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Cube Root
by David Langford
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First published in Interzone Magazine, 1985

Fictionwise Contemporary
Science Fiction
Winner, 1986 British SF Association Award for best short fiction.

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They had been three days on the moor when the message came.

"Operation Cube Root...cancelled?" Finlay read from the flat screen. He looked up, incredulous. "Why would they do that? Sir."

Captain Mackin shrugged slowly. Already his thin face was haunted with possibilities, each more likely than the last to hinder his next promotion. He was a man who thought too much for the Army.

"Some kind of emergency," he said at last.

Faulkner chose that moment to clear his throat and ask, "What kind of emergency means you have to cancel a national exercise?"

For a second there was no sound but a hiss of wind through the sparse undergrowth of Bodmin Moor. Finlay read a second message from the display. "This link is closing down. Repeat. This link is closing down. You are instructed to follow Cube Root procedures real-time. Repeat. Real-time. This link is closing down. Message ends."

"God," said Faulkner before anyone else could. "It's going to happen." With a practised eye he noted the reactions of the little knot of men: Mackin white-faced and understanding all too much, of course; Finlay nibbling his lip as he folded display and keyboard into one compact unit; Spratt fumbling for a joke and Lewdown for a sneer; young Gray copying alarm from his hero Mackin; most of the squad with regulation blank looks and Tregennis too stupid to wear any blank look but his own.

"Our orders stand," said Mackin, raising his voice imperceptibly. "All units in Cube Root will remain dispersed away from military and civilian targets until 48 hours after second strike or until recall. On occupying target or near-target zones we are to re-establish -- "

"We know all that," said Lewdown to the wind.

"And they could not but own that their Captain looked grand, As he stood and delivered his speech," quoted Spratt to Lewdown.

First signs of insubordination evident almost immediately, said Faulkner to his mental notebook. Not quite unconsciously, he rubbed at the slim band of transparent, smoky plastic circling his right wrist. All the men wore them. Faulkner found himself taking a morbid interest in his.

The Land-Rovers and the camp were tucked under the flank of a high, granite-tipped tor. Cube Root orders specified "no line-of-sight visibility from military or civilian targets including roads." In a hollow further down the slope, the greygreen waters of a tarn moved sluggishly under the wind. Unit 338 (Capt. Mackin commanding) was having a practice wrestle with heavy, rubberized protective suits, pretending to occupy a contaminated zone. When in

doubt, give the dummies something to keep them busy, Faulkner reflected. As an attached civilian, he could loaf a little.

Afterwards, still prickling with sweat, they drank tea.

"Wonder how effective that camouflage really is," said Faulkner conversationally, pointing to the daubed and dappled vehicles.

"Pretty good, I'd say." That was the loyal Gray.

"Should have painted them bright yellow," said Spratt. "Blend in with all these bloody gorse flowers."

"You mean satellites?" Finlay said to Faulkner.

"Yes...I dunno," said Faulkner, who knew quite well. "All this dispersal; and the eyes they have up there can track us all over the moor, I'll bet."

"Your business is with the medical supplies." Mackin sounded distant. Since the communications closedown he'd been barricading himself behind thicker and thicker layers of protocol, of routine. Faulkner dropped submissively out of the conversation. Another dangerous thought was loose in Unit 338, helping the buildup to critical mass.

* * * *

Finlay's business was with communications. As the light began to fade over the bare moorland, he unfolded his apparatus and began laboriously to compose a situation report.

"Suppose you didn't hear we're off the air," said Lewdown indifferently, peering over the technician's shoulder.

"Piss off," said Finlay, this being his way of pointing out that Cube Root orders were for scrambled reports to go into the Net whether or not anything was coming out.

Stress symptoms, noted Faulkner as with pursed lips Finlay backtracked up the screen for some minute correction, and Lewdown made pitying _tch-tch_ noises.

The automatic mental annotation continued. _The existence of a state of emergency helps crystallize behaviour. Lewdown's strategy for countering stress is to manoeuvre himself into positions of justifiable contempt for others' activities, an exaggeration of his normal cynical stance. Finlay, meanwhile, prefers to immerse himself in minor duties...Later he would transfer the impressions to his case notebook.

The adjustment of Captain Mackin is particularly
It happened then.

An appalling light flared high over the tor, like a giant flashbulb which instead of flashing and dying went on and on in an optical crescendo. At peak its dazzle washed out the colours of people and things with too much light, as moonlight bleaches them with too little. It died away in yellows and reds and a pulse of heat like dragon's breath; last of all came the slap of an invisible shockwave that lashed the grass and pummelled the breath from the lungs.

CLOSE EYES AND KEEP THEM CLOSED. FALL FLAT, FACE DOWN with HANDS TUCKED UNDER BODY. STAY DOWN UNTIL THE SOUND OF THE EXPLOSION PASSES. They all had it written in a little booklet.

Faulkner picked himself shakily from where reflex had flung him, in the mud. Through lurid afterimages he saw other men doing the same. His ears rang with a thunderous silence, his eyes with a solid purple lightning-sheet. The interestingly adjusted Lewdown was first to speak, leaning again over Finlay as the latter wiped his comm unit.

"Report _that_," he said.

"I'll have to start again," the Private/Tech said mechanically. He peered at the LCD screen, and Faulkner heard a sharp intake of breath.

"Corrupted," came a voice that sounded hypnotized. "Radiation..."

The screen was filled with garbage, random letters and symbols, alphabets of madness.

Finlay, Lewdown, Faulkner, and one by one the others, stared through the fading light and dazzling afterimages at the plastic band about each right

wrist. But of course it was too soon to tell.

* * * *

A disaster's stark outlines can be blurred by soft layers of official forms. Mackin demanded a roll-call almost before anyone's vision had cleared, and within minutes Gray was scratching his cropped head over the "Observers Initial Report Form" which was thoughtfully provided with Cube Root supplies.

"Date...unit position...approximate time of event. It's 1748 now, sir."

"Put 1740," said Mackin, staring into the void air over the unchanging tor.

"Strike serial number (if known). Azimuth, umm..."

("It was N," Davies was saying not quite out of earshot, with the tireless dull persistence of a pub bore. "I've been on the nuke course and I know what I'm talking about. N, that's what, and you know what that means.")

("I dunno," said Tregennis. "I never cottoned onto that stuff really.")

"Air or ground burst, sir?"

"Air, of _course_," said Mackin overloudly. "Air burst, altitude approx 200 metres, line-of-sight distance approx 700 metres, and you'll bloody well have to _wait_ to fill in the question after _that_."

Gray scribbled in silence, chewing from time to time on the end of his ballpen. "Personal N monitor records: oh. Oh yes." He flicked a look at his right wrist.

"I can smell something funny. Chemical," Tregennis said, an unaccustomed look of concentration on his face.

Spratt sniffed horribly. "Hey, you're right. Don't suppose they're -- "

"You can expect to smell some odd things right after a burst," said Faulkner rapidly. "Reaction products in the air. And the r/a flash can scramble your nerves, like Mike's comm screen. We call it synaesthesia in the trade. It'll pass off." He rapped it out confidently. Keep them calm. Gray, who had been sniffing too, murmured almost at once that whatever he had smelt ("funny...chemical...lighter-fuel and lemon" was dying away. The others agreed.

Important note. At least five men claimed to detect an odd smell about nine minutes from zero. Should be investigated further.

"Immediate deaths resulting from burst," Gray intoned.

"None," said Mackin wearily.

"One if he doesn't shut his gob," Lewdown muttered.

"Subsequent casualties resulting from delayed effects..."

It was Faulkner who first saw the change, and Lewdown who first moaned, "Oh my God -- " He did not add a quip or sneer. In the dying light it was hard at first to be sure. Eventually, though, checking and doublechecking in the harsh glare of Land-Rover headlamps, they had to admit that the faintly tinted wristbands had darkened, every one, almost to black.

"You can fill in that 'delayed effects' box now," said Mackin with surprising mildness. It sounded almost like relief.

Checked against the comparator strip with its continuous spectrum from smoky transparency to pure jet, the bands were darker by a safe margin than the zone marked _prognosis 0% negative_.

* * * *

It was night, but no one wanted to click off the friendly lamps.

"Zombies," Mackin could be heard saying to himself. "We're zombies." That was the name they'd given to r/a contaminated refugees in the 1978 Scrum Half exercise. Bodmin Moor was supposed to be a Safe Dispersal Zone, in between the fallout paths of nuclear strikes on Falmouth and Plymouth assumed in the 1980 exercise, Square Leg.

"Maybe they're taking out the forces just when we're scattered for Cube Root," Faulkner said. "God, remember what I was saying about satellite eyes? What a...coincidence."

"Waste an N on us lot? You've got to be joking," said Spratt.

"If they've taken out the whole country..." That was Patel, who tended to worry about his large family.

"We'd have seen more bursts flashing over the horizon," said Lewdown with the air of one who explains to a five-year-old.

Gray leant forward nervously, glancing at the withdrawn Mackin. Almost, Faulkner expected him to raise his hand before speaking. "Suppose it's all just bad luck, a Rung 18 thing, 'spectacular show of force' on bits of waste land -- like the Moor. Only we had to be parked here."

"Teacher's pet," Spratt murmured.

"Or suppose," said Lewdown, "suppose the Cube Root orders leaked, eh? When something big gets ballsed up, look to the top. Suppose they saw how Cube Root gave them a handy chance to strike out the army without touching one single bloody pampered civilian -- "

Faulkner watched their faces. Often before he'd said that someone looked like death. He had a hint now of what, without exaggeration, the cliché meant.

"I feel sick," Gray said suddenly.

Later: Blaming everything on the chiefs of staff was popular tonight. Only Mackin seems to think it remarkable that a single squad should be the target for a neutron bomb strike: tonight, though, he said very little. And thought too much? He, Gray and Lewdown vomited between one and two hours after the event. No.7 pills issued to them and all the rest. NB: these three were on nuclear alert course recently and presumably knew what to expect. Ditto the nonentities Davies and Tregennis, but ...

* * * *

A glorious sun rose through thin white mist, gulls wheeled and shrieked overhead to remind them of the nearby sea, and in his tent the promising young career officer Captain Francis Mackin was cold as the country's granite bones. An emergency capsule issued with Cube Root supplies (not more than one per man) had erased the worry-lines from his face.

"So he couldn't take it," Spratt said sotto voce.

"College boy," Lewdown explained.

For an instant Faulkner hated them both, hated himself. Too much imagination, too much ability to visualize the progressive symptoms, he wrote in his brief and secret obituary. And, after an unclinical pause: I liked him.

Death was making preliminary advances to the others, so soon. A leaden-faced Spratt made inevitable jokes about morning sickness. They buried Mackin in a shallow grave, shallow because this moorland was a skin of waterlogged earth and peat over granite. As the damp stuff was shovelled over the sheet-wrapped body, Private Davies doubled up and retched uncontrollably into the grave. No one seemed to have enough spare sentiment to suggest a marker, an inscription. Faulkner was inclined to say, but did not, "Let the dead bury their dead."

Afterwards, he issued more pills. So far only one man, Gray, had shown the spasms which were the classic symptom of r/a damage to the central nervous system.

* * * *

"How d'you spell nausea?" Finlay asked. Through the long, raw morning he had obsessively composed and transmitted a series of minutely detailed reports, as though the numb horror could be chronicled out of existence. Faulkner filed the reflection for his notes as he spelt out the word.

"'...all personnel.' You too, I suppose, Doc? You don't look so green as the rest of us."

"When you get past forty you'll find your complexion's like this all the time," Faulkner said as casually as he could. "I try not to let it show. Have to win my patients' confidence and all that."

"Scramble," Finlay murmured to his keyboard, and as though the word were a signal there came the flat crack of a rifle close at hand. A wisp of smoke rose from the hole punched through the comm unit's case. All the text had faded from its screen before Faulkner heard the echo from the stone outcrop high above.

"That's enough of that," said Private Davies, lowering the smoking rifle. "Now you listen to me."

Davies. Davies the nonentity. Faulkner had imagined Lewdown and Spratt as disruptive forces, but they were all words. Now Davies, never the tallest man of the squad, was suddenly towering over them all.

"...telling you. I'm bloody not sitting here waiting to fall apart. The way I see it is, we're dead, right? Two days, maybe three. Right. If we're going, I say we go out in style. Joe Tregennis tells me there's this place not ten miles off -- "

"You can't do that," Gray said with genuine outrage. "Captain Mackin would never have let you. The Cube Root procedure has us staying _here_, in our assigned position."

"I don't hear Captain Nancyboy Mackin complaining, son. If you want to keep in with him, why not do what _he_ would've done -- what he did -- right?" Gray bit his lip and studied a tussock at his feet.

"Ooo, isn't he masterful," Lewdown murmured.

Oddly enough, the small and ratfaced Tregennis was the only other man to protest. "Only get into trouble, Ron. They'll get you some way or another. Like I said, I don't see there's much in all this N-bomb shit really..."

Davies turned to him, and the rifle-barrel turned too, its muzzle moving in tiny, hypnotic circles. He said, mildly, "Must have been someone else I saw puking up his guts this morning, Joe?"

"Been sick before; I'll be sick again; so what? Oh, don't get me wrong," Tregennis said, interpreting some cryptic text in the other's eyes. "I'll come along for the ride all right. You know me, Ron..."

In forty minutes the two Land-Rovers were bumping and squelching over the sodden moor. A dead army on the march. The only pause in striking camp had been when Davies found Gray with a scarlet capsule in one shaky hand. He had cuffed the younger man so he reeled, and stamped the fallen lullaby-pill into the rank heather. "Give the kid a chance," he said magnanimously. "You deserve some fun with the rest of us -- and no more of that, all right?" Faulkner had made another note.

_Davies is revelling in being able to give orders, to give and take away. Interesting to see our comedy duo, Lewdown and Spratt, acknowledging his status by heckling him in undertones, just as they did the captain. Gray is poised to switch allegiance and make a hero of Davies: he's a man who needs one. Only our dim Tregennis seems to have reservations; he knew Davies before the Army. Strategically the situation is fascinating, a goldmine. Personally I'd rather be anywhere else. There are some things -- _

"What's that you're writing, Doc?" said Spratt, who sat by him in the lurching vehicle. "One last mad batch of prescriptions?"

"Ha ha, no," Faulkner said easily. "Medical notes, I'm afraid. They'll help me keep you patched up. Maybe help some other poor sods one day too." He allowed Spratt a glimpse of the shorthand pages, and to his relief the other simply shrugged, not wanting to talk about the only subject there was to talk about.

"Big of you," said Lewdown with perfunctory sarcasm. Both he and Spratt fell silent then, perhaps thinking of the further progression through falling hair and haemorrhage and necrosis. Both, after all, had been on the course which showed and told of such things. The training film was supposed to have a big circulation as a horror video.

* * * *

"That's it," Tregennis said uneasily. As he pointed, Faulkner saw he had refused to accept judgement, had defiantly thrown away the night-black strip from his wrist.

"Right," said Davies over his shoulder, to the men packed in the remaining Land-Rover. The other had bogged down three miles into the moorland. Davies seemed to take the loss as a personal affront, and was becoming less easy-going in his decisions.

"Right," he said again. "Three forty-five, after hours, all we have to

do is walk in and take it. Just remember, all the regs and the Doc were offering (no offence, mate) was a few days sitting in the rain dying. That or a bloody lullaby pill. Back me up now and you get the piss-up of your life, ha bloody ha, and when the rot gets to you you won't give a fuck. Right. Let's get on with it."

Piebald shoals of white and dark-grey clouds scudded overhead. In one of the erratic gleams of sun that all afternoon had alternated with backhanded slaps of rain, they studied their objective. The Kernow Arms. A gaunt building of grey stone, spotted white and yellow with lichen, outhouses tumbled round it like stonefalls from the central, granite tor.

It was Davies who banged on the heavy door. It opened a crack, and an uncertain voice said: "Sorry sir, we're not open till six o'clock. If you'd like to come back -- "

For an instant the spell of normality gripped the men. One or two gave automatic nods, almost apologetic for their intrusion. Gray blinked hard. Then Davies took two paces back, lunged forward. His boot smashed into the door. The flimsy doorchain snapped with a crack, and there were confused sounds within. Faulkner took a deep breath, and followed the others in after Davies, into a stone-walled bar replete with wooden beams and horse-brasses, all exhaling a reek of stale beer. He bent over the grey-haired man who lay groaning and writhing. The nose had been flattened redly over his face by the door's impact.

"Leave him be," said Davies, looking critically at the list of beers. Faulkner continued to mop at the blood streaming over the landlord's face in a glistening half-mask; and was slapped aside by a heavy hand. "Leave him be, I said."

Standing, Faulkner saw malicious smiles on more than one face. Davies was their leader. He dared not put himself outside the magic circle.

"Joe Tregennis," said the bleeding man. "What's all this about?"

Tregennis's mouth worked silently. "Orders, Mr Ezard," he said at last.

"You've been requisitioned, old chap," said Lewdown.

"By the Captain here," said Spratt.

"Put him away. -- No, not in the cellar," Davies said. "Put him away and anyone else you find here."

Within ten minutes the red-sputtering Ezard, and his mousy wife, and a nondescript teenager who was a son, barman or both, were behind the solidly wedged door of a blind-walled coalhouse. In the bar, Davies's promised session was beginning: "Here's to Joe, finding us a real-ale pub first try!" In the gents' toilet, Faulkner wrote: _...fairly harmless so far. Davies is immovably established now; they need him to take responsibility; he slapped down Schwartz for wanting to get religious (expected that sooner from a Catholic), and Schwartz caved in. I'm not supposed to have feelings about all this, but thank God Mrs E. turned out to be fiftyish and gone to seed. If only they get drunk and stay drunk now! _

* * * *

The party was well under way. Finlay had come out of eclipse by mastering the old-fashioned beer taps and cask connections. He was beaming behind the bar, barely flinching even as Davies and Spratt used up Her Majesty's ammunition in snap shots at the forlorn row of china dogs shelved a yard over his head. Faulkner moved through the smoke and uproar, trying to give out No.7 pills. He doubted the effort was worth it any more.

Presently Lewdown, who was keeping score in the shooting gallery, suggested sardonically that Davies should let the prisoners run for it on the moor, "try a few rounds at moving targets." As it circled the roaring room, the joke took on the dimensions of a serious, popular proposal. Faulkner found himself saying rapidly, "No, no, the light's bad, suppose one of them got away, police'd be round before you know what and there's the end of your party..."

"And who says I couldn't hold this place against fifty lousy coppers?" Davies shouted: but the idea was quenched. He looked at Faulkner hard, before

drinking again and calling Gray to bring him more. Behind the bar, a portable radio pumped out music and frothy gouts of disc-jockey babble. A _radio_.

By five o'clock a new bright idea had come bubbling up through the beer: to site a couple of marksmen out by the main road. "They could take out cars," Spratt said dreamily. "Not just any car, no, just ones with cunt in. That's what we need to make this thing go with a bang. Like your piss-up to go with a bang...gang?"

Davies looked sourly at Faulkner. Faulkner shrugged. "I've said it already. Captain."

"Doc's scared again, mates. Never you mind. I know a trick worth two of that." Davies leered at nothing in particular.

"I've got a joke about a doctor," Spratt was saying at the bar. "Lemme tell you my joke."

"No, you mustn't do that," said Lewdown.

"Eh? Why not?"

Lewdown said delicately, "Because, dead men tell no tales."

"Oh _bloody_ good...Here Dave, I'm dying of thirst here."

In the notebook: _Becoming impossible to remain aloof. The whole situation is impossible. How can they expect me to watch, take notes and not interfere? "You've volunteered for a very dangerous job. You must follow your orders." I have to be myself, which means going into that bar and interfering again before six. If only Davies hadn't got them into seeing a death sentence as simply a release from all the rules -- _

* * * *

It was twenty to six. Schwartz was trying to shoot a bottle of light ale off Patel's head, to catcalls and applause. The flagstones were streaked and pooled with spilt beer and vomit, the cause of the latter now being ambiguous.

"Captain," Faulkner said to Davies where he sat as if throned, squinting at the radio. "Captain, I think we should go and take down the Kernow Arms sign on the main road. We want to lie low."

Davies belched luxuriously. "Clever boy. Just happens, though, I don't want that sign down. Said I'd got a plan, didn't I?"

"Captain -- with all respect -- "

Davies turned red-flecked eyes on him. "Who d'you think you are anyway, Doc?" And then, with an air of frightful accusation, he pointed a finger and said into a deadly little silence: "You...aren't...drinking."

"Give the Doc a drink," Gray chanted.

"Make him lick it off the floor," said Lewdown.

"What'll it be?" said Finlay, a master-at-arms pottering happily amid the bar equipment.

Faulkner felt a trap closing. "Gin and tonic," he said.

"Make it a big one for the Doc."

"A big one for the Doc." Finlay took his cue from the tone. He two-thirds filled a pint mug with gin, poured in a small bottle of slimmers' tonic water, and held out the result.

Though everyone was smiling -- just another bit of fun in the mess -- Faulkner smelt resentment. Aimed at the one who diagnosed death and so had to be allied with all the forces of death. Their instincts were right. He took the giant drink, smiled weakly, and sipped.

"Drink it down, Doc," said Davies inexorably, still sprawling. "Make a man of you. Let's see how fast the Doc can drink up."

The ring of faces seemed closer, the smiles more toothy. Faulkner gulped, choking, the perfumed stink overpowering in his nose and throat.

"Another big one for the Doc. Doc's thirsty tonight."

"Another big one for the Doc."

* * * *

Faulkner stirred on the floor, and retched. Someone had scrubbed viciously at his memory with a revoltingly juniper-scented brush. The stone room was still full of voices, the smoke thicker than ever. The second monstrous drink, and his refusal, and the bullet from Davies that clipped the lobe from his left

ear. (The collar was glued to his neck still, in a clotted mess.) A casual blow had sent him reeling, beneath contempt, forgotten. His left hand was twisted under him; he eased it from the vicelike grip of cramp that held it there, and studied the watch. It wasn't yet seven o'clock.

The situation is now declared to be out of control, he thought wryly. He should get up and do something about it. But his head sang, his body ached, his stomach heaved. If he moved now, his innards would eject like a sea-cucumber's.

"Number six," he distantly heard Davies saying. "Stringy old bugger, isn't he? put him away with the others, then. Where's all these young ravers, then, Joe?"

Tregennis: "Later, Cap, later. This'll be the lot coming home from the quarry. Don't get much hot stuff in a quarry, you don't."

Laughter.

Lewdown: "That's funny...This one isn't breathing any more. Who was it looked after him? You, Mikey?"

Spratt: "Yep."

Lewdown: "Well, you must have tapped him a bit hard."

A moment's hush.

Davies: "And so...first enemy kill to Mikey Spratt. Aren't they all the enemy out there? Us against them. Hear the radio, hear those bastards going on with life? Like I said, their fucking N-test, no bloody war. They nuked us. Fill up and let's hear it for Mikey, DSO and bar, especially the bar."

Gray called from somewhere further off: "Another carload on the way, Captain."

Davies: "Privates Lewdown, Schwartz and Patel...preepare to engage enemy! And tap 'em as hard as you like."

In an imaginary notebook: Drunk on more than alcohol. The feeling of being unpunishable, irresponsible, invulnerable through death...stronger than anything in the spirits rack. I see it now. We aren't looking into psychological effects of invisible neutron death with any hope of preventing the worst. We want to know the worst and learn how to make it worse still. Find how army units can be made into wandering cancers, attacking their own. They never told me..._

Davies has guessed -- _

Spratt, hilariously: "Tapped all this lot a bit too hard as well, chaps."

Lewdown: "Trying out the eight silent ways to kill a man. Going to write and complain, there isn't a one of them that's properly silent, you know."

Davies: "We heard. Like a stuck pig. Some soldiers you are. Hey, we ought to have a trophy collection, you could keep their ears for souvenirs. Or their pricks. Up on the shelf there..."

Gray called: "Headlights again...No, false alarm. They aren't turning here."

Davies: "Nothing but mangy old wallies and one old bag. What a bleeding hole this is. -- Dave, let's try that Slivovitz stuff. Thanks."

Gray: "Action stations!"

Lewdown: "Let's re-establish some more law and order."

A sound of laughter, of many feet leaving the room. The dance of the dead. Faulkner staggered upright and went reeling towards the toilet door, followed by a wave of not unfriendly chuckling.

It could be...The famous top-secret indicator wristbands are a straight copy of matériel they use behind the Curtain. That would make sense of it. I can guess the rest. The hell with orders. _

Returning after an interval to the bar, he heard Davies saying, richly, "Now this is a bit more like it."

She was young, pretty and brightly dressed, her face sharply attractive, her yellow skirt and blouse making her glow like a canary in a cage of great drab hawks. All this, Faulkner could see, was unimportant

compared with the fact that she was young and a woman. Spratt held her expertly from behind. One leg of her tights was laddered.

"At the very least we should draw lots," Lewdown was saying lazily.

"Stuff that," said Davies, bulking huger than ever for all that he was not a tall man. "You'll all get your turn."

"You're mad," said the dark-eyed woman. "What have you done with Harry? The police -- "

Schwartz mimed the death-chop to the throat, preening himself a little. The woman fell silent.

Faulkner tensed himself and stepped into the tight, electric circle. He did not feel like a hero. "You'll be wanting your anti-IR pills," he said casually.

"It's Doc again," said Davies with an air of false delight. "Doc can hold his drink."

"Doc wants another. Another big one for Doc," said Lewdown.

"Sure, sure. But -- " Faulkner managed an appalling leer -- "you won't want to be puking over the lady, eh? Here you are." He handed round the grey pills. "Three each."

"Three of his usual for the Doc," said Davies wittily: but while Finlay got to work, the men swallowed their pills.

"What is all this," said the woman raggedly.

Faulkner accepted another pint mug, touched it submissively to his lips, held back his retching with a huge effort. "Let me tell you a story," he said.

"Piss off -- "

"Your timing's lousy, Doc."

"Dead men tell no tales, ha ha. You heard that one? Dead men -- "

"Listen a minute. I've been thinking. You know you can simulate an N-bomb with a micronuke, just a few tonnes like the old Davy Crockett missile? There's even things that look like nukes but aren't. Then again, remember we smelt something funny, like fibreglass catalyst on the wind, just after the burst? Commandos with gas cylinders, maybe, way upwind, some gas that turns a certain kind of plastic black...Ever thought how they'd test a nasty that just makes you think you're dead from N?"

"I told you," Tregennis whispered. "I told you."

It was painful to watch Davies as power and assurance were torn from him like long strips of his own skin. But he aimed a handgun at Faulkner's stomach and said, "Cobblers. We was all puking and heaving ever since this morning."

"But first you took pills. Remember the pills?" (Gray hadn't even needed the pills, but he'd spare Gray the lecture on suggestibility.)

"Then you knew all along...you bastard."

"I put it together for myself. They kept me in the dark too," he lied. Half-lied. He suppressed the words I was just following my orders.

"Captain Mackin..." Gray said with something like a sob.

There was a pause. He slumped back, subsided into snores.

"Can't hold it," Davies said. "It's too late to stop now. It's gone too far. You two, bring her in the back bar. I'm not missing out now."

Moving like sleepwalkers, Spratt and Lewdown forced the screaming woman through a decorative wrought-iron door.

"And you...I'm not going to waste good bullets on you. Drink. And drink again."

Faulkner gulped the foul concoction, and through his choking managed to say, "You'll be all right. They can't let you come to trial. It's me that's spoilt the exercise, me they'll court-martial. Stop now and you've got a chance."

"So...I'll be all right whatever I do? Thanks. Thanks a lot. All I wanted to know, all this and a life in front of me as well. Now drink. God, this stuff gets to you...look at them all, pissed as rats." He steadied his mug, currently brimming with Pernod, and rubbed his eyes. Then he shook his

head furiously from side to side, like a dog shedding water. "I...funny..." The revolver wavered in his hand.

Faulkner relaxed. Too obviously, he realized at once.

"You fiddled the pills," said Davies with a squinting clarity as he saw the others reeling with more than drunkenness. He raised the gun with a titanic effort. He fired. Faulkner felt a violent blow to the shoulder, like the glancing impact of a bus. It slammed him against the granite wall. He was still alive, he thought vaguely. Davies, last of them all, dropped while Faulkner was still slithering down the rough stone.

The back of his head was sticky, and swirls of black moved in moire patterns over his field of vision. He imagined the appallingly well-briefed cleanup squad arriving in spurts of gravel...efficient tidying...reports, perhaps, of a fire at the Kernow Arms in which customers and gallant Army rescuers lost their lives?

The young woman came uncertainly into the room, with nervous, darting glances like a sparrow's. She was wiping at a splash of buff-coloured vomit which clung like lichen to her left breast; but she seemed unhurt.

"You'd better phone local army HQ," Faulkner told her, mechanically reverting to orders, unwilling to stand or move. "I'll give you the number..." The cleanup squad?

"What have they done with Harry?"

The Cube Root Effect: techniques of low-cost psychological warfare in a context of sub-threshold nuclear confrontation. Top secret. With an Appendix of personal observations by Dr T.T. Faulkner. He saw the unwritten report in his mind's eye, and his face puckered as had the woman's when she looked at her soiled blouse. Harry, and Mackin, and the others.

"On second thoughts...call the police. No. The newspapers. Anyone. Everyone."

"Damn you, what have they done with Harry?"

"Just make the calls I tell you," he said very tiredly.

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