

It was inevitable that they should up and leave Pleasant Gap. The most the people could say, and they said it often, was that Pleasant Gap was a good old town.

Good old town really summed it up. Pleasant Gap was built on one of the most stable points in the fabric, it nestled in a fold of the grey elevations that the people of Pleasant Gap liked to call the hills. There were maybe fifty houses, frame buildings with wooden shingles, front porches and neat front gardens with well-tended lawns and flowers. Then there was the church, Eli's Store, Jackson's Repair Shop, and down at the end of the main street, a couple of bars and, although nobody mentioned it in polite company, Miss Ettie's Sporting House, which must have been visited by every man in town at one time or another.

Beyond Miss Ettie's was the railroad track. Of course, the railroad didn't go anywhere, just ran around a fold in the hills and came back again. The main use of the railroad, apart from reminding people what time it was, was that the two boxcars concealed the faraday cages that hooked into the transporter beam from Stuff Central.

Pleasant Gap had a consumer contract with Stuff Central which gave them just about everything they needed, but the trouble was that a lot of people in town didn't like to see their cans of dog food, bolts of cloth, and new work shoes appear out of nothing in a flash of static. It reminded them too much of the wild things that happened in other places. And so, every morning the train chugged out of town empty, and every after-noon it chugged back in full of supplies.

These supplies were unloaded and delivered to Eli's Store where people then went and bought what they wanted with the money they picked up from the Welfare Bank.

This system worked fine, except that every year, when the Stuff contract had to be renegotiated, Stuff Central kept putting pressure on the town council to take more and more stuff. Eli would bitch and complain about how he would have to reduce prices and how that would be bad for business, and then the citizens would complain about the amount of stuff that they were expected to use up. Jed McArthur and his cousin Cal would sit on Eli's porch and complain to each other about just how many motor mowers a man was expected to keep in his tool shed.

That was about the extent of the troubles of Pleasant Gap, and the calm, placid life was due mostly to the huge stasis generator, as big as two city blocks, which stood, hidden by a grove of pines, down below the railroad track. It drew power straight from the fabric, and hummed away to itself all day and night keeping things in Pleasant Gap as they ought to be.

There hadn't been any trouble in Pleasant Gap for a long, long time. No disruptor had come near them in living mem-ory, and the even pattern of life was rarely interrupted. Occasionally a small rupture would appear in a garden or the main street, but nothing worse than you could maybe catch your foot in. Once, a few years back, an ankylosaurus had wandered down Yew Street, but Ma Hoffman had chased it with a broom, and it had lolloped off into the hills. Apart from these little anomalies, the generator kept things pretty much as the people of Pleasant Gap wanted them.

Life in Pleasant Gap was safe, well regulated, but, to some, crushingly monotonous, and it was more than likely the mon-otony that started them having thoughts of moving out.

It was Billy who first brought it up. Billy liked people to call him Captain Oblivion, but most people called him Billy. It was a great disappointment. He felt his thin good looks and hard penetrating eyes merited a

better tide. Billy was secretly very vain.

He and his buddy Reave were lying in the back room of McTurk's Bar with the alphaset cranked up past euphoria. Reave was the stockier, more solid of the two. In another age he would have been a farmer. It was the middle of the day, nobody was about, and Billy was bored.

'I'm bored.'

His voice was slurred. It was very hard to talk against an alphaset running at full power. Reave rolled over slowly, and pushed his long greasy hair out of his eyes.

'What's the matter?'

'I'm bored.'

'Bored?'

'Bored.'

'So let's go down to the tracks, and watch the train come in.'

'We must have watched the train come in maybe a thousand times.'

'So? Let's go watch it again.'

'Who needs it?'

Reave shrugged and said nothing. Billy was always having these fits of discontent, it didn't pay to take them too seriously. After a while another thought struck him.

'We could go down to Miss Ettie's.'

'Why?'

'I dunno, have a few drinks, get laid. It's something to do.'

'Maybe.'

There was another long silence, and then Billy stretched out and hit the off button on the alphaset, and their nervous systems came down with a bump.

'Shit, what did you do that for?'

Billy sat up. He had that kind of crazy look that people get when they've been soaking up alphas for too long.

'Let's split.'

Reave scratched his leg.

'That's what I said. Let's go down to Miss Ettie's.'

'I don't mean go to Miss Ettie's or the railroad track. Fuck Miss Ettie's and the railroad track. I mean split the town, leave Pleasant Gap and go somewhere else.'

Reave frowned and scratched his head.

'Yeah? Where? A man can get himself killed or lose his mind out there in the wild lands.'

Billy walked over to the window and stared out.

'A man could lose his brain hanging out in a town, like this.'

Reave shrugged.

'It's easy enough, living in Pleasant Gap.'

Billy looked at Reave's placid, easygoing face and began to get annoyed.

'Sure it's easy. It's just that nothing happens. It just goes on, day after day.'

'So what do you want to do about it?'

'I want to get out of here.'

'Why?'

'There's got to be something out there that's better than this.'

Reave looked doubtful.

'What?'

Billy shrugged.

'How the fuck should I know until I find it?'

'So you want to set off looking for something, and you don't know what it is?'

'Right.'

'And you want me to come with you?'

'If you want to.'

'You've got to be crazy.'

'Maybe. Are you going to come?'

Reave hesitated for a moment, hitched up his dungarees and grinned.

'When do we leave?'

They spent the rest of the day going round town telling their friends and buddies that they were leaving. Their friends and buddies shook their heads and told them that they were crazy. After they'd left, the friends and buddies all shook their heads and told each other that Billy and Reave had always been no good.

Billy and Reave finally wound up at Miss Ettie's Sporting House, saying a special goodbye to some of the whores. The whores looked at them thoughtfully, but didn't shake their heads and say they were crazy.

The next morning saw them bright and early inside Eli's Store, clutching their final payments from the Welfare Bank. Eli shuffled out from behind the counter rubbing his hands together.

'Hear you boys are leaving town.'

'That's right, Mister Eli.'

'Nobody leaves this town, can't recall anybody leaving in years.'

'We're going to do it, Mister Eli.'

'Rather you than me, boys. It's supposed to be pretty dan-gerous out there. You wouldn't catch me going out into the wild lands. A couple of years ago a drifter came in on the train...'

Billy interrupted.

'The train doesn't go anywhere, Mister Eli. It just goes round in a circle.'

Eli appeared not to hear. Nobody in town was sure whether Eli was deaf, or just didn't want to listen to anything that conflicted with his own ideas.

'This old boy came in on the train, and the stories he told. You can't count on nothing out there. If you drop something you can't even count on it falling to the ground, you won't even know if the ground is going to be there from one minute to the next.'

Billy grinned.

'We'll take a chance on it, Mister Eli.'

Eli stroked his bald head.

'That's as maybe, but I can't stand here all day chatting with you boys. Did you want something?'

Billy nodded patiently.

'We want some stuff, Mister Eli, we want some stuff for our trip.'

Eli shuffled vaguely round the store.

'Plenty of stuff here, boys. That's what I'm here for. Stuff's my business.'

Billy and Reave wandered up and down the shelves and displays, picking things up and dumping them on

the counter.

'One leather jacket, two pairs of jeans, two shoulder bags, a pair of cowboy boots.'

'You got any camping rations?'

The old man stacked a pile of packets on the counter.

'How about stasis machines? You got a couple of porta-pacs?'

Eli peered at a high shelf.

'Don't have much call for them.'

Billy began to get impatient.

'Have you got any?'

'Don't take that tone with me, lad. I think I've maybe two of them somewhere.'

He picked up two chrome boxes about the size of a half pound box of chocolates, and blew the dust off them.

'I knew I had some somewhere. Is there anything else?'

'Yeah. You got any guns?'

'Guns? I haven't been asked for a gun in a long time. I've got some shotguns, and a couple of sporting rifles.'

Reave glanced at Billy.

'I don't much fancy toting a rifle all over the place.'

Billy looked at Eli.

'You got any hand guns?'

Eli scratched his head.

'I think I've got a couple of reproduction Navy Colts some-where in the back.'

The old man shuffled out. Billy looked round the store. Its dark, dusty, cluttering interior seemed to stand for everything that was driving him to leave Pleasant Gap. Old Eli came back holding a pair of long-barrelled revolvers from another age. He placed them on the counter beside the other things. He reached under the counter.

'I've got two belts here. They have holsters that will take the guns, and some sort of do-hickey that will hold the porta-pacs. Reckon you'll need them.'

Billy picked up one of the belts, strapped it round his hips, and picked up one of the pistols. He spun it

on his index finger, dropped it into the holster, and drew it in a single fluid motion. He grinned at Reave.

'Neat, huh?'

Reave nodded.

'Neat.'

Billy turned back to Eli.

'Okay old man, how much is all this stuff?'

Eli stood calculating under his breath.

'Three hundred and seventeen, boys.'

Billy pulled a roll of notes out of his shirt pocket.

'We'll give you three hundred. Call it a cash discount.'

Eli grunted.

'You'd make a poor man of me, but I'll do it, seeing as how you're leaving.'

Billy handed the old man three one hundred bills.

'Nice to do business with you, old man.'

They stuffed the food, spare clothes and ammunition into the shoulder bags and strapped the gun belts round their hips. Billy pulled on his new cowboy boots, and shrugged into his leather jacket.

'How do I look, Reave old buddy?'

'Heavy.'

Billy pushed his fingers through his curly black hair.

'Just one more thing, old man. You got any sunglasses?'

Eli placed a pair of dark glasses on the counter.

'You can have those, son. Call them a going away present.'

Billy grinned.

'Thanks, Mister Eli.'

He put the glasses on. They seemed to make his pale face look even sharper under the mass of black hair.

'I guess we're about ready.'

Reave nodded.

'It looks like it.'

'So long, Mister Eli.'

Eli shook his head.

'You boys have got to be crazy.'

She/They floated free across the smooth chequered plane of Her/Their control zone. The light, ordered by Her/Their passing, shone brightly but without apparent source, casting no shadows except for a pale smudge below where Her/Their feet hung over the smooth surface.

Slowly She/They drifted forward, and although no other being heard, the motion was silent, and although no one watched, She/They adopted the regular triple form. The Trinity. The three identical women, who looked as one and moved as one. Their slim erect figures were concealed by the white ankle-length cloaks that swayed gently with their motion, each in identical folds to the other two. Her/Their heads were encased in silver helmets with high crests and plates that curved round to cover the nose and cheek bones, leaving dark slits through which Her/Their eyes glittered steadily.

The control plain stretched, in regular dividing squares, uniformly to the horizon. Overhead the sky was bright, cloud-less and a perfect white. Only a faint, tumbling, distant haze where sky and plain met gave evidence that Her/Their power to control was finite, limited by distance, and around the zone were the twisting chaos fringes.

She/They halted and appeared to gaze intently at a point on the dark, twisting fringe. At the point of Her/Their gaze the dark area appeared to expand, stretch out into the plain and rise a little into the sky.

'Disruption.' The word seemed to hang in the air displacing the silence.

'Possible rupture,' a phrase took its place.

'Freudpheno possible.'

The structure of the turbulence at the horizon changed; it began to revolve forming an almost regular circle. The centre of the circle began to assume spatial depth. The silence that had resumed after the passing of the word was filled by a low hum that seemed to originate from the growing tube on the horizon.

More words cut across the hum.

'Freudpheno imminent.'

The hum grew louder, became a roar, and suddenly, straight from the mouth of the tunnel rushed a herd of rhinoceroses, close packed and charging straight for the triple form of Her/Them. The surface of the plain trembled under the rhinos' armoured weight. In their wake the fabric of the zone rose in boiling moir, patterns.

The centre unit of Her/Them raised the hand that held the energy wand. A yellow stinger of light flashed

towards the rhinoceroses, who slowed to a halt and stood for a moment blinking, and then turned and trotted back the way they had come.

She/They lowered the energy wand, and watched as the animals disappeared back into the fringes. More words occupied the silence of the zone.

'Freudpheno returns.'

'Disruption at fringe still gains level.'

'Suspect proximate disturb module.'

The frenzied churning on the horizon continued to grow and even gradually advance into the zone. In the centre of the turbulence a solid cylindrical object appeared. Slowly it began to advance into the zone.

'Confirm disturb module.'

The module moved out into the zone, its blue metalflake body half buried in the surface of the plain. Its front end was an open intake that sucked in the fabric of the zone as it slid towards Her/Them. Behind it, it left a trail of swirling chaos that stretched back to merge with the fringes.

She/They again raised the energy wand. The module came steadily towards Her/Them, like an open-mawed reptile cutting through the surface of the plain, its smooth, shining sides reflecting the swirling colours of its wake. The stinging of yellow light flashed again, but had no appreciable effect on the machine. The thin path of light widened to a broad band. The metalflake skin of the module changed from blue to a pale green, but it still kept on coming. The yellow band of light hardened into a deep flaming red. The module became a shining grey/white, but still maintained its steady forward motion.

She/They experienced the novelty of horror as the band of light from the energy wand was forced, inexorably, up through the spectrum. Yellow, green, blue and finally violet, then fading and vanishing altogether.

The module was upon Her/Them.

As its gaping mouth engulfed Her/Them, the zone twisted and became unrecognizable. She/They was sucked into the interior of the module, losing form as Her/Their structure flowed and twisted, falling simultaneously in any number of directions, down through tunnels that squirmed in downward Möbius patterns, glowing with shifting pink, and faced with a soft cosmic tuck and roll.

She/They had never before been caught in the path of a module, and found Her/Their self fighting against patterns that threatened to destroy the integration of Her/Their fabric.

Desperately She/They pulled into a rough sphere to best withstand the pressures. As She/They managed to retain a grasp on Her/Their structure, the tunnels abruptly vanished, and, in total darkness, waves of hard energy washed over Her/Them. The environment seemed to contract and there was a sensation of falling, then suddenly everything mapped, and a phrase filled Her/Their consciousness.

'Folksymbol.'

She/They was standing in a hot dusty street which was lined with wooden buildings. She/They was in a male structure and wearing a rough cotton shirt, denim trousers and heavy boots. Facing Her/Them was



a man, similarly dressed, his eyes shaded by a wide-brimmed black hat. His arm hung loosely beside a heavy gun that was strapped to his right thigh.

'Reach, stranger!'

Her/Their hand, a man's hand, calloused and sunburned, clutched for the similar weapon that hung from Her/Their belt.

The male's gun was already in his hand, there was a roar as it fired. She/They tried desperately to rearrange Her/Their fabric as the metal projectile tore through it. The experience of pain clouded Her/Their consciousness, preventing the energy buildup needed to shift out of the collective illusion of a Folksymbol. The shift was impossible, but the wooden build-ings did begin to fade, and the blue of the sky took on the swirls of chaos. The male figure that She/They had been forced into began to dissolve.

In its place, amid the pale ghost of the Western township, She/They reverted to the triple form. Two standing erect, while one lay crumpled in the dust.

Billy and Reave stepped off the railroad track and started up the bare grey hillside. It was easy to see where the field of the Pleasant Gap generator stopped. All along a curved line the ground boiled and fell away into a blue-grey smoke. The clear air inside the field also became a swirling, multi-coloured mist. Billy and Reave walked up to the line and hesitated.

'Do you just step into it?'

'It's like stepping off the edge of the world.'

'I don't like it.'

'We can't go back now. The porta-pacs should hold things together.'

They turned up the gain of the machines on their belts and, side by side, stepped into the shimmering fog.

The porta-pac doesn't hold things together much beyond the area immediately around the carrier, even when it's turned up. Billy and Reave found that the fog in front of their faces turned into about a foot of clear air, and a patch of solid ground formed each time they set a foot down. They could breathe, walk and even talk to each other, although their voices sounded muffled and distant. Reave looked at Billy in alarm.

'How the hell do we know where we're going?'

Billy looked round at the shimmering fog and shrugged his shoulders.

'We don't know where we're going so we can only go on until we find something else.'

'Suppose we don't find anything?'

'Then we'll just walk round for ever.'

Reave was about to call Billy crazy, but then he thought better of it and shut his mouth.

They trudged through the bright flickering mist. There was no sense of time, and no indication that they

were going any-where. For all they knew, they might have been walking on a treadmill. The only changes in the total sameness were occasional shifts in the direction of gravity, which pitched them on their side like a sudden pile-driving wind. It was painful and annoying, but comforting in the way that the porta-pacs always seemed to be able to produce enough solid ground for them to fall on, even though it wasn't sometimes in exactly the right place.

Although they might have no sense of time, Billy and Reave realized they were progressively collecting an array of bruises and small cuts. Reave sucked his barked knuckles and spat into the haze.

'I sure wish I was leaning at the bar in Miss Ettie's. I'll tell you that for nothing.'

Billy plodded on.

'Miss Ettie's ain't even open yet.'

Reave looked at him in amazement.

'What do you mean, not open? We've got to have been walking all day. It must be about evening.'

'I don't figure we've been walking for more than an hour.'

Reave looked round bitterly at the changing colours.

'A day or an hour, what's the difference in this stuff? I don't figure there's anything else at all. Pleasant Gap's the only place left anywhere.'

Billy turned and scowled at him.

'What about Stuff Central, what about that, huh? That's got to exist somewhere.'

'Stuff Central? Is that what you're looking for?'

'Course it ain't, but it proves there's something else besides Pleasant Gap. Right?'

'It don't guarantee that we'll find it, though.'

Billy looked at Reave in disgust, and plodded on. Reave spat again, and hurried after him. They plodded on and on. The reality of their life began to look like a half-remembered dream. It was as though they'd been walking through the nothings for ever.

Just as despair was starting to edge its way into Billy's mind, he put his foot on something that was uneven. He looked down, and saw blades of green grass. He stopped and bent down. It was grass. He grinned up at Reave.

'It's grass, man! It's grass, growing on the bit of ground around my foot.'

'You've cracked up.'

'No, no, it's real.'

Billy picked one of the short blades, and passed it to Reave, who turned it over slowly between his

fingers.

'Sure looks like grass.'

'It is fucking grass. Listen, here's what we do, take two more steps forward, kind of carefully, and I've got a feeling we'll find something.'

Hand in hand, they took the first step. There was more grass at their feet, extending out for maybe four feet. They took a second step, and then a third, and they came out of the coloured nothings.

They were standing on a grassy slope that rose in front of them. Billy fell to his knees and rolled on the ground.

'We made it! We made it!'

Reave sat down and pulled at the straps of his bag.

'Want a beer?'

'You got some beers?'

'Sure, I nicked a six-pack while old Eli was out back.'

'That was sharp. Yeah, I'd really like a beer.'

Reave pulled out two cans of beer, and passed one to Billy. Billy turned it over, looking at the label - Tree Frog Beer, the fat green frog squatting under the red lettering, grinning at you. For the first time Billy knew there was something called homesickness.

After a couple of moments, though, he snapped out of that particularly unique depression, pulled the ring on the can and gulped down the beer. When it was finished he wiped his mouth and flung the can at the wall of nothing. As it hit the mist the can melted, smoked and became nothing itself. Reave grunted.

'That's what'd happen to us if we didn't have no stasis generators.'

'Better not get caught without one.'

Billy stood up.

'Guess we better find out where we are.'

The sky above them was a uniform shining white without either sun or clouds. The air was warm, clear and still. The grass slope ran upwards for a matter of yards and then stopped at some kind of summit. Billy scrambled up it and, once at the top, turned and shouted down to Reave.

'It's a road, man. A goddamn road!'

'A road?'

Reave scrambled up to join him. The road ran flat and dead straight as far as they could see in either direction, a wide, six-lane highway. It was made out of a smooth composition material with a grassy

central reservation. On either side were more banks of grass, like the one that Reave and Billy had stumbled upon. Beyond that there were the walls of shimmering nothing.

After prowling around for a few minutes, Billy and Reave came back to the central strip of grass.

'So what do we do? Start walking?'

Billy stared down the seemingly endless strip of highway.

'It looks a mite far to walk.'

'What do we do then?'

Billy sat down on the grass, and tilted his dark glasses forward.

'Just sit here a while, take it easy and wait. I reckon some-body's got to use this road, and when they come by, we'll try and beg a ride.'

Reave looked doubtful.

'We could wait a good long time.'

Billy shook his head lazily.

'I don't think so. Nobody builds a big old road like this, and then doesn't use it. That stands to reason.'

'Maybe.'

Reave sat down on the grass but still looked uncomfortable. Billy punched him on the arm.

'Come on, man. Relax, it's warm, we're out of that fucking fog, what more do you want? This is an adventure and we ain't in any hurry to get anywhere.'

He rummaged in his bag and pulled out a ration bar, snapped it in half and handed one of the halves to Reave.

'Have something to eat and take it easy. Something'll come by sooner or later.'

Reave munched on the food bar and stretched out on the grass beside Billy, feeling a bit more comfortable. Just as the two men were drifting off to sleep, they heard a humming way off in the distance. Billy sat up and shook Reave by the shoulder.

'Something's coming.'

Reave rubbed his eyes and looked around.

'Which way's it coming from?'

Billy listened intently.

'I don't know, it's hard to tell. It must be a good way off.'

Gradually, the humming grew louder, and a tiny speck appeared far off in the distance. The hum became a high whine which took on more body as it came closer. From a small speck, the object got bigger until Billy and Reave saw it was a huge truck bearing down on them. They jumped about and waved frantically, but the truck sped past them in a flash of chrome exhausts and black and white paint job. Then huge red warning lights flashed at the back and it screeched to a stop, about two hundred yards down the road. Billy and Reave started running and the truck started to back up. They met each other halfway, and a skinny little guy with a shaggy crewcut, long sideburns and a face like a shifty lizard, leaned down from a small door high up in the cab.

'Wanna lift?'

The truck was a huge semi, with an immaculate matt black paint job on the cab and huge bonnet, it was trimmed in white. Huge chrome blowers reared from the top of the hood, and all the accessories, the wind horns, the military spots mounted high on the cab, the headlights on the fenders were also chrome. The sides of the trailer were of matt finish alumin-ium, and jetstream willie was lettered on the cab door.

Reave and Billy climbed up the steel ladder on the side of the truck and ducked inside the cab. The driver sat in a high bucket seat behind a huge steering wheel. The dash panel was a mass of instruments. A pair of rabbit's feet on a thin silver chain dangled from the top of the windscreen. There was a long bench seat, upholstered in white leather with black pip-ing, beside the driver's seat. Reave and Billy sat down on it. Billy grinned up at the driver.

'Some truck.'

The little lizard guy threw the truck into gear.

'Sure is. Seven speed, four pod 5-0-9, blown through. Hits three hundred when I floor her.'

He went through the gears like a master, and was soon at a speed that made Billy and Reave dizzy. Billy swallowed and grinned again.

'Is that your name painted on the side?'

'Sure is. Jetstream Willie, that's me.'

He swivelled round in his seat to show them the same letter-ing on the back of his black leather jump suit, and the truck swerved so alarmingly that Reave and Billy grabbed for the edge of their seats. Jetstream Willie laughed and accelerated even more.

'Where you boys from?'

'Pleasant Gap.'

'I never heard of a place of that name, not on the road.'

'It's not on the road.'

'Whadda you mean it's not on the road? If it ain't on the road, then how the fuck did you get here?'

Billy pointed out to the side of the truck.

'We walked through the grey stuff.'

'Through the nothings? That ain't possible.'

Billy held up his porta-pac.

'Had these.'

'What's that?'

'Miniature generator.'

Jetstream Willie shook his head in disbelief.

'You two got to be crazy.'

Without waiting for an answer, he punched a button on the dash, and country and western music blared from concealed stereo speakers.

' "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash. Finest music the world ever known.'

Billy and Reave both nodded. They didn't know what the hell he was talking about. The truck seemed to be going at a suicidal speed, but Jetstream Willie held the wheel with one hand and went right on talking.

'So where are you crazy guys headed?'

'Anywhere. We're just drifting.'

'Drifting, hey? Long time since I picked up any drifters. I can take you as far as Graveyard.'

Reave looked puzzled.

'What's Graveyard?'

He found he had to shout to make himself heard above the roar of the engine, and the country music. Jetstream Willie looked amazed.

'You don't know what Graveyard is? You must have come out of the nothings. Graveyard's the end of the road, It's the truck stop. It's the wheelfreaks' paradise. That's where I got my camper, and that's where my little woman is, just a-waiting for me to come back. A-waiting in that them trans-parent neglig-ay that she got from the Stuff catalogue. A-waiting to give me something hot with my dinner, or, at least, she better be, or I'll kill the bitch.'

Reave waited until the tide of poetry had stopped.

'What's a wheelfreak?'

Jetstream Willie looked shocked.

'You asking what a wheelfreak is? You don't know nothing. You're looking at one. Us wheelfreaks are

the lords of creation. We're the boys who ride these rigs, we're the only ones who got the balls. We haul them from Graveyard clear down to no man's land.'

'What do you carry in these trucks?'

'Carry? We don't carry nothing. Ain't nothing in the back of here 'cept one ol' big generator. How else do you think we keep this road together, wouldn't stop turning into nothing for an hour if we weren't gunning these ol' boys up and down.'

He fumbled in the pocket of his leather jacket and produced a green plastic box, and popped a little white pill into his mouth.

'Yes sir, there wouldn't be no road or nothing if it wasn't for us, I can tell you.'

He offered the box to Reave and Billy.

'Have a benny.'

Each of them dutifully took a pill and settled back in his seat. They didn't want to ask any more fool questions, and risk upsetting a lord of creation.

Another truck flashed past in the opposite lane, going in the other direction. Briefly, as it passed, all its lights came on, and it shone like a Christmas tree. Jetstream Willie hit buttons on the dash, and his own lights came on in reply.

'That's Long Sam. He's a good ol' boy.'

Jetstream Willie cut the lights, and pointed to a set of sockets on the dash panel.

'If you want to recharge them portables of yours, you could try plugging them in there, takes power from the engine.'

Reave and Billy unclipped the pacs from their belts and did as he indicated. Willie seemed to have lost interest in them because he now stared straight in front of him, and sang along with the music. It consisted of the same song, over and over again.

After an hour of this, by the dash panel clock, he swung the truck on to a slip road. Without apparently slackening speed, he jockeyed the truck up a steep ramp and out on to a huge expanse of flat, smooth, concrete. He cut the engine and let it roll to a stop at the end of a line of about a dozen other huge baroque vehicles. They were of the same general shape and massive size, but each was unique in its elaborate design and paintwork.

Jetstream Willie caught them staring at a vast gold monster with black trim and enormous balloon tyres.

'That's Dirty Marv's, sure is a fine-looking machine, but it's all show and no go. I can shut him down with a ten minute head start before he's even hit the quarter line.'

They unplugged the porta-pacs, gathered up their bags and swung down from the cab. The truck still seemed to hum slightly, and Reave looked at it curiously. Jetstream Willie provided the answer.

'Always leave the generator on, all helps to keep things straight.'

At first sight Graveyard looked like one huge parking lot surrounded by buildings, and that, in fact, was what it was. Far over on one side was a row of trailers, with smoke curling up from chimneys and lines of washing hanging out to dry. They were dwarfed by the odd truck that was parked among them. On the other side of the lot, right by where Jetstream Willie had parked, was an immensely long single-storey building made of glass and chrome that stretched for a whole side of the roughly square lot. On its flat roof was mounted a huge replica of an ice-cream soda, which rose into the air for sixty or seventy feet. The cherry on the top was illuminated from inside, and it flashed on and off like a beacon. Flashing in time with the cherry was a red and yellow neon sign that occupied most of the rest of the roof, and spelled out the words Vito's Cozy Drop-In in twelve-foot letters. It was towards this structure that Jetstream Willie led. As they pushed through the revolving glass door, Willie looked at them warmly.

'You better keep yourselves to yourselves in here, some of the boys might not take too kindly to the way you look.'

The Cozy Drop-In was decorated in black and orange plastic. There were lines and lines of tables and seats. A bunch of men, all with similar suits and cropped haircuts to Willie's, queued at a long counter waiting to be served by a team of blonde girls with jutting breasts and short yellow tunics. Willie pointed at a table away over in the corner.

'You best go and sit yourselves down there, and I'll bring you something over.'

Reave and Billy did as they were told, while Jetstream Willie joined the other men in a flurry of back slapping and hee-haw laughter. Like their trucks, the wheelfreaks' suits were all basically similar, but each one had its own colour and design.

While they waited for Willie to come back, Billy and Reave looked cautiously round the room. One end of it was dominated by a vast juke box, as tall as a man and maybe eight feet across. Coloured lights kept changing the patterns of reflections on its elaborate chrome face and it seemed to be playing the same 'Ring of Fire' record that Willie had had in the truck. Another wall was filled by a row of pinball machines, but again they were much larger than anything that Billy and Reave had ever seen. Instead of standing in front of it, the player sat in a kind of pilot's chair that had complex flipper controls set in the arms.

Jetstream Willie came back with a tray of coffee and donuts. He banged them down on the orange plastic top of the table.

'Here you go, get some of that down you.'

He jerked his thumb towards the waitress who had served him.

'There's a hot little number. Sure like to crawl into her jeans.'

He winked and pushed a hand into the leg pocket of his suit.

'Might as well put a kick into this here coffee.'

He produced a bottle wrapped in brown paper. Reave looked at it curiously.

'What's that?'



Willie grinned and touched the side of his nose with his index finger.

'Good ol' crank-case gin. Put hairs on your chest.'

He topped up each coffee cup, and Reave and Billy both took a tentative sip. They coughed as the raw spirit hit their throats.

'Strong stuff that.'

Jetstream Willie winked.

'Sure is.'

He gulped down his coffee in one, took a bite at a donut, and then a hit from the bottle.

'Listen, boys, can't hang round here all day. Got my little woman waiting there at home.'

He stood up.

'See you both later.'

'Yeah, thanks for the lift.'

'That's okay, see you all.'

They watched him walk away. It was strangely sad, some-where beneath the wheelfreaks' frenetic confidence there seemed to be something doomed. Billy and Reave looked at each other, and there was a long silence. Then Reave let out his breath.

'So what do we do now?'

Billy shrugged.

'Hang round Graveyard and see what turns up. I don't have any ideas.'

As it happened, something turned up before they'd even finished their coffee.

A huge fat man in a scarlet leather suit with blue and white stars and the words Charlie Mountain in white across the back, sauntered over and placed a heavy boot on the seat beside Reave.

'You the boys that came in with Jetstream Willie?'

They both nodded.

'Yeah, what of it?'

Charlie Mountain put two huge hands on the table and leaned forward threateningly.

'It's lucky that you came in with Willie, else we'd be doing something about you right now. As it is, I wouldn't stay too long if I was you. You don't fit in around here, we don't need your kind in Graveyard. You know what I mean?'

Billy and Reave said nothing, and Charlie Mountain straightened up and strolled away. They looked round and saw that every eye in the place was on them. Reave leaned close to Billy.

'Let's get the fuck out of here. I don't like this.'

'Yeah, you're right, but take it easy. We want to do it with class. If we run, they'll probably come after us.'

Billy leaned back in his seat, took a small thin cigar out of his pocket and lit it. He signalled to Reave.

'Okay, let's go.'

Slowly, they both stood up and walked carefully towards the revolving doors. Just as they reached them, one of the wheel-freaks sounded off behind them.

'Will you guys just look at those sweet things!'

Billy and Reave were left in no doubt as to who was being talked about. They hurried through the swing doors and out on to the lot. The white sky was still as bright and shining as it had been when they'd first come out on to the highway. They were both tired and Reave began to wonder if there was any day or night in this truckers' paradise. Billy put on his dark glasses, and they walked across the lot.

A.A. Catto hadn't slept at all that night and now watched the sun come up through the clear bubble of the roof garden. It was only fitting that the Con Lec tower generator could produce day and night. It was a pity that after a while even that became tedious. She turned her back on the view and trailed her silver nails in the water of the fountain.

It was very quiet in the roof garden. The only sound that could be heard was that of the dying party in the mirror room. Somewhere in that party was De Roulet Glick. He was aching to have her again, and as far as she was concerned he could ache. She had made the mistake of sleeping with him once, about a year earlier, and he disgusted her by talking too much and coming too quickly. She had no reason to suppose a second time would be any improvement.

The sounds from the party increased, it seemed as though they were coming out into the roof garden. A.A. Catto re-treated towards the rose bushes that concealed the lift entrance, and pressed the call button. The voices grew louder. She thought she heard Glick. The lift doors opened with a hiss, and she stepped inside. Behind her Glick called out.

'A.A., wait a moment.'

She laughed as the lift doors closed on his stupid, eager face.

Inside her apartment she unsnapped the metallic dress she had worn for the party and stepped into the shower. The needle jets seemed to wash the tiredness out of her body, and after the warm air vents had dried her, she stepped out and looked at herself in the full-length mirror.

There was no mistaking the fact that her body and face were almost perfect. It was little wonder that fools like Glick fell over themselves to try and get to her. The only trouble with her perfection was that no one man in the five families could in any way match her desirability. She was wanted, but for the most part she didn't want. Even the guests that arrived from the other citadels usually amounted to little more

than a temporary exploration. A brief period of amusement that usually proved to be indistinguishable from all the others.

She pulled on a robe and debated with herself whether to remain awake for the rest of the day, or to sleep until evening. She picked up a small ornate case from a side table and looked at the two injectors; dormax, which would guarantee her eight hours' uninterrupted sleep, and altacaine, the alternative shot that would see she remained lively and talkative until late the following night.

The problem was that if she did decide to use the altacaine and stay up all day, what exactly was there to stay awake for? She walked over to the entertainment console and punched up the day's social programme. It was the usual round of talk, consumption of drink and drugs, and sexual assignations. Nobody was even putting on any kind of show or amusement, not even so much as bringing up a pair of sturdy L-4s to fight or copulate with each other. It looked like a blank day. No-body seemed to have any imagination left.

Idly she wondered if anything was going on in the outside world, and reset the console to the newsfax channel. It was mainly concerned with the firestorm. That had been amusing a few days earlier when it had actually threatened Akio-Tech, but now that it was confined to L-4 dwellings it was no longer the least bit interesting.

She left the console chattering to itself and stepped out into the perspex blister that served her as a balcony.

Far beneath her was the ugly mess of shacks and ancient buildings that were the warrens of the L-4s. Maybe if they caught fire it would brighten up the day, but at the moment, the city looked safe and tranquil under its blanket of filth.

The outside had once filled her with fascination, there had been the abortive plan that she had hatched with Juno Meltzer to disguise themselves as L-4 prostitutes and slip out into the city, but the details became too complicated, and the plan had been abandoned. With the dropping of that scheme, most of her interest in life among the L-4s had faded.

She wandered back into her day-room. The console was now muttering about population figures and she cut it off. In the act of turning the switch she came to a decision. If nothing was going to happen that day, the best solution was to shut it out. She picked up the dormax injector and walked into the bed-room. She adjusted the circular bed to a light vibration, slipped out of her robe, turned the temperature setting to sleep and lay down. She pressed the injector against her thigh, and squeezed the release. There was a cold tingling as the minute droplets penetrated the pores of her skin, and then consciousness began to fade.

We've all heard the legends that have grown up around the Minstrel Boy. Now the troubles are over, and the natural laws have been brought back, we tend to think of him as the romantic figure of the movies, off on his journey singing stories and telling poems through the length and breadth of the troubled lands.

Of course, the Minstrel Boy did exist, and he was even something like the artists depict him, the blue jeans and the black fur-trimmed jacket, the pale intense face with its sunken cheeks and large, penetrating eyes. When Billy and Reave first saw him in the parking lot at Graveyard, he looked more scuzzy than romantic. His clothes were dirty rather than funky, and his mouth, so sensitive in the paintings, was weak and petulant. He did have the dark glasses, though, much the same as Billy's, and the halo of light brown hair. He had the legendary silver guitar, too, slung over his shoulder, but even that caused confusion.

He was always telling people that it was an original Nat-ional Steel, which would have made it incalculably old, where-as in fact it was only a Stuff Kustom Kopy, like Billy's and Reave's pistols. It was immediately clear from looking at the guitar that it couldn't be an original. It had a porta-pac built into the back.

The problem with the Minstrel Boy was that he was an inveterate liar, who generated legends about as quietly as he generated songs.

When Billy and Reave first saw him he was standing beside an electric blue metalflake monster trying to hustle the driver for a lift. The wheelfreak wasn't having any, and replied with an obscene gesture. The Minstrel Boy shrugged and wandered away. Reave and Billy caught up with him.

'You trying to get out of this place?'

The Minstrel Boy looked suspicious.

'Yeah, it ain't healthy, but what's that to you?'

The Minstrel Boy was also very paranoid. Billy and Reave fell into step beside him.

'We were just asking because we've got to split too. We just got run out of Vito's Cozy Drop-In.'

The Minstrel Boy twitched.

'You should have known better than to go in there in the first place.'

There was a short awkward silence while they stood on the lot and wondered what to say next. Billy felt strangely drawn to the pale, desperate young man. He also felt challenged by the apparent lack of interest in either him or Reave. He didn't know it was one of the Minstrel Boy's most successful tech-niques for getting people under his influence. Finally Reave waved his hand in the direction of the line of parked trucks.

'What are the chances of getting a lift?'

'Slightly worse than the odds against getting your head broke for asking. I been trying for hours and I'm still here.'

'Is there any other way out of Graveyard except for riding a truck?'

The Minstrel Boy scratched his ribs, and pulled a face.

'I was coming round to thinking that maybe I was going to have to walk.'

Billy looked surprised.

'Walk? Walk where? I thought there was only the road, down to no man's land.'

'Well, I sure as hell don't want to go there, and even if I did, I sure wouldn't walk that far. No, you been talking to truckers. They always forget about the old road. They can't hold it together, and they can't run down it, so they don't think about it.'

Billy frowned.

'You mean the wheelfreaks didn't make the road?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at Billy as though he was looking at an idiot.

'Course the wheelfreaks didn't make the road. The road's been there for ever. They just hold it together. There's this other bit of road that goes on from here, it ruptures in places, but it goes right through to the plain.'

'The plain? What's the plain?'

The Minstrel Boy shuddered.

'Don't even talk about it. The only good thing about the plain is that the town of Dogbreath is in the middle of it, and you can get a stage from it. That's only a good thing, though, because everything else is bad.'

Reave looked anxious.

'Could we make it that way?'

The Minstrel Boy stared at the two of them speculatively.

'Maybe. I doubt if anyone could do it on their own, but three of us might, particularly when you've got those fancy guns. Can you use them?'

'Sure.'

Billy whipped out his gun, spun it and dropped it back into its holster. The trick made Billy feel that he was back on to a level with the Minstrel Boy. He might know more than Billy, but Billy was armed. It was Billy's turn to look speculative.

'Maybe the three of us should travel together?'

He turned to Reave and winked.

'You want to travel with this guy, brother?'

Reave shrugged.

'Maybe. I don't see no reason why we shouldn't.'

The Minstrel Boy's eyes flickered from Reave to Billy and back again.

'Who says that I want to travel with you guys?'

'You said one man couldn't do it on his own.'

'I never said whether I wanted to make it.'

'You don't want to get stuck inside of Graveyard.'

'Okay, okay. We'll travel together. There's no other way, we all know it. What are you two called, anyway? If I'm going to cross the plain with you, I might as well know your names.'

Billy grinned.

'I'm Billy, and he's Reave.'

'Glad to know you.'

'And what's your name?'

'People call me the Minstrel Boy.'

'So now we know each other, shall we get started?'

They walked across the parking lot and down the slip road. Billy walked slightly in front, while Reave walked with the Minstrel Boy, telling him about life in Pleasant Gap, and their walk through the nothings.

They started down the road, and after about a mile, Billy stopped and looked at the Minstrel Boy.

'How long before the Graveyard field stops?'

The Minstrel Boy tried to explain.

'It ain't like it actually stops. This ain't like the nothings. It kind of holds together in a way, only there are sort of holes in it. You know? You could maybe get right through without any kind of stasis machine, but it would be better to turn them on now, to be on the safe side. It'll save anyone who falls in a hole.'

They all halted, turned up the gain on their porta-pacs, and then walked on. After about another mile, they came across an elliptical hole in the surface of the highway. It was about four feet across, although the edges shimmered and fluctuated slightly. There didn't seem to be any bottom to the hole, and it was filled with a thin blue mist. Billy walked across and peered down into the hole. He glanced back at the Minstrel Boy.

'Is this how the road starts to come apart?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'There's more and more of them as you go on.'

Billy carefully placed one foot above the hole, and a piece of highway surface obediently appeared to receive his foot.

'Lumps of the same nothing.'

They walked on, and the holes became more and more numerous. At times they had to thread their way along a flimsy network between a mass of openings. Despite their porta-pacs, they all tried their best to avoid stepping on the empty spaces.

After walking for a long time they came to a fairly clear section of road. The sky had changed from brilliant white to a dull metallic grey, and they found they were walking through a dim twilight. Reave stopped and dropped his bag.

'I'm exhausted, for Christ's sake let's stop here for the night. It's almost dark.'

Billy and the Minstrel Boy also stopped. The Minstrel Boy put down his guitar, and pushed his hair out of his eyes.

'We might as well stop here, but don't think it's nightfall, it ain't. That light the truckers use goes on twenty four hours a day, we're just moving out of range of it. It's always dark along this stretch.'

Reave shook his head.

'I don't care anymore. Let's just stop here and sleep, I'm going to cave in any minute.'

Billy looked at the Minstrel Boy.

'What's the best way to sleep in this kind of country?'

The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'You boys'd be lost without me. It's simple. We hook up our three pacs in a series. That'll give us a field big enough to sleep inside of.'

They coupled up the power pacs, piled up their belongings, and unstrapped their belts. Billy tucked his gun inside his jacket and lay down on the grass of the central island. It was hard and cold, and he drew his knees up to his chest. Just as he was convincing himself that it was impossible to sleep in those conditions, his consciousness drifted away.

Billy wasn't sure what had woken him. He raised his head and looked around and saw to his surprise that the road was filled with people. He sat up in alarm, but none of them seemed to notice him.

It was a long column of people, men, women and children, hobbling and stumbling through the twilight. There were young and old, grandfathers limping on crutches, and young mothers holding clinging babies. Every one of them looked sick and exhausted. Their clothes were ragged and torn. They moved on and on past where Billy crouched, coming from the same direction as he and the others had come.

They looked neither left nor right. They just trudged on, staring at the ground. They made no attempt to avoid the holes, but walked straight over them as though they didn't exist. Some pushed prams or carried suitcases, while others were bent under bundles on their backs. They came on and on in a never-ending, sluggish stream.

At intervals along the lines were armed guards on tall horses. They wore dark uniforms, and their faces were hidden by their steel helmets. Even the guards seemed bowed in their saddles, as if they too had travelled a terrible distance. Each time one of them passed him, Billy tried to make himself as small as possible, but although even in the twilight he must have been clearly visible, none of the guards seemed to notice him. The thing that really scared him was that both guards and prisoners seemed to have a strange, unnatural, ghostly translucence. Billy felt a cold sweat begin to trickle down his face and body. He stretched out a hand and shook the Minstrel Boy.

'What's happening?'

'Ssh!'

Billy put a finger to his lips and pointed at the awful pro-cession.

'Look.'

'Dear god.'

'What is it?'

'I don't know. I don't think I want to know.'

'They don't seem to be able to see us.'

'Thank Christ for that.'

For what seemed like hours, Billy and the Minstrel Boy crouched shivering as the inhuman column moved past them.

When it was finally past, they waited a little longer and then woke Reave. He was reassuringly human as he bitched and complained, and gathered up his things.

The three of them divided up the rations from Eli's Store, and washed them down with the last of Reave's beer. Billy and the Minstrel Boy didn't eat too much, but Reave appeared not to notice.

They disconnected the porta-pacs from each other, and hitched them back on their belts. The Minstrel Boy shouldered his guitar, Billy and Reave picked up their bags, and in single file they started down the gloomy highway.

Uttering a strange high sound like the keening of high-tension cables, She/They gathered up Her/Their fallen third in Her/Their arms, and slowly began to move forward.

'Grief.'

'Gather data, it is a unique situation.'

'We are wounded.'

'We are wounded.'

The wooden buildings of the township began to fade, and the multi-coloured mist flowed in its place. She/They noted that there was a greater density to the mist where there had been ground.

'Chaos below total.'

'Willeffort.'

The ground-mist became thicker, and the air-mist grew thinner. She/They continued to move slowly



forward. The oppressive silence jangled with the presence of chaos. Even the words that filled it were blurred and indistinct. With a gesture of what might have been reluctance in a being of different form, the right-hand figure raised the energy wand. The mist around the figures was bathed in an orange glow. It twisted and swirled, and then began to fold in on itself, coiling into thick viscous strands that sluggishly settled to produce ground and air around the space where She/They hung suspended.

A bridge began to form in front and behind Her/Them, a plain, stark structure without decoration or parapet. It was made of a dark blue material, and as it formed, the energy wand glowed brighter, its light shifting from orange to yellow. The bridge extended, not to the horizon, but a considerable way into the mist that still swirled in the distance. The bases of its piers were also obscured by the shimmering fog, but around Her/Them it was absolutely solid, and She/They floated above its surface, casting a slight shadow. Even the silence was most pure, and the words that formed in it were sharp and clear.

'All potential reduced proportionally.'

She/They drifted along the bridge, gathering momentum. As She/They approached it, the mist receded.

'Problem of continued existence.'

Despite the burden of the fallen third, She/They seemed less bowed by the weight.

'Problem necessitates an external stasis source. It is not possible to maintain control zone and heal. Insufficient power potential.'

The words flipped rapidly through the silence.

'Seek external source.'

The road abruptly stopped and the plain was in front of them. It was like a wide lake that had solidified and become a hard, smooth, but glowingly translucent material. The sky above it was pitch black, apart from an edging of the deepest blue where it met the horizon. All light came from beneath from the plain itself. To look at everything in a soft cold light that came from below was disconcerting. It was like being in some huge, ghostly ballroom. Billy and Reave hesitated before stepping off the last broken fragments of the road, and on to the surface of the plain. The Minstrel Boy, however, went straight ahead.

'You don't have to worry, it's quite safe to walk on. You can even shut your porta-pacs off. Stasis is the least of our worries.'

Doubtfully, Billy and Reave went ahead, and found that they could, in fact, walk on the plain's surface. Billy caught up with the Minstrel Boy.

'So what do we have to worry about?'

'Reaching Dogbreath. It's a fair distance.'

'Ah, come on now. You keep talking about this plain as though it was dangerous.'

'It can be.'

'So what do we have to look out for?'

'That's the trouble, you never know. You can't ever tell.'

'You must have some idea.'

'Maybe I have, and then again, maybe I haven't.'

Billy's temper snapped. He swung round and grabbed the Minstrel Boy by the lapels of his frayed velvet jacket.

'Listen smartass, tell me all you know and don't fuck around.'

'Let go of me or I ain't saying nothing. Okay?'

'Okay.'

Billy relaxed his grip. The Minstrel Boy stepped back and dusted himself off. Billy looked hard at him.

'I'm still waiting.'

'Okay, okay. You know what an anomal is?'

'Sure I know what an animal is.'

'No, no, an anomal.'

He spelled the word for Billy. Billy frowned.

'I think so. It's something that appears where it doesn't belong.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded like he was a teacher talking to a backward pupil.

'And it would seem that this plain is a high-density point for them.'

'So we've got to watch out for them?'

'That's the problem. Nobody knows where they come from. It's been suggested that people produce them themselves.'

Billy frowned.

'I don't understand.'

The Minstrel Boy pursed his lips impatiently.

'Look at it this way. Say you're walking down the road, thinking about elephants, and this herd of elephants shows up where no elephants ought to be, that's a self-produced anomal. Right?'

Billy nodded.

'Right. I get it. If we cross this plain with our guns drawn, looking over our shoulders all the time, the thing we fear is more than likely to jump out at us.'

'Something like that.'

Billy glanced round nervously.

'Surely if we blank out our minds, nothing's going to happen to us.'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'It's not as easy as that. Try looking at it this way. Say you're walking down the road, and you ain't thinking about nothing 'cept where your next meal's coming from, and then a herd of elephants jump out on you where no elephants ought to be. How about that?'

Billy fiddled with his belt.

'I don't know. That just don't fit.'

'Well, according to the self-production theory, those elephants are left over from somebody else thinking about them. Somebody who might have passed by years before.'

Billy looked uncomfortable.

'So what you're trying to tell me is that we can expect anything, but it's dangerous to expect too hard.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'That's about it.'

'You think we should tell Reave about it?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'You want to?'

Billy glanced at Reave plodding across the glowing plain.

'No. I guess what he don't know won't hurt him.'

They both hurried to catch up with Reave.

The next hour or so was completely uneventful, and Billy began to think that maybe the Minstrel Boy had just been trying to make him paranoid. They were approaching a rocky growth, a kind of jagged mesa that jutted up through the sur-face of the plain. Billy had just started to relax when a figure darted from around the rock and began running towards them. Billy jerked out his gun, but the Minstrel Boy signalled him to wait.

'I don't think he's anything to do with us.'

As the figure got closer Billy saw that it was a small fat man, naked, terrified, and obviously out of breath. As soon as he saw Billy, Reave and the Minstrel Boy, he shot off in a different direction.

'What I'd like to know is what he's running away from.'

They stood perfectly still, and waited. They didn't have to wait long; almost immediately a horde of naked, howling children came charging round the rock. They carried crude spears with fire-hardened tips, and their only garments were multi-coloured stocking caps or head bands.

Billy and Reave both had their guns out, but the wild children seemed to ignore them, and raced off in pursuit of the little fat man. They chased him for maybe a hundred yards, and then a well-flung rock brought him down. In an instant, the wild children were all over him. His screams were suddenly cut off short.

The Minstrel Boy swung round on Billy and Reave.

'Quick, let's get out of here.'

Reave continued to stare as the children milled round the man.

'What are they doing to him?'

The Minstrel Boy grimaced.

'Playing a game of tag. They play the terminal kind. Let's get out of here.'

The three of them broke into a run, their bags bumping against their hips. Their single purpose became to put as much distance between themselves and the children as possible while they still had the chance.

They ran as fast and as long as they could, but eventually had to stop for breath. The three of them stood together, their heads down and their hands on their knees, gasping for air. Finally Reave straightened up and pushed his long straight hair back from his forehead.

'Christ. Where in hell did those kids come from?'

The Minstrel Boy spread his hands.

'Who can tell? There's supposed to be hundreds of them roaming these plains.'

Reave shuddered, and hitched up his pack.

'Let's keep moving. The sooner we reach this here town, the better.'

The other two fell into step beside him. In the next hour of walking they saw a herd of huge misshapen apes plod across their path. They were well off in the distance, however, and didn't bother them. Later a monstrous flying thing swooped down ahead of them. Reave took a shot at it, but he missed. The thing croaked and flapped away. Finally, when they were just beginning to believe they were really lost, they saw the lights of Dogbreath. Honest yellow lights that shone out against the eerie glow of the plain.

As they came closer, they could make out the shapes of buildings, and finally they heard the sounds of people, laugh-ter, shouting, a dog barking and a fiddle scraping.

Dogbreath was little more than a single main street. Down one side was a saloon, a bar, a slot arcade, another saloon, a whore house, another slot arcade, and a general store. Down the other side was a

saloon, a slot arcade, another saloon, the Leon Trotsky Hotel, the town hall and the jail. Tucked away at the back of the main street were some dwelling houses and an abattoir. Dogbreath would have been a paradise of fun if it hadn't been so broken down and ratty.

Whoever had erected the predominantly wooden buildings seemed to have been incapable of constructing a right angle. They staggered, and looked in imminent danger of collapse. The decorations on the outside had been done with an amazing lack of either skill or taste. The only redeeming feature was that the crude, garish paintwork had, at least, chipped, peeled and mellowed to a kind of uniformity.

Electric light bulbs had been strung along the fronts of the saloons and slot arcades to lend them some kind of glamour and excitement. The effect was rather spoiled by at least half of them being blown and dead.

Despite the air of decay and dilapidation, the place was alive with people, hustling and jostling, scuffling through the sand and garbage that covered the street and helped to block out the light from inside the plain.

Billy, Reave and the Minstrel Boy slowly made their way down the street, looking around at the passing crowds.

'Sure are some weird people in this town.'

The Minstrel Boy took Reave by the arm.

'You want to keep those kind of remarks to yourself, Reave, old buddy. People here don't like to be talked about as weird.'

Reave pointed back down the street.

'I just saw a guy with orange hair, and six fingers on each hand. There sure wasn't nothing like that back in Pleasant Gap.'

'That's as maybe, but there are a lot of weird folk in this town. They more than constitute a majority, and they're very touchy about strangers pointing fingers and calling names. If you go on the way you're going you're quite liable to get your-self lynched.'

Reave shrugged.

'Okay, okay. But some of these folks are sure strange look-ing.'

'Yeah, sure they are, but just keep it to yourself. Okay?'

'Okay.'

They stopped in front of one of the saloons. Billy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'I sure could use a drink after all that walking.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced at him.

'You happen to have any money?'

Billy grinned.

'Sure, we got a bit left.'

'Let's go then.'

They pushed through the swing doors and a wave of noise, smoke and the smell of booze hit them like a slap in the face. They elbowed their way through the crowd and up to the bar. Reave's eyes were popping, but he kept his mouth shut. He had never seen such a diversity of skin colours, not only black, white, brown and yellow but green, blue, red and orange. There was an unimaginable variety of dress, style and even strange anatomical variations. Reave did his best to look straight ahead and show no surprise.

Billy hammered on the bar.

'Can we have some drinks over here?'

'Okay, okay, what do you want?'

'Three beers to start off with.'

'Three beers coming up.'

The bartender banged their mugs on the counter.

'Twenty-one.'

Billy fumbled in his pocket, and handed him three Pleasant Gap tens. The bartender looked at the bills blankly.

'What the fuck are these?'

Billy looked surprised.

'Money, of course. There's thirty there.'

The bartender began to look ugly.

'What kind of money do you call this?'

'Pleasant Gap money.'

'Then I suggest you fuck off back there and spend it. It ain't no good around here, we only take Dogbreath money.'

He signalled to two men on the other side of the room.

'Milt, Eddie. Throw these bums out of here.'

The three of them were grabbed by burly bouncers, hustled through the crowd and thrown out into the

street. As the Min-strel Boy picked himself up, he looked at the other two and shook his head.

'You two really don't know nothing, do you?'

A.A. Catto came out of the deep, total, dreamless sleep that came from dormax. She looked around the soft glow of the dimmed room, and stretched out a hand to the bedside console. The lights came slowly up, and she blinked again. The small clock on the console read 21.09. She became aware that she was hungry, and wondered if that was because she had become aware of the time. Did she feel hungry because she knew she ought to be hungry?

She slid off the bed and stood up. Through the perspex of the balcony, she saw that the sun was setting, turning an angry red through the shifting air, a romantic, Wagnerian sky loom-ing like some terrible vengeance over the dark shadows of the ruined buildings and squalid shacks. A.A. Catto hoped her brother Valdo was watching. It would fit so well, particularly if he was still into his Nazi craze. She wasn't sure if he was, though. She hadn't seen him for a month or so.

She stared for a while at the screen of the entertainment console, tapping her silver nails on the plastic coating. She made a mental note that the silver would need redoing in a couple of days. Maybe she should have something different this time, maybe metalflake.

She punched a button, and a show sprang into life. It was the fight games. Four naked L-4 children, with the numbers one to four tattooed on their backs in different colours, were struggling on the sandy floor of a small walled area. A com-mentary drawled out of the speakers.

'... And don't forget, the combatants have all been starved for two days and then given massive injections of dinamene to make them fierce and aggressive. Right now they are strug-gling over the piece of meat, and so far, none of them have noticed that there is a heavy steel bar in one corner of the arena.... And yes, number three has the meat, and one and two are both on him. You'll notice that the combatants have their heads shaved to stop...'

A.A. Catto flicked the channel selector round and came up with two fixed smiling Hostess-1s attempting intercourse with a bored-looking donkey while gales of canned laughter roared from the speakers. She scowled at the screen and punched the off button.

She lay back down on the bed and rang for her personal Hostess. Moments later an almost too pretty blonde in tight pink covers stood in the doorway.

'You rang, Miss?'

'I'm hungry.'

'You'd like to be served dinner here?'

'Screw dinner, I only just woke up. I want breakfast.'

'Shall I dial you a breakfast menu?'

A.A. Catto sat up and shook her head.

'No, no. I'll have orange juice, three poached eggs, whole-meal toast and coffee.'

The girl nodded.

'Yes, Miss.'

A.A. Catto liked to order her food directly through servants rather than dial it for herself. She knew that the only time the girl would taste any of the menu would be if she stole her leftovers. The girl turned to go, but A.A. Catto called her back.

'Tell me, girl, did you notice that I was naked?'

The girl coloured slightly and nodded.

'Yes, Miss.'

'You could hardly miss the fact?'

'No, Miss.'

'Do you like my body, girl?'

The girl blushed more.

'Yes, Miss.'

'Do you think it's a beautiful body?'

'Yes, Miss.'

'More beautiful than your body?'

'I think so, Miss.'

'Yes? Why?'

'Because you're one of the directorate, Miss. The direct-orate are the most beautiful people in the whole citadel.'

A.A. Catto smiled. This girl had been well trained.

'Tell me girl, would you like to touch my body? Would you like to handle it, play with it?'

The girl began to look frightened.

'I think so, Miss. I think that would be a wonderful ex-perience.'

Her training went deep. A.A. Catto laughed.

'Well, you won't get the chance. Go and get my breakfast.'

The girl hurried from the room. A.A. Catto stood up and reached for her robe. As she slipped into it, she smiled to herself. She really should try to resist baiting the servants, but it did relieve a few moments of



boredom. She went back to the main console and punched for information. The screen flick-ered into life with the image of another pink uniformed Hostess-1. This time she was a brunette.

'Information. May I help you?'

'What's happening?'

'Tonight, Miss Catto?'

'Not next year.'

'Tonight the Glick family are giving a formal dinner for Cynara Meltzer at 22.00.'

A.A. Catto scowled at the screen.

'Forget that. The Glicks are tiresome, Cynara Meltzer is tiresome, and the dinner will be tiresome. What else?'

'At 24.00 there is to be a party given by Juno Meltzer.'

A.A. Catto raised an eyebrow.

'Yes? Do you have any information as to what attractions she's providing?'

'No, Miss Catto, only that they are to be a surprise.'

A.A. Catto smiled. Juno Meltzer could be exceptionally wild at times. The surprises might even be surprising.

'Anything else?'

'I can get you the vu-screen schedules if you require them.'

A.A. Catto shook her head.

'If that's all, don't bother.'

'There is one thing, Miss Catto.'

'What?'

'I'm instructed to remind all callers that there is a full meet-ing of the directorate at 10.00 tomorrow.'

'Yeah sure, you reminded me.'

She snapped off the screen, and wandered idly to the entrance of the balcony. It was almost dark outside, and the perspex blister gave a distorted reflection of herself and the lighted room.

There was a hiss behind her as the door slid open, and her Hostess-1 came in with the breakfast tray. She hesitated inside the doorway.

'Would you like it here or in bed, Miss?'

'Oh, I'll go back to bed.'

The Hostess-1 nodded.

'Yes, Miss.'

She carried the tray through into A.A. Catto's bedroom, and A.A. Catto followed. She picked up the glass of orange juice and curled up on the bed.

'Run my bath.'

'Yes, Miss.'

'And then come back to attend me. You can help me bath, it'll be another chance for you to look at my body. You might even get the chance to touch it.'

'Thank you, Miss.'

A.A. Catto laughed.

'You're very well trained.'

'Miss?'

'Never mind, attend to the bath.'

The girl disappeared into the bathroom, and A.A. Catto pushed a finger of toast into one of the eggs. The problem that remained was what to wear to Juno Meltzer's party.

She finished toying with breakfast, and lit a cigarette. It was one of her personal blend, a lovingly reproduced mixture of Turkish tobacco and ground Nepalese hashish. As she smoked it, she reflected on the time and trouble it must have taken to obtain the contents of the cigarette. She flicked the ash over the remains of the meal. A.A. Catto took a primitive delight in spoiling food.

The Hostess-1 returned to tell her that the bath was ready, and A.A. Catto crossed the bedroom, slipped out of her robe and stepped into the sunken tub.

After she was dry again and the Hostess-1 had massaged her and done her hair, she asked for the peacock cape outfit to be laid out. She had had it hand made from an archaic print that she had discovered one bored afternoon in the directorate library. She had added some modifications of her own, and it seemed suitably perverse for Juno Meltzer's party.

For a while she sat naked in front of the pink glass mirror, studying her face and body. It pleased her to think how many of the sub-class women in the citadel took their idea of beauty from her vid-lounge image.

She had herself made-up, and then stood up so the Hostess-1 could perfume and dress her. Once finally dressed, she turned.

'What time is it?'

'23.35, Miss.'

'Damn, that means I have an hour to kill, I can't possibly turn up on time. Switch the screen to an entertainment chan-nel.'

The girl hurried to the console, punched buttons, and a bloody battle with tanks and infantry sprang into roaring life. Four men crouched behind a rock were incinerated by a burst of flame that lashed from the turret of a tank.

'Change the channel.'

A dozen or more couples writhed and squirmed in a tank of black oily liquid, to a background of electronic music.

'God no, try another.'

A comedian appeared, going through some sort of rapid-fire patter.

'Forget the channels.'

'What would you like, Miss?'

'A fast burst of 91 k.'

After the quick, pleasant radiation bath, she dismissed the girl and, careful not to crush her dress and cape, she sat for half an hour watching an ancient movie. Then she shut down the console and picked up the box that held her in-jectors. She gently pulled up her long black skirt and pressed the one marked altacaine against her thigh, and gasped with pleasure as the first rush of the drug rocketed round her system. She pressed the button twice more. That would see her flying for at least twenty hours.

She was ready for the party.

They stood in the main street of Dogbreath and looked at each other.

'How the fuck was I supposed to know they didn't take Pleasant Gap money?'

The Minstrel Boy mimicked Billy.

'How the fuck was I supposed to know? How the fuck are you supposed to know anything? Oh yes, I've got some money, let's have a drink, and you pull out that funny money and we get the bum's rush.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know.'

'No, you never fucking know.'

'Okay, okay. You made the point, what do we do now?'

'What do we do now? Nothing, man! We're fucking broke! We can't get a room, we can't get a meal and we can't get a drink. We can't even get the stage out of here.'

Billy and Reave fell silent. There didn't seem to be any-thing they could say. A drunk staggered out of the saloon, across the boardwalk and collapsed in the shadows. The Min-strel Boy grinned.

'I think we just fell on our feet.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. Follow me.'

The Minstrel Boy crossed to where the drunk was lying mumbling to himself, and crouched beside him. He started to go through his pockets. Reave looked at him in surprise.

'What are you doing?'

'Rolling a drunk, what do you think? Quick, come and help me.'

Billy and Reave knelt down beside the drunk. The Minstrel Boy gestured impatiently.

'Quick, go through his boots.'

They both pulled off a boot each, turned them upside down and shook them. The drunk protested feebly and then started giggling. A small package fell out. The Minstrel Boy leaned across and grabbed it.

'What's this?'

He unwrapped it.

'Fucking lucky day. Good quality heroin. We're doing all right, boys. Hundred and ten in coin, and about an ounce of smack in his boot. We can live with class for the next couple of days.'

They stood up and moved away from the drunk who was now snoring. Reave and Billy looked at the Minstrel Boy.

'What happens now?'

'Well, it'd be good to keep the scag and have ourselves a time, but we can't afford it. We'll take it down to the store and see what they'll give us for it.'

'Won't they want to know where we got it from?'

'Nah, they won't give two fucks. The only law and order in this town is dedicated to protect the mayor's interests and the police chief's interests. It doesn't extend to drunks on the street.'

They hurried down to the store. A small furtive man gave them a thousand in coin on the heroin, and they went off laughing. They avoided the saloon they'd been thrown out of, and in front of one of the others, the Minstrel Boy divided up the money.

'Remember to save at least a hundred for the stage, or we'll never get out of here.'

They pushed their way into the saloon. It was almost identical to the one they'd been thrown out of. This

time they made their way through to the bar, ordered drinks with a flour-ish, and paid in coin. The beers tasted good. The raw spirit that followed tasted even better.

A trio of girls walked past their table, pretending not to notice them. One of them, a tall black girl in shorts and halter of a metallic purple material, let her thigh brush against Reave's hand for a moment, before walking away with an exaggerated sway of her hips.

Reave began to get up to follow her, but the Minstrel Boy put a restraining hand on his arm.

'Hold on, man. Before you start having yourself a party, we ought to get ourselves a room at the hotel.'

Reave scowled.

'You sound like my mother.'

'You boys need a fucking mother, the way you handle things.'

Reave sat down again.

'Yeah okay, you told us already.'

They finished their beers, left the saloon and made their way down the street to the Leon Trotsky Hotel. It looked dim and deserted in comparison with the bustle of the saloons. Billy pushed open the door. Reave and the Minstrel Boy followed him into a dim foyer. The hotel smelled of dirt and decay, and their boots echoed in the hollow silence.

The only light was a small yellow bulb above the dusty reception desk, and as their eyes got used to the darkness they saw that the only furniture was two beat-up sofas and an aspi-distra that drooped sadly in its pot. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust that looked like it hadn't been disturbed for centuries.

'Can I help you, gentlemen?'

The three of them started and turned to see that a figure had emerged from a bead-hung doorway behind the reception desk.

'We're looking for some rooms.'

He was a small man with narrow shoulders and a pot belly. His large, pale, watery eyes watched from rimless glasses. His skin was a sallow olive colour, and he wore a dirty white suit, a rumpled black shirt and thin white tie. On top of his limp black hair he wore a dark red fez. He smiled ingratiatingly and rubbed his hands together. 'Three?'

Billy nodded.

'How long do you want them for?'

Billy looked at the other two.

'How long do we want to stay here?'

The Minstrel Boy glanced at the man.

'When does the next stage leave town?'

The little man consulted a yellowing timetable.

'Tomorrow, at midnight.'

'What time is it now?'

'Just after eleven.'

'Night or morning?'

'Night.'

'So we've got to wait twenty-five hours?'

'That's right.'

'That's how long we'll be staying.'

'That'll be twenty each. In advance.'

They all tossed coins on to the counter, and the little man scooped them up.

'My name's Mohammed. I'm your host.'

He picked three keys off a board behind him.

'If you follow me, I'll show you to your rooms.'

He came out from behind the desk and led them towards a flight of stairs that wound up towards pitch-dark upper floors. At the foot of them he stopped and turned on another dim yellow bulb on the first landing. A fat black cat that had been asleep on the third step raced past them and out of sight under one of the sofas.

They followed him up the first flight of stairs and along the landing. At the foot of the second flight he stopped, turned on another light, again dim and yellow, up on the second floor.

They went up four flights in this fashion. Stairs, landing, stop, click, and up again. On the fourth floor, Mohammed stopped and unlocked a door to a room. Billy let himself be ushered inside. He dropped his bag on the floor and Mohammed turned on the light.

'You like?'

'Uh... yeah.'

Mohammed slid out of the door and went to unlock the next two rooms for Reave and the Minstrel Boy.

Billy looked round the room. The kindest thing you could say about it was that it was minimal.

Mohammed's slow burn-ing light bulb shed its sickly glow over a plain iron single bed with two grey blankets and a slightly less grey sheet. On the floor was a yard square strip of worn carpet. There was a chipped washstand and a wooden chair, and that was it, apart from a small sepia photograph of a camel that hung above the bed in a black frame.

Billy kicked his bag under the bed, and walked down to the next room. The Minstrel Boy was looking out of the window. Billy sat down on the bed.

'Some hotel.'

'I've been in better jails.'

'Are we going out?'

'Could stay here and tromp roaches.'

'I'll go and get Reave.'

They found that Mohammed had turned off all the lights on his way back down to the foyer, and the return trip on the stairs was a series of near disasters.

Mohammed reappeared as they walked back through the foyer, and beckoned furtively to them.

'Hey, boys. Come over here, I got something to show you.'

Reave, Billy and the Minstrel Boy looked at each other questioningly. Without saying a word they seemed to settle it and strolled over to the desk.

'Okay, Mohammed, what have you got to show us?'

The little man put a plastic cube on the counter.

'Filthy tri-di?'

Inside the clear cube was a miniaturized scene. Tiny doll-like figures performed within its substance. It was two blonde girls in short pink uniforms beating a third who was bound and naked. The naked one squirmed a little in mock pain, but all three showed distinct traces of boredom. After a matter of seconds it became clear that the cube had been produced on a loop system, and there was only a single, short action which went on repeating itself. Mohammed grinned and looked side-ways at Reave, Billy and the Minstrel Boy.

'Pretty hot stuff, eh?'

Billy slowly shook his head.

'No.'

Mohammed looked disappointed.

'You no like?'

'No.'

'I got others, maybe you like them better.'

'No.'

Mohammed began to look as though he might burst into tears. He tried again.

'You boys going out to find some girls, maybe?'

'Maybe.'

'I can get you nice girls, they come right here, right to your room.'

'We'll find our own girls.'

They started to walk towards the door, but Mohammed came round the counter and stopped them.

'Listen, maybe you want to buy some hashish?'

The Minstrel Boy began to look annoyed. He took hold of one of Mohammed's lapels between two fingers.

'Why should we want to buy hashish off you? They sell as much as we could want right across the street at the store.'

'I sell much cheaper.'

Still holding him by the lapel, the Minstrel Boy walked Mohammed across to the reception desk.

'Your hustling is beginning to annoy me. Let's have a look at this wonderful hashish.'

The little man reached under the counter and produced a piece of black dope, about the size of a matchbox. The Min-strel Boy picked it up and sniffed it.

'How much?'

'Twenty.'

'Do the cops know that you're selling dope without a licence?'

'Fifteen.'

'I'll give you ten.'

'You'll break me.'

'Ten.'

'All right, all right. I was a fool to try and help ingrates like you.'



The Minstrel Boy pocketed the piece of hash and slapped a ten on the desk. He turned and made for the door. In the doorway, he turned and glanced back at Mohammed.

'If you've been through our bags when we get back, I'll kill you. Got it?'

Out in the street, things seemed to have slowed down a little. The crowds had thinned and a high proportion of drunks leaned against walls and lay in the gutter. The three strolled into the first saloon they came to. It was quieter and more peaceful on the inside as well. A poker game was in deep session in one corner. Beyond that the only signs of life were by the bar, where a number of men stood around, morosely drinking. About half the tables were taken up by drunks, their heads cradled in their arms, sleeping soundly. A string band was playing tired music on a small bandstand.

Reave went to the bar to get some drinks, while Billy and the Minstrel Boy sat down at a vacant table. The arrival of three new customers, apparently with money to spend, had an immediate effect on the bar girls. Within seconds three had closed in on the table, strutting and smiling.

'You gentlemen mind if we sit with you?'

Reave waved his arms in an expansive gesture.

'Go right ahead, be our guests.'

The ones who sat with Reave and the Minstrel Boy were attractive enough, but they could have easily come from Miss Ettie's. The one who sat beside Billy was the most amazing thing Reave had ever seen.

Her skin was a pale blue, and seemed to be made up of tiny reptilian scales. As far as he could see, she was completely without hair, but this enhanced, rather than detracted from her appearance.

The back of her head was covered by a kind of skull cap of multi-coloured sequins. Her long skirt was made of the same material, and slit up to her thigh. Apart from the cap, skirt and a pair of satin mules with ultra-high heels she was naked. A kind of necklace made of rows of much larger sequins hung in front of her small firm breasts, but did little to obscure them.

Billy put a hand on her arm.

'Is your skin real? I mean, really real?'

The girl laughed.

'That could cost you money to find out.'

'Is that a promise?'

She patted his cheek.

'No, honey. It's a profession.'

'What's your name, babe?'

'Angelina.'

One of the other girls giggled.

'Angelina the whore. No limit.'

Angelina flashed round on her.

'You shut that come-inside mouth of yours, bitch, or I'll set Ruby to tear your face off.'

She turned back to Billy.

'Take no notice of her, honey, she don't have any idea of how to behave. She can't leave the grease gun alone.'

The Minstrel Boy, his silver guitar in one hand and his girl in the other, went over to sit in with the string band. A few minutes later Reave also stood up and, with a wink at Billy, followed his girl up the stairs at the back of the saloon. Billy sent over for a bottle of mescal, and he and Angelina began to get acquainted.

The operation was going very well when a commotion started on the other side of the room. One of the sleeping drunks had woken up, and was wildly staring round the place.

'Where's that goddamn pig with my money? Where's the blue-skinned bitch gone with my fucking money?'

He caught sight of Angelina, and staggered across the room towards where she and Billy were sitting.

'I paid you for time, bitch, and I ain't had nothing yet.'

Angelina looked at him coldly.

'You busted out, buddy. I can't help that you fell asleep.'

The drunk grabbed Angelina by the wrist.

'I aim to get what I paid for.'

Billy jack-knifed to his feet.

'Take your hands off her.'

The drunk kept hold of Angelina, but swung round to look blearily at Billy.

'Butt out, sonny. I'm getting what's righteously mine.'

'I'm warning you. She's with me.'

'Fuck off, kid, or I'll rip your arms off.'

Billy swung at the drunk, and to his surprise he went down in a crash of overturning chairs. He came again, though, almost straight away, with a polished black tube in his hand. There was a shout from the bar.

'Laser!'

Everyone who was still awake hit the floor. A thin pencil of bright blue light flashed silently from the tube and swung down at Billy. Billy ducked and twisted, and it sliced through the table behind him. Billy found he had his own gun in his hand, and before the drunk could swing the laser back at him again, the gun exploded. There was a loud, frozen silence. A look of surprise came over the drunk's face. The laser slid from his fingers, and, almost in slow motion, he crumpled to the floor. The saloon seemed to breathe out. The bartender came across to where Billy was standing over the drunk with his smoking gun still in his hand. He knelt beside the body and put an ear to its chest.

'You killed him.'

'He went for me with a laser.'

The bartender held up his hands.

'It's nothing to me, kid. I'm just saying that he's dead. You could leave a twenty for the cleanup crew, though.'

Billy dropped his gun into its holster, and took a hit from the bottle of mescal. He tossed a twenty on to the table, and turned to Angelina.

'I've got to get out of here.'

She picked up her bag.

'Want me to come with you?'

'How much is that going to cost?'

She ran a pointed tongue round her blue lips.

'You just killed a man, honey. You can have me all for free.'

She/They moved forward, the two units carrying the fallen third cradled in her/their arms.

Forward, along the blue bridge that cut such a perfect line through the swirling kaleidoscope mists.

Forward, seeking a place of stasis where Her/Their power could be concentrated on healing Her/Their wounds.

Forward, creating the bridge in front of Her/Them.

Forward, with the bridge behind Her/Them smoking and boiling, finally becoming one with the swirling, shining, coloured chaos as Her/Their area of power moved on.

She/They had been alone from the beginning. It was Her/Their choice. The other beings who had, on occasion, used the order that She/They created for their own purposes had been so contaminated with the seeds of chaos that if they appeared too often, She/They had always moved on, removing the field of influence and leaving the area to disruptors and the shim-mering mists. There could be no serenity and

order where other beings came with their scattering influence. Since the beginning Her/Their being and purpose had been concentrated on creating an order sphere wherein She/They could find the real satisfaction.

She/They had devoted Her/Their infinite existence to that world of white sky, smooth surface resolved into perfect squares of alternate black and white, total density of the solid ground and total purity of clear air.

Her/Their being found its only satisfaction in the poetry of ultimate symmetry, in a purity of form that had been destroyed by the coming of the disruptors.

Her/Their memory of Her/Their life before the disruptors raged across the levels of the finite world was old and clouded. The most She/They could recall from that time was a longing for a cloistered, patterned existence. It came to Her/Them as indistinct fragments of pale contentment. She/They had long abandoned any hope that She/They might regain Her/Their place in that ordered work. The order that now maintained Her/Their being was the single purpose to reconstruct as much as She/They could of that which the disruptors had ruined and destroyed.

Her/Their wounds, the bridge across which She/They travelled, and most particularly the circling, twisting mists that insinuated, attacked and sought to engulf Her/Their sole symbol of order caused Her/Them pain and horror that were unique in Her/Their experience.

Although She/They used the entire residue of energy that was left from Her/Their creation of the bridge to break down, analyse and catalogue these impulses, She/They was intensely aware that the very existence of such phenomena as fear, pain and the awareness of danger had introduced disorder into the heart of Her/Their consciousness.

She/They loathed and hated the impulses that attacked Her/Them, but in that loathing She/They knew that She/They was Her/Their self producing disorder. The silence She/They prized so much was flawed with a high static sound, and the words that formed in it glowed a garish, ugly red,

'Irregular spiral.'

'Estimate product to be destructive.'

'Energy drain approaches critical.'

'Active destruct move at spiral results in tightening the circuits.'

'Emergency.'

'Willeffort fails to negate trend.'

'Passive acceptance reduces trend but increases spiral motion.'

'Paradox.'

'Paradox is not.'

'Paradox exists therefore is.'

'Contradiction produced.'

'Warning warning.'

'Reduce trend or increase speed.'

'Solve paradox.'

'Energy drain.'

The words were burning with a hideous brightness, crackling against themselves. The silence began to break up under the strain of gusts of white noise.

'Attempt order production by mathematic route out'

'Product of wave form.'

'Prime.'

'Root of wave form.'

'Prime.'

'Numerical escape blocked by prime number groups'

'Out, out, out.'

'Negative.'

The bridge began to turn, it assumed an elliptical and downward form. Inexorably it started to corkscrew.

'Class A emergency.'

'Disorder in terminology.'

'Terminology by definition is a factor for order.'

'Disorder as term becomes factor of definition.'

'Reject.'

'Rejection tightens spiral.'

'Stop.'

She/They stopped.

'Paradox flow up four points'

Cracks appeared in the bridge.

'Prepare passive state.'

'Wounds preclude total passivity.'

Her/Their form became spherical, but gradually one side began to flatten and streaks of colour began to creep across Her/Their reflective surface.

'Wounds render passivity partial.'

She/They resumed the triple form. A large section of the bridge fell away into the mist. Slowly She/They raised the energy wand. It glowed a dull red. She/They stood on the flat side of a blue hemisphere.

Slowly it began to rise, and the silence broke into a scream.

If Billy's mind hadn't been blown by the killing, it certainly was after Angelina had finished with him. She did everything that Miss Ettie's girls had ever done to him, and then took him into places that he had never been before.

Her blue skin was strangely cold. Afterwards, he told Reave that it was like fucking an energetic corpse. Fucking was, by no means, the end of it. It was little more than a beginning. After she'd sucked him and brought him on, she rushed him through to a series of numbers that took him higher and higher until he finally blew apart. That wasn't the end of it, either. She pulled a little induction coil from her bag. It didn't generate more than maybe ten volts, but it was sufficient to do alarming things to their nerves when each of them held a term-inal and their bodies came in contact. Her arms slid round him like blue snakes, and they started again. This time with the added electric jolt.

Billy's head was spinning and his body was exhausted by the time they'd worked out all the possibilities of the shock machine. He lay on his back and stared at the ceiling while Angelina ran her fingernails over his chest.

He was drifting in a half sleep when there was a furious pounding on the door. Billy woke with a start and reached towards the gun in his belt.

'Who is it?'

'Never mind who it is, open up.'

Billy carefully got up, and draped a blanket over his shoulder.

'Hold on, I'm coming.'

Holding his gun in one hand, he opened the door a tiny crack with the other.

It was immediately kicked open and the barrel of a huge .70 calibre recoil-less pistol was shoved under his chin.

'Police Department, freeze.'

Billy stood perfectly still as a huge beer gut of a man re-moved his gun, while his equally huge partner held the pistol at his throat.

The Dogbreath Police Department took pride in their appearance. They wore yellow metalflake helmets with a red star on the front and black visors. Their bodies were encased in black PVC one-piece suits with padding on the shoulders, ribs, elbows, crutch and knees, and decorated with a wealth of badges and insignia.

They were also well prepared. From a wide belt around their waists hung a riot stick, tear gas canisters, a stock prod, handcuffs and a narrow beam laser. All this was in addition to the .70 calibre recoil-less that each of them held in their pudgy hands.

The pistol was taken away from Billy's throat.

'Okay, relax, but don't try nothing or I'll blow your head off.'

The cop holding Billy's gun looked at his partner.

'Is he the one that shot the guy?'

The one holding the gun on Billy grinned.

'Must be, Angelina's up here with her shock box.'

Angelina sat up in bed.

'Screw yourself, pig.'

'Shut your mouth, honey, or we'll book you for L and F.'

The one with the gun prodded Billy in the stomach.

'So you're the gun-happy kid?'

Billy tried to explain.

'Listen, he pulled a laser on me...'

The cop slapped Billy across the face.

'We'll tell you when to talk.'

He pointed with his gun to the upright chair.

'Sit.'

Billy sat. The two cops stood in front of him.

'So you're the killer who blasts down citizens of Dogbreath with his fancy reproduction pistol.'

The one with his gun spun it on his finger. Billy tried again.

'He was roughing up Angelina, I hit him and he pulled a laser.'

'So?'

'It was self defence.'

'So?'

'I don't understand.'

'What makes you think Dogbreath has got any laws about self defence?'

'It wasn't my fault.'

'No? You shot him, didn't you?'

'But...'

'It's lucky for you, kid, that Dogbreath don't have no laws about killing, or you'd be in trouble.'

Billy looked bewildered.

'So what are you here for?'

'We don't like gun-happy kids in town.'

'But you said there was no laws...'

'We kill who we don't like. The stage leaves at midnight. Don't miss it.'

Billy shook his head vigorously.

'I won't.'

The cop pulled a pad of printed forms from a pouch on his belt.

'Sign here.'

'What is it?'

'Statement exempting the People's Metropolis of Dogbreath from all claims by agents or relatives of the deceased.'

Billy signed.'

'Okay, that'll be...'

The cop counted on his fingers.

'Conveyance Fee ten, Mortification Duty twenty, Disposal Fee twenty, and Law Enforcement Charge fifty. That's a round hundred altogether.'



'You mean I have to pay to go through this?'

'You better learn, kid. Nothing comes free.'

They gave him his gun back.

'Be on the stage.'

They left. Billy looked round at Angelina.

'What was that all about?'

'They shook you down for a hundred. You got taken, honey.'

'So what was I supposed to do?'

She licked her lips with a swift, lizard-like flick of the tongue.

'You could have killed them, and run.'

'Wouldn't that have been overdoing it?'

'You don't have any sense of class. No drama, no romance.'

Billy started to get into bed, but Angelina pushed him away.

'I've gone off you, honey. I don't think I want you any-more.'

'What's the matter with you?'

'The way you handled those cops, you're just no good, babe.'

Billy began to get annoyed.

'I was good enough to handle your buddy with the laser.'

Angelina thought about it, and then slowly rubbed her thighs together.

'Yeah, I guess you were at that. Come on back to bed.'

After another strenuous hour with Angelina and the induction coil, Billy passed out.

He woke up with Reave shaking him.

'Wake up, old buddy. The stage leaves in an hour.'

Billy yawned.

'Have I been out for that long?'

'You have indeed.'

Billy sat up rubbing his eyes.

'Got a smoke?'

Reave handed him a cigar, and then struck a match. Billy inhaled and coughed.

'Did you have a good time last night?'

Reave grinned and winked.

'I'll say.'

Billy got out of bed and struggled into his clothes. Reave laughed.

'You look rough, did you have a heavy night?'

Billy pulled on one of his cowboy boots.

'Heavy.'

'Yeah? What happened? Did you come back here with that blue chick? She looked weird.'

'She was weird.'

Reave poked him in the ribs with his elbow.

'Come on Billy, it's me, Reave. What happened? Don't be so cagey.'

Billy took another cigar from Reave and sat down on the bed. He began reluctantly to tell him about the killing in the saloon and the scenes that followed.

'... And then, to top it all, the fucking cops took a hundred off me.'

The atmosphere of all boys together telling tales dropped away. Reave stroked his chin and looked worried.

'How much money have you got left?'

'About eighty, why?'

Reave looked guilty.

'I don't have more than that left myself.'

'So? We've got a hundred and sixty between us, and the Minstrel Boy must have some more money.'

There was an awkward silence. Reave walked across to the window and looked down at the street.

'That's the trouble. I haven't seen him for hours.'

'You mean he hasn't been back?'

'There's not a sign of him, and the stage goes soon. I mean, if he don't show up in the next few minutes we're in trouble. We don't even know where the fucking stage goes to.'

Billy stuffed the last of his things into the bag and did up the straps.

'We don't need the Minstrel Boy to nursemaid us.'

He strapped on his gun belt.

'We'll go down to the stage, and if he doesn't get on it, we'll just ride it down to the next town and see what happens there.'

Reave slung his own bag over his shoulder. He still looked unhappy.

'I don't like it, Billy.'

Billy turned in the doorway.

'What's the matter with you? We've done okay so far. We don't need anyone to look after us.'

Reave shrugged, and followed Billy out of the door.

'Maybe you're right.'

In the foyer Mohammed stood behind the counter and watched them walk to the door.

'Good luck on your journey, boys.'

Billy glanced back at him.

'Yeah, right.'

Whatever Billy and Reave had expected, the stage was a total surprise to them. It was like something out of a legend. Billy had seen pictures of things like it, back in Pleasant Gap. The battered wooden coach with its high spoked wheels, small square windows, three on each side, and the brass rail round the luggage rack on the roof. None of the pictures had shown anything like the four huge green lizards that were harnessed to it, and squatted on their haunches, waiting for the journey to start.

On the boardwalk, beside where the stage waited, there was a signboard. Overland Hollow City and Dogbreath Stage Co. - Passengers Wait Here. Only one man stood beside the sign. He wore a wide-brimmed bat hat with a band of silver and turquoise links, and an ankle-length, dirty yellow duster coat. His pin-stripe trousers were tucked into high black boots. As Billy and Reave approached, he turned and they saw he had a weather-beaten brown face with a blond drooping moustache and short pointed beard. A strap across his chest, outside his denim work shirt, indicated that he was wearing a shoulder holster. He looked Billy and Reave up and down.

'Well now, two more for the stage. Where you boys headed?'

Billy shrugged.

'Anywhere, we're just drifting along.'

The man stroked his beard.

'You better stay on the stage right through to Hollow City. This here stage only stops at two other places. Sade and Galilee. Galilee is bad, and Sade you don't even want to talk about in broad daylight.'

Billy and Reave looked at each other.

'Looks like it's Hollow City for us.'

Two men came down the boardwalk. Both wore peaked caps and heavy fur coats. One carried a long whip, while the other cradled a wicked-looking riot gun in the crook of his arm. The one with the gun climbed up on to the driver's box of the stage, while the other stopped in front of Billy, Reave and the man in the hat and long coat.

'Stage is leaving, let's have your fares.'

The man dropped some coins in the driver's hands and climbed into the coach. Billy was the next in line.

'How much to Hollow City for the two of us?'

It didn't look as though the Minstrel Boy was going to show.

'Two hundred.'

Billy felt an empty feeling hit his stomach.

'How far can we get on seventy-five each?'

'Galilee.'

Billy thought about what the man in the hat had just said. Then he thought about what the police had said the night before.

'I guess it better be Galilee then.'

They paid the driver and climbed inside the coach. The man in the hat looked at them inquiringly.

'Thought you were going to Hollow City?'

Billy scowled.

'We were, but we found we only had enough money to make it as far as Galilee.'

The man shook his head.

'That's too bad, boys. Rather you than me.'

Reave looked at him.

'What's wrong with Galilee?'

'They don't like strangers.'

Billy was about to ask him to go into more detail when the coach gave a lurch and then slowly began to rattle down the main street of Dogbreath. Once out of the town, the driver whipped up the lizards and soon they were bouncing over the plain at a merry pace. Reave grinned at Billy.

'Sure beats walking.'

Billy sighed.

'I guess it does.'

The man took off his hat, and laid it on the seat beside him. He fished a flask out of his coat, took a hit from it and offered it to Billy. Billy accepted the flask and took a healthy swig. It felt as though his mouth and throat were on fire. His eyes watered, and he coughed.

'What in hell is this?'

The man winked.

'You know what they say. Don't ask no questions.'

Billy passed the flask to Reave, who, despite a little more caution, went through the same performance. He handed the flask back to the man, who took another swallow, put the cap back on the flask and pocketed it.

'If we're going to be travelling together, I'd best introduce myself. People call me the Rainman.'

He stuck out a hand. Billy and Reave both shook it.

'I'm Billy, and he's Reave.'

'Pleased to know you.'

The stage rattled on, and Billy wondered if he ought to ask the Rainman what exactly was wrong with Galilee. Before he could say anything, Reave started a conversation with him.

'If you don't mind me asking, why do people call you the Rainman?'

The Rainman laughed.

'Because I bring on the rain.'

'Huh?'

'These stasis towns, you know, they get bored and they hire me on. Ain't you never heard my slogan?'

Reave shook his head.

'Can't say I have.'

The Rainman recited.

'Change your weather, change your luck. Teach you how to... find yourself.'

'Neat slogan.'

'I think so.'

'What I can't figure is why these people want the weather changed. Nobody grows nothing since Stuff Central set up in business.'

The Rainman grinned knowingly.

'They don't. Not until I get to town.'

'So what happens?'

'Well, I just ramble into town, hang around for a couple of days, tell a few people about how the weather used to be in the ancient days. I tell them about rain, clouds, sunshine, showers, thunder and hurricanes, and pretty soon they get to thinking about how dull it gets with the old white sky and even temper-ature, and that's the time I make them an offer.'

'An offer for what?'

'An offer to lay on some weather.'

Reave looked impressed.

'You can really do that?'

'Sure can.'

He glanced up at his bag on the rack.

'Got me this little old limited-field disrupter, trapped it myself out in the nothings a few years back, and I ain't been short of a meal or a drink or a woman since.'

'So what exactly do you do?'

'It's simple, son. I just set up that disrupter in the middle of those bored old stasis towns and give him a couple of kicks to get him going, and bingo. They got weather. Rain, snow, heat-wave, lightning, fog, as much weather as they could want. Of course, it ain't exactly like it was in the old days. They don't have the same weather for more than ten minutes at a time, and now and then things get a bit out of hand, and they maybe get a hurricane or an earthquake or something like that that they didn't exactly bargain for. When that happens, I find myself leaving town in a hurry, but it works out okay in the end.'

Reave scratched his head.

'What happens when these people get all this weather? We never had anything like that in Pleasant Gap.'

The Rainman laughed again.

'Son, you should see them go. They just about go crazy. Dancing about, singing and shouting. And the women, oh boy, you should see those women get it on. And me, well, I started it all and that puts the good old Rainman right at the front of the line.'

'Sure sounds like a good life.'

The Rainman nodded.

'It is. 'Cept most towns get tired of weather after a few days and begin to hanker after everything getting back to normal. That's when they pay me off and I shut off Wilbur, that's the pet name I call the disruptor, and it's time to move on. Like you say, though, it ain't a bad life.'

Billy started to take an interest in the conversation. He looked at the Rainman.

'You sound as though you don't have too much regard for these stasis towns.'

The Rainman shook his head.

'I don't, and I must have seen a hundred of them since I got hold of old Wilbur.'

'What's wrong with them?'

'Oh, nothing really. It's just that they're so goddamn self-satisfied. You know, they sit there, inside the field of their generator, everything they need coming in on a stuff beam. After a while they seem to fold in on themselves, refuse to believe there's anything different from their little world. They start to get so fucking narrow, some then really turn weird.'

'Weird?'

'Yeah, these little towns all get caught up on some stupid detail and build their whole lives round it.'

Billy looked interested.

'Is Galilee like that?'

'Yeah, they're all crazy.'

'Crazy?'

'Yeah, they have this thing about work. I mean, everything they need comes in on a stuff beam, but they have this kind of religion thing about work. They work all the time at these pointless jobs, hard physical work for maybe ten hours, a day. They have this mad priesthood which keeps everybody hard at it. It's a terrible place to get busted for vagrancy. They'll have you breaking up rocks with a goddamn hammer. You wouldn't believe the way they carry on around Galilee.'

Reave looked alarmed.

'And this is the place we're heading for?'

The Rainman nodded sombrely.

'If I was you, I'd get the hell out of it as quick as possible. It's no place for freewheelers and ramblers.'

They rode on in silence for a while. All of them were lost in their own thoughts. Outside the coach, the glowing plain seemed to go on for ever. After about two hours, the driver leaned down and yelled.

'We're hitting the nothings, better switch on your generators.'

Billy punched the on button on his porta-pac and glanced at the Rainman.

'Doesn't this coach have its own generator?'

'Sure it does, it's under that canvas sheet at the back, but it's an old beat-up bunch of junk and it ain't too reliable.'

'Why are we going into the nothings at all?'

The Rainman looked at him as though he was an imbecile.

'If you don't go into the nothings, how the fuck do you get anywhere?'

'But how does the driver know where he's going?'

'He don't.'

Billy and Reave were beginning to get confused.

'Then how do we get anywhere?'

'The lizards.'

'The lizards?'

'Sure, them old lizards seem to know where to head when they get into the nothings. Leastways, they usually come out where they're supposed to.'

'Usually?'

Billy thought about his life being in the hands of the huge lumbering green monsters that had sat scratching themselves in the street at Dogbreath. The Rainman shrugged.

'A few stages don't turn up. That's why people don't move around much.'

Billy stared out of the window at the swirling colours that flashed and blended and faded back into the ever-present grey. Apart from the occasional lurch, there was no indication that the coach was moving in any direction at all. Looking out into the nothings Billy was filled with a deep depression that he could find no logical reason for. He began thinking about what the Rainman had told him about Galilee. It seemed as though they'd really made a mess of things by losing the Minstrel Boy. Billy didn't want to wind up on



some religious nut's chain gang.

Then they were out of the nothings and running on a strip of barren dusty desert. The only things that grew under the hot red sky were twisted thorns and stunted cacti. In the distance Billy could make out what looked like a walled city.

As they drew near, the city revealed itself to be a grim, forbidding place. It had high white walls, behind which Billy could make out the pointed tops of dark buildings. The coach seemed to be heading towards a pair of sinister gates made of some kind of embossed black metal. It was then that Billy saw something that made his stomach twist.

Outside the walls and a few yards from the gate was an enormous gibbet. It stood like a huge angular tree, or the mast of an ancient sailing ship that had sunk into the sand. There must have been a full fifty bodies hanging from it, men, women and children. Evil-looking crows circled the ghastly structure, picking choice titbits from the dead.

The driver didn't take the coach into the city, however. Before the trail reached the gate, it crossed another that ran parallel with the walls. At the intersection a figure was waiting. It had a broad black hat that flopped to hide its face, and a black cloak that concealed its body. The driver halted the coach beside it and hollered out.

'Sade.'

The figure opened the door of the coach and climbed inside. Billy had a brief flash of a deathly white hand with purple nails and heavy silver rings. Then it vanished beneath the cloak. The figure seated itself in the corner, as far as possible from Billy, Reave and the Rainman.

The Rainman held out his hand as he'd done to Billy and Reave.

'Howdy stranger. People call me the Rainman, maybe we should get acquainted seeing as how it's a long ride to Hollow City.'

The stranger gave a sharp hiss, and moved even further into the corner. The Rainman shrugged.

'Suit yourself, just trying to be sociable.'

He settled back into his seat and stared out of the window. The coach was still rushing through the same parched landscape with its baleful red sky.

It was about then that the stage hit a rock or something and was jolted a foot into the air. The Rainman's bag crashed to the floor. As he reached down to pick it up, it began to smoke and dissolve. He looked at Billy and Reave in alarm.

'Wilbur's woken up, and he's mad. Grab hold of me, there's no knowing what can happen - and you, stranger.'

He reached out towards the figure in black, but it twisted violently away from him. The sudden movement tipped its hat, and for an instant showed the pale face of a beautiful but incredibly evil woman.

Then Wilbur started to move and everything shimmered and dissolved.

A.A. Catto walked at a suitably stately speed down the moving corridor that led to the Velvet Rooms. She looked at herself in a small pocket mirror. Her features were perfect, the straight aristocratic nose, the large pale blue eyes and the sensuous mouth with its trace of cruelty.

A.A. Catto was extremely satisfied with herself.

The Velvet Rooms were an ideal place for a party. Their floor, walls and ceiling were covered in purple velvet, and the main floor was hydroelastic and sections could be made soft or rigid by the touch of a control. Jutting out of the main floor was a broad terrace of pure white marble, with a baroque balustrade and a wide staircase that swept down to the floor.

It was on the terrace that A.A. Catto made her entrance. Directly she stepped inside the Velvet Rooms, the familiar atmosphere of opium smoke, incense and chatter swirled around her, and she looked across the party. Bruno Mudstrap and his yahoo friends already had the floor at soft and were rolling round, pawing each other. A.A. Catto decided to stay on the terrace. A Hostess-1 came up behind her with a tray of drinks and A.A. Catto took one. She took a careful sip. She was always careful with drinks at Juno Meltzer's parties. There was no knowing what pleasant concoctions Juno might serve to her guests.

A.A. Catto was attempting to guess the ingredients of the drink when she heard a languid voice from behind her.

'A.A. Catto, you came. How nice. I believe your brother's here somewhere.'

Juno Meltzer had spared no effort to be the most noticed person at her party. She was completely naked apart from her jewellery, and her body had been treated so the flesh had become transparent. It was as though she was made of clear plastic, inside which was the red and blue tracery of veins and arteries, the white moving muscles and pink candy-stick bones. Her hair had been dressed so it looked like spun glass. A.A. Catto regarded her with frank admiration.

'You look very impressive, Juno.'

Juno Meltzer smiled.

'I thought I ought to make an effort for my own party.'

'Isn't it awfully dangerous?'

'I don't really care. What are a few cells, one way or another? And anyway, it's so exciting. Whoever I have to-night will be able to watch what happens inside me. That ought to do something for them.'

A frowned creased A.A. Catto's smooth forehead.

'It could be a little undignified.'

Juno Meltzer waved her hand in rejection of the idea.

'My lovers have seen me in every kind of position, darling, but I think I have enough breeding never to be undignified.'

Both women allowed themselves a brittle laugh, and then Juno Meltzer steered A.A. Catto to a long buffet table.

'Perhaps you'd like to eat something?'

The table was full of the rarest and most exotic delicacies, arranged in elaborate constructions. The centre piece of the whole buffet was a huge dish of chilled and crushed straw-berries, upon which a beautiful young L-4 girl, she couldn't have been more than fourteen, lay perfectly still, her body providing a unique receptacle for all manner of sweetmeats. A.A. Catto picked up a silver spoon and took some chocolate ants that were heaped where the girl's pubic hair should have been. Then she put down the spoon and with her fingers took a morello cherry from one of the girl's nipples and pepped it into her mouth. She turned to Juno Meltzer.

'Is the girl dead?'

It was hard to read Juno Meltzer's transparent face, but A.A. Catto thought she detected a trace of disappointment.

'Of course not. She's fully conscious. All we did was to have her pre-frontals radiated out. She does exactly what she is told without a thought. Bruno and his gang will have a great time with her once all the food's been consumed.'

The two women parted and began to circulate, making the small talk with people they really didn't want to know that was the traditional preliminary to every party. A Hostess-1 presented A.A. Catto with a blue glass opium pipe, and when she finished it she felt ready to move into second gear. She sought out Juno Meltzer.

'When does the fun begin, darling? I hope the human plate wasn't the big surprise.'

Juno Meltzer shook her head most mysteriously.

'Any moment now the entertainment will start.'

The end section of the floor became rigid, and formed a low semi-circular stage. Some Hostess-1s politely persuaded Bruno Mudstrap and his cohorts that maybe they'd like to move back and watch the show.

A.A. Catto slowly descended the marble staircase and sank into a reclining position on the soft part of the velvet floor. De Roulet Glick spotted her, and hurried to her side.

'A.A. Catto, it's so wonderful to see you. I wonder...'

'Get lost, Glick. I find you loathsome.'

'But...'

'Loathsome, Glick.'

De Roulet Glick slunk away like a whipped puppy.

Hostesses moved among the guests with drinks and opium, and then the music faded and the lights dimmed. A troupe of tiny people appeared from a concealed door and the lights focused on the impromptu stage.

They were L-4s who had been reduced to a height of not more than sixty centimetres by some kind of DNA adjustments. They played miniature instruments, sang and did acrobatics. A.A. Catto yawned. What kind of cornball idea was this? The transparency treatment must have damaged Juno Meltzer's brain.

The Hostess-1s moved among the guests again and, along with the others, A.A. Catto found herself handed an ornate, leaf-blade knife. The midgets continued with their absurd pantomime.

Gradually A.A. Catto found her mood was changing, she was becoming irritable. The irritability turned to anger, and the anger to a cold hate. She realized that there was a wide-band alphaset being used. Juno Meltzer's surprise was about to be sprung. It was the midgets that cracked first. One of them, a comparatively tall male, cried out in a high trilling voice.

'Now, brothers and sisters! Slay the oppressor!'

Squeaking, they rushed at their audience. Before A.A. Catto could get to her feet a tiny woman had struck at her with a small sword. As the blow fell it became clear that the sword was only painted balsa wood. It snapped and A. A. Catto swung her own inlaid steel blade at the L-4 and cut her practically in two. Leaping to her feet she hacked at the little people, cutting off heads and limbs in a savage fury. The rest of the guests were joining in with relish. In five minutes it was all over. The L-4s had all been slaughtered.

A.A. Catto felt her emotions change. Someone had adjusted the alphaset, and a feeling of wellbeing crept through the Velvet Rooms. A team of Hostess-2s cleared away the tiny corpses and removed the blood. A.A. Catto sank back to the floor.

She felt positively good. So good, in fact, that she was actively pleased when her brother Valdo pushed up her black skirt and began to caress her thighs.

Reave, Billy and the Rainman clung desperately together. There were no words to describe what they were going through. Disruption patterns filled the sky, and glowing things flashed past them.

Their sense of down kept shifting, and in their minds they seemed to be falling in constantly changing directions. In a similar way to when they had walked through the nothings, the idea of time became warped and twisted. One moment they floated through a curving, ribbed pink tube, and the next they were dropping past glowing perspective lines. The paradox was that although they seemed to slip rapidly from one plane to the next, while they were actually experiencing a phenomenon it was as though it had been going on for ever.

After what seemed like both an eternity and a few moments, they hit something. Billy fell heavily and twisted his shoulder. Painfully, he picked himself up and looked for the others. Reave and the Rainman were sprawled beside him, but there was no sign of the strange woman in black.

The three of them climbed to their feet and looked around. They were in a narrow stone-flagged alley, on each side of which were high, windowless granite walls. The place had a hard, forbidding atmosphere.

'So where are we?'

'Somewhere, and that's a comfort in itself.'

'Think we ought to take a look round? It's a gloomy kind of place.'

Grey seemed to be the key note of everything they could see. The sky was the colour of slate, the granite buildings and flags echoed the same theme, and dark, dirty water trickled down a gutter in the middle of the alley. Reave shivered.

'It's none too warm.'

Billy nodded.

'This place gives me the creeps.'

The Rainman shrugged.

'We ain't going to improve matters by standing round com-plaining.'

He flipped a coin to see which way they should go. It came up tails, and they started down the alley. They'd only gone a few paces when men appeared at both ends of the alley. Call-ing them men was rather stretching the point. They had coarse, ape-like features and their arms hung nearly to their knees. They wore black tunics and leggings, and leather helmets with an iron strip that hung down to protect the nose. On the front of the tunics was a design that consisted of an eye surrounded by stylized flames. In their hands they held dull iron tubes that Billy assumed were guns of some kind.

'Halt!'

Billy started to run, but there was a deafening bang and a hail of nuts, bolts, nails and assorted lumps of metal whistled over his head. Billy stopped, and stood very still. A group of the men surrounded him. They were shorter than either Billy, Reave or the Rainman, but they had massive chests, shoulders and arms. A hand covered in warts and thick bristles was thrust under Billy's nose.

'Papers!'

'Papers?'

'Papers, snaga, papers!'

'I don't have any papers.'

'No papers? No papers? Everyone has papers, filth.'

'I don't have any papers. I just fell out of the nothings.'

One of the creatures punched Billy hard in the mouth, and Billy was knocked to the paving stones. The creature who had hit him roared down at him, showing sharp yellow teeth.

'The nothings are forbidden, worm. You are a prisoner of the Shirik.'

Billy was hauled roughly to his feet, his arms were dragged behind him, and a pair of manacles snapped round his wrists. Reave and the Rainman received similar treatment, and sur-rounded by the creatures who called themselves the Shirik, they were marched down the alley.

They turned into a wider street that was paved with the same granite as the alley and surrounded by the same high, menacing buildings. It was Billy's first chance really to look at the sinister new city. As far as he could see it was built from the same sombre grey stone, topped by steeply sloping roofs of darker grey slate. The total lack of colour touched Billy with an edge of fear. Another feature that seemed to be absent from the high dour buildings was windows. Billy could see no open-ings near the ground, and it was only high up under the roofs that he could make out some narrow slits. The most fright-ening thing about the city was that it was completely silent. Apart from the strange apemen that surrounded him, there was nobody in the streets, no birds fluttered round the roof tops, and the city looked totally deserted.

After walking for some three hundred yards, the party came to a doorway with writing over it in some strange script. Billy, Reave and the Rainman were bundled inside, pushed down a corridor and into a stone-floored room where another of the apemen sat behind a high wooden desk. He looked up as the room filled with people, and barked at Billy's captors.

'What's this? What's this?'

'Prisoners, Uruk sir. Wandering without papers.'

'No papers? No papers?'

He climbed down from his stool and came out from behind the desk. He jabbed at Billy with a thick stubby finger.

'Where's your papers, filth?'

'I don't have no papers. I only just arrived in the city.'

The finger jabbed again.

'Arrived? Arrived? How you arrive? You couldn't pass Black Gate without papers.'

'We came out of the nothings, a disrupter got us and we finished up here. We don't even know where we are.'

The Uruk's small red eyes narrowed and he peered intensely at Billy. He paced up and down. One of the group that had brought in Reave shuffled his feet and coughed.

'The Eight. P'raps we should report this to the Eight.'

The Uruk sprang across the room and punched the one who had spoken.

'Eight? Eight? I'm the Uruk for this section. I say what gets reported to the Eight.'

The Shirik wiped blood from his mouth and spat.

'You won't be Uruk for long if one of the Eight found out you'd not been telling things they wanted to know, you'd have the skin taken off you, and the flesh, too.'

The Uruk flashed round and kicked the Shirik hard in the groin. With a scream, the Shirik dropped to his knees. The Uruk swung his ironshod boot at the Shirik's head and the Shirik rolled over and lay still. The

Uruk faced the other Shiriks.

'See that? See that? That's what'll happen to any others of you filth who talk fancy.'

He turned back to Billy, Reave and the Rainman.

'No papers, come from the nothings. What tale you scum trying to give me? The Eight going to hear about you. They'll deal with your tales.'

He swung round on the Shiriks.

'Six of you process them, and the rest back on patrol. Jump, I said!'

Billy, Reave and the Rainman were released from their manacles and hastily stripped. Their clothes and possessions were stacked on the Uruk's desk. He prodded the heap.

'We keep this for the Eight. Take them down.'

The three of them had their manacles replaced, this time with their arms in front of them instead of behind their backs, and were marched naked into another corridor. The guards in front of them stopped at an arched doorway, and one of them unlocked a huge door of dark wood studded with iron nails.

They descended a winding stone staircase with guards in front of them and behind. Narrow corridors radiated out from the foot of the stairs, and the three were pushed and kicked down one of them. The leading guard unlocked another door, this time a steel one with a small peephole in it, and they were all thrown into the same narrow cell.

The cell was about six feet wide and ten feet long. Its walls were made of the same granite, and in places it ran with slimy dampness. There were no windows in the cell, and the only light came from a yellow globe high up in the door. The floor was covered with damp straw, and an open drain ran along the far wall. Reave flopped to the ground.

'We really did it this time.'

Billy and the Rainman sat down as well. Billy tugged in frustration at his manacles, and winced as the metal bit into his wrists.

'If we only knew where the hell we were.'

He glanced at the Rainman.

'You got any idea what this place is?'

The Rainman shook his head.

'I never seen anything like this. It's not the usual stasis town. This looks like something different, something I ain't even heard about before. We're in trouble, boys.'

Reave slumped against the wall.

'You can say that again.'

A rat scuttled down the drain, and wriggled through the little opening where the drain continued into the next cell.

'We've really got to get out of here.'

'Yeah, but how?'

'Fuck knows.'

They lapsed into thought, and Billy's attention kept going to the hole through which the rat had gone. He stooped over, and knelt down beside the foul smelling gutter.

'Hello, hello in there.'

There was a grunt from the other side of the hole, and then a blunt hairy hand was thrust through the space. It grabbed one of Billy's hands and tried to drag it into the next cell. Billy tugged it free, and looked round at the others.

'Don't look as though we're going to get any help from that direction.'

A glum silence fell over Billy, Reave and the Rainman. They slumped on the damp straw. The chill began to get to them. Reave watched his legs slowly turn blue, and very soon, all three's teeth had begun to chatter uncontrollably.

'Dear god, how long do we stay stuck in here?'

Billy jumped to his feet and hammered on the door with his fists.

'Hey out there. What the fuck's happening?'

His fist made little more than a dull thud on the thick wood of the door, and no sound came from the outside. Frustratedly he beat on the door and then sank to the floor.

'We've fucked up good.'

The other two shuddered and nodded.

The gloomy silence descended again. Only the occasional rustle of the straw punctuated their paranoia. Reave remembered Miss Ettie's. It was worlds away.

The lights of memory dimmed as the blackness of cold and despair closed around Reave. They wouldn't be wandering heroes. They'd blown it and wound up in a filthy cell. They'd lost the bet for fortune, adventure and experience.

Just as Reave had decided that he was a loser, a familiar voice echoed from outside the cell.

'... And you, shiteater, under para 4, section 1, a registered minstrel gets himself into all and any public administration buildings. Here's my fucking card, so open the door, Got it?'

Billy's and Reave's heads both snapped up.



'The Minstrel Boy, here?'

They jumped up and stood by the door. More voices came from outside.

'Not possible. No one goes into cell till Ghfshn kh come to interrogate.'

'And it says in the Code that I go anywhere.'

'Not possible.'

'Shirik Precinct Houses come under the public administration order of the Ghfshn kh. Right?'

'Yes?'

'So Shirik Precinct Houses are public administration buildings? Right?'

'Yes?'

'So minstrels, and namely me, gets to go where I like in public administration buildings. That means Shirik buildings, so open up.'

'It's against regulations.'

'If you don't, it's against the Code, and I'll report it.'

'Code?'

'Code.'

'But regulations...'

'Look at it this way, scumbag. If you break the Code it's a hanging deal, and that's it. The regulations, the worst thing that can happen to you is a flogging. Know what I mean? Make it easy on yourself.'

'But...'

'Ever thought about it, piggio? Hanging, I mean, how it must feel and all, swinging away and choking, your hands tied behind your back, and just nothing you can do about it.'

There was a reluctant scraping of keys in the door, and it swung inwards. It was a very different Minstrel Boy who stepped into the cell.

The thin white face was hidden behind huge black multi-faceted glasses that made him look like he had the eyes of some grotesque insect. The halo of hair was still there, but it had been dyed white. He wore a dark green lizard-skin frock coat over a black ruffled shirt, velvet trousers and high black boots with silver fastenings. The silver guitar hung from a heavy strap inlaid with coloured stones.

Billy and Reave bombarded him with questions.

'Where are we, man?'

'How the hell did you get here?'

'How do we get out of here?'

The Minstrel Boy held up his hands.

'Hold it! Hold it! Dumbo behind me might suddenly de-cide that there's nothing in the regulations says I get to talk to you. So listen. If you can just hold on a while longer I'll try and get you out of here. Okay?'

'How soon?'

'I don't know. It ain't easy. You won't be going anywhere.'

'Where are we?'

'Dur Shanzag.'

'Dur Shanzag?'

'I can't talk now. Don't worry, I'll swing it. I don't know how you could get into any more shit if you worked at it.'

'Okay, okay. We know, just try and get us out.'

'I told you, don't worry.'

He stepped back out of the cell and the door was slammed shut. Briefly it opened again.

'What's the other guy called?'

'The Rainman.'

'Okay, I'll see what I can do for him.'

The Minstrel Boy ducked out, and again the door was slammed. Billy and Reave looked at each other.

'What the hell. Did that happen?'

'Seemed to.'

'But his clothes and everything?'

'Who knows?'

The Rainman stood up.

'Who was your friend?'

'The Minstrel Boy, a guy we met on the road back in Graveyard.'

'Some useful friend to have in a strange city.'

'I sure hope so.'

'And me, boy, I can tell you. Say you met him in Grave-yard?'

'Sure, we travelled with him from there to Dogbreath. You know Graveyard?'

'Graveyard, sure I know Graveyard. Jived up many a thunderstorm for them guys to slide their old rigs through.'

He looked at them intently.

'What did he look like, back in Graveyard?'

'Much the same, only with dirty blue jeans instead of those fancy clothes, and his hair was dark. Why?'

The Rainman shook his head.

'It's nothing. One of those things stuck in the back of your mind that you can't quite bring out. Maybe it'll come to me later.'

They waited, straining their ears for any possible footfall, but nothing happened. It had long ago become impossible to gauge the passage of time. Billy and Reave had lost that skill altogether when they first stepped into the nothings. The sudden appearance of the Minstrel Boy receded and became confused. They began to think it was an absurd way of snap-ping their minds. To add to their problems, they had begun to get ravenously hungry, and thirsty too. Nobody was ready to drink the foul trickle that ran along the guttering. At one point there was a commotion of voices a long way away, and they held their breath to see if it came nearer. Then the sounds died, and hope of immediate release faded.

It was just when any faith in the Minstrel Boy's return had all but disappeared that the door creaked open, and he walked in.

'I've done it, you're free.'

'Free?'

'Well, almost free. I've got a release order, and you don't have to be interrogated by the Ghfshn kh. You could say that you were substantively free.'

'We can get out of here?'

'Sure, right now.'

'That's great. Where do we go?'

The Minstrel Boy frowned.

'That's one of the problems, but I'll tell you about it when we're out of here.'

Billy shrugged.

'Just as long as we're out of this filthy cell.'

Again surrounded by guards, they walked out of the cell, along the corridor, and up the stairs. Groans and snarls came from the other cells as they walked past. The release of a prisoner seemed a great novelty.

They were again pushed into the stone-flagged room where the Uruk sat behind his high desk. Billy, Reave and the Rainman were lined up in front of him, and he scowled at them with distaste.

'Release orders? Release orders? You scum have friends in high places. They won't help you if I ever get my hands on your filthy bodies again.'

Two of their guards were dispatched to fetch their clothes, and the three of them hastily dressed. Their bags, porta-pacs, and even their guns were returned to them, and then the Min-strel Boy initialled a sheaf of forms. Finally they were re-leased, and they followed, the Minstrel Boy out into the street. Once outside, Billy caught up with him.

'Where are we going now?'

'To the barracks.'

'Barracks? What barracks?'

The Minstrel Boy avoided Billy's eyes.

'That was one of the things I had to do to get you out. In order to get the release papers, I had to enlist you in the Free Corps.'

'The Free Corps? What in hell is that?'

'It's... uh... part of the army.'

Billy stopped dead in the street.

'The army? Are you trying to tell us that we've joined the goddamn army in this place?'

He swung round to Reave and the Rainman.

'This idiot's gone and got us into the army.'

The Minstrel Boy took Billy by the arm.

'Keep moving, you don't want to get arrested again. There was no other way, Billy. It was a case of jail or the Free Corps.'

They walked on, Billy shaking his head.

'I don't understand any of this. You better start from the beginning.'

'Okay, listen. This is Dur Shanzag, and it's a long way from Graveyard or Dogbreath.'

She/They rose slowly through the threatening mists. Her/Their mind was not required to continue the upward motion, and She/They allowed it to retreat into the memories of the almost infinite past. It drifted back to Her/Their hardly re-membered birth, the fusion of shapes and colours that had condensed and blended and produced Her/Their triple form. She/They could go back no further than the triple form. Before that there had been something, an order that had enabled Her/Them to transcend and escape the chaos that had overtaken everything else.

The achievement of the triple form had been followed by centuries of contemplation while She/They had ordered and stabilized the space that She/They occupied. It was a long period of calm that had been savagely brought to an end by the arrival of the first disruptors.

The arrival of the disruptors had started the long battle that She/They had waged against the encroaching mists of the twisting chaos.

It was the start of a hateful, searching period in which She/They had moved across the fabric, attempting to stabilize the sectors She/They covered.

She/They had become the continual prey of the disruptors, and, for a very long time, She/They had directed Her/Their intelligence at the problem of what they were, and where they originated. It had never been possible to come in close proximity of the thing without Her/Their objectivity being damaged by the disruption process. All Her/Their observations led towards the assumption that the disruptors were some strange halfway point between animal and machine.

She/They had never solved the problem of their coming. Before the disruptors Her/Their triple form had not existed. There had been form and there had been consciousness, but beyond that, all memory was hazy and tattered. Her/Their creation was inexorably linked with their arrival. It was almost as though they had given Her/Them birth as they first tore into the fabric of reality.

She/They was produced out of the disruption. The logical opposite to disrupters and the wake of chaos. By the same logic it should follow that She/They was their equal. That would only be disproved either when they shattered Her/Them and diffused Her/Their form into the clouds of unstable fabric, or when She/They extended a state of un-changing order throughout Her/Their entire area of experience.

She/They, over the millennia of Her/Their struggle, had watched the behaviour of the disruptors, and the pattern that seemed to lie behind their attacks. She/They had, at times, entertained the proposition that an intelligence was directing the disruptors. For a few long periods, the movements of the disruptors had seemed regular as though they moved according to a directing logic. During other periods, their actions had become completely random, and the idea of an overall intelligence had been rejected by Her/Them as a product of chaos-induced paranoia.

She/They returned Her/Their mind to the present. The mist had taken on a more even quality, and was starting to glow a deep electric blue. Her/Their upward motion ceased. Her/Their two heads turned slowly. Deep in the blue mist something solid seemed to be moving.

'Dur Shanzag is the city of the Presence. Nobody seems to know any more exactly where the Presence came from. Seems as though he or it has been around for thousands of years.'

'He or it?'

Billy walked along with the Minstrel Boy, a confused look on his face.

'They say he was a man once, but, by all accounts, he's not any more. He's... well, he's the Presence. They say he's burned up with the idea of being the master. The lord of everything. They say he's had four or five empires, way back over hundreds of thousands of years.'

Billy shook his head.

'How does one man get to live a hundred thousand years? It just isn't possible.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'I'm just telling the story. I don't have to account for inconsistencies. The story goes that he ain't a man any more. It could be that he ain't the original one who built those empires, maybe he's just another crazy living out some fantasy that he got from some old book. I don't know, there's a whole lot of things that it doesn't pay to look too closely at. When it comes down to it, all I know is that there's a thing called the Presence, and this is his city.'

'What about those things that threw us in jail? This Presence was like one of those once?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'The Presence wasn't ever an apeman. Those things are his slaves. He created them. He bred them down through the centuries to serve him. The Shirik, they're the workers, soldiers and watchdogs of his citadel. The smarter ones are Uruks. They boss the Shirik, and pass on his orders.'

'What about the Ghfshn kh? What are they?'

'The Ghfshn kh? They're the next level of power after the Uruks. They're men, but slaves just the same. They're his officers, civil servants and secret police. They hate and fear him but are all loyal to him. I suppose each, in his own way, shares the same desire for power and conquest. His whole massive bureaucracy runs on a balance of greed and fear. It's not efficient, but I don't think he cares. It seems like he gets a kind of twisted pleasure out of watching it fuck up.'

'But surely that's not going to help him conquer the world?'

'I don't think he cares. The rumours say that all his concentration is fixed on the disrupters, He thinks that the way to power lies in the control of the disrupters. That was why I had so much trouble getting you out. You told the Uruk that you'd been hit by a disrupter, and disrupter cases are always interrogated by the Ghfshn kh. That's why I had to sign you into the Free Corps, in order to get your release papers. You'll still get questioned by the Ghfshn kh, but it'll only be a stage three. The Uruk would have handed you over for a stage one. There ain't too many who live through a stage one.'

'What's the Free Corps, then? What have you gotten us into?'

'Don't be like that about it. I did the best I could.'

Billy nodded.

'Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm sorry. Tell me about this Free Corps.'

'The Presence is at war. He's always at war. This time it's with the Regency of Harod. It's been going on

for years. The Harodin will lose in the end, the neighbouring cities have all lost in the end.'

'I thought the Shirik did all the Presence's fighting. I don't see what he needs us for.'

'The Shirik make killer infantry, but they're too dumb to operate anything complicated. He needs mercenaries to man his fighting machines, and operate the big guns. That's the Free Corps. They're the crew of mercenaries who do the Presence's dirty work for him.'

'How does he treat them?'

'It ain't too bad. The Ghfshn kh make sure they have enough women and enough booze. They're the elite troops and they get treated that way. They're a rough mean bunch, though.'

'How long have you signed us on for?'

'Two years.'

'Jesus.'

'That's the minimum period, nothing else I could do.'

'What happens then?'

'You get paid off, and a free passage to the limits of the zone. Of course, they put the arm on you to re-enlist, but in the end, they let you go.'

'What about escaping?'

'Should be quite easy once you get to the front. It's up to you. I've done all I can.'

The Minstrel Boy halted, and pointed at a huge granite block, larger, but otherwise identical to the Shirik House.

'That's the barracks. Go in and tell the guard that you're the new recruits. I'll see you later, okay?'

The Minstrel Boy started to walk away, but Billy called him back.

'Just one question, Minstrel Boy. How did you get here? And the way you're dressed up?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head sadly.

'Don't ask, Billy. Just don't ask.'

'But...'

'We all got to survive, Billy. Remember that.'

The Minstrel Boy turned on his heel and walked away. His boots echoed hollowly on the paving stones of the deserted street. Billy watched him go, and then followed the others inside the cold, forbidding building.

A huge man with a full black curly beard lounged behind a desk similar to the Uruk's. He wore an olive green combat suit and a peaked fatigue cap. A cigar was clenched between his teeth, and a huge pair of combat boots were propped on the desk. The peak of his cap hung down over his eyes, and when Billy, Reave and the Rainman walked in, he raised it lazily with his forefinger. He stared at them for a while, and then lazily shifted the cigar to the side of his mouth.

'Whatcha want?'

'Recruits.'

'Recruits? Where the hell did you come from?'

'Our friend got us out of jail on the promise that we'd enlist.'

Billy thought it was best to keep quiet about the disrupter.

'Get lost in the nothings and wind up here?'

'Yeah, that's right.'

'That's how most of them get here. No one comes here from choice.'

'It's bad?'

'You'll see.'

He swung his legs off the desk, and his boots hit the floor with a crash. He stood up, and yelled towards a door behind him.

'Hey Skipper, there's three recruits out here. Wanna take a look at them?'

A man emerged from the doorway. He was a little wiry man with a clipped moustache. He wore a sheepskin jacket and dark blue trousers tucked into scuffed riding boots. On his head, he had a light blue cap with the same eye and flames badge that the Shirik wore. He looked the three of them up and down.

'Recruits?'

'That's right.'

'Just got out of jail?'

'That's right.'

'You better get signed in.'

He walked over to the desk and picked up a clipboard.

'Okay.'

He pointed at Reave.



'You, come over here.'

Reave sauntered over to him and stood in front of him with his hands in his pockets.

'I'm Sperry, kid. Master of Warriors. You train with me and I get to choose whether you train easy, or you train hard. You got that?'

Reave straightened his back and took his hands out of his pockets.

'I got it.'

'I got it, sir.'

'I got it, sir.'

'Okay, name?'

'Reave.'

'Place of origin?'

'Pleasant Gap.'

'Do-you-solemnly-swear-to-serve-in-the-Army-of-the-Sovereign-State-of-Dur-Shanzag-for-a-period-of-not-less-than-seven-hundred-days-in-accordance-with-the-Code-and-military-regulations-of-that-said-state? Say "I do".'

'I do.'

Sperry handed Reave the clipboard and pen.

'Make your mark here.'

Reave scrawled his name and handed them back. Sperry looked towards Billy.

'Next.'

Billy stepped up.

'Name?'

'Billy Oblivion.'

'Place of origin?'

'Pleasant Gap.'

'Do you solemnly swear what he just did?'

'I do.'

'Okay, make your mark and stand over there with him..'

Billy made his mark and stood by Reave.

'Next.'

The Rainman stood in front of Sperry.

'Name?'

'People call me the Rainman.'

'Ain't you got a proper name?'

'It's the only one people use.'

'Okay, Rainman. Place of origin?'

'Hell, how should I know? That's a helluva question to ask a travelling man.'

'Where was the last place you stopped? You remember that?'

'Why, sure I do, it was Dogbreath.'

'Okay, Dogbreath. I gotta put something. Do you swear too?'

'Sure, I ain't got no choice.'

'You should remember that. Make your mark and get over with the others.'

Once the Rainman was in line with Billy and Reave, Sperry came over and inspected them.

'You got any weapons?'

Billy nodded.

'We all got handguns.'

'Okay, fetch 'em out.'

He looked at Billy's and Reave's reproduction Colts and sniffed.

'They'll have to do.'

He seemed more impressed with the Rainman's spiral need-ler on .75 frame.

'Yeah, okay, put them away again. Your clothes are all right too.'

Reave looked surprised.

'You mean we don't get uniforms?'

'Only when the things that you got wear out.'

He jerked his thumb towards the door he'd come out from.

'Go through there, and tell the guy inside that you're report-ing for training.'

Training consisted of an intense ten days of being run around and shouted at by veterans who had been wounded at the front. Billy and Reave flopped into their bunks exhausted each night, and, all too soon, were roused out by Simp the one-eyed trooper, who seemed to be primarily in charge of them.

The command structure of the Free Corps was loose and haphazard. The only thing that Billy and Reave knew for sure was that they were very definitely the lowest of the low. The only group beneath them in the pecking order were the Shirik, who seemed universally loathed by the Free Corps mercen-aries.

Surprisingly, the Rainman appeared very little worried by the hard training regime. He went through everything at the same leisurely pace, and treated the yelling officers with smiling contempt.

The final night, after they had completed the course, the three of them were given a recreation pass. This entitled them to spend an evening in yet another granite building, drinking flat beer and raw spirits in the company of a small group of depressed whores.

The next day they were due to leave for the front. Billy was rudely awakened by Simp shaking him.

'Come on out of it.'

'It ain't time yet.'

'Sure it is. You want to die in bed?'

'Would suit me fine.'

Simp tugged at the blankets.

'Come on, start moving. Inspection in half an hour. Got it?'

Billy dragged himself out of his bunk and staggered across to the stone wash-trough. His head was splitting from the bad booze that he'd poured down himself the night before. He splashed cold water on his face and neck, and struggled into his shirt. He was pleased that the Free Corps barracks didn't run to mirrors. He felt that that particular morning he really couldn't face the sight of himself.

After a breakfast of grey porridge, Simp assembled the next recruits on the windswept expanse of stone that served as a parade, ground. Sperry made a short preliminary speech, and then moved down the line giving the recruits their assignments to the front. He stopped in front of Billy, Reave and the Rainman. He stared at them for a moment with one eyebrow raised.

'For reasons unknown, the powers have decided to keep you sorry trio intact. As of now you're a machine crew. You'll pick one up from motorpool and join the Seventeenth Gorb-kh at Hill 471.'

He handed Billy an envelope.

'Here's your written orders, you're off my hands now.'

The Rainman grinned.

'Ain't you gonna wish us luck... sir?'

Sperry sneered.

'Why bother. You're past help.'

The three of them were dismissed, and they walked to pick up the fighting machine.

The Dur Shanzag fighting machine was a squat iron construction. Its square box-shaped body, with riveted plates and tiny slit windows, housed the crew of three. Mounted on top was a small circular turret from which the gunner could direct fire from either the flamer or the repeating bolt gun. At each end were the huge spiked rollers which, driven by a low gear flutter engine, carried the dull grey monster along the ground at something like the speed of a man running.

The Rainman signed out the machine from a motorpool orderly with a bald head and thick, horn-rimmed glasses. As they climbed inside it, the orderly waved.

'Don't scratch the paint now.'

Reave gave him the finger, and slammed the iron door. Crouched inside, the Rainman grinned round at the others.

'Either of you mind if I drive this here rig for a while?'

Billy and Reave shook their heads.

'Go right ahead. It's okay by us, we'll just take it easy.'

The Rainman brought the motor to life, and the cabin reverberated with a teeth-jarring hum. The fighting machine wasn't built for comfort. He guided it through the empty streets of Dur Shanzag to the Black Gate, and then they were out of the city and running along a road that stretched out into the bleak desert. The Rainman gave the machine full power, but it was incapable of going any faster than the stage that had carried them out of Dogbreath. It seemed that the fighting machines weren't built for speed either.

The journey across the desert very soon became monotonous as they clanked and rattled along the desert road. Occasionally they would pass columns of Shirik heading for the front at a last, loping trot, and once they passed a train of wagons pulled by scrawny mules, returning to Dur Shanzag loaded with Shirik wounded.

Reave pointed out of the narrow slit window.

'They must lose millions of those dumb brutes, the rate they seem to be sending them out to the front.'

The Rainman grimaced.

'I hope they don't lose millions of us dumb brutes as well.'

The three of them fell silent, and Billy stared out at the endless dull brown dust. The only break in the desert was the odd clump of thorn trees. Apart from that, it was completely barren. Only the continuous jolting of the machine stopped Billy from falling asleep.

After riding for hours they began to hear the rumble of distant gunfire above the noise of the engine. Very soon, they could see a pall of smoke along the horizon and they knew that they were entering the battle zone.

At a fork in the road an Uruk appeared to be directing traffic. Billy pressed his face to the window and shouted.

'Hill 471?'

'Hill what? Hill what?'

'4-7-1'

The Uruk stared at the ground frowning, and then jerked an arm towards the right.

'Straight down. Can't miss it.'

The Rainman swung the fighting machine down the right-hand fork.

After a series of false trails and a dozen wrong turnings, they finally pulled up at a low hill that was crisscrossed with trenches and coils of barbed wire. One side of the hill was honeycombed with foxholes and bunkers. The Shirik were swarming over it like a colony of burrowing ants. Billy spotted an Uruk who was standing over a squad of Shirik labouring on a trench. Every so often he encouraged them with a knotted rope.

'Hey! Hey you! Uruk. This Hill 471?'

'Who wants to know?'

Billy pushed his pistol through the slit.

'We want to know, shiteater.'

The Uruk responded happily to threat and abuse.

'Sure, sure. This 471.'

'Where do we find the Free Corps command post?'

The Uruk pointed.

'Down that way.'

The Rainman put the machine in motion and swung it down a deeply rutted track. They were now in the heart of the Dur Shanzag lines. The snouts of light cannon and mortars poked from foxholes. Shell craters dotted the landscape, and all round them squads of Shirik sappers sweated with picks and shovels enlarging the foxholes and dugouts.

They passed a Shirik stripped of his uniform, suspended by his hands from a wooden frame that had been erected beside the track. He was obviously undergoing some kind of punishment. Around his neck hung a placard on which was a single word in the strange script they had seen used throughout Dur Shanzag.

A ditch ran for some distance along the side of the track, and every so often Billy noticed huddled shapes, the bodies of men and mules that lay half in and half out of the muddy water, where they had been pushed off the road and left to rot. They rolled past crisscrossings of tangled barbed wire and Billy saw to his horror that in the middle of a particularly thick section, a skeleton was hanging with shreds of clothing still adhering to it. It seemed as though the war had crossed this area and moved on.

Eventually they found what they were looking for. A huge dugout where a collection of olive green tents huddled under the protection of sandbagged ramparts. In front of the tents and tunnel entrances, a group of humans lounged round a huge black field piece. Three fighting machines, similar to their own, were parked beside it.

The Rainman pulled in beside the other machines, and the three of them climbed down and walked over to the men squatting round the cannon. They were all unshaven and filthy, and wore a motley assortment of combat suits and work clothes. At their belts they carried a vicious array of knives and side arms. None of them looked up as Reave, Billy and the Rainman approached. They seemed totally to lack interest in anything that went on around them. Billy stopped and cleared his throat.

'Where can we find whoever's in charge?'

A big man with blond hair and a black eye patch spat a stream of tobacco juice in the dust.

'I am, I'm Axmann, M of W for this section. You re-placements?'

Billy nodded, and gave him the envelope.

'These are our orders.'

Axmann seemed to have no interest in opening them.

'You better get settled in.'

He glanced back at the men beside the gun.

'You, Duck. Show these replacements where to bunk, and explain the facts of life to them.'

A little bald man with a rodent's face and extremely short legs scrambled to his feet. Axmann turned back to Billy, Reave and the Rainman.

'Duck will show you round. Oh, just one thing. You boys don't plan to be heroes, do you?'

'It's not our greatest ambition.'

'Good. The last thing we need is heroes.'

Duck led them inside the bunker. It stretched way back inside the hill, and housed the command post,

stores and sleeping quarters. The roof was low, scarcely four feet high in places, and they had to move in a half crouch. The walls of the excavation were shored up with an assortment of scrap timber and here and there someone had stuck a pin-up. These served to highlight rather than disguise the appalling squalor. Duck pointed at three empty wooden bunks.

'You can take them three. The guys they belonged to took a direct hit. They won't be needing them any more.'

They dumped their gear on the beds, and Duck led them out of the bunker and up the hill a little way.

'If you keep your heads down you'll be okay. You can see the whole battle zone from here.'

The plain beneath them was gouged with craters and scar-red by trenches. At irregular intervals a boom and an eruption of dust would mark a shell landing. Small figures would scamper out of a trench, and rush into the section of no man's land that ran between the lines of either side. Inevitably, before they'd gone very far, the figures would fall and lie still. Overhead, off in the distance, two clumsy flying machines, cigar-shaped objects with a collection of umbrella-like repulsors on their top sides, circled each other warily. One carried the eye and flames markings of Dur Shanzag, while the other bore the seven-pointed star of Harod. Billy watched in appalled fascination.

'How long has this been going on?'

Duck shrugged.

'Who knows? Maybe a generation. Maybe more.'

'But I thought the Presence was winning.'

'Sure he's winning, We've gained maybe a hundred yards this year. I guess another twenty years will see us at the gates of Harod.'

'Twenty years.'

Duck dug the heel of his boot into the dirt.

'Twenty, maybe twenty-five. Attrition's the name of the game. The only thing that could prevent it was if the Shirik stopped breeding. The Shirik do most of the fighting. They're sent up the line. They rush the enemy, most of them get slaughtered, but they keep coming, and we keep gaining little bits of ground. If they start losing too many of them, we have to take our tin cans in and sort it out. Beyond that we try and keep out of the fighting and stay healthy.'

'Doesn't anyone want to fight?'

Duck scowled.

'Who needs it? Except the Shirik, who can't get enough. Occasionally one of our boys goes kill crazy, but when that happens they usually start on the Shirik, and we have to go down and fuse them before they do too much damage. Beyond that, it's like I said, we do our best to keep out of it. We all hate this goddamn war.'

Billy scratched his head.'

'I don't see why any of us go on with it.'

Duck looked at Billy in contempt.

'Did you ask to come here?'

'Nah, we were in jail. We didn't have no choice.'

'Neither did anyone else, sonny boy. Get stuck inside of Dur Shanzag and you wind up at the front before you know it'

'What are the enemy like?'

'I ain't seen 'em close to 'cept maybe a few times. They looked like regular guys to me. Just like us, 'cept they're fight-ing for their lives. You'll get called out soon enough, and then you'll see for yourselves.'

A.A. Catto came home from the party in another artificial sunrise. Once again, she was bored. Juno Meltzer had done her best, but when A.A. Catto finally came down to it, nothing new really happened. It was yet another party where she had finished up with her brother. It was an indictment of the lack of stimuli that someone like Valdo was superior to most of the other available men.

She made a mental note that she really should stop doing it with him, particularly in public. People were beginning to label them, and there was nothing more tiresome than being labelled.

Inside her apartment A.A. Catto tore off her black Art Nouveau party dress and flopped on the bed in her underwear. She grinned at how her silk stockings and basque corset had come from the pornography of a slightly later period, but nobody had even noticed. With the exception of Valdo, she decided, the people she knew were exceedingly ignorant,

She kicked her legs and stared at the ceiling. It was the morning problem again. Sleep or stay awake. It was a choice between dormax or altacaine. A.A. Catto rolled over and watched the sunlight begin to filter through the perspex of the balcony. She glanced at the clock. It was 08.15. She reached out and punched up Information. The blonde in the pink uniform flickered into life and smiled.

'Information. May I help you?'

'What's going on this morning?'

'There is a full directorate meeting at 10.00. All family members are expected to attend, Miss Catto.'

'Don't tell me what to do.'

'I'm sorry, Miss Catto. I'm only relaying information.'

'All right, all right.'

She hit the off button. The directorate meeting would wipe out anything happening for most of the day. She might as well sleep right through it. She was reaching for the dormax when a thought struck her. Maybe it would be fun to go to a meeting once. If Valdo was there to back her up, between them they might throw some shocks into those old fools. She punched Valdo's combination, and another pink-clad



Hostess-I ap-peared.

'Mr. Catto's residence.'

'Is Valdo conscious?'

'If you'll wait one moment, please, Miss Catto, I'll find out.'

The screen dissolved into a pattern of neutral colours. It stayed that way for almost a minute, and A.A. Catto tapped her silver nails impatiently on the console. Finally Valdo's image appeared on the screen.

A.A. Catto had often thought that the reason she liked her brother so much was that he resembled her so closely. He had the same straight nose and large blue eyes. He even had the same full mouth. It was something that didn't quite fit on a male. Valdo revelled in the fact that he was definitely border-line.

The image on the screen was far from Valdo at his best.

He still had on the pale blue wig that he had worn the night before, and his makeup was smudged and streaked.

'What do you want, sister? I thought you'd be dormaxed out by now.'

'You look awful, brother. What do you plan to do this morn-ing?'

'Sleep. There's nothing happening except a directorate meeting.'

A.A. Catto pretended to be scandalized.

'You mean you're going to miss a directorate meeting?'

Valdo scowled.

'What are you talking about? We always miss directorate meetings.'

'I thought we ought to go to this one.'

'You're joking?'

'I thought it would be a good idea if we went to the meet-ing.'

'Have you gone mad, sister? Directorate meetings are boring, tedious, and, very positively, no place to be.'

'Think about it, brother. If we took on maybe three pay-loads of altacaine, and then went along and caused trouble for the parents, I thought it would be fun.'

'Aren't you rather scraping the barrel?'

'I thought if we worked on it, we might be able to force through some dictates that could make life more amusing.'

Valdo looked unconvinced.

'Like what, sister?'

'Maybe we could have a war.'

'There's no one worth having a war with.'

A.A. Carto waved his objections aside.

'I only just thought of it. We can work out details later. Say you'll come.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Listen, sister, I'd rather sleep than spend the day with those boring old farts.'

'But we could take it over, brother. We could really put them through.'

'It still seems like a waste of time. A whole day spent in pursuit of the tiresome. It almost seems an insult to good drugs to take on a load and then sit with awful, OLD people.'

'It's because we never go to meetings that these old awful people have it their own way. That's the reason that the enter-tainments are so wretched.'

'My dear sister. Is it that you've become a concerned citizen?'

A.A. Catto's eyes flashed with anger.

'Don't be disgusting.'

'It does rather sound like it. I never thought I'd see my dear sister wanting to go to a meeting. Perhaps you're getting old.'

'You can be very insulting when you try.'

'That kind of remark isn't going to persuade me to come with you.'

'Then will you come?'

'I'll consider it. You haven't tried to bribe me yet.'

'What do you want?'

'I don't know. There's very little that you have that I want.'

A.A. Catto's mouth twisted.

'You didn't say that four hours ago, brother.'

'I was simply accommodating you, sister dear.'

'Then accommodate me now.'

'Will you promise to come back here and allow me to use you in a cruel and original manner for a whole hour if this meeting's as boring and loathsome as I fear it will be?'

A.A. Catto nodded quickly.

'Yes, yes, anything you like. Say you'll come?'

'I'll come.'

'Wonderful. I'll see you at 10.00 outside the Boardroom.'

Valdo grimaced.

'Oh god, sister, don't say you want to be punctual.'

'Sorry, make it 10.45.'

'That's a little better.'

'Thank you, brother. You won't be disappointed.'

Valdo yawned.

'Anything to amuse my little sister.'

Like a wave of coarse flesh the Shirik poured out from trenches and dugouts and charged howling towards the Harodin lines. The enemy immediately opened a withering fire and dead Shirik fell one on top of another. Some dropped like stones while others fell twisting and snarling, clawing at their wounds. Although they died in their hundreds, still more came on, clambering over the bodies to get at the enemy.

One small group actually made it across no man's land and reached the opposite trenches. They discharged their single shot scrap guns and then fell on the remaining defenders, clubbing, hacking and biting. They were shot down, but the Harodin line was breached and more Shirik poured into the gap. A horrible slaughter began in the narrow confines of the Harodin trenches.

Billy wiped the sweat from his face. It was their first time in action. They had hung round the dugout for five days, and then, along with two other machines, they had been ordered to back up and consolidate the Shirik assault.

As he watched, a handful of Harodin leaped from the for-ward trenches and tried to run away. They had only gone a few yards when they were cut down by blasts of scrap metal from Shirik guns. The men who had run seemed indistinguishable from the mercenaries. Duck had been right when he'd described them as being regular guys.

From the driver's seat, the Rainman grunted.

'Looks like we'll be moving up soon.'

Billy swivelled the turret a little to look at the other two fighting machines. Sure enough, a red flag appeared through the turret hatch of the lead machine. Billy glanced at the Rain-man.

'Okay, here we go, roll it.'

The Rainman eased the machine into gear and it began to move forward in formation with the other two. Billy licked his dry lips and glanced down at Reave, who crouched in the stand-by position, ready to move if anything happened to either of the other two. Billy grinned tensely at him.

'This is it, kid.'

Reave shook his head.

'How the fuck did we get ourselves into this?'

'Don't ask, man. Just don't ask.'

The fighting machines crossed the Shirik trenches and started across no man's land, towards the huge gap the apemen had carved in the Harodin defences. The wheels crunched over the thickly littered Shirik bodies, crushing them into the dust. Billy fought to keep himself from being sick. He dropped a burst of bolts on a section of the forward trench, but saw that it was already in Shirik hands and stopped firing. There seemed to be nothing left for them to do.

A Harodin machine gun opened up on them from an iso-lated foxhole, and bullets clanged against the machine's armour. Billy swung the flamer round. As he fired he saw the gun was manned by two haggard, bearded men in dirty blue tunics. They looked surprised as the tongue of flame lanced towards them. It was the same look of surprise that had crossed the face of the man he'd shot in Dogbreath. The next instant the flame caught them, and they turned into blazing inhuman things. Billy lost sight of them as the machine dipped and lurched across the first enemy trench. His stomach twisted but he managed not to be sick.

The formation stopped just beyond the Harodin advance trench and took up a defensive position. The Shirik mopped up the last of the defenders. Once the trench was cleared it was their job to guard against a possible counter attack, while Uruk engineers reconstructed the newly won fortifications.

No counter attack came, and at nightfall the mercenaries dismounted from their machines and made a temporary camp. The killing was too strong in Billy's mind to allow him to sit and relax with the other crews. He wandered along the trench, until he came to a group of Shirik huddled round a small fire. Without going too close he watched the strange subhuman creatures and listened to their grunted conversation. The Shirik seemed to have been issued with fresh meat, possibly as a reward for their victory. They snuffled and grunted over large bones.

'Fight huh? Fight?'

'Some fight. Some fight.'

'Plenty kill huh?'

'Listen...'

'Huh?'

'Listen... I fight.'

'I fight, I fight.'

'I fight, I hit 'em, I kick 'em an' bit 'em. I had t' fight huh?'

'They get on top of you?'

'Nah... I fight. I kill 'em.'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah.'

'All fight.'

'All attack.'

'Hey.'

'Wha?'

'I... fight.'

'Sure, all fight.'

'No, no, I remember...'

'Wha?'

'I remember.'

'Wha?'

'I... I don't remember.'

'You forget.'

'It was before, before.'

'Didn't we surround 'em?'

'Kill 'em.'

'Plenty good killing, huh?'

One of the Shirik waved his bone in the air.

'Good killing, good eating.'

He wiped his mouth with a strip of blue uniform, and in a flash Billy realized. The fresh meat was human. The Shirik were eating the bodies of the Harodin. He backed away in silent panic, and as soon as he was well away from the Shirik, he bolted along the trench towards where the machine crews were camped. He stumbled across a figure lying in the darkness.

'Fuck off, I'm trying to sleep.'

It was Reave.

'It's me, it's Billy. Listen, I just saw...'

The words stuck in his throat.

'I... I...'

Reave looked at him in alarm.

'What's wrong, man? You look like you seen a ghost.'

'It's worse than that, man. Much worse.'

'What is it, Billy? You look terrible.'

'You remember how Duck told us about the guys who went kill crazy. How they always attacked the Shirik?'

Reave nodded.

'Sure, I remember.'

'Reave...'

Billy's hysteria was holding off by only a fraction.

'... I found out why. The Shirik, man. Those fucking animals eat the dead! They're out there, eating the men they killed today!'

Reave closed his eyes.

'Jesus! You saw this? You saw it happening?'

'I saw it, Reave. I saw it and heard them talking. It was horrible. We got to get out of here.'

He clutched at Reave and sobbed into his jacket. Reave put an arm out and stroked Billy's hair.

'It's all right, kid. We'll get away from this place. We did in Dogbreath, and we can do it here.'

Billy said nothing, and for a long time they clung together in silence. A figure emerged out of the darkness.

'What's the matter with you two? Never had you tagged as queers.'

Reave looked up, and saw Axmann standing over him. Axmann had been in command of the lead tank.

'My partner cracked up when he saw the Shirik eating the dead.'

'Didn't Duck warn you what it was like?'

'He didn't tell us they were cannibals.'

Axmann scratched the stubble on his chin.

'That's too bad. It must have been a shock to just stumble on to it. We all stay close to camp after a victory. Nobody wants to get close to the Shirik.'

Billy looked up at him.

'It's okay for you to talk. You've got used to it.'

Axmann put a hand on Billy's shoulder.

'Nobody gets used to that. I've been here for five years, and I never got used to it. The best you can hope for is to be able to close off your mind to it.'

He fumbled in the pocket of his combat coat, produced a small bottle and shook some of the contents into his hand. He handed Reave two flat white pills.

'Give him these, they'll put him out for the rest of the night.'

Axmann turned and walked away. Reave gave Billy the pills and some water to wash them down with. A few minutes after Billy had swallowed them, he fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

The next thing that Billy remembered was being shaken awake by Reave.

'Come on, man, move. We're under attack.'

There was an explosion close by, and Billy shook his head to make his brain work.

'What's going on?'

'The Harodin are counter attacking. There's thousands of them. I guess they want to get their own back on the Shirik.'

There was another explosion, and Billy scrambled to his feet.

'Get inside the machine. It'll be safer than out here in the open.'

Billy and Reave climbed out of the trench and sprinted towards the parked machines. Bullets spattered around their feet. Bearing down on the Dur Shanzag lines was a wall of blue uniforms. The air was filled with snarls and howls as the Shirik prepared to meet the enemy.

They reached the fighting machine, and Reave tugged open the door.

'Quick, inside.'

They dived inside.

'Where's the Rainman?'

'Dunno, I ain't seen him.'

Reave pointed out through the observation slit.

'There. There he is. He's coming.'

The Rainman was ducking and weaving towards the machine, attempting to dodge the crossfire from the Shirik and the Harodin. He was only ten yards from the machine when he stumbled, spun round and hit the ground. Reave looked at Billy in alarm.

'He's been hit. He's gone down.'

The Rainman was on his hands and knees, slowly crawling towards the machine. Reave reached for the door.

'I'm going out to get him.'

There was the clang of bullets hitting the side of the machine. Billy grabbed Reave by the arm.

'Don't be a fool. You'll get killed out there.'

'I can't leave him lying out there wounded.'

As he spoke, more bullets hit the Rainman, he jerked convulsively and lay still. Reave pulled away from Billy and began opening the door.

'I can't leave him out there.'

Billy pushed Reave hard into his seat.

'There's nothing you can do. He's dead.'

'But we can't leave him out there. Those goddamn creatures will eat him.'

'You can't go out and get him. You'll be killed yourself.'

Reave slumped in his seat, and covered his face with his hands.

'Okay, okay, I know it. I know it. Why did we ever get involved in this? Curse this fucking, absurd war.'

Billy dropped into the driver's seat, and threw the machine into gear.

'Get into the turret, Reave. Get yourself together. The Rainman's dead, and we've got to get out of here.'



Reave climbed slowly into the turret, and Billy started the machine rolling. The other two machines were also on the move, cutting into the Harodin lines with their turrets spitting bolts and belching fire. Billy swung away from them, and turned sharp right. He pushed the machine as fast as it would go, running parallel to the trenches, between the attackers and the defenders. Bullets hammered against the armour and the fighting machine bucked and skidded as shells exploded near-by. Reave yelled at Billy in alarm.

'You gone crazy? You'll get us killed. Where the fuck do you think you're going?'

Billy clung grimly to the steering gear as a near miss rocked the machine.

'I'm getting us out of this. Away from this insanity.'

'But where are you heading?'

'I don't know. I'm just getting away.'

'If you keep running along in no man's land we're just going to get ourselves blown up.'

'All right, all right.'

Billy swung the machine to the left and plunged across the trenches, crushing Shirik under the spiked wheels. Soon they were running towards the rear. Confused Uruks gesticulated at them as they cut through supply columns and rolled across dugouts. The battle zone seemed to go on and on but after thirty minutes they left the last shell hole and excavation be-hind. They were in the bare, open desert. Billy brought the machine to a halt.

'We made it. We got out of their war.'

'It's too bad the Rainman didn't make it.'

'Yeah. It's too bad.'

'Where do we go from here?'

Billy slid down in his seat.

'Who knows? Just keep on going until we hit something. We've never known where we've been going before. Something'll turn up.'

There was a long silence. Each of them was absorbed in his own thoughts. The quiet of the desert was strangely deafening after the roar of battle. The occasional rumble of distant gun-fire was the only reminder that it still existed. After a while, Reave took a deep breath.

'Billy?'

'Yeah.'

'You got any idea what you're looking for?'

'Not really. No more than I had back in Pleasant Gap. I just know there's something, and I'm going to keep looking for it. One thing's for sure, we can't go back.'

Reave nodded.

'That's true enough.'

Billy glanced up at him.

'You regretting this whole thing? You wishing you were back in Pleasant Gap?'

Reave shook his head.

'No. I don't regret nothing. I'll go along with anything. It's just...'

'It's just what?'

'It's just that I don't have your faith that there's something out there waiting for us.'

Billy laughed.

'Shit man, I don't have no faith. I didn't leave Pleasant Gap to find no divine destiny. The only thing to look forward to in Pleasant Gap was growing old and ending up like old Eli.'

Reave grinned despite himself.

'That's true enough. There doesn't seem to be anything to do except go on.'

Billy started the engine again and dropped the machine into gear, and they moved forward across the desert. Billy halted the machine again and looked up at Reave.

'Want to drive for a spell?'

Reave climbed down from the turret.

'Sure.'

He took Billy's place behind the controls. Billy slid into the standby seat and the machine moved forward again. They rolled across the desert for another few hours. Billy had dropped into a half sleep when the engine coughed and died. Reave fiddled with the controls. Billy sat up and leaned over his shoulder.

'What's the trouble?'

Reave banged the speed control backwards and forwards.

'It just died on me. One minute it was going, and the next it wasn't.'

'Move over. Let's take a look at it.'

Billy squeezed past Reave and studied the controls. He flicked at a couple of switches and moved some of the levers.

'Sure looks like it's dead.'

Reave nodded.

'Just faded out on me. What do we do now?'

'Foot it, I guess.'

'You mean just trek off into the desert?'

'I don't like this any more than you do, but we can't stay here.'

Reave took a last kick at the controls, and then opened the door.

'I don't need walking across this fucking desert.'

'I don't see any way round it.'

Reave jumped down into the dust, and looked back up at Billy.

'What are we going to take with us?'

'I'll see what we've got and pass it down to you.'

Billy stripped everything he could out of the fighting mach-ine and passed it out to Reave. When there was nothing left he joined Reave and looked at the stuff laid out on the ground, Reave squatted down on his heels.

'We ain't going to be able to hump this lot on our backs. We'll have to leave most of it behind.'

Billy looked at the mass of stuff, and scratched his head.

'We'll just have to take essentials.'

Reave picked up the steel water container and shook it.

'Ain't too much water left.'

'Pour it out into the small bottles and dump the can.'

Reave transferred the water to two canteens and he and Billy slung one each over their shoulders.

'We'll need the porta-pacs.'

They clipped them on their belts.

'And food.'

'It's a pity we left our bags back in the bunker.'

'We'll just have to stash as much as we can in our pockets, and eat what's left.'

They sat in the shade of the machine and chewed their way through the surplus of flat, tasteless ration bars. When they'd finished Billy took a mouthful of water and stood up.

'Might as well get moving. There's no use hanging round here.'

He hitched up his gun belt, and started walking slowly away from the machine in the direction it had been going when it stopped. Reave clambered to his feet and reluctantly followed him.

It got hotter and hotter. Billy took off his dark glasses and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. There was nothing in sight but sand and thorn bushes under a steel-coloured sky, no sign of a track or habitation. He waited for Reave to catch up, and then started walking again. The heat got worse and then, at last, the sky began to dim, and it grew dark. Billy and Reave slept huddled together on the hard ground. The nights were as cold as the days were hot. They walked on through the second day. They didn't speak to each other. They didn't even think. Life shut down until it consisted of nothing more than putting one foot in front of the other. Billy kept his eyes carefully fixed on the ground. He found if he stared at the horizon he began to hallucinate.

He stopped and wearily pulled the top from his canteen. He put it to his lips, and nothing happened. He tilted it further. Still nothing. The canteen was empty. He turned and waited for Reave.

'I'm out of water.'

Reave held his canteen to his ear and shook it.

'I don't have more than a mouthful left.'

'We're in trouble.'

Reave looked around.

'There ain't nothing we can do about it except keep on walking, and hope we find something.'

They kept on walking. Their lips dried and cracked. Their tongues became rough and parched. They began to feel sick and dizzy. Billy's feet seemed a long way away. Then his legs gave way and he crumpled to the ground. Reave stumbled to where he lay.

'Come on, man. Try to keep going. Only a bit further. We got to find water soon.'

'I can't. I've got to have water. I'm burning up.' 'Come on, Billy. Try and make it.'

'It's no good, man. You'll have to go on without me.'

Reave hauled Billy to his feet, and supported him while they staggered on for another hundred yards. Then they both collapsed and fell to the sand. Billy rolled over on to his back.

'We've had it, Reave. This goddamn desert goes on for ever. We've had it.'

Reave looked up, and for a long while he stared at the horizon.

'I don't believe it!'

Billy looked blankly at the sky.

'It's true, man. We've had it.'

'No, no. Look!'

It's no good, man. If you stare at anything too long, you start to hallucinate.'

'This isn't a hallucination. I can see it! I can really see it!'

Billy rolled on to his side.

'It's a mirage.'

'It's not, Billy. There's trees and water. I can see them.'

Billy painfully raised his head.

'Holy shit! You're right. I can see it too.'

Stumbling and crawling, they made their way towards the oasis. Billy expected it to disappear at any moment, but, as they fought their way forward, it remained and came closer. They were in the shade of tall spreading palms. On their knees they reached the edge of the pool of clear water. They stooped to drink. Then a voice came from behind them.

'Hold it right there!'

'Cease upward motion.'

'Turn fifty seven degrees'

'Object.'

'Object responds as solid body.'

'Probe.'

'Probe non-responding. Nature of body concealed.'

'Assume protective formation.'

She/They shimmered and slowly closed in on Her/Their self. She/They took on the protective spherical form, but once again the sphere was discoloured and dented on one side. In every form Her/Their injuries had their effect.

'Move forward and observe.'

'Caution.'

'Caution is maintained.'

She/They moved towards the object that was concealed in the blue mist. She/They halted some distance from the object.

'Probe again. High density.'

A round spot on the side of the sphere glowed yellow, and a thin pencil of light cut through the blue mist.

'Partial response on probe.'

'Organically arranged mineral construction.'

'Structure familiar.'

She/They moved a little closer and probed again. This time, the result of the probe struck a trigger response in Her/Their consciousness.

'Alarm. Object conforms to data on disruption modules.'

'Object does not conform to normal mass or dimension information stored from previous encounters.'

'Object has ceased to move.'

'Assumption that object is small dormant disruptor.'

'No record of such phenomenon.'

'Lack of information does not preclude its existence'

'Hypothesis. Small dormant disruption module will re-awaken if probing continues.'

'Assumption that object is dead disruption module.'

'Insufficient data.'

'Data may be gathered by probing.'

'Probing could activate.'

'Close and probe. Increase caution level.'

She/They, still in Her/Their spherical form, closed with the object. It was now visible through the blue mist. She/They probed again.

'Object remains dormant.'

It was definitely a disrupter, although it was much smaller than any that She/They had previously encountered. Its body, instead of the usual smooth, gleaming, metalflake skin, was a dull black, and its surface was cracked and pitted.

'Assumption is that the disruption module has been subjected to damage, energy drain or burnout.'

'Assumption would warrant further probe.'

She/They probed again. The disrupter showed no signs of awakening.

'Indication of external tampering.'

'Indication of non-functional human interference.'

Along the side of the disrupter, in crude white letters, was the word wilbur.

'Hold it!'

Billy looked up in dull surprise.

'Huh?'

A huge albino stood behind them. He had large incongruous breasts, small pink eyes, and straight white hair that fell to his shoulders.

'What are you two doing, making free with my water?'

'Your water?'

'Sure it's my water. Who told you that you could go drink-ing it?'

Billy looked at him in disbelief. His voice was a dry croak.

'We're dying of thirst. We just came across the goddamn desert.'

'I can't help that. There ain't too many people come this way, I'll admit, but all the ones that do want water. If more folks started coming here I'd have no water left at all.'

Billy pushed himself up on to his knees, and pulled out his gun.

'Listen. I don't know who you are, or what you do here, but we've got to have water and nobody's going to stop us.'

The albino held up his hands.

'There's no call to take it like that. I wasn't saying you couldn't have no water. I just like to be asked first. Good manners don't cost nothing.'

Billy sighed and dropped the gun back into its holster.

'Could we please have some water?'

The albino beamed.

'Sure, fellas. Help yourselves, take all you want.'

Billy and Reave drank deeply and splashed water over their heads and necks. When they had finally

finished they turned and faced their host.

'We're much obliged to you, mister. We were just about dying.'

'Think nothing of it, boys. I'm always glad to oblige. By the way, what do people call you?'

'I'm Billy, and he's Reave.'

'Billy and Reave, hey. Pleased to make your acquaintance. I'm called Burt the Medicine.'

'Hi.'

'Maybe you'd like to come over to the shack and take the weight off your feet.'

'Sure.'

Billy and Reave followed Burt the Medicine towards a log shack under the palms. There were a table and some canvas chairs in front of the ramshackle building. They were shaded by a multi-coloured beach umbrella. Burt the Medicine waved a limp hand.

'Sit yourselves down, boys. Make yourselves at home.'

Billy and Reave flopped into two of the chairs, and Burt the Medicine took another.

'What brings you way out here?'

'We were getting away from the war.'

'The war, hey. It's still going on?'

'It's still going on.'

'You wouldn't believe the way they could drag it out.'

'When we ran, it looked like it would go on for ever.'

'It's amazing what some folks will do for amusement.'

Reave scowled.

'We didn't find it too amusing.'

Burt the Medicine smiled.

'You done well to get out then.'

Billy and Reave both nodded, and the conversation flagged in the way it does between people v/ho have only just met. The albino pulled a deck of tattered cards from somewhere inside his robe.

'Fancy a game of Loser Take Nothing?'



Billy shook his head,

'Fraid we don't play, and besides, we don't have any money.'

Burt the Medicine put the cards away.

'That's too bad. I don't get too much company out here. In fact, I ain't had a good game since the last time Quinn was here.'

'Quinn?'

Burt the Medicine looked surprised.

'You don't know Quinn? I thought everyone knew Quinn.'

'I don't recall ever meeting anyone called Quinn.'

'If you'd met him, you'd remember. When Quinn gets here, everybody jumps for joy.'

'Maybe we should meet him.'

'You ought to. Where are you fellas planning to go from here?'

Billy shrugged.

'No idea, we'll just travel on until we come to something.'

Burt the Medicine looked surprised.

'You're weird.'

'Maybe.'

'Still, it takes all kinds.'

He struck himself on the forehead.

'Here I am, chattering on, and you're probably starving.'

Billy and Reave both nodded.

'We are kind of hungry.'

The albino stood up.

'I'll see what I can do. There should be something in on the stuff beam.'

'You've got stuff beams out here?'

Burt the Medicine put a hand on his hip and pouted.

'Well of course. This isn't the outback.'

'We didn't mean that. It was just that they didn't have any stuff receivers in Dur Shanzag.'

'Well, they wouldn't, would they?'

Billy looked confused.

'No, I suppose not.'

The albino disappeared inside the shack, and returned with a laden tray.

'Here you go, boys. It's all cold, I'm afraid. I got a bit wary of hot stuff down the beam. The war zone, you know, it sets up some kind of interference. A roast chicken went wrong one time, and that's how I grew these tits.'

Billy and Reave looked suspiciously at the food, but Burt the Medicine waved aside their fears.

'Eat up, fellas. I guarantee nothing won't happen to you.'

Billy took a speculative mouthful.

'Tastes all right.'

'Course it does.'

They began to eat. Reave looked questioningly at Burt the Medicine.

'Must have been quite a shock, growing those tits and all.'

The albino finished chewing.

'It came as a kind of a surprise at first, I can tell you, but I soon got used to it. After a while I quite got to like it.'

He jiggled one of his breasts.

'I mean, I never was the sort of guy who had much truck with women, so it didn't make that much difference, if you know what I mean.'

They went on with the meal. They had just started on a dish of ice-cream and stuff beam strawberries when a high-pitched buzz started away in the distance. It grew louder and nearer. Burt the Medicine leaped to his feet.

'Fuck the bastards. It's another one. You two better get down on the ground.'

After their experiences in battle, Billy and Reave didn't ask any questions. They dived from their chairs and hit the dust. A small red propeller-driven airplane with multiple wings was coming straight at the oasis, almost at ground level. It sprayed a burst of machine-gun fire at the shack, and peeled off, circling for another run.

Burt the Medicine leaped to his feet and ran to the edge of the trees. He whipped the cover off a pair of tripod-mounted, twin field lasers and swung them towards the plane as it came in for a second low-level attack.

Twin pencils of white light sprang from the lasers as the albino pressed the triggers. They sliced neatly through one of the sets of wings, and the plane rolled over. It dropped like a stone, hit the ground and exploded, scattering pieces of wreck-age across the sand. Burt the Medicine replaced the cover on the laser and came back dusting off his robe.

'Well, that takes care of another one.'

Billy and Reave got up off the ground.

'What in hell was that?'

'Quin-plane auto-pirate.'

'What?'

'It's some little gizmo they dreamed up over in Dur Shanzag a while back. Automatic killers. They let 'em loose and ever since, they've been buzzing round looking for live targets. I've taken out maybe a dozen so far. The control system ain't too smart, so they're quite easy to deal with.'

He sat back down at the table.

'Guess we might as well finish our meal. I really hate being interrupted while I'm eating.'

They finished their dessert, and then the albino produced Turkish coffee and a bottle of Stuff Central's best cognac. The sky was already starting to dim, and by the time the bottle was drunk it was quite dark. The albino stood up and yawned.

'I could sit here talking with you boys all night, but it's past my bedtime. You two look like you could use some sleep.'

Billy and Reave both nodded. The brandy had wiped out what little was left of their energy. The albino cleared away the remains of the meal, and started to rig up a hammock between two of the palm trees.

'There's room for one of you to sleep in the shack, and the other can sleep in this here hammock. It's plenty warm enough on account of how it zips up like a sleeping bag.'

He demonstrated. Billy and Reave looked at each other.

'Who's going to take the hammock?'

'We could flip a coin for it if we had a coin to flip.'

Billy shrugged.

'I'll take the hammock, I could sleep anywhere.'

'If you're sure you don't mind.'

Billy tested his weight on it.

'No, I don't mind.'

Billy took off his jacket, boots and gun belt.

'You can take these into the house with you. I'd hate to lose them in the night.'

'Sure. Goodnight.'

Reave took Billy's things and followed Burt the Medicine into the shack. Billy zipped himself into the hammock, and within minutes was asleep.

It was light again when Billy woke up. He felt better than he had at any time since leaving Pleasant Gap. Even the memory of the Shirik had diminished to a dull nightmare. He pulled down the zip on the hammock and swung his feet to the ground. Neither Reave nor Burt the Medicine seemed to be up and about yet. He walked over to the pool and had a leisurely wash.

Feeling clean and refreshed, Billy looked round for some sign of life, but nobody had yet emerged from the shack, so he walked to the partly open doorway in his bare feet.

The interior of Burt the Medicine's shack had none of the makeshift appearance of the outside. Although it was only one room, the floor was carpeted and the walls were hung with tapestries and finely wrought brasswork. Light filtered in through Venetian blinds over the windows. It revealed that the room was crowded with ornate furniture and objets d'art.

At one end of the room was a huge bed made of dark, carved wood. Billy moved quietly towards the bed. To his surprise he found, naked under the covers, Reave and Burt the Medicine curled up together in each other's arms. They were sound asleep.

Billy backed quietly away from the bed, grinning to himself. He'd never thought that Reave was that sexually adventurous. His boots, belt and jacket were lying on a chair, so he picked them up and tiptoed out of the shack.

He sat by the pool for nearly an hour before anybody emerged. The albino was the first to appear. He wore a white brocade robe and oddly dainty silver sandals. He came over to where Billy was sitting.

'Breakfast?'

'Yes please.'

'Be ready in a few minutes.'

'Great.'

Burt the Medicine strolled back to the shack. A while later Reave appeared. He walked over and joined Billy. He looked a little sheepish.

'You got your stuff out of the shack, then?'

'Uh-huh.'

'I guess I must have been asleep at the time.'

Billy tried hard to keep a straight face.

'That's right.'

'In bed with Burt?'

'Yeah, as far as I could see.'

'I... uh... was pretty drunk last night.'

'Yeah?'

'I... er.'

Billy laughed.

'Don't worry about it, man. I don't care who you ball.'

'But I...'

'It doesn't matter, Reave. We ain't in Pleasant Gap now. There aren't any rules any more.'

'I guess not.'

'So stop looking so fucking guilty. Did you have a good time?'

'He was pretty weird.'

'Yeah. He's coming back, so leave it for now.'

The albino set a tray down on the table. There was chilled melon, sliced ham, croissants and a pitcher of cold milk. He grinned at them.

'Breakfast, boys.'

For the next half hour they ate and made small talk, and then, while Burt the Medicine was clearing away the meal, Reave looked at Billy.

'What do we do now?'

'I guess we should move on sooner or later.'

'On foot? Back into the desert?'

'Maybe we should talk to Burt the Medicine about it.'

'Talk to Burt the Medicine about it.'

He had returned from the shack. Billy glanced up at him.

'We were talking about moving on.'

'Moving on? You only just got here. What's the matter, don't you like it here?'

He looked sideways at Reave.

'Bored already?'

Reave coloured.

'No, no. It's just that...'

He quickly borrowed a phrase from the Rainman.

'... We're travelling men.'

Burt the Medicine stared out into the distance.

'Travelling men.'

His voice was wistful.

'A lot of travelling men used to come through here before the war started.'

He switched his attention back to the present.

'What do you want to do then?'

Billy spread his hands.

'That's the trouble, we don't really know. I suppose this desert doesn't go on for ever.'

'No, but it goes on for quite a way. I suppose you want to go on to the river?'

'The river?'

'That's the only place to go, except back to the war.'

'What happens on the river?'

Burt the Medicine grinned.

'Just about everything you could think of. You'd best head for Port Judas. From there you can take a river boat all the way down past Dropville, Arthurburg and right through to the nothings.'

'How far is it? How long will it take us to get there?'

The albino shrugged.

'Depends how you go.'

'I guess we'll be going the same way we came.'

'You came on foot.'

'That's what I mean.'

'It takes a week to reach Port Judas on foot. You'd probably die before you got there.'

Billy frowned.

'Then we're in trouble.'

The albino smiled.

'Not really. I'm sure I can fix something. I'll see what I can jive up on the stuff beam after we've eaten lunch.'

Billy grinned.

'Sure do a lot of eating round here.'

Burt the Medicine shot Reave another sidelong glance.

'That's true.'

He stood up, and bustled back to the shack. Billy and Reave continued to sit at the table. Burt the Medicine came back with a bottle of Campari, a soda syphon and a dish of ice. He put them down on the table.

'This'll keep you two amused until lunch. I've got a few chores to do.'

He disappeared inside the shack again. Billy and Reave drank Campari and soda until the albino appeared with yet another meal. When they'd finished, Burt the Medicine took a deep breath, as though he was about to make an announce-ment.

'I've been looking through the Stuff catalogue. There's a nifty little two-seat buggy. I think I could get it for you with-out them wanting to push up my quota. That's if you've really got to go.'

'We've got to move on, I'm afraid.'

Burt the Medicine stood up.

'I'll go and dial up the buggy for you. It'll take me a while to set up the large cage. If you just wait here, I'll bring it round to you.'

He went round to the back of the shack, and after a few minutes there was an intense flash of static and then the low hum of a flux motor. Burt the Medicine swung round the out-side of the shack in a small two-seat pink buggy with huge white balloon tyres. He halted it just outside the line of trees. Billy and

Reave hurried over to join him. He climbed out and patted the fibreglass body.

'There you go, boys. That should get you to Port Judas inside of two days.'

Reave scratched his head.

'I don't know how we can ever pay you back for this.'

The albino laughed.

'Don't bother about it. Stuff Central are always getting on to me about how I ought to consume more. It's like you're helping me out.'

Billy and Reave came over adolescent tongue-tied.

'Well thanks.'

They threw their few belongings into the buggy, and Burt the Medicine once again disappeared inside the shack. He re-turned moments later carrying a wicker basket.

'I just packed up some food for your trip.'

Billy was about to make a crack about grandmother's house, but decided it would be unkind.

'Thanks.'

'Be sure and stop by here again.'

'We will.'

Reave set the buggy in motion, and they pulled away from the oasis. Their last glimpse of Burt the Medicine was as he stood waving, a solitary white figure between the palm trees.

At ten forty-five sharp, exactly three quarters of an hour after the meeting had started, A.A. and Valdo Catto entered the boardroom. It was a grand entrance. A.A. Catto had made sure of that. Both she and her brother were dressed in white. He wore a uniform modelled on ancient film of the legendary hero Hermann Goering, while she had on what she liked to refer to as her vestal virgin outfit.

The five families of the hereditary directorate were all present in the circular, domed room. The Cattos, the Glicks, the Meltzers, the Mudstraps and the Feric, each sitting in their own wedge-shaped section of the hall. The most senior of the families sat at the front, after which the seating was allo-cated, rank behind rank, in succeeding generations.

The young of Con-Lee were noticeable by their absence, and the oldsters mumbled together about irrelevant problems of fiscal logistics. On a rotating podium in the centre of the hall great-great-grandfather Dino, the senior Mudstrap, was taking his turn at chairing a meeting. Valdo and A.A. Catto took their seats with the maximum of noise and fuss.

When they were able to prolong the disturbance of their arrival no longer, the meeting resumed, and Bull Feric got to his feet and, in a long rambling dissertation, presented an esot-eric motion for the restructuring of the Exec level grading system. After the first twenty minutes, Valdo nudged A.A. Catto.



'Remember our agreement.'

A.A. Catto waved him away.

'I know, I know. We haven't even started yet.'

Bull Feric continued for another half hour and then abruptly sat down. Dino Mudstrap called a vote. A.A. Catto, who had understood nothing of the argument, looked at the yes and no buttons on the arm of her chair. Quite at random she pressed the no button. Dino Mudstrap studied the results as they were relayed to his podium, and announced the motion carried. A.A. Catto felt mildly pleased that she had instinct-ively disagreed with the majority of the oldsters.

Dino Mudstrap was swivelling his podium looking for the next motion. A.A. Catto jumped to her feet.

'Mister Chairman.'

The podium came to a halt.

'The Chair recognizes... ah...'

Dino Mudstrap consulted his seating plan.

'... Miss A.A. Catto.'

A.A. Catto took a deep breath.

'I propose the motion that the L-4 dwellings, and all the stasis territory beyond the perimeter walls of the citadel, be declared insanitary and firestormed forthwith.'

Dino Mudstrap's bushy eyebrows shot up.

'Firestormed, Miss Catto? For what reason?'

'For no particular reason except that the destruction of the L-4s would provide an excellent diversion. It would be fun.'

'Fun, Miss Catto?'

'Fun, Mister Chairman.'

Dino Mudstrap stroked his bald head.

'I see.'

He paused, and peered round the meeting.

'Does anyone second this... ah... unusual motion?'

Valdo was on his feet.

'I do, Mister Chairman.'

Again he consulted his seating plan.

'The motion is seconded by Valdo Catto. Does any member care to speak against it?'

In the front rank of the Feric's, the ancient Melissa creaked to her feet.

'It would seem, Mister Chairman, that the proposal to destroy, en masse, these potentially useful life forms would be in direct opposition to our long-established traditions of frugality and conservation.'

Melissa Feric had long been famous for her sentimentality,

'I must therefore seriously warn this meeting against sanctioning any such action.'

She resumed her seat. The ever-practical Nolan Catto, A.A, Catto's grandfather, was immediately on his feet.

'While not sharing the venerable Miss Feric's humanitarian considerations, I must also call on this meeting to reject the motion. You will all recall, no doubt, that in the case of the accidental firestorm that consumed the periphery of Akio-Tech, there was a period when the citadel itself was endangered.'

A.A. Catto pouted.

'They put it out in time.'

The chairman banged his gavel.

'You are out of order, Miss Catto. Pray continue, sir.'

Nolan Catto glanced at his granddaughter.

'While appreciating our young people's need for spectacle, I do feel that such a drastic display would, to say the least, be foolhardy.'

The next to rise was Havard Glick. Heads turned to look at him. Havard Glick was notorious for his eccentric ideas.

'It might have escaped Miss Catto's knowledge that there are some who hold the belief that even the L-4s are possessed of human sensibilities, and the morality of their wholesale slaughter would be somewhat questionable.'

There was a ripple of laughter. The old man was obviously senile. Everyone knew that the L-4s were the descendants of rejects from Con-Lee DNA research and that Con-Lee could dispose of them in whatever way they pleased. Nobody else seemed eager to speak after Havard Glick, and the chairman returned to A.A. Catto.

'Do you have anything else to say, Miss Catto?'

A.A. Catto jumped to her feet.

'Indeed I do, Mister Chairman. My grandfather's senti-ments are typical of the decay that will one day destroy this citadel. Don't firestorm the L-4s, he whimpers, it might en-danger us. Leave these insanitary organisms to scuttle round the outside of our beautiful towers. My grandfather would have our citadel overrun by vermin rather than risk the purg-ing flames.'

Her voice rose in high patriotism.

'It is the voices of cowards and traitors that plead for this rabble. The five families created the L-4s to serve, and when they no longer serve, it is the duty of the five families to destroy them. The fire cannot harm a citadel. It didn't at Akio-Tech and it won't here. I say to you one more time, we must firestorm the L-4s.'

The chairman, who had appeared to doze off during A.A. Catto's speech, opened his eyes.

'I thought you said earlier that you wanted to firestorm the L-4s for fun.'

'Yes, Mister Chairman. And because it's my sacred duty.'

The chairman nodded.

'Yes, I see.'

He looked round at the directorate.

'Shall we vote?'

Nolan Catto was on his feet.

'May I propose a compromise? It might be a very good idea to instruct the entertainment Execs to prepare video simula-tion of a firestorm. It might do a little to satisfy these young people's need for spectacle.'

A.A. Catto dug her nails into her palms.

'You patronizing bastard.'

The chairman glared at her.

'Shall we vote? First for Miss Catto's motion, and secondly for Mister Catto's compromise. Vote on the first one, please.'

A.A. Catto stabbed at her yes button.

'And now the second.'

She pressed the no button. The chairman consulted his results.

'Miss Catto's motion is rejected. Mister Catto's compromise is carried.'

'Damn you old fools.'

A.A. Catto stood up and stalked out of the boardroom. Valdo followed a little way behind. Outside in the corridor, Valdo caught hold of her wrist as she was about to step on to the moving walkway.

'Have you forgotten our bargain, sister dear?'

'Bargain?'

'You promised to let me take you home and ill-treat you if I found this meeting loathsome and boring.'

'Did I agree to that?'

'Indeed you did.'

'But surely you didn't take me seriously?'

'I must admit, sister, that I took it very seriously. So seriously that I filed a tape of our conversation with Audit-12, the steward of wagers. He found it perfectly acceptable.'

'You little beast.'

'I thought I should get some fun out of what promised to be a very boring morning.'

A.A. Catto glared at her brother.

'I positively forbid you to lay a hand on me.'

'I was going to use a whip. I have one that would be eminently suitable.'

'I won't let you.'

Valdo smiled at her. He looked like a vulture.

'You'll have to.'

'Why?'

'Because otherwise Audit will compel you to under the term of a family wager.'

'Let them try.'

'If they make you, it'll be in public.'

'Public?'

'Delinquent wagers are always collected in front of vid-cameras. It goes out like on channel 79. I'm sure all our friends will watch, and of course, the tape will be available in the library.'

'You're an unpleasant little weasel.'

Valdo beamed.

'It runs in the family. Are you ready to come?'

A.A. Catto pursed her lips.

'Yes, I suppose so.'

Valdo helped her on to the walkway.

'I think the hour will be sufficient.'

Like Burt the Medicine predicted, it took less than two days to cross the desert. It gave way to rolling grasslands, and the track that Billy and Reave had been following became a sur-faced highway. Then other roads connected with it, and soon Billy and Reave were driving through tidy, cultivated farms. They passed other traffic on the road, square, upright, boxlike vehicles painted black or brown and driven by noisy impulse motors. The people inside looked sombre, dour folk. They dressed in black or grey and stared in amazement at Billy's and Reave's flamboyant buggy.

They passed more and more of the sedate, austere cars. The farms became increasingly built on, and then they passed a sign that read:

Port Judas Welcomes the Clean Living.

Reave grinned at Billy.

'Think we qualify?'

Billy grinned back.

'I don't know about you, man.'

They drove into the town, past rows and rows of small stone houses with white picket fences and neat little gardens. Billy grimaced.

'It doesn't look too much like fun city.'

Reave shrugged.

'Maybe this is just the suburbs.'

'Maybe.'

The gardens disappeared and they found themselves in an area of high walls and grey stone factories. Then the road swung round a corner, and out into a square. The square was surrounded by all kinds of imposing municipal buildings. They were built from the same grey stone, but had been dig-nified by the addition of pillars and broad steps. On the pave-ments, serious people in black and grey went soberly about their business. In the centre of the square was a bronze statue of a sour, elderly gentleman in the same long scholastic robe worn by most of the male inhabitants. He clutched a book under one arm, and held the other poised as though about to shake an admonishing finger. The whole place had an air of unshakable piety.

Reave swung the buggy into the kerb and looked around.

'Don't say this is downtown Port Judas.'

The albino had included a box of cigars in the hamper of goodies. Billy lit one and inhaled.

'It looks like a good place to catch a boat away from.'

A man in a blue coat with brass buttons and a peaked cap was staring intently at Billy and Reave from the other side of the square. Billy glanced at Reave.

'He's got to be the law around here. He's a cop if ever I saw one.'

'Don't look now but he's coming over.'

The figure was sauntering across the square, fingering the stick that hung from his belt. He had the unmistakable unconcerned walk of cops in every place, every age.

'We can't have broken a law already.'

'You never can tell.'

'Shall we do a runner?'

'No. Hang on and see what he wants.'

As the figure came closer Billy and Reave could see that his cap bore the legend 'Port Judas Bureau of Correction'. He halted beside the buggy and jerked the finger of his white gloved hand at Billy.

'Thou!'

'Me?'

'Yea, thou. What thinkest thou, parking in the main square?'

Billy smiled politely.

'Sorry officer. We just drove in from the desert.'

'Thou makest for the harbour?'

'That's right.'

'Then make. Outlanders have their own quarter by the waterfront. Thinkest thou the good people of Port Judas suffer them to run all over the whole city?'

'Well, no. We just didn't know.'

'Ignorance is no excuse.'

'We're really sorry.'

'I think maybe I should book thee for vagrant wandering.'

'We won't do it again.'

'Thirty days in the workhouse would ensure thou didst not do it again.'

'Listen officer. We're new in town. Give us a break.'

Billy gestured pleadingly with his cigar. The officer looked at it in disgust.

'Put out that vile weed. Thou transgressed City Ordinance 417.'

'Huh?'

'Thou shall not partake of the weed tobacco in a public place. Penalty sixty days in the city workhouse. That's ninety days thou couldst pull already.'

Billy ground out the cigar with his boot.

'Listen...'

'I think I shall overlook thy offences this one time. Hurry thyself to the outlanders' quarter and we'll say no more. I promise thee, though, if I see thy face...'

He glanced at Reave.

'... or thy face either, around here again, I'll book thee for sure. Understandeth?'

Billy nodded.

'We understand. Thanks for letting us go, officer.'

Reave flicked the buggy into drive, and they moved off. The cop watched them until they'd left the square. Once out of sight of him, Reave glanced at Billy.

'I think you were right about this town.'

'I'll say one thing for it, it's better than Dur Shanzag. Let's make it down to the outlanders' quarter. The good people of Port Judas give me the creeps. I think we'd be better off with the bad people.'

The outlanders' quarter was surrounded with a high stone wall made from the same grey stone as the rest of the city. Billy and Reave drove along the wall until they came to an entrance. Over it was a sign that read 'Outlanders' Reserved Area. Gates Closed Dusk to Dawn.' Two more Bureau of Cor-rection officers were on duty at the gate. They waved Billy and Reave down.

'Are ye entering for the first time?'

Billy and Reave both nodded.

'That's right.'

One of the officers produced a bundle of yellow cards, and handed them one each.

'Heed the warnings contained therein.'

They both promised they would, and the officer waved them on. As they drove into the outlanders' quarter, Billy scanned the card. It was closely printed on both sides with stern warnings to outlanders as to what the good citizens of Port Judas considered to be unseemly behaviour. The gist of it was that any foreigner showing his face in the main part of the city had better have a pass, a good reason for being there, and get himself back behind the walls before sunset.

'This is some friendly town.'

Reave glanced round.

'It don't seem too bad in here.'

The outlanders' quarter seemed a good deal more human. Its streets bustled rather than proceeded with stern piety like they did outside. Sailors in striped shirts and rough cotton trousers rubbed shoulders with merchants in black robes. Street vendors cried their wares and hard-eyed men in frock coats, fancy waistcoats and wide-brimmed hats moved determinedly through the crowds. There was even a subtle difference in the women. They still wore the same grey dresses and white aprons as the strait-laced ladies on the outside, but many had discarded the starched white caps, and they contrived to show more cleavage and the occasional flash of leg. Reave grinned at Billy.

'This looks more like it.'

Billy laughed.

'I could feel more at home here. What we need is food, drink, a bed and some female company. Right?'

'Too right.'

Billy pointed to a place ahead on the left.

'How about that?'

It was a two-storey building. Grey stone again, but its woodwork was painted a cheerful yellow. Over the door hung a sign - The Hot Puddings. They pulled up in front of it.

'Is that an inn, or is that an inn?'

They parked the buggy and walked inside. The front parlour smelled of ale and tobacco. The timbers of the ceiling were mellowed and darkened by generations of smoke. The place was lit by an iron fixture in the ceiling that held dozens of flickering candles. Their light reflected on the different coloured bottles behind the bar.

Billy and Reave stood in the middle of the parlour and looked around. There were maybe a dozen men in the place. Most were sailors, except one group of three who looked disturbingly like mercenaries either coming to or from Dur Shanzag. A small man in a white shirt, black trousers and a leather apron came out from behind the bar. He had a round moonface and slanted oriental eyes.



'I help you gentlemen?'

'We're looking for a place to stay.'

'You gentlemen find no finer rooms than here at the sign of The Hot Puddings.'

Reave looked sideways at the little man.

'You the landlord?'

The little man nodded.

'Sure. Me Lo Yuen. I run this place.'

'Well tell me, Lo Yuen. What passes for money in this town?'

Lo Yuen looked suspiciously at Reave.

'Port Judas crowns, of course. You got some?'

'No stuff beam?'

'Port Judas don't allow. You got to have money. You got money?'

Lo Yuen was looking less and less friendly. Billy inter-vened.

'We don't actually have any money...'

Lo Yuen looked decidedly hostile.

'... However, we do have this very fine desert buggy outside which we would very much like to find a buyer for.'

He leaned close to Lo Yuen and dropped his voice.

'Seeing how we don't know too much about the currency we were wondering if you might help us sell it. I mean, we'd be happy to give you a percentage on the sale.'

The little man looked a good deal happier.

'It sounds like very admirable proposition. Where is fine vehicle?'

Billy gestured towards the door.

'Right outside, honoured friend.'

He led Lo Yuen out of the inn and into the street.

'There it is. What do you think?'

'It very... colourful.'

'Yeah, well, apart from that.'

'I think maybe some men in parlour might want. Hold on, I talk with them.'

He went back inside the inn, and a few moments later he came back with one of the men in combat gear.

'This Zorbo. He want to talk about buying vehicle.'

'Yeah?'

Billy faced the mercenary.

'You headed for the war zone?'

'That's right.'

'Rather you than me, friend.'

'You been there?'

'Sure, we just got out of it.'

'Bad, huh?'

'Bad.'

Zorbo shrugged.

'We're fighting men. What else can we do?'

'Don't ask me, friend. It took us all our time to get away from it. You want to buy this machine?'

The mercenary stroked his chin.

'Looks like the kind of thing that we need to get us across the desert. How much you want for it?'

Billy glanced at Lo Yuen.

'What would be a fair price, mister innkeeper?'

Lo Yuen went through a pantomime of patting and inspecting the buggy.

'Look like two thousand crowns' worth to me.'

Zorbo poked the buggy with his finger.

'I'll give you a thousand.'

Billy looked down at his boots.

'It ain't more than two days old. Eighteen hundred.'

'I'll make it twelve and not a crown more.'

'Sixteen?'

'Fourteen.'

'Fifteen hundred.'

'Done.'

The mercenary gave Billy a heavy canvas bag of coins, and went inside to fetch his friends to look at their purchase. Billy dipped in the bag, and gave Lo Yuen a hundred and fifty crowns. The little man smiled and ushered them back into the parlour of the inn.

'We do good business, hey gentlemen?'

Billy clapped the little man on the shoulder.

'Good business, Lo Yuen.'

The two of them ate, and then spent the rest of the after-noon lounging at a corner table working their way through a bottle of tequila. Sailors and drifters passed in and out of the place, and as the day wore on, Billy and Reave picked up various snippets of information. It appeared there was a river boat going down to Arthurburg in a couple of days, and also that Port Judas could be quite an easy place to live in if you stuck to the outlanders' quarter. They also discovered that the thirteen fifty they had from selling the buggy was more than enough for them to buy a passage all the way down the river. For the first time in a long time, life looked pretty good.

The afternoon drew into evening, and the sky outside the inn parlour's narrow windows became dark. Lo Yuen built up the log fire in the huge stone fireplace, and the room became a cosy recess of warm light and deep shadows. Bright highlights glinted on the polished wood, the brasswork and the ranks of bottles.

The parlour began to fill up and Lo Yuen put three wait-resses to work, who moved between the tables serving drinks, collecting glasses and bandying ribald chat with the customers. A fiddler and an accordion player struck up beside the fire-place, and the laid-back atmosphere of the afternoon dissolved into a jumping jollity. Reave, already half drunk from the afternoon's tequila, laughed and nudged Billy.

'Only one thing we need now, old buddy.'

'What's that, man?'

'We need us some broads, old buddy. That's what we need.'

'Amen to that, buddy.'

Word began to spread round the parlour that Billy and Reave were big-spending travelling men. A couple of card hustlers cruised by to check them out, but they made it clear that they didn't want to know. Girls also began to hover round their table. Not only the waitresses, but two or three other girls

who seemed to be employed by Lo Yuen to keep the customers happy and drinking.

Reave stretched out his arm and grabbed one of the girls by the wrist. She was a pleasant plump brunette whose ample figure couldn't be disguised by the sober grey dress, particularly as she wore it considerably less buttoned than the good women of Port Judas.

'You want to dance, honey?'

'I don't know about that, sir. Dancing ain't really allowed in public inns.'

'Fuck that shit. I want to dance.'

He climbed to his feet and started jigging about with the girl.

'Thou art a one, young sir.'

A circle was formed in the middle of the room. Reave swung the screaming and giggling girl round and round, while the accordion player and the fiddler stamped their feet.

The dance whirled faster and faster, then, abruptly, the music stopped. The door had opened, and in the doorway stood two blue-coated officers. Reave collided with the girl and they both fell in a heap on the floor. The officers stood looking down at them.

'What do ye, herein?'

Reave scrambled to his feet. Billy stayed seated at the table, but his hand slid down beside his gun. Reave grinned sheep-ishly at the officers.

'We, uh, fell over.'

'Ye fell. Art thou sure it wasn't public dancing?'

'Public dancing?'

'Aye, fellow. Public dancing.'

Lo Yuen hurried from behind the bar.

'There no public dancing in this inn, gentlemen officers. That would be against law.'

He took each officer by the arm, and after a muttered conversation they all went outside together. A couple of minutes later Lo Yuen returned on his own. He went straight up to Reave and the girl.

'If gentleman want to sport with girl, then he must take her to own room.'

Reave grinned, and slapped the girl's bottom.

'That suits me, brother.'

He grinned at her.

'You coming then, gorgeous?'

She pouted.

'If that's what would please thee, good sir.'

'Let's go then.'

He took her by the hand and led her towards the stairs. Lo Yuen caught him by the arm.

'One moment, my friend. Officers took twenty crowns of persuasion before they leave.'

Reave dropped the coins into his hand, and then hurried up the stairs with the laughing girl. Billy relaxed in his seat and poured himself another drink. He was beginning to like Port Judas despite its absurd laws. A girl dropped into Reave's empty chair. She had red hair and large green eyes. There were freckles on the section of her ample breasts that were presented to Billy. She smiled at him slyly.

'My friend's gone upstairs with thy mate.'

Billy laughed.

'You want to do the same?'

'I might. If thou wast specially nice to me.'

'It would be productive to gather data from the static module.'

'It is unfortunate that we lack the time.'

'We are injured and unable to delay our search for a naturally occurring stasis point where we may heal our wounds'

'We must continue.'

'We must continue.'

The spherical form of Her/Them detached Her/Their self from the dead hulk of Wilbur and floated free. She/They maintained the form until She/They was some distance from the silent disrupter, and then resumed the triple form. The two identical women carrying the injured third in their arms. She/They turned so that She/They faced away from the broken disruption module, and once again began Her/Their steady progress.

The mist was unnaturally still. It lay in even horizontal layers. All twisting and undulation had ceased. She/They moved forward, breasting the layers of mist with little effort. Then abruptly it ceased. The mist, the blue light, there was nothing at all. A total empty blackness.

'Absence.'

For a fraction of a second, She/They did not exist either. Then, moved by Her/Their emergency programming, She/They exerted Her/Their will. She/They began to glow with a soft violet light, and became the only thing in that totally empty universe.

'The state of our existence is related to nothing. There is no external by which we may judge our being.'

The words glowed bright red, growing bigger and bigger to fill the empty space. Abruptly they blinked out.

'If motion can be equated with the expenditure of energy, then we move.'

'We expend the energy in order to move, therefore we move.'

'Subsequently we move'

More words flashed away into the void.

'The absence of external produces a hole of total subject-ivity.'

'Observation. An external has been produced.'

A point of light appeared.

'Cease all energy use.'

She/They became totally inert. The point of light re-mained.

'External proved to be objective.'

The point of light grew larger and slowly took shape. It moved towards Her/Them like some winged object. It grew larger and larger. It was a huge penguin that glowed with a hard yellow light. She/They remained totally inert as it flapped majestically past without a sideways glance. It flew on, becoming smaller and smaller. Finally it was just a point of light again.

'We possess no data on such a phenomenon.'

'It fails to compute.'

'Thou wert lusty, young sir.'

'I could say the same for you, babe.'

The girl had been willing and eager. She had lacked a lot in technique, but more than made up for it in enthusiasm. She had reacted with shock and amazement when Billy had put his mouth between her legs. It was obvious that no one in Port Judas behaved that way. She had also been somewhat dis-turbed when he had suggested that she treated him to a blow job. After some persuasion and instruction she had acquired a taste for both.

'Thou hast taught me much.'

'Glad to oblige.'

When he had entered her she had seemed much more at home, bucking and writhing, moaning and lifting her hips to meet him in what seemed to Billy to be genuine earthy pleasure. She had raked his back with

her nails, and finally, after a long time, they had both come together and collapsed exhausted. They had lain together in silence for a while, and then she had spoken. Billy propped himself up on one elbow and looked at her.

'Don't girls like you have a hard time in Port Judas?'

'It's not too bad if we don't stray outside the quarter.'

'What about the good people of the town? Don't they give you a hard time?'

'They call us whores and sinners, but they can't do without us. They need us so the good women can keep their sacred virtue. Much good it may do them too. I wouldn't swap with the wife of an elder right now.'

'Don't they have laws against doing this kind of thing?'

The girl scowled.

'Course they have laws. Every so often the blue coats round up a few of us and we get dragged in front of the pro-curator for fornication and lewdness.'

'And what happens then?'

'Either ten strokes of the rod or five days in the workhouse.'

'Have you ever been pulled in?'

'Once or twice. I always take the rod. It's quicker.'

'You mean you've been beaten?'

'Course. I said I had, didn't I? It don't happen often be-cause like I said, they got to have us. We only get rounded up for appearances.'

Billy shook his head.

'I don't understand you. Why the hell don't you split? Why don't you run away from this place?'

The girl looked at him in surprise.

'That's silly talk, young sir. Where would I go?'

Billy lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. The girl seemed so certain that Port Judas was the whole world that he could think of nothing else to say. After a time he rolled over and began to stroke her breast. Just as the excitement was starting to mount again in both of them, there was a knock on the door. Billy's mind flashed back to Dogbreath.

'Not again.'

He rolled over, and grabbed the gun from his belt that was hanging on the bedpost. The knocking came again.

'Who is it?'

'It's me, Billy. It's Reave.'

Taking no chances, Billy padded across to the door, slipped the bolt, and stepped back.

'Come in, but come in nice and slow.'

The door opened and Reave stepped inside. Billy lowered his gun.

'What's happening?'

'I just been down to the parlour for a nightcap, and I heard something that I thought I ought to tell you about.'

Billy wrapped a blanket round himself and sat down on the bed.

'Wouldn't it have kept till morning?'

'I don't think so. There's these two guys downstairs. They're sitting in the corner. They're wearing trench coats and they've got their hats pulled down over their faces. La Yuen told me that they've been asking about us. He reckons they're secret agents from the war zone.'

'Sounds like they're from the Gh/shn kh.'

'And they're looking for us. I got a feeling it's trouble, Billy.'

Billy reached for a cigar, lit it, and held the smoke in his lungs for a long time while he thought.

'I don't think they'll try anything while we're in here. There's too many people about.'

'So what do we do?'

I guess we've got to stick close to the inn until it's time for the boat. Then we'll make a run for it.'

'What do we do about boat tickets?'

'Get Lo Yuen to fix them for us.'

'Think we can trust him?'

'We're going to have to.'

'I suppose so.'

'Listen. Go to bed. Lock the door, and we'll see how things are in the morning. We're going to have to play this thing by ear.'

Reave grinned.



'When did we ever do anything else?'

He headed for the door, and Billy bolted it behind him. He went back to the young woman in his bed. She looked at him nervously.

'Thou art in trouble.'

He ran his fingers between her legs.

'Nothing we can't take care of.'

To his surprise she pushed him away and sat up.

'I think perhaps it's time I was leaving thee.'

Billy put his arm round her.

'Listen. There ain't going to be no trouble. I thought you were going to stay the whole night?'

The girl shot him a sidelong glance.

'Thou couldst try giving me another little present.'

Billy fumbled in his jacket, and dropped ten crowns on the girl's stomach. She gathered them up and placed them with her clothes, then she lay down smiling.

'Perhaps we should play them new games that thou hast taught me?'

Billy pulled her close to him, and they played for a long time before they fell asleep.

When Billy came down to the parlour the next morning, the two men in trench coats were sitting in a corner. They watched openly while Lo Yuen brought him a plate of eggs and a mug of beer.

They were just as Reave had described them. Dirty trench coats and grey fedoras pulled over their eyes. They just had to be Gh/shn kh agents. Billy ate his eggs and stared back at them. Bit by bit the parlour began to fill up with the morning trade, and when the place was fairly full, Billy managed to get a quiet word with Lo Yuen.

'I hear there's a boat leaving tomorrow?'

The little man nodded.

'Pier six, eleven in the morning.'

'Could you fix it so me and my partner were on it?'

'Very simple. I get you tickets.'

'How much would it be for a good-class cabin for the two of us?'

'Two hundred crowns.'

Billy dropped the coins in Lo Yuen's hand.

'There's an extra fifty. It's for your trouble.'

He gave the little man a hard look.

'I wouldn't like it if anyone else heard about it.'

Lo Yuen smiled blandly.

'You no worry. Me soul of discretion. Ask anybody.'

'Okay. Thanks.'

'Okay. I go now.'

The little man hurried off to take care of his customers, Reave came down to the parlour rubbing his eyes. He flopped into the chair next to Billy and glanced at the men in the corner.

'I see they're still here.'

'Did you really expect them to be gone?'

'I guess not. What are we going to do?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. We're just going to sit here and drink. Lo Yuen's getting our boat tickets, and at about ten thirty tomorrow, we'll do a run for pier number six. Okay?'

'It's okay with me. I guess you know what you're doing.'

'I hope so. I don't fancy being dragged back to Dur Shanzag.'

They spent the rest of the day sitting at their table in the parlour, drinking in a leisurely manner, and watching the two agents watching them. Towards the end of the evening they each found themselves a girl and retired behind the bolted doors of their rooms. Billy spent a pleasant night informing a second Port Judas whore of the joys that could be had from oral-genital contact. Billy reflected that if the idea spread round the town, he would probably be responsible for yet another addition to the Port Judas city ordinances.

The next morning Billy got up, dressed, crossed the corridor and tapped on Reave's door.

'Who is it?'

'Billy, let me in, quick.'

He slipped inside, and Reave bolted the door behind him.

'You got the tickets?'

Billy nodded.

'Lo Yuen gave them to me last night, I also paid our bill.'

'So we can walk straight out of here?'

'If you've got everything together.'

Reave struggled into his jacket.

'I'm ready.'

'Okay, let's go.'

They hurried down the stairs, and went straight across the parlour and out of the door before the two agents had a chance to move. Once in the street, they hurried along for a couple of blocks, and then ducked into an alley. Reave glanced behind.

'Think we've lost them?'

'I don't know. Let's keep moving.'

They doubled back through the narrow streets of the outlanders' quarter, crossing the same route a number of times, before heading for the pier. There was no sign of the two men when they finally emerged on the quayside. They were jostled by sailors and dock workers as they looked for pier six. The smell of the river seemed like the scent of freedom. At last they came across a sign that read Pier Six and they hurried out to board the river boat.

The Maria Nowhere was a floating palace. It looked as though it had been designed by a fin de siècle shipwright with an obsession about decorative wrought iron. It lay low in the water, but its elaborate white and gold superstructure was a maze of saloons, companionways and promenade decks. Towering above the wheel house were the ship's pair of slender smoke stacks, and in the rear, the huge single paddle wheel that drove the river boat.

Billy and Reave breathlessly hurried up the gangway. At the top, they were stopped by the purser.

'You have tickets, gentlemen?'

Billy produced the tickets and they were directed to the first-class berths. Halfway there, they were met by a steward and showed into a large, comfortable cabin. Reave grinned at Billy.

'This is the way to travel.'

The cabin followed through the same design style as the outside of the boat, except that the wrought iron and white timber had been replaced by inlaid veneer, crystal mirrors and dark red plush. Billy flopped into an armchair while Reave wandered round the cabin looking in cupboards and opening drawers.

'This sure is an improvement on anything else we've had.'

Billy laughed.

'It's a pity we're so scruffy. That steward couldn't believe we were first-class passengers.'

'Fuck him. We've got money, and that's what counts when you get down to it.'

There was a shudder as the boat's engines began to turn over, and then after a few minutes an even tremor began. Reave went to the porthole.

'We're moving, Billy. We're under way. Come and have a look.'

Billy moved across to the porthole. The waterfront of Port Judas was slowly receding. Billy put a hand on Reave's shoulder.

'Looks like we're out of it, old buddy. We've got away from it all, Dur Shanzag and the good people of Port Judas. I got a feeling that life is going to get better. I got a good feeling, old buddy.'

Reave smiled.

'I got a feeling that I need a drink now all the excitement's over.'

Billy grinned.

'Good idea, let's go up to the saloon. I think it's on the next deck up.'

They both stowed their porta-pacs in one of the cupboards, hid their surplus money under the mattress, and started for the door. Billy opened it, and found himself staring down the muzzle of a heavy-calibre automatic pistol. Behind the gun were the two men in trench coats.

'Oh no!'

They pushed Billy back into the cabin. The agents' eyes glittered from behind their hat brims and upturned collars.

'You will not move or make a sound.'

'Turn round and place your hands on the wall.'

The agents' voices were little more than a cold hiss. Billy and Reave did as they were told, and were patted down and relieved of their guns. They were then ordered to sit on the bed. Billy decided to try and bluff it out.

'Who are you, and what do you want?'

Silently one of the agents reached in his pocket and produced a black leather billfold. He flicked it open. Inside was an enamel badge with the eye and flames emblem in red on a black background.

'We are agents of the Ghfshn kh. We are taking you back to Dur Shanzag for interrogation.'

Billy started to get up.

'Listen, you've made a mistake. I don't know who you're looking for but...'

One of the agents hissed at him.

'Sit down. If you move again I shall blow your head off. One would suffice to take back for interrogation.' Billy sat down abruptly.

'As for being mistaken, there is no possibility of that. You are without question the deserters who stole a fighting machine. We found it where you abandoned it in the desert. Your accessory the albino pervert also told us much before he died. There is no mistake.'

Reave leaped to his feet.

'You mean you killed Burt the Medicine?'

'Obviously, and we'll kill you if you don't sit down.'

Reave sank to the bed.

'What are you going to do with us?'

'You'll be taken back to Dur Shanzag for examination by the Eight.'

'And then?'

'You won't survive examination.'

There seemed to be nothing more to say. Then Billy had an idea.

'You'll have to get us off the boat.'

'You'll be taken off at the next place we land. The crew won't interrupt us. There are no laws on river boats except those the captain cares to invent.'

This time there was nothing at all to say. The little tableau remained totally static. Billy and Reave sat side by side on the bed. The two agents stood slightly apart, with their backs to the door, watching them.

Then it all erupted.

The door flew open and there was the ugly whine of a needler. The two agents swung round and crashed to the floor. Their bodies were riddled with tiny slivers of steel. The Min-strel Boy stood in the doorway holding a miniature needle gun in his right hand.

'The next time I get you idiots out of trouble, I'm going to charge you.'

A.A. Catto followed Valdo into his apartment. She really hadn't bargained for this situation. It promised to be painful and humiliating. The odd thing was that she also felt a vague stirring of excitement.

Three Hostess-1s were waiting in the bedroom. A black velvet coverlet had been laid across the bed, and the wall colouring had been set at a dark purple. A.A. Catto had to admit that her brother had a fine sense of the gothic. A short plaited whip of white leather lay on the bed. It was arranged to give the impression that it had been casually tossed there.

Valdo snapped his fingers at the Hostess-1s.

'Quick now. Undress Miss Catto.'

The Hostess-1s surrounded A.A. Catto and began system-atically to remove her clothes. She did nothing to stop them. It was an odd sensation to be involved in. A situation over which she had no control.

When she was completely naked, Valdo hit the light con-trols so the walls faded almost to black and the room was completely dark except for a single white spot shining down on the bed.

Valdo's voice was a sinister whisper.

'Lie down, my dear sister.'

A.A. Catto was finding the stage management ritual very exciting. She wasn't too sure about the actual pain.

Two of the Hostess-1s took hold of her wrists, and gently but firmly led her towards the bed. She was laid face down, and the Hostess-1s pulled shiny chrome manacles, padded on the inside with soft black leather, from hidden recesses in the bed and snapped them on to A.A. Catto's wrists and ankles. A.A. Catto was spreadeagled on the velvet. She was totally unable to move.

Valdo hit two more buttons and the dim glow of the walls began to undulate in changing shapes and patterns. Richard Strauss came through hidden speakers. A.A. Catto swivelled, her head round to look at Valdo. He was pulling on a pair of white kid gloves. He smiled down at her.

'You must admit that I have taken a lot of trouble over you.'

'You do have good taste.'

Valdo leaned forward and picked up the whip.

'I like to pride myself on that.'

He flicked the whip in the air, as though he was testing it.

'Would you like some altacaine before we start?'

'I think I would prefer a shot of deadout.'

'Oh come now, sister. That would defeat the whole purpose of the exercise. It really must be altacaine or nothing.'

A.A. Catto tugged against the manacles but found that they wouldn't move.

'Yes, yes. I suppose altacaine will make the experience more interesting.'

Valdo turned to a Hostess-1.

Give Miss Cato a single-dose shot.'

The Hostess-1 pressed the injector against one of A.A. Catto's buttocks and pressed the release. A.A. Catto tingled as the boost rushed through her system. Valdo gestured to the two other hostesses.

'Now, rub Miss Catto's body with sensitol.'

A.A. Catto was outraged.

'Sensitol? I never agreed to sensitol.'

'I think it's perfectly legitimate. I wouldn't want you to miss the slightest nuance of the tactile experience.'

The two hostesses rubbed the cream all over A.A. Catto's shoulders, back, buttocks and legs. Her flesh began to come alive, and her skin was sensitive to the slightest movement of the air. She felt pinned down, vulnerable and exposed. She was ultimately receptive to anything that her brother might want to do to her. In the total passiveness and total abasement there was a novel excitement. Valdo's voice came from some-where behind her.

'I think we're about ready.'

There was a swish and A.A. Catto tensed herself, but it was only Valdo testing the whip again. She turned her head.

'For god's sake get on with it. Stop hanging it out.'

Valdo laughed.

'I didn't know you were so eager, sister.'

'Just get on with it.'

'Why? I'm in no hurry.'

'Valdo, please.'

He giggled.

'Come on, beg.'

'Valdo!'

He slowly raised the whip. There was a frozen moment of stillness and silence.

Then the whip came down and A.A. Catto gasped, squirmed, and finally screamed as loud as she could.

The Minstrel Boy dropped his gun back into a small shoulder holster and stepped into the cabin. He was a little more soberly dressed than he'd been in Dur Shanzag. He still had the green lizard frock coat, but it was now cracked and worn. His hair was back to its natural colour, and his dark glasses were again the aviator kind. He wore a double-breasted calfskin waistcoat and a black gambler's tie with a white shirt. His black pants covered scuffed cowboy boots.

Reave and Billy stood up in amazement.

'How the fuck did you get here? What happened?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'I saw you coming aboard, and then I saw those two.'

He gestured to the bodies on the floor.

'I figured what might be going on, and came down here to check it out. You saw the rest.'

'But what are you doing on this boat?'

'You sure ask a lot of questions for somebody who just got their life saved.'

'Sorry, it was just such a surprise.'

'Yeah, okay, life seems to be one big surprise for you boys. You got anything to drink?'

Billy and Reave shook their heads.

'We were just going up to the saloon when these guys came bursting in.'

'Okay then, let's go up there. You can buy me a drink, and meet my partner on this trip.'

Reave gestured at the dead agents.

'What do we do with them?'

The Minstrel Boy glanced casually at the bodies.

'You got twenty crowns?'

'Yeah.'

'Gimme.'

Reave handed the coins to the Minstrel Boy, who pocketed them.

'I'll drop this on the steward, and he'll take care of them. Once they're in the river, the alligators will do the rest.'

They left the cabin and climbed the steps to the saloon. The first-class saloon was a floating casino that seemed to be made from mirrors and cut glass. Two huge crystal chandeliers hung overhead. A steward on the door looked distastefully at Billy's and Reave's clothes.

'Are you gentlemen sure that you're first-class passengers?'

'Sure.'

Billy flashed their tickets, and the steward had to content himself with asking them to leave their guns with



the hat-check girl.

The Minstrel Boy led them across the saloon to a green baize table where a game of nine-card sidwinder was in progress. As they approached, a man in a black velvet coat, with long dark hair, looked up and grinned at the Minstrel Boy.

'We're going okay, partner.'

'That's good. Hey, Frankie, I'd like you to meet two friends of mine, Billy and Reave. This is Frankie Lee, he's a gam-bler.'

Frankie Lee stretched out his hand.

'Pleased to meet you boys. You want to join our game?'

Billy shook his head.

'I think we'll just sit and drink, thanks. We've had a busy day.'

'Okay, suit yourselves.'

The Minstrel Boy sat down at the table and resumed his place in the game. Billy called over a waiter and ordered drinks.

They drank their way through the rest of the day, watching Frankie Lee and the Minstrel Boy clip close on a thousand crowns from two Port Judas merchants out on a spree. Then, towards midnight, they staggered drunkenly off to their cabins where, as the Minstrel Boy had predicted, the bodies had been removed and even the stains on the carpet had vanished. They fell into their beds, and slept soundly until well into the next morning.

They were awakened by a bright, cheerful Minstrel Boy.

'You boys planning on going ashore?'

'Ashore? Where are we?'

'Tied up at the Dropville jetty.'

'Yeah? How long for?'

'Till tomorrow morning.'

Billy sat up in bed and lit a cigar.

'Maybe. What's Dropville like?'

'It's okay for a party, but I wouldn't like to live there.'

'You can have a good time though?'

'Sure. It ain't like Port Judas.'

'Say listen, where's your partner? Is he going ashore?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'He's sleeping. He stayed up all night to finish off those two merchants. Me and him have got to make some money on this voyage. Are you coming, then?'

Billy nodded.

'Yeah, we'll come. Why not?'

The Minstrel Boy opened the door.

'I'll see you in the saloon when you're dressed.'

'For sure.'

The Minstrel Boy closed the door behind him. Billy and Reave climbed out of bed and struggled into their clothes. In-side fifteen minutes they were walking along the deck with the Minstrel Boy in the direction of the gangway. As they were about to leave the ship, a steward stopped them.

'Have you got your porta-pacs?'

Billy and Reave patted the chrome units on their belts and the Minstrel Boy held up his guitar.

'We got them. Why?'

'You never can tell in Dropville. Now and then something comes unstuck.'

They thanked him, and walked down the gangplank. The pier at Dropville was a humble affair compared with Port Judas. It was little more than a rickety wooden jetty, a shed on the bank, and a track that led out into what appeared to be dense, luxuriant jungle. Billy turned to the Minstrel Boy,

'What happened to the town?'

The Minstrel Boy pointed up the track.

'It's about ten minutes' walk. There's too many mosquitoes and things to live right on the river.'

They started up the track. The trees formed a solid canopy of green above their heads, and troops of monkeys crashed through the branches as they approached. Other unseen things slid away through the undergrowth, and brightly coloured birds screeched a raucous warning.

Billy noticed that here and there among the trees were the ruins of buildings. Low structures that had once made exciting use of steel and concrete, but were now overgrown by vines and creepers. Walls and roofs had fallen in, as the jungle light-ened its grip on them. Billy pointed one of the derelicts out to the Minstrel Boy.

'This must have been a much bigger town once upon a time?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'Sure. There was a time when Dropville was one of the richest, most beautiful towns anywhere.'

'What happened to it?'

The Minstrel Boy paused before he answered. The track had led them into a wide clearing. Here and there patches of marble paving still remained, but most of it had been broken up by the relentless pressure of the encroaching jungle. Four or five of the low buildings with their patios and wide expanses of glass stood in fairly good condition, while others, nearer the edge of the jungle, had fallen into total disrepair. Even the ones that were still in use had undergone makeshift patch-up jobs, and received crude, garish redecoration. They walked around the shattered remains of an abstract statue and along the side of an empty overgrown swimming pool. On the bottom of the pool a number of brightly dressed teenagers sat crosslegged in a circle staring vacantly straight ahead. The Minstrel Boy began his story.

'I guess it must have been easily two hundred years ago, Dropville, it was called Laurel Bay in those days, was, like I said, one of the richest and most beautiful towns you could hope to find anywhere. The story even goes that Solomon Bonaparte, the guy who invented the stuff system, retired here after he'd made his pile. The city got richer and richer, and life for the citizens got as close to idyllic as anyone could hope to get. Laurel Bay was a paradise on earth.'

Billy looked around at the ruins and semi-ruins that fought a losing battle with the creepers and undergrowth. They skirted a decorative stainless-steel fountain, filled with generations of dead leaves.

'So what went wrong?'

Before the Minstrel Boy could answer, a figure darted from behind the fountain.

'Wanna see me do my sword swallowing?'

It was a boy who looked about fourteen. He was barefoot and wore white cotton trousers and a silk vest covered in hundreds of tiny mirrors. In his hand he held a short dress sword. The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'Not right now.'

The boy looked disappointed.

'You sure?'

'Sure we're sure.'

A hopeful look came over his face.

'Maybe later?'

'Maybe.'

'See you then.'

'Okay.'

He scampered off and the Minstrel Boy sat down on the edge of the derelict fountain.

'Like I was telling you, things got better and better until, one day, the ultimate happened. Somebody invented im-mortality.'

Billy's and Reave's eyes widened.

'Immortality.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'That's right. They actually achieved the final goal Some-body, some say it was old Solly Bonaparte, came up with a pill or a shot or something that once you'd had it, barring acci-dents, you'd live for ever. Of course the secret's lost now.'

Reave frowned.

'I still don't see how immortality could have caused all this '

The Minstrel Boy lit one of Billy's cigars and went on.

'What happened was this. Directly they had this eternal life dose, everyone in town queued up and got one, and there they all were, set for infinity, provided they didn't drown in the river or fall out of a tree. The only problem was that the immortality deal, stopped the ageing process, and all the people stayed whatever age they were when they got the dose. The old folks kept right on being old folks and the young folks kept on being young folks. The only drawback to the treatment was that it made everyone sterile, and so the population re-mained absolutely the same. Just like time had stopped.'

Reave chewed his lip.

'Pretty weird, huh?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'Pretty weird. The first thing that went wrong was that the old folks, who'd been pretty much running things until im-mortality came along, wanted to go right on running things after. They couldn't stop treating the young folks like they were kids, and gradually the situation grew up where a guy might be, say, sixty years old, but because he looked fifteen, he was treated like he was fifteen. This, coupled with the fact that the old folks got mightily hung up on their eternal life and began bringing in all these heavy public safety laws, created a pretty bad generation gap.'

Billy interrupted him.

'You mean that kid, the one who wanted to show us his sword swallowing, wasn't a kid at all?'

The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'He was certainly a hundred, if not more.'

'Jesus.'

'That was the trouble, you see. The old folks wouldn't listen to the young folks and relations between them, got worse and worse. I don't know the details, but one night the shit hit the fan, and the young folks up and slaughtered every one of the oldsters. Nobody escaped. With the old folks out of the way, they gave up bothering about the fancy houses and all that kind of thing. They didn't have to worry, you see. Stuff Cen-tral beamed in everything they needed. They changed the town's name to Dropville and settled down to having the eternal good time. Bit by bit, the jungle crept in and things got the way they are today.'

Billy grinned.

'Sounds pretty good.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Maybe. I don't like to judge. Dropville's got its problems.'

'Like what?'

'Well, I suppose the main problem's that while, okay, the people will last for ever, the city won't. This is the other side of the river to Port Judas. It ain't part of the static zone. Under this clearing is the biggest generator you ever seen. One day it'll break down and the whole town'll just blink out. There's the odd fault showing up already. I tell you one thing though, it's a good place to party.'

Without saying anything, a girl had come and sat down on the fountain beside Billy. She looked about seventeen, with long blond hair and a deep tan. She smiled when Billy spoke to her. Then she pulled a pack of Northern Lights out of her faded dungarees and offered them around. Billy took one of the slim, white, plastic tubes, and inhaled deeply. He felt him-self filled with an overpowering sense of lightness, and objects that he looked at were surrounded by a fine aura of colour.

The girl looked amazingly beautiful to Billy's enhanced sight. He touched her hand and smiled at her. He felt that it was unnecessary to say anything. She smiled back.

After a few minutes the effect wore off, but Billy found that it returned each time he took another drag. For the next hour the three men and the girl sat on the broken fountain and smiled at everything in sight. The tubes were finally used up and they dropped the plastic cylinders into the fountain. Reave turned to Billy.

'Those things were certainly something.'

Billy nodded, with a look of awe on his face.

'They certainly are.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced at him.

'You've never had Northern Lights before?'

Billy and Reave both shook their heads.

'No, never.'

'Good, huh?'

'Good's hardly the word for it.'

They were all sitting on the fountain thinking about how good the Northern Lights were, when the girl tapped Billy on the shoulder and pointed towards one of the larger buildings that were still standing. A bunch of boys had moved some amplification equipment on to the patio and were plugging in electric instruments. A small crowd was starting to gather. The Minstrel Boy stood up.

'Let's go and watch this.'

Reave stared across the clearing.

'Are those kids going to play some music?'

'Those kids have been playing music for maybe a hundred years. They are the best. Wait till you hear them.'

The four of them strolled across the clearing. The girl seemed to have attached herself to Billy in her strange, silent way. They settled themselves on the grass as the group of musicians started to play. The Minstrel Boy had been right. They were unnaturally good. The girl handed round the Northern Lights, and for another hour they all sat very still, completely sucked in by the beautiful, free, interweaving music. The first piece lasted for nearly an hour and a half, and when it was finished, one of the group, a tall boy of something like nineteen with a first growth of beard, walked to the front of the patio. He appeared to be the leader of the group, and he gestured towards the Minstrel Boy.

'You want to come up and join us?'

The Minstrel Boy picked up his guitar.

'I don't know if I'll be good enough.'

The leader grinned.

'Don't worry about it. Try and fit in where you can. Maybe we should play some of your songs.'

The Minstrel Boy stood up and made his way to the patio. The silver guitar was hooked into the amplification gear, and the band started again, with the Minstrel Boy tentatively fitting himself in. Billy and Reave sat and watched as the music rolled over them. Another girl came and sat down be-side them. She was almost the twin of the first girl. She smiled in the same way, but she also spoke.

'You have come from the river boat?'

Billy nodded.

'That's right.'

'Are you going to stay with us?'

'Only until the boat moves on.'

'That's a pity.'

'You'd like us to stay?'

'We're pleased when anybody stays.'

The first girl turned her head and smiled at Billy and Reave. Billy stretched out on the grass and stared up at the canopy of leaves overhead. The music wound in and out of itself. Billy sighed. It was the best part of the trip so far. Dropville seemed to have been made for him. He glanced at Reave.

'This is the way to live, huh?'

Reave frowned.

'It's very nice. It's a bit spooky, though. I mean, all these people staying young for ever, and the way they killed off all the old people.'

He waved his hand at the luxuriant vegetation and the huge bright flowers that covered the jungle floor.

'It's like the whole place was rooted in death.'

Billy closed his eyes.

'That was years ago. It's long gone. This place is like fuck-ing paradise. Listen to that music, Reave. Look at the women.'

He patted the hand of the mute girl. She smiled and stroked his hair. Reave looked at Billy doubtfully.

'Are you thinking of staying here, Billy?'

Billy shook his head.

'No. But it sure is tempting.'

She/They was everything.

She/They was the only thing that Her/Their senses, even at full stretch, could detect. The only source of energy was She/They. The only thing that existed was She/They.

She/They continued to expend energy, and She/They assumed that a forward motion was maintained. There was no edge, no boundary on the negative zone. There was nothing at all. Only the strange vision that had flown past Her/Them convinced Her/Them of the possibility of anything else exist-ing.

She/They knew that at some point in time She/They would start to grow weak. She/They needed to expend energy just in order to maintain Her/Their existence. There was nothing in the zone to draw on. All Her/Their energy was being drawn from inside Her/Them. Her/Their energy re-serves were finite. There would come a time when Her/Their resources would be exhausted and Her/Their existence would just flicker out.

She/They shut down all Her/Their functions except that which concentrated on motion. Her/Their shape

flickered, wavered and ceased to be. She/They was reduced to a form-less point of light that moved across empty blackness.

With nothing to relate it to, time had no meaning. She/They continued, and She/They moved. There was nothing else. Then something appeared.

The peripheral sensors that She/They had maintained during the shutdown roused the other functions and She/They grew back into the triple form. There was an object away in the distance. She/They could ascertain that the object was spherical, but beyond that it was too far away to determine any details. Gradually She/They and the object came closer together. Tentatively, She/They probed the nature of the object.

'Uniformly dense spherical body.'

'Uniform composition'

'Large body of water contained in spherical form by its own surface tension.'

The sphere floated towards Her/Them like a small planet. It appeared to Her/Their sensors like a huge blue-green ball. Faint ripples passed across the surface. As the sphere drew closer, She/They felt Her/Their self being drawn towards it. She was expending no energy. The mass of water was sucking Her/Them in.

Waves circled outwards as She/They struck the surface of the sphere. She/They felt Her/Their self drawn into the watery interior. She/They kicked with a furious jolt of energy, and began to move upwards. The sphere couldn't contain such a violent motion. The sphere broke apart and a column of water began to rush upwards carrying Her/Them with it, bouncing and buffeting Her/Them as it rushed past.

The water rushed up and up, then She/They broke surface, and found Her/Their self bobbing on the surface of a huge lake. The ripples of Her/Their arrival slowly died and She/They was partially submerged in a glassy smooth lake that appeared to stretch all the way to the horizon.

'Approach of humans monitored.'

'We are prepared for defensive action if humans prove hostile.'

The humans moved across the surface of the lake propelling a crude floating craft. No machinery of energy transfer could be detected. They appeared to attain forward motion by the use of their own bodies.

Their craft cut a long V in the surface of the lake as they moved across it. She/They watched and waited. The humans had always puzzled Her/Them. At times it almost seemed that they might have a primitive grasp of the essential conception of the symmetry that was Her/Their joy and being, then they would contradict the whole idea by their illogical disordered crudeness. They would swarm over Her/Their hard-won stable areas, violating them with their haphazard behaviour and rude creations.

The humans seemed to have a coarse resilience, possibly a natural compensation for their obvious stupidity, that enabled them to resist both the disruptors and even Her/Their efforts to bring a degree of order to their hideously random lives.

She/They found that there was no way in which She/They could really manipulate them. She/They could



sense them totally, and at times they could perceive Her/Them. Beyond that, She/They found that She/They had no power to move them. They occupied the same stable zones. It seemed that the humans clung to stable zones, but on different levels. The levels might be close at times, and even parallel, but there was always a gulf between Her/Them and the humans. They neither aided nor threatened, they just existed. To Her/Them they appeared as a strange byproduct of the disruption.

The day turned into night, and the music went on and on, complex and contorted, and then, the next minute, simple and driving. Lights appeared in the trees so the jungle looked alive and glowing. Areas of foliage had been sprayed with phosphorescent paint. It was invisible by day, but with the darkness and the black lights mounted in the trees the plants pulsed and shimmered in a riot of unearthly colours.

As the music became more loose and wild, the rapt attention dissolved into dancing and laughing. Couples and groups moved in and out of the lights and shadows. Casks of wine, narcotic fruit, bottles and pharmaceuticals from a hundred cultures were brought from the stuff machine.

Billy had lost track of Reave as he wandered along the jungle paths with the strange silent girl. He had been offered so many different things, strange liquors, exotic drugs, that his head was spinning and his vision played awesome, spectacular tricks on him. They passed a battery of red and green lights that pulsed on and off, and the girl's face dissolved into a glowing rainbow. Billy stood perfectly still and stared at her.

'You're fucking beautiful. This whole place is beautiful.'

The girl smiled at him. To Billy, it was a flash like the sun coming up. He hugged her, and then they walked on, across the floor of the clearing. The Minstrel Boy was still sitting in with the band. His eyes were closed in total concentration as he tried to coax more and more from the silver guitar. Sweat stood out on his forehead and he seemed totally oblivious to the dancing crowd around him. Billy and the girl stood arm in arm and watched for a while, then they moved on, out of the clearing and along the shining paths that ran through the tall trees.

They came to a smaller glade where two large U.V. generators shone down on the soft leafy jungle floor. Billy felt a new sensation in his head, and he guessed there were a couple of alphasets tuned to wide dispersal somewhere in the bushes.

A number of people were gathered in the glade. Most were naked, some had their bodies painted in colours that glowed under the ultra-violet light. Some of them sat while others lay on the ground and caressed each other. There were few couples. The naked people in the glade grouped themselves in threes, and there were two large groups of seven or eight, who laughed and writhed together in a mass experience. Billy stood at the edge of the glade and watched in fascination. The girl let go of his hand and quickly slipped out of her clothes. She held out her hand, inviting him to do the same, and join the people in the glade. Under the U-V. light her skin became very dark, while her lips and the whites of her eyes glowed an eerie blue.

Billy slowly took off his clothes, while the girl stood behind him and stroked his back. He placed his clothes beside hers and then she took his hand and led him into the glade. She sank to her knees in front of a group of three intertwined people, a boy and two girls who looked like they couldn't be more than fifteen. Billy knelt down beside the girl and the three others held out their hands in welcome. The music soared through the trees.

Billy let his mind float. The hands and lips that moved across his body, the roaring music and the shifting lights couldn't be logically put together. He just ran with it, letting himself drift in a world of sensuality,

confident that nothing bad could happen to him in this place.

Hours later, Billy found himself lying on the floor of the glade staring blankly at the sky starting to become light in tiny patches between the leaves and branches. The girl was curled up with her head on his chest. His body felt totally exhausted, but the colours in his mind kept swirling and changing. Sleep was impossible. He lay on the ground, totally drained. Memories of the last few hours flooded through his mind in dis-located images of faces, bodies. They invited him, smiled intertwined with his. They distorted into their component colours, and merged back together to form something else that started the process again.

Above him, the sky grew brighter. He was aware that the music had stopped. The only sounds were the rustling in the undergrowth. The first birds were starting their morning chorus. He absently stroked the girl's smooth, golden, sleeping body. He felt totally at peace. The forest was like a huge, rambling cathedral. Thin beams of light lanced through the high ceiling of foliage and illuminated tiny bright patches of the soft moss that covered the floor of the glade.

It seemed to Billy that everywhere he looked, the forest was a bright rich mosaic. It took him a long time to realize that someone was talking to him.

'Come on, Billy. Pull yourself together. We've got to move in a while.'

He focused on the two faces that looked down on him. It was Reave and the Minstrel Boy, but their faces seemed hard and cruel and their clothes coarse and out of place after the beauty of the night before. They refused to leave him alone.

'Hey, Billy. We got to go soon. Come on, man. Get your clothes on. Move it, Billy.'

'Go?'

'Yeah, go. We got a boat to catch.'

'We don't have to catch the boat yet, do we?'

'Yeah, pretty soon.'

Billy sat up and clasped his knees to his chest.

'I'm not going.'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy looked at him in amazement.

'What do you mean, not going?'

'I want to stay here.'

'Stay here?'

'That's right, man. I'm happy here. I don't want to leave.'

'But we got to leave. That's what you always say, keep moving, keep on looking. We've got a boat to catch.'

'Fuck the boat. I want to stay here. I like it. You understand? I'm happy, I found something. I don't want to move on. I don't want to get myself together. Fuck that shit, man. I like it here.'

The Minstrel Boy stuck his hands in his pockets.

'You are crazy.'

'Why? Because I don't want to rush off into another load of trouble?'

Reave shook his head,

'All that U.V. has scrambled his brains.'

The Minstrel Boy squatted down beside Billy.

'Have you thought about what staying here really means? These people are immortal. They don't grow old. You do.'

Billy rested his chin on his knees.

'That won't matter. Not for a few years. I'll deal with that problem when it comes.'

'A few years? You won't live a few weeks.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'You've seen the way these people live. They load them-selves up on everything they can get their hands on, and no doubt you plan to do the same. Right?'

Billy giggled.

'Sure, why not? Nothing wrong with that, or are you going to hand me some crap that being stoned is an illusion?'

'I ain't saying nothing like that. You know me, Billy. I'll get stoned any time, but I wouldn't stay here. I know I wouldn't last thirty days.'

Billy looked confused.

'There's nothing here to hurt me.'

'The whole life style would kill you. The fact that you're human would kill you.'

'I don't understand.'

'How do you feel right now?'

Billy shrugged.

'Okay. Kind of wasted. Why?'

'Think you could live like this all the time?'

'No but...'

'That's how life goes on here. You'd have to live like every-one else. There'd be no other way.'

Billy gestured to the sleeping girl.

'She seems to do okay on it.'

'Sure she does. She doesn't age. Her tissue regenerates, She can grow new brain cells. You can't. You live the same way as her for a couple of weeks and your brain'll be fried. It'll burn out. Your body would break down, and you'd die. Now do you understand?'

Billy put his head in his hands.

'Are you sure about this?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'Quite sure. It's happened.'

'Jesus. I don't know what to do. I believe you. It's just that I still want to stay here.'

The Minstrel Boy put a hand on Billy's shoulder.

'I know how you feel, man. Think I wouldn't like to stay here and just play music with those guys? It'd be the best thing in the world, but I know it wouldn't work out.'

'I don't know. I don't know what to do.'

The Minstrel Boy stood up.

'Come along with us now. It's easier this way. If we hang around until they wake up, it'll be a whole lot more difficult.'

Slowly, as though he was in a trance, Billy got to his feet. He looked down at the girl sleeping on the moss. He sighed deeply.

'I suppose you're right.'

He picked up his shirt and slowly began to pull it on. When he was fully dressed they started to make their way down the track that led to the jetty. To their surprise, when they emerged from the forest there was no sign of the Maria No-where, The jetty led out into an empty river. The three of them looked at each other in bewilderment.

'How did we manage to miss it?'

'It surely can't be that late.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'It's gone. That's for sure, and my partner's on it with all my money.'

Reave slapped his forehead in horror.

'Most of our money's on that fucking boat as well. Billy hid it under the mattress.'

Billy grinned.

'I suppose we'll have to spend another night in Dropville. That won't hurt us.'

Reave and the Minstrel Boy scowled at him.

'Another night there, and none of us might want to leave.'

Billy laughed.

'What else can we do?'

The Minstrel Boy pointed to the edge of the jetty. There were some canoes tied up.

'We could take one of those. It's an easy stretch of river, we could catch the Maria Nowhere when she stops over at the next town.'

Billy looked at the canoes dubiously.

'Couldn't we wait for the next boat?'

'There may not be one for a week, and we don't have any money.'

'I guess it's all down to paddling then.'

They climbed into one of the flimsy craft, settled them-selves and pushed off. They found that if they kept to the middle of the river, the current carried them along at a fair speed, and they only needed to paddle when they wanted to change course. The sky was warm, and it seemed to be a not unpleasant way to spend the day. After the first novelty of riding the river had worn off, Billy announced that he was going to catch a few hours' sleep. He curled up in the stern of the canoe. The next thing he knew was the Minstrel Boy yell-ing at him.

'Wake up, Billy. We're in trouble, man.'

'What's the matter?'

'There seems to be a fault in the river. A big hole that's sucking us in. Paddling doesn't help, we're heading straight for it.'

Billy became aware of a deep roaring noise, and he sat up. Ahead of them was a huge circular hole, rather like they'd seen on the road out of Graveyard, only much, much bigger. All the water from the river seemed to be pouring down as though it was a huge drain. Billy grabbed a paddle and tried desperately to fight the current. Reave and the Minstrel Boy both shook their heads.

'It's no good. We've tried. It doesn't make the slightest difference.'

The roar of the water was so loud that they had to shout to make themselves heard.

'Ain't there nothing we can do?'

Billy looked round desperately. The hole was getting very close. Then he had an idea.

'Turn on your porta-pacs! I don't know if it'll do any good but it might help.'

Coming up to the hole was like going over a waterfall. A knot twisted in Billy's stomach. The boat tilted and then dropped into the hole. They held their breath and fell. There was nothing else to do.

They fell. It seemed to go on for ever. Billy's lungs ached from holding his breath. He felt that maybe he should let himself drown. Maybe it would be easier than being dashed to pieces when they hit bottom.

Then he was floating. He was going upwards. The porta-pac field seemed to have a buoyancy all of its own. His head broke water, and he took a deep, choking breath. After holding his breath so long it felt wonderful. The field of the porta-pac seemed to support him, and he looked around. A few yards away was the canoe. It was floating upside down, but other-wise it seemed undamaged. Billy paddled towards it. He was struggling to turn it over when Reave appeared beside him. Together, they righted the canoe and flopped inside. Billy tentatively switched off his porta-pac. Nothing changed. It seemed as though they had arrived somewhere. Billy sat up and looked around. There was smooth, untroubled water as far as he could see. He turned to Reave.

'Have you seen the Minstrel Boy?'

Reave shook his head.

'Not since we fell into the hole.'

'I hope he made it.'

'I hope he landed somewhere better than this. There's no sign of land anywhere.'

'It's so still, too. No waves, no breeze, nothing.'

'Which way do you think we should go?'

Billy looked at the sky. It was a flat uniform grey, a few shades darker than the water. He shook his head.

'Your guess is as good as mine, and anyway, we don't have any paddles.'

Reave pointed.

'Yes we do. Look.'

There was a single paddle floating a few yards away. They pushed the boat towards it, and Reave fished it out of the water.

'We can take turns. I'll do the first stint.'

He settled in the stern and began to propel them across the smooth surface of the lake. Billy sat in the bows and stared into the distance, searching in vain for something that would give them a clue to what direction to take. There was no way to judge the passage of time. Nothing moved either on or under the water. Billy glanced at Reave.

'You think they have day and night here?'

Reave grunted.

'The time I've been paddling, it sure don't feel like it. You want to take a turn?'

They changed places, and Billy dug in with the paddle. Reave dipped his hand into the water.

'I wonder if you can drink this stuff.'

He licked his fingers.

'Tastes okay. It don't seem like we're going to die of thirst. I tell you one thing though, I'm going to be well hungry pretty soon. I sure wish Burt the Medicine was here to bring out one of his meals.'

Billy slammed the paddle into the water with unnecessary force.

'Burt the Medicine's dead.'

There was a tense silence, and Reave fidgeted awkwardly.

'You still mad because we made you come away from Dropville?'

Billy shook his head.

'I ain't mad, but I don't really want to talk about it.'

From then on he paddled in silence, avoiding Reave's occasional glances. Then Reave crouched forward in the bow.

'Hey, Billy. There's something out there.'

Billy shaded his eyes and stared where Reave pointed.

'There's something out there all right. You still got your gun?'

Reave nodded.

'Sure. You?'

'Yeah.'

They paddled towards the object bobbing on the surface. Reave looked back at Billy.

'You know, from here, it looks like a couple of people swimming.'

'Maybe it's the Minstrel Boy?'

'It definitely looks like two, I'd say... Holy shit!'

An impossible sight was rising out of the water. Two women, both identical, carrying a third in their arms. They wore white ankle-length cloaks, and silver helmets that covered most of their faces. Even the folds of their garments seemed to hang in exactly the same way. They pulsed with a faint blue light, and Billy wondered if the pulse was real or a flashback to the previous night's drugs. Reave backed down the canoe and crouched beside Billy with his gun drawn.

'What is it?'

'I've no idea. Let's just go on and see what happens.'

Billy steered the canoe so it passed within four or five yards of the figures. The strange beings stood motionless, and then slowly turned their heads in perfect unison. Then Billy and Reave were past them, Billy rested the paddle and stared back at the unique thing that floated above the surface of the water. Billy felt an unreasoning blanket of sadness wrap around him. Reave crawled down the canoe and crouched beside him.

'Gosh.'

Billy looked at Reave strangely, but said nothing. The heads turned back to where they had been looking previously. It seemed that Billy and Reave held no more interest. The figures began to move. They were like a rigid statue that drifted forward across the lake, gradually gathering speed. The composite entity began to grow smaller and smaller, and soon Billy and Reave could no longer make it out at all. Billy turned to look at Reave.

'What made you suddenly say "gosh" just now?'

Reave frowned.

'I don't know. My personality just seemed to slip for a moment. It's back again now.'

A.A. Catto returned to her own apartment, bruised and ach-ing. The door responded to her voice and she went straight through into her bedroom and threw herself down on the bed. Damn her oily cunning little brother and his tricks. The whip-ping was a novelty, but it certainly wasn't worth the pain in-volved.

She slipped out of her white dress and looked up at the mirror ceiling. Her back and buttocks were crisscrossed by angry red weals. Curse Valdo, the little worm. She reached the bedside console and punched up Information. A blond Hostess-1 appeared on the screen.

'May I help you?'

'Get me a Medic.'

'I'll put you through, Miss Catto.'



'Don't put me through. Just get me one.'

'What seems to be the trouble, Miss Catto?'

'I've been whipped. By my brother. I suppose you could say the problem was bruising.'

'I'll have a Medic-1 with you straight away. Will there be anything else, Miss Catto?'

'Yes, just one thing. If any word of this should leak out, I'll see that you're broken to L-4 before you know it.'

'Your privacy is guaranteed, Miss Catto.'

A.A. Catto grunted and cut the connection. Within minutes, the door buzzer sounded and she pushed the entry button to admit a Medic-1 and a pair of Hostess-2s. She lay on her stomach while the Medic-1 inspected the damage to her back. The Medic had the white covers and the middle-aged, com-potent features that were the hallmark of his class. He shot four hundred mics of analgethene straight into A.A. Catto's spine and the discomfort rapidly faded. The Medic ran a dis-persed Gamma beam over her bruised flesh and the red weals started to fade. A.A. Catto found the treatment pleasant and stimulating. After some time the Medic straightened up, and put his equipment back into the carrying case.

'You will make a perfect recovery, Miss Catto.'

'Good. You'd better not say a word about this.'

The Medic placed a pompous hand on his heart.

'Discretion is something sacred to this class.'

'Yes, yes. You're dismissed, you can go.'

The Medic and his two blond assistants departed. The con-sole buzzed at her. A. A. Catto pushed the answer button, and Valdo's face appeared on the screen.

'I thought I'd call and see how you were, sister.'

A.A. Catto's eyes flashed.

'Haven't you done enough for one day?'

'You really are a bad loser. So angry, just because you lost one little bet.'

A.A. Catto snarled at her brother and cut the connection. The console buzzed again, but she ignored it. The last person she wanted to talk to was her wretched brother. She rolled on her back, and stared at her reflection on the ceiling. Her body was really far too beautiful for nasty little Valdo. She resolved that she would have nothing more to do with him, for a while, at least.

A.A. Catto began to get bored with even her own reflection. It was still only mid afternoon and after the painkillers and stimulants she had been consuming, it seemed a pity to waste them all. She stretched out a languid hand to the console and punched up the Steward service. A bronzed young man with short-cropped blond hair and pale blue covers answered.

'May I help you?'

'Can you send me a Steward straight away.'

'What service do you require, Miss Catto?'

A.A. Catto giggled,

'Personal, of course.'

'Do you have any preference to the type of Steward?'

'I'd like you to run up a special for me.'

'Full gene surgery will take a few days, Miss Catto.'

'Gene surgery won't be necessary. A plastic temporary job will do.'

'A plastic reconstruction will take about fifteen minutes.'

A.A. Catto thought she detected a hint of sullenness in the man's voice. She looked sharply at the screen.

'You Stewards don't like plastic temp jobs, do you?'

'Our preferences are not relevant. We are designed to serve.'

'Afterwards though, it can be very painful when it grows out, can't it?'

'There are after effects for the individual Steward, but those should not concern you, Miss Catto.'

A.A. Catto smiled a particularly nasty smile.

'That's right, it doesn't concern me at all. I want you to look up records. There was once a movie actor called Valentino. Rudolph Valentino. I want you to prepare a special using those old films and pictures. I want a Steward sent up that looks like Valentino.'

'There will be a time factor involved in the production of this.'

'How long?'

'I would estimate it at about half an hour.'

'I'll wait, but it better not be much longer.'

'It'll be as soon as possible, Miss Catto. Are there any other requirements?'

A.A. Catto smiled.

'Only the usual ones.'

She cut the connection, and lay on the bed waiting. Would it be more fun to dress up? Make the Steward rip her clothes off? She decided she had had enough violence for one day. In addition, it was too much trouble, dressing only to undress again. It was, after all, only a Steward. She would just lie there naked and let him service her. When she'd had enough, she'd dismiss him. There was no point in making elaborate arrangements for a Steward-1.

Twenty-five minutes later the door buzzer sounded again. A.A. Catto smiled and pushed the entry button. A young man with slicked-back, patent leather hair, dark, flashing eyes and cruel mouth strode into A.A. Catto's bedroom.

'I am here, Miss Catto.'

His appearance was perfect, he was just what A.A. Catto had ordered. She wondered, however, if his voice and gestures were a little too theatrical. She'd report the fact to the Steward service when she was through with him.

The young man posed at the end of her bed while A.A. Catto examined him. After a couple of minutes, he cleared his throat.

'I was instructed to inform you that I am also programmed to do the tango.'

During his third turn with the paddle, Reave began to bitch. Apart from the strange apparition, nothing had appeared that gave any indication of land. Billy looked up from where he was dozing in the bow of the canoe.

'What's the matter with you?'

'I'm hungry, and I'm tired. I'm sick of this fucking lake, and I'm sick of not getting anywhere.'

Billy yawned.

'Too bad.'

Reave glared.

'What do you mean, too bad? If something doesn't turn up soon we're going to die out here.'

'What am I supposed to do? Get excited or something? Before you start handing me the you-got-me-into-this line, just remember that it was me that wanted to stay in Dropville.'

'You would have died in Dropville.'

'I'm going to die here, according to you. It strikes me that I'd have been better off dying in Dropville.'

Reave scowled.

'Is that what you really think?'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah?'

There was a moment of tension, and then the two of them realized the absurdity of attempting to fight in the small canoe and relaxed.

'There's no point in getting on each other's back. We're stuck here and there's nothing we can do about it.'

Reave went on paddling for some time, and then Billy took over. Their changing places was the only thing that gave them any idea of the passage of time. Nothing else changed. There was only the still water and the unchanging sky. Hunger gnawed at their stomachs, and the boredom of their surroundings provided nothing to distract them. Billy felt that his world was totally composed of paddling, sleeping, and waiting for starvation to creep slowly up on them.

Reave was sitting in the bow staring into space, and Billy was mechanically paddling, when Reave suddenly stiffened.

'There's something out there.'

Billy looked up.

'You sure you're not seeing things?'

Reave pointed.

'Look for yourself.'

Billy pushed up his dark glasses and shaded his eyes with his hand. He could just about make out a dark smudge on the horizon.

'Seems like there's something out there.'

Billy paddled harder and the dark object came nearer.

'It looks like an island of some sort.'

'It's kind of small for an island.'

They paddled nearer. The island turned out to be a floating reed bed, a mat of tangled vegetation that lay sluggishly on the surface of the lake. Billy prodded it with his paddle and oily water oozed up between the fibrous plants. Reave stared at it morosely.

'This ain't much use to us.'

'Maybe not. It could be a sign that we're getting nearer land. Have you noticed anything about the air?'

Reave looked puzzled.

'Don't think so.'

'There's a smell. Fish, and, I don't know, maybe plants, or dead leaves.'

Reave sniffed the air.

'You could be right. Let's keep going. At least it's a sign of something.'

He crawled towards Billy.

'Here. Give me the paddle. If there's land out there, let's get to it.'

Reave paddled with renewed vigour. They passed more of the floating vegetation. The tangled beds became more numerous, and here and there they linked up to form huge areas of matted plant life. Billy and Reave were soon paddling along channels that separated the now vast reed beds. The air was filled with the swamp smell of decaying plant life, and the water became black and stagnant. Mosquitoes and brightly coloured dragonflies danced over the surface of the water, and pale flowers struggled to hold their own among the crawling dark green plants.

The reed beds grew thicker, and Billy and Reave found that they had to force the boat through increasingly narrow spaces, and even hack their way with the paddle through the thinner parts of the beds.

Billy peered down into the black water. It seemed to be getting more shallow. The boat occasionally scraped some hard object and Billy thought he could make out shapes under the water. They looked like the ruins of something man-made.

The canoe stuck fast and wouldn't move. Billy took off his belt, slipped over the side, and sank up to his waist in the swamp before he found a footing. He put a shoulder to the stern of the boat and heaved. At first nothing happened, then there was a grating, ripping sound and Reave let out a yell.

'There's a hole in the fucking boat. Water's coming in.'

The canoe began to list badly and Reave splashed into the black water beside Billy.

'We've had the canoe.'

'My porta-pac and gun are still inside.'

Reave leaned over the side of the settling canoe and fished them out. Billy looped them over his shoulder.

'I guess we better foot it until we reach some firmer ground.'

'Nothing else we can do.'

They found that each time they moved their feet, sluggish bubbles of foul-smelling gas rose to the surface and burst. Small black insects darted about, and mosquitoes laughed at them. They stumbled and fell often. As Billy had thought, under the layer of liquid mud there were heaps of some kind of jagged rubble on which they stubbed their toes and twisted their ankles. The going was almost impossible, and although they were soaked from the waist down, sweat poured down their faces. Billy stopped, with swamp water up to his knees.

'Listen, I just had an idea. If we were to turn on our porta-pacs the extra buoyancy might make it easier.'

'If they still work after the number of times we've dropped them in the mud.'

Billy held his up, shook it, and pressed the on button. There was a ripple as the field came on. It proved to be a good deal easier to move. They covered another three hundred yards, and Billy found that here and there patches of dry land covered in coarse spiky grass rose above the level of lie swamp. Billy and Reave staggered up on to one of the dry hummocks and flopped down.

'Jesus, I'm exhausted.'

'At least we seem to be getting somewhere. There seems to be more firm ground as you go on.'

The ground beyond them was more solid. There were wide areas of the spiky grass. Further on a few short twisted trees struggled to survive. In the distance they could just see a line of low hills.

After they'd rested for a while, Billy and Reave moved on. Although it was easier to cross the firmer ground, it wasn't without its hazards. They had to wade through large areas of standing water, and Billy, at one point, sank up to his waist in a trough of thick, sucking mud. Reave struggled for ten minutes before he managed to drag him out. The insects seemed to increase, both in numbers and in daring, and the mud drying on their clothes irritated their skin just as much as the mosquito bites.

Filthy and exhausted they eventually reached the lower slopes of the high ground. It was covered in soft springy turf. Both Billy and Reave fell down and lay panting on the grass. They rested in silence for a while, then Reave noticed some-thing in a slightly longer clump of grass, and crawled towards it. He laughed and called to Billy.

'Hey, see what I found.'

Billy raised his head.

'What is it?'

'Come and take a look.'

Billy crawled to beside Reave, who parted the grass with his hands. In a hidden nest were a clutch of eight pale blue eggs. They were slightly larger than the pigeons' eggs Billy had stolen in Pleasant Gap when he was a kid. He grinned at Reave.

'Breakfast!'

'Or lunch.'

'Or supper, who can tell in this fucked-up place?'

'It's food, anyway. What do you think we should do with them?'

Billy looked around.

'I don't know. I guess we're going to have to eat them raw.'

'We could build a fire and try to cook them.'

Billy laughed.

'With what, man? We don't have any pans or anything.'

'We could build a fire and fry them on a hot rock.'

'We don't have any grease.'

Reave shrugged.

'There are times when you have to improvise.'

Reave scrambled to his feet and hurried down the slope. A few minutes later he returned with an armful of twigs and a round flat stone. After a couple of false starts, he got a fire going. Reave laid the rock on top of the hot embers. He spat on it to make sure it was hot enough, and when he was satisfied he cracked all the eggs on to the top of the rock. They were chalky and full of pieces of grit. Billy and Reave burned their fingers picking the food from the hot rock. When they'd finished, however, Billy lay back on the grass with a grunt of satisfaction.

'I could eat that three times over.'

'It sure was welcome.'

They slept for a while, and woke up stiff, aching, but a good deal more hopeful than they'd been earlier. They began to climb the hill. About halfway from the top they came across a well-used dirt road that appeared to wind to the other side of the line of hills.

They'd been following the road for perhaps half an hour, although they both still had trouble judging how time passed. They heard a sound from somewhere. It started as a high-pitched whine, but seemed to get fuller as it came towards them. It grew to a full-throated roar, and a figure on a motor-cycle came over the hill and down the road towards them. The motorcyclist bounced past them, but slewed to a halt, and came back. Both Billy and Reave had caught the flash of a guitar on the rider's back. They looked at each other.

'It can't be.'

'It's not possible.'

The Minstrel Boy kicked the big elaborate machine, with its long forks and high bars, on to its stand and walked towards Billy and Reave. Pulling off his leather flying helmet, he brushed the dust from his long suede coat.

'Hey fellas, fancy seeing you boys around here.'

'We never thought we'd see you again.'

'No?'

'How did you get out of that fault in the river?'

The Minstrel Boy frowned.

'The river? That was a whole long time ago.'

It was Billy's and Reave's turn to frown.

'Huh? It was only a couple of days ago.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Suit yourselves. You know best. Where are you headed?'

Billy spread his hands.

'No idea. We just pulled ourselves out of the swamp. We were going up this hill to see what was on the other side. Are there any towns near here?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded wearily.

'Sure, there's a city on the other side of the hill. I wouldn't care to say whether you'd like it or not.'

'You mean there's something wrong with it?'

'There's something wrong with most cities. You don't need me to tell you that.'

'But is this one okay?'

The Minstrel Boy scratched his ear.

'I'm a minstrel, not a tourist guide. If you mean will you come to harm, there's a chance of that anywhere. If you wanted to avoid harm you would have stayed in that hick town that you came from. If you mean is the city where you'll find what you're looking for, you got the wrong person. I can't tell you something that you don't even know yourselves.'

After the Minstrel Boy's outburst, there was an awkward silence. Billy looked at the ground and spoke tentatively.

'Where are you headed?'

'Some other place.'

'How would it be if we came with you?'

The Minstrel Boy pointed at the motorcycle.

'It don't take but one.'

'That's a pity.'

'Not really, I'm headed for one place, and you're on the road to that city over the hill. We just met in passing. It doesn't call for anyone to change their plans. You go your way, and I'll carry on along mine.'

'Sure. I guess we'll be seeing each other.'



The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'That's possible. So long.'

He was walking back to the bike, pulling on his helmet, when Reave called him back.

'You wouldn't have anything to eat, would you? I mean, something you could spare.'

'You run out of food?'

'Yeah.'

He fumbled in one of the big patch pockets and pulled out a small package.

'Have a cookie.'

'Uuh...'

'Have two. In fact, if you're hungry, take the whole packet.'

He tossed the cookies to Reave and then turned and walked away. He kicked the bike into life and swung back on to the dirt road. Billy and Reave watched until he was out of sight. Then they turned, and started up the hill.

Her/Their sensors had long detected the existence and location of the place. Now it was coming close. She/They was filled with hope. All caution was abandoned as She/They cut a straight line through the grey fabric of disordered matter. She/They was homing in on the place of stasis.

It was a natural fold in the fabric that would have been safe on its own. With the addition of the generated field, it was the ideal place for Her/Them to heal Her/Their wounds and re-store Her/Their full potential.

As She/They drew closer She/They discovered that humans were occupying the fold. It was they who had built and still operated the generator. They would be a nuisance, but would not constitute a danger to the delicate energy transfer that She/They had to perform. She/They would rather that they weren't standing around gawping at Her/Them, but it couldn't be helped.

To Her/Them, the generators typified the attitude of the humans, crude machines that produced a semblance of stability. The humans seemed content with them, but to Her/Them they were an ugly half measure. An expedient answer to a question that demanded absolutes. It pained Her/Them to have to resort to their rough power, but the present necessity dictated it.

She/They slowed down as a landscape formed beneath Her/Them. She/They floated slowly down a bare grey hill, at the bottom of which there was a seemingly pointless land transport that ran on a circular track. Beyond a line of tall cultivated plants lay the dwellings of the humans and the mean centre of the stable area.

She/They moved towards it.

Billy and Reave reached the top of the hill and looked out over a destroyed valley. There was a city, just like the Minstrel Boy had predicted. He hadn't, however, prepared them for the sight that met their eyes.

The war zone at Dur Shanzag was the only thing that Billy could compare it with, and even there, there hadn't been such a terrible destruction of the landscape.

The centre piece of the whole area was a huge white tower that soared thousands of feet into the air, dwarfing the domes and high-rise buildings that clustered round its immediate base. A wall ran round the tower and its attendant structures. Beyond the wall the desolation began in earnest. Like a dark stain on the earth, miles of shacks and ruins spread out from the walls of the inner citadel, and across almost the whole valley. In the area of the shacks, there were huge faults in the fabric that drilled giant circular holes in the broken-down city. The size and number of the faults seemed to diminish near to the citadel, and around the walls the ground was quite stable.

A thousand little fires seemed to be burning among the shacks and the air of the valley was foul and polluted. A filthy river sluggishly wound its way through the ruins. Its banks were crowded with all shapes and sizes of dilapidated craft. Others crawled slowly across its surface. The streets and alleys between the shacks were thronged with jostling human-ity. They were a total contrast to the area inside the walls, where a pristine order and calm seemed to reign.

Billy looked doubtfully at Reave.

'You think this is really the place to go?'

Reave surveyed the valley.

'It don't look too pretty, but there's people. It can't be all bad.'

Billy wished silently that he shared Reave's optimism,

'Okay then, let's go.'

They started down into the valley. Before they'd reached the bottom, the road had changed direction twice to skirt huge faults in the side of the hill. They made their way down to the flat lands and found themselves among the outer edges of the shacks. They seemed to be built out of any and every material that might be at hand and could be crudely knocked together. Some were built around the ruins of older and what had once been more substantial buildings.

Thin ragged children peered out of doorways, and there was an air of appalling squalor and poverty. Billy glanced at Reave.

'It don't look like people have too much of a good time round these parts.'

Reave pointed to the tower that rose high above them into the polluted air.

'I bet the folk up there do all right. That's got to be where the high living goes on.'

'You think we can get in there?'

Billy looked at their torn, filthy clothes. He rubbed a hand over his chin. It felt as though he hadn't shaved for a week. Reave just grinned.

'We can but try.'

They walked on deeper into the city. They passed more and more people. Three times, Billy tried to approach groups of people and talk to them. Each time, before he could say any-thing, they shrank away from him and hid their faces in their filthy rags. Disconcerted, Billy went back to Reave.

'I don't know what's wrong with us, but nobody seems to want to know us.'

'Maybe they don't like strangers.'

'They seem terrified when I try to get near them. There's something else, as well, that bothers me.'

'Yeah? What's that?'

'Well, I don't know if it's the bad air, or something wrong with my eyes, but there's something sort of, how would you call it, insubstantial about them. Like you could shine a bright light right through them. Do you know what I mean?'

Reave looked around and slowly nodded.

'They do seem kind of transparent. Like ghosts or something. I thought it was just a trick of the light.'

He pointed towards the tower again.

'That looks pretty damn solid.'

Something moved in Billy's memory.

'I know what these people look like. They're just like the folks we saw on the road out of Graveyard.'

Reave looked at Billy in puzzlement.

'What folks?'

Billy remembered how Reave had been asleep when he and the Minstrel Boy had seen the strange column of prisoners and their sinister guards pass them on the broken road.

'It was just something that reminded me and the... Hey! Look at that.'

A medium-sized fault had suddenly appeared some twenty yards down the road. Two shacks and about a dozen people had flickered out of existence. All that remained was a circular hole in the ground. For a few seconds, Billy and Reave stood transfixed, then, simultaneously, they both hit the buttons on their porta-pacs.

'This whole fucking place is falling to pieces!'

'I think we ought to try for the citadel. If we can't get inside, I'd rather we got the hell out of here.'

Reave nodded.

'I'm with you, Billy boy.'

They hurried on. A crowd had gathered around the newly formed fault, but it quickly dispersed as Billy and Reave approached.

'They seem to treat us like poison.'

'We don't look too good.'

'Neither do they.'

'That's true.'

They turned into a broader avenue, where men and women struggled under heavy burdens. A group of children strained to pull a large clumsy cart with big solid wheels. A man walked beside them with a long cane, encouraging them to greater efforts. As before, the crowds hastily parted to let Billy and Reave pass.

A commotion at the far end of the avenue caught their attention. A sleek and very solid-looking, field grey, armoured car was forcing its way through the crowd, who fell over each other to get out of the way. Reave quickly glanced at Billy. The armoured car seemed to be heading straight for them.

'Think we should run?'

A loudhailer mounted on the armoured car supplied the answer.

'You there! Stop! Do not attempt to move!'

Billy groaned.

'Not again.'

'Why always us?'

'There seems to be something about authority that makes it home in on strangers.'

The armoured car squealed to a stop beside them, and the turret swivelled ominously, pointing the snout of some kind of heat weapon at them. The speaker boomed again.

'Take one pace away from each other and place your hands on your heads!'

Billy and Reave did as they were told, and a hatch in the side of the machine swung open. Two men in grey uniforms and steel helmets climbed out and covered Reave and Billy with machine pistols. Tear gas canisters and long flexible rubber truncheons hung from the webbing of their tunics. Patches on their shoulders carried the single word Personnel and the figure 3.

For Billy, there was something strangely familiar about their captors. Then he had a horrific flash of recognition. Their uniforms were the same as those of the sinister guards he'd seen on the road out of Graveyard. The fear he had felt then came back to him. He broke out in a cold sweat.

One of the uniformed men poked Billy with his gun.

'What are you doing here?'

'Just passing through.'

'The two of you, together?'

'Yes.'

'And what is your purpose for coming here?'

'We got lost, and this was the first city we came to.'

'It's hardly satisfactory. You better come with us.'

'But we...'

Before they could protest, they were bundled into the back of the armoured car. Their wrists were clamped into manacles on the wall, and they roared away. Both the vehicle and the men inside it were just as solid as Billy or Reave, and had none of the ghostly appearance of the rest of the population.

The machine halted, and through a small ventilator Billy could see they were waiting to enter a tunnel that led through the tower's perimeter wall. A thick steel door slid back and they moved on. After a couple of minutes the armoured car halted and the rear hatch opened. Billy and Reave were re-released from their manacles and ordered to get out. They were pushed into an enclosed courtyard where an escort, in similar uniforms to the armoured-car crew, waited for them. One of the escort, who had a figure 2 on his shoulder instead of a 3, walked over to the car commander. He jerked a thumb at Billy and Reave.

'What are these two?'

'Suspicious persons. Possibly vagrancy and unemployment. Possession of unauthorized stasis equipment. I was bringing them in for Search, Tests and Questioning.'

He turned to the escort.

'Take these two down for S. T. & Q.'

The escort saluted, surrounded Billy and Reave and marched them away. Billy leaned close to Reave.

'Looks like we're getting inside the tower, though...'

One of the escorts punched Billy in the side of the head, and he staggered.

'Talking by prisoners is not permitted.'

They were pushed into what looked like a service lift. It sank at high speed to a deep sub-basement level. The lift gates clanged open, and they were marched out into a large, white-tiled room. A stainless-steel counter ran down one side of the wall. Behind it were three men and a woman, in uniform shirt sleeves with the same Personnel-3 shoulder patches. As the escort marched out of the lift, one of them looked up.

'What have you got there?'

'Two prisoners for S. T. & Q.'

'We'll have to throw them in the tank for a couple of hours. They've got a lot upstairs.'

The escort pushed Billy and Reave towards the counter.

'Just so long as you sign for them, I don't care what you do.'

'Okay.'

The man behind the counter picked up a clipboard. He scribbled something on it, tore off a slip and handed it to one of the escort. Then he turned to Billy and Reave.

'Right, you two. Let's have you.'

He looked round at one of his companions behind the counter.

'Bring your gun. We'll I.D. them and then put them down.'

The second man picked up a machine pistol, while the other tucked a file card and a set of electronic keys under his arm. Billy and Reave were taken through a series of small rooms where they were stripped, fingerprinted, photographed, blood typed and X-rayed. Their clothes, guns and porta-pacs were confiscated. They were given dog tags with a number printed on them and pushed through a steel door, down a short flight of steps and into a large bare room with a concrete floor and smooth tiled walls. Bright striplights were buried in the roof behind thick unbreakable glass. An iron bench ran down the middle of the room. Two of the ragged ghostly men from the outer city sat hunched up on it. Billy and Reave both sat down and looked round the room.

High up in the ceiling was the unmistakable fisheye of a closed-circuit camera. There was also a loudspeaker hung in each corner of the room. Despite himself, Billy grinned. It was the first jail he'd ever been in with quad sound.

Billy moved closer to one of the prisoners and whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

'What you in for, buddy?'

'Got arrested.'

'Listen, uh... if you don't mind me asking. How come you folks look the way you do?'

'No power.'

'Huh?'

'No power. Th' field ain't too strong outside of th' wall an' we jus' grow this way. Take alla power t' keep t' tower up. It's like we...'

The speakers crackled into life.

'Prisoners will remain silent! You two on the bench, move apart!'

Billy slid down the bench and glanced covertly at Reave,

'Looks like they watch all the time.'

The speakers spluttered angrily.

'Silence in there!'

Billy wondered what happened if anyone just ignored the speakers. He thought about the long rubber truncheons and decided not to be the one to put it to a test.

There was nothing for either Billy or Reave to do except sit with his own thoughts. There seemed to be rules against every-thing. Prisoners had to face the camera. Prisoners must not cross their legs or hide their hands. The speakers screamed and yelled. At first Billy had thought that this jail, with its stain-less-steel and antiseptic white tiles, would prove a whole lot better than the lock-up at Dur Shanzag, but after a couple of hours under the eye of the camera and continual barking of the speakers he wasn't so sure.

'79014 will stand facing the door!'

Billy looked at his dog tag. It wasn't him. One of the men from the outer city reluctantly stood up and shuffled over to the door. He seemed to grow more and more transparent. His thin shoulders hunched and seemed to be trying to wrap them-selves round his narrow chest. The door was flung open with a crash. Two grey-uniformed Personnel men clattered in, grab-bed him by the arm and bundled him out. In a final, futile effort of resistance he clung to the door frame and struggled with the guards. One of them unclipped his truncheon and brought it down on the man. He slumped on the floor, and was dragged out. Reave looked at Billy, his face had gone white.

'Jesus. Did you...'

The speaker roared.

'Silence!'

'They beat him un...'

'Silence! This is your last warning!'

Reave slumped on the bench with his head clasped in his hands.

'Prisoners will not hide their faces. Prisoners will face the camera.'

Reave sat up scowling sullenly. A heavy ominous silence settled over the room. It seemed to Billy that it was all over. He could think of nothing that might turn up to get them out of the place. Hope of rescue seemed a very long way off. Again the speakers barked.

'79021 face the door. 79022 face the door.'

Billy and Reave examined their dog tags.

'That's us.'

'Jesus.'

'Silence!'

They walked slowly towards the door, feeling naked and helpless.

The Steward-1 left, and A.A. Catto stepped into the shower. Her body felt pleasantly tired and, for once, she wanted nothing more than to lie back and think over the events of the day. She might not have gone along with everything that had happened, but, all in all, it had been more interesting than most parties. The 360-degree needle jets struck her body from every direction, and it tingled exquisitely. She flicked on the warm air and, once dry, she flopped back on to her bed.

She had had enough of her own reflection for a while, and she dimmed the ceiling mirror, and the surface was covered by a swirl of yellow moir, patterns. She stared at them and gradually she felt her body begin to float.

She flicked on the alphaset and adjusted it to a medium setting. A sense of euphoric wellbeing spread from her head to her toes and fingertips. The combination of the alpha waves and visual stimulation sent her drifting out to a soft yellow haze that was far more beautiful a high than could be obtained from any of the ordinary pharmaceuticals. She rolled sensuously on the bed, and it was slowly twisting across the universe. It was as though she was basking in the light of a thousand lazy suns.

A melodic tune pulsed through her beautiful universe and something suggested that it didn't fit. The face of the Valentino Steward floated across her memory. It really was a good idea to design her own specials. It was a delicious idea. The idea of a constant stream of custom-made lovers gave her a hot liquid feeling deep inside the warm cosmos of her body.

The tone came again and A.A. Catto realized that it was the console. She was back on the bed again, stretching out an unsteady hand to the answer button.

'Yeah?'

Her voice was far away and dreamy. Unintelligible sounds came from the speaker and the screen was a random blur of drifting colours. A.A. Catto giggled.

'Who is that wanting to speak to me?'

'It's me, Juno Meltzer.'

'Juno... how nice to hear... from you... Juno.'

The words became gibberish again. A.A. Catto listened to them with rapt interest.

'I'm not very sure what you're trying to say to me, Juno. Your words are not very clear.'

Juno Meltzer's face swam slightly more into focus, but the colour still changed and floated off the screen.

'If you shut down the alphaset you might be able to make some sense out of what I'm saying.'

'Now maybe that would be a possibility.'



'Switch off the damn alphas for a minute.'

A.A. Catto didn't like the idea.

'Juno, I...'

'Turn it off for god's sake.'

A.A. Catto's hand went out to the alpha control before her brain realized exactly what it was doing. She hit reality with a bump.

'Damn you, Juno. What do you want?'

'I suppose you haven't had your vid channel open.'

A.A. Catto scowled. Surely the stupid girl hadn't called her from her blissful state to talk about vidshows.

'Of course I haven't. I've been out of my brain for hours. Why?'

'There was something very interesting on newsfax.'

'Newsfax? Are you crazy? You called me up to tell me about newsfax. I had the ceiling going and was right out on alphas.'

'That was evident.'

'Well now you've brought me down, what was so wonderful on newsfax?'

'Personnel have arrested two strangers in the L-4 area.'

A.A. Catto shrugged.

'So? Personnel are always arresting L-4s.'

'No, no, they weren't L-4s. They were strangers. They claim they're from beyond the water. They said they came through the swamp.'

'You mean that they claim to be...'

'That's right. They're real genuine natural-selection humans.'

'Not gene-jobs or L-4s?'

'Plain folks if their stories are true.'

'Then they're just like us?'

'I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Just because the DNA structure's intact doesn't immediately make them the equal of anyone in the five families. Even when there were plenty of natural humans running around, we were still pretty superior.'

'That's true.'

'Punch up a re-run on the newsfax item. They're quite interesting.'

'Hold on then, I'll split-screen.'

A.A. Catto pressed a series of buttons, and Juno Meltzer's image was pushed to the left of the screen. On the right was a film clip of two hard unkempt-looking men being led across a compound by an escort of Personnel-3s. A.A. Catto clapped her hands in delight.

'I want one. I want one.'

Juno Meltzer moved back to take up the whole screen.

'What do you mean, you want one?'

'I could have a party or something. They look very differ-ent. They look as though they might be interesting.'

'They look dirty, and like they might be carrying all kinds of horrible diseases.'

'Oh, they can be cleaned up and decontaminated. I still want one.'

Juno Meltzer looked doubtful.

'Don't you think it's going a bit far? I mean, you know, outsiders?'

'I always thought you told everyone that you couldn't go far enough.'

'Yes but...'

A.A. Catto interrupted Juno's protests.

'I don't care. I want one. I want one before anybody else gets them. I wouldn't put it past my loathsome little brother to try to get his hands on them.'

'I heard something about you and your brother...'

'You keep quiet about that, Juno Meltzer, or I'll kill you. Understand?'

'I...'

'Listen, I'll talk to you later. I've got to call Personnel be-fore Valdo does.'

A.A. Catto cut the connection and punched some more buttons. A hard-faced man in grey appeared on the screen.

'Personnel. May I help you?'

'I want the prisoners who claim to be from outside sent up here straight away.'

'They're under interrogation at the moment.'

'The interrogation must be stopped. I want them sent straight up to me, after they've been showered and disin-fected.'

'I'll see what I can do, Miss Catto.'

A.A. Catto slammed her small fist into the console.

'You'll do it.'

'Yes, Miss Catto.'

'Name?'

'Billy.'

'Billy what?'

'Billy Oblivion.'

There were two of them. One playing Mutt, the other play-ing Jeff. They'd been through his name and origins. The friendly one put a hand on Billy's shoulder.

'Where are you from, Billy? Where's Pleasant Gap?'

'I've no idea. I've been through the nothings so many times.'

'Liar.'

The bad guy lashed at Billy with his fist. His head exploded in a painful shower of stars and he sagged against the re-straining straps that held him in the hard, upright chair. The chair was bolted to the floor in the centre of a small bare room. The bad guy pushed the bare light globe so it swung back-wards and forwards in front of Billy's face. The bad guy put his face very close to Billy. Billy could see his strong white teeth and feel his breath on his face. His voice dropped to a vicious whisper.

'You're a fucking little liar. You're a dirty little L-4 who managed to get his hands on a portable generator.'

The good guy smiled sympathetically.

'You'd do well to tell him the truth. He'll only hurt you if you don't.'

'But I'm not an...'

'Where did you get the generator, kid?'

'In Pleasant Gap.'

'Where's Pleasant Gap?'

'I told you. I don't know any...'

Smash! Billy's head reeled.

'Where did you get the generator?'

'Pleasant...'

Smash.

'Name?'

'Billy, Billy Oblivion.'

'Place of origin?'

'I...'

'Are you going to tell us the truth, kid?'

'I've been trying to. I'm not an L-4. I don't even know what an L-4 is. I didn't know there were any laws here against porta-pacs. I don't even know where here is.'

'How did you get here, then, mister outsider?'

'On foot.'

'Through the swamp?'

'After our canoe sank.'

'In the swamp?'

'Yes.'

Smash!

There was a pause while they waited for Billy to be sick. The good guy lifted Billy's head.

'You really shouldn't lie to my friend here. He's got a whole lot of sophisticated stuff that he could use on you. This kind of thing is only openers for him.'

The bad guy laughed.

'Think I should tell him about a few of them? Like maybe the needles that you can stick through the flesh and scrape his bones with.'

The good guy shook his head.

'I don't think we'll need it with this boy. I'm sure he'll co-operates. Let's try again. Name?'

'Billy Oblivion.'

'Place of origin?'

'I...'

'Place of origin?'

'If I tell you, he'll just hit me.'

'Not if you tell the truth.'

'But I WAS telling the truth. I did start out from Pleas-ant...'

Smash!

The bad guy scowled.

'I thought we'd sorted out that business.'

'I don't know what else to say. It's the truth.'

'Why not...'

The door opened and another grey-uniformed figure came into the room. The bad guy smiled at him.

'What the hell do you want? Don't you know we're quest-ioning a prisoner?'

'They want your prisoner up at the top.'

'The hell they do, we've only just begun to work on him.'

'They want him and the other one. Straight away.'

The bad guy started to button his tunic.

'Who wants him? I'll sort them out.'

'It's a directorate order.'

'Directorate?'

'Miss A.A. Catto called in herself. Shower, delouse, and send them both straight up.'

'What does she want them for?' .

'To fuck her, probably. That's all the families seem to think about.'

'Why can't she get herself a Steward-1? I got to turn in a report on these two.'

The third man shrugged.

'It ain't my problem. Orders is orders.'

'When Data want their report, I'm going to send them straight to you.'

'Do what you like.'

He took a slip of paper out of his pocket and handed it to the bad guy.

'Here's a receipt for prisoners 79021 and 79022. They're off your hands now. You don't have to worry about it.'

The bad guy took it grudgingly.

'Okay, but I don't like it.'

Billy felt himself being unstrapped from the chair. He was hauled to his feet, and at that point he passed out.

He came to under the shower. Reave, who'd been holding up Billy's head, helped him to his feet and supported him.

'They sure messed you up.'

'Yeah. You were lucky they picked me to work on first.'

'Do you know what they're going to do with us now?'

'I was pretty groggy, but I heard something about how we were being sent to the top. Whatever that means. Some guy came in and stopped the other two beating me up.'

'Maybe they're about to start treating us right.'

The water stopped and jets of warm air dried them. Reave helped Billy out of the shower, and a grey-uniformed guard led them to a glass cubicle and told them to step inside. They both suffered a moment of panic as yellow-green fumes began to fill the chamber. They found that they could still breathe, even when the gas filled the whole cubicle. An extractor fan was switched on and it quickly cleared. The guard opened the door and led them to a table on the other side of the room, where pants and jackets of some striped material were laid out.

Billy and Reave quickly dressed. They were each given a pair of plastic slip-on shoes and led through a series of corri-dors to a moving walkway. The walkway led eventually to a set of blue steel doors. The guard inserted an electronic key and the doors hissed open.

Beyond them was a lift. A lift, however, that was fitted with contour seats. The guard told Billy and Reave to sit. He strapped them in and then stepped back outside. The doors shut and the lift rocketed upwards at a tremendous acceleration that pushed Billy and Reave down into their seats. Minutes passed and finally they came to rest. The doors sighed open again. Three men in light blue uniforms and short-cropped blond hair were waiting for them. Each held what looked to Reave like some kind of stun weapon.

Billy and Reave were unstrapped from their seats and led on to another moving walkway. High, almost subliminal music came from hidden speakers, and the corridors were decorated in rich gold and pure white. The city seemed to be presenting another face to them. Reave leaned close to Billy and whispered in his ear.

'This looks a good deal better than down below.'

Their guards seemed to ignore the conversation. They changed direction twice, then left the walkway. They marched Billy and Reave down a short corridor and halted in front of a pair of gold double doors. One of the men in blue pressed a bell. After a short delay the door slid back and with one of the guards, they stepped inside a luxurious apartment. In the centre of the large main room a girl of about thirteen wearing heavy makeup and a slightly incongruous silver sheath dress stood flanked by two well-developed blondes in short pink tunics and thigh-length pink boots. The girl looked angrily at the two guards.

'Who told you to bring them to me in that condition?'

'That was how they were sent up, Miss Catto.'

'In prison suits, and one of them covered in bruises. Is it the way I'm supposed to be presented with people? I want clothes for them, and a Steward with shaving equipment. I also want a Medic for the one who's been beaten up, and the names and numbers of the Personnel officers who did it. Do you understand?'

'Of course, Miss Catto.'

'Then get out and see to it. I want it done immediately.'

The man in blue bowed and hurried out. The girl turned to Reave and Billy, and smiled graciously.

'I deeply regret that you've been treated so badly. Please be seated. The Steward will see that everything is put right. I am, A.A. Catto.'

Reave nodded his head and shuffled a little. He was bemused by the way the girl's manner was such a sharp contrast to her appearance. She looked like a child who had scarcely reached puberty, but behaved like a mature woman. He made stumbling introductions.

'My name's Reave, Miss, and my partner here, he's called Billy. He normally does the talking but he's feeling a bit rough since your cops, or whatever they were worked him over.'

A.A. Catto gestured to a pair of antique tubular chrome and black leather chairs.

'Please sit down. You both must be exhausted.'

Reave grinned.

'Thanks ma'm, we are kind of ready to cave in.'

Billy said nothing, and flopped into a chair. A.A. Catto turned to one of the girls in pink.

'The injured one is no use to me as he is. You'd better arrange for him to have a guest suite down on 1009. Detail two Hostess-1s to look after him. They're to extend him the full service. Get them to explain what that includes. He can be taken down there when the Medic comes.'

She turned her attention back to Reave.

'So where do you two wanderers come from?'

At the question, Billy's eyes opened and flickered round. Then he saw where he was and closed them again. Reave coughed and shuffled his feet.

'A place that goes by the name of Pleasant Gap, Miss.'

'Is that beyond the water?'

'Beyond the water and then some.'

'How wonderful. We meet very few new people here.'

Reave smiled.

'Sometimes you can meet too many new people. Perhaps you got to meet our friend the Minstrel Boy. He was leaving town as we were coming in.'

A.A. Catto frowned politely.

'I don't recall anyone of that name. Does he come from Pleasant Gap, also?'

'I don't rightly know where he comes from.'

Before the conversation could go any further, the door buzzed, and one of the Hostess-1s admitted a Medic, two Stewards and three more Hostesses. A.A. Catto hurried about the room supervising the various operations. She chose ward-robos for Billy and Reave from a design catalogue, she watched as the Steward fitted Reave's chin into a permashave, and stood beside the Medic-1 as he gave Billy a series of shots, and prepared to have him moved. Once the clothes had been ordered and Billy dispatched to his temporary apartment, she sat down next to Reave.

'Now that's all done, you must take off those ugly clothes and get better acquainted.'

She patted his knee and smiled. Reave gestured to the two remaining Hostess-1s.

'What about them?'

A.A. Catto looked up.

'What about them? They're here to assist us in any way we want. Unless of course they embarrass you, then I'll send, them away.'

Reave looked at the two girls appraisingly.

'No, let 'em stay. They look like they might come in handy.' He stood up and slowly began to strip off his



striped suit.

Before he'd finished, A.A. Catto was already pressing her thin hard body up against his.

Billy could remember very little of what happened after he'd been taken out of the lift. He dimly recalled a strange young girl talking to them. He could remember a figure in white who did something that made the pain stop, but after that every-thing had been a drowsy jumble of dreams and reality. He was carried along corridors, through doors, the images of his grey-uniformed interrogators loomed in front of him. He'd screamed and fought, and then been comforted by visions of blond hair and pink material stretched over firm breasts. A machine that buzzed and gave off violet light was moved over the damaged areas of his body. The figure in white had come and gone. The pink visions had remained to save him from the questions. The column of ghosts had shuffled past. Briefly he had imagined himself in Pleasant Gap, then he had sunk down into a dark warm pit of unconsciousness.

A.A. Catto and Reave lay naked on her huge bed. The ceiling above them was a large glowing mirror. Her reflection smiled down at him and her lips nuzzled his ear.

'Do you like me, Reave? Do I please you?'

'Yes, very much.'

'Do you think I'm beautiful?'

'Very beautiful.'

She propped herself up on one elbow.

'I have a present for you, Reave.'

'You mean the clothes? They're too much. I've never had clothes like that.'

A.A. Catto smiled and shook her head.

'No, not the clothes. Something else.'

Reave sat up.

'What is it?'

'Wait and I'll show you.'

She called to one of the Hostess-1s.

'Bring my special present for Mister Reave.'

They came over to the bed carrying a box made of purple leather. A.A. Catto opened it, and Reave saw, lying on a pad of dark red velvet, a collar that looked as though it would fit round a man's neck. It was made of silver, about three inches wide and decorated with fine gold inlay. Beside it was a tiny ring, its exact miniature. A.A. Catto picked up the collar and snapped it round Reave's neck.

'There.'

Reave put his hand to it.

'It's very pretty. I don't normally wear jewellery.'

A.A. Catto smiled.

'You'll wear it for me?'

Reave stroked her tiny breast.

'Sure.'

She slipped the ring on her third finger, and chanted in a childish singsong.

'The collar for you, and the ring for me.'

It was the first time Reave had heard her sound anything like she looked. Her lovemaking was in no way childlike. Reave remembered being surprised by some of the things she'd suggested. His finger fiddled with the fastenings at the back of the collar.

'I don't seem to be able to get this off.'

A.A. Catto kissed him.

'You can't.'

'I can't?'

She held up her finger with the ring on it.

'Only if I want you to. It's controlled from here. I twist the ring one way, and the collar's locked. I twist it the other and it's released.'

'Can I take it off now? I'm not really used to wearing it.'

A.A. Catto rolled over and began to play with him.

'Not yet. It does a lot of other things as well.'

Billy opened his eyes. He was in an unfamiliar room, lying on the largest, most comfortable bed he had ever slept in. One of the pink and blond girls came into his field of vision. She smiled at him.

'May I help you, Mister Billy?'

Billy struggled to sit up.

'I don't know for sure. How long have I been out?'

'Just over five hours, Mister Billy.'

Billy stretched, and patted his face with exploratory fingers.

'I feel amazingly recovered.'

'The treatment has an almost total success rate.'

Billy grinned.

'So it would seem,'

Another Hostess-1 joined the first one.

'How may we serve you, Mister Billy?'

Billy scratched his head. They were both smiling at him so invitingly that he began to wonder if maybe he was still delirious.

'What can you do for me?'

They both chorused.

'Anything you might ask, Mister Billy.'

'How about some coffee and a cigar?'

'Certainly, Mister Billy. Shall we both fetch them, or would you like one of us to stay here and entertain you?'

Billy laughed.

'Does that mean you tell me jokes or join me in bed?'

'Whatever you wish, Mister Billy. If you find one of us attractive we are available to serve you in any way.'

'Yeah?'

'Of course.'

'Okay then. Let's do it. One of you go get the breakfast and the other climb in with me.'

One of the Hostess-1s began to take off her pink tunic while the other went to arrange the food. Billy grinned at the one who was leaving.

'You can join us when you get through.'

A.A. Catto and Reave were locked together, intertwined, moving furiously against each other. The gasps and groans mingled as their excitement grew and grew. Reave moaned as he felt himself on the verge of orgasm. A.A. Catto opened her eyes and her hand moved to the ring. Reave screamed as the collar sent a violent shock flashing through his nervous system. His spine arched and his body shook in uncontrollable spasms. A.A. Catto dug her nails into his back and then sank back with a satisfied smile.

Reave shuddered and passed out.

She/They floated up a flat area that ran between the human habitations. Her/Their energy was depleted, and She/They moved very slowly, but now She/They was within reach of the stasis point and everything would be well.

The human beings spilled out of their crude buildings and gawped at the strange creature who floated down their main street. She/They had always found the childish curiosity of humans an inconvenience, but under the circumstances it couldn't be avoided. The stasis point was all important to the task She/They had to perform.

A sense of relief came over Her/Them as She/They reached the absolute centre of the field. The standing pair carefully laid their injured third fractionally above the dust of the street. The inert form was supported a few inches above the ground by a faint blue glow. The remaining two stood erect, and one of them slowly raised the energy wand.

A crowd of humans had surrounded the triple form, but remained at a safe distance. Their shouts and chattering died away as a dim red light enveloped the three figures. They backed away a few paces as the light grew in intensity and rose up the spectrum through orange to yellow. The light became stronger and stronger, turned green, blue and finally an intense violet that almost hid the figures from the view of the crowd.

The sky above the little town flickered on and off as She/They drained incalculable amounts of energy. Lightning flashed in the distant, grey hills, and claps of thunder rattled the buildings. The glass in some of the windows shattered and collapsed, and a tree, down beyond the last house, crashed across the main street. The town generator whined and vib-rated as it tried to cope with the incredible overload. A gale-force wind howled down the street whipping up tall spirals of dust. Some of the older humans sank to their knees and began praying.

There was a flash of intense white light. The humans who had been watching it turned away, temporarily blinded. The light around Her/Them slowly faded down to the dull red again. The pitch of the generator fell to normal, and the sky returned to its usual colour and brightness. The inert figure on the ground slowly rose to join the other two. She/They was once again complete. The triple form rose slightly and began to drift back the way She/They had come. Towards the end of the street, She/They began to gather speed. Her/Their desire was to get away from the gawping, ignorant humans. Her/Their trials and pain were over, all that remained was the continuing search for the place of invulnerability. A place of solitude that She/They could render stable and make secure from the inroads of the disrupters. There She/They could restore Her/Their power, meditate and study, and prepare for the ultimate campaign. There would be other battles and other reversals, but Her/Their projections always led to the final conflict. It could only resolve itself in one of two ways. Her/Their form would be broken and become part of the chaos, or She/They would restore order to every level of the fabric of reality.

For an instant She/They wondered what would be the fate of the humans when that time came, then, dismissing it as scarcely relevant, Her/Their form rose up the surface of the grey hills and vanished into the formless, swirling nothing.

The crowd in the main street slowly dispersed. Old Eli went to inspect the damage to the windows in his store. Jed McArthur scratched his head and looked at his cousin Cal.

'Did you see that?'

'Right in the main street of Pleasant Gap.'

'Without so much as a by-your-leave.'

Cousin Cal looked around suspiciously.

'It was them two boys leaving the town and wandering abroad. I knew it was tempting fate. Outlandish things was bound to happen, if folks started coming and going just as they pleased.'

Jed McArthur spat in the dust.

'I don't know what things are coming to.'

Billy was having trouble accepting that the whole thing was real. The two young girls who now lay, one on each side of him, in the huge luxurious bed were hard to reconcile with the horror of the arrest and interrogation. The girls, whose pink uniforms littered the floor of the apartment, acted as though they were totally devoid of character. Their whole existence seemed to be directed towards pleasing his slightest desire. Beyond that, there was nothing. It was something that made Billy slightly uneasy. They were more like programmed machines than real people.

They showed this constant anxiety over Billy's welfare, to the point where he felt almost under an obligation to produce more and more petty whims for them to indulge and keep themselves occupied. There seemed to be something strangely unhealthy about the whole city. All the people he had encountered, with the possible exception of the strange child whom he half remembered from his delirium, seemed to have had large sections of their personalities erased. Even the brutality of the Personnel men seemed to have been aimed, not so much at getting information out of him, but at rearranging his memory of the outside world. He stared at his reflection in the mirror ceiling and worried at the problem.

One of the girls seemed to sense his mood, and sat up.

'Are you unhappy, Mister Billy?'

Billy shook his head.

'No, not really.'

'You seem troubled.'

'I was just thinking, that's all.'

'You are unhappy.'

'I'm not, really.'

'Aren't thinking and unhappiness the same thing?'

'Not usually.'

'Would you like us to distract you?'

Billy laughed.

'I'm completely wiped out from being distracted.'

'Perhaps you'd like to watch one of the entertainment channels?'

'Okay.'

The girl reached out a hand to the bedside console and the screen flickered into life. Men in period costume hacked savagely at each other with swords and axes. Billy shook his head.

'I don't think so.'

The girl changed the channel. Two women and a crowd of dwarfs were engaged in slapstick pornography. Billy rolled over.

'I think we can forget the entertainment.'

The girl looked concerned.

'We are not pleasing you at all.'

'Sure you are. I'm quite happy.'

She gestured to the other girl.

'Perhaps it would amuse you if my colleague and I had sex with each other while you watched. We are often asked to do this. We are quite highly skilled.'

Billy laid a hand on her shoulder.

'Do you ever think of anything else but what would please the people you serve?'

The girl frowned.

'Of course not. What else is there?'

'Don't you ever just please yourself?'

'I'm a Hostess-1. I take pride in my rank. I find my pleasure from pleasing those I am assigned to. That is the natural order, it's the function of my class.'

Billy found it impossible to get through to her.

'Are you happy, though?'

'Of course.'

'Wouldn't you like to have people serve you?'

The girl immediately brightened.

'Does it please you to say obscene things to me? Perhaps you'd like to beat me?'

For a moment, Billy thought she was mocking him. Then he realized that she was perfectly serious. The concept of someone serving her was obscene according to her programming. The paradox was that she accepted it with pleasure. Before Billy could probe any further, the console buzzed and the girl reached out to answer it.

'Mister Billy's apartment. May I help you?'

Reave's voice came over the speaker.

'Let me talk to Billy, will you, babe?'

Billy moved into range of the camera.

'Hey Reave. How you doing, old buddy?'

Reave grinned.

'Just fine. It's a wild set-up they got here. Is everyone treat-ing you right?'

Billy laughed.

'Falling over themselves to show me a good time. I got two broads down here that you wouldn't believe.'

'How you feeling after that going-over you got?'

'Fine. Completely recovered.'

Reave looked relieved.

'That's great. A.A. Catto's really sorry they did that to you.'

Billy lit a cigar and inhaled.

'Yeah? How you making out with her?'

Reave winked.

'I'm doing okay.'

He paused.

'Listen Billy. I got something to talk to you about. Can you come up here?'

Billy nodded.

'Sure. How do I get there?'

'I've, no idea. Hold on.'

Reave vanished from the screen, and A.A. Catto moved into frame.

'Just tell your Hostess-1s. They'll bring you up here.'

Again Billy nodded.

'Okay, fine.'

The connection was cut, and Billy sat up in bed.

'I've got to go to A.A. Catto's apartment.'

The two girls sprang out of bed, hastily dressed and then helped Billy on with some of the clothes that A.A. Catto had chosen for him. Billy wasn't too sure about the red velvet jump suit that A.A. Catto had picked out of the catalogue, but Billy couldn't be bothered to argue, particularly as the Hostess-1s kept telling him how cute he looked. The girls led Billy along a series of walkways and corridors. They were admitted to A.A. Catto's apartment. Billy dismissed the girls, and went inside on his own.

Reave was sitting crosslegged on the floor. He was wearing a white silk robe and a fancy silver collar. Billy looked at him in surprise. It was a far cry from his dungarees. Billy smiled to himself but said nothing. A.A. Catto was sprawled across the bed covered only by a black shawl that did little to hide her nakedness. Reave glanced up as Billy crossed the room.

'Hey old buddy, how are you?'

Billy sat down in one of the antique chairs.

'Fine. You?'

'Oh, I'm okay.'

A.A. Catto sat up.

'Don't you think Reave looks pretty since I went to work on him?'

Billy noticed that, as well as the collar, Reave was wearing lipstick and eye shadow. Billy grinned.

'I never exactly thought of Reave as being pretty.'

A.A. Catto pouted.

'Of course he is. He's very very pretty.'

'Yeah, maybe.'

He turned to Reave.

'What did you want to talk to me about?'

Reave looked a little uncomfortable.



'Oh yeah... uh... would you like a drink or something?'

'I'd like to know what you want to talk to me about. You're stalling, Reave.'

Reave looked at the floor, and then up at Billy.

'Well... It's as simple as this, man. I want to stay here.'

'What?'

'I like it here, Billy. I want to stay.'

'You're kidding?'

A.A. Catto moved to the end of the bed. Her shawl fell away revealing tiny breasts with small brown nipples.

'He's quite serious. Reave has decided to stay here.'

'But why?'

'I like it here, Billy. You kept telling me that we were look-ing for something. Well, I've found it. I want to stay here.'

'Don't you think it's a bit early to decide?'

A.A. Catto answered for him.

'He's made up his mind. He's staying.'

Billy turned to face her.

'What have you done to him? Reave never used to wear makeup and jewellery.'

A.A. Catto's large blue eyes flashed with anger.

'What's wrong with makeup and jewellery?'

Billy shrugged.

'Nothing. It's just...'

'It's just that you've got a narrow hillbilly mind.'

Reave fingered his silver collar.

'It's not exactly how it appears, Billy. It's...'

A.A. Catto interrupted him.

'Shall I tell you how it really is, Billy? Shall I tell you what his pretty collar's really for?'

There was the hint of a sneer in her voice. Billy sat very still as A.A. Catto went on.

'The reason that Reave likes it here is that he doesn't have to think too much. It's easy for him.'

She held up her hand.

'See my ring. See how it matches Reave's pretty collar. They are linked together. With my little ring I can give him amazing pleasure, or I can punish him. He doesn't have to think about a thing.'

Billy swung round on Reave.

'Is this true, man? Is this what you want?'

Reave stared at the floor and said nothing. A.A. Catto again answered.

'It's what he wants. Watch.'

She turned her ring. Reave gasped and arched his back. Billy's mouth dropped open.

'You did that to him.'

Reave was shaking his head dazedly. A.A. Catto laughed.

'My little ring, and his pretty collar. He doesn't have to worry any more. He likes that.'

'You've made him into a pet.'

'He likes it.'

Billy stooped beside Reave.

'Do you, Reave? Is this what you want?'

Slowly Reave nodded.

'I guess so, Billy.'

'But you're her slave, man. Just an object to keep around the place. Is that the way you want it to be?'

'I think so, Billy.'

'You're crazy. What's going to happen when she gets tired of you?'

'I don't know. I'll deal with that when the time comes.'

A.A. Catto rolled over on the bed and smiled spitefully.

'What's the matter, Billy, are you upset because he's mine now? Did the two of you use to be lovers?'

Billy looked up in surprise.

'Of course not. It was nothing like that.'

'What was it like, then?'

'We... we were partners.'

'That's different.'

'Sure.'

'Well, you've lost him.'

Billy looked helplessly at Reave.

'Tell her, Reave. Tell her how we left Pleasant Gap to look for something good. Tell her how it was. Reave.'

He waved his hand round the room.

'We didn't come all this way, and go through all those troubles to end up with this. This ain't what we came looking for.'

Reave looked up at Billy. His voice was very quiet.

'I didn't come looking for anything, Billy. I didn't have no dream. I just came for the ride.'

Billy slumped in his chair. A.A. Catto draped her shawl round her shoulders, and stood up.

'It looks like that's it, Billy. You'll have to follow your dream on your own now. Reave's staying here with me. That's right, isn't it, Reave?'

Reave nodded silently. She smiled sweetly.

'Of course, you must feel free to be our guest for as long as you like. Maybe you'll decide to settle down here. I know some of the other ladies have their eyes on you.'

Billy stayed exactly three days.

On the first he lay around his apartment and sported with the Hostess-1s.

On the second he went to a party that A.A. Catto threw to show off Reave, and was taken off by Juno Meltzer to sport with her.

On the third he decided to leave. He left Juno Meltzer still asleep and made his way back to his own apartment. The Hostess-1s were waiting for him.

'Did you have a good night, Mister Billy?'

'Yeah. It was fine.'

'How may we serve you today? We have a few suggestions.'

'I'm leaving.'

'Leaving, Mister Billy?'

'That's what I said.'

'Have we displeased you?'

'Of course not. It's just time to move on.'

'We're sorry you don't like it here. Are there any services we may perform before you leave here?'

'Yeah. You could get me my old clothes, my porta-pac and my gun. If it's possible, I'd like some transport to the edge of town.'

'We'll have to clear it with Miss Catto.'

They had a brief conversation with A.A. Catto through the vid-screen and then turned back to Billy.

'Miss Catto has authorized your request. We'll arrange everything.'

They left the room, and reappeared half an hour later. They presented Billy with his clothes, which were cleaned and pressed, his belt, his porta-pac and his gun. He quickly changed and came back to the Hostess-1s. One of them gave Billy a leather shoulder bag.

'A gift from Miss Catto.'

It contained food concentrates and a water bottle.

'Did you fix transport?'

'There'll be a Personnel car in the compound. It will take you to the edge of the valley.'

'Okay. I guess I'll be going.'

He kissed both the girls, and grinned at them.

'Thanks for everything.'

They looked confused.

'It's not your place to thank us.'

He touched the door stud.

'I thought it would make a change.'

The doors closed behind him. He rode down in the lift, and followed the signs to the Personnel

compound. A grey-uni-formed driver saluted smartly and opened the car door. Billy sat in the back and smoked a cigar as he was whisked past the shacks and ruins. The car halted at the edge of the hills. Billy climbed out of the vehicle and the driver sped away without a word.

Billy turned and started to walk up the track. The thought crossed his mind that maybe he should have waited till the end of the day. Then he could have walked off into the sunset in the grand classic manner. He dismissed the idea as pointless. There was, after all, no one to watch.

The End

## About this Title

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