny

neck. I grabbed her by the scruff of it and hauled her away from the wall.

‘Now,’ I said and shifted my consciousness into one of the backup areas of my brain, one that Slead’s restructuring hadn’t touched.

‘Bloody hell,’ I said. ‘I’m gonna have to lock that lot off for months until it sorts itself out. Thank God for APE regeneration processes is all I can say...’

I realized that Benny was still cowering away from me in terror. The thread of control I’d retained under Slead’s preprogramming hadn’t let me hurt her all that much, but being wrenched from a comatose state and slapped around is hardly the best way to start the day for anybody.

‘Look, it’s OK,’ I said, raising my hands placatingly and backing off with the kind of body language that said I wasn’t going to go near her again. ‘It’s *OK*. I had to go along with the act until I’d put that out of action.’ I gestured towards the damaged camera. It was at that point that my mind got sidetracked, in the way minds sometimes do, by the fact that I was wearing the clothes I’d discarded just before I’d been captured. Fortunately, I’d been naked in the sensory-deprivation tank, and for the surgical procedures on my head, but that didn’t help the fact that the clothing was basically worn, bloodstained and ruined.

‘Oh, dear God,’ I said. ‘Will you look at that? My outfit’s totally knackered.’

Perhaps it was because it’s remarkably difficult to feel threatened by somebody fussing over their state of attire, but Benny was remarkably quick on the uptake - I knew something of her life, but I would later learn that a large part of it had been spent in situations so extreme as to make the current one, if not a walk in the park, at least on the level of an orienteering course with a good pair of boots. She climbed shakily to her feet and leant against the wall. She looked decidedly unwell, and not just from the recent shock or, I felt obscurely, the effects of being recently comatose.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘It was all part of the act, and one of these days I might just forgive you for it. At the moment - I’m too tired to care.’

‘What’s wrong with you?’ I asked. ‘I mean, what is it that’s really wrong with you? I gathered it was some kind of brain thing, but nobody was giving me the details.’

Benny scowled. ‘It’s because of that Mary-Sue I had done, the personality wipe-and-replace. The problem is that the bootleg medic didn’t prime the wiping protocols properly to eradicate themselves after they’d done their job. They were lying in me, dormant - and then I caught a form of mind virus that activated them again. They’ve been proliferating through me ever since, and it’s only a matter of time before they dump their pay load.’ She shrugged. ‘If I’m lucky, it’ll just shut down my brain and kill me on the spot.’

I didn’t quite know what to think about that. Not guilty, precisely, because the Mary-Sue procedure as such had been nothing to do with me, but there was an obscure sense of embarrassment for having been around at the time.

‘How long have you got?’ I said before I could bite my lip and stop it. The last thing Benny probably wanted to do was actually think about it. Even if the thing that was eating her mind left her with the automatic physical impulses, and even if some new and self-aware personality could be established in the blank that had been left behind, the person known as Bernice Summerfield would be dead.

‘I’m on borrowed time as we speak.’ Benny forced herself to shrug in a funny little way that seemed to be the opposite of the more usual motion: it was like she was putting on the burden of the world and testing its weight rather than letting things slide off. ‘But I’m not going to let it get me till I’ve finished the job,’ she said with a new sense of purpose. ‘So what are we going to do now?’

I thought about it. ‘Well, after I’ve killed you, I gather that I’m supposed to lapse into a kind of childlike semi-conscious state. That guy Praetorian - who’s up and about, now, by the way - is then supposed to get me out and take me to various security people. I say we go along with that for a little while.

If you wait here a few minutes and follow me down to the car pool, I should have been able to sort something out.'

Benny nodded dubiously. 'I suppose I should call Brax and let him know what's happened...'

'Not a good idea,' I said. 'Not from inside this building at any rate. The place has more plants knocking around than a botanical hydroponic facility after a fertilizer explosion, and we don't even know how many there are.'

Benny lay against the wall where she could feign the postures of death if needed, and I left the room as though dazed. I rebounded vaguely off a couple of med-centre corridor walls until I came face to face with Praetorian.

'I was coming to check if things were all right,' he said, a little suspiciously. 'After we lost the camera I got a little worried.'

'The old cow *hit* me,' I said petulantly. 'She hit me *hard*. So I hit her back, and now she don't move no more...'

'That's very good,' Praetorian said, with fatherly condescension. He was still looking at my face a little dubiously, and there was one of those little edge-moments where I knew he was going to go and check on the body, just to make sure.

'Want to go for a drive,' I said.

'Yes, well, I think we -'

'Want to go for a drive *now!*'

Praetorian considered his options, and evidently decided that, whether I were in full possession of the marbles or not, an APE on the verge of throwing a violent tantrum would just have to be humoured.

'Very well,' he said. 'We'll go for a little drive.'

I made my face light up with a sunny little grin. 'Can I pretend to drive the car?'

Praetorian nodded paternally. 'We'll see. If you're good.'

'I'm going to dri-ive!' I sang happily. 'I'm going to dri-ive! I'm going to dri-ive...' I made a little bet with myself that I could keep this up at least twice as long as he could stand it.

I think it was my shouting 'Wheee!' at the top of my lungs in the drop shaft that finally made Praetorian snap. I thought

he was going to try to hit me, but instead he said, 'I'm going to take you to the SecServ™ station, now.'

Since this was one of the precise triggers Slead's restructuring process had implanted me with, there wasn't much I could convincingly do about it. I gave my face a slack and switched-off quality. 'All right. One, two, three, four...'

'What the hell are you doing now?' Praetorian snapped angrily.

'Counting,' I said. 'Five, six, seven, eight...'

Praetorian gave himself what looked like a nastily split thumbnail in opening up the car he'd chosen. 'And why are you counting?' he asked as my voice droned on behind him.

I made a feeble, blatting motion with my hand. 'Cause when I get to thirty I'm going to hit you. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen...'

Praetorian was now at the end of his rope. 'Just you do that,' he muttered, fumbling with the car door. 'Just you try.'

'All right I will. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, *thirty*.'

I smacked him on that spongy mass of bone at the back of the head, directing the force to shatter it and drive it deep inside and, incidentally, to explode his eyes out of their sockets. I suppose I could have just knocked him out or something, but I really didn't feel like it. This guy had killed Kara, so he said, and, even if it was a lie dropped in as some specific bit of disinformation, then it wasn't the sort of thing he should have said to me and he deserved what he bloody got. Besides, you couldn't say I hadn't warned him.

I'd dragged the body out of the way and left it behind a nearby charging rack by the time Benny arrived. She'd come in the elevator rather than the express tubes - I had the vague idea that the gravmetics of the tubes would exacerbate her worsened condition, or at least that she thought so. She had found a set of clothes from somewhere, sloppy-looking sweats and a polymerized jacket that was almost ridiculously too big for her. I never bothered to ask, then or later, where she'd got them, sartorial disasters not being one of the things on my 'important' list.

‘What’s that you’ve got on you?’ she asked.

‘Just a bit of blood,’ I said. ‘Don’t worry, it’s not mine. Mr Praetorian won’t be joining us for the remainder of the trip.’

‘You know, you’ve really got that B-movie thug act down pat,’ said Benny.

‘You have no idea,’ I said, ‘how hurtful and insulting that was.’

‘You’ll get over it.’ Benny looked in vague horror at the car, where certain minor bits of the late Mr Praetorian had landed. ‘And just where are we going, precisely?’

‘For the moment, I just want to get out from under and get away,’ I said.

‘Fine plan.’ Benny nodded with that mock brightness common to those who have just been told the completely bleeding obvious. ‘And where are we going after that?’

‘I have a few thoughts on that,’ I said. ‘I’ll tell you when we’re clear, but I’ll give you a clue now. Slead’s modus operandi on Sharabeth was to infiltrate lethal devices throughout the population in the guise of consumer products. I think he’s trying something along those lines here in the Proximan Chain. So where’s the single most obvious place to go and check out something like that?’

CHAPTER 11

The ZipCo™ building was situated in the commercial zone of a planetary Habitat that, in spatial terms, was almost dead in the centre of the Chain - though if I'd had my way, and purely for cosmetic reasons, I'd have preferred it to be in some comer as far out of the way as possible. It's a cylindrical tower, from which radiate five blocks, finished in that concrete that goes mildewed and streaky after a few years, and is able to be reformulated in this day and age only by sheer conscious and bloody-minded effort. The proportions of the thing were in a style known as the Vernacular of Obstructionalism, which is architects' argot for scrupulously noting absolutely every element of aesthetic merit and just as carefully removing the lot of 'em. Historical Soviet architecture is the Taj Mahal in party streamers compared with it. The thing was a local navigational landmark, in the sense that it was something to be avoided at all costs and an overdraft loan on top.

'Good Goddess, that has to be one of the most depressing-looking buildings I've ever seen in my life,' said Benny, sourly, looking at it through the window of the car.

'I've seen better,' I admitted, 'I'll admit. You want to go in?'

Benny shuddered with a revulsion that, in the end, wasn't all that theatrical. 'I suppose we better had.'

Now, at this point, the only plan we had in mind was to get inside the building and have a bit of a nose around. Second-storey work was out of the question, and it wasn't as if we were going in with big guns blazing for some final and spectacular confrontation with the Evil Villains in their lair. We were going in armed with the formidable weapon of a convoluted story about how we'd ordered some rather sensitive and dubious items from the bastards and they had yet to arrive. Receipts and other suchlike proof were

irrelevant, since the last thing we actually wanted to come out with was a bag of dubiously sensitive items. So, armed with this unassailable untruth about the misery of our fives due to the lack of a set of inflatable silicon-gel anacondas, we girded our loins, quashed our fear of contracting terminal sick-building syndrome and entered the main ground-floor reception of the nearest block in search of Customer Complaints.

I'm not sure what I was expecting - and in the back of my mind, even despite myself, I had the vague idea of every ZipCo™ worker recognizing us and instantly pulling out a bunch of heavy-duty pulse pumps, or instantly turning into the basically human monsters I'd encountered while being the captive of Sled. What I hadn't expected was for the place to be completely and utterly deserted. There were the basic forms of a reception desk, a number of benchlike seats, the occasional empty plant pot presumably waiting for a pot plant, but no sign of any living thing. Our footsteps rattled off blank walls with a kind of mausoleum sound as we headed for the elevators and gravmetric shafts. Neither were working: the power supply to them was off.

The emergency stairs were chained up and locked with heavy and archaic-looking padlocks. There's a trick to dealing with them with a little bit of *[method of unlocking padlocks removed]* but, since I didn't have a little bit of *[method of unlocking padlocks removed]*, I had to force them by hand. I sprained a couple of fingers, and the muscle strain popped the wound in my left arm open again, but I had to work with what I had.

There was no way we were going to be able to search the entire building, so I settled for simply climbing a few flights of stairs, keeping an eye on Benny for signs of her tiring, with the idea of stopping if it looked like being too much for her. She was struggling on gamely, but her breathing was harsh and her eyes looked like a pair of a certain kind of holes in the snow.

As we climbed, though, I noticed something else. I stopped and gazed up the full height of the stairwell. 'Take a look at this,' I said to Benny.

She followed my gaze. 'Take a look at what? I can't see anything.'

'You haven't got my eyes.' I put my hands together and rocked them back and forth, wincing as the action made their minor injuries hurt. 'The block sways outward, more than the standard wind-factoring should allow. It doesn't sway inward.'

Benny seemed entirely uninterested in the lateral-to-perpendicular relationships of motion in tower blocks. 'So maybe the central tower stops it.'

'Only if it were solid - and the construction didn't look like that.'

We left the stairwell and entered one of the levels proper, and found ourselves in what looked like a still life of an office, of the incorporate sort that provides all those under its wing with the postures of productive work. Desks and transputer-equipment and even food and drinks dispensers, each with that strange dated look that business stuff gets after a few years, no matter how dynamic and sexy it looked at the time it was new, and all, without exception, unpowered. There wasn't even a powered light source, the scene being illuminated by a warmish light coming from frosted-glass windows. There was something vaguely disorienting about those windows, and it took me a second or two to pin it down: the windows were on the wall that joined the block this office was in to the central tower - a place from which, on most reasonable counts, no light should come.

My mind turned in an obvious direction. 'An unguarded place like this, I'd have thought this stuff would have been ripped off years ago.'

'Years ago, possibly,' Benny said, 'but not now.' She wrote her name in the dust on top of a transputer unit - grime-particulate dust, I noticed, rather than the shed skin cells that would come from habitation - and ended it up with a little heart, which I thought seemed totally uncharacteristic

of her without quite knowing why. ‘None of this equipment is actually current.’

‘Yeah,’ I allowed, ‘but think of the scrap value alone. The stuff inside...’

Another thought struck me - or rather, I think, one of certain things that I’d already suspected, and already worked out on some deep level, bubbled up and made itself known. I unlatched the transputer unit and pulled open the casing.

‘There’s nothing *there*,’ Benny exclaimed, not suspecting what I did and thus being slightly more surprised.

‘Not exactly,’ I said. ‘You see those bubble circuits on the inside? They provide a basic functionality so that customs people and the like think it’s the real thing, leaving you one hell of a lot of space to put in what you like. It’s an old trick for smugglers with drugs, or terrorists with bombs - though I very much doubt you’d find a trace of either in this thing with a spectroscope as big as the world.’ I slapped the almost empty transputer casing. ‘I think this is just doing in a small way what this entire place is doing in a *big* way. It’s just a front.’

Benny frowned in thought. ‘Then where does all the ZipCo™ merchandising come from?’

‘Hmm.’ I thought of all the ubiquitous ads for things that nobody in their right minds could ever need or want. ‘Have you ever bought something from them? Has anyone you know bought something?’

Again, Benny frowned. I got the impression that even these simple processes were requiring a supreme effort on her part, now. I didn’t know whether to bring her attention to it or not. ‘No...’ she said at last, ‘but the scale’s too big, isn’t it? Nothing like that could possibly work.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ I said. ‘I can think of a few ways to do it, and all you really need is organization.’ I took in the whole office with a gesture. ‘So what we have here is a corporate entity that produces and sells nothing, and whose only visible assets are a building that wobbles outward but doesn’t wobble in. I think I’d really like to know why that is.’

I picked up the all-but-empty transputer unit and hefted it, judged it was just about heavy enough, carried it over to one of the frosted-glass windows and threw it. The ZipCo™ building had, in the final analysis, been built with the sort of concern for human habitation that included suicide-proof windows as the last thing on its mind: the window shattered with a satisfyingly spectacular crash.

I looked down through the hole, into the base of the central tower and what seemed to be a massive mirrored cone, presumably of monomolecular ceramic, its surface mirror bright because it was utterly smooth. It was lit by some bright and multiple overhead light source, the angle of the cone such that I couldn't make out from where the light was coming in the reflection. And then I looked up, to the multiple source. 'Oh damn.'

Benny joined me and followed my gaze. 'I saw that story on GalNet,' she said at last, in a small voice. 'I thought they'd been found.'

'Only two of them,' I said in a voice not that much bigger. 'They only recovered two.'

Now I can go on about the subconscious and the deeper levels of thinking all I like, but in the end the humiliating truth is that, quite frankly, I'm just not half so clever as I like to think. I can think of things and put things together, congratulating myself on my perspicacity all the while, but I never seem to get the true facts of matters properly until they tum around and bite me on the arse.

I'd intimated that ZipCo™ was a 'phantom' company, but I hadn't quite pegged the vital, fundamental distinction. A phantom is usually set up to *acquire* money by nefarious means, and this was the precise opposite. Money and resources had been sunk into a concern that promoted products that were never made or sold, for the sole purpose of establishing the *idea* of that company as existing in the collective Proximan Chain mind. As a secondary function, this diverted suspicion from what was really going on - remembering Sharabeth, I'd been looking around for

exploding burgers, spike-sprung binoculars and the like, all the while thinking I was oh-so clever for having seen through one level of misdirection, while being quite unaware that I was participating in another. The secondary function of ZipCo™, quite simply, was to keep people like me off the scent.

The primary function, on the other hand, was to build the ZipCo™ tower, which was nothing but a massive amplifier for the mutagen bomb hanging in its centre.

Later, when the dust had settled, we were able to learn the specifics of the thing, the schematic details that made it work. The operation of it in general, though, was obvious from first glance. The sides of the building's radiating blocks, butting in flush with the walls of the central tower, were lined with transmat hoops, solid-state active, and it was from these that the light to see by came. Hanging in the tower 'shaft' was a smallish command-triggered thermonuclear device - 'smallish' being a purely relative term of course - and beneath this hung a containment tank for concentrated mutagenic compounds crawling with hazchem symbols and sigils.

There would be no countdown or warning, because countdowns and warnings just don't happen in real life. Could be weeks or months. Could be seconds. The bomb would detonate, splaying open the radiating blocks and vaporizing the mutagens, the force of the blast driving them down to be rechannelled by the planes of the walls into the transmats. I had no evidence as to where the transmats were set to transmateralize, but I had a nasty thought that achieved the status of an absolute certainty. The entire setup was designed, before it blew itself apart and took the local zone with it, to catastrophically flood the major Habitats of the Chain with its payload. It was the difference between elegance of concept and subtlety of execution. The elegance of Slead's basic *conception* had now allowed him to achieve his ends in one bludgeoning and brutal sweep.

'There's nothing we can do.' Benny seemed on the verge of collapse, not in the physical way she'd been after the

bombing incident, but in a state of complete and irrevocable despair. 'There's nothing. It could go off at any time, and there's no way the whole of Proxima could be evacuated, and if they see it happening they'll detonate it anyway...'

Personally, I was staring around in a kind of blank shock, thinking harder and more desperately than I ever had in my life. And, having beaten my breast about not exactly being the fruitiest wine in the rack, I have to say that just occasionally my mind does throw something useful up, if only by the law of averages. The thought was elusive, something about the office we were in, something about our positioning in general... and then I had it.

'Listen,' I said. 'Benny, please, snap out of it and listen to me.' It was only later that I realized that this was the first time ever I'd used her most familiar name out loud - no big deal: it had just seemed a bit uneasily presumptuous to use it. There was no time for the niceties now, though.

Benny turned to look at me. Her sick eyes didn't exactly light up at the small, vague sense of hope in my voice, but at least I knew something behind them was paying attention.

'When I was captured by Slead, wherever that was, he said that his mind wasn't actually *in* the body he was using. He also said that his dream was to remake the world to his own liking, leaving him alone in the centre. Now, the centre of the blast area is gonna be this building, but within it we're still off to one side.' I gestured to the window and the contrivance beyond it. 'I'll bet you anything you like he's not up there. That leaves only one place.'

Benny thought about it, and laboriously forced her face into the lines of dubiousness. 'You're clutching at straws. Real life doesn't work like that.'

'Well, OK,' I said. 'So we've blundered into fiction. Down into the bowels for the final confrontation with the Mephistopheles Beast. Thing is, if I'm wrong and he's not down there, we're bugged anyway. So we've got nothing to lose.'

For all I know, the ZipCo™ building may have housed a vast underground complex packed with minions, torture machines and monitors that show countdowns and go *bing*. We didn't find it, though. What we did find was a likely-looking cover plate under the carpet in the lobby, and this time I actually broke a finger getting it off.

The maintenance shaft was just over a metre wide, fixed with steel rungs. It would have been dark as hell down there, but I made a small detour back to the car and returned with a little torch I'd unearthed from the glove compartment.

We descended, me holding on to Benny and using a little trick I'd learnt years before, when I was in the Oblivion Angels, for situations such as this. You keep your back braced if you can and simply drop, kicking your feet against every second or third rung to control your momentum, brushing the rungs with your fingers (in this case, unbroken or unsprained fingers of my free hand) to compensate for any change in rhythm. Do it right and it's several times faster than climbing, and just slow enough to stop you ending up as a greasy stain.

We descended for two whole minutes. We dropped through areas of intense heat and passed a number of ducts that smelt of melting steel. I assumed that these would come into operation and seal the shaft some time before the bomb above went off, and just hoped that they wouldn't start gushing quite yet.

I became aware of the fact that we'd reached the bottom of the shaft by the simple expedient of trying to kick at a rung that wasn't there, falling three metres through pulsing light and landing on something hard. Benny landed on top of me, which wouldn't have ordinarily been a problem, but the general battering I'd gone through over the last few days had taken more out of me than I'd thought. I felt a couple of ribs go. I looked up at a pair of retracted butterfly shutters and coughed blood for a bit.

Benny's weight went off me and then her exhausted face came close to mine. 'Are you all right?'

I've been asked more than a few stupid questions in my time, but this one was right up there in the packet-of-Garibaldi stakes. 'Wheeze,' I said. 'Wheeze, wheeze, wheeze.'

Benny shrugged out of her too-big jacket and pulled off her sweatshirt, which she tied around me, working with the deliberation of someone forcing her body to move long after it should have dropped. The stretchy firmness of the cloth seemed to do the trick to some extent - I'd either caught instantaneous parapneumonia or my left lung had collapsed, but any kind of medical attention for it was going to have to wait.

We were in a smallish steel-walled chamber. Set into one of the walls was a heavy-impact door that seemed to be the living epitome of the entrance to a holomovie bunker. It even had one of those metal wheels in the centre. I regulated my breathing so I could move without too much pain, climbed to my feet and spun the handle. Mechanical bolts retracted and the door swung inward with a hiss and gust of equalizing air pressure. A faint vibration in the floor, which I hadn't noticed till my attention was called to it, became the thrum and whine of generators.

'Can you walk?' Benny said to me. 'Should we see?'

'Wheeze,' I said.

Leaning on each other, neither of us completely sure who was supporting the other, we went through the doorway.

I suppose that, when I'd thought about it, the image I'd had of Sled's brain had been based on the state of his stolen bodies, in the Executive Boardroom on Sharabeth and here in the Proximan Chain. I expected something cancerous and malevolent, a black and pulsing clot of matter surrounded by sparking, arcane galvanistics and blood pumps.

In the end, Sled's brain wasn't even so much as nasty-looking. It wasn't even organic. Under a crystal dome was a cruciferously dendritic tree of golden, glowing filaments, the light it cast seeming to pulse and swirl over it, producing a scintillating and maybe even coruscating effect. As an object, as a physical shape in the world, it was beautiful, a perfect mechanism that seemed to hold eternity within it. My first

impulse was to step towards it, automatically, with a kind of mindless sense of wonder.

And then my senses spun. My body shook and lurched as what felt like electricity arced through it. And something insinuated itself through my brain. I know the brain isn't supposed to feel anything, but I know what I felt. It felt warm and slippery and glutinous, and I apologize in advance for any delicate sensibilities, but it felt precisely as if my brain was being injected with semen.

Now I'm supposed to be talking about the facts here, so let me drop in several of them that were surmised and somehow confirmed later. It seems that Sled was attempting to infect me on the mental level, subsume me with a control far greater than that when he had attempted to set me upon Benny, and closer to the man whose body he was using then. Sled was, in short, attempting to pull my body and physical brain on like a new suit.

The thing was, it didn't work. Since his attempt at restructuring, my conscious mind was operating on a different level, working through some quite unorthodox cerebral connections and centred around areas of the brain that your basic humans simply never use. The upshot was that he couldn't get a handle on it, like opening the instruction manual for some complicated bit of hideously expensive equipment to find it's in Mandarin when you can't even read Cantonese. Of course, it's possible, too, that he simply rejected my body because it wasn't in the best of shape, what with one thing and another.

In any event, my body jerked and shook under alien energies - and then the contact broke, shocking me into unconsciousness. As my last thread of awareness died, however, out of the corner of my eye before the blackness rushed in to engulf me, I saw that tendrils of energy were now playing over Benny's body, and that it was beginning to rise...

Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield:

I'm not in any state to... I just want to...

Concentrate, Benny. Sequence is everything, sequence is all. One thought in front of another. Got that? Good. Carry on...

The feeling was impossible to explain or describe, any more than you can quantify every specific process in the way you think of something when you're trying to write a book, and it leads to something else, and something else - and before you know it there's a whole cascade of thoughts and emotions coming out of you, completely formed, that you never quite knew were inside.

It felt like that, only these thoughts were alien and insane - insane in the sense that they had no connection with the sanity of humans, any mind-set that a human being could ever fully comprehend.

I remembered jumbled images from a life that was not my own. Of existing on what humans called the planet Dellah, a minor being among those who owned the planet and its people, to whom they stood in the office of gods. Of stumbling upon an installation, built by outsiders from another world, of finding machinery within that was capable of bending time and space. Of attempting to manipulate this machinery - and the explosion that had destroyed the small god's corporeal body and flung its essence into the space/time void at unimaginable speed, ultimately to strike some other planetary body with such accumulated transdimensional force as, in a certain sense, to shatter it.

Memories of how this entity - now, truly, an entity - had found purchase on this world for its essence, had infiltrated the data systems of this Sharabeth planet, a ghost in the machine. Of how it had subsumed the systems of the Sled Incorporation and thence the body and brain of its head, a man who had allowed extensive cyber-modifications of himself in an effort to cheat what human beings knew as death. Memories of how it had used this Sled man to construct a new brain, more to its liking and utilizing the technologies that, the entity realized, would make it powerful and immortal in a new and different way from all the others

of its kind. Memories of how it had then ordered the Sharabeth-world itself to its liking and desires.

Memories of how it had been thwarted...

And then I felt its absolute hatred and rage. I knew that it knew we were a threat to it, but I had never quite comprehended the depth of that hatred - it remembered us both, you see, myself from Dellah and the way I had stood against the ultimate triumph of its kind, and *[name defaced on original source]* from when, apparently, he had been instrumental in destroying all its works on the planet Sharabeth. It burnt for revenge, a desire for vengeance so strong that it was madness even on its own terms - and the chance to exact it, here and now, was simply too good an opportunity to miss.

All of this I knew, as the tendrils of that mind wove through my own. It took control of my limbs, some detached little part that was still me watching it as it made them move, made me lurch towards the immobile *[name defaced on original source]* with the intention of jamming my hands into his guts until they broke, and then plunging the splintered, jagged shard of them into him over and over again...

And then the questing tendrils of the entity's mind hit the tangled mass of structured protocols that were the legacy of the Mary-Sue. They activated - flared to life - ripped through my brain. It was as though I were watching from the outside, watching those blazing strands expand and eat me up alive. And then they stopped, and seemed to cohere, close in upon themselves, become a living thing in its own right.

It seemed to be hunting for something, this living thing, casting about itself in my head. And then it shot from me, crackling from me like a static discharge, smashing into the entity in the glowing artificial brain, which began to thrash and scream, soundlessly, within - and forgot about me entirely.

I gather that the Mary-Sue protocols, once triggered, were set to latch on to and eradicate the dominant personality in whatever brain they happen to inhabit - and, in that moment, the dominant party had been the entity known as

Sleed. As for myself, I found I could move again, the essential self flowing inside, able to take command and to affect and be affected by the world. The entity had retreated almost entirely into its artificial host, now, locked in desperate struggle with something it hadn't expected and was trying to eat it whole. I knew what I must do, then. I made my body move to the glass dome and the glowing brain. There were no tools to hand, nothing I could use as a club, and so I brought my hands down on the dome with all my remaining strength.

Over and over again.

[Extract ends.]

For myself, I don't remember anything more until I found myself in an untidy heap with Benny outside the ZipCo™ building, lying on builders' rubble and backed against a disused skip. I hadn't noticed at the time, but there had been five exits leading from the chamber that housed Sleed's brain and, taking one other than the one we'd come down, we had resurfaced in a block not visible from the access route by car, and on which the cosmetic building work had never been finished.

When I came back to myself, I found that one of my not particularly serviceable hands had its fingers clamped around one of Benny's completely mined hands, in the sort of grip where you make the muscles lock immobile and then forget about it. Benny tells me that, after smashing Sleed's brain, she herself went blank from shock and pain, and woke up to find me dragging her out of the shaft and into an unfinished lobby.

Apparently, so Benny says, I was muttering the same words, over and over again, in a kind of desperate, semi-conscious mantra. 'It's not over,' I was saying. 'It's not over.' Now, banal as it sounds, I'm going to assume I was talking about life in general, the fact of there being lots left of it and that sort of thing - the alternative being that, on some deep level, I knew that everything we had done had been ultimately pointless, and that sometime soon the nasties are

gonna turn up again, in ways we can never expect. And that latter, quite frankly, I can live without even thinking about.

All in all, it was a jolly convenient way of getting out of having to describe the torturous process of going up the shafts we'd just come down. In point of fact, I think the shafts were filling up with molten steel behind us by then, so I'm rather glad I don't remember anything about it.

In any case, now I was in something like a position and condition to take stock again, I could see that neither Benny nor I would be dancing the light fandango in the near future. At a press, I considered, we'd be hard put to essay a faint limp - but there was something about the way she held herself, something in her haggard face, that gave me an active *shock*. It was like that time some months back when she had - so we'd thought - reversed the effects of the Mary-Sue, and her true personality had surfaced from what had been a senile-seeming wretch. Only now, it was back on full force, blazing from her eyes as though someone in the Country of the Soul had thrown a switch, and for the first time I truly realized how beautiful she was. I don't mean visually or sexually but, well, you know, as a proper *person*. I'm getting all embarrassed now.

Benny caught me looking at her, and looked back at me. 'Don't worry about me, it's gone.'

'What, the illness or Sled?' I said.

'Both, I think, and that's not -' She looked confused for a moment, the way people get when they're trying to remember something that's just on the top of their brain. Then her face cleared and I saw a flash of her innate humour, which I'd first seen in the briefing stills of her those months before. 'I really think you can let go of my hand, now. People are going to talk.'

'Not a good idea,' I said. 'I really don't think you can stand to lose any more blood.' I started rooting around in the pockets of my torn and filthy jacket in the hopes that, in cleaning it out after I was captured, Sled and his cohorts had neglected the odd piece of string or the like. As I did so,

though, I became aware of movement in the sky, heard the approaching whine of turbines.

It was a nasty-looking VTOL flier, skimming over the roof line of the commercial zone and putting itself through manoeuvres I just knew were making the preprogrammed collision alerts scream in fright. Whoever the pilot was, he knew his stuff - though in our current situation that was hardly a comforting thought. The private security people don't hire pilots like that, but there were other people after us than private security clowns.

'Look, Benny,' I said. 'Do you think you'll be able to run?'

'At the present moment,' Benny said, 'I doubt if I could even dribble.'

'Bollocks.' I did that kind of internal systems check where you ask your body if it feels capable of picking up someone and running away from hideous but basically human monsters, and it responded with a cheery 'sod you, sunshine'.

The flier grounded, throwing up a cloud of elderly cement dust. A hatch racked back and two figures came out, one heading towards us at a run, the other strolling nonchalantly behind. Almost anybody or anything would have been preferable to basically human monsters, but the sight of them triggered in me what I can only describe as a pure and mindless joy at the fact that I could now go limp and let other people worry about things for a while.

'Hello, Mira,' I said, looking up at her concerned face, and noting in passing that Braxiatel, while strolling nonchalantly, had somehow managed to reach us at the precise same time. 'I think I've gone and hurt myself.'

EPILOGUE 1

The hours and days that followed seem slightly unreal now, like I'm looking at them through some cataract-like scab. My body functions might be slightly more resilient than your basic human being's, the brain cells able to repair themselves without resort to the nanonetic techniques that were used to repair what were basically holes eaten in Benny's head. The fact remains, though, that I can be damaged and the damage leaves scars. I spent a few weeks in an accelerated-healing vat, and came out of it to find that various Slead-instigated contracts were still out on me for the murders of one Bernice Surprise Summerfield and one Kara Delbane, Crimes Against Sentience and various other minor infractions against the various factions and powers, and one or two of them were actually true.

Since Benny was quite obviously alive it was relatively easy to get the first charge quashed, only slightly more difficult for the second after something of the true facts came out. And the rest were more or less dealt with by way of liberal quantities of cash in certain quarters, and the fact that GalNet suddenly started trumpeting me as the Saviour of the Proximan Chain. This last was achieved, in part, by some contacts I have in the media, and by way of some heavy-duty transputer-system manipulation by Braxiatel, who has the sort of resources in that area that make my own small efforts with Box look sick.

Actually, I didn't. Save the Proximan Chain, I mean, at least in that sense. I'll come to that in a minute.

Getting back to the time I spent in the healing vat, though, I have to mention something somewhat stranger than most. What with one thing and another, though I was unaware of it at the time, I'd damaged my left arm to the point where the only real way to go was to lop it off and prep it for grafting. I

then caused quite a stir when my body started to regenerate a new one of its own accord. They removed the preliminary nubs of fingers at least three times, thinking they were tumours or something, and it was only a sharp-eyed med tech noticing what might have been the beginnings of the roots for fingernails that stopped this process going on indefinitely.

This is not a biological characteristic of humans, or even a custom-built APE, and, thinking about it, I can come up with only a couple of possible explanations. The first is that, when the basically human creature attacked me in the transit station, it infected me with some kind of arm-growing-back matter that ultimately remains unidentifiable and unclassifiable. The second is that, for reasons I cannot even begin to guess at, I am neither human nor APE in the generally accepted sense, and everything I've known or have been told about myself is a lie. There's a healthy dose of *that* kind of paranoia in me, in any case, just as there is in everybody else, and this would take it to a whole new level - so, on the whole, it's probably best not to think about it, much.

On a personal note, I'd forgotten to add a medical-treatment clause into my contract with Braxiatel - and I couldn't write it off as expenses, the contract having ended with the destruction of Slead's brain. I could have asked Braxiatel or Benny for a sub, I suppose, and I like to think that they'd have paid without a thought - but the code by which I live simply won't allow me to do that. So I ended up paying for it myself, which ate enough of my exorbitant, five-times-base fee away to leave me stone-cold flat. Ah, well.

There are a couple of loose ends that I suppose I should tie up. The murder of Kara, for example, was never fully solved, at least to my satisfaction. I mean. Praetorian said he was directly involved, and all the circumstantial evidence gives me the feeling that it was him in the company of Slead's remote-controlled and borrowed body - but it also feels a bit too *pat*, if you get what I mean, dropped in there for the

specific reason of tying up a loose end. In any case, if it was some other actual hand that clapped itself across her mouth and pinched her nose shut, the mind behind the hand is dead and gone - or so we can but hope.

I never found out where, precisely, the place was that I had been taken to when I was captured, the place where Slead had stored his basically human monsters. It could have been anywhere, quite frankly, what with the way names and addresses in the Proximan Chain tend to gravitate around. I do know, though, that quite a number of basically human but hideously deformed bodies have been found scattered sporadically across the entire Chain, each having committed suicide more or less simultaneously, and more or less around the time that Benny was destroying Slead's brain.

The various APEs and other Stratum Seven operatives who had been hired by Braxiatel for the case have been simply paid off, Craven and whosoever might have been working for the other side included. We won, they lost, and the point about people in this line of work is that afterwards all bets are off. It's just one of those things that, if you don't get what I mean like a shot, I'd have to spend around fifty virtual pages making clear, and I don't wanna do that, so I won't.

ZipCo™ is still advertising, incidentally. Part of Slead's process in setting up this phantom concern was to generate all those various ads on a self-replicating basis capable of ringing the changes on incredibly dodgy consumer items for ever, and the bandwidth and airtime are booked up in advance, and locked solid by contract, for well into the next century. There is literally no *way* that these ads can be stopped, even though the corporate entity that created them doesn't exist and never really existed in the first place. Ah, well, again.

Oh yeah, I said how I was going to talk about how I didn't really save the Proximan Chain. To get to that, let me back up a bit and run through the events more or less in order:

Chris Cwej, you'll recall, was left unconscious and temporarily mind-wiped by Praetorian so's he could wake up,

look at all that footage of me horribly murdering Benny and get the completely wrong idea. Things didn't go to plan, at least from Praetorian's end, so Cwej wakes up, sees the footage up to the point where the camera goes dead, and instantly rushes to Benny's room to investigate. The lack of obvious horrible murders and bodies leads him to the instant conclusion that Benny, rather than being killed, has been abducted.

The trail leads him down to the car pool, where he finds the body of Praetorian. Now, Cwej, apparently, was once a real cop - not one of those SecServ™ dickheads but an Adjudicator, a member of the Church of Adjudication on Earth, with real cop instincts. These may not have revealed the entire truth of the matter to him in a blast of blinding light, but at least they let him integrate all the factors and come to the conviction that I hadn't kidnapped Benny for some nefarious purpose, and may just not have to be automatically shot on sight.

Cwej then contacts Braxiatel and Mira. Braxiatel provides the kind of souped-up and sensor-packed flier that some planetary governments I could name couldn't buy without mortgaging the entire planet. Those sensors are capable of latching on to and distinguishing the pattern signature of a specific being across half the physical Chain, as easily as a spy satellite can read a page of newsprint. They couldn't find us for a while, and were starting to worry, before we happened to come out of a mile-deep shaft and all the sensors went *ping*. With the flier's own mini-transmat capability, and with Cwej in the pilot seat, that was how they found us. Seems like a lot of trouble to go to when we weren't in any actual danger by the time they *did*, but there you go.

After they had found us, and learnt something of the story, Cwej had contacted certain experts that he knew. I'm a sort of general specialist, and know how to find the odd expert in various things myself if I need to - but Cwej knew the sort of experts who could defuse a planet-cracker two hours after it had exploded and put the planet back together as an afterthought. These people went over the mutagen bomb in

the ZipCo™ central tower with a fine-tooth comb and discovered that, as Benny and I had intimated, it was quite capable of turning the Proximan Chain into a seven-billion population centre of utter screaming horror - or at least it would, if a couple of the key control systems hadn't been cross-connected so that the trigger codes chased themselves round and round in circles ad infinitum.

So, anyway, long story short. The Proximan Chain was never in any danger from that quarter, so I didn't save it in any way, shape or form. Ah, well, again. Just one of those weeks, basically.

Benny and the others are saying that all this was the result of Sled's basic nature. Whatever he was, they say, whatever he or it transformed into on the trip from Dellah to Sharabeth in his disembodied state, he or it was still, fundamentally, one of Dellah's gods. Those things operate on belief with a capital B, so Benny and the others say, and it was just that this Belief became centred upon something different from godhood.

Sled, they say, because it was expected of him, became a kind of archetypical Villain in some sense - down to and including the fatal flaw that meant he could never ultimately win. Me, I think they're reading too much into it. I've come to feel that now, whatever I might have Believed at the time. The flaws in the bomb, Kara's death and so much else were just the tragic, random and ultimately meaningless cockups that happen to us all, every single one of us, for every day in our ultimately pointless lives. In real life.

Not that I'm an expert on real life or anything. Whatever I do, I can't escape the certain sense that things are in the end illusory. I dream, sometimes, that I'm still in the Think Tank, and I sometimes wonder if that's the case, that I've constructed a kind of semicoherent environment as a last-ditch defence against the dark. I keep expecting to wake up one day, and find that reality has completely changed around me yet again - it's happened before, so why shouldn't it happen again? I have an idea that the mind - the generally humanoid mind - isn't quite designed to cope with those

transitions, which is a bit of a shame, quite frankly, because in one sense that's how the universe actually works. I get the feeling that we're all of us living on our own personal Fractured Planet, and desperately trying to pull out whatever sense of meaning or identity we can.

* * *

And that's it. It's late now, and I'm - not tired, exactly, just restless. That nervy, twitchy feeling when you can't keep still.

I'm suited, booted and packed, and Box is on my arm again, minus all the expansions and expensive peripherals that I thought might be useful but just tied it to the ground. My flights are booked and I am, of course, for various reasons, going to be on completely different flights. In any case, there's nowhere I have to be for the next few hours, and even then I don't have to be there if I don't want. But I can't sleep and I don't want to be awake and there's nothing I need or even want to do any more. Things'll look better in the morning, of course, but the mornings never come here without sleep, and I can't sleep. I think I'll just go out.

EPILOGUE 2

Extract from the diary of Bernice Summerfield:

I think I need some time on my own, now, for a while. Brax is being all solicitous and attentive in a way that suggests he's learnt it from a book. Chris is running around after me like a kicked puppy dog, and it's strangely at odds with that new body and persona of his. The only person I can even stand to be around at the moment, strangely, is Mira, purely for the fact that she makes no bones about not bothering to be nice.

I'm not even going to *think* about... well, I'm not going to think about him. Not yet.

The diagnostic units that are advanced enough to know say that there's nary a sign of a stray Mary-Sue protocol in my head. I've been given a new lease on life, and quite possibly the freehold. Part of me wants to jump around and dance, while another part just sits there saying, 'What the *hell* am I going to do with it?'

I'm not quite the same, I know that much. When the protocols went active, they took out several largish chunks of my memory before they noticed Slead. Whole rafts of my life are now completely blank - the problem being, naturally, that I don't know what they are, so I have no idea if they're really missing or not.

Before I started writing this, I went through my stuff and pulled out my old diaries. I'm sitting on the bed in the hotel and just looking at them. They make quite a pile - have I really done so much? It doesn't seem possible.

I've been debating with myself for an hour now, whether to read them. What if they just contain all the usual getting-up and brushing-of-the-teeth minutiae that I know anyway and, if I've forgotten, I can damn well live without? What if they contain episodes of memory so wonderful that I'll never

capture them again, and my life will be lost in *knowing* how much I've lost? Wouldn't it just be better, in the end, to bum the whole bloody pile and go out and start making some *new* memories, rather than retread the best and the worst of a past with which I find I now have no connection?

The lady or the tiger. What do you advise?

[Extract ends.]