The Weerde

The Weerde, Book 1

A Shared World Anthology
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'Really? What happened to the last guy?'

The Librarian shrugged. 'I have no idea. You people come here, you read, you leave. Sometimes you write your own books and w£ file them on our shelves.'

'You do? Well, you'll be filing mine in a year or so.'

'If I might make so bold as to inquire—what will it be called?'

Harry Lamb scratched the side of his cheek with his beer glass. 'I don't know. I'll probably call it something like: *Notes Toward a Theory of Co-Evolution: Emulative Mimicry Amongst the Higher Orders*. And if anyone publishes it they'll probably call it Werewolves Among Us! and put a photo of Lon Chaney Jr. on the cover, with his face all hairy and a wet black nose.'

But his good fortune has a shocking consequence. He finds himself stranded in a strange world awaiting its redeemer. Now Jeff must face his destiny—in a dangerous, wondrous quest to lead humankind's children back to the realms of Light.

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Prologue: The Lady And/Or The Tiger: I

Neil Gaiman and Roz Kaveney

The Library of the Conspiracy is currently to be found in a small university town in West Virginia, in the southern United States. The town has no litter in the streets, and its buildings are painted white; a

shopping mall was proposed at the county seat ten miles away, but nothing came of it. Once the Library was in Rome, in catacombs adjacent to those where the Sibylline books were held; some say it still contains copies of those books of prophecy which the Sibyl affected to have burned when King Tarquin the Proud refused her asking price, though the Librarians denied this to the Prefect Sejanus when he came calling with his clients, informers and hired bravoes. Later the Library was in Alexandria, then for many years in Venice, and later still in London, moving to its current location in the late 1930s. It is privately funded and little-known, save in certain circles.

In the broad wooden shelves of the Library there are sections on all manner of subjects: Lee Harvey Oswald has almost half a wall, as has John Wilkes Booth, and Joshua Norton, the self-proclaimed Emperor of the United States. There are shelves devoted to the Illumi-nati, and to the Suicide Royale, and the 1929 World's Fair; the secret patterns on the scarves of the Thugs are documented here, as are the names of the Quechua's bird of hope and the True Name of the Chinese adventurer who called himself the Younger Brother of Jesus Christ. These are on open shelves, and are freely available to legitimate researchers, although they may not be taken from the building.

Researchers need a letter guaranteeing good character and serious intentions; moreover the usual authorities are not always accepted as a reference here: the Vatican Librarian is good for a reference, as is the small public library of the town of Elgin, Illinois. But the Librarian of the Athenaeum Club quarrelled with the four Head Librarians of the Conspiracy over certain documentation that could, it was felt, have persuaded the requisite full twenty-four Bishops of the Anglican Church to assemble for the opening of the sealed box Joanna South-cott left at her death; this was in 1851, and courtesies have not been resumed.

There are open shelves. There are sealed stacks. And there are also the cellars.

One of the four Head Librarians must approve any requests for inspection of materials to be found in the sealed stacks, and these must be read at the high desk in his or her office. Where certain of the manuscripts are concerned, a Librarian will turn the pages for the reader. The Librarians of the Conspiracy have no uniform, but each of them wears white silk gloves; to turn some pages they add a second pair of gloves, and these are black.

The young man with the lank black pony-tail sat at the high desk, taking copious notes. He turned to the Head Librarian. Thank you,' he said. 'I think I'm finished with this.'

The Head Librarian took the manuscript, a twelfth-century illuminated chronicle, and placed it carefully on his desk.

'Is there anything else you'll be needing today, Mr Lamb?' he asked.

The young man shook his head. 'Not today,' he said. 'I'm still trying to make sense of what I've already found.' He paused. This is a *very* remarkable place.'

'Yes, sir.'

'So.' Lamb hesitated, then, 'How long have you been working here?'

The Head Librarian stroked his grey moustache with his white silk gloves. 'Sir, it is time to close the Library. And private discussion with our readers is frowned upon, on Library premises.'

'Oh. I see. I'm sorry. I just wondered ...'

The Head Librarian looked at him, quizzically. 'Yes, sir?'

'Well, did you answer an advertisement in The *New York Times* to work here? Or what?'

The Head Librarian blew a tiny scrap of dust from the tip of his white silk finger. The Library does not advertise, sir.'

Lamb looked away from the Head Librarian, embarrassed, and shuffled his notes into a portfolio. They went out into the corridor. The Head Librarian turned off the lights behind them, leaving his office to the darkness of the December evening.

'I-I'm sorry,' said Lamb. 'I didn't mean anything. I mean, I wouldn't want to get you into trouble. Talking.' He shrugged. 'Sorry.'

The Head Librarian nodded, gravely. 'I fully understand, sir. And I regret that our conversation, such as it is, in this building must be limited. However, were you to be on the corner of Main Street and Elm in say, half an hour, there is a small establishment in which drinks may be purchased ...'

The young man smiled suddenly, widely. ‘I’d like that,’ he said. Til be there.’

Lamb sipped his beer and waited. The juke-box was playing a country song, something about a woman who had finally discovered, after twenty years of marriage, that she never really knew her man.

‘Hallo.’

He started. T didn’t see you come in. Something to drink?’

‘A soft drink. Ginger ale will suit me perfectly.’

‘Are you sure I can’t buy you a beer? I’m on expenses ...’

The older man looked down briefly. Thank you, but no. I had,’ he paused, then began again, ‘... some slight problems with alcohol, many years ago. I no longer drink.’

‘My mom was an alcoholic,’ volunteered the younger man.

‘Then you know that one never ceases to be an alcoholic. One simply does not drink alcohol, a day at a time. My name is Chepstow. Roland Chepstow.’

‘Harry Lamb.’

‘I know.’ They shook hands. Chepstow no longer wore his white silk gloves; his hands were clean and perfectly manicured. The juke-box sang.

And these days you come home and 1 don’t know *you any more,* Seems you never *really get to* know *your man.*

A waitress came, took their order, returned almost instantly with the drinks.

The Library. It’s a wonderful place.’

Chepstow nodded. ‘It is indeed remarkable. I get, alas, little time for reading. But I enjoy watching our readers. We attract a particular type of person. Did you notice the gentleman at seat 15H? The Asian gentleman with the muffler?’

The big purple scarf. Sure. He seemed to be asleep.’

‘Exactly. He has been coming here for two years now. He is gathering evidence to prove that Indira Gandhi was murdered not by her Sikh bodyguards, but by agents acting on behalf of the hereditary chairman of the East India Company, in collusion with the British House of Lords. He arrives here first thing in the morning, he orders his books and goes to sleep, waking when the Library is closing to return the books.’

Harry Lamb grinned. ‘For two years? It’s an expensive place to nap. Doesn’t he ever read?’

‘When once I ventured to tax him upon the subject, he told me that the precise page of the precise book he was seeking would eventually be revealed to him in a dream. For now, he sleeps.’

Lamb sipped his beer. The Virginia heat was getting to him, even in his T-shirt and jeans. He eyed the Librarian in his sober suit. ‘You must hear some strange theories in this place.’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘Harry. Call me Harry.’

Chepstow shook his head. ‘I’d rather not, sir.’ He signalled to the waitress. ‘Another beer for my colleague and another ginger ale for me.’

‘A ...,’ Lamb paused, ‘A ... woman I used to know ... once told me that all conspiracies are parts of the same conspiracy, that they are all cells of an ultimate Beast. Like the story of the blind men and the elephant.’

Chepstow nodded. ‘People have come to us seeking proof of such ideas, and stayed for years in the attempt to prove *iV*

4I don’t think that can be true, though. It’s like the physicist said, Heisenberg—you know what he said ...’

‘I had the honour,’ Chepstow said quietly, ‘of meeting Herr Heisenberg once, in the company of Mr William Donovan.’

‘He said,’ Lamb said, ‘that the act of looking disturbs what is looked at. So if you are a particular sort of person the conspiracy you find, when you look, will mirror what you think, what you are.’

‘I would agree with that. There are certain features that some of the Library’s readers have in common. For example, it is my experience that those who lay the planet’s difficulties at the feet of the Illuminati tend towards slightly bulging eyes and to be less careful about personal hygiene than those who,

for example, seek to prove the existence of the cartel of international bankers. The banker-theorists are by far the best groomed.

'And it has also been my experience that certain types of people orbit certain conspiracies. The last thing Ripperologists want to know is the identity of poor Jack. *That's* there for the asking; but no one ever cares enough to ask. They are seeking themselves on the cobbles of Mitre Street and in the mists of White-chapel.'

'So what am I?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'C'mon. If you can recognize types, what type am I?'

Chepstow looked intently at his drinking companion. 'That would not be fair, sir. I processed your application, after all. You are a journalist. And journalists, in my experience, can be on the trail of ...' a small shrug, '... anything.'

'Well, yeah. But—'

'The books, manuscripts and newspapers you have been examining are without any thread that is apparent to me. Today, for example, you examined a cryptographer's report on the dimensions of the Red Fort at Agra, a transcript of the tapes taken on Mr Hoover's orders of the last telephone conversations of Miss Jayne Mansfield, and Herr Weisshaupt's suppressed commentary on the libretto of The *Magic Flute*. I think we could describe your interests, Mr Lamb, as either wilfully eclectic or globally paranoid.'

Lamb looked around the room. There was no one near them, and the juke-box was playing loudly enough to mask their conversation from casual listeners. He grinned and said it.

I'm hunting werewolves.'

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'How unfortunate.'

'Yeah.'

A tall woman entered the bar. She walked over to a man in the corner. They spoke in low voices urgently, angrily; then the woman walked out and the man followed her. Lamb shook his head slowly. 'I wonder what the story is behind that, then?'

'I doubt we will ever know.'

'You married?'

The Librarians of the Conspiracy are ... well, I suppose you could call us a celibate order. And you?'

'I came close once. She's dead.'

'I'm sorry.'

There was a pause in the conversation. The record on the juke-box ended and suddenly, for a few seconds, the bar was silent. The young man checked his watch. 'Twenty of eight. You ever notice that? A room full of people talking falls quiet, it's always twenty-past or twenty-to?'

'I can't say that I have. Would you like another beer?'

'Yeah. No. What the hell, sure. It's not a long drive back. I got rooms. You live local?'

'The Library provides living quarters for us near by, Mr Lamb. So ... what set you on the trail of werewolves, then?'

‘They aren’t werewolves.’

‘I thought you said ...’

‘People think they’re werewolves. But they aren’t. Not really.’

‘Ah. Psychosis. People imagining themselves as ...’

Lamb shook his head. ‘No, no. Not mad people. Not *people*. They look like people, but they can look like any large animals. Mimics. Imitating us, living among us.’

‘So what do they really look like?’

Caroline ...

On the juke-box a man sang emotionally about his woman and his bottle and his gun. Steel guitars wailed in the background. Lamb was silent.

‘Did I ... Did I say something wrong, Mr Lamb? I’m sorry. I must say your theory sounds eminently more practical than that of the previous werewolf gentleman. As I recall, he maintained that all politicians had eyebrows that met in the middle, and hunted on all fours when the moon was full.’

They ... they wouldn’t be politicians. I don’t think so. That would be too conspicuous. They ... they want to blend in.’ Lamb thought of Caroline; her smile, her voice, her face. And the way her face had danced and changed when the bullets hit her.

If she comes home tonight

Then I’ll he waiting in the darkness

For my woman *with my hottle and my* gun ...

The waitress gave them their drinks. Lamb paid the tab and tipped her generously. Intense, he began to talk to the Librarian in short, staccato bursts—astonished to find himself saying out loud the thoughts that had, until this time, been reserved for his notebook, for himself.

They’ve been living among us since we were in the caves. They’re older than that, though. I don’t know how old. Real old. We give them a home. We give them a place to hide. I don’t know what they’re hiding from; I don’t think it’s just us, most of the time. If you look carefully you can see their traces in the history books, in legends, in folk songs.’

‘Ah. And that’s what you have, then? History books, folk songs?’

Lamb drained his drink. He smiled the confident smile of the slightly drunk. ‘Got more than that. They aren’t as careful as they think they are. And even they can be unlucky.’

Chepstow left the last of his ginger ale untouched. ‘I’ll walk you to your car.’

‘Yeah. OK.’

The street was dark and deserted.

‘Her name was Caroline,’ said Lamb. ‘We were covering a story in Naples. She was my photographer, and a damn good one. No, I’m sorry. That sounds so dime-novel, so dumb. And she wasn’t just my photographer. We were fucking. Maybe if I’d got my shit together we would have married. I don’t know. What does anyone know? They said that the shipment we were tracking was coming through that night and we waited in an alley. She had her cameras. There wasn’t any shipment.

‘They shot her in the chest. I held her as she died, and I watched her change ... Change into something. And I had to know. What had I been sleeping with? What had I *loved?’*

In the distance Lamb heard something move, then scream: a night animal, a little death. Something was feeding, somewhere in the shadows.

Chepstow looked at him with quiet, intelligent eyes. He nodded. ‘You were right about the caves. But they go back a long way before that. All the way back through the ice and the comets and the Dark; they were not the first intelligent species to walk the Earth, but they were the second and they are, by far, the oldest.’

‘But ... then ... but,’ said Lamb. ‘You ...?’

‘The Library of the Conspiracy has many names and many purposes,’ said Chepstow. ‘And we know things you are unlikely to know. We know of the Fifty Lives, and of the Darkcallers, and of Those Whose Names Are No Longer Sung.’

Lamb drew back slightly; curled his hands into fists.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Chepstow. T am as human as you. But I too have looked at some

interesting files in my time. Perhaps you should accompany me back to the Library; there are some things that you should read.'

Lamb thought about running. Then he sighed, and side by side with the older man, walked back towards the Library down the clean, dark sidewalks of the pretty little town. Once he stopped, convinced he had heard something behind him: an animal perhaps. He looked around, scanning the shadows, but saw nothing. No one. Chepstow took his arm and led him gently towards the Library. They entered the building by a padlocked door at the back. There was a deep stairwell there, and at its bottom several more locked doors; Lamb had thought Chepstow limped, but perhaps it was the weight of his keys. They passed through another door, and they were in the cellars of the Library of the Conspiracy.

The cellars of the Library of the Conspiracy are airy rooms of various sizes. When the Library was in Venice, certain seekers after knowledge would agree to be immured in the cellars of the Library in return for the knowledge they sought; it was an awkward compromise between the Library's function as a repository of information and its need that certain information be withheld from the world outside. It is said that this no longer happens; and indeed it would not be credible in this day and age.

Chepstow led Lamb through a labyrinth of small rooms and corridors, and finally through a door with many locks into a large room, its walls all lined with cardboard boxes, each filled with files to overflowing.

At the far end of the room was another door.

The room contained a desk and two chairs—one cheap, red plastic that sat by the desk, the other an ancient armchair, in the far corner of the room.

Chepstow locked the door behind them.

On the desk that stood in front of them, lit by a solitary lamp, were various papers—part of a German scientific paper and a photograph of a small, unsmiling woman; a clipping from a Manchester evening newspaper from the year before and a broadsheet printed in Prague in 1618; a sheaf of bar bills, in Spanish, and a stack of xeroxes of what seemed to be scientific formulae; and other remnants of tales. Each had a commentary attached.

'I think,' said Chepstow, 'that these are what you are looking for.'

Lamb nodded, took his seat at the desk, and began to read.

And, before any *of* the *Fifty Lives is* sung:

We moved among them quietly, lest we disturb them in their meditations.
In the palace of their thought
Our walking was not even an echo:
Their servants, and their lovers, and their pets.
Sharers of hearth and bed and counsel.
They thought of strange things and strange gods.
They walked in closed chambers of the mind
And bowed to what they found there.
Then the Dark came and in a season they were gone; in their folly they were eaten and were gone.
The star fell, and the world was dark.
It fell, the great city.
And we moved quietly, for a thousand thousand lives.
We paced the cage of silence lest the Dark hear us.
We hunted with the beasts;
With the wolf and the hyena we lay down.
We forgot fire;
In the cold of night we remembered loss.
We remembered our song;
And many times cursed the pain of remembrance.
Man came;
Young apes in their nakedness.
We waited in silence;

Quietly we watched what they might do.
They made fire.
In the night there came flame and warmth.
We watched.
And we warmed our hands;
In the light of the fire we watched and were no more cold.
They made cities;
Halls of stone they built.
We were silent.
And we were glad of shelter.
In their palaces we walked silently.
They followed strange gods.
And we killed.
In the moment of their idolatry
We struck them down.
We move among them, quietly,
Their rulers, and their lovers and the beasts at their throat.
The Dark will not come again;
Nor shall the firelight end.
Who does not heed this, their life shall be sung no more
Their name shall be forgotten.

A Wolf To Man

Roz Kaveney

Some fifty miles from Petrograd, the line was blocked and the express delayed by a bonfire on which strikers had burned alive two inspectors, a station-master and a particularly unpopular ticket clerk. Charlotte had forgotten how, burned, the human body smelled like any other charred meat. Eventually an official announced to each compartment in turn that the Cheka had arrived, and would be executing the ringleaders for excessive zeal; as the train pulled away, five shots punctured the cold, bright air.

In a siding outside Omsk, where the train had been shunted so that troop trains could be rushed past it, Charlotte shared her last two tins of pate de foie gras with the Dobrochelskys—who refused to allow her to give any to their children, as being too rich for their blood—and with two fresh-faced commissars with shiny new insignia, who wished to taste the counterrevolutionary delicacy, but were not prepared to abuse their authority by commandeering her hamper. They confirmed that the Whites were in retreat everywhere, but that the train was unlikely to be allowed to proceed all the way east into the war zone—both of these statements were greeted in the carriage with sullen resentment.

Some hours from Novonicolaevsk, she and the rest *of* the passengers were forced by drunken Whites with cocked revolvers to stand in the snow and sing the Tsarist anthem, while the raiders' horses breathed white steam and the raiders hanged the two young commissars from a water-tower at sunset. Charlotte found her new furs, and the vast sable muff she had inherited from a great aunt, protection alike against the cold and the drunken stares of the horsemen.

Every night, there was the calling of wolves.

That was unpleasant, if salutary,' said Dobrochelsky, the elderly doctor with ivory-framed pince-nez, who had occupied the warm corner seat near the corridor with its back to the engine. His French accent was as unpleasant as his manner. 'A few more hangings in the years before the War, and we would not be in this mess now.'

There is only one answer to scum,' said the clerkly looking man who sat next to Charlotte. 'Scum and conspirators.' He buffed the dirty nails of his left hand against the faded plush of the seats.

'Someone told me,' said Dobrochelsky, 'that Lenin is predicted explicitly in the Protocols.'

‘He is,’ said the clerk, ‘of course, a Jew.’

‘No,’ said Dobrochelsky, Trotsky is the Jew. Lenin is some sort of Kalmuck. Another is a Georgian, of all things.’

‘Like I said,’ said the clerk, ‘all of the beast peoples living among us, waiting to infect us with their rabies.’

‘As a doctor,’ said Dobrochelsky, ‘I can tell you that the only cure for rabies is the hot iron.’

‘Surely,’ said the man in the corner by the window, ‘the cure for rabies is a course of injections in the stomach.’

‘Foreign nonsense,’ said Dobrochelsky. ‘Like I said,’ he continued, ‘unpleasant but salutary.’

‘I wouldn’t say so,’ said Charlotte over the top of her copy of Women in *Love*. One thing about this damn awful journey is it gives one a chance to catch up on light modern fiction.

‘Would you not?’ said the small, quiet man in the window corner, next to Madame Dobrochelsky; he had introduced himself at an early stage in the journey so effusively, that Charlotte had made a point of forgetting his name entirely. Over his head, something in his luggage rustled and squeaked mysteriously.

‘No,’ said Charlotte, ’it seems to me that it is insane to say anything that might offend anyone, given that anyone might be listening.’

‘But,’ said Dobrochelsky, ‘they just took the Red agents off the train and hanged them. We have nothing to fear, mademoiselle.’

‘Well the last we heard, the Reds were in Novo-nicolaevsk. I don’t think you should consider a few raiders stopping a train as all that significant in the scheme of things. And if I were—what’s the man’s name?’

‘Dzershinsky’ said the man by the window. Discreetly she took from one of the pockets in her muff the card he had been so diligent in handing out to everyone in the carriage, even to the Dobrochelsky children, and discovered that his name was Schmidt.

‘Well,’ said Charlotte, ‘if I were him I would send a couple of expendable young men in uniform, just to be on the safe side, so that anyone important with uncompromising papers would be sure to be ignored, and get through.’

‘Just so,’ said Schmidt. ‘Then you suspect our friend Dobrochelsky here?’ His voice had that high tenor charm that Charlotte had always distrusted, in men.

‘I suspect nobody,’ said Charlotte. ‘I’m not remotely interested. It is not my country, or my revolution, *or my civil* war.’

The gaslights flickered; though it was warm in the carriage, there was a draft from somewhere.

‘What are you doing here, then,’ said the clerk, ‘if you are not one of the buzzards of the International?’

‘I am going to Mongolia. I am going to visit my brother’s grave and collect his papers for the Museum. And then I am going to go back to my own works in Paris.’

‘Could not your father or your husband have gone?’ said Madame Dobrochelsky, a plump woman who seemed considerably nicer than her husband.

‘My father is dead, madame,’ said Charlotte, ‘and my mother. Dead these three years. Of the influenza. I have no husband; there was a young man and he fell on the field of battle.’ Two statements, both of them true, if in the latter case entirely general, and how convenient and silencing an explanation.

‘So you are alone in the world, alas,’ said Dobrochelsky, ‘now your brother is dead.’

‘If one chooses to judge solitude by the number of one’s relatives.’

Her eyes flickered across the carriage where three plump Dobrochelsky girls and two short-sighted Dobrochelsky boys were somehow squeezed in between their parents and on the floor at their feet. There was a moment of slightly hostile silence.

‘Your brother?’ said Schmidt. ‘He fell in the war with the Chinese?’

‘He was killed by some beast of prey.’

‘They are all beasts out there,’ said Madame Dobrochelsky. ‘The Reds, the Chinese, even the White troops. They say that Ungarn von Sternberg keeps a pack of wolves specifically to feed prisoners to them.’

‘Red propaganda,’ said her husband. ‘Ungarn is a gallant officer who keeps no wolves but rather a band of brave young men, many of them dead on the field of battle.’

‘A band of drunkards, dope fiends and assassins,’ said Schmidt. ‘Whatever you may think of their bravery, it comes from a bottle or,’ he sniffed ostentatiously, ‘out of a twist of paper.’

When the train entered Novonicolaevsk a few hours later, there was a Red troop train at a siding and a Red flag flying from the roof of the small run-down station house, lit by an arc light. Soldiers in greatcoats with red stars on their caps and red triangles at their wrists, entered the carriage with a minimum of fuss, examined the papers that the travellers offered with eagerness and departed a few seconds later, dragging Dobro-chelsky and the clerk with them.

The train stayed where it was for some time; Charlotte dozed in spite of the sobbing of Madame Dobrochelsky and her children. She was awakened by Schmidt, pushing past her to the door of the carriage.

The man’s a reactionary old fool,’ he said, ‘but probably harmless. We may hope that the Reds will see that.’

‘Don’t go,’ said Madame Dobrochelsky. ‘Fyodor would not want a stranger to throw his life away. Too many have died, these last four years, hoping for the mercy of the Cheka.’

‘Madame,’ said Schmidt, ‘I am trusting to the good sense of the men of the Cheka. You may not accept this, but I believe that the urge to progress is productive of good sense. I am prepared to stake my life on progress and kindness.’

Charlotte looked at this man with renewed interest; sometimes priggishness can impose itself on the universe like a creative urge.

He was gone for some time; Charlotte dozed again, assuming that if there were to be shots she would hear them. Some time later two men returned. Schmidt had a fresh red mark across his cheek as if he had been struck with a swagger stick; Charlotte noticed, though, that his clothes were still in elegant order and there was not even a scuff on his white kid gloves. Dobro-chelsky had lost his cravat, his glasses and a couple of the more ostentatious rings from his fingers.

They saw reason,’ said Schmidt. ‘Eventually. We have you to thank, it appears, mademoiselle.’

‘Me?’ said Charlotte, as the train juddered and started to move again. There was a volley of shots from behind the station. The clerkly man had not returned, nor now ever would.

‘It would appear,’ said Schmidt, ‘that the head of the local Cheka is not the usual scum. We are all men of science in Novonicolaevsk, it appears, and of some limited compassion, and your name has not gone unnoticed. The train may proceed, even across the lines. So long, that is, as the Whites do not shell a flag of truce. As for our lost companion he was one of the Black Hundreds; we need not mourn.’

‘Thank you,’ Dobrochelsky slobbered over her hand, which she removed from his grasp, placing it inside her muff in order not to be unambiguously rude. ‘Thank you for the power of your name.’

‘Ah, yes.’ said Charlotte. ‘Well, hardly my name, is it? My father’s and my brother’s name, perhaps. I could be considered to have the loan of it.’

‘But your brother,’ said Dobrochelsky eagerly, ’is he not Matthews, who led the expedition into the Karoo before the war?’

‘No. It was my uncle who led the expedition into the Karoo and then proceeded to get himself shot by the Germans for running arms to the Herero. It was my brother and his friend Grobel who got the expedition party, and its fossils, out.’

‘Matthews is a famous name,’ said Schmidt. ‘Here in Russia we tend to be suspicious of your British Darwin and his disciples.’

‘*Nekulturny*^ said Dobrochelsky.

‘All this progress,’ said Schmidt, ‘and to be achieved only by blood and struggle. No room for co-operation; and there is still progress?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know,’ said Charlotte. ‘My interests lie elsewhere.’

‘But your brother,’ said Schmidt. ‘You know of his papers on mammalian evolution and the Life Force, surely?’

‘As I said, my interests lie elsewhere.’

She had always found babble about the Life Force and its embodiment in Lamarckian evolution naive and embarrassing, even from Tom. She turned up her fur collar decisively, shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep. Very soon it was no pretence. In the night, she dreamed that she heard the crying of sea birds.

Later—and she thought she was now awake—her brother came to her, raising his left arm in mock salute. He was wearing his captain's uniform, that smelled crisp and newly pressed, though still it had in it the bullet-holes that had almost cost him his arm. There was a gaping wound in the side of his neck. He was carrying a copy of his work on progress as a universal principle. He mouthed something to her, but when she gestured to her ear to indicate that he was too far away he smiled sadly and dissolved like a ripple in a stream. He was replaced by a woman she had never seen before, but who seemed familiar; when she smiled, her face rippled into a snarl.

Next morning, it was long past dawn when she was woken by the smell of coffee from Schmidt's portable stove and the weight of her muff, and the contents of its pockets, in her lap; they had come closer to the edge of the plain and the edge of the southern mountains beyond it. In the grey sky long streaks of cloud rushed westwards on the wind, but it seemed warmer than it had been earlier.

The Reds were in Krasnoyarsk,' said Dobrochelsky. They seem to be everywhere. If there is one consolation for the death of the Tsar, it is that he has not seen this last incompetence of his supporters.'

She looked from the window; the train jolted as it mounted a bridge and soon they were crossing a great river.

The Yenisei,' said Dobrochelsky.

'Look, Father,' said one of his sons, 'the ice is breaking up.'

In the centre of the channel there was clear water, with occasional floes in it. There were also what looked like rags of cloth and lumps of meat floating in it; and round them the water was not so clear. Sometimes the larger floes had legs and arms sticking out of them, which the ice was still preserving against rot as it travelled hopelessly towards the Arctic.

'Look away,' said Madame Dobrochelsky to her children.

'Last night I heard,' said Schmidt, 'that the partisans have been busy in the hills all winter, flushing out the last of Kolchak's partridges. That group, last evening, must have been the very last of them. Meanwhile the pike will grow fat this spring ...'

If I were very ruthless and wicked, thought Charlotte, and trying to get a man east, I would even disguise one lot of my own troops and hang two of my own men. And have my man at least slightly beaten. And do what I could to ingratiate myself with a possibly influential foreigner, she added to herself, as Schmidt passed her a coffee.

It smelled of liquor.

'Please,' she said, 'I really would prefer one that did not have alcohol in it. I regard the claims for its medicinal value as hugely overstated in any case, and I am not ill.'

'As you wish,' said Schmidt, and poured her another cup. 'We have some way to go now before our next stop and we may find the journey wearing.'

'You know this country well, then,' she asked.

'I have hunted this country often, I and my sisters.'

'What did you hunt, in these barrens?'

'The usual thing, beasts of prey.'

'Wolves, then?' she asked.

'Among other things.'

'Where are your sisters now?' Madame Dobrochelsky asked, solicitous.

'Some await me in the East,' said Schmidt, 'and some are abroad in the West. Others fell in battle.'

'These are terrible times,' said Madame Dobrochelsky.

'All times are terrible,' said Schmidt, 'and all inevitable acts.'

Charlotte drank her coffee slowly, periodically glancing from the window at the spectacle of desolation and death below her; she had warned Tom, back when she had last seen him, that the middle of other people's wars was no place for the calm study of the past, and he had mocked her. He had said

a woman could have no idea of what he had been through in France and how little he could now fear anything. She had refrained from mentioning that she had seen as many horrors in the hospital tents at Caporetto as he in the mud; boasting about such things is a boy's game. In a sense, she thought, he was right; it was not the malice of man that had killed him.

Charlotte continued to resist conversation; the Dob-rochelskys were the sort of common bourgeois to whom she felt no positive ill will but whose company irritated her. She felt a certain obligation to wipe the perpetually runny noses of their children, but that was merely a public health measure in a cold, stuffy and crowded compartment, grown progressively full of an almost animal stench of inadequately washed bodies. In the meantime, she worked her way halfway through the Tauchnitz Gibbon she had grabbed as a supplement to the seedy Mr Lawrence in his small American edition.

The conversation around her ebbed and flowed; this was not her war and, even had it been so, the constant babble of Kolchak and his gold, of Michael Romanov, of this man Ungarn down in Mongolia with his Order of Military Buddhists and his pack of tame wolves, of whole squadrons of Death's Head Commandos and military amazons and spies who were masters of disguise, was the sort of thing she had grown tired of in Italy. There was always some man coming, on a horse, who would save things and make things right. They never came, or came too late; they were a superstition, in politics as in life.

Two days later they entered Irkutsk. This seemed to be no man's land and no one checked their papers, the station was empty even at midday, except for dirty snow on the platform where a roof had given way and old newspapers drifting back and forth in the breeze.

Oulen-Oude was another matter. There were gallows along the track as they passed into the town, and the sleeves of the corpses had Red insignia.

Tapers, mesdames et messieurs,' said the young officer who entered the carriage. 'Where are you all going?'

'My family and I are going on to Harbin,' said Dobro-chelsky.

'And I and Mademoiselle Matthews, the young Englishwoman here,' said Schmidt officiously, 'are hoping to find a train that will take us down to Urga.'

'Ah,' said the lieutenant, 'that may be a problem.'

'But surely,' said Dobrochelsky, 'you at least hold everything east of here.'

'Of course,' said the lieutenant, 'but we are regrouping in Harbin, and we cannot afford to feed too many extra mouths.'

'We can support ourselves,' said Dobrochelsky. 'And I am a doctor.'

'Ah,' said the lieutenant, seizing him by the arm. 'General Kolchak and Michael Romanov have need of doctors. You are now a member of the Imperial Russian Army, sir, even though you have a funny Polish name.'

'But my wife?' said Dobrochelsky, 'My children?'

'They can wait for you in Harbin and if we lose, they will be whores for the Reds or for the Japanese.'

Dobrochelsky hesitated.

'The penalty for desertion and for disobedience,' said the lieutenant, the boredom of routine in his voice, 'is death.'

Dobrochelsky bent down, kissed his wife, kissed each of his five children, reached up to the rack for his medical bag and was gone. The lieutenant turned to Schmidt and Charlotte.

'You may have problems with your journey south.'

'But surely,' said Charlotte, 'the Reds are far from here and far from Urga. Indeed, they warned me so in Petrograd when they gave me my passport. You took

Urga before the winter—and that was from the Chinese.'

'Ah, Mademoiselle Matthews,' said the lieutenant, 'would that it were as simple as that! You could describe the forces in Urga as our allies after a fashion, but no longer, I fear, as our troops.'

'Can I have a word,' said Schmidt, 'alone?'

He and the lieutenant went out into the corridor, and there was urgent whispering.

'I see, sir,' said the lieutenant as they returned. 'I had been warned of this, but I did not expect such

good forgeries. Our people at this end are not that good. You must of course use your own judgement, sir. I will make a train available at once, sir.'

'Miss Matthews,' said Schmidt. 'The regular service may be somewhat delayed. Perhaps for some months ... And I respect your desire for independence. You have made it abundantly clear that you do not wish to be beholden ... But if you will accept a ride, I can have you in Urga by the morning after tomorrow. Otherwise I fear you will have to spend some considerable time wiping the faces of these children.'

She gathered her bags from the seat that had been the clerk's, and he pulled down his cases. The young lieutenant tried to help her down from the carriage and looked suspicious when she drew back.

'It is all right, lieutenant. At ease,' said Schmidt. 'In England it is not only the women of the Reds that are touchy about their independence. Is that not so, mademoiselle?'

Charlotte said, 'Until I am thirty I have no vote. Without a vote, there is no point in my having a party allegiance, is there?'

'Just so, mademoiselle,' said Schmidt. 'In this world it is far better to keep your options open, and your mind.'

She reached into her hamper, dashed back to the carriage and handed the Dobrochelsky children her entire supply of Kendal Mint Cake. There was no point in letting this man think he had understood her every attitude, was there?

They took tea in the parlour of what had been the station-master's house and now seemed to be some mixture of telegraph office, officers' mess and low-class bordello. They offered Charlotte a hip-bath in an upper room and Schmidt the use of the officers' bathhouse. He insisted on privacy when he washed, she noticed, of a piece with his supercilious dandiacal ways. Her own bath was lukewarm but felt like luxury; this was the first time in days she had been wholly warm. She dressed slowly, continuing to wear her now shabby, but still serviceable, travelling costume, and then returned and drank further tea.

It would have been pleasant to be warm, had not Schmidt persisted in pestering her with conversation about her brother's theories.

The lieutenant interrupted them. 'Your train is ready, sir. I can lend you a driver and a stoker; but I can spare you no troops.'

Outside there came clangour and a noise of confusion. They finished their over-strong tea and the sandwiches, stuffed overfull of unidentified sausage, that someone had produced from somewhere in honour of Charlotte. A couple of soldiers carried their bags out on to the platform and up into the one heavily armoured carriage of a train whose engine was shielded with what looked like sections of a battleship's plates, and which pulled behind it a passenger carriage and a goods car. This last had a ramp down at the back and, as Charlotte watched, they drove a black car on board with acetylene lamps and broad running-boards. Schmidt observed her interest.

'It is a present from Kolchak to his misguided lieutenant, mademoiselle. The sugar for the pill of good counsel, you might say.'

'What advice might that be?' Charlotte asked.

'Baron Roman Theodorovich Ungarn von Sternberg,' said Schmidt, 'is one of the bravest soldiers in the whole of Russia, but he failed his strategy classes at the Academy. He believes himself to be the chosen of Buddha, mademoiselle, chosen to lead the Mongols to victory against revolution and modernity. We need his troops, but we do not need his crusade. Nor will we send him further supplies until he starts taking orders again.'

'Earlier on I thought that you were on another side altogether.'

'Ah well, mademoiselle, what use would an agent be if every passing stranger could discern his intentions and his allegiance?'

'Not much,' said Charlotte, privately sure that this man was no more to be trusted now than he had been earlier.

'I have some letters to write before we depart,' he said, and produced some paper on which he scribbled. From the mysterious box that had twittered all the way from Petrograd, he produced two pigeons.

‘Old ways are the best?’ said Charlotte.

‘Ah, yes: on the plains of Mongolia you will find the old ways are essential.’ And Schmidt flung his pigeons from the window out into the pale sky of late afternoon.

The train rattled to a start. Charlotte reflected that the armoured trains she had seen further west at least looked as if someone had known what they were doing with the extra metal, and the bolts. These Whites hardly seemed to have a skill between them. Except for Schmidt. ‘What are you reading?’

Charlotte showed him.

‘Ah,’ Schmidt said. Two Romes fell, one stands. A fourth there will not be. Do you know that saying in the West, mademoiselle?’

‘Does it stand? With the Reds in the heart of holy Russia and your white paladins turning to strange gods, does it stand? Still?’

‘The true city stands in our hearts, mademoiselle,’ said Schmidt, with such conviction that she was suddenly sure that there was something to which the slightly portentous dandy was loyal, whatever it might be.

As the evening wore on the countryside around them turned to high, jagged hills and then to plain—the flattest plain she had ever seen, and this after crossing Russia by train. Every so often they would pass clumps of larch; every so often the landscape of snow dotted with grass clumps would be varied by the open water of swamps. As night fell the wind rose slightly, blowing a flurry of loose snow briefly into the air; ducks rose against it from the water. Later, as she watched, the open water flickered with fire.

‘The swamps produce gas,’ Schmidt said. ‘They call it a *feu follet*, a will-o’-the-wisp, but it is only methane combusting spontaneously. We must avoid superstition, mademoiselle.’

‘I have always done so. I have never seen a thing for which there was not a rational explanation.’

‘I have instructed the driver to stop in a while,’ said Schmidt. ‘You may wish to use one of the empty compartments to sleep for the night. I have no chaperone for you, after all. Superstition is one thing, but appearances are all.’

‘Thank you,’ said Charlotte. ‘How nice to know that someone considers such things still.’

Ahead there was a distant light. The train slowed as it neared it. A tall man in black monk’s robes stood by the track, swinging a lantern. Pistols, cutlasses and hatchets glinted like dark fruit slung from the bandoliers that crossed and recrossed his robes. Squatting beside him on the ground was a younger monk whose robes were the more expected shade of ochre. Some way back from the line a horse grazed.

‘Mademoiselle,’ said Schmidt, ‘I have private business with these men, you will appreciate?’

‘I am not interested,’ said Charlotte, ‘in the secrets of boys’ games. I have made this perfectly clear. None of this is my game or my war.’

‘That is as may be,’ said the tall monk, swinging himself up as he opened the door, his French accurate but slow. He was a European, Charlotte noted. ‘We have all thought this at one time: I once thought it myself. Yet here I am, mademoiselle: Tuskegoun Lama, at the beck and call of the birds of the air and the beasts of the forest, in their tasks.’

Charlotte descended on the side of the carriage, opposite the hurried and heated conversation that followed in a language she did not know, and let herself into another compartment. She wetted a sponge from the water bottle she had filled at Oulen-Oude, cleaned herself as best she could and stretched herself across the upholstery, covering herself with her fur coat and placing her hat and her muff under her head.

After a while the shouting ceased, to be replaced by a slow regular chanting that sounded vaguely religious. The avoidance of superstition, Charlotte reflected even as it lulled her, has only lasted a very few hours indeed.

Nurses were never entirely safe, even in dormitory tents, and Charlotte had developed the habit of sleeping lightly. When someone tried the handle of her compartment door Charlotte, who was sleeping on her left side facing the wall opposite, shifted her head from its supports and slipped her right hand into her muff. When lantern light played close on her face, accompanied by the smell of rancid butter, she

kept her eyes shut tight but unsquinting, and breathed regularly, waiting for her chance to move.

Hands pushed her on to her back and started to tighten about her throat. She swung her right hand round, disengaged her small Derringer from its pocket in the muff, jammed the Derringer hard against the chest of her assailant—right under against the breastbone—and pulled the trigger. The edge of the muff and the cotton robe largely muffled the sharp crack, but the compartment was filled with the smell of blood, shit, powder and the scorching of cotton and fur.

When she looked down, in the light of the lantern that still swung from the luggage rail where it had been hung, she saw the young monk's robe, tattered around the wound her dumdum bullet had made. Above the wound the monk had small breasts, and the face, under the shaved scalp black with the shadow of new hair, was her own. The teeth were not hers though, and they sharpened as she watched; the face became less hers, less anyone's, as it became death's.

There was a flurry of movement in the corridor and Schmidt rushed through the door; she flicked the remaining chamber of her Derringer under the hammer and held it steady, pointing it at him.

'How unfortunate, mademoiselle,' he said. 'You appear not to be dead.'

'Sit down. Is there anyone else on the train?'

'The last time I looked we had a driver and a stoker. Trains tend to find them useful.'

Tuskegoun?'

'Ah,' said Schmidt. The good lama delivered my sister here, not entirely as he would have wished, and then—what is the phrase?—vanished into the night as silently as he had come. I did warn my sister here, but she would have it so. Shifting is not the making of death masks, she always said.'

'Your sister,' she noted. 'I see.'

'You are supposed to be gibbering with fear at this point. Look how the features, which were for a while your not especially regular good looks, have changed into something altogether other. Look how the bones are shifting in their sockets. Consider, mademoiselle, that you are alone with me and the corpse of something you don't understand, on a train heading into the heart of the Mongolian plain to a rendezvous with your brother's dirty little secrets and a mad tyrant who kills as a point of principle. Damn it all woman, does your hand never shake? Do you think you can outstare me?'

'No, it doesn't,' said Charlotte. 'Yes, I can, Hen* Schmidt. Once one sets aside superstition there is no limit to what one can do, I find, as it becomes necessary.'

Schmidt sat there and smouldered. He turned his face away and as the lantern guttered, his profile seemed to lengthen with the shadows and to change. Without shifting her gaze, she reached her left hand into another pocket of the muff.

'What big teeth you have, Herr Schmidt,' said Charlotte. As he turned his face changed into something other, something closer to the corpse's on the floor. He lunged, and she flicked open the razor, raking him across the forehead just above the bridge of what was still just about a nose. With her right hand she brought the barrel of her gun down against Schmidt's left temple. As he staggered back, she hit him a second time. He sat down, breathing hard through the longer teeth and extended jaws and bleeding from the slash and the other cuts, dazed but still conscious. She palmed the razor shut, placed it in a coat pocket and pulled from his belt the large revolver he had not even thought it worth drawing against her, placing it on the seat beside her. It was probably too heavy for her to fire one-handed and she dared not let go of her own gun, in case this one was not loaded.

She shifted her own revolver back to cover him.

'What am I to do with you, Herr Schmidt?'

He sat quietly, and his jaw seemed to move slowly back to its original length. 'You will understand,' he said after some time, 'that one cannot conveniently both talk and tear.'

'Is that a proverb?' said Charlotte. 'It sounds like a proverb. Do your people have proverbs?'

'Good God,' said Schmidt. 'Are you even human?'

'I suppose, from you, that is a compliment. But what could be more human than to labour in my profession? No, you didn't ask, did you? A thousand miles or so in the opposite seat, and you didn't ask. I am a folklorist, Herr Schmidt; I collect proverbs. And folk-tales, though I rarely meet them socially. But what are we to do, Herr Schmidt? I prefer only to kill in direct self-defence.'

‘I shall have to kill you, you know,’ said Schmidt.

‘Undoubtedly,’ she said, ‘but to do that you will have to be alive.’

‘Do you really suppose that you can kill two people with successive shots from a toy gun?’

‘Are you confident that I cannot? And I might reach your own gun. Besides,’ she added, ‘you have a body to dispose of. One which you cannot afford to leave lying around. And one which you would wish, presumably, to honour.’

‘You are right of course, damn you. You will think that losing many sisters to the cause of progress would make the later losses easier, but it is not so.’

They paused, watching each other warily.

There is the car; it does have a tank full of fuel, and more on board,’ he said. ‘And there will be opportunities to kill you in Urga.’

‘I would rather not be killed,’ she said. ‘But I would like to know more.’

‘That, mademoiselle, is why you need to be killed.’

‘Like my brother.’

‘Like your brother,’ he agreed. Though he, unlike you, was not the best sort of prey.’

He pulled the communication cord and the train drew to a halt.

Trust me,’ he said. This will be too good a hunt for me to cheat now.’

She covered him with the gun, and made him carry her luggage—a man with full hands is not equipped to lunge, which is perhaps why women invented gallantry in the first place. She pulled her coat on to her shoulders and then hefted the muff by its inner strap with her left hand. They descended from the carriage and walked to the back of the train, their shoes squelching in the soft snow. The driver and stoker looked back at them from the engine; Schmidt gestured them back to their post. He put her bags down, thoughtfully avoiding a large puddle, and unbolted the ramp of the goods van.

She watched him warily as he put her bags on the front seat; then he walked down the ramp and she got into the car. It started first time, and she drove it quickly off and away from the train, bouncing it off the tracks and across to the vestigial road that ran alongside it. Schmidt made no hostile move.

‘Au revoir,’ he shouted. ‘Keep the sunrise on your left and Urga will be straight ahead. You can’t miss it. Just follow the corpses, Miss Matthews.’

Charlotte wasted no breath; she needed to get to Urga as soon as she could. Here she was, racing a train full of werewolves across Mongolia; he was right, she should be more nervous. A throat cleared in the back seat of the car, and the lama with the bandoliers sat up, clanking.

‘My Lord or Lady Goro ...,’ he started in English, as diffident as a man armed to the teeth can ever be.

‘I am not a Lord,’ she said, ‘and I regard Goros as an entirely spurious legend.’

‘But I have seen them,’ said Tuskegoun Lama, ‘skull faces and all. They took me to Agharta and made me their liege man for ever.’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, it is bad enough having to deal with werewolves, let alone with the theosophical maunderings of some penny-ha’penny Renfield.’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘you’re the real one. Thank my Lord Buddha for that; I was feeling quite guilty, even though they explained it was necessary. But they are servants of the Wheel as are we all, and they do not command my prayers.’

‘What are you doing in this car?’ she asked.

‘It’s all very well,’ he said, in an accent that sounded more like Birmingham than the mystic East, ‘being expected to ferry demons across the heart of Mongolia, but a fellow needs to sleep once in a while. And my horse was lame. I find that, if you’re going to be a legend of sudden appearances and departures, righting wrongs when you’re supposed to be hundreds of miles away, being good at hopping freight trains is a useful skill.’

‘Oh, is that what you do?’

They think I’m a Kalmuck. Russians don’t like Kalmucks much, so they never talk to me to find out. And Mongolians and Chinese don’t care anyway. You’re who you say you are, out here. Not like at home. But you’ve got to stop people taking liberties, haven’t you? I mean, following the Lord Buddha

fair enough, but that shouldn't mean you let people walk all over you. They conquered the world once round here, but the Chinese, they were taking liberties, weren't they?'

'So you decided to play Robin Hood?'

'Well, it's what you do when there's wicked barons, isn't it?'

'What's this got to do with the Goros?'

'When I came out East,' he said, 'it was rumours of Agharta made me jump ship. I mean underground kingdom, loads of treasure, stands to reason. I wasn't looking for enlightenment in those days, was I? And a couple of times they helped me, the Messengers, looking human mostly, but sometimes you can see something about the eyes even before the jaws do it. But I knew about the King of the World and His Messengers, so when they turned on me, I knelt to them.'

'You dear silly man, I don't think you know what you're playing with.'

She drove on in silence, keeping her foot on the accelerator; looking back, the train was not even in sight yet. In the headlights' gleam the railway and the road were parallel lines stretching on to doom.

'I am not on good terms with your masters,' she said. 'Will you need to do anything about that?'

'Not my business to do that,' he said. 'I may ferry them across the plains to do what mortal reason indi—

cates is no good; but as for myself, right's right and wrong's wrong, isn't it? I mean, for a Demon Lord the path to enlightenment might be through all sorts of things you or I wouldn't be allowed to do, see what I mean? Tuskegoun Lama told me so.'

'I thought you were Tuskegoun Lama.'

'Well I am now, most of the time. But he was our master and you don't let legends die, not when you're winning. So I and his other disciples, we took his place when he died of the influenza, didn't we? Able Seaman Satchell, miss, First Class. By the way, miss,' he said. 'You don't half pong.'

'Oh,' she said, 'sorry. The front of my jacket and skirt are soaked in blood; one of your Lords Goros' blood, I fear.'

'Why don't you stop and change your clothes? You can't turn up in Urga smelling like that. They're all Buddhists there, and they consider blood tactless. Except for the Baron, and he goes to the other extreme, doesn't he?'

'I would stop and change except that I can't trust you, can I?'

'Miss,' he said. 'We are both English, after all. Ask me anything you like and I'll prove it to you.'

'Sing *Burlington Bertie* and I'll trust you.'

So he did; somehow the thought of Vesta Tilley was reassuring.

Some miles later, he told her to turn off the road down a track that led to a small stone hut and a raised mound. He led her inside the hut, where there was a well; he pulled up water for her. In spite of the cold outside the water from the well was almost boiling; she was not even going to ask.

He left the hut and she stripped off her bloody clothes and washed herself in the water; the fur was only slightly stained, but her skirt and jacket and blouse were irredeemably soaked. She changed into her riding breeches and jacket and put on her last blouse. Informality might not be her best protection here, but it would have to do. She bundled up the soiled clothes and took them outside.

'I would like to bury these,' she said.

'Not here,' he said, 'not near the mound.'

'Why not?'

'This is the tomb of Lord Boltis Van. Four years ago, the Whites came upon three Reds at the well-head and strangled them where they stood. Ever since, a demon of death by violence has stalked the land. Boltis Van lies here, far from Uliassutai, as a guardian; if even throttling weakens him I dare not let the place be polluted with the life blood of a Goro.'

Sometimes there is no point in explaining the foolishness of superstition to someone.

She let him drive back to the road, and then along it with the dawn at their left, and slept in the back seat. When she awoke, it was almost evening, and he was gone. There was a note: 'Train passed one hour ago; hid car among larches; bandit to kill and my Master's summons to obey. Clothes buried. Sorry to leave you. S.' She drove on.

In the distance, where the road and track headed, there were lights against the dark plain and the stars, and after an hour or so it became clear that ahead there was a city. Beside the road there was something that glimmered in her headlights, endless piles of bones in the snow; there had been a Chinese army in Urga once, and now it lay here beside the road, stripped by buzzards and by wolves.

With a shout, horsemen converged on her from the sides of the road, leaping the bones; she pulled to a halt and put her hands in the air. One of the horsemen dismounted, climbed on the running board and held a revolver to her head.

'I wish,' she said in a loud and commanding voice, 'to see General Roman Theodorovich Ungarn von Sternberg.'

'It might be easier with you,' said the officer commanding them, standing beside the road. He kicked a skull to pieces under his feet as he walked towards her; the man whose revolver was at her temple looked to him for approval.

'It might be easier if I told my man to fire,' he continued.

'I wish to see General Roman Theodorovich Ungarn von Sternberg.'

'As you wish, Miss Matthews,' said the young captain, his monocle making his left eye a white blur in her headlights, 'as you wish.'

Urga was a city of amorphous shapes, in which most of the buildings were either tents, or looked like them; arc lights blazed prodigally, throwing the shadows of men and temples into each other's beams. The whole city stank of disinfectant. The gun still at her temple, the horsemen still surrounding her, Charlotte drove the car after the captain through the dark and empty streets; she knew it was only the curfew, but it was as silent as a city of the dead.

The young officer pulled up his horse and his man pressed the revolver harder against Charlotte's temple; she braked the car and he went sprawling off her running-board on to the hard paving of the street. He jumped up with his revolver in both hands and his officer quirted him across the eyes so that he dropped the gun as he covered them with his hands. His companions brought up his horse, in the silence of resentment, and they rode away, clattering on the stones, leaving Charlotte alone with their officer.

They had stopped outside a not especially distinguished building between two temples. Charlotte dropped her muff on the floor of the car, descended and, raising her hands in the air, followed him through the door, across a paved hall and into a room where a small man sat at a large table. He had a sabre scar that crossed his forehead and disappeared into his straggling long blond hair; his moustaches trailed on to his shoulders. Schmidt sat at one end of the table; his face looked hardly scratched. The young officer showed her in, saluted his general with a black-gloved hand and promptly left, clicking his heels as he went.

'I am Roman Theodorovich Ungarn von Sternberg, Mademoiselle Matthews,' he said. 'Would you care to explain what you were doing with my car?'

'I was crossing Mongolia with Captain Schmidt here,' said Charlotte. 'I don't wish to criticize a doubtless gallant officer, who has been under a lot of strain. None the less, he is a man and I am a woman, and I have my honour to defend, and I had to take steps ...'

'Schmidt, you scoundrel,' Ungarn shouted. 'Guards, take this man and throw him in a cell.'

Two of the guards who lined the wall walked over and seized Schmidt by the arms, kicking his chair from under him.

'Besides,' Charlotte said, 'are you sure he is Kolchak's man? In Oulen-Oude they seemed sure, but you know how slack they are in Oulen-Oude. In Novonicolaevsk the Cheka were as prepared to dance to his tune as Kolchak's men were later.'

'Charlotte Matthews,' said Schmidt, in tones that were almost admiration, 'you are a demon from Hell. This is a better hunt than I had hoped.'

Take him away,' said Ungarn, his scar blazing on his forehead. 'I do not want to look at his traitor's face any longer. And fetch this lady a chair and some tea; she is swooning as we watch.'

He fussed around gallantly; strange how the really dangerous ones are always the most gushing. Charlotte did not approve of gambling, but her brother had once made her play his system at Monte Carlo. The dizziness that came over her now was the exhilaration of a successful spin of the wheel.

[4]Rien ne *va* plus, Heir Schmidt,' she said as they led him away.

'Mademoiselle Matthews,' said Ungarn, 'you are the sister of the scholar who was killed west of here, I presume.'

'Yes,' she said. 'I have come to take his papers back to London, and to find out why he was killed.'

'Why he was killed, I can tell you,' said Ungarn.

She waited.

'It was as it ever is: the law of the strong and the weak,' Ungarn said. 'A scholar cannot fight a beast of prey. Nor should he presume to. It was the law of Karma; destiny, mademoiselle, is the beast of prey before whom we are all weak. You are, I trust, noble enough not to need words of comfort.'

This was not, Charlotte decided, the moment for a lecture on the virtues of the intellectual middle classes. 'You are too kind,' she said.

'Do you think so?' he said, inconsequentially. 'I sometimes worry about that. Destiny demands more of me than kindness.'

'Shakespeare says something about being cruel to be kind,' she murmured.

'Ah yes, GamJet, the closet scene. How often Shakespeare understands the deepest human motives, mademoiselle. I entreat you to believe that I would rather be a monk than a lord of war—yet the world grows full of degenerates, ever breeding more degenerates for souls to be trapped by. If virtue is to be rewarded with ever higher forms, we must destroy degeneracy wherever we find it. I am the Sword of Karma, mademoiselle.'

'I see.'

'By the way,' he said. 'You heard of your brother's death when you were where?'

'In Paris,' she said. 'I heard in Paris.'

'Yet your brother died near Uliassutai and the Chinese dynamited the telegraph line from Uliassutai to Irkutsk last November. How did you know he was dead, mademoiselle? How did you know so quickly if you are not an agent of the Reds? Answer quickly, mademoiselle; I burn agents of the International.'

'He was my twin,' said Charlotte. 'When he was wounded on the Somme, I collapsed a thousand miles away. When he died in Uliassutai, I felt teeth in my throat in Paris. I have cast aside superstition but beyond superstition, Baron, some things are none the less true.'

'That is true,' said Ungarn. 'But you will be watched none the less.'

The young officer who had brought her to Ungarn returned to the room. With him was the guard who had led Schmidt away, nursing a left wrist whose hand hung limp; his right hand was over his mouth from which blood gushed, as well as from his nose.

'Sir,' the young officer said, 'I thought it best to disturb you.'

'Yes, Visoloffsky,' said Ungarn. 'What is it?'

This idiot,' said Visoloffsky, striking the guard across the face again, 'has allowed Schmidt to escape. Schmidt struck the gun from his hand, and disappeared into the shadows beyond the city.' The officer's white dress gloves were stained with fresh blood.

'Ah, you should not be so harsh, Visoloffsky. Come, my man, sit down and tell me about it and we will consider what is to be done.'

The young guard sat down apprehensively at the table, a chair along from Charlotte.

Ungarn turned to his orderly. 'Give the young man some tea. Teapot, I say.'

The orderly took two steps to one side which brought him behind the young soldier, placed his hands around his neck and throttled him. Charlotte saw the whites of his eyes go red from where she sat. The orderly drew the corpse to its feet without changing his grip, and then dragged it from the room.

'Magnificent,' said Visoloffsky. 'You have a treasure there, sir.'

'You think so?' said Ungarn.

'Indeed so. Not a sound did I hear, even in this room. When Commandant Sepailoff made such a show of strangling his mistress last week, he took her to the next room to do it, and only then boasted of the silence of his method. Your man is a treasure, sir, and you are a connoisseur.'

'Mademoiselle Matthews,' said Ungarn, 'you will pardon our manners here. But this is a military front and a certain roughness is in order. You will wish to see the man Grobel, your brother's

companion?'

'Yes indeed,' said Charlotte, clenching the nails of her left hand into her palm under the table.

'I thought there might be inquiries,' said Ungarn, 'and he claims not to be Jewish at all; so I deferred his death until I had a chance to interrogate him properly. I am a civilized man, after all.'

Contradiction in terms, Charlotte thought to herself.

'We will all go and see him,' said Ungarn. 'I prefer to leave scum in their cells, where someone is responsible for good order. Do not expect too much, mademoiselle; he is quite mad.'

He walked over to the desk behind him and lifted a telephone. 'Operator, get me the Living Buddha,' he barked into it. 'We may as well involve the spiritual arm,' he added in explanation.

Visoloffsky offered Charlotte his arm. 'It is not very far to the jail,' he said. 'And it is only one in the morning.'

'Mademoiselle is weary from the journey,' said Ungarn.

'Do none of you ever sleep?' Charlotte said.

'I have some cocaine in my car, if you desire it, mademoiselle,' said Ungarn. 'I find it restorative, when sniffed. Or you could take it in a beverage.'

At this point, his connection was made.

'My Lord,' Ungarn said, and broke off to listen. 'Certainly, my Lord,' he eventually continued. 'There will be a reckoning for this incivility, my Lord. At once, my Lord.'

'It would appear,' he looked round at them in explanation, 'that negative influences are at work. My Lord Buddha has experienced something of a domestic crisis.'

Visoloffsky led her to the car outside, helping her in with a solicitude clearly intended to demonstrate to her just how firm his grip could be; another had been driven up into which Ungarn climbed with his orderly and a couple of other guards.

'My Lord Buddha's palace,' Ungarn ordered. Charlotte waited until the other car had moved off, and then followed it through the maze of silent streets, the car occasionally veering to left and right where the paving stones had sunk. Eventually they drew up outside a temple; it was larger and cleaner than most, and stank of incense as well as disinfectant. Ungarn led them through the great copper doors; inside were two great prayer wheels that, even as they entered, were slowing to a halt. A monk lay beside each, their faces drawn back from the teeth and their bodies twisted. Ungarn dashed to each of the wheels in turn, starting their movement again, crouching and springing from the knees with fierce energy.

'Guards,' he said, and two of his men stepped forward. 'You will keep these wheels turning. Better your unworthiness should touch them than the prayers of seven centuries should cease. O Lord,' he looked beyond the hall in which they stood, 'the sin is of these monks for failing their duty; let the pollution fall on them.' He kicked one of the corpses.

As they walked through the halls of the temple they found corpse after corpse, many still holding their food bowls. In the heart of the temple there sat an old man, with a jewelled headpiece, cradling the corpse of a young girl. Another girl sat beside him in a green cheong-sam, her tears carving tracks in the white rice-powder of her face, and a guard stood by them, his pike moving in a slow, warning semicircle.

'How is it with you, my Lord?' said Ungarn.

'As you see,' said the old man, looking past the Baron into the shadows. He was, Charlotte realized, quite blind.

'What is it that they ate?' said Ungarn.

Their evening gruel,' said the old man.

Boots clattered behind them into the hall. There entered several guards and a fat man whose skull was malformed, sunken into a dent as though something small and heavy had ridden there; he saluted.

'Commandant Sepailoff,' said Ungarn, 'have you any explanation for this desecration?'

'Strangling is only one of Sepailoff s hobbies,' Visol-offsky whispered to Charlotte. 'Strychnine is another.'

'I have no idea,' said Sepailoff, 'but a city that is full of rats is surely in need of rat poison. And if one rat takes the bait back to a lair of other rats ...' He shrugged.

‘I had told you explicitly,’ said Ungarn, ‘that you could do what you liked with any Jews, any Reds, any liberals. You could even have touched enlisted men as long as you had cause, and officers, with my permission. But the monks of my Lord Buddha! That, Sepailoff, is another matter ... Guards!’

Sepailoff started to draw his revolver and Ungarn struck, quick as a cobra, with his bamboo cane. Visol-offsky had drawn his pistol and placed a bullet firmly between Sepailoff s eyes.

‘Thank you, Visoloffsky,’ said Ungarn. ‘I would have preferred to deal with the man myself, but at least someone around here is showing vigour in the execution of their duties. Komu *nijny eti tovarishi*—what am I to do with such fellows? There has been too much slacking, too many pranks; it will cease. My Lord Buddha, you will accept my apologies for this inconvenience; I will of course provide you with new guards.’

‘That will not be necessary,’ said the old man. ‘I have already summoned the servant I need.’

‘I would wish, none the less,’ said Ungarn, ‘that you come with us at this time. We are going to see the madman Grobel.’

Charlotte noticed that Sepailoff s features had started to alter, like those of the creature on the train.

‘Captain Visoloffsky,’ she said. ‘General Baron. What is happening to his face?’

‘A trick of the light,’ said Visoloffsky. ‘Come on now, we are taking you to the man you have crossed the world to see.’

Ungarn glanced at the corpse. ‘It is the relaxation of muscles in death, merely; it produces strange effects sometimes. I have seen this often. Come, my Lord Buddha.’

The old man rose from the steps, assisted by the girl and the pikeman. He paused to stare blindly into Charlotte’s face as if his mind were memorizing her, even though he had no way of knowing she was there; he stank of drink.

‘Bogdo Dhjebstung Damba Hutuktu Khan,’ said Visoloffsky. ‘The Living Buddha and the Lord of Mongolia.’

Ungarn dropped to his knees in front of the old man.

‘My Lord,’ he said.

‘My Lord Ungarn,’ said the old man, ‘my sword and shield, how goes it with you in this life?’

‘Well enough, though I have only one hundred and twenty-nine days left in it.’

‘Still no change in the prophecies?’ said the old man. ‘I must try and persuade the Lords of Karma on this point.’

‘One hundred and twenty-nine days is enough. Tomorrow, we march to Novonicolaevsk. And the Red scum will crumble as we charge.’

‘Perhaps,’ said the old man.

‘I will build you an empire,’ said Ungarn. ‘Once I come to Novonicolaevsk.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Anyway, I thought it would amuse you, Lord, to hear us talk to the madman Grobel about the deaths of his companions. Mademoiselle Matthews here has come all the way from Paris to hear how her brother died and what, before he died, the rocks had told him.’

This time, Urga skimmed past Charlotte in a confusing blinking of lights and shadows. She concentrated on driving the car and following the car in front. Eventually they drew up at a building, the same sort of amorphous mass of stone as all those others that were not clearly temples; it stank even from the outside of sweat and urine and death, to the point where she realized it was clearly the jail. She picked up her muff and descended.

‘Can you not leave that behind, mademoiselle,’ said Visoloffsky. ‘It is not cold inside.’

‘I do not wish to touch anything,’ said Charlotte. ‘This whole city seems to drip with blood.’

‘Let her retain it,’ said Ungarn. ‘I would not wish the lady inconvenienced in small things.’

The jail was a place of corridors and quiet. What guards there were stood at the corners of passages, silent and glaring; most of the doors stood open and the cells stank, over the harshness of disinfectant, of sweat and urine. The fact that the cells were empty did not reassure Charlotte, or indicate to her the likelihood here of an enlightened penal policy.

‘It is quiet here,’ said the Living Buddha. ‘When the Chinese were here, this was such a lively place,

full of the hum of busy souls.'

'I thought it best,' said Ungarn, 'to free those souls to pursue their destiny.'

'That is one way to look at things, my son,' said the old man, 'though I doubt that it is the Way.'

'I know it right in my heart, my Lord,' said Ungarn. T know that it must be right to scythe the fields that the harvest may come.'

'Men may scythe,' said the old man, 'and men may sow, and men may water. Sometimes they may even reap. But it is not their will that ripens the corn.'

They neared the last cell on the corridor, and Charlotte heard a mumbling; a guard silently unlocked the door and the group filed into the cell. At its far end, lit from the window by the edge of an arc-light's beam, a man with grey hair slouched against the wall, the shattered left lens of his glasses glinting in the light. He continued to mutter, ignoring their presence entirely.

'Item: the mummy from the peat bog, with teeth not anthropoid. Item: the fossil from the upper Permian, with the clear impression of fur alongside dog-like bones. Item: the great crocodilian bones with the horned creature in the stomach cavity. Item: the fossil bone with the holes of a flute carved into it. Item: the seemingly anthropoid bones with the retracting leg-socket. I put it to you, gentlemen of the Academy, that the conclusions are inescapable.'

'As I said,' said Ungarn, 'he is entirely mad, and useless to our purposes. Is there anything you wish to ask, mademoiselle?'

'Herr Grobel,' Charlotte took a pace forwards. 'We met before the war, and then again three years ago, with my brother. I am Charlotte Matthews, Herr Grobel; and what has become of you?'

'We thought,' Grobel continued, 'we thought there was progress. We thought there was a pattern from the lowest to the highest. But there was hot blood when there was cold blood, and the cold blood won; the crawlers and the creepers beat the runners and the jumpers. We are only the tattered banner of the army that lost that war; and the side that won, the side that won went on to glory and doom. We are the sour aftertaste of creation.'

'What did you and my brother discover, Heir Grobel?'

'It is not the items, Miss Matthews,' said Grobel, looking at her directly. The light showed a gaping wound on his forehead, glinting with the dark red of dried blood, the white of bone and the succulence of pus. 'It is not the items that are the evidence, it is the pattern. Your brother could not bear that pattern, and walked out into the the night when the beasts came.'

'Beasts?' said Ungarn.

'Beasts,' said Grobel, 'if you can call them beasts that came with flame and steel as well as teeth and claws.'

'Where are my brother's papers?' said Charlotte.

'Some he burned,' said Grobel. 'He said that it was not right that a generation that has known horror should know despair. Some they burned when they smashed our finds with great steel hammers.'

'What despair?' said Charlotte.

'We are not the golden harvest: we are the weeds among the stubble that will wither in a season.'

'You see mademoiselle, and my Lord Buddha,' said Ungarn, 'the results even on a man of science of the heresies of the Nazarene. Feeble-mindedness and contemptible weeping.'

'And we are only the weak vines and flowers,' Grobel went on. 'Growing up among us are the thistles and the thorns, the hardier growth.'

'Of course,' said Ungarn, 'I am glad to see a man of science who recognizes the truth. There will be an end to the unfit and those who would shelter them; there will be a day of strength and wild horsemen trampling the Cross under their horses' hooves.'

'You fool,' said Grobel, pulling himself to his feet in time to be buffeted to the floor by a hail of blows from Ungarn's bamboo cane. Charlotte, dropping her muff, seized the Baron's right arm, held him back for a moment, and was pulled off him by two guards. Visol-offsky placed his foot firmly on the muff.

'You fool!' repeated Grobel. That is not what I meant at all.'

Ungarn held back a second, his bloody cane poised.

'You fool, what you do not understand is that there moves among us, silent as the shark in the ocean,

a race of beings whose purposes are not ours, whatever the faces they wear. We are the stilettos of their vendettas; we are the pawns of their relaxation; we are their meat and their whore and their treasure. When we kill in battle, they are the general and the paymaster; they are the wolf, the maggot and the carrion crow. Whoever reigns, they rule.'

'I had thought that we were about to hear something of interest,' Ungarn said. 'And in the end the poor fool was only talking about the Jews.'

He turned to his orderly.

'Teapot, I say.'

'No,' Charlotte shouted. 'Lord Buddha, Bogdo Khan, how can you allow such things in your name?' she appealed.

'I cannot condemn what I cannot see,' said the blind old man, as his attendants led him from the room. 'And having renounced will, I cannot alter things as they are.'

The orderly knelt to Grobel like a nurse, his shoulders hiding his work from Charlotte's eyes and only revealing the young savant's death by the shrug of completion.

'Mademoiselle,' said Ungarn, 'that is twice that you have inconvenienced me. There will not be a third. I shall, the soothsayers tell me, die in a hundred and twenty-nine days, but I shall outlive you by as much.'

He turned to Visoloffsky.

'See to it,' he said.

'I don't suppose,' said Charlotte, 'that there is any point in asking to see the British Consul.'

'Heavens, no,' said Ungarn. 'He was one of the first men I had shot on entering Urga. My family have never liked the British, not since your sodomite King allowed my ancestor to die at the walls of Jerusalem.'

'Silly question, really,' said Charlotte, 'but I find it does no harm to pay at least lip service to the polite forms.'

'Typical conventional bourgeois hypocrisy,' said Ungarn. 'For a few moments I had confused you with an interesting mind.'

'You, sir, are a superstitious drug-crazed boor, a coward who needs servants to do his killing,' she said, hoping to make the end quick. 'Pray relieve me of your company.'

'My ancestors had servants and to spare,' said Ungarn. 'Riga was theirs, and the world. My servants were once many; three hundred brave fiends, and now they are few. My servants have been taken from me, but I still have some power. See to it, Visoloffsky.' He swept from the room, followed by his guards.

'You wish to pray, Mademoiselle Matthews?' said Visoloffsky as he drew his side-arm, a look of almost erotic triumph on his features.

'What big teeth you have, Herr Schmidt,' Charlotte said.

He flinched as if from a blow.

'It was the gloves—you forgot to change your gloves.'

He still had his fingers on the trigger, but the look on his face was less certain or at least less defined.

'What you need to understand,' said Charlotte, 'is that I am not necessarily the enemy of your kind.'

Her putative executioner sat down on the floor next to her, attentive. 'The hunt continues, then.'

'I am making certain assumptions,' said Charlotte. 'And I trust you will delay any decision about killing me until I have run through them. And allow me the odd wrong guess.'

He nodded.

'Grobel and my brother found out a lot of the truth but they reacted with hysteria, not intelligence. If your people have always been here, there must have been a time when we were weak and few and you let us live, and there must have been a reason why you let us live. If there was once a third people something happened to them; I do not think that your people were their doom or you would not have let my people live. You are the creatures to whom many, many superstitions refer, but you are creatures in the presence of whom we must keep an open mind, and cast superstition aside.'

'Continue,' said her companion.

'I thought at first that you were an agent of the Cheka. The business at Novonicolaevsk was a nice

piece of theatre but it had to have been arranged in advance; my presence was at sufficiently short notice that it is unlikely to have been improvised for my benefit. Killing me and replacing me with one of your own was the improvisation, so you had a mission. You serve masters beyond the Cheka and beyond Lenin, but they are as ruthless, as rational and as cold. Rational creatures might use the Baron, but would not serve him; yet you have a purpose here and it concerns him.'

She paused, and was not interrupted. The cause of progress has plenty of brutes and thugs to serve and to discredit it. What progress needs most is a brute among its enemies so vile that people forget the crimes committed in progress's name. For a while I assumed that Ungarn was one of you, but his every word and deed *stinks of* man, if not of humanity. He is the scarecrow with which you hope to frighten Asia into revolution, and progress.'

'Much of this is true, Charlotte,' said her companion, drawing his side-arm once again. 'And that is why you must die. We of progress admire cleverness, but not to the point of infatuation.'

There was a cough at the door. Bogdo Khan stood there with his attendants. Next to him there stood Tus-kegoun Lama, with a drawn revolver levelled at the young man's head.

That will not be necessary, young man,' said the Living Buddha. 'Do not treat my colleague's gun as a weapon, by the way. Treat it as a symbolic device for gaining your attention. To be on the safe side, it is a symbolic device that is loaded with silver bullets.'

'That is superstition, merely,' said Visoloffsky, or Schmidt.

'So much is,' said the Living Buddha. 'But as we see, superstition is the sister of fact. I require that you depart from my city. I require that you leave Mademoiselle Matthews unharmed. I require that you tell us what you have been doing here. I am an old man and likely to die soon, but if those around me are to perish, I require to know why.'

'That had nothing to do with me,' said Visoloffsky. 'You humans always jump to such simple-minded conclusions.'

His face shifted, not to the form with the teeth and jaws but to something intermediate, dangerous and yet gentle.

'Tuskegoun,' he said.

The lama continued to cover him. 'I fear, my Lord *Goto,'* he said, 'that my loyalties come in order. My master, the real Tuskegoun, told me that when the message came I should serve my Lord Buddha here, and none other. Sorry about that.'

'In any case,' said Charlotte, 'Visoloffsky, or whatever he is called, shot Sepailoff, who was one of them. Grobei said vendettas and games. How stupid of me to have missed that.'

'So,' said Bogdo Khan, 'you have your own wars. And what has been going on in my city and my kitchen is part of them.'

'Remember,' said the young man, 'I am not he whose face I wear. But he was not him either.'

'What do we call you?' Charlotte asked.

The name of my people I may not speak. But my name is Watcher of the Flickering Lamp, in its short form. Ungarn is human, but most of his three hundred were not. When a star fell on Siberia there were those who thought it an omen, and flocked there to search for a tool.'

'It is,' said Charlotte, 'the basest of superstitions to believe that the falling of a meteorite or the passing of a comet means anything in the world.'

'Ah,* said Watcher, 'but it was not always so. Once a comet brought the fall of princes, princes that the world has not seen since; and there are those that were glad.'

'That was the Rome that fell,' said Charlotte, 'before there was Rome. The third people were the true city, were they not?'

'Just so,' said Watcher. 'The Callers of the Dark and the devotees of Chaos followed the man they met where the star fell, hoping to use him to call Darkness; I and my sisters have harried them from Vladivostok to Tan-nenburg. They killed our parents and their household; is this not justice?'

'Have you no brothers?' said the Living Buddha.

'There were no sons among my parents' litters,' Watcher said.

This is all very well,' said Charlotte. 'And a scarecrow is always useful. But Ungarn marches in the

morning, and you are assuming that he will lose.'

'I have set on the soothsayers to prophesy Ungarn's doom,' said Bogdo Khan. 'To tell the credulous and wicked man that his share in the common fate of humanity upon him is a work of virtue, because it means that he is made to acknowledge the workings of justice.'

'I have told the horsemen of the plains to ride with him as long as fate does so,' said Tuskegoun Lama. 'And then to turn on him, and to fulfil the prophecy.'

'The state prosecutor in Novonicolaevsk,' said Watcher, 'has an indictment drawn up. It will be a fair trial, and a humane execution.'

'And then the Reds will come to Urga,' said Bogdo Khan, 'and I will allow them to come.'

'Will that not mean your death?' said Charlotte. 'I mean, presumably there is no place for a Living Buddha in a People's Republic'

'I assume that they will kill me,' said Bogdo Khan. 'And throw down the temples and still the prayer wheels. And what of that? The world of power has its seasons, and the thing about seasons is that they change. I have no personal memory of them, but I know that I have lived many lives and will live many more. What matter if my next incarnation lives the life of a common herder or a clerk? In this incarnation I have been a lecher and a drunk, but I have done what was necessary where a saint might not. The season will change, and the Living Buddha is eternal; you must take the long view.'

'You are really quite perceptive for a human,' said Watcher.

Everyone seemed to be busy congratulating themselves.

This is all very well,' said Charlotte. 'But what if he wins?'

'The man is an anachronism,' said Watcher, 'and as we speak the last of the Darkcallers, and of Chaos, are being throttled or stabbed. My sisters are efficient in their work, Charlotte; you need have no fear of that.'

'I can think of one further thing,' she said, 'that will put the nails into his coffin. Ungarn is a drug fiend, is he not? How many of his followers are also?'

'Many,' said Tuskegoun Lama. 'All of his Great Russians and many of his Cossacks.'

'An inspiration,' said Bogdo Khan. 'There is a great store of the white powder in Ungarn's palace. You are right; it is best disposed of.'

'Without Dutch courage and twitching from their cravings,' said Charlotte, 'his men will be easy meat for the Bolsheviks.'

'It will be seen to,' said Tuskegoun.

Charlotte considered further. 'And the petrol, what about his stores of petrol?'

'I would like to leave you two young people together,' said the Living Buddha. 'Please refrain from further acts of violence; it would distress me to order the necessary level of penance. My men control this building for the moment; and a vehicle will be brought to you.'

He and Tuskegoun left the room; the two women looked at each other.

'A truce, then,' said Charlotte, 'until we are out of the jurisdiction of the priest-king and free of the madman.'

'A truce,' her companion agreed, 'but what then?'

'Well, I would like to know more of your people.'

'That is the trouble, is it not?' said Watcher.

'Not really; I am a scholar, not a gossip. I said I wanted to know, not that I wanted to tell the world. Grobel said my brother killed himself out of despair and I am sure that is right—despair at knowing no one would ever believe him if he told them.'

'We killed your brother, Charlotte.'

'You did not personally, yourself, nor even your sisters. And you people do what you need to. As I do. I myself killed your sister, when she tried to kill me. This cannot go on for ever.'

That, Charlotte,' said Watcher, 'is the dearest hope of my sisters in progress.'

Tuskegoun came back into the room.

'There is a small problem,' he said. There is a guard over the tanks of fuel at the railway station almost as large as that on the magazine. I do not know how we are to get past them, or how we are to

explode the fuel when we do. There are just too many to take by surprise, or kill in the dark, and it is but a few hours to dawn.'

'Well,' said Charlotte, 'as to the first, what could be more natural than that a general call on his troops?'

She looked at Watcher with anticipation.

'I am sorry,' she said, 'but I can't do facial hair on that scale at short notice; some of my sisters can, but I have to use false whiskers. And I don't have the right ones in stock.'

'Oh well,' said Charlotte.

'But I can call my sisters from their other work, if there is some purpose to be served.'

Charlotte picked up her muff from the floor, turned it inside out, pocketed her revolver and her razor as they fell to the floor and started unpicking the stitches around their pockets.

'It is at times such as these,' she said, 'that I always *find the* possession of high explosives so reassuring.'

She produced two grenades and three sticks of dynamite.

'You were carrying those all the time?' said Watcher.

'As I said, I can keep a secret.'

'And you shot my sister, with that much explosive in the vicinity?'

'Dead,' said Charlotte, 'is dead, and I prefer to have some choice in my going.'

'I could do Visoloffsky again,' said Watcher. 'They probably haven't found the body yet.'

Watcher took Charlotte's hand as they walked from the cell and along the silent corridors.

They drove through the streets of Urga in a twilight that threatened perpetually to become dawn. As they drove, Watcher called; it was not, when you listened to it carefully, nearly as much like wolfsong as it had first appeared. Gradually, at the corners of avenues, there started to be shadows with eyes, some on four legs but most on two, never quite coming to where they could be seen, and racing the car into what was left of the night.

Beside the railway tracks some hundred yards from the basic sheds that served as a station, there were fuel tanks mounted on wagons. Around them, there was a picket fence with an armed guard at each corner. Watcher had reassumed Visoloffsky's face.

'Lieutenant,' she called out to the officer in charge, and descended from the car.

'Sir,' the man walked towards her.

'I am here to check that all is well,' said Watcher.

'Fine, sir, but why have you brought civilians into a restricted zone, sir?'

'Security. You need not know. Have you seen anything peculiar?'

'No, sir. Will that be all, sir?' Behind him there was a sequence of sudden half-noises as Watcher's sisters flowed in from, and then back to, the shadows, leaving the corpses of the guards in their wake. It was like the Ballets Russes, Charlotte reflected.

That will be all,' said Watcher. The lieutenant turned to go, and Watcher shot him, expertly, in the base of the neck. Charlotte revved the engine and threw the sticks of dynamite, unlit, among the wagons, before pulling the pin from one of the grenades and throwing that also. She accelerated away, ducking from the blast that followed.

Suddenly, as they left the open railway-yard for the darkness of streets, another car pulled across the road in front of them.

'Does nobody obey my orders?' said Ungarn. 'Is everyone a traitor?'

Behind them the petrol wagons blazed, exploding one after another with a gulp and a roar. Through clouds of choking smoke, Ungarn's guards covered them with revolvers and rifles.

The last of my three hundred died tonight,' said Ungarn, 'shot by their servants, or choked by their whores. And you, Visoloffsky, I have looked on what appeared to be your body. All changed into beasts as they grew cold. I do not pretend to understand, but intelligence is an overrated virtue. These men are not my three hundred but they will still shoot when I tell them to.'

'I wouldn't if I were you,' said Charlotte. 'I have a grenade here. You may kill us all, but I might kill you all the same. And if you die now, who will march on the Reds? Who will build your empire?'

Ungarn paused; as he did so, five sharp-faced women came from the shadows behind him, levelling their revolvers in turn. Their faces rippled and changed out of humanity in the light of the burning. When you cast aside prejudice, Charlotte reflected, they are really quite beautiful.

This is all quite enough,' said Bogdo Khan, coming upon them all from another street, leaning on the shoul—

der of his last pikeman. 'My Lord Ungarn, are you still my sword and shield?'

'You know that I am, my Lord Buddha.'

Then do as I say,' Bogdo Khan continued, 'and be silent for a moment. What is it that you see?'

'I see conspirators, and I see my hopes in flames,' Ungarn said. 'And I see women with the faces of beasts. And I see my duty.'

'These are illusions, my son. All, save duty.'

'But—'

'Not another word,' said Bogdo Khan. 'You wish to restore the empire of Genghis? Then do it as he did, on horseback, or fail. There are no beasts here, only my servant Tuskegoun and seven women who are under my protection. Do you wish for my blessing, or for my curse?'

'My servants have been murdered,' said Ungarn, 'and I demand justice. I would like your blessing and I fear your curse, but I demand justice.'

'That you will have, I promise. When you enter Novo-nicolaevsk, you will have justice. Until then, these women are under my protection.'

'Very well,' said Ungarn, 'until Novonicolaevsk. As you wish, my Lord. Come, my men; it is almost dawn, and at dawn we ride. To Novonicolaevsk, and justice. Will your men ride with me?'

'If you do as I say,' said Bogdo Khan.

A light came into Ungarn's eyes. 'I will make such a speech to them; it will light a fire greater than that one over there. You will see. The fire lit by Genghis has never ceased to burn deep in the bridled hearts of your people. All they needed was a leader, to drive them in holy war. A tautology of course; all war is holy. All is illusion, as you say; there is no good and no evil. No more than there is life or death. There is only action; there is only struggle.'

His car drove away, its motor echoing and dying away among the twilit smoky streets.

The man is fated,' said Bogdo Khan. 'How fortunate it is that he will never enter Novonicolaevsk.'

'How can you be certain of that, even now?' said Charlotte.

'Because,' said Tuskegoun Lama, climbing out of the back seat, 'they have changed its name. It is now Novosibirsk; you have cast aside superstition, we all know that, but to a man like Ungarn even a confusion of names is the blow of doom.'

'Farewell,' said Bogdo Khan, 'I have a city to set in order, but I hope that you ladies will be able to resolve your differences. Tuskegoun, come.'

The monks and the guard moved away. Beside Charlotte, Watcher's face had changed back to features resembling the five women whose revolvers were now pointed at Charlotte. Watcher's jaw had not become so cruel, and where their eyes glowered with reflected flame, hers danced in the dawn.

Charlotte brought the hand with the grenade above the level of the car door, and then reached down and carefully placed it on the running-board. She reached into her pocket and removed revolver and razor; she shook the last bullet from its chamber, folded the razor, and put bullet, razor and revolver beside the grenade.

'There are legends,' she said. 'Legends of changelings, and of Thomas whom the Queen of a fair people taught always to speak truth. I have no family of my own now, and I claim the right to run with your pack and learn its singing, if I may, if a human can keep up with you. I can keep a secret, and I have proved that I have teeth.'

'But,' said Watcher, 'there is only one way I could bring you among my sisters.'

'I take it,' said Charlotte, 'that the hunt of which you spoke on the train is the hunt where throats are bared in turn; the hunt where both are predator and both prey; the hunt where there is no killing but the little death. That is the way you could choose to bring me among your people.'

'But alas, you would not find that congenial, surely. Most humans have prejudices in these matters.'

‘When you have cast aside superstition,’ said Charlotte, ‘there is no end to the prejudices you can set aside. There is a people that moves among Man, subtle as the fish in the sea, whose purposes are not his. That is a saying with many meanings, you know, and we may choose between them. Your people are my people, and whither thou goest, I go. If not, then I am content, also.’

She reached up to the collar of her blouse and undid it. She bent her head over to the side, offering her throat to Watcher. Watcher undid the collar of her officer’s jacket and did the same. Her sisters sheathed their revolvers and their teeth; two of them climbed into the back of the car and the other three disappeared back into the dark streets. The noise of burning guttered to silence.

‘Now,’ said Watcher, ‘Ungarn will delay a little—he so loves to make speeches—and so we should leave now. I suggest that we drive east as long as there is fuel; we have sisters in Vladivostok.’

‘Fine,’ said Charlotte, ‘but can any of you drive?’

‘Of course,’ said the sister on the left. They all changed seats and Charlotte cradled her head in the corner of Watcher’s arms.

‘Well, my dear,’ she said, drowsily. ‘Now that we have established the mating rituals, our next course of study should probably be lullabies.’

It was, the more you got used to it, ever less like the howling of wolves.

A people’s court condemned Baron Roman Theodor-ovich Ungarn von Sternberg, bound and abandoned by the last of his men, and captured by a Bolshevik patrol. He was killed by a firing squad in Novosibirsk, on the one hundred and twenty-ninth day of the prophecy. None know where his body lies; that autumn was a busy season for gravediggers, and for wolves.

Sunflower Pump

Paul Cornell

The Ozone Summer was beautiful for Manchester, all sound and colour. The sound, as Johnny Marr had put it, was the noise of children with too much money; the colours were those of the bright flares of early nineties fashion. But beautiful needs ugly to make it happen, like the fluorocarbons made the Summer.

Hatcher was ugly, nose pressed to the glass of the sports shop in the Arndale. He wore a bright track suit and a basin haircut, and had tiny amphetamine pupils. He’d been made by the Happy Mondays, in the same way that God had made poisonous insects. He’d have been happy at nineteen in whatever era: skinhead, punk or scally. At that moment, his pupils were as big as they could be, staring at heaven.

Those.’ His breath clouded the glass. ‘I want those.’

His mates looked close. Haikai pumps with inflatable air supports. Brilliant white. £195. Sports shoes you wouldn’t dare play sport in.

‘Sheddy stuff, lads,’ he added.

‘Real baggy, Hatch.’ But behind the agreeing voices stood Tag, only sixteen, here with his brother Gaz, who had warned him. And he said:

‘Sheddy? What’s sheddy, Hatch? That’s not a real word, like.’ He was grinning his teeth off, shifting from foot to foot, mildly dissing Hatcher, who he thought was a bit of a goit.

‘Sheddy—’ Hatcher turned and kicked Tag in the knee. The boy yelled and crumpled, then put up his arms to protect himself as Hatcher quickly landed a sparkling toe on his ear and ribs. His brother would have said something, but Hatcher paused to tie his shoelace. ‘It’s a real word, spaz. I said it, it’s a real word.’

The gang helped the lad up, and there was a look of awe and tears on his face. People kept on walking by. Hatch stood up. Too hot, lads. Let’s get some ale in.’

As they strode out into the street, Hatcher glanced at his trainers again. No scuffs, so he didn’t need new ones yet.

Eh was squatting by the wall on her heavy-knit woolly, taking in the sunlight for the vitamins. Her hair was a mass of dreads in the centre, left to keep itself clean, shaved at the sides. She wore black, and was

enjoying roasting in it, remembering the cold of winter in Congle-ton Wood. A parade of consumers' legs shuttered the sunlight across her, and some of them tossed coins on to the spread shape of her black star parka. Eh was very poor. She carefully gathered the shining coins up into her greasy hand. A pair of bright trainers arrived and stopped.

'Got a job then, love?' Gaz had his hands thrust into the depths of his jogging pants. His face was a black smudge against the sun. 'It's easy, like. You go down the SS and they give you one.' The crowd behind him snorted, except Hatcher, who was vacantly skipping from one foot to the other, scuffing.

'Piss off.' Eh glanced down a side street, where a pair of fierce eyes met hers over a dustbin. Something large and shaggy had tensed there, waiting. She raised an eyebrow.

'You telling me to piss off?' guffawed Gaz, redundantly. Hatcher heaved a sigh, and tapped his boys round the shoulders, pointing to move on. Boring. They shuffled off, and Hatcher glanced over his shoulder. Maybe he expected the usual anarchist blank fury, but what he saw on Eh's face surprised him. He shivered despite summer, but shrugged it off.

That night, as the streets were clearing and people were less inclined to stop and ponder the immensity of a traveller's dog, Eh was able to talk to Chob, her protector.

'I've seen him often,' she said. 'I like his ears.' Chob looked up at her with soulful eyes. Eh could tell by the shape of his mouth that he was eventually going to say something.

Chom, wah wah, chom.

The man might have been naked. Barely glimpse through overlit video, a blaze of feedback. Glimpses of sunlight flaring off cropped blond hair, stinging taut muscles. Oilscarred. He ran across girders, scaffolding, high off the ground.

A sudden corner.

Blaring trumpet discord.

The girder swayed. He tottered out over the abyss.

But his trainers took him on to the next challenge.

Holding perfectly.

'How?' asked Jim, rolling a cold can across his acne-scarred chin.

'Steam it,' Hatcher was slumped in a corner of shade, his mind still riddled by the vision of those shoes. 'Steam it, matey.'

'What, steam a shoe shop?' muttered Tag, dropping an E into his can before swigging from it. Hatch looked up quickly, and the gang tensed again, but

Tag's tone had been respectful. Maybe not this time.

'Shouldn't do that,' Hatch pointed to the can and held the point, his finger quite steady. 'Girl did that in Rotherham, I heard. She was on one and put down a few. Know what happened?'

'No ...' Tag grinned and slurped again, the tab taking hold. Beer was honey, and he loved Hatch as much as his brother did.

'Her liver and kidneys and stuff all shut off.' Hatcher blinked slowly. 'She baked like a pie, and when they opened her up ...' he popped a finger out of the corner of his mouth, '... she was steaming, so don't do it. Now, that reminds me. Steaming. That reminds me. Your question. Nah, not the shop. We rob someone else, then pay the shop for my shoes. Right?'

The posse nodded, entranced. This was the good stuff, the slow jackanory stuff.

'So who do we rob?' Tag took another gulp. 'How about that place you work?'

'Don't be a knobhead. I'm into that, good at it. Top telesalesman, me. Nah, we rob a Paki shop in Rush-olme.'

'Top,' agreed Tag. Then he faltered, rolling his eyes, and fell, making blubbering noises in the sun. 'I'm melting! I'm steaming!'

Then he sat upright, grinning. Hatcher laughed then, and so did the rest.

Eh lay in the shade of an old elm in the park, enjoying the feeling of wood on her back. Chob was lying around her like a comfortable pillow. Over the years, the pair had evolved various strategies for concealing Chob's size, and this was one of the more subtle ones. The less subtle ones involved growling at people and running away. Chob's jaw was dripping with saliva now, his canines having retreated and

his tongue shortening by the minute. He glanced around to see that nobody was near.

Tharrrrshh ...' he began.

'Give it a little while,' Eh patted him. Chob had, thankfully, also evolved a great patience. They had each changed in response to the other, but even now Eh couldn't shake the feeling that this whole lifestyle was only Chob indulging her.

Recently, in 1978 that is, Eh, who had been calling herself Emily since she'd given up 'Sunflower' in 1972, had given up on the ways of money. She and Chob (Charles, Charibdys) had been standing in an armpit-to-armpit express from Crewe to Bournemouth. Charles had been smiling, happy as always with the people he met, but Emily had fretted for the whole journey.

'Why,' she had asked an old lady, 'don't you go and sit in first class?'

'Oh, it wouldn't be right ...' muttered the old lady, suffering.

Indeed not. What was right was what made these cramped humans sweat and swear at each other. Eh found that, in that case, she had fallen in love with wrong. She had a great deal of sympathy for these poor devils.

At Bournemouth, she and Charles gave their clothes and baggage to some travellers. Then they ran out into the sea.

They slept there in the brine for three days, basking and dreaming, spouting in the midday sun. When they returned to shore, their hair was cropped and their skin hard.

But still, they found that to ignore the rule of dirty cash was to ignore the Law. They found themselves running away from the coast, sprinting across fields and leaping ditches and hedges to avoid the chase. To a pair of philosophers like Eh and Chob, who had wanted to let the foibles of late capitalism wash over them like the tide had, this was swimming upstream.

Chob had slumped down by a tree one night and sighed. 'You be the human,' he had said. I'll be something more useful.'

And while a beast might be chased for his crimes, only humans were chased with any heart. So that had worked.

This,' Chob said, his tongue now perfect, 'is a bad idea.'

'What is?'

This fleshboy. He's an evil little ape.'

'Yes, he's gorgeous. Nasty.'

'Please don't.'

'You're just jealous.'

'I am not jealous,' Chob almost barked, his maw awash with saliva. 'He's dangerous.'

Eh laughed, rubbing Chob's mane roughly. 'More dangerous than me? How's that then?'

'You always mate below your station.'

'We all do.' Eh kissed his head gently. 'Every one of us.'

Chakka chakka bom.

The girders blurred and swayed. A gap yawned open between two of them, swinging on cranes.

Slomo leap, screaming guitar. The man just reaches the next girder.

His trainers carry him safely on.

Sanir was carefully winding a sari on to a window dummy, enjoying the sunshine through the glass of his shop window. It wasn't really warm, not as he re—

membered (dreamed of?) the old country as being. Still, the approximation of heat made him feel more content than he had been of late. It wasn't as if he minded Rose wearing jeans, they were quite proper in their way, but shorts ... She was only fourteen, and this city contained many evil men.

He examined the eye make-up of the dummy. Well, Rose could repaint that when she came home. He could talk to her then. He couldn't be angry with her because she'd make him laugh.

The shop bell rang, and Sanir climbed out of the window display, calling to his customers that he wouldn't be a moment. Then there was a crash. The shop owner emerged to find five brightly-clad youths struggling to prise open his cash register. It had fallen on to the rug.

'Don't you come any closer!' screamed Jim, waving a Stanley knife. Sanir had fought in the war, and

was more angry than scared. Words failed him. He grabbed a chair and hurled himself at these villainous children.

Hatcher ducked around the weapon and slammed his forearm into the back of Sanir's skull. The man tottered forward and collapsed into the glass counter, smashing the display of ornaments. An alarm bell burst into life.

Tuck this! Get out, get out!' Hatch's posse dived out of the door and ran off down the street, ducking into an alley and weaving their way down to Moss Side.

Eh was watching, of course. She sat on the kerb on the other side of Wilmslow Road. She could feel Chob, sulking in the deserted lot behind her. She simulated what he would say. Over the vast time they had been together, these simulations had gradually taken the place of actual words. Now it was only in dispute that they talked, just to emphasize the differences between them. They were talking a lot these days.

'That's what you want?' He would pretend amazement.

'Yeah,' Eh sighed resignedly, Tm set on it, Chob.'

'Why?!'

'Because he doesn't care for his own flesh either. I want to make him care, or make him see that he cares, or ... I don't know. He's a vintage human. Action over words, eh?'

'You've been around humans too long,' she heard Chob snort.

Well, perhaps she had.

Eh spent the next couple of days making cash in the way that she did, singing the *Fifty Lives* in the Arndale, dancing, begging (sloppy eyes for the mothers, aggression for the businessmen) and drawing pavement knotworks with stolen chalk. People gave her more money for the arts than for the begging, because they assumed Eh was a student and thus rich enough to deserve their money. With the cash, they ate, and Eh bought a T-shirt. A big bloom of gold flowers on a crimson sky, with a hood.

'Top, eh?' she asked Chob, but he just howled mournfully.

Ankle height. The trainer-feet jump past those with heavy boots.

And then it was night, the kind of negative night that follows a blazing day. The sky was an overexposed blue-black, and warmth still rose off the street. Chob stood under a railway arch, munching on the boxed remains of a fried chicken. He watched as Eh approached the queue for the Hacienda. The queue was a snake of hooded colours, anticipating and loaded. Eh vanished amongst them. Chob bit bones apart, and spat them.

'Pig came round my place last night,' Gaz was saying. 'Asked my mum if she knew where I was the other day.'

'What did you say?' Hatch was glaring at his trainers. There was a black mark on the gleaming tip of one. The Hacienda queue moved, and the gang moved with it, leaning again on the wall a few feet along.

'She said I was with my friends, like, but they were all good lads and wouldn't have got into any trouble. How about that, eh?'

Hatch looked up, half bored, half crazy. 'I've got a spot on my toe, Gaz. Here you are, here's my hanky and all, wipe it off, will you?' Gaz looked around, amazed that the whole thing had swung away from him so fast. There were girls about. He laughed.

'Yeah, right. Anyway ...'

'No, I mean it. Take me seriously, mate.' So Gaz, caught between laughter and embarrassment, bent down and wiped the toe, with a flourish that showed he was playing along with the joke. Nobody, he was sort of relieved to hear, was laughing.

Hatch was really casual, watching him with slight approval. They were still like this when Eh arrived, behind Hatch's shoulder.

'Hiya!'

Hatcher jumped, and Gaz used the movement to stand up, handing back the handkerchief.

'Hi,' Hatch grinned sideways and turned to look at her. The boys looked back and forth at each other, wide smiles curling. 'You're that street girl, aren't you?'

'Yeah.' Eh stuck her tongue out at the boys as Hatch glanced back to them.

‘What’re you doing here?’ He had snapped back to her instantly. Good reflexes for a human.

‘Want to go in,’ she smiled.

“How did you get the cash? On the game?’

‘No,’ and Eh saw Hatcher flinch as her pupils bloomed with anger. Stupid wanton monkey. Arrogant meat. That he could say such a thing to her made her want him even more. In what other time, she thought, would mating be like invading another country? Her nation didn’t push, didn’t flirt with boundaries, didn’t even play politics. Time for an overture. ‘Don’t say that, it could get you hurt.’

The boys laughed and crowed. Hatcher just looked at his shoes again. There was a real scuff there.

‘Oh, fuck you ...’ he murmured absently, and walked on with the crowd. The gang jeered and chattered at Eh as they passed.

This was absurd! She felt rage boil in her stomach. He felt so far above here that he could do that, use the words and save face. He wasn’t even provoked! The monkey was lucky that she didn’t grow herself a penis and fuck him anyway!

But she wouldn’t. She could. She could do anything that rage and biology allowed, but she wanted to be in Hatcher’s frame, be one of his wanted things, he desired as only he could desire something. Eh knew that she was playing her way into a power relationship as old and as shit as humanity. If she had just wanted his flesh, the rape of apes was easy.

The rape of her own strength was much harder.

She hit the wall with her fist. A few of the queue noted, as Eh walked carefully away, that from the crack ran brick dust rather than blood.

Days sweated by, heavy in the sunlight, easier by night. Hatcher did his share of lulling people down the phone, and his share of shouting *once that* phone had been carefully clicked down. Every now and then he got a pain between his eyes. His gang were recreation, home, family. In his heart he knew, maybe, that he’d never use his brain to plan a decent crime for them. He was afraid of losing any of them.

They were his little nation. Gaz had called, but he wouldn’t go out with Gaz on his own. That would disturb things.

So a few drinks and a few pills found Hatch wandering one night, wandering the streets between the people, looking for a place to go alone. It couldn’t be the places where the gang met, ‘cos they might meet without him, and he didn’t want to see that.

Hatch stopped and leaned on a corner, dull, spaced eyes checking out the people that wandered by. He swigged from a bottle of Newky Brown he carried, and when he lowered his head again, there she was.

Long, blonde hair, with a cap tucked on top. A rich purple top, baggy pants and a medallion that swung and glinted. She was standing in the middle of the back-street, staring at him. Hatch’s gaze sped from her face (a glimpse of longing, carefully shy) to her feet. It stayed at her feet.

A blare of brilliant toothy white. Pumped up. Those were—

And then she ran. Hatch threw aside the bottle and ran after her. A howl bruised the air.

They ran through the streets, past the pubs that were emptying with club-bound crowds, through the alleys where the homeless huddled. Their feet paffed down the tarmac and their shadows held and died in the headlights of passing cars.

Hatch had seen frigging aristocracy, and he wanted it. Debutante curls, no nonce, a girl like that, but an orbital brat, money out for rough. But still she kept ahead of him, and he was bloody fit, he was.

They ran down a row of street lights, students laughing and calling after them, and at the end light she swung to a halt and watched him, pushing back her curls.

She wasn’t even breathing hard.

He stepped forward, trying to think of words. She stayed where she was. He could hardly speak, and his brain was full of her. He raised a hand. There was not an expression on her face. He looked half aside, gauging.

Then he grabbed the back of her hair and shoved his tongue into her mouth. She let him, and Hatch found himself snogging like this street was a club and this goddess was a first-year on her first night out of home.

Her strong arms pulled him down into an alley, and he found himself surrounded by things wet and warm. Old Welcome mats and cardboard, debris and dross. The cocoon folded around him. A scrape of moist card sealed the door and he was in darkness.

Hatcher could hear the girl breathing, and he found himself frightened and aroused. She wanted this, she had prepared this, but it was so ... dirty. Like fucking should be, he licked his lips, like it should be.

Her arm snaked out and pulled him further inside, pulled him to her. Hatcher wondered what her name was—Sarah or Fiona or Jo? Something soft and southern, something fragile.

The arms that wrapped around him, pulled his shirt over his head, were hard and muscled, and Hatch found himself being moved like a doll, pulled and shaped by a thing far stronger than himself.

He nearly shouted, blind as he was, as a flap opened and he entered her. Fuck, he wanted to see her, to hear her name, to ask! But he was absorbed in a fury of smooth fabric, twisted tight around his body, and he could only gasp and grunt as she let him thrust, the only expression he was allowed.

As he came, he thought, beyond the relief of his climax, that he had a story to tell the boys. And then he slept.

In the dreams, something like a man scampered away from the darkness, a gathering terror chasing. From path to path, jumping from tree to tree, the runner went, but always hot breath and helplessness were on his neck.

His trainers slid in the sweat and jungle mud.

Hatcher woke up sober.

It was 3 a.m. by the light on his Rolex. Beside him slumbered the slim, strong form he had wrestled with, unconscious. She was hissing in her sleep and, for the first time without intoxication, Hatcher caught her smell. It was heavy and ancient, full of death and lust.

He shivered again.

Fuck this bitch, who did she think she was, dragging him in here and acting like a slut. He was covered in scratches and bruises. His ribs ached. He sucked a knuckle, wanting to smack her one.

If she was on something, then maybe she'd still be that strong. Best just get out, lad. Still, he felt unsatisfied, like some part of the sex had been missing.

Reaching over to where he thought the door was, Hatcher brushed his cheek against the toe of her trainers. Well, they had the rough edge of trainers. They could well be Haikais, what else could be that white and that arousing? Maybe he could give her something to remember him by after all.

Fumbling, he unlaced them, and gently pulled. The laces were wet in his hands. No movement. Sodding hell, he wanted those. He wanted them 'cos he'd wanted her, got her, and it hadn't been like getting at all. They wouldn't come, they were secured by something. He felt up her ankle. Rough, like a sport sock, or maybe the dyke didn't shave her legs.

He pulled again. There was something holding the thing on, like maybe she had laced it up behind her foot. Shit! Hatcher patted his pockets for the Stanley knife he carried, and applied it to the girl's ankle, starting to cut around the interior of the shoe.

He tensed, and pushed the blade in.

She screamed, or it was somewhere between a scream and a howl. Something scythed past his head. Hatcher leapt up and burst his way through the door of the hide, scrambling like a boy in a nightmare. He dashed out into the night, naked. As he rounded the corner, the howl came again. Way behind the young human, something ancient was sobbing and concentrating on staunching blood.

The skinny monkey ran down the hard streets, adrenalin pounding him along. But even over that chemical imperative, something else was happening. He stopped, panting, his breath boiling out of him in the chill air, and tasted it.

In his mouth, something he had licked from under her tongue, or something she had kissed into him. He fought it for a moment, but his body was used to the feeling, used to the fizzing of skin neurons, the bliss of heavy love shoving its way up his spine. Tasted bad though, worse than a bad E cut with speed.

He felt the hunger, the dream of freedom, of cars and sex and looking like a million. He felt it worse than ever, worse than watching those rich commercials.

And then he felt the dream answered. He could be anything. His body awaited his commands, and

finally the pleasure was his, not given in grudging kisses by another predator. Blissed out, he let his mind fly, and got absorbed in time and the voice of the city.

On his feet shone two phantom trainers, pumped to the max.

Behind the running, screaming, naked boy padded Chob, who had licked healing enzymes into the blood of Eh's wound. Even he wasn't certain of his intention. It might even have been to help. It was possible that Hatcher felt that his dreams were being pursued in any case. So the result could have been just built in, the way the monkey was.

The monkey wanted to fuck around and fly.

By dawn, the dreams were screwing around with sunlight, throwing it through a rainbow filter, pumping blood between him and the sun. The soundtrack jolted with nasty chords, spilling noise out over the city. The noise was distant pleading and requests, all of which he could ignore. And would. Only other people.

What a city, the sound of money hunting flesh. Yet he was king of it, astride his falling girder, surfing down into oblivion and waving his arms to the masses of stupid zeros below. He was way above the ground, having missed a corner on that fantasy scaffold. He was plummeting, the wind plucking his clothes into a baggy sail.

Tuck!' he shouted, 'What a ride for what a price!'

The spikes of steel and flat hard tarmac swung high to meet him, and he cried again. 'Just like in the adverts!'

And then he woke up. And then he hit the ground. His head burst across the concrete. His spine skittered across the impact surface, crumping into a tangle of bones burst through muscles. The stomach contents spilled along the street. Steaming.

Just for a moment, Hatcher had really known what it was like.

Eh, in her new form, watched from a distance, Chob beside her. A mother was sobbing into a policewoman, and reporters were pointing up at the girders from which the naked boy had jumped. A forensic team was removing the offal. Eh felt a moment's sadness for dead flesh. She would limp for a few days. None of this, beyond the rape, had been meant. Hatcher had almost conspired to infect himself with Eh's wilful biology. Once he had done so the flesh had, as always, followed the instructions of its owner. Hatcher had made his dream real, and fatal.

Eh turned to Chob and licked his face with her rough tongue. He licked back, and together they padded out of the city, hoping to find somewhere where the air smelled better and the people didn't cut your flesh.

Chob wasn't hopeful.

As the van carrying the remains of Hatcher drew away from the scene, a gang of boys in bright colours ran after it. They hopped and jumped to get a glimpse at the corpse through the back window, cheering in the sunlight. Tag was among them, not knowing who it was who died. Perhaps he would never find out.

The dream faded in the sun on the corpse and the flesh, realizing it was dead, ceased to spark with chemical war.

The dream froze on the running man, fading into blackness, a noise like a descending axe.

Haikai—Gets You Where You Want *To Go.*

Rain

Christopher Amies

No wind to stir the blackened olive branches, none to cool the stripped, orange shafts of the cork trees. In the still, hot air there was only dust, no sound; nothing dared venture out in this heat. In the hills above the dry valley of the Guadiaste, the tumbled ruins of past occupations baked slowly in the heat: a fluted pillar driven through rock, a small, almost featureless figure of granite watching out over the valley. A shallow depression in the hillside, filled with dust and thorn bushes, was the sole remains of a Roman

theatre. Beyond it a jagged hole in the rock, a metre across, was the mouth of a shaft with no apparent floor. It came out further down the valley somewhere; nobody really knew. In the valley a hundred feet below, the village of San Isidro merged into the brown of the valley floor. Further down the valley, around the village of Villamenor, the land was a sudden spring-like green. But the clouds that had suddenly gathered to give the land rain, had all gone now. The burning sky went on and on without the slightest cloud to break its metallic blue indifference.

Not even animals dared move. In the shadow of the grey wall, John Aylwin lidded his eyes and let the past of this area flood back into him. He was letting himself change towards the original form, muscles and sinews sliding against one another. He could only let this happen here, where nobody else came. If this happened slowly the change brought no pain, only a warm prickling. Drifting back into this place when it was a small Roman town, soldiers of Augustus's V and X Legions brandishing spears and swords; then through the slew of centuries haunted by fierce-grinning Arabs who held the land for seven hundred years, when it was still forest. Aylwin lay back, head against the rock, and heard the rumours of the millennia still humming in the stone. Hours later, when the rocks began to cool, he shifted slowly back to the shape people knew as 'John Aylwin' and began to walk down into the valley. Far away, sensing him move out from the shadow, a dog began to bark frantically.

The area has a sad history,' Pablo Sanchez said. 'In 1938 the Falangists marched ten of the town's finest young men up there and machine-gunned them to death. They stood them on the hill overlooking the Guadiaste so they could get one last look at their country. Then they killed the lot and threw their bodies down the old mine shaft.' Aylwin was not surprised. He had heard all these stories and more. Humans killing each other was hardly anything new. Not to him, who had been face down in mud and corpses, back when. Now behind the bar once again, chest and thighs still tingling from the change to human form, he said nothing and occasionally looked at the television blaring high up in its corner. Sanchez had had it put in last year—the first set in the village—and was exceptionally proud of it.

Not that Pablo Sanchez was proud of much else. He had grown fat in the years Aylwin had known him. He had his wife Angela, and a son and a daughter. The son had gone to Germany, but the daughter, now she was a different matter. The village youths were pining for nineteen-year-old Consuelo, but she belonged to John

Aylwin. As she should, for they had been married for a year and a half.

Whenever he lay awake at night, John Aylwin would hallucinate rain against the shutters. The sound comforted him somehow, even though he had never been able to bear what it brought with it. Even though it was something he had not heard in fifteen years. It spoke to him of Passchendaele, now so many years ago, when deafened by shell blasts he'd clung to the trench wall as the trench slowly filled up with mud, and rain, and more rain. The endless rain.

In summer, irrigation pumps flung their lazy arcs across the brown fields like a line of men pissing; in spring the Guadiaste grew from a muddy trickle to a cascade of green water. But it never rained. Out where the village of San Isidro became a waste of barracoons and tumbledown huts, there was only brown scrub, stretching past the thorn bushes, a carpet of undulating brown until the land soared up into the enigmatic grey-blue of the Sierra de Aracena.

In the evenings the farmers came into the bar to cool their parched throats with rough, red local wine. Dry brown men of a dry brown landscape, who still called Aylwin *El Ingles* though he had been here the last fifteen of the twenty years San Isidro had been without rain. He was EJ *Ingles,* even though he had changed himself slowly, so as not to arouse suspicion; become shorter, broader and darker. Now those passing through would not make an Englishman of him unless they detected a faint accent behind his mastery of the dialect. But the rain. What rain? None for twenty years; that was why Aylwin came here, when his hatred of rain grew so that he could no longer leave home if the slightest drizzle spattered the streets. When every drop of rain took him back to the dead men in the trenches, and the men who should have been dead screaming on the wire. And rats, grown fat on German and English corpses. And rain, and mud.

He left the Kin without a farewell, setting out on his travels as though he meant to come back. He wandered here and there and then, after hiding from another war in some ways even more terrible, he

was in Spain. Here too they had lived in trenches and seen their friends blown to pieces. In this, John Aylwin found some kind of kinship with them. By the year's end he had reached the village of San Isidro and was working for Pablo Sanchez at the Bar *del Telon* on the village square.

Early morning. At seven, just after Aylwin opened up, two *Guardia Civil* came in on their usual patrol out of Llera. They took coffee and sat at the end of the bar while Aylwin prepared the day's food, *chorizo* sausage and refried beans and *tortilla* and empanada. Aylwin relied on the *Guardia* as much as on the radio for news of the world outside. These two men were almost old friends to him; though he could not quite be at ease with the representatives of Madrid, these were local men, slow, tough, easy humoured, relying on presence rather than force to keep the peace which they valued as honestly as anyone else.

'Still no rain?'

'Now what do you think, Felipe?'

'I think it never will.'

But they had been hearing rumours, tales from other villages, stories that Catholic Spain should have been ignoring. Sergeant Felipe Garcia had been in Castaneras when the rain dancers had gathered. They had done no good—it still hadn't rained—but in Villamenor, it had. Aylwin got the rumours from these men, too. They were worrying. Superstition, yes. Calling down the rain. That was the last thing Aylwin wanted; not just because of his hatred of precipitation of any kind, but also because such a gathering might be the first beginnings of something less welcome.

'How many are there?' he asked casually, watching the plume of coarse smoke from the tip of Felipe Garcia's cigarette rise and dissipate in the morning air.

'Just the one man,' Sergeant Garcia said. 'But in every village he gathers more followers. People are desperate for rain, Juan.'

'We've lived without it,' Aylwin said. 'Government irrigation programme and all that.'

'But,' the Guardia said, 'we are dying without it. You remember. The land used to be greener, when you came here.'

'I came here hoping to avoid rain,' Aylwin said.

'Well,' Garcia said, 'I should be careful if I were you. When Letamendi gets here. And he will.'

'Careful?'

'Yes, careful. I'm your friend, I'm not threatening you. Just suggesting.'

Aylwin wondered. The possibility came to mind of Letamendi's pitchfork-wielding hordes, or so he imagined them, stringing him up and running him through for stopping the rain falling.

'What do you know about Letamendi?' he asked.

'Not much,' Garcia admitted. 'Complainer, I suppose. But we can't drag him in; he's caused no actual trouble.'

'I don't suppose the Church likes him very much?'

'The Church?' the other *Guardia* wondered. 'They support him. There are those who say Letamendi is a priest, or was. That he gets the priest on his side to start out with. I don't know. A lot of people say a lot of different things.'

In San Isidro, that meant Father Duarte. Maybe it would be time to go and see the priest. Ask a few questions.

The Guardia finished their breakfast and went out to their patrol car. The engine cracked into life, droned out into the silence of the village morning. Aylwin poured himself a glass of coffee and drank it, troubled.

Letamendi lay asleep in the shade of a fig tree. Beside him a half-full bottle of rough local wine warmed slowly; on his other side a young girl, looking fifteen years old, slept trustingly, keeping him company. Elena had not left his side since the first village he had tried to bring rain to. She found the stranger exciting and dangerous, and of course a worker of miracles. He told her nothing more than he told anyone else; he had brought back the old religion's dances and incantations, stood a hundred people in the village square and made it rain. No wonder he was held in superstitious awe. As he slept, occasional passers-by stopped to gaze upon the miracle worker. Some made the holy sign upon their

bodies; one old man forked two fingers to his eyes to ward off the Evil Eye, and went on his way muttering about bru/o. Those who, despite Letamendi's own words, had followed him to this, the third village of his rain-making, crept about and stole glances.

Letamendi's dreams were momentous things: rolling waves of surf crashing through the ancient city at the mouth of the Guadalquivir, walls and towers poking through the surface of a sullen sea. A long time ago; but not so long for the memory of his tribe. Water, and more of it. He had met the men responsible for irrigating this dry, poor corner of Spain; honest men, solid working men, but not his people, not at all. They could bring water—but water itself, vital as it was, trickling from rusty pipes, prosaic, gushing from old standpipes, was not rain. Besides, it had to come from somewhere, and the wells grew drier every season, the rivers less full in spring. Not the hellish opening of the sky to lash the dry, dusty world with liquid life.

And that was what he was dreaming of. He was of the old people, was Letamendi; his Basque name told you that, but his people had been there even before the Basques, or so his father had said, who had taught him the secret dances he was now bringing to the people of south-western Spain. They didn't need them in the north, where enough clouds built up on the southern flank of the Pyrenees or drove in from the Atlantic. Up there Diego Letamendi had been no more than a factory worker, one of a family that haunted the interstices of a steel-grey town, the way its type had always done, keeping to the shadows where not too much might be said; and kept a weather eye on its own folk. Diego wanted nothing of it. Down here he winked a gypsyish eye and became a doer of miracles.

Oh, literally so, now. The village of Villamenor was green; the fields swarmed with flowers and lush grass. A miracle, if you liked; though the Church, much as it would have liked to draw the Pope's attention to its sudden luck, muttered dimly about God's ordered plan being no miracle, and said Mass on Sunday as usual. Corn and grapes would grow now, where none had grown for ten years and the people had lived off growing olives and figs. A living, but only for the very poor, and those who were determined or prepared to stay. As it still was in San Isidro. Some claimed it had also rained in Castaiieras and Pueblo Martires; but there, Diego Letamendi had led the dance and the sky had remained resolutely dry. When he came to Villamenor the heavens opened.

An aeroplane droned over the hills somewhere in the distance, dropping water on the fires that had raged in the Sierras all summer. Letamendi heard it in his sleep and smiled.

Father Teobaldo Duarte didn't have much to say to Aylwin. The old man, as brown and dry as most men of San Isidro, spoke to Aylwin in his sacristy. His voice was always surprising; from the ancient, parched throat came a round, reverberating voice, a real sermon voice as the men of Aylwin's home village used to say.

'I don't believe in it,' Father Duarte said. 'Yes, miracles happen. But why God would spend His time sending rain down to one little village after another when so much of the world is turning to desert, I can't imagine.'

The villagers think it's a miracle,' Aylwin said. 'And they call Diego Letamendi a miracle-worker.'

'Superstition,' Duarte said, grimly. 'Oh, the rains follow him, but what might follow the rains, eh?'

'Precisely, Father.'

Duarte looked keenly at his visitor. He was sure Aylwin had looked more like an Englishman when he arrived; fair-haired, tall, red-faced. Must be the sun and wind, like it was for all of them. He remembered stories he'd heard years ago, stories which themselves seemed like the superstitions he was lambasting; but stories which for all that might just as well be true. Then what had made Aylwin run this far, to this little place everyone else wanted to run from? So much that there were only the old men now and the very poorest families? Father Duarte wondered.

'Don't worry about that,' the priest said. 'I'm not going to throw my church open to Letamendi and his flock. Elijah, praying for rain; do you think I haven't? But Man proposes; God disposes. We shall see what's what.'

Aylwin watched back. Assuming the priests of other villages had gone joyously to Letamendi's side, *what* likelihood was there that the austere Duarte would remain aloof?

Elena watched from the mouth of an alleyway. In the main square of San Isidro the people were

milling, hustling to and fro among the market stalls that no longer overflowed with fruit and vegetables, but where poor and scurvy produce was sold. A boy of Elena's age watched her as she watched, with brown, expressionless eyes, then looked away again.

It was no matter. Elena was safe, under the protection—she knew—of Letamendi. Whatever he was. He wasn't Weerde but he wasn't human, not as she understood it. She, too, remembered stories, and for the moment did not much care. If she did not want these humans, these cattle on two legs, to see her they would not. They could look through her. But the youth watching her; was he one? She thought not. He was another of the Kin. Elena did not sense many of them here, and if her intelligence proved correct some of them had moved into the daytime with the humans, had lost the special edge to their senses that had allowed the Weerde to survive this long.

Not Elena; and not Letamendi. She had survived the winnowing of Franco's post-Civil-War clean-up around her native province of Valencia and walked back into her home village when it was no more than a burned-out shell. Even the poor end of town where the immigrants, the gypsies and her own people lived was gone, bodies heaped in the white dust of the street. Among the bodies was the rest of her family.

While the international community squawked genocide and did precisely nothing, Elena took the road west. Not looking for anything in particular, not even looking for others of the Kin. The families of the southern towns were either dead or in hiding. She begged for food and money; in Cordoba she hung around the railway station at midnight when the huge expresses steamed in, to meet the soldiers coming home on leave. They took her among the freight cars in the marshalling yard and did things to her she really didn't care about. She changed herself to make herself more appealing, to cadge a few more pesetas from them. She stayed looking fifteen even though her age was now closer to thirty. Only once a soldier looked into her eyes as he was pumping and recognized her for one of his own people. He did nothing but kiss her, pay her, and leave. Then it was his mate's turn.

And as the years rolled on she came to Extremadura, beyond which there is Portugal and not much else. She met Diego Letamendi, descendant of the Cagots of the Basque hills. Those same people the Weerde had driven almost to extinction so many thousands of years before. Elena was barely aware of that part of history though there were songs about it, and the oldest of the Kin spoke at length of the 'flatheads', of the powers they had and the alarm they caused all those years ago. It was nothing Elena knew, or cared about much.

Others followed Letamendi; in some places he walked the dusty roads with a capering crowd a few paces behind him, but he preferred to be alone, and so when his devotees came to the next village he bid them go back, and he strode in on his own. Except for Elena. The villages were desperate for rain. Letamendi was never short of them. Others had rediscovered the old dances in their despair, willing to turn to anything. But nothing worked; until Letamendi went to Pueblo Martires, then to Castaneras, where he escaped the people's disappointment with a swift departure. Then he went to Villamenor, where the rain came to him. This, he said, was the blessed land. The village suddenly flocked with refugees from the still dry heartland.

Elena ran back along the hard mud road to Villa—

menor where Letamendi was still resting beneath his tree, watching her as her shape grew out of the heat-hazed distance towards her, and she flung herself down against him.

'Well,' he said, pulling her towards him. 'What have you seen?'

The people,' she said equably. 'But there is nothing to be afraid of.' She watched for a reaction in his eyes; deep-set eyes, big irises as black as the pupils.

'Nothing at all,' Diego Letamendi told her. 'What did I tell you?' He unfastened his trousers, raised her skirt, and drew her down upon him.

In the bar at San Isidro, Aylwin was serving customers when the boy slipped in as quietly as he could, not looking at anyone; he was silent, thought half-witted by the men and youths who drank in the bar. He reached the bar amid their sideways looks. Nobody quite trusted him nor the rest of the Perez family, who lived in an old house on the edge of the village in quite un-Catholic conditions, people said. It was possible, Aylwin thought, that the villagers could also sense the unsettling presence of a Weerde; in

which case, why don't they object to me? Probably because John Aylwin is foreign and they expect foreigners to be strange.

Joselito jumped to a stool and pushed himself across the bar towards Aylwin.

'He's coming,' the boy said.

Aylwin looked at him closely.

'You're sure, Joselito?'

'The girl who goes with him? She was here, looking around. Trying not to be seen. But I saw her, Juan.'

'Did anyone else see her?'

'None of the people. Nobody else would know.'

'They wouldn't. No.' Only, John Aylwin thought, because none of them had been told. This was a very old story maybe the grandmothers knew. But as soon as San Isidro knew the rain man was coming, they'd listen. Some had gone already, but most stayed, listening, waiting.

That afternoon Aylwin did not head into the hills as he had the previous day. He and Consuelo went to bed, and after they had satisfied their bodies Aylwin drowsed in the cool of their bedroom and Consuelo read poems, mostly for herself, but sometimes out loud to her husband. She was sitting cross-legged on the rush mats of the floor, wearing nothing. The fibres dug ridges into the soft skin of her buttocks. Later her husband would smooth them out with fingertips and kisses. 'Listen to this:

And it will rain. Grandmother Muntala is keeping the sun in the cupboard of had weather, among *the lace* woven by the /lingers *of Sinera.*

Very appropriate.'

Aylwin felt little when faced with this; what did these people know?

'I've better lines,' he replied slowly, his voice hoarse with the desire for sleep.

Some ancient faith opened the doors to its crypt; now the saints and devils dance *together* among *the* horses *of the sea drawing the carriages of the dark.*

'You believe that?' Consuelo asked, quite evenly; she did not believe nor disbelieve it. Brought up in the faith of Rome, she knew there were some things you shouldn't tamper with, 'Like the Monsignor says, "If God meant it to rain here He'd send rain. Not someone like Letamendi."'

Consuelo ran over the lines in her mind and shuddered. Her affection for poetry was something rare where she lived; something of her own, that her husband could not quite understand. She had read Lorca from cover to cover several times, and Hernandez and Machado, before discovering the delights of Espriu; a far darker voice, not even written in Spanish to start with. But once she'd introduced John to this poet, he seemed to click on to a fellow-feeling. He shared something of the strangeness of the Catalan poet. It was that quality of his she could not define, that she was sure was not just due to his being foreign. After all, he was a man of San Isidro now, just as much as anyone else.

Consuelo leaned against her man, and he put his arms around her neck, hands reaching down to her breasts, and kissed her hair. Consuelo sighed, arching her head back until John could curl round her and kiss her lips. The poetry forgotten, she opened her mouth to his tongue as he slid down against her and his hands found her thighs.

In the late afternoon people were standing around the village square, by the church doors, and under the town hall clock as if to show how heavily time hung upon their shoulders. The men talked about football and the lottery; the women talked about any one of their number not present. Children ran and kicked footballs in the dust. A farm truck rattled into the square and out again, towards the hills. In the Bar *del Telon,*

John Aylwin and Pablo Sanchez sat behind the counter, watching the people go by.

A long black car drew silently into the square. It was different enough for conversations to falter, eyes to turn, indiscreet fingers to point. It was low and wide, and the windows were blacked out. It drew to a halt by the church. The rear door opened and a man stepped out, tall and thin, dressed in a dark suit and with his eyes hidden by dark glasses. Without a look to either side of him, this individual climbed the church steps and entered, leaving a bemused silence behind him. Sanchez looked at his son-in-law for an inquiring second.

‘D’you think he’s from Opus Dei?’ he wondered.

‘Of course. I wonder what they want with Don Teo-baldo?’

‘Whatever it is,’ Sanchez said, ‘if Madrid starts nosing around here, life won’t be happy.’

‘Oh I don’t know; we might get some money out of them.’

‘Not from those bastards.’

John Aylwin was still watching the closed wooden doors of the church, the grey stones with their inscription JOSE ANTONIO, the stone saints, San Isidro and Santa Josefina, both looking constipated. Consuelo claimed they looked that way because they were repressing screams of horror at the squalor around them. Either at that, or at the atmosphere of chill authority that cloaked the well-dressed man who came out of the church half an hour later. He climbed back into the car and was driven away. Despite the looks of loathing on the faces in the square, nobody moved nor said anything until the limousine was well out of sight. On the wall of the town hall, last year’s Falangist poster—XXV *ANOS DE PAZ*—was slowly peeling away.

As the Pegaso limousine pulled out of San Isidro on its way back to the city of Badajoz, Javier Castillo y Cid watched from its back seat for some glimpse of the roving blasphemer he was trying to track down. He had been to Villamenor; yes, it was blooming: leaves on the trees, long grass in the fields, flowers by the roadside. And it was completely incomprehensible. Miracles happened, but not to poor villages in Extremadura, and certainly not to roving Basques of uncertain parentage and even more uncertain abidance by the law. He had spoken to the *Guardia Civil* and they couldn’t stop him. Castillo suspected they were as keen as the villagers on getting some rain, no matter what they had to do for it. Rural policemen were rural first, policemen second. Castillo lit a cigarette.

Nobody in Villamenor had spoken to him; no more than they had to. The priest had expressed sorrow at the superstitious goings-on, but—understandably—delight at the outcome.

This man Letamendi must be stopped!’

‘Why? He did us some good. Who are you, Don Javier Castillo y Cid,’—his full name delivered like a sneer—‘to tell us what the Good Lord wants and does not want?’

In San Isidro, Don Teobaldo Duarte had been less impressed by Castillo’s Opus Dei credentials than any priest he had yet met. The man simply did not respond to threats. Unlike Villamenor’s incumbent, he was quite in agreement that the rain dancers posed a danger. However, he was less clear as to what the threat was. Not blasphemy as such; Castillo began to wonder whether Duarte was as superstitious as the rest of them.

‘You think God will strike him down?’ Castillo asked, disdainful.

‘I think something will strike us down, if we don’t stop him. And it’ll be something a lot less pleasant than the Lord of Hosts. The Lord of the Flies, you know that phrase? In the original, Baal-Zebul, or Beelzebub? Well then. I am an old man, too old to threaten, and I do not care for your Opus Dei nor for your General Franco. But I do care about my village, and do not want the Malign One taking an interest in us, so I shall deal with it, be assured. I know these people, and I won’t let you down. The Church has ways, believe me.’

Thank you, Don Teobaldo.’

The car gathered speed, heading out of the dry lands. Castillo puffed at his cigarette and closed his eyes.

By eight, the *Bar del Telon* was almost full: locals coming in off the fields to pour wine down their throats. Two men in their thirties, thin, brown men wearing patched clothes that looked as old as the bodies wearing them, sat by the bar and Aylwin passed them a flagon of wine.

‘What did the man from the city want, huh? Coming sniffing around our church.’

‘Serves them right, the Church. Priests getting in everywhere. Putting their noses in where they aren’t wanted.’

‘Ah, you leave Don Teobaldo alone, Carlos. He’s a good man. And he’s a village man. I suppose you’d go along with those pagans who are doing rain dances up by Villamenor?’

‘Have done rain dances, you mean. They worked, didn’t they? Have you been along there, Pepe? Eh, Juan, what do you think? Did they work, his dances?’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Aylwin said, leaning over the bar. ‘It’s all chance.’

‘We’ll see when he gets here. Tomorrow, they say.’

The conversation led on to other subjects and Aylwin went back to serving wine, joining in discussion of football teams and bullfighters, keeping an eye out for strangers. Towards nine-thirty, while he was preparing food, there was a murmur in the bar. Expecting some stranger passing through, or even—could it be—Leta-mendi and his people, Aylwin put down the knife and went towards the noise. Young Joselito Perez was making his languorous way to the bar.

‘Hold, *amigo,*’ said Aylwin, shaking the boy’s hand. Joselito grinned, and asked for a beer.

‘He’s on his way,’ the youth said, drinking. ‘Letamendi is coming. Now.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Sure I’m sure.’ Joselito smiled whitely. ‘He’s coming up the road from Villamenor. Aunt Soledad said so. She just came back from buying tomatoes in Villamenor market.’

‘You’re telling the truth, boy?’ Carlos asked, virtually knee to knee with the Perez lad.

‘What did he just say?’ said Pepe. ‘You leave Joselito be. At least I can trust what he tells me.’ He grinned past Carlos at Joselito and made an expression of doubt in Carlos’ direction. Then he turned round, filled his lungs, and stated loudly without shouting:

‘Letamendi’s on his way, lads!’

The result was a hail of mixed cheers and abuse. Some people darted out into the square to watch for the man. Most stayed where they were to wait for events. Joselito finished his beer and ordered another. Rodolfo Sanchez turned to his cousin Jorge and drove a fist into Jorge’s left eye, then the cousins simply went on drinking.

The evening went on. John Aylwin started in on a conversation on the relative merits of matadors Ordonez and Curro Romero. Consuelo passed among the tables serving food. Much wine was drunk. But every eye was watching, every ear was cocked to the rumours from the dust road.

At the edge of town Diego Letamendi strode slowly up that same road, past the tumbledown barracoons, the corrugated iron shacks, mostly abandoned. He crossed the old wooden bridge over the cracked mud bed of the Guadiaste. A few yards behind him—for Letamendi wanted to make the approach alone—walked Elena, also listening to the voices of the evening. And in the shadows behind her were other figures, people of Villamenor come along to see what would happen.

As the travellers advanced into San Isidro, curious inhabitants came out to look at them. Some of the Perez family crowded out of their dilapidated brick house, chattering. Families on balconies leaned down and called to each other. Diego Letamendi waved to some of them. A youth of the populous Sanchez family called out to Elena, and she tossed back her hair and blew him a kiss. Soon he was down in the street and walking beside the girl.

And not only him. From doors and alleyways the people of San Isidro came out, converging on the village square. People who had been working the dry land all day and whose only respite was a bowl of beans and the sleep of great exhaustion before they rose at sunrise the next day. Twenty, maybe thirty of them strode into the square like a procession, fanning out as they faced the church and the town hall.

‘Is anyone going to wake up Don Teobaldo?’ a voice called.

‘Let the old buffer sleep,’ another said. ‘We want rain and no priest is going to stop us.’

Then Letamendi, standing in the middle of the square, folded his arms and addressed the crowd.

‘We shall start at dawn tomorrow,’ he said. ‘But now I am going to drink a skin of wine and prepare myself.’ With that he headed for the Bar del Telon. Three of the locals followed, among them the lad who had called out to Elena, but the rest softly and silently vanished away, back into the darkening streets.

Diego Letamendi strode between the tables and presented himself at the bar.

‘Wine,’ he demanded with his most pleasant smile. But as he made eye contact with John Aylwin a dark look flashed between them and Letamendi felt his teeth settle in their sockets, the muscles around his jaw begin to bunch in preparation for fight. This lasted but a second; then he took the goatskin flask and went to sit by the wall, his followers around him.

Through the evening John Aylwin supplied the Basque with more wine, but Letamendi did not appear to grow more than mildly drunk. Towards one in the morning Consuelo announced that she was going to

bed; Pablo and Angela had already gone, so Aylwin was there to see to the handful of remaining customers on his own. Aylwin kissed her softly on the mouth and she left.

One by one the followers drifted away. The last customers took their leave and went out into the cool of the night. Elena went off draped around her village boy. Neither of them were due for any sleep that night. Aylwin came round from the bar and sat facing the one remaining customer: Diego Letamendi. With him he brought a fresh flask of wine.

'Well, Letamendi,' Aylwin said, finally.

'I don't need to ask what you're thinking,' Letamendi said, amiably. 'I can tell. It's all over your face.'

'You should know. You know what you risk by doing these dances?'

'Legends,' said Letamendi. 'Nothing more. Tales you scare your kids with. A justification for your killing off our people: my people.' Letamendi stretched with a brief, animal movement, for an instant his lips drew back from his teeth and there was a flash of the ancient face, canines bared. This was the face of the old enemy, Aylwin thought. The ones they had lured to extinction in their thousands at the hands of *homo sapiens* sapiens, turned them from fellow-humans into something demonic and to be destroyed.

'You,' Letamendi said, 'did for our people once, and you won't again.'

'Because you nearly did for all of us,' Aylwin said.

'You drove us back,' Letamendi insisted. 'Back to living in caves, while the others built huts, then houses, then cities. To hiding, pretending. We weren't apes, you know. When people mention us, they're so busy with "Neanderthal" that they don't hear the "Man" that comes after it. We wore clothes. We had tools, songs, and we buried our dead. We had magic'

That, Aylwin thought, is why you had to be destroyed. Thousands. Like the trenches. Men dying on barbed wire, screaming. And the rain, the midnight rain. He shivered, and a tear crept from the corner of his left eye. It trickled down to his mouth and he tasted wine and salt.

'But,' Letamendi went on, 'how much hiding and pretending is it possible to do, eh? And how much nowadays?'

'We've always had to do that,' Aylwin said. 'We've always been in the shadows.'

'Not like now,' said Letamendi. 'With their numbers and regimentation. This Franco wants to take names, then maybe kill off anyone who isn't *Espahol y Catolico*. The Catalans, the Galicians—even though he is one—

and the Basques, and by extension ourselves. You can't imagine what he's going to do.'

No, Aylwin thought. Franco's *Falange* wiped out cultures, villages, peoples at the end of the Civil War, but it wasn't going to happen again. Not—he shuddered—the way it had happened to Letamendi's people thirty thousand years ago. But that had needed to happen. Their magic was too strong, it had too much of a grip on their people. The survivors hid among the Basques, themselves an ancient race of disputed origin who called Letamendi's folk 'the old people'. If Letamendi was allowed to carry out his plan in San Isidro or anywhere else, then there was only one consideration in Aylwin's mind: Consuelo. She was beautiful, sensual, gentle; she and John Aylwin loved each other with an intensity he had never known before. But maybe even she would not save him from the rain.

'Juan,' Letamendi said, 'why would you want to live here? Nobody is happy here.'

'I am.'

'Why is that?'

'Consuelo. And also, Diego, it does not rain here. That's why I came here in the first place. That I met Consuelo here just makes my life all the sweeter.'

Letamendi twisted his heavy-browed, bearded face into something that might have been a smile or a snarl and demanded more wine. Through the night they drank together, filling and refilling the wine flask from the cask in the back of the bar. Neither of them seemed to become drunk, but from time to time either Aylwin or Letamendi would fall asleep, then wake again to the sound of the other's voice. John Aylwin twisted inside. What could he do? Anything to keep from the rain. The rain, and the mud, and the rain. He drank again.

At sunrise, the two men stood up and walked out of the bar. A small crowd greeted them: maybe

fifty people, possibly more. Aylwin looked for Consuelo; she was not there. Neither were Pablo or Angela, nor Joselito, nor the priest. Aylwin stood back as Letamendi, raising both hands over his head, declared that they would go to the hill above the town to perform the dance. The crowd walked up the narrow, white rocky path that led upwards from San Isidro, through an area of thorn bushes and cactus, where an occasional goat nibbled thorns; through a fenced-in olive grove and past a stand of orange trees.

'It's going to rain,' Jorge Sanchez exclaimed, his eye now vividly bruised.

'Perhaps,' Aylwin said.

'Oh, you don't believe it?'

Aylwin was watching the dark figure of Letamendi ahead. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing to do. If he tried to stop Letamendi now he would be torn to pieces. All he could do was watch. He wondered where Don Teobaldo was, and if Consuelo were still asleep in bed, her dark hair fanned out on the pillow, so soft and warm.

Eventually Letamendi stopped the procession.

'Here,' he said. The dust-filled Roman theatre, overlooking the scorched valley. The people crowded round him, faces inquisitive. Aylwin stood by the wall where he had lain only two days before. Letamendi moved among the people, edging them into place, smiling, touching, exchanging words of greeting and instruction. Just like a priest, Aylwin thought. But Diego Letamendi made no effort to bring him into the triple circle he was building. There would be no point. Whatever was to be attracted would not sense anything from a Weerde. Even so, Elena went into the innermost circle, holding hands with her new boyfriend.

Ever so gradually the circles began to dance, shuffling sideways, the inner and outermost circles moving against the sun's course, the circle between them following the sun. And just as gradually the dancers began to give voice to a low moan, without harmony or rhythm. Heads low, they started their unearthly mewling; then threw their heads back so that they were looking directly at the pale dawn sky. Their feet scuffled through the dust and debris of years. One of the women convulsed suddenly, drawing a hooked leg up to her breasts, then planted it down again into the dust like a grotesque flamenco. Letamendi stood apart from the circles, head low, nodding approvingly. As Aylwin watched him Letamendi stripped off his shirt and trousers and stood naked, a heavy body matted with red-brown hair, hunched and smiling.

Well, Aylwin thought. The old enemy. We thought they'd all died. But we thought wrong. Maybe we knew, really, all the time.

Now Aylwin's right hand reached out and he took hold of a rock the size of his fist. He crept out from the shadow of the wall and skirted the circle of oblivious dancers. He drew closer, raising the rock, preparing to stove in Letamendi's skull; Letamendi saw him. With a snarl, he threw himself at Aylwin, knocking him in the chest and pushing him down. Aylwin hit the hard ground with kidneys, back and head. His world exploded into colours and lights. Letamendi stood over him for an instant, hatred blazing in his purple eyes. Then he turned back to the dancers.

As Aylwin lay with tears in his eyes, watching Letamendi lead the dance, he noticed a grey figure toiling upwards from the rocks bearing a box in his hands. Don Teobaldo. The priest reached the wall of the ruined *house* and, setting down the box and taking out its contents, pushed through the circle of dancers and flung himself at Letamendi. His speed was unbelievable. Aylwin saw him throw the contents of a small glass bottle over the shaggy figure, and raising a cross, begin to invoke:

Adiuro ergo te, nequissime *draco ... audi ergo, et time, Satana, inimice fidei ...*

Spectacular, Aylwin thought sadly, and good for old Don Teobaldo, but the rite of exorcism won't help us. Except that it did. Woken from their stupor by the familiarity of Latin, or Father Duarte's voice perhaps, the triple circle began to peel off from the outside. The shuffling horde began to snap back into consciousness, and looking towards the source of the commotion, saw their village priest being attacked by a creature from their oldest nightmares.

'iDemonio!' yelled Rodolfo Sanchez, grabbing his cousin by the arm and running towards Letamendi, who was holding the priest by the throat and beginning to squeeze. The two—both big

lads—pulled Letamendi's hands away, and Jorge punched him straight in the face. Letamendi took it almost without blinking. He returned the blow, knocking Jorge to the dust, and doubled Rodolfo up with a kick to the stomach. He stood over the two fallen men and faced the villagers. Then he saw his Elena at the edge of the mob in the arms of her village boy, her shift raised around her waist and her groin pressed to his. And the rest of the dancers, some fifty, were heading towards Letamendi, some bearing knives, others with stones.

Diego Letamendi groaned with despair. His luck had gone. He turned and ran past the theatre, all the time looking back over his shoulder to see if the mob was gaining on him. Then he ran straight into the old mine shaft. He had no time to realize what was happening until he was falling through darkness. His long scream echoed out of the earth, its echoes becoming more and more hollow, until after a seeming age the scream ended in a distant wet thud.

The villagers stood around the hole and gazed down. One spat into the darkness. Then they turned and walked back to see to the priest and John Aylwin. Aylwin was already kneeling next to the recumbent priest, a hand on the old man's brow. Duarte was fevered, but plainly not dying.

'I failed,' the priest said.

'No, Don Teobaldo. You succeeded.' He turned to look up over his shoulder at one of the village men. 'Help me carry him back to the village.' The farmer firmly moved Aylwin aside and beckoned to one of his mates, and the two hoisted the priest between them.

In a haze of confusion, the villagers headed back down to San Isidro. None of them could explain what they had been doing and none of them wanted to talk about it. In the dust behind them John Aylwin walked alone, stopping for one last look out over the valley. Somewhere, far away, slow thunder rumbled.

Years later, it rained.

What God Abandoned

Mary Gentle

What God abandoned, these defended, And saved the sum of things for pay.

Epitaph on an Army *of* Mercenaries, A. E. Housman

There had been no rain for a month and the ground was hot iron under Miles's bare feet. Running, his bones pounded the earth. He bled. Dust rose, choking.

'*—take him!'*

The camp stretched away, apprehended in a single moment of time smaller than sundial or chronometer could measure. All its white tents, pennons, smoke from the cooking fires in the sutlers' quarters, shouts of muleteers, bellows of drill and countermarch, sun, dust and heat blanked out, narrowing down to just two things: two yards behind him the ratchetting-cogwheel snarl of one hound; the other four dogs running silent, without breath to waste, jaws dripping white foam on to the dust.

Half a world away (half the camp away) there was the glint of sun on metal: great-barrelled cannon and ranked organ guns. Men played cards on an upturned drum in the meagre midday shadow of the artillery field. The provost's voice shouted again:

'Seize *hold* of him, rot your guts!'

Miles threw himself forward, legs pumping; healing muscular changes going on at cell level, fibre level ... To think, now, in the heat of panic; to change anatomies without meditation or preparation—predator's instincts cut in. His muscles hardened, swelled, and drove him surging forward. A dog snarled, heart-stoppingly close, and then swerved, its bay rising a register into distressed yelps at the changed flesh. It doesn't like my smell, Miles Godric thought, smiling despite everything. The bearing of teeth became a snarl and he held back the instinct to turn and rip the animal's throat out.

The hounds' smell was sharp in his nostrils, like vinegar or sta[1/^] wine. Below lay the slow burn of anger, his pursuers' pheromones on the still air. And below that the stench of the camp: sweat, undercooked food, bloody cloth bandages, gangrene and lice, wine, dung from the herds of sheep and

cattle and somewhere the smell of women, camp-followers with their scrawny arms deep in washtubs, the tang of menstrual blood so at odds with the blood shed in battle.

He loped, now, in a pace that ate up distance like a wolf's sprint, the tents and the open ground flashing by. His chest heaved deeply. The hounds fell back, outdistanced.

'Sanctuary!' He pitched on to his knees on the rutted earth, throwing his arms round the carriage of the nearest cannon. 'You're my countrymen—sanctuary!'

Sun-hot metal burned his cheek. He made his chest heave as if panting, dizzy with effort, releasing the sudden changes of flesh. As his body subtly altered, he clung to the culverin.

'Hand him over!' The provost, shouting. And the baying of his accusers:

'The witch! Give us the he-witch!'

'—demand the justice of the camp, and execution—'

*—1*11 gut him like a rotten fish and leave him stinking!'

'Sorcerer—man-lover!'

'Who do you want?' That would be the artillery master. John Hammet: the English mercenary and a stickler for camp law.

'He,' the provost said thickly. The big Englishman there. Godric.'

'He has right of three days' sanctuary, he has claimed it.'

Miles lowered his head, resting it against the barrel of the cannon, not looking round. The earth under his body breathed heat out, and dust whitened his shabby clothes, and a thirst began to rasp in the back of his throat. The provost's voice sounded, close at hand. 'Very well. Three days only. I know the sanctuary of the artillery fields—he must move no further than twenty-four paces from the gun, or he is mine for the high justice.'

The master of the artillery train chuckled down in his throat. He removed his pipe from his mouth and spat. The spittle hit the earth a yard from Miles's sprawled body, darkening the dust. 'Take him now and I'll take my guns out of the camp, I swear it on God's bones and the Virgin's heart. And then you may fight your next battle with your pike and shot, and may all the saints help you to a victory without us! Sweet Lord, ten weeks since Maximillian's paid us, and now you come sniffing about to maintain justice in my own camp—'

Miles rolled over and sat with his back against the culverin. A blazing blue sky shone, as it had shone for most of the summer. Bad campaign weather. Plague ran through the camp on little feet, taking more men to God than ever the King of Bohemia's muskets and pikes had. He wiped at his sweating forehead. The card-players had turned away and had their heads bent over their gambling again. He raised his head and looked up past John Hammet at his accusers.

The provost with his staff of office, a burly man with the veins on his cheeks broken into a mass of red threads, and warts on his hands. A dozen other men, mostly from his own pike unit. Familiar faces blank with a fear not shown in battle.

'I will station a man here to watch. Three days, you. Then broken on the wheel, before the camp drawn up to watch you.' The provost spoke in a slightly stilted English: a version of the camp patois that was part a myriad German dialects, part French, Spanish, Walloon, Pole and Irish.

'May God damn your soul, and may the little devils of Hell play pincushion with your balls.' Miles had the satisfaction of seeing the provost snarl.

The men turned away, muttering. Miles Godric could not help but look for those he would not see—the little French boy, beardless, hardly out of swaddling bands; his friend, who dressed as a southern German should but whose accent was never quite in one country for more than a day, and the big man that he had first seen after the battle a fortnight ago.

'Succubus!' a departing voice yelled. Miles suddenly felt chill sweat down his back. Sarnac's voice? John Hammet hacked at the dirt with the heel of his boot. His face was red, either from wearing good English woollen breeches and doublet in this hellish heat or else from anger. 'Is it true? Have you turned witch? God knows, the priests are burning enough of them now.'

Miles stared after the men walking away across the camp. The provost's leashed dogs bayed. His scent came to them still on this still air. His lip lifted a little over a sharp white tooth.

‘Give me a drink,’ he said, ‘good John, and I’ll tell you the truth, I swear.’

A week ago ...

... A warm night. Stars shone thick above the makeshift tent. They lazed half in the shelter of its canvas, protected from a myriad biting insects attracted by the warmth of their flesh, and passed bottles of sour wine back and forth as they drank.

‘But how will I believe you?’ the French boy said. ‘When master Copernicus proves that the great world hath the sun at its centre, and we and all the lesser stars move about it, and all this without necessity of star deities to guide the planets in their courses.’

Miles rolled over and took the bottle from him. A young man—face spoiled from handsome by pox-scars—with lively eyes and magnetic, sharp gestures. Miles was a little in awe of him: the admiration of the Weerde for a creative mind. The third, older man said lazily, ‘Was not what I showed you today sufficient?’

‘I have seen instruments for searching out the stars, that’s true, but I have seen nothing of what makes the stars move.’

The older man, who spoke slightly imperfect French (as he spoke slightly imperfect Spanish and Walloon, to Miles’s certain hearing) took a deep draught from the bottle. He appeared to be fifty or so; broad-shouldered, strong, and sunburned. Miles noted with half his attention that the man, Maier, did not grow drunk.

‘Love moves the stars, as the Italian wrote.’ Maier wiped wine from his thick, spade-cut beard. ‘Look you, master Descartes, you asked me for such wisdom as I can give, and it is this: there are correspondences between the earth and the heavens, such that all living things are subject to influence from the stars, and it is with the help of star talismans that I draw down influences and perform healings.’

‘And with such powers that you perform your alchemical experiments? You note I have studied your own Arcana arcanissima and *Atalanta fugiens,* master Michael Maier. And for all this,’ the boy Descartes said drunkenly, ‘you ask no pay. A sad thing in a mercenary army. Much more and I shall truly believe you one of that Brotherhood that travels the world secretly, apparelled in each country as that country dresses, cognizant of secret signs, and practising the occult arts. But we are not—’

Descartes’ beardless face screwed up in concentration, and he brought out:

[1]—we are not in an inn, neither are we under a rose.’

An interrupting voice took Miles by surprise so that his heart thudded into his mouth. The fourth man, Sarnac, said: ‘Rosicrucians, is it, now? And will you have our Maier a member of that secret Order?’

He bellowed a big, relaxed laugh. A look went between Maier and Descartes that escaped him. He has the intelligence of a bullock, Miles reflected. How can it be that I ...

The big man’s smell dominated the tent, blotting out all others. Miles lay on his pallet, picking at ends of straw; the breath shallow in his chest, breathing in, breathing in the male smell that dizzied him. He watched, in the campflre’s shifting illumination, the curl of a lock of hair, the fall of loose wide shirtsleeves and buttock-hugging breeches, the knotted bare calves, the shape of broad shoulders and belly and balls. Wanting to bury his face in soft and solid flesh. He reached across Sarnac. His hand brushed the man’s yellow-stubbled cheek as he grabbed a wine bottle, and the man swatted absently as if at an insect. Sitting up to drink, Miles shifted so that they sat hip to hip.

‘Give me room, can’t you?’ Good-natured, Sarnac elbowed him a yard aside with one hefty shove. Miles spilled wine, swore, and slammed the bottle down to cover the sight of his hands: shaking so that they could hold nothing. Sarnac stood, took a pace or two to the other side of the fire, and hitched down the front of his breeches. One unsteady hand grabbed his cock. A stream of urine arced away into the darkness, shining in the fireglow.

O wine *it* makes *you* merry, Sarnac sang, O wine, *the* enemy *of* women;

It gives you to them, it makes you useless *to them* ...

Michael Maier lay with his upper body in the rough shelter of two sticks and a length of canvas, so that his face was in shadow. His voice sounded from the darkness:

‘Come into Prague with me, master Descartes.’

Miles Godric belched. ‘What is there in a sacked city that we haven’t had already? The gold’s gone

to the officers, and there isn't a woman left virgin between here and the White Hill.'

Descartes ignored him. 'And see what, master Maier?'

The bearded man pointed a stubby finger. 'You came searching for that Brotherhood in which you profess not to believe. If I tell you what is old news, that the city of Prague has been the heart of Hermetic magic since the days of Doctor Dee, then will you believe me when I say there is enough yet remaining that you would wish to view it?'

'Bollocks!' Miles snorted. 'There's nothing left. The fornicating Habsburg Emperor's fornicating army's had it all.'

He settled back on his loot-stuffed pallet. The burghers of Prague had shown little inclination, last month, to stand a siege for their king after the battle of the White Hill. They threw open their gates to welcome the invading troops with indecent haste, but it did them no good: Maximillian of Bavaria and Tilly and the Imperial general Bucquoy ordered the city closed and gave the mercenaries a week to loot it bare. Truly, the troops should have robbed only the followers of the King of Bohemia, sparing those loyal to Habsburg Ferdinand; but questions are not asked in the heat of plunder, and Miles Godric had little German and the complexities of the German Princes' wars defeated him in any case, and Prague as it now was—burned, stripped, slaughtered and deserted—lacked only the scars of artillery fire to make it seem as if it had been taken after a six months' siege.

'Will you come?' Maier demanded of the boy.

Sarnac prowled back into the circle of firelight, his feet unsteady. He elbowed Descartes aside and went down on to his knees and fell into the makeshift tent beside Miles, face down, breathing thickly. The light shone on his white-blond hair.

Descartes said, 'Yes.'

'Don't leave without us,' Miles said. He studied the finger he had waved accusingly in the air with owlish curiosity. 'We'll come into the city with you. We'll come into ... what was I saying?'

He let himself slip back down on to his elbows, then rolled slowly sideways off his pallet, so that his back and buttocks rested snugly against Sarnac's chest, belly, prick and thighs. Somewhere on the border of sleep, he smelled Sarnac's flesh tense. The big man grunted, asleep and instinctive, throwing one arm across him, then rolled and kicked until Miles could only sit up, dazed, and say, 'You're a plague-take-it unquiet bedfellow, Sarnac!'

He lay awake and aching the rest of the night, not daring even to relieve himself in dreams.

Morning came welcome cold, the hour before dawn.

Miles stood with feet planted squarely apart, lacing the unfastened front points of his breeches to his sleeve—

less doublet. Between his feet, scabbarded, lay an arming sword and a foot-and-a-half dagger. The sixteen-foot pike that was most of the rest of his equipment still rested across two notched sticks, supporting the tent canvas. He absently picked at a rust spot on its blade with a pared fingernail. The fingernails he had not pared with a dagger grew white and hard and more pointed than might be expected. Momentarily he covered his face with his hands to hide the change of stubble vanishing and leaving him clean-shaven.

He buckled on sword-belt and sword. Dew damped down the dust. He squinted across the waking camp, seeing the French boy on his way back from the sutlers with his arms full of bread and raw meat. Miles turned to build the fire in the fire-pit hotter, sanded out the inside of his helm, and filled it with water to boil.

'Beef?'

'Beef,' the boy agreed, kneeling down and spilling his load on to the earth. 'Out of Prague. We didn't eat like this before White Hill.'

Experienced, Miles said, 'We won't eat like it in a month, so eat while you can. Did you hear aught?'

'The usual rumours. We're to strike and move towards Brandenburg, to catch Frederick's Queen who's there with child; or else march on Mansfeld's mercenaries—but he'll turn his coat if we offer him pay, they say—or else we're to sit here and wait while the German Princes decide which one of them'll rebel against Habs-burg Ferdinard this time.'

Miles grunted. The morning had brought no sign of the woman and two boys he'd hired as servants to carry his plunder. He suspected the company captain had added them to his growing entourage. 'I'd happily winter here.'

Prompt on that, Sarnac groaned inside the tent and crawled out with his fair hair all clotted up in tufts and sleep grit in his eyes. Miles reached down and, with the hand that would have thumbed clean those eyes and lashes, handed the big man a pot of mulled wine.

'Urrghm.'

'And God give you a good morning, also.' Amused, suddenly warmed and confident, Miles chuckled. He ruffled Sarnac's long hair roughly enough for it to count as horseplay, and walked a good distance from the tent to piss, standing for long moments cock in hand and squinting his eyes against the lemon-white blaze of sunrise. On his return (the smell of boiling beef rank on the air) he found Maier about, dressed, armed, and neat as ever.

He remembered, with one of the flashes of memory which come in the dawn hour, Maier elbow-to-elbow with him in the thick of the line-fight, his pike raised up to shoulder level, a yard of sharpened metal slamming into enemy eyes, cheeks, throats, ribs. Not neat then. Splashed red from chest to thigh, doublet and breeches soaking. A bad war, White Hill. The boy Descartes had vomited most of the following day, and Miles had also—but he could smell the gangrenous wounded two leagues away, and hear them too; and to excuse his reaction had drunk himself into a stupor and woken—yes, woken to find himself beside the big drunken Frenchman from another pike unit, a man in his thirties, smelling of sweat and grass and blood: Sarnac. Sarnac.

He rescued some of the beef from the boiling helm and gulped it down hot, ripping the fresh bread apart with his strong teeth. Preference would have given him raw fresh beef, too; but the teaching held that such habits were unsafe. He chuckled under his breath. As for what the Kin might say about this appetite ...

'God's teeth, man! You're not going looting without your comrades, are you?' Sarnac put his arm across Maier's shoulder. The bearded man (Swiss, could he be?) smiled. Young master Descartes sulked.

'Loot for the wit, master Sarnac, not the belly or the purse.'

'What difference? We'll come.' His gaze fell on Miles, and his brow creased.

'God save us,' Miles Godric crossed himself, 'let's go to the city while we may. Tilly's thieving bastards have been there again, but they may have left something for thieving bastards like us.'

Dawn began to send white light across the camp. Pennants flickered into life on the officers' tents. The harsh bray of mules sounded. The four of them threaded a way through the rest of the pike unit with its drudges, wives and servants; through musketeers, grooms, hawkers, children and quacks; past two sutleresses coming to blows over a stray sheep (Sarnac stopped to watch and Miles hung back with him, until the big man suddenly realized that neither Descartes nor Maier had stopped for the entertainment), and out through the ranked wagons that formed the military camp's walls.

Midmorning found them in Prague, picking a way over blackened timbers, across squares and alleys choked with debris. Miles found a chipped dagger and shoved it under his belt. The rest of the ground was picked clean. Only the stench and the bodies heaped up for the common grave remained in the city. Refugees dotted the countryside for leagues around. It seemed to Miles that wherever he stepped, flocks of crows rose up from the streets. He watched them wheel, wide-fingered wings black against the sun, and drop down, and stab their carrion beaks into sprawled limbs. Maggots, disturbed, rippled away like sour milk. The only things more numerous than the crows were the flies. He wiped his mouth clear of them.

This ...' The French boy waved a hand vaguely, as if he had lost his sight. This.'

Sarnac plodded back from the open door of an unburned house, empty-handed. 'Nothing! This quarter's been done over—I'll wager ten thalers it was that bastard Hammet's gun crews. I wonder they left food for the crows. Or if I heard they'd been selling this to the sutlers, and we eating it, it wouldn't surprise me.'

The boy retched and bent over, a thin trail of slime swinging from his mouth.

This way,' Maier directed.

Miles, hot in brigandine and morion helmet but not about to go even into a sacked enemy city unarmoured, followed the older pikeman down between two stone mansions and out into an open space.

The gardens of Prague had not been deliberately sacked, but fire had raged down from the slum quarter and made a scorched earth of the Palace grounds. Miles shaded his eyes, staring out across lines of blackened hedges at stumps of trees.

There is enough left yet. Master Descartes! Here.' Maier turned and walked to where a terrace stood, the stone blackened, and stood staring out across the ruins. Miles followed him. Descartes and Sarnac came some distance behind, walking out into the gardens, the boy with his hand on Sarnac's arm. Miles felt his chest tighten. He stripped off and threw down his mailed gloves, and swore.

The Order of which that boy speaks,' Michael Maier said softly, 'has its rules, which are these. That each Brother of the Order travel, alone, through what countries of the world he may visit. That he in all things dress and speak as a citizen of the country he is in, whatever it may be, so that each man shall take him for one of his own. And also that he shall teach, as he goes, and not take life; but that last—'

Maier frowned, dreamily.

'—that last rule is not so strictly adhered to as is said.'

Miles Godric flared his nostrils, catching no scent even of a feral line, and smiled, showing clean and undecayed teeth. Cattle sometimes imitate their masters, all unknowing. 'Are you a Brother of the Rosy Cross then, master Maier? I'd heard Rosicrucians infested Prague and are half the reason the King and Queen fell into exile. Not a safe thing to be if concealment is your rule. In this country they burn sorcerers.'

Maier grinned. 'And in this country, master Miles, they burn sodomites. I think your big man there will not consent to your desires. I think him a woman-lover only—well, they have their peculiar superstitions, these men.'

'Yes,' Miles said. He watched Descartes and Sarnac climb up on to the ruined terrace. The big man wiped his sleeve across his face, mopping sweat; Miles's teeth nipped his tongue.

'You may yet see the patterns of the knot gardens,' Michael Maier said, expansively gesturing. The sun flashed from his breastplate and morion helmet. 'Master Descartes, allow me to instruct you: *that* was the astrological garden, whose hedges grew in the shapes of the zodiac, and within the hedges the plants and herbs pertaining to each sign. *That* was the garden of automata, and *that* of necromancy—'

'Necromancy!'

'You cannot stand in a sacked city and baulk at the dead, young master.'

'But necromancy! But there,' the boy said, all his vitality momentarily gone, 'it is superstition, as my friend

Father Mersenne tells me; and the Holy Church would not allow its practice, even were it a real danger.'

Maier asked acidly, 'And does your Father Mersenne instruct you in logic?'

Miles left them quarrelling. Sarnac, idly wandering, hooked a bottle out of his half-laced brigandine and swigged at it, his back to the garden. Miles moved cautiously towards him.

Trails of soot blackened the masonry surrounding the garden. Something that might have been a rose-vine straggled up the wall, a dead bird crucified in amongst its thorns. Sarnac sat down with his back to the sun-hot wall. The harsh calls of crows drowned Miles's footsteps. The big man sat with his head thrown back, eyes closed. Dust grimed his corded throat. The bright curls of his hair showed under the battered morion he wore, the straps dangling loose; and sun shone through the golden hair on his chin and arms and bare shins, gleaming. A pulse beat in the hollow of his neck. Wine dried on his mouth and chin.

Cold to the belly, Miles sat down on his heels. Sarnac opened his eyes. Light shone in them, as in brandy: brown and gold. He half frowned.

'Sarnac' Miles swallowed. The cold hollow under his ribs remained, and the smell of the man made him feel as if the earth dissolved. He said, 'You must know I would lie with you.'

The briefest joy in gold-brown eyes; then Sarnac's face went blank, went white and then red. His

voice came thick with disgust. ‘You? The Italian vice? Sweet saint’s bones, you mean it for truth.’

Miles held up his hands in protest. He looked at his rough, calloused skin speculatively. ‘Please ... please. Listen. I’m not as men are.’

The big man burst out into a laugh that began in scorn and ended in revulsion. ‘So I’ve heard many say.’

‘Sarnac, have you ever seen me unclothed?’ He held the man’s gaze. ‘Or bathing in a river, or pissing?’

[4]No.’ Puzzlement on Sarnac’s face.

No, because you have been with the unit no more than a week. Miles bent forward, intense; he used the Frenchman’s own language. ‘Because of my great desire for you, and because you should not think me capable of an unclean sin, I tell you my secret. I am no man, because I am a woman.’

The big man’s mouth opened, and stayed open. His coarse brows dipped, frowning. A look began to come into his face: something between pity and lust and condescension.

‘A woman soldier? One of the baggage train, tricked out in breeches—no, but I’ve seen you fight as no woman can! Are you one of the mankind sort, then, aping us?’

Behind him, Miles heard Maier’s impatient raised voice: ‘But I cannot prove it to you here and now! You must wait. Whether you will or no.’

Softening his voice, Miles held Sarnac’s gaze. ‘No, I wish for the privileges of no man; I would not have manhood if it were to buy. It is an old tale. I have seen such played on the public stage in London—a woman in boy’s guise following her sweetheart to the wars. I dressed in male garments for safety and preservation of virtue and, when I learned he had died upon the field, stayed, and grew used to weaponry, since what else is left to me but to serve my Prince?’

A *very* old tale, Miles reflected sardonically. Sworn virgin warrior-maids are acceptable to him; this man had for countrywoman three centuries gone that Jehanne, who fought the English. Were I to say: I am a woman who loves fighting, who loves not the lordship of men, who will not wear petticoats—well then, Sarnac, would you lie with me? No, you would not.

Sarnac, still frowning, began to smile. ‘Are you truly a she?’

Miles let out a breath he had not been aware of holding.

‘Ay, ay, God’s truth, and I’ll prove it to you. Will you lie with me, and love me? Nay, not now, we’re observed. Secretly. Tonight.’

Maier’s voice sounded closer behind him, quarrelling with Descartes’ importunate questions; but Miles did not move, still sitting forward on his haunches, the tight cloth of his breeches hiding his erection.

‘Yes. Tonight,’ Sarnac said.

Habit kept Miles outside the camp, in concealment. He lay up in a burned-out cellar near the walls of the city, eating crow-meat and less palatable offal and at last sleeping the thick, heavy sleep of the change. Shifting subcutaneous layers of body fat, retracting testicles and penis, moving cartilage and hollowing muscle. Knowing what he would be when he woke.

The dark-lantern, its shutter half closed, made a golden glow in the cellar. Sarnac grunted. Straw dug sharply into Miles’s back. She rubbed the slick length of her body against his, her breasts against the rough hair of his chest; shifted so that his hips and elbows were more to her liking and wound her legs about his hips. He thrust, his penis finding obstruction (she had not, after all, forgotten the hymen) and then pierced her.

‘Ah-h ...’

Miles Godric made deep noises in her throat. She buried her face against his shoulder, smelling the sweet—

ness of his skin: sweat and dirt and woodsmoke. She bit at the bulge of muscle with her teeth.

‘Wildcat!’

He pinned her. She shoved her hips up, taking him deep inside her; the tightness of a new vagina not wholly according to her plan, but still she held him and thrust against his thrusts, and rolled over still holding so that she straddled him.

‘Damn, but you’re lively!’ Sarnac, sweating, leaned up to nuzzle and suck at her breasts. ‘Miles—no,

what do I call you? What's your name?'

'Jehanne.'

The word came out unplanned; Sarnac, his eyes bright and heavy, never noticed. He mumbled the name into her belly and pulled her down, one hand flat on the small of her back, pumping up into her.

'Woman!' he groaned.

She rode him as he climaxed, expecting nothing for herself, but the smell of him and days of wanting surprised her: she raked fingernails down his chest and bit his shoulder, drawing blood, with her own orgasm.

That day and the following she came back sweating and grinning from training fights, stepping lively and whistling, not caring who saw. For those who questioned she told tales of a rare treasure looted out of Prague.

'You should have something for this,' she said expansively to Descartes on the third day, sitting outside the tents. 'Didn't you fight at White Hill with the best of us? What will you take home to your sweetheart?'

The boy looked up from where he sprawled outside the tent. His deft fingers shaved a pen-nib, and a notebook lay open beside him. 'Pox, if I'm unlucky!'

'You're too young,' she teased.

'I was twenty-two when I left Paris,' Descartes said, naming an age precisely one third her own, 'when I joined with Maurice of Nassau's men. It being my thought that, were I to be with an army, I would as soon be with confirmed victors.'

Miles rubbed more carefully with oiled cloth at the blade of her pike until it shone. She laid it down on the earth and stretched, and lodged one ankle over the other and leaned back on her elbows, surveying the evening.

'Nassau's bastards win,' she confirmed idly. 'So what are you doing with Habsburg Ferdinand instead of the Protestants?'

'I belong to Holy Mother Church. It's Maier who's the Lutheran. He's the one you should question. Or,' he quoted a prevalent maxim, '"So we serve our master honestly, it is no matter what master we serve"'.

She squinted at the horizon, seeing thick pine forests darkening the mountains and, below them, white harvest fields burned black in the army's passing. 'You had that out of Sarnac's mouth.'

'Ay. Along with "In war there is no law and order, it is the same for master and man", and "He who wages war fishes with a golden net".'

The boy rubbed at his scarred face and rolled on to his side to look up at her. His small body had a kind of electric vitality to it; some spiritual equivalent of the wiry strength that made him train for the pike instead of (as he more properly ought) the musket.

'Master Maier showed me Tycho Brahe's famous astronomical apparatus, in the city, before the—before it was taken away.'

Miles snorted. 'Before the Rosy-Cross brethren had itr

'You don't believe in them.'

She shrugged, looking down a longer perspective of history than the human. 'I don't know what I *do* believe in, boy. I doubt, therefore I must think: and if I think, I cannot doubt that I am; what else is there?'

His eyes glowed. 'Much! Master Maier is instructing me. I write it all down here. Listen.'

In a sudden expansive affection for the boy and all the world, Miles Godric sat and sharpened the blade of her dagger, and listened to him declaim on analytical geometry, alchemical marriages, and other subjects not worth a penny beside the colour of the hair on Sarnac's belly.

On the fourth night Miles stayed in the cellar after Sarnac departed. The big man kissed her, left the lantern, and at the doorway turned with one last puzzled look.

'You should let me guard you back to camp ...' His voice trailed off. She could see in his face how he could not take in the idea of a woman who was neither to be raped nor protected against rape. 'Are you content, lass?'

Miles nodded. ‘I’ll return later, as I have before.’

She listened to him go, hearing his footsteps halfway across the ruined city. Owls shrieked and rats scuttled; and she curled up with her chin on her forearms, eyes dazzling in the lantern’s yellow glare. She reached out and extinguished it.

And for tomorrow’s drill? she thought. Sword and falchion I can use in this shape, and have; but for the pike should I change and be a man? The weight may be too much to bear ... And if not, still, there’s risk of discovery. Not as Family, but as woman, and then what? The baggage train, washing and whoring. I might stay concealed a woman soldier, as I have seen many *do*$_9$ *with* only a few of her comrades knowing and keeping secret. But too many of *my* comrades have already seen me male.

She was not a small thing, lying there in the starlight; only her skin was a little smoother for the layer of fat beneath it, cushioning the muscles. Her eyes gleamed flat silver like pennies. One hand stroked her breast, and she closed her eyes and slid down into the sleep of change. And so did not wake when they came.

‘But when will you show me? When?’

‘Soon! Be patient. You had patience enough to spend two years searching us out. Have a little more.’

The voices finally woke him. Miles shifted uneasily, rolled over, grabbed breeches and brigandine and—old habit of many night alarms—stood dressed and armed before he properly woke. The cellar was dark, the door outlined with silver. On silent feet he slid out into the ruined moonlit alleys, shaking his head against sleepiness and chill. Voices, familiar voices, but where? And he—Miles grabbed inelegantly, discovering himself awake and male. And the voices ... he slid the morion briefly from his head and cocked an ear. The voices were not as near as night-bemusement had made him think. But they were none the less familiar voices. Maier and Descartes.

He glanced at the constellations. Two hours to dawn. The way to the camp would be clear, and the dead-watch not prone to querying brother soldiers (if, indeed, they were not risking execution by dozing on duty). But then there was curiosity, and the question of what the French boy and Maier might be doing here, now, of all times.

Miles padded through rubble-choked alleys, silently climbing shifting, burned beams, avoiding pits, the pupils of his eyes wide and dark. The small winds of night brought him little but the stench of decaying flesh. For that reason he didn’t realize Maier and Descartes were not alone until he heard boots scratching at stone. Half an hour’s solitary backing and tracking brought him to where he could observe. He eased into the shadow of a fire-blackened tree stump. Dry ferns brushed his face. He eased up a little, looking over the bank, and blinked momentarily at the space opened up before him.

Far below, the river shone silver. The town ran up in steep banks to either side. No lanterns, no movement; the darkness shrouded destruction. Directly ahead, the towers of a palace rose up, almost untouched. The Emperor Ferdinand’s banners now draggled from its spires, and men were quartered in its far chambers; but this part, overlooking the formal gardens, had no occupants that his hearing could detect. The only living beings—four of them—moved in the gardens below. Miles slid on his belly over the bank and down, moving soundlessly despite armour, his dagger drawn and carried in his left hand, ready.

He moved silently through burned gardens, past a hundred blackened and overturned marble statues, into what had been the centre of a maze.

‘I had such dreams, last winter.’ The boy, Descartes, stood with his arms wrapped in his cloak, hugging it around his body. His sharp, uncomely face caught the full moon’s brilliance. Miles saw the moon’s reflected twin in his eyes.

‘Dreams. Nothing to do but winter over in Bavaria with the rest of Nassau’s soldiers, get drunk and have women. I wondered, why did I ever leave Paris? Why did I ever join the God-forsaken Protestant cause?’

Softly, so that even Miles could hardly hear him, Maier prompted: ‘But the dreams?’

‘Of the black art which is called mathematics.’

Enthusiasm in the boy’s voice, that faded with his next words. ‘I dreamed that mathematics answered

all, accounted for all, was all. That nothing moved on this breathing earth but mathematics could account for it, down to the final atom ... They were dreams of terror. They had no God in them, or if they did, removed far off and become watchmaker to the world: winding it up and leaving it until the end should strike. There was no magic.'

Unguarded, his French was of better quality than heard in the camp, and Miles with difficulty adjusted his ear to it.

'And then I began to read pamphlets published out of Amsterdam and Prague. The *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani* Rosenkreutz, the Fame—*Fraternitatis*. And broadsheet appeals to the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross to come out into the open, to share their secret knowledge of how the world works—how everything that is, is living and magical. *Everything*. How rocks, gems, trees and stars share souls, as men do. How the alchemical transformation can change all our spirits to gold, and bring again the Golden Age of which the ancients wrote! And how a great instauration of magical science will come on the earth, and the bond be knitted again between the Lutheran Churches and the Roman Church into one great Christendom.'

Someone sighed behind the half-burned hedges. A woman, Miles realized. He felt bare-handed to see what cover he lay on, detecting no twigs to snap; and slid up on to one knee and then on to his feet. He reached down and loosened his sword, thumbing it an inch out of the mouth of the scabbard.

'And all this is words!' Descartes' voice snagged on pain. '1 must have proof. Is there such a Brotherhood? Do you have such magical knowledge? And is it truth, or charlatan tricks?'

Miles flared his nostrils. The sweet stink of rotting flesh covered all other scents. He could hear heartbeats, indrawn breath; but the four of them so close blurred his senses, so that he could not tell where the last one stood, or how near he was to the woman. The moonlight blinded his night vision. Using an habitual trick he searched the shadows with only peripheral sight. There?

Michael Maier put his hand on Descartes' shoulder. He carried his cloak bundled over his left arm, leaving free the hilt of his military rapier, hood covering the glint of his helmet.

That is a poor world you have in your dreams.' Maier's voice softened uncharacteristically. His French was adequate, not as good as the boy's, but as good as his Italian, or Spanish, or (if it came to it, Miles knew) English. 'I will give you *magia* for your mechanical universe, if you will.'

'Magia?'

'Platonist magic, sometimes called the Egyptian or Hermetic Art. It is easier explained if you have first seen. Hold in your mind the thought that all you have read is true. I have stood in these gardens on the day when statues spoke with human voices and moved, inspired by the spirits in them; when the sick came and left healthy, and the dead with them—believe it—and the sacred marriage of the rose and the dew made bud, blossom and fruit grow upon these same trees all in one hour.'

Miles heard the rustle of cloth. He stepped easily between sharp twigs and pressed his hand over the woman's mouth, his dagger-point denting her skin. He pitched his voice to carry no further than her ear. 'Cry out and I'll rip out your throat. What do you hear?'

This close to her he smelled satin, sour flesh, dirty hair, but no fear whatsoever. Maier's voice sounded again and Miles could feel the woman strain to hear what came so clearly to him. Michael Maier said, 'All this through magia. All this because our souls and our flesh are one, and at one with the living universe. We are demiurges upon this earth, and all of it from stone to sea will obey us, if a man but know the prayers, words, actions and sacrifices necessary for it. We of the Brotherhood may speak to each other across vast distances, travel the sky and sea unhindered, heal, create gold and pray down the wrath of the Divine upon the Divine's enemies.'

Miles Godric showed teeth, amused: one of the Weerde hearing—despite the searing belief in the man's voice—the old lie from a human mouth. Descartes coughed. 'You may say so.'

Miles heard the fourth heart beat now, not so close as he had feared. A dozen yards away in the wrecked maze.

'I say so!' Maier shouted. The empty gardens echoed and Miles saw him look about, startled. More quietly, the burly man repeated, 'I say so.'

'But your true Alchemical Marriage, your Rosicrucian Kingdom to be founded here in Prague where

all this is to come about, where is *that* now—now that the city is sacked and the King and Queen exiled or dead?'

'That hope is not ended.'

The woman breathed hard against his body. Her hands hung limp in the massive folds of her gown. Stiff, starched lace rasped against Miles's face and he felt the small coldnesses of gems in her hair. Listening hard, he momentarily ignored the sensations of his skin.

A soundless blast lifted Miles and threw him.

Stone and gravel scarred his palms. The world dissolved. Miles shook, his mouth full of blood, head ring—

ing, hands and face afire. Mortar fire or cannon? His left hand hung bloody and empty; he did not recall drawing his sword but the fingers of his right hand locked about the hilt.

Neither sword nor shot, but the suddenly loosened power of a human mind seared the marrow in his bones.

'Maier!'

The voice he did not recognize as his: a bewildered and outraged child's shriek. He cowered, one hand over his head, sword thrusting aimlessly into the dark. Voices screamed and shattered around him; he stood up, and the sky laughed as his sight cleared. The night glowed blue.

Rich blue and gold, and the stars above were gone. The night sky over Prague shone with figures: planetary gods and zodiacal beasts, figures with swords and flaming hair, balances and spears, winged feet and bright eyes that shone no colour of the earth. The tides of power rocked the sky and Miles fell down on his knees. He stared at the spade-bearded man. He heard the French boy cry out, and could not tell whether it was in joy or terror.

'Maier!'

The older man laughed.

'What, Miles, you here? Well, then. See. See with clear eyes. Master Descartes, the Rosicrucian Kingdom is not ended, albeit the city has fallen. Look with clear eyes upon the Marriage of the Thames and the Rhine, the Winter King and Queen, Strength and Wisdom, sophia and scientia. Look upon the true Alchemical Union: Frederick the heir of the Germanies, Charlemagne's heir, Barbarossa's son; with Elizabeth the Phoenix Reborn, the daughter of Jacobus and heir of Gloriana, England's Virgin.'

The oldest of Weerde fears pierced him.

'Oh God I am most heartily sorry that I have offended Thee!' Miles buried his head down against his knees, mumbling. The hot stench of urine made his eyes water. He rocked, holding his bloody hand to his gut, gripping the hard hilt of his sword; even in this extremity giving to his fear the name humanity in this age knew. 'I am most heartily sorry; preserve me from the Devil; preserve me from Him who walks up and down among men; dear God, most holy Lord ...'

Maier's hands gripped his shoulder, shaking him. 'Miles!'

Miles Godric at last lifted his head. 'Is it you who are doing all of this? Don't you know you'll call him, you'll call the Devil down on us? On *all* of us?'

Maier, kneeling behind him, put his warm arms around Miles's shoulders. 'Is *that* anything to fear? Look.'

Miles whimpered.

The two figures walked out into the centre of the maze. A woman and a man. Now the sound of their hearts beat against his ears, deafening him. A man with a plump face, dark hair and soft dark eyes; dressed in cloth-of-silver doublet and breeches, the Order of the Garter at his knee, but crowned in nothing save rose-coloured light. And a woman in cloth-of-gold farthingale and stomacher and ruff, a fashion two generations out of date: her sharp-featured face the living image of a greater Queen. Frederick and Elizabeth: Winter King and Queen of Bohemia.

Not being human, Miles had only to gather his wits—thinking Yes, they escaped the battle!—to see the truth of it: a shabby man, a woman in a torn kirtle, their faces the pinched faces of refugees. The power that beat about them was not theirs. But a power none the less, that brought the beasts of the night—foxes, wolves, wild boar—creeping to their feet, eyes shining. The rose light gleamed with images

of lion and stag and pelican piercing her own breast. Fireflies darted across the suddenly hot air.

In the false, living tapestry of the night sky the Lords of Power bowed from Their thrones. Roses seemed to bud and blossom from the garden's blackened twigs. A petal brushed Miles and he shuddered uncontrollably, feeling it against his skin.

'How can they ...' The French boy knelt beside Maier, his face wide and wondering. 'How can they still be here, and their armies defeated and the city taken?'

'Because they are not defeated. Because they only await their time. Which I, and you, will help to bring about. Nay, speak to them, question them. I will be your warrant for it.' Maier stood and pulled Descartes to his feet. 'Come.'

The boy wiped his hair off his face, with the gesture seeming to take on years. He stepped forward. Something in his expression commanded: not the wonder, but the confirmation of knowledge.

'Is it so?' he said softly. 'And is it true, this union and this harmony?'

The woman spoke. 'Witness. We would *have you* witness, *for you are the child of* Our marriage. You *are herald to the ages to come of what* We *proclaim: the* union *of man and* beast, spirit and *matter, soul and* substance.'

The man spoke. 'Witness Us as We are. Yours is a great soul, such a pivot as the world turns on, and We have called you these two years that you should witness Us, and proclaim the Rose and the Cross openly to the world. So all men may he as We are."

To Miles's ears they mouthed rote-learned words badly. But the boy grinned, sucking at his still ink-stained fingers, and opened his mouth with the light of debate in his eyes.

'No!' Miles shielded his face with his arm. Shaded from that illusory light he could stagger to his feet, gain balance in the shifting world.

Time split now into clock-ticks, each one for ever, as time changes on the field of battle into a thousand nonsequential nows. He saw Their lips move, and Descartes' face shining. He saw Maier with arms folded, standing as a man stands who controls all circumstance. He saw the maze now blossoming with a hundred thousand red and white roses, their scent choking him with sweetness. And he heard, on the edge of consciousness, something else: the metallic clash of legions marching, lost legions, led by the Devil, and coming here to feed—he sobbed laughter—attracted like moths to a campfire. Attracted to the Light. Small whirling bodies crisped in flame ...

Miles Godric beat at his clothes with bloody hands. His sword fell, discarded, and stuck point-down and quivering, a bar of silver fire. The French boy took another step forward, holding out his hands. Miles strode forward and grabbed him around the body, lifting the boy and making to throw them both backwards away from Maier and his illusion of a mystical Marriage. Descartes struggled. The boy's head jerked around. Miles stared into his eyes: eyes as dark blue and wide as a child's. It seared into him, the origin of this force. Not Maier.

Not Maier, no more creative than a Weerde, but one of the human minds that is bound to change an age, whatever age it is born into; a mind only requiring, like a sun's beam, to be focused for it to burn. This boy's mind, tapped all unknowing, so that he spoke to the figures of his own desires—his own, and Michael

Maier's. Miles staggered, this close to the boy all barriers permeable now, even the barrier between soul and soul.

Memory filled Miles Godric: memory not his own. The Kin's memory. A vast coldness seared him, and a vast dark; and then the darkness blazed into a light more unbearable because in that light he saw one speck of dirt, himself, standing upon another speck of dirt which is the turning world; all circling a match-flame sun, one more in a swarm of firefly-stars. And between earth and suns, between stars and stars, such an infinite predatory emptiness and appetite that he whimpered again, eyes shut, himself and the boy curled foetally together on the garden earth, choking back tears in case they should be heard.

'*NoV* Maier screamed. His hands pried at Miles. 'No! Give him back to me! I want him for this—'

In a kind of battlefield calm, Miles knelt up and supported the boy across his thighs. He pried back one eyelid to study the boy's dilated pupil. 'Want must be your master.'

The approaching tread of the Devil's legions beat on his ears. Miles lay the boy down and stood up,

grasping and recovering his sword.

'Well, I will have him for this in any case, and damn you,' the older man said. His voice held all the blindness of human belief. He knelt down, efficiently scooping the boy up, the thin body slumping forward, and drew his knife. 'I've waited for this conjunction of stars—and They have waited also, my King and Queen there—and now I shall give Them what They need to make Them actual, in this world, for ever.'

The irregular tread rasped in Miles's ears. He rubbed one sweat-sticky hand across his eyes. Movement in the Rose Garden, now. The tread of legions ...

The moon, distorted by the boy's mind, made a false magia-light in the Garden. A white figure seemed to come into the centre of the maze, moving jerkily and swiftly towards Miles. The light shone on stone armour, full Gothic harness and stone sword, stone features; shone upon limbs where white marble flushed now with the rose-and-gold of incipient life.

Reacting instantaneously Miles feinted and slashed, backed two steps and then came forward, his blade swooping under the marble statue's sword and hitting with two-handed force where the armour gaped vulnerably under the arm.

His sword broke against the motionless statue.

His fingers fell open, numb. Metal shards shrieked and whirred past his face. He shouted, his voice ringing across the broken city gardens. Other white things appeared to move in the moonlight: all the stone warriors of the Garden, breeding like Cadmus's dragon's teeth.

Miles stumbled back, no longer sure what illusion might become truth, given such an outpouring of the mind's power. He caught a heel against Maier's outstretched leg and staggered.

The older man bent over Descartes, his dagger carefully bleeding a vein in the boy's left wrist. With the blood and his fingers, he drew sigils on the hard earth. The spirals of psychic force tightened, tightened, building higher. Miles saw the boy's eyelids move and finally open, saw him look up into Maier's face; saw him realize the open conduit, his soul drained to power visions, illusions, that Maier demanded become reality. The boy shrieked.

Tut an end to this.' Miles kicked Maier accurately and hard on the side of the head. The older man's dagger stabbed up and pierced his thigh. He sat down heavy, staring at the bleeding. Maier groped around for the boy's arm, and Descartes crawled crab-wise away from him on the burned earth.

'Stop it. *While we yet* can.' Miles hoisted himself up and sat down again heavily, one leg no more use to stand on than water. He began to drag himself towards Maier.

Roses seemed to grow up from the ground and twine around his legs and arms. Their thorns bit deep into his flesh. He threw back his head, teeth gritted, straining. The vines held. Twisting, for one second he found himself staring into what he had avoided seeing.

In the heart of a rose-and-gold light, two naked and winged figures are embracing. Man and Woman, they are becoming more: draining the power of a human mind to become Lion and Phoenix. Their faces are radiant. They are a beacon of joy.

A beacon that can be seen for how great a distance?

Miles Godric lifts himself up again, as the rose-brambles bind him to the earth. The ground shakes with the approaching tread of legions. A yard or two away, Michael Maier picks up his dagger and positions it under the French boy's ear; lifts his elbow to thrust.

The night explodes.

Nose and mouth bleeding, head ringing, eyes dazzled with the vanishing of a Light beyond all lights, Miles Godric lies among tangled dead briars and watches the moonlight shine on battered helms, scruffy brigandines, one smoking musket, halbards, and the excited faces and shouts of Maximillian of Bavaria's army.

'What was it, a quarrel over loot?' Sarnac shifted his body, pulling Miles's arm further over his shoulder. Miles slumped against the big man. 'Christ's bones, I didn't think there was enough left in the city to burn! You could see that fire clear from the camp.'

'Fire?'

'It's gone now. Odd.'

Miles felt the cold night air sting his face. He glanced down. The moon's light showed him dark patches on his breeches and hands, and his leg was still numb. He groped at his head. Something sticky matted his hair.

'I don't ...'

Only moonlight. Grey matter and dark liquid spattered his doublet. The memory of a musket-ball taking off one side of Michael Maier's head came back to him and he tried with a dry mouth to spit into the road, knowing how inaccurate muskets are.

There was a bustle of soldiery around him and someone somewhere shouting orders. The road to the camp shone white and dusty.

'Where's the boy?'

'Vanringham has him. Living, I think. God's death, what were they quarrelling for?'

'I ... forget.'

Sarnac's body heat warmed him, and Miles conscientiously tried to stop shivering but without success. He would have sent men to search out the man and woman if he could have spoken—or if he could have been certain they had survived the illusions.

The march back to the camp seemed at the same time long and over in a heartbeat. Prague's ruined walls gave way to dawn and the ranked wagons of the camp, the provost and one of the company commanders, all of it happening somewhere far away. An hour passed in a minute.

Straw rasped against his back. An early light shone in under the makeshift canvas tent. Weakness pressed him down. He could not focus his eyes on what lay beyond the immediate circle of earth, firepit and scattered equipment. He tried to moisten his dry mouth, swallowing. Sarnac, his back to Miles, boiled soup in someone else's upturned helmet.

'I ... need a surgeon.'

'Do you, lass?'

Miles tried to make himself wake, move, protest. He saw Sarnac turn, face beaming with good intention.

Think I'd let 'em treat you and discover you for a woman?'

'No ...' He managed to raise his arms and grab Sarnac's hands. He knew himself safe with surgeons, the surgeon's tents a cover for the many-partner marriages of the Weerde, and besides a necessary means for taking dead Weerde bodies from a battlefield.

'No, that's right.' The big man frowned down at him. Tm going to treat these wounds. Christ's little bones, woman, you're bleeding like a pig with its throat cut!'

The effort brought sweat out on Miles's face. His hands shook with the effort of holding Sarnac away. At some level of cell and blood he called on strength, knowing it was no use to call on change, but the big man deftly slipped his grip away, stripping off Miles's doublet and breeches together and pulling at his shirt.

'Damn but you women always have some vapouring quibble. Haven't I seen you naked bef—'

Miles giggled faintly. The sheer bald shock on Sarnac's face made him splutter, not wishing it; robbing him of any words. He thought muddily, What words could there be? The man bent over him, freckled shoulder close to his face, and Miles breathed in the smell of him through swollen and blood-choked nostrils; felt the big hands slide down the skin of his chest and belly and move as if stung from his cock and balls.

'But you *can't* be—'

The hot morning slipped a cogwheel, reassembled itself into an absence of Sarnac and somewhere a voice shouting.

'SuccubusJ *Witchcraft!'*

With an effort that brought blood streaming from *his* thigh Miles Godric crawled out of the shelter, pulled up breeches and doublet, and staggered away from the tent. The voice shouted. A dog bayed. His head came up and he searched the stirring camp, forcing his body to walk; to run ...

... John Hammet sat beside him, back resting against the gun carriage.

'And thus I thought of you,' Miles finished, 'being a countryman of mine. And Family.'

Swallows and bats flew against the darkening evening sky, snapping at gnats.

'Pox take it, it's the world we live in that gives such schemes life.' The artillery man spat tobacco into the dew-dampened grass. 'I would the Kin might change it. But witness our attempt to rid these lands of their superstitions—now half of the German principalities are burning witches, and half of their inquisitors are Protestant Lutherans. Such was never our intent.'

Miles hunched his shoulders against the dust-clotted wood of the carriage. Heat stung his hands and face, blood now scabbing on their flayed skin. He tightened the bandage around his thigh.

'Will they burn me, think you?'

Hammet ignored the question. 'I talked to your French youth when they brought him in last night. I've seen men regain their rightful sense and speech, with less courage and spirit than he. Yet if I mistake not, he will fear "magic" all the days of his life. Do you know, Kinsman, I think I would much like to live in his mathematical world. I would like a world where there are no devils and spirits in men, to risk calling down the Dark on our heads. It would be a peaceful one, I think, Descartes' world.'

Miles Godric shivered in the summer heat. Crows called.

The artillery man said, They will either burn you or break you on the wheel for a man-witch. So the provost orders. You had best shift your shape this night and join another unit.'

Remnants of fear chilled Miles Godric's bones. A vision came before his eyes of Sarnac's face loose in the concentration of pleasure. 'And leave Sarnac?'

Desire moves in his body for the man Sarnac, will move in it no matter what shape he wears; as if his mind were merely carried in this fleshly machine, a passenger subject to its will.

'How we love these mayflies/ he said ironically. 'Well, and in a while I may change flesh again, and find him again.'

'If he lives,' Hammet said. 'What is it draws us to wars?'

Miles Godric leaned his head against the metal of the culverin. Thinking of the heat of metal, firing case-shot; of pike and musket and the long sharp blades of daggers, watching the evening dusk come on. 'We don't begin them. We only follow the drum.'

He got slowly to his feet, adding, 'We have few enough pleasures that we can afford to miss that one.'

In months to come he will hear rumours of Frederick the Garterless King—the royal boy having mislaid that English Order in his flight from Prague—and see him represented on satirical broadsheets with his stocking falling to his ankle. The drawings will show a plump young man and a hard-faced woman tramping the countryside in old clothes, trying to whip up support for their lost Bohemian kingdom. But support never comes.

In years to come Miles Godric will think of the taking of Prague, first bloodshed in thirty years of grinding war, and hear of Elizabeth's son Rupert lighting *bloody* battles *in* England that civil war also engulfs. Word will come to him that Elizabeth, in exile, has the no longer young Descartes at her court at the Hague and that he has dedicated his *Principia philosophiae* to her. He will wonder if the man remembers what the boy once experienced in Prague, in a garden, among roses.

And, being of the Kin of the Weerde, he will live long enough to fight in most of the wars of the Age of Reason that Cartesian dualism will usher in.

But for now it is a summer evening and Miles Godric is earning his reprieve; forgetting all else to stand, wounds stinging in the surface change of stature and feature, and laugh, and anticipate the next battle.

HISTORICAL NOTE

The young Rene Descartes shared a common preoccupation of the European scholars of his time—contacting the hypothetical organization known as the Rosi-crucians. His desire did not outlive his period of service in Maurice of Nassau's army in 1619, however, during the winter of which his diary records singular dreams.

It seems probable that he was in Prague after the capture and sacking of that city, after the Battle of the White Hill in 1620. Michael Maier's connections with that centre of neo-Platonic experiment are longer and better documented. The mysterious vanishing of this European scholar and author is reported

to have taken place in Prague in 1622.

Upon Descartes' return to Paris at the height of the Rosicrucian scare, he was himself widely assumed to be a member of that invisible college, and could only counteract this by making himself available to the public and therefore, after a manner of speaking, visible. In his later writings he continues, to say the least, to distance himself from the hermetic world-view.

To The Bad

Brian Stableford

I think I ought to write the story of how my sister Cecilie went to the bad. Some of you will probably think that I have gone to the bad too, for simply wanting to write it, but that is one of the reasons why it ought to be written.

No one in the family had the least suspicion, while we were growing up, that Cecilie would one day go to the bad. When we were children, I was always the naughty one; Cecilie was always good. After a while, that kind of contrast came to be expected of us. Our mothers would shake their heads and fondly lament that it was always the same with a litter of two unless they were identical twins. They were always looking out for us to disagree and be different and because Cecilie was always so anxious to please, I was inevitably cast as the rebel. It wasn't all my fault.

Not that I could see this at the time, you understand; at the time I thought it all came naturally to me: the breakages, the sins of omission—even, oh horror of horrors!—the lies and the indiscretions. It's only hindsight that allows me to see that it was all a kind of *game*. I was unwittingly nudged into being a living illustration of all the things that kids of our kind shouldn't do and shouldn't be, so that I could be patiently redeemed and straightened out. My childhood was made into a lesson from which Cecilie and I were both supposed to learn what we need to know in order to get by. It would have been a neat trick if it had worked, but it didn't.

The trouble was that this approach to our sentimental education made me question things, and there were some questions which never did get answered during the straightening-out process. I came to understand well enough about sins of omission, and lies, and the overwhelming necessity to be *discreet,* but there were other things about which the doubts remained. One of them, as you will have guessed, was writing.

I first sat down to write a story when I was eleven years old. It was a science fiction story about men on Mars—Yuri Gagarin had just orbited the Earth for the first time and I was hung up on the idea of space and conquering the universe. At first, the adults assumed that I was just doing my homework, but when I told Mother Thalia what I was really doing she asked Father John—my actual father—to have a quiet word with me.

It's just not our way, Francis,' he told me, gravely. 'Writing is one of *their* things. It's necessary for you to go through the motions at school—that's all part of *fitting* in—but it's not something you can bring home. It's not something we ever do on our own account. Writing, you see, is a kind of indiscretion in itself. It preserves things, and there's too much danger of revealing something even when you don't mean to. Our arts are the performing kind, which leave no material traces: music, singing, dancing. Cecilie is a ioveJy singer—you could have learned to play an instrument, if you'd only put your mind to it. You still could.'

'It's a science fiction story,' I assured him, earnestly. 'It's not about us—it doesn't matter a bit whether the people in it are our kind or theirs; they just have adventures.'

That's a dangerous way to think, Francis,' he told me, soberly. 'It always matters whether people are our kind or theirs. *Always.* Forgetting that is the greatest of all indiscretions.'

I abandoned my story, and decided that I would be a real astronaut instead of a science fiction writer. I must have nursed that ambition for a year or more before I finally became reckless enough to mention it to Mother Heloise. It was Father Valentine who was delegated to explain why it was just as bad as wanting to be a writer.

'You're old enough now to think about this sort of thing *realistically,'* said Father Valentine sternly. He was the oldest of the co-husbands, and he always seemed scrupulously stern. 'The world is becoming hazardous for people with secrets to keep, and we have to be very, very careful in selecting appropriate niches for ourselves. It's best to avoid anything which involves being closely scrutinized. Can you imagine what an astronaut must go through in terms of medical examination and testing? We can alter our appearance inside as well as out, but we couldn't be certain of passing for human under that kind of scrutiny.'

I saw the sense in it. I understood what he was telling me. Even then, though, I began to see corollaries of his argument that disturbed me. Father Valentine was oblivious to those corollaries, but Father Valentine had been born in 1830 and to him—as to the great majority of our kind—bureaucracy and medicine were just newfangled nuisances which threatened our best-kept secrets. He couldn't see that doing our utmost to avoid all the kinds of scrutiny to which the humans had begun to subject themselves was a strategy which could only work for a little while longer, and served to cut us off from certain benefits which the humans obtained from their new skills. He couldn't see that we ought to have our own legion of doctors, studying and refining an up-to-date kind of medicine for our kind. He couldn't see that in telling our children to stay well away from any contact with X-ray machines or blood tests or operating theatres, for fear of being *indiscreet,* we risked cutting ourselves off from something very valuable.

Cecilie dutifully took not the slightest notice of the science lessons we had at school. She was a good girl, easily clever enough to appear conventionally dull. I was the rebel, too clever for my own good, who couldn't help being interested. It didn't help matters that I always seemed 'young for my age' to my fast-maturing classmates; if there's one thing the average bully hates more than a smart-arse it's a precocious smart-arse. I assume that the bullies had a good laugh when the family pulled me out of school at sixteen, as soon as they could get us out of the system.

In spite of the differences between us, Cecilie and I were very close. We were bound to be, I suppose, given that we were the only kids in a household of eight adults. Mother Lucrezia had had a three-boy litter fifteen years earlier, but by the time Cecilie and I were able to take notice they seemed to us to be uncles rather than brothers, and they soon passed on into the network.

When our turn came to be passed on—to begin our 'real education', as Father Raphael put it—there was some talk of splitting us up, but we protested and all four mothers came in on our side. I think their most telling argument was that Cecilie would be a 'stabilizing influence' on poor unreliable Francis. Oddly enough, nobody took the trouble to explain to us exactly why we had to pass on. I presume that the mere fact that it was customary was considered explanation enough; our great respect for tradition is, after all, one of the things which is supposed to make us superior to those wild-hearted humans.

I remember thinking that I was very clever when I worked out the logic of it. It was like a flash of illumination when I first saw that those who are perpetually in hiding must always have hiding places in reserve; they must always have somewhere else to go when discovery threatens and it must be somewhere they know, somewhere where they can fade into the background. It isn't enough for one of us to be part of a single household; our links to other groups, even other families, must be many and complex. So for thirty or forty years—three or four times as long as we spent in *their* schools, learning the geography and mechanics of *their* social world—we visit our Kin, learning the geography and mechanics of our hidden and parallel world.

Ours was a small-town household in the north of England, so it was virtually inevitable that we should be passed on to Kin in the capital city. Mother Lucrezia's litter had been passed on along the same route thirteen years earlier, but things had changed since then. London in 1967 was not quite the same place that London in 1954 had been.

Our aunts and uncles in the wicked city weren't nearly as protective as our mothers and fathers had been; we were there to learn after all, and they had no intention of wrapping us up in cotton wool. We went out a great deal, together and separately. We made a great many connections, with the other kind as well as our own. It wasn't just Cecilie and myself who absorbed something of the human Zeitgeist—there were other youngsters of our own kind around, who were just as fascinated by the

fashions and the music and the ideas of the day.

In the beginning. I was the one who was curious and excited about everything we did and everything we discovered. I was the one hungry to find out what was going on. Cecilie was nervous and intimidated, and took time to come out of her shell. As the months went by, though, the situation changed dramatically—and Cecilie changed far more than I did. However interested I was in all the things that were happening I always remained an observer, an outsider. I never lost the consciousness of being apart from it all. I didn't think of my apartness simply in terms of belonging to a different species; I was certainly no human-hater. I guess it was simply an attitude of mind. I still fancied myself as a pioneer of sorts, as an explorer of the vivid and confusing wilderness of sex-and-drugs-and-rock'n'roll (and it was all one thing, to those who were a part of it). Cecilie was different. Cecilie, once she had learned to love the life, loved it with all her heart. Once she had loosened up, she threw all her energies into whatever was happening. She went to the bad. She went native.

It wasn't obvious to her, or even to the aunts and uncles we were lodged with, that what she was doing was going native. Father Valentine would have seen it immediately, but Father Valentine had come to seem to us—and even to our adult hosts, although at least one of them was old enough to remember Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee—to be a boring provincial stick-in-the-mud. You see, we didn't think of the things that were going on as a purely *human* thing; in many ways, they seemed more our sort of thing: the music, the dancing, all the performances and displays and trips (which blew our minds in exactly the same way that they blew human minds, and made all our physiological differences seem trivial ...).

Cecilie was far better prepared to take her place in that kind of culture than I was. I was a doubter and an explorer; she was more adept at fitting in—and she had such a *lovely* voice. It was a time and place extremely and fatally hospitable to talented singers—especially if they could be beautiful. That's one of the corollaries of our talent for fitting in, of course; we can make ourselves dull, but we can also make ourselves beautiful, if we want to be. It must have seemed entirely natural to Cecilie that in adapting herself to an age of beautiful people she must make herself beautiful. In fact, it was a sad mistake.

The aunts and uncles didn't mind her singing with the Firestreaks at first. The bass player was one of us, and they thought that it was good for her to mix. How could she learn to fit in and hide herself away, they reasoned, if she didn't mix?

Aunt Darya had a quiet word with her when it became obvious that she was sleeping with Ray McHale, the Firestreaks' lead guitarist, but she took that meekly and reasonably enough. Uncle Shilaq had us both on the carpet when we arrived home too stoned to know what day it was, but it was water off a duck's back. We knew it was all OK—and the aunts and uncles seemed to know it too, deep down. They were understanding people; they didn't tell us what not to do, the way Father John or Father Valentine would have done; they only told us to be careful. They didn't see any real problem in what Cecilie was doing with the Firestreaks. After all, it was only music, only performing, and our kind are born to perform.

The alarm bells didn't begin to ring loudly until some time after the Firestreaks cut their first single, when it became a minor hit. A minor hit meant publicity, and the first rule of our existence is, of course, that all publicity is bad publicity and good publicity is worst.

All of a sudden, Cecilie's photograph began to pop up here, there and everywhere in the newspapers, and she even made it on to the TV. Everybody watches TV, even in the frozen north.

When Father John and Father Valentine came down to see us it was obvious that they were hopping mad—and not just with Cecilie. Their real wrath was reserved for the aunts and uncles who'd let us 'run wild'. They knew it had to be the fault of the aunts and uncles because they took it for granted that it couldn't be *theirs*. They'd brought us up so carefully and so *well* hadn't they? In a way, facing them was fun, because it made us part of a conspiracy with adults—the aunts and uncles—for the first time in our lives. We looked upon the whole thing as a freak of nature, like a sudden storm, that had to be meekly endured while it was happening, but could be forgotten as soon as it went away. We listened stoically to Father Valentine's legendary lecture on the perils of fame, but we didn't really hear a word.

Father John wasn't quite so predictable, and I couldn't help being interested in some of what he said.

These are bad times for our kind,' he told us, soberly. Things are changing far too rapidly. You're

particularly vulnerable to the tide of change because you're young, but you mustn't let yourself be seduced by visions of unlimited possibility. At the end of the day, there are only a handful of possibilities which really matter: survival or extinction; the long, lazy afternoon or the coming of the Dark. The most difficult thing you have to learn in life is to keep a proper balance between hope and anxiety. It's an unpleasant lesson to learn that the proper balance has more anxiety in it than hope, but that's the way it is, and always will be.'

I was still a sucker for a well-hung argument, but it didn't mean a thing to Cecilie. She was hooked on hope by now, and anxiety had been banished from her soul. She wanted to Jive. To her, at that particular moment in time, it seemed that only the humans really knew how to live, and not all of them: only the *young* humans; only the beautiful people. Cecilie was already a beautiful person and then some; she had advantages mere humans didn't have. Surely it must have been one of us who invented the mini-skirt—humans just don't have the legs for it!

The Firestreaks never reached the very top. Maybe it would have been better if they had, and maybe it was unjust that they didn't. Cecilie really did have a lovely voice, and Ray McHale was as competent a guitarist as many who achieved greater things, but they didn't have a real writer on the team, and they didn't get the kind of material that could sustain them for long. Personally, I think it was a bad career move to enter the Eurovision Song Contest and a worse career move to come second, but that's life.

It was the infamous affair of the centrefold which really screwed things up. I never did discover how Father Valentine got hold of a copy; I'm pretty certain that none of the family had a subscription. If I had to bet on it I'd hazard a guess that it was one of the men in the village who got the magazine, and his wife who gleefully recognized Cecilie in spite of all she'd done to alter her bodywork. Either way, it was the end so far as the family was concerned. Father John came to fetch us home, and it was pretty obvious that if and when we were put back into the network we would probably be bound for Siberia or Patagonia.

I was surprised and hurt when it became clear that the mothers held me to blame for it all. They had allowed us to stay together so that Cecilie could exercise a benign influence upon me, and they naturally assumed that the influence had unfortunately flowed in the wrong direction. I pleaded my innocence in vain—but at least I had the sense to ride with the punches. Cecilie didn't. Cecilie ran away. She went back to London to live with Ray McHale, and she left a note to say that if anyone came after her or tried to interfere with her chosen career, she'd complain to the police and the News *of the World.* The police probably wouldn't have taken any notice, but the *News of the World* certainly would—she was, after all, a fading pop star who'd once posed in the nude for the kind of magazine they put on the top shelf at W. H. Smith's.

Cecilie wasn't ever any threat to our security—not really. She only wanted to *live,* after the fashion she'd adopted as her own. She was a product of the times: times when there really didn't seem to be any limits; times when joy and extravagance were sanctioned by everyone except *us.* Cecilie was only doing what all our kind have done ever since mankind first appeared: pretending to be human. She just pretended a bit too hard, that's all.

'No one will hurt her, will they?' I said to Father John, when it finally became clear that the break was absolute.

This isn't America or the Dark Ages,' Father John assured me. 'We don't have cousins with daggers hidden in their long black cloaks. But there are worse things than being assassinated. She's cut off from the family, and the fact that she did it to herself won't make it any easier to bear when she needs us.'

'When she needs us,' I told him, 'she'll come back. And we'll take her back, won't we?'

'If it's as simple as that,' he agreed, 'yes we will. But if she really does become famous, she'll have to stay away. We can't stand too much scrutiny, you see. Our private lives are too different—it's difficult enough to cope with the village gossip and the Government's data-gatherers.'

The next time I saw Cecilie—the last time I saw her

—I did my best to persuade her to drop it all. I knew it wasn't going to work, but I had to try. By then, she was a whore through and through. She had contrived to make herself even more beautiful, and she regarded her beauty as pure commodity. She'd left the Firestreaks and abandoned Ray HcHale, and

she was determined to make it on her own, any way she could. And she did.

I don't suppose she's a star exactly, even today, but she's well on her way to being a household name. TV has made her face familiar to millions of people. She fits into her chosen scene very well—as well she might, given that she had a lot of early practice in the dubious art of following convention. I don't know how lonely she is, but I don't suppose it matters to her. Not much. How many others are there just like her? I could name three, and guess at one or two others—but it's interesting, in a way, that there might be many more. Our kind are so good at hiding, at fitting in—nobody knows how many of us there are in Britain, or Europe, or the world.

Once, I wanted to write a science fiction story—this one strictly for our own consumption—about a future time in which human beings have become extinct but nobody knows, because the world is still ludicrously overpopulated with our lineages, all of them pretending fiercely to be human and defending their secret to the death from everyone. I know it's silly, but ... I know that I have to forget the other stories, and concentrate on this one. I know that I have to finish it with a lesson

— a *moral*—because that's the only hope I have of excusing the fact that I've written it. For what it's worth, though, those of my readers who are utterly horrified by the mere fact of its existence are overreacting. If it were ever to fall into the hands of human beings, they'd just think it was science fiction, and pretty dull at that—not a monster or a mad assassin in sight.

The lesson we might try to learn, I think, is this: we've reached a threshold in our career as a species and things will never be the same again. Even the Father Valentines of this world already know that, but it hasn't quite sunk in. They think of it as decadence and corruption, but it isn't. The point is that the humans now have lots of things which are genuinely valuable but which we're reluctant to share. It's not just medicine and the possibility of setting off on all the great science-fictional adventures, like conquering the universe and becoming immortal—I'm sure we'll figure out a way to jump on those bandwagons eventually. It's seemingly trivial things like excitement and well-being and quality of life. We think we have those things already, by our own standards, but I'm not so sure.

I think that what we have to learn from my sister Cecilie, and all the others like her, is that there are some aspects of modern life which really have to be *lived* to be appreciated, and not just *performed*, hollowly, by way of *imitation*. I'm not arguing that we should blow our cover and try to become full partners in Planet Earth Enterprises (Incorporated or otherwise). I'm not even saying that we should condone what my sister Cecilie's done, or copy the particular ambitions which drew her away from her family and wider Kin. I'm just saying that we ought to look a little longer and harder at what the humans of today are doing and try to figure out what might be in it for us. If it's left to the humans they'll only louse it up, but we could really do it *well* if we were only prepared to try.

Maybe we could be really beautiful people if only we could loosen up a bit, and think a little more about living our lives and a little less about concealing them. Maybe that isn't such a silly and shabby ambition to have.

This story is dedicated to the bad; I have a sneaking suspicion that they'll be the only ones who can possibly understand.

A Strange Sort Of Friend

Josephine Saxton

I only remembered much later that my first impression of Serena had been, 'She looks a bad bitch—must avoid her!' This intuitive flash must have slid out of reach immediately, because it was not long afterwards that I found my place at the canteen table was somehow always next to her. This, I think, helps to illustrate what I want to say, which is that the mind creates its own realities. One minute you know that something is true and real, and the next minute your world is broken open like a chocolate egg, containing very little except crumpled paper. Love, hate, happiness, misery—what am I telling you? This only: a kind of confession really—that for a while I truly believed an extremely preposterous thing. I look back with astonishment at how gullible I was.

Let me fill in some background to the story; let me tell it my own way. Bear with me if possible; picture me stopping mid-sentence with my mouth open and the words stopped, pondering in bewilderment how utterly idiotic even the most intelligent, cultured, sensitive human being can sometimes become when under sufficient stress. I apologize if my statements sometimes seem inflated and egotistical, but I was brought up to believe in my better qualities; it was instilled in me by two excellent people that a belief in the self, the better human self, is not egotism but applied objectivity. I

have of course learned not to voice these aspects of myself. Now for Serena, whom I thought to be a 'bad bitch' and who became my friend, someone I valued and loved, and who ...

We had both begun working at the depot within a couple of days of one another, and neither of us had ever worked in such an environment before. Tentatively, we exchanged notes as to what two educated, intelligent people of mature years could possibly be doing in such a place. Her story had elements like my own, its outer parameters tallied. We had sufficient in common to feel 'at home' in a dialogue. I think we were both alienated in those surroundings at that time, and welcomed the exchange. This was in the tea break and the half-hour at midday. We also walked home together most of the way; she lived not very far from me. So far, so ordinary and normal.

What transpired later seems completely incredible when I look back on it or rather, it is incredible that at this time I could have believed my eyes. The mind leads a life of its own I have concluded, and if it wants its hapless owner to be led astray by ideas and visual mistakes, then it can achieve a whole changing of the world. Take such jokes too far of course and 'madness' ensues, and the joking mind cannot return to a normality generally agreed upon. I was deceived for a while into contemplating the reality of something utterly bizarre, which is quite interesting if not pathetic. I am more cautious now about my perceptions of the world, especially where people are concerned. I am, in fact, more withdrawn from life altogether.

Anyway, Serena was there in my life, a somewhat eccentric and dilapidated working woman, someone I could talk to from among the generally tedious crowd which stolidly remained unsullied by reading, thinking or intellectual exercise of any kind. We had some things in common, and while her views of painting and literature were always rather odd, at least she could pick up on references, instead of answering with a blank stare.

Our views of the workplace matched; we hated it, and would leave just as soon as we had got ourselves straight and saved some money, although she was vague and without ambition. I wanted a sum to live on while I wrote my film script of the life of Aleister Crowley. I had a contract and a small advance, not enough to live on for long. It was to be a low-budget movie which nevertheless aimed to get itself seen and make money. Living here in Leamington, where Crowley was born and where there is much secret interest in his work was a head start, or so it was thought. There was a film company attached to the nearby university, composed mainly of semi-professionals.

Meanwhile, gathering material in some of my spare time, I and Serena and many others were parcelling up orders as fast as lightning and not being paid much for it. We became grey-faced with fatigue; I bid goodbye to the last of what had once been beauty, telling myself that it did not matter. We worked in a warehouse which was alternately overheated and then freezing, when the huge doors at the end opened to let out the forklift trucks loaded with the fruit of our labour. Most of the workers including myself had a couple of vile colds, followed by hacking coughs. Not Serena; she seemed unusually immune to normal ailments, although she did mention some symptoms which I took to be menopausal. We made a poor-looking pair of drudges tracking home in the evening; the feeling of life at that time with the October nights bearing darkly down was Victorian lower class, although thank heavens I had a nice house with a hot shower and central heating or I think I might have died of wretchedness.

Serena never felt the cold, always complained of the heat. She had breathing problems at times, and made unfortunate sounds almost as if she had a cleft palate which she never excused and I ignored. Her manners left much to be desired but I concluded that she had not been brought up well. She was from some East End area of London, but her accent also had a strange country roll. At least I had someone to talk to and although she had a queer comprehension of what she read, at least she read. Excepting the presence of Serena I would have suffered a severe anomie. I cannot endure soap operas, nor any

television for long, a fact which is often interpreted as a sign of madness. Perhaps it is.

I was at a trough in all my relationships except for Leon, a partner perhaps rather too young who lived with me, and had a steady job in computers. Serena too was in a rut except for Gary, whom she always referred to as her boyfriend, a term which grates on my nerves. He was out of work, had hardly ever worked. He had huge fines to pay to do with motoring, dud cheques, non-payment of all kinds of things. A parasite. He was easily less than half her age, far too young, and from everything she told me rather odd to say the least. I thought he sounded autistic or schizophrenic as he rarely spoke except to express a wish for death, but she found this restful. He sometimes went through manic phases, so the diagnosis was unclear. Odd anyhow, and not likeable. Leon, seeing him at a dance, said he gave him the creeps. I assumed that Serena fulfilled some kind of motherly role towards him, although she boasted of their sex life from time to time. I never discuss mine. When it is good it is good, and when it isn't it stops. I despise people who discuss something shared with another, I deem it a betrayal. It is a measure of my loneliness at that time that I forgave her many peccadilloes which in my more gregarious phases would have repelled me completely.

Serena was not just unconventional but downright weird—to me a mark in her favour. I seem at various times in my life to make friends with weird people; they warm to me and I to them. I am a painter and I write poetry sometimes (my interest in film-making was a later craze, as things transpired), and at an early age absorbed the idea of being an outsider, a Bohemian. I was an adopted child and used to wonder if my real parents were talented, as my adoptive parents were not, although they were clever and kind. I find ordinary people boring, and they often dislike or mistrust me. I have little to say to the Person in the Street. And folk wisdom I do not find illuminating. If a person is described as 'really nice' or 'the salt of the earth', I find myself yawning. I exist very well on a salt-free diet.

But the fact that she was 'different' was not my first attraction to her as a friend. My first impulse was compassion, an empathy towards her which moved me to want to help her, to make her help herself. From the conversations we had, I discovered that she was apparently on a pathway to self-destruction. I on the other hand was looking after myself and my health, had a nice place to live, kept my act together as well as possible and made sure I ate properly and dressed well enough to please my ego—the ego I think a necessary entity which enables one to get through life, and is not something to be lost lightly. Serena apparently didn't have one, or else it took the form of what might be selflessness, the obverse aspect of the same thing.

When she first came to work she had just arrived in Leamington, and owned only one pair of shoes with holes in them and very few clothes decades old in some cases. She was sleeping in the old car she and the boyfriend owned, and used public toilets for her bathroom: a derelict, virtually. She had been living in some broken-down country cottage somewhere, and had come to Leamington because a couple of her children were living here. I discovered that they were what I would call 'anarchist' although they were truly more chaotic than anarchistic; there comes to mind a dirty kind of girl with hennaed hair in rat-tails, with illegitimate children, living in horrible rented flats with a crew of unsavoury males drifting around. Their mode of living was post-hippie cliche, the lifestyle without the idealism. They never paid for anything if they could help it, any of them. They were not creative, thinking people, just messy and incompetent.

Why didn't I suspect something was up when she first said in a loud enough voice for several to overhear, 'I'm a Christian, as a religion it's never been bettered. I'm a believer I am, although I never go to any church, I wasn't brought up to church nor nothing, it's just a feeling you know?' No person who actually is a Christian ever says so like that, it is unchristian behaviour.

'I detest Christianity,' I countered, instantly wound up. 'It is a religion of blood, pain, denial. It has caused untold mass destruction of peoples and cultures, it has repressed females, it spreads darkness and misery everywhere. It is hypocritical.' I don't pull punches, which is perhaps why I have few friends, but what I liked about Serena was that she was the same. Always said what she thought, or so I believed then.

'Yes, but what about the light side? What about eternal life? What about the message of hope and universal love?'

‘Bullshit, all bullshit. Simplistic junk designed to put the masses to sleep so they won’t notice what’s going on.’ She snorted at that, a horrible raucous snort, and sprayed crumbs as she replied.

Serena was an ugly woman, with deep, dark grey grooves from the corners of her nose right down to her jawline, which was hard. Her eyes had no whites to them, and one seemed slightly off-focus, giving her a shifty look, although her eye contact was piercingly direct from under drooping eyelids. Her front teeth were a denture which sometimes slipped; her laugh was hard, false-sounding, each syllable beginning with a pronounced ‘h’, a sort of bray or bark which annoyed me dreadfully at times. (I admit to being over-sensitive about many things, perhaps I should have been a critic, for I find fault too readily.) Her hair was naturally fuzzy although she was very white; it looked like a bad perm. Her figure had gone and she slouched, so badly at times I wondered if she was slightly deformed. Her legs were unshaven, the hairiest I have ever seen on a woman, and her feet were totally without grooming, horny and with ugly, uneven nails. She looked at least twenty years older than her true age, and I felt sorry for her, indeed.

This was why I befriended her; I could never resist helping the unfortunate or the sick. My heart goes out to such people, or it did; I have since learned to act differently, more in accordance with a saying of Gurd-jieff, which is: If you help people, they will hate you for it. Always true, but I was weak and I enjoyed the feeling of being a beneficial and encouraging influence, self-indulgent I know, although truly I felt my spirit to be behind the impulse.

She admired my skin and I told her about moisturizers, face-packs, night cream. She didn’t bother with things like that, she said, Nature took care of everything.

‘Nature is a killer, and, furthermore, doesn’t give a damn about middle-aged women who have done what Nature requires of them. You’ve got to look after yourself.’

‘God will look after me if Nature won’t,’ she countered. ‘I only believe in the Good, I don’t recognize Evil, there’s no such thing. There is only the Light, there is no Darkness.’

‘God and a course of vitamins and maybe some Agnus Castus,’ I told her in cynical tones. ‘And furthermore, there can be no light without darkness, that at least must be obvious, otherwise everything would be grey!’ My short leash was strained. I had thought myself at a nadir, but that was the beginning of a descent.

I told Leon about her and he agreed with me that she was certainly in need of help, by the sound of it. He considers himself enlightened, a feminist, and always made the right responses to my litany. I had always felt that I could trust Leon with my deepest thoughts and feelings, and that he was a person of true integrity. I now believe there is no such thing: anyone can be corrupted. This is a world ringed with darkness that is always waiting to encroach.

Around that time, by what seemed to be no more than coincidence, synchronicity as I shall reveal, I went to interview a woman who lived in Leamington and who professed to be a witch. She had posed as a scarlet woman for quite a few years, and was a devotee of Mr Crowley. I had met her at parties a few years previously, when she dressed in exotic, tarty clothes; satin cami-knickers with suspendered stockings, spike-heeled sandals, laced corselettes, bits of lace shawls, bright red hair swept to one side, amazing make-up with brilliant red lips, plenty of jewellery, feather boas—pure theatre, although she walked around at all hours in this get-up, and was one of the features of the town. Leamington has numerous eccentrics, but at that time she stood out. She had great courage, great beauty, great style and a huge crowd of lovers.

When I went to see her however, that phase was past. She was dressing very dowdily in horrible old clothes, topped by a dirty blue beret with all her hair shoved out of sight, and no make-up at all. She was not beautiful but she had charisma, and had kept the numerous lovers. She told me she was in disguise, and that when a magician reaches a certain level of skill, the outer image must be sacrificed. At one time Mr Crowley had gone around in sky-blue knickerbockers, with a magician’s staff and a cloak, but in later life he dressed very quietly to the point of being invisible. I had known that of course, but I was impressed with her following suit, and the calm certainty with which she spoke. I was dubious about her magical powers, but not about her belief in herself.

She calmly told me a great many other things too, which I listened to with growing incredulity. I

regarded it as nourishment for my film script. In my mind I had flights of inflated dreaming about the film, in which it was a great success and a whole new career opened up for me. I had a brilliant inspiration while sitting talking with her, that Alexei Sayle would play Mr Crowley; there was an astonishing resemblance I thought. But I am wandering off the story. What this remarkable young woman—called Joan—told me seemed bizarre in the telling, and compulsively rich in interest.

She told me that she had read a secret diary written by Mr Crowley which told of some remarkable discoveries he had made in the course of the practice of magick. He had proved beyond doubt that there was another race of beings living amongst us who were not human but which passed for human, because they could change their shape. These creatures were far higher than us in their thinking and philosophy because they not only knew the great true secret, which is that Good and Evil do not exist, being only concepts instilled into the human mind to put bonds upon it, but that they lived above this human nonsense. They were a more ancient race than human beings, had developed separately from us and had ideas and aims which the human mind, unprepared, could barely comprehend. He had met several of these beings and said that a few had helped shape human history, but that mostly they remained in disguise for their own purposes.

The way Joan told me of Mr Crowley's discoveries did not make them sound mythic, but real, very real. Of course I was very aware during the interview that magic, or as her mentor would have it, magick, is a concentrated application of the power of the imagination and nothing more. There is no such thing as superhuman power, nor telepathy, nor is it possible to communicate with spirits or demons, simply because there are none.

There is the Dark, though. This is my personal name for something I have always felt the presence of out there somewhere, or just behind my left shoulder, metaphorically speaking of course. I do not know what it is but I feel it, and fear it. Something destructive, alien; it does not of course affect me, in fact I put such numinous feelings down to an allergy although to what I have been unable to detect. Cow's milk, chocolate, sherry, cabbage and coffee have all been suspected but nothing is proven. There is of course a rational explanation, being that the feeling of the Dark is in itself irrational. I spoke to Joan about the Dark, and she smiled mysteriously and said that Mr Crowley knew about that too, but she would not or could not expand further. She did expand upon his skill in time travel and bilocation though, talents I had never heard attributed to him, although sorcery in general is supposed to confer these powers.

I began to have ideas about making the film work on two levels; Crowley's personal biography, and a kind of fantasy with effects, taking him to multiple times and spaces. I later abandoned it of course as it was outside the scope of the movie, and too expensive. I also went off the idea, which seemed banal when taken out of the presence of the compelling Joan. I only wished to write a script about a remarkable and strange genius, not to promote magick as if it were a true phenomenon or come up with some trashy fantasy, for there had been too much of that. Mr Crowley, genius, was also deluded.

I asked Joan what these creatures who lived among us were like, and she told me they were much like us a lot of the time, but that when they reverted to their own true form they were frightening to those who had no stomach for strange things. They were definitely not human and, although shaped roughly as we are, have descended from another branch of evolution altogether. I found this an interesting and fantastical idea and asked her if she had met any. She knew several; she had taken them for lovers and spoke lasciviously of their powers of endurance, their sheer greed. She said that in bed they were not imaginative, but were without morals or inhibitions, which made up for a lot.

I felt ashamed at being secretly excited at her descriptions of their marathon sexual excesses, at the same time thinking that she was very odd, even slightly unhinged. She had taken large quantities of various drugs since her teenage years, and I wondered if this had permanently changed her mental outlook. And yet she was so ordinary in some ways, so pragmatic, so pleasant.

During our interview she went into her little kitchen and prepared vegetables for an evening meal, and offered me a slice of excellent home-made cake.

My friendship with Serena progressed. I do not make friends easily, and was delighted to have found a new one. She was getting very tired working at the depot, seemed depressed, and took a few days off work. I was out shopping with Leon one Saturday afternoon and suddenly decided to take her some

flowers. I had the feeling that it was probably years since anyone had taken her flowers. Filled with the delightful feeling that comes from doing a good deed, I bought two large bunches of mixed blooms, wrote a card, and we went to ring her doorbell. Her boyfriend answered, and stood there staring at us with empty grey eyes, saying nothing. At my prompting he focused sufficiently to usher us up the stairs of the very run-down building, once a lovely Georgian house but now housing grim shops at street level and having badly converted flats above, and showed us into their bedsitting room.

I was horrified at the smelly slum, but behaved as if visiting a well-kept house; I gratefully sat down, declined tea, and offered my flowers to the figure lying in the utterly filthy bed. She lay under torn and greasy coverings with her bush of hair spread on a grey pillow, looking quite dreadful. When she saw the flowers she barely reacted, but, as if remembering her manners, smiled and held out a hand. I saw her whole arm naked, and was amazed to see the thick hair growing almost up to the shoulder, just like a hirsute male. Her smile was strange, with closed lips, for some of her front teeth were in a glass on the arm of a foul old armchair by the bed. She invited us, in a hoarsely hollow voice, to sit down but I said we were in a hurry to get to the shops before they closed. She was evidently relieved at that. The boyfriend just stood there like a mute, staring not even at us but at the wall.

I wished her a speedy recovery, although she had not offered to explain her illness nor had I asked. Somehow I dared not, or felt I should not, that a kind inquiry would be intrusive. She looked ancient, and not just lined in the face but almost toad-like in texture. I thought as we went down the staircase with its rolls of dirt and slicks of grease, that she too probably suffered allergies. I did not regret my gift of flowers, though. Leon and I did not discuss the visit until later, in the pub.

'You certainly cultivate some weird friends,' he remarked after drinking a half pint in one long draught. 'I've never seen such a shambles. Who the hell is she?'

'I don't know really, she comes from East London somewhere originally; divorced, five adult children, spent two years in a peace camp after her divorce, and also spent her share of the matrimonial loot on gigolos, as far as I can make out. She's had hundreds of men, so she says. Thought she would catch up on finding out more about sex after her divorce. Hard to believe to look at her.'

'Incredible. What a dump they live in. That guy's a bad lot, and I'm never wrong on first impressions. Wouldn't trust him at all, a really odd type.'

I agreed with all that, although his belief in his capacity for correct first impressions is laughable. We changed the conversation, but we were both a bit shaken. The atmosphere and the decor of the place had been grimly horrible. Even the pub seemed quite hygienic and pleasant after that, and it is in truth a rather sleazy dive, with occasional marked overtones of the hells of Hieronymus Bosch. I am not an imaginative type of person, I do not fantasize like many people I have known, I do not daydream, in fact, I hardly dream at night. A more creative and agile mind might have jumped to conclusions immediately, but not me. Note that I had diagnosed Serena as possibly having an allergy, and that I had suggested she take Agnus Castus, a herb known to stimulate female hormones. It seemed obvious to me that she needed not only that but possibly medical treatment and vitamins, and that was before I saw her ill. But of course, 'Nature was looking after her', and this irritated me and made me think her arrogant.

On the way home one night I suggested that she come with me for a drink before going home. She said she could not be long because Gary hated her to drink, he effectively guarded her and fretted if he did not know where she was. I told her it was time she asserted herself more, and she agreed. It was in this way that she was introduced to several of my acquaintances, my own territory.

It was not long after that when Serena began to have trouble with her boyfriend Gary. It seemed to me from her descriptions of his behaviour that he was becoming manic, even dangerously so. They were having terrible quarrels, and he was becoming a changed man. He had more energy, never slept, had begun to eat a great deal of meat and disappeared at night not saying where he was going. She was in a terrible state of nervous tension and looked harassed at work, although not so very strange as she had when ill in bed. She asked my advice.

From the descriptions of his behaviour which she gave me, I deduced that Gary needed medical help—was possibly dangerous. He threatened her with knives, pushed her about and paced the room all night raving about his energy, his future, his marvellous plans for setting up in business and making a

fortune. Serena said that hardly anything he said was in sequence or made sense and that he contradicted himself continually.

I directed her to a clinic where a psychologist could be consulted free of charge, and when she had been she told me that she could probably have Gary sectioned—put in a secure ward—possibly indefinitely. For someone who could say that a few weeks before he had been her boyfriend, she seemed curiously unemotional. She talked about love, and loving people, quite a lot but I never saw any real evidence of love in her relationships. This is of course usually the case with people who boast of their own loving nature; such people don't really give a damn about anybody but themselves.

Two days later Gary had left her and gone off in their car with another woman, a younger, plumper, silly woman who had fallen for his ravings. He had taken a lot of Serena's things, and put the contents of her fish-tank down the drain and broken the glass, and had also absconded with some money. She retaliated by telephoning the insurance company where she had just paid a year's insurance and cancelling the deal, obtaining a refund. I praised her for her spirit which at that time seemed undaunted. She seemed determined, and spoke of a new life, a fresh start, cutting out dead wood. I had tutored her in these sentiments and impulses over a number of months.

The next day at work Gary turned up and gave her a beating until the manageress threatened him with the police. Everyone who worked with her felt sorry for her, I most particularly. I arranged to meet her in the pub that evening. I was deep in giving consolation and advice when Leon turned up. He did not look pleased at her presence, but after a couple of drinks joined in with the supportive litany. We got her to laugh, and in my somewhat euphoric state of charity, for once the sound did not grate upon my ears. I suggested that we all go for a long walk the following Sunday. She needed fresh air, exercise and company, I decided. She must not sit brooding. She had moved out of the ghastly flat, and was living in the spare room at her nephew's flat. She was virtually homeless and friendless; I and Leon, would look after her. I told her, now that she had only herself to look after, she must open a savings account, but also spend some money on clothes for herself.

On Sunday morning she arrived on time, and I could not help commenting on the change in her appearance. She looked healthier, younger, altogether more cheerful. She did not slouch so much, her whole muscle structure looked in better shape. She was not at all what you might call attractive, but she was almost presentable. I had, to my own shame, felt ashamed of being seen in the pub with her before. She looked cleaner, smoother, lighter, as if a burden had dropped away, which of course it had. Her Gary had been dragging her down for almost three years. We all three set off along the canal bank, in bright sunlight, at a deliberately brisk pace. I wanted to drive out her blues with exercise. We did upwards of six miles before lunch, which we had at a pub.

I was elated. All three of us seemed to be getting along so well, in mental accord about so many themes which our lunch-time beer evoked. We laughed a lot, and again I was not so irritated by her donkeyish expressions of mirth; they seemed more normal. People stared a little at the three of us I thought, but this always happens to strangers in country pubs.

Walking though, she did not last out long and asked to rest while we went on, because her feet hurt. She was wearing the same awful pair of once bright yellow shoes over nylon socks. I vowed to find some sticking plasters somewhere; perhaps a little shop would appear. In fact, about a mile further up the canal bank there was a Sunday market and I bought a packet of plasters straight away, and felt triumphant. I was like a mother duck with a lame duckling; I even contemplated buying her some decent wool socks, but Leon said that was going too far.

On the way back we found her lying in the sun and difficult to rouse, very torpid. And looking like an old tramp too, I could not help thinking privately, but my compassion still ran high and I presented the plasters, waiting for praise and thanks like a child. They were not forthcoming. She took off her shoes and socks and I had to look away, for her feet were such a horrible sight. I have never seen such neglected feet, all horny and rough, gnarled, the toes bent, the nails unkempt and unclean, more like the claws of some strange bird than human feet. She patched up her sore spots and we walked further, until in the heat of the afternoon we rested in some shade by a wood.

I had been listening to the birdsong for some time, enjoying the lift to the spirits which cheerful sounds

convey. Serena then told us that this was her first ever country walk, she had never done anything but stroll. She seemed unaware of the beauty of her surroundings and indeed, the birdsong ceased when she laughed at something. There ensued one of those strange silences which sometimes occur on a hot afternoon in the country. I remember feeling a little thrill of fear at this quiet and looking at Leon for his reactions, but he seemed not to notice anything; he chewed a blade of grass as town people will, as if some distant browsing gene were jolted into action. There was a charge of hyper-reality for a short while, an experience which I

believe is probably quite common but not spoken of because it is not understood.

Just then a beautiful dragonfly came by and my spirits rose higher. When Serena's hand shot out and captured it expertly, unfeelingly, I could hardly believe my eyes, but just gave a small strangled cry of horror. I saw her face, her small, dark eyes glittering, her mouth open, her narrow tongue actually hanging out with concentration. 'She's mad!' I recall thinking, and got up quickly to try to dispel the atmosphere which had gone bad. Leon laughed and congratulated her on her skill, and I said nothing. My sympathies were with the dragonfly entirely and I walked on ahead in silence, the two of them trailing behind. I walked very briskly to recharge my mood; I detest gratuitous cruelty, any cruelty.

The other two were out of sight for quite a while, and I feasted my spirits on the sight of baby swans, various wild flowers, clouds, the renewed birdsong, a squirrel. By the time I had rested and they had caught up with me, the two of them laughing and cheerful, I had repressed the horrid sight of Serena killing an innocent creature, and one which is quite rare at that. I did not want to quarrel with her, and although I often chided her about her self-neglect, I never criticized her actions. I had no close female friend but her at the time and I valued her company; apparently I was prepared to compromise, to overlook faults and failings. Probably, if this were not done, there would be few friendships of any kind, for people are frail.

We all went out drinking one weekend, and got somewhat plastered and overly genial. On these occasions behaviour changes radically, in my case it is almost as if some other personality emerges, which has only been waiting for the alcoholic key to free its madness. We set up a watchword for the weekend, a catch-phrase, and I

originated this, which was 'Outrageous'. Anything we said or did was OK so long as it was Outrageous. We were hardly truly outrageous, but we did make a lot of noise in restaurants, laughed a great deal, hurled jocular insults at various passing souls in the pub—known to us of course, not strangers—and generally caroused.

People were attracted to me that weekend; I lost my invisibility, which I have cultivated over a number of years, and became more as I was when a student. But you need others to do this kind of thing with, and then I had the two of them, for Leon too seemed lighter; usually he is a rather gloomy soul, sunk into himself, and he drinks heavily. So I found all this a great and lovely relief, to have my lover and my friend, to waste a little time for a change, the three of us together, in companionship, with some understanding of one another.

Of course you will easily have guessed what happened, and why my whole narrative is threaded with hostility and bitterness. I have struggled with these negative feelings and even now, a year later, I feel great waves of hatred, pain, loss. Serena managed to entice my Leon into bed with her; I had gone to bed early and he had gone out with her, and they came back to our house and she stayed the night.

It is interesting how the mind can both know and ignore a fact at the same time: I had heard strange sounds in the night, having been woken up twice, but had not allowed myself to register what I heard. Although how I would identify the groanings, whistling and hissing sounds with sexual activity it is difficult to say, for I have never imagined that anyone would or could make such sounds to express pleasure. At one point in my half-dreams I thought the central heating had been left on and had air in the system; another time

I thought I heard a neighbour's Rottweiler, which I fear, killing a smaller animal, perhaps an unfortunate cat. I put my hands over my ears—you cannot rescue a cat from a Rottweiler even if you are dressed and properly alert—and slept again, uneasily.

Leon told me quite casually that Serena had stayed when I got home later that day, taking an attitude

of enormous surprise that I should mind at all. After all, we were all three close friends now, what did it matter? My suppressed horrors had already been confirmed first thing in the morning, for there were traces of her in our bathroom, a strong, female animal smell on my personal towel, not a normal or healthy smell, not quite musky; a bit like rotting pears, but undoubtedly Serena. I stuffed it into the rubbish bin, choking back sobs of pain and disgust. It was not so much that I had lost Leon, but that I had been cheated by Serena; she had become more friendly with me in order to get nearer to him. And the two of them had cut me out of the three-sided friendship which I had helped create for us all. I felt like a small child as the parents' bedroom door slams in its bewildered face.

I was in shock for a day, then began to break down little by little. I realized painfully the profound implications of their careless and stupid act. Everything had changed, and could never be the same again. My shortlived bliss was over.

The whole incident seemed to create a change in my personality, to spark off something very deep and awful in me. I was in dreadful pain day and night, an emotional and spiritual hurt which bled over into the physical realm; my heart pounded in series of palpitations, my muscles ached, my eyes were shot through with sharp pains and at the least mention of her name my whole system was as if flooded through with a hurtful poison; my body became a massive twinging thing, panting with misery, catching its breath with great gasps of agony which I could not control. I made great efforts to control these reactions; I thought I would go mad.

Leon was out a great deal, he would march out with a bottle of wine in one hand and, so to speak, his cock in the other, flaunting his right to do as he pleased no matter what I felt. When I protested that people who lived by exerting their rights rather than exercising their sensitivity were grossly unpleasant people, he just stared at me uncomprehendingly. It was as if he had been hypnotized, possessed, was under compulsion. He said he was not in love but Serena was. I told him, you are brewing up hellish trouble for yourself: she is hardly presentable, what will you do on occasions such as the office parties which you have to go to, take her as the girlfriend? His answer was stubborn silence.

I began to detest him, to despise myself for having got mixed up with such a *schmuck*, and yet I clung on to him as if he meant life and breath. This triumph of illogicality was almost a madness, in fact, I lost my reason several times over the next few months. He made my life a torture, I even felt genuinely suicidal. I felt so betrayed that I thought I would never again totally trust another human being, and that would mean loneliness and lack of love for the rest of my life. The future gaped at me like a black hole. The Dark loomed.

We fought too, verbally and physically; I became a harridan almost overnight; my nicer nature died, and I wanted to kill. I was haunted with terrible desires, frightful images; I wanted to cut Serena's face, disfigure her, a strange impulse as she was already ugly. It riled me terribly that my lover should have been stolen by a creature with no loveliness; it was more insulting, more hurtful than if he had taken a beautiful lover, someone irresistible. I dreamed up tortures for her; the dark side of my mind had completely run amok. It was like being possessed; this incident had broken open a side of my nature which was almost unearthly in its nastiness. I hated myself and tried to control it, and matters became worse. I wished gang rape on her, any awful fate I could dream up, that would be hers. I clenched my whole being a dozen times a day in total and utter ill-wishing—I wanted her to experience every last bit of humiliation and pain which I was experiencing; every wave of pain I had, she would have in return. I wished slow deaths upon her, and slowly died myself. I have never been so ill and yet so filled with energy. My eyes sparkled, my muscles were toned, I danced everywhere; I flew, I burned up the hours on adrenalin caused by fear of loneliness and hatred of the two treacherous friends, who had cut me right out of the lovely triangle I had created. The more I screamed at Leon's retreating back the more I thought about the disagreeable aspects of our years together; I reassessed his behaviour and the state into which I had sunk, and began to hate him. I could see that in a way, both Serena and Leon had done me a favour for showing me what awful people I had treasured. And yet they were all I had: Leon had been a jealous lover and chased away all my other friends. I was alone, I felt I was howling like a wounded wolf in the middle of a cold desert.

I lost weight. Still I speeded along, running through my jobs and creating endless possible scenarios

for the film about Mr Crowley. But when the time came for discussing the scenarios I was suspicious of the motives of the other people involved; I lost control, I ranted, disgraced myself, I wept and stormed out, accusing them of stealing my material. I trusted not one person in the world any more, I wanted no more friends if this was how it turned out. One night I found myself in the pub and Serena was there, and I followed her out and gave her a beating, making her weep.

'You're not human, you vile bitch, what you have done to me I do to you. I have wasted years on Leon, valuable years; I never thought he would behave so stupidly and cheaply or do anything so gross, screwing a horrible creature like you in the next room! I wish I had never met you, damn you! Go away, nobody here in Leamington needs you, we were all happy before you came. You call yourself a Christian, damn you—if you want to be a Christian I'll crucify you personally! Don't you know that to be a Christian you have to satisfy God, not yourself, you stupid bitch!'

All this to an accompaniment of blows and pushings, she did not retaliate, just whined, a strange noise that excited no pity in me at all. I knew later that I should have been ashamed of such behaviour, but instead only regretted not hitting her harder. I sneered to Leon about her professed Christianity and he was astonished. He replied that she was no Christian but had told him she was completely atheist. He suggested that she had told me she was a Christian to wind me up, but in my paranoid state I felt she had said this as part of a disguise: she was hiding something, I knew it.

But Serena looked well, younger, healthier. She laughed a lot. At work we did not speak but kept our feud secret from the other workers. I felt depressed when I was not madly angry, I swung from one extreme to another. She seemed quite balanced while at work, but when I saw her in the evenings, in the middle distance, she was dressed like a young girl in silly tight clothes, a large hat, make-up; very tasteless but celebratory and signalling sexual activity. I noticed that she had depilated her legs and arms, and seemed better washed. Her fingernails were cleaner but those awful feet were displayed in cheap sandals. She had taken my advice and got herself some new clothes; in poor taste, wearing Indian house-sandals in the street. Nobody ever wears these out of doors in Leamington and certainly not the Asian women who introduced them.

I often heard her boasting about her wonderful new boyfriend and clutched my hands together to prevent myself from running at her with intent to murder. I had no one to tell my pain to, no other close friend. I vowed never to try to help another person again as long as I lived. My charity was at an end.

One night by mischance she was sitting at the same table as I in a pub where I had gone for a rare pint of Guinness. I had stopped drinking because it fuelled my rage. I looked up in utter alarm and embarrassment to see her there, grinning, dressed in see-through Indian pyjamas, the kind that would only be worn in an Indian movie. She just did not realize the impression she was making, which in some ways was an advantage, because she was behaving like a glamorous twenty-year-old, and full of self-confidence, which has its attractions even in an ugly person. We stared at one another. I had not meant to speak but something blurted out of me.

'You may have stolen a lover, Serena, but you have lost two friends. Love does not last, friendship might have.' She gave a strange little twisted grin and I saw her false teeth shift in her mouth.

'I would still be your friend if you would let me. I love people.'

'You never were my friend: all the friendship came from me, you only came near me to get at Leon, I see that now. And as for loving people, I think you know nothing of love, nor of people. You are not human, you are weird, I mean bad weird, no conscience, like a psy—

chopath or a goddam alien. You don't function as a human being at all.' At this point something very strange and frightening happened. I shall never forget what I saw.

Something happened to her eyes. Those strange eyes with no whites were momentarily obscured by a membrane, not unlike the membrane which draws across the eyes of a cat when it is ill. Simultaneously her hand, looking very clawlike, came up to her mouth and, right there in the pub, she removed her upper set of false teeth, revealing a row of yellowed fangs distinctly inhuman in shape. The corners of her mouth drew up and back to reveal how far these incisors grew, and I saw that her gums were almost black like those of some dogs. I felt myself reeling with shock, sounds grew distant. The membrane over her eyes slowly drew aside once more, and I knew I was gazing into eyes which were quite definitely not human.

She spoke, and her voice was hoarse and heavy, deeper than usual.

'I am Weerde all right, but not as you think. All my family are Weerde. What you don't know is that you are Weerde. You don't know who your parents are, do you? I at least know mine.' She returned the false human teeth to her mouth, gave out a horrible coughing noise and picked up her pint of beer. Nobody else seemed to have noticed anything at all, and she looked at me and smiled and smiled over the top of her glass. Her eyes spoke now, telling me that she had my lover; I could forget him, she was offering him delights of which I knew nothing nor ever would.

I thought then, for the first time in connection with Serena, of what Joan had told me about the ancient race living among us. It was as if a mental curtain had been lifted; I told myself that I had been hypnotizing myself into not seeing what was there because it did not fit within my parameters of reality. I believe that this happens a great deal: we simply refuse to see things because they would disturb our world too much, so it wasn't at all crazy. My world was disturbed at that frightful moment, and I felt all reality shattering inside me like a windscreen hit by a stone. I punched my hand through the obscuring shards and saw a monstrous cloud of darkness approaching, its jaws open to feed on the world. There would soon be nothing left, for if one preposterous fact could be seen to be true, then so could a thousand, and in half a day the universe would be inside out. From this comes the peculiar blindness of those people, many of them scientists, who pour scorn on anything remotely fantastic. They express their terror that we live in a fragile construct which at a gesture from something outside 'normality' can atomize the world, and us with it. I knew all this, in a kind of slowed time, a drowning sequence which spun the film of my life and beliefs to be looked at again, a replay with more insight.

I saw with horror that Mr Crowley might not have been deluded, that his magick might have been a true science and his calling up of demons a fact, and that even if magic is an extreme use of the imagination, this very imagination is a thousand times more powerful than most dreaming humans could themselves imagine. My entire rational universe fragmented, and in its place there appeared a world populated by witches, Yeti, Loch Ness monsters, sorcery, shape-shifting, ghosts, bogies and singing mice. I felt both crazy and illuminated.

I stood up, and without saying anything or knocking over my glass, or revealing my horror in any way, I left the place. When I was outside I ran and ran, supressing a scream, and flew into the house, slamming the door behind me. I think my eyes must have stared and my hair stood on end, and I know I panted with lips drawn back, out of sheer terror, disbelief and also the impact of certain knowledge of the Impossible. I knew I was not going mad, I had no doubt. I called out loudly for Leon, and he emerged from the bedroom where he was packing a case. He was leaving me.

'Don't go! She isn't human, she's weird, she'll eat you alive; you'll be tainted, awful things will happen! She's using you, she has no feelings, don't go, please Leon ...' I babbled these time-worn phrases into a face set against me.

'Do me a favour,' he said wearily. 'Put another record on. If you really want to know, Serena has more feelings than you have. I've never had good sex in my life until I met her, I know that now. You are as cold as a lizard, you don't give me anything or do anything for me. Just get out of my way, OK?'

I didn't say another word. I caught a glimpse of his eyes, and knew he had changed. I called what I saw possession, whereas an hour before I would have swallowed that word and said he was simply feverish. I kept out of his way, and when he had gone with a classic slamming of doors, I felt only relief. He had destroyed my love for him, only proving, maybe, that it was not very strong, I do not know. I rushed around opening all the doors and windows to let out the smell of him, and of her, which clung to him. I got out the vacuum cleaner and the dusters and cleaned the place right through, and felt slightly more calm. There was something else still bothering me though.

As I polished a mirror I focused on my own face. I grinned at my teeth, peered under my eyelids, pulled at my ears, scrutinized my skin. I looked perfectly normal: there was nothing odd at all. I stood there a long time in front of the mirror, thinking. Were there a lot of

Them? Had her boyfriend been one too? Her whole family?

I decided to go and visit Joan again, and did so the next day. She was not there, her friend told me, she was in a mental hospital. She had been sectioned there some weeks previously and would not speak

to anyone.

It was at this point that my universe began to re-create itself again. I had been mentally and emotionally undermined by the whole series of events, in need of help myself perhaps. At such times one can begin to see and believe things which are untrue. I have conveyed just how powerful such delusions are: for example the awful sight I witnessed when Serena removed her false teeth in the pub. My mind undoubtedly filled in that ghastly hole in her face with those strange, animal teeth. It was symbolic of the sort of feral person I had seen her to be, that was all. And for a brief while I had thought that Mr Crowley was a real magician, as if there could ever be such a thing! I had been ill, I had had a narrow escape, several in fact; from Leon, from Serena, from a psychotic episode. I feel somewhat stabilized just from writing all this down.

Leon I do not miss. He was part of a phase. I do not need a treacherous male in my life. I see Serena infrequently—1 work elsewhere now—but in the street we sometimes pass and I shudder, not because I think her to be some ancient life-form, some weird subhuman branch which neither Darwin nor Kammerer even dreamed about, but because she is what I first thought her to be: a bad bitch. A bad, bad bitch.

Railway Mania

Michael Fearn

I found the box tucked down the side of one of the gravestones at the cemetery in Chapel Le Dale. It was quite clearly a new addition, because I often came to pay my respects to the graves of the navvies who had been killed building the railway, and this was at the side of one of a small group of graves which were set a little apart from the rest. It was a newish, small, olive-green tin box, probably army surplus.

There has always been a link between railways and churchmen. I suppose I am just one in a long line of what must seem to be rather dotty old clerics who, too heavenly minded to be of much earthly use, spend their time with the dwindling evidence of this country's great railway past, which is certainly greater than its present. Fortunately, those who are acquainted with me will know that I have my feet firmly anchored to the ground. I haven't had a locomotive named after me like Bishop Eric Treacy, but my zeal is none the less, for all that. A psychologist once explained the railway hobby as the need to be part of something that is running to schedule in a world of growing confusion. That may be his explanation. I just like trains.

So it was with anticipation that, having taken morning service in Skipton, I set out in the car for what was probably going to be one of my last afternoons beside the *Long Drag,* as the Settle to Carlisle line has always been called. I am getting on a bit now and they're going to retire me soon, but when I get out into the wildness of the Ribble Valley I feel nineteen. Besides, there was a steam special to be photographed on Ribblehead Viaduct. It was going to be a good afternoon, and I had barely shaken the hand of the last member of the congregation when I was into the vestry like a shot and out of the back door. The drive to my favourite part of the line via the cemetery took place in brilliant June sunshine, but I didn't kid myself that once I got to the viaduct I wouldn't be freezing cold.

On that winter morning of 1866, we are told that the bells rang in Appleby, when the House of Commons passed the bill granting the Midland Railway Company the right to build a railway line from Settle to Carlisle over the northern Pennines. This was the railway which many said neither could, nor should be built. It was a product of the Midland's desire for its own route to Scotland. Unable to secure satisfactory agreements with the London and North Western Railway to use the route over Shap, James Allport, the Midland's Manager, had drawn an imperious pencil stroke on a map between Settle and Carlisle, saying: 'We'll build our own damned line!' It was a railway built in a fit of pique, an access of *folie* des grandeur. Six-and-a-half thousand men had been involved in the building of it, and now it was threatened with closure: part of the problem, in my opinion, caused by employing accountants to run railways, instead of railwaymen. I simply had to spend as much time there as I could.

I confess that I shouldn't have, but yes, I fished the box out from its niche beside the headstone, and

opened it. Inside there was a perfectly ordinary pad of note-paper: the kind with the cardboard back that always falls off. It was filled to the end of the last-but-one sheet with as close to a Victorian copperplate hand as it is possible to render in blue ball-point. I put it next to my sandwiches, tape recorder and camera on the front seat of the Mini, and drove as close to Ribblehead Viaduct as I could.

I was right about it turning out to be a perfect afternoon. I climbed as close as possible to the line, then I sat down and opened the box once more. That was the point at which my day changed completely and even though I was shortly surrounded by others of the railway fraternity, they certainly might as well not have been there. I began to read.

I remember quite a lot of what I have written down here, even though I was only a youngster of eighteen at the time. Some I was told and much I can guess, for I am almost twice the age that Uncle Sam Inskip was when he saw the men coming.

One member of the party was a young man in tailcoat and stove-pipe hat. He carried with him a map which he consulted from time to time, having the manner of one who would have berated the very limestone and earth for being different from what his map showed, if thus provoked. A slightly older man of stooped and clerkish appearance carried other rolled-up documents. There were three other men, obviously labourers, who were carrying sticks.

I remember that it was a kind day for September, high clouds and bright sun. Every so often, Sam told us, the party stopped and one of the labourers hammered into the ground a stake half the height of a man. It was banded in alternate hoops of black and white. I caught sight of the men several times myself as I was out tending the sheep, and I recall thinking that it was a miracle that they had even got so far, dressed as they were.

'Skiving off, Vicar?' I heard, and looked into the rubicund and friendly face of Ted Longstaff. I had noticed at second hand that some of the local railway group had been arriving for the past half-hour or so, and had set up photographic and sound equipment. Ted was a railway buff of many years' standing, and I could not be rude. I had to talk to him for a while, discussing the inconsequentialities that fellow enthusiasts chatter about. We exchanged reminiscences of the last days of steam on the *Thames-Clyde Express* and the Waveriey. I feel as well disposed to my fellow man as the next chap, probably better than some, but I did wish that Ted would go away. You see, the railway enthusiast in me had realized that I was reading a firsthand account of the marking-out of the line in 1866, and the clergyman in me was beginning to feel a little cold. This account was recent, and it was written on a pad which still carried the modern price label from the sub-post office in Clapham. Surely a work of imagination? Anyone who was present at the scene described, even as an adolescent, now had to be over a hundred and forty years old. Ted sensed that I was preoccupied and walked away, muttering under his breath about how I could be out there anyway on the only day of the week when my kind did any work, so far as he could see. I read on.

When they reached the edge of what we thought of as our land, Sam stood, checked his shape, and walked down diagonally from the cottage to join the men at a stand of trees which was a particular favourite of his.

'Good day, gentlemen,' he shouted, and I knew that he would be very careful to sound neither too brusque nor too cultured. These humans are so sensible to the slightest inflection and we did not see many people here to practise on.

'Humans!' You can imagine what I felt now. Actually no, I don't suppose you can.

This is the conversation as my uncle told it to us later that day.

'Good day to you, farmer,' the young man had replied. 'Is there some way in which we can help you?' There was something strange about the young man's accent.

'Aye. You can start by tellin' me who you are and what you're doin' on my land.'

'My name is Charles Stanley Sharland. I am a surveyor attached to the staff of Mr John Crossley, the Chief Civil Engineer of the Midland Railway Company. We are marking out the route of the new railway line from Settle to Carlisle.'

'Railway line ...'

'Surely you must have heard that the Bill received the Royal Assent on July the 16th last?'

‘I heard summat o’ th’ sort. But they’ll never build a line through here: it’s ower wild for that.’

‘Progress, my good sir!’

‘You’re not from round here, are you, lad?’

‘No, sir. I have the honour to come from her Majesty’s colony of Tasmania.’

‘Isn’t there enough for you to do out there without coming and poking your nose in round here where it’s not wanted? And you’ll be wantin’ them trees out of your road, I suppose?’

‘Most certainly.’

‘Then I’ll ask you to spare that one.’ Sam pointed to the tallest.

‘Why that one in particular?’

‘To hang you and all the engineers of the Midland Railway upon it, for daring to come here at all.’

Sam turned on his heel and stormed back up the hill, towards the cottage. The marking-out party continued.

This, of course, was the clincher. Either it was a very good piece of historical research or it was an actual, firsthand account. Sharland *had* led the staking-out party from Settle to Carlisle in 1866, but had become famously snowed in at the inn at Gearstones, near Ribblehead. He had been forced to tunnel out to continue with the work, but this was surely far earlier in the year. Possibly an unrecorded, previous attempt? Sharland had died in Torquay at the age of twenty-six without ever seeing the line completed. His clerk had died locally of influenza, and there was a story that he had continually shouted out in his delirium about being unwilling to go back to Ribblehead because a ‘weird man who wasn’t really there’ had kept trying to get him to throw himself from the valley sides. I whimsically noted the biblical parallel of the Devil suggesting to Christ that he throw himself from the pinnacle of the Temple, and continued my eavesdropping.

Great grandfather Josiah Inskip was a hundred and sixty at that time, and in human terms he looked seventy. He was the only remaining member of a Stasis-faction group which had come here for peace and isolation after their part of the Tame valley had vanished under a cotton mill. He used to tell us youngsters that we shouldn’t be bothered here, but even if we were, we ought to remember the trouble that was caused when humans arrived, and never to trust them a single inch. He used to sit by the fire, smoke his pipe and spit. I always thought that was disgusting, but I never would have dreamed of telling him. The grate was always black-leaded by mother Rachel until it shone, but no one ever visited. It often seemed to me that we had taken to human ways just that little bit too much. Such things do not normally matter to Weerde.

Weerde? What were they? From the writing style, there were no grounds to assume that the writer did not know what an adjective was, or that they couldn’t spell.

I remember that day’s events bitterly and well, for they were directly the cause of my having to leave on my wanderings a good while before I was ready. This is something no Weerde likes to do, for it is a period full of danger and risk for us, and we must be fully prepared by our fathers, womb-mothers and by the rest of the group.

An armchair on either side of the fireplace formed the arms of a squarish U whose base was the oak settle, which Rachel shared with Jessica, Sam’s womb-sister. Even though she was my second mother, I could recognize that Rachel was a well set-up lass of fifty-three who looked thirty in human terms. She had been sufficiently influenced on her wanderings to insist to Sam that they be ‘married.’ This they had done in Gars-dale. The others were out and the offspring were playing in the lengthening shadows. Their shouts reached us through the open door. I am quite sure that if the adults had realized I was there they would have made me go, but they were too preoccupied. It is strange how such times can come back to you across the years, so clearly.

‘But we aren’t a group of filthy Darkcallers! Why should they take over our land to build this monstrous thing? It was for the very reason of these humans and their pernicious need to cover every inch of the land with their created things that we were hounded out of Greenfield. It’s as if they don’t believe they exist unless they’re constantly littering the ground with the proof ...’

‘Josiah, it simply is not that desperate a situation.’ Rachel rose, and knelt down before the fire, placing the poker between the cast-iron bars and lifting the coals. A small plume of sparks rose. ‘The

railway in the city takes very little room, and here it would be noticed even less.'

'Very well, father,' said Sam. 'Have you any suggestions? I confess that I found it a shocking trial to have to play *the* yokel for the surveying party.'

'Something must be done. You've had your wandering years, Sam, and you've seen humans, but you haven't seen what they can do to a place in months.'

Uncle Sam heeded his father's words and organized us well that night. Not only did we remove the markers that the party had put out in the morning: he had us fill in the post-holes. The southbound party found their work undone.

Have you ever been so utterly convinced by the authenticity of something you have read, that you did not question it for one moment? Everyone who has read at all has at least one piece of writing that they come back to again and again because it is a real, created thing. Whether the events it describes are completely fictional or not, either the writer's skill or the emotional impact of the content has a life of its own. All I can tell you is that I heard a rushing sound passing by twenty feet below me and I knew that this would be the special: 4472 *Flying* Scotsman, one of Sir Nigel Gresley's supreme creations pulling a rake of restored, varnished-teak LNER coaches, but quite frankly at that moment the date was 1866 and I didn't even look up.

I should explain that it did not go well for the Midland Railway. *Why* should I explain? If you are reading this I am almost certainly dead, so what difference can it possibly make? Maybe I was not so far from my original calling, with faith dulled into a round of routine observance, as I might have liked to think. Call it a finicky attention to detail. The Midland's application for an Abandonment Order in the light of the difficulties they faced was turned down by Parliament: the landowners and the farmers had now got behind the idea of the railway, and if they had to have the thing at all they really thought it would be a good idea if it happened as fast as was practicably possible.

The account went on to tell of how Sam took his sheep to market and heard that there was quite a lot of excitement about the line. It was said that it would be the making of the entire area. It would open up the border country to the rest of the world. Leeds in two hours! London in five! Then came a most remarkable passage:

Being Weerde, he was able to circulate around the busy market and be even more inconspicuous than a human who does not wish to be noticed. We know enough about human perception, having shared a world with them (albeit for a few short ages), to know that they sometimes seem to look straight past us without noticing that we are there: a phenomenon which we have used to our advantage upon numerous occasions.

It would be a truly stupid cleric who ignored the fact that there are inexplicable things in the world, but such was the realism of the account that I find myself (in this rather donnish and mannered report of the events) at a loss to see how I failed to realize more quickly what I was dealing with.

Sam listened. A viaduct at Ribblehead, just below our group's house. A tunnel at Blea Moor. Damn these humans! This was as good as putting up a beacon to the Dark! Farmers from Horton, New Houses, Selside all seemed to agree that there would be much to be gained. Sam came home with a heavy heart. By the time I met him at the junction of Cam beck and the nascent Ribble, he realized that he was going to have to take charge of events. Then came the evening that excluded me from the group as surely as if the Midland Railway had dragged me out with one of their locomotives.

'Rachel, I tell you we shall have no peace. You may be more familiar with these trains than I, but the more machines there are the more chance there is of the Dark being called.'

'And I tell you, Samuel, that these people are the sons of their mothers just as our Thomas and Ruth are!'

Josiah stirred by the fire, and shifted in his chair. We all looked at him with affection, habits or no habits. He really was beginning to revert now. It would not be long until he found it too much of a strain to take human shape. The very reason we were here was for isolation, and we did not wish to start a yeti-bigfoot-sasquatch rumour in these parts, as aged Weerde who found shape-stabilization difficult had in certain other parts of the world.

The argument continued. It was quite obvious to me that even the threatened presence of large

numbers of humans was going to cause trouble. Discussions were common in the Inskip group, but this was an argument. I suppose the fact that I was subject to the hot and intemperate mood swings of a rather difficult adolescence might explain what happened next. What the humans were doing to us already was making me uncontrollably angry.

'I think they should be allowed to build their railway.' The words had escaped with the same lack of conscious control as an unexpected sneeze.

Sam turned slowly round from his seat opposite Josiah and asked:

'What's that you said, Davy?' He looked as though he knew all too well, but was hoping that I would be able to reassure him. Matthew, my own father, was a taciturn individual, and I was far closer to Sam than to him. He simply shifted on his own stool and looked uncomfortable.

'Let the boy have his say,' Josiah rumbled from his chair, and I found myself the centre of attention. I remember feeling so hot that I wished the fire were further away.

From behind me, my father's voice asked:

'Now, David, what do you mean?'

The people I loved most in the world were all looking at me with expressions which ranged from concern to hurt bewilderment, and I felt quite out of control. There was a long, silent pause in which I could hear the fire logs spit.

'I think we should let them carry on, and call the Dark, and then they will take them off and we shall be left in peace again,' I blurted.

'You'll not talk like that in this house!' Sam roared. 'Have you any idea of what you are suggesting?'

'Sam, he's only a youngster. He's a year or so yet from his wandering time ...' Jessica tried to calm the situation down, but Sam had been roused, and it was too late.

'He should have thought of that before he chose to open his mouth. He's only here as the eldest of the children: not as a full member.'

'AH the more reason to let him off,' my father said.

'Matthew, I know he's your boy, but you must see that we can't ...'

I couldn't bear for this to go on any longer.

'Stop it!' I yelled. 'If you mean that we risk calling the Dark, I don't believe they're real! They are just an excuse a lot of old men and women give for never doing anything!'

Of course, I did not mean any of this, but it was too late. Sam told me to leave. The others could probably have changed his mind, but I really had gone too far. I know that many young humans leave home after disputes of this sort, but it really is not the way with us. We know that we will leave, but we leave in order to return. We also have what has always been called the ceremony *of* return, which takes place on the day the Weerde youngster leaves. The hours spent with each adult member of the group, listening again to the tales and advice culled from their own wanderings are followed by time alone with everyone in the group, even the smallest. They will be adults when one returns (or they may have left on their own wanderings) and all personal disputes and animosities must be settled. All debts must be paid. Some of the old ones may have died, so all things must be said. I was denied that solace. None of this could take place for me.

I know that this caused as much grief in the group as it caused me, for I did not actually go far. Shapes were too unstable to go out into human society for some time, and my Kin had to begin to live on their own livestock and whatever scant crops they could force to grow on such inhospitable heights. Great grandfather had chosen this location for isolation, not horticulture. From the Saurians we had learned the science of stone, and the memory of Earth's oldest race was strong. The death and burial of Josiah on Batty Moss showed Sam the way of it, and he took charge. Much of the rest of what happened I have from Jessica, who refused to isolate me completely, and who would meet me by arrangement in Ingleton or Garsdale on shopping trips every so often. It was in the December of 1869 that Thomas ran into the room where his father, Rachel and Jessica were in conversation.

'Father! There are hundreds of men on the Moss with big things with legs on them and ...'

'Calm yourself, Thomas. I shall come directly.'

'There was no need to elaborate, or to chide his offspring for exaggeration. There were, indeed,

hundreds of men on the Moss. They had what were quite obviously drills, and several holes had already been bored.

The humans did not know why, later in the day, a new charge-hand came to take over the location of the drill, and no one could have said that they remembered much about him. From that moment onwards, they had no luck with their drilling, and it became clear that their drills were going down into twenty-five feet of mud and peat, and that no stable foundation could be found. The drilling party became discouraged and some of them began to feel very agitated.

In the bitter, knife-like north-east wind and louring cloud there was scant need to inject another factor of discomfort to encourage the desertion of the illiterate navvy. Men who could carry bags of sand up and down sheer valley sides all day could not countenance the additional illusion of there being wild beasts at the edge of their vision. We are shape-changers, and know what humankind are really frightened of better than they do. We have had the time to find out. Work had to be abandoned for the next few days until a priest of their ridiculous god could be brought in to purify the site.

No, to be honest, I was not shocked by that. One thing you have to develop in my calling is a broad back—especially in these days when there seems to be a special case for what I was trained to believe was a moral or religious absolute. Perhaps there is something in the psychologist's ponderings about railway enthusiasts, after all!

This being, this Weerde, continued his narrative.

It was a small town of wood, this Quebec, as the navigators called it, the shanty town where the three hundred men and their families lived who were to build the viaduct at Ribblehead. It had this name for they were forced to scale heights daily just as terrifying as those faced by Wolfe. Yes, I have to admit that I lived in Quebec for a short time, and worked with the men there. This is why it was hardly surprising to me that whispers started from a quarter that no one else quite understood, to the effect that the viaduct was to be built on bales of wool. That was all that was said to be available locally to soak up the groundwater, otherwise the viaduct would sink as soon as it was raised.

This legend is still current, and I have heard it quoted as truth by very knowledgeable railway historians. Each of the piers of the viaduct, actually built on concrete for one of the first times, emerged from the floor of the Moss caged in a wooden framework. The 'bog carts' with a barrel for wheels delivered the materials to the site, and every sixth pier was made thicker so that if one fell, it would only take another five with it.

My Kin were forced to rely upon shadow and reflection; upon suggestion and innuendo. The Welsh masons and Irish labourers were a fertile ground for such seeds: moralistic and dissipated by turns. The life of Quebec was that of any frontier community. Justice was rough and ready, and stories ran like wildfire. Drunkenness was a way of life, and venereal disease so rife that Mrs Garnett of the Manchester Missionary Society paid a visit to attempt to instil some moral rectitude into the hearts of the navvies. They were too busy with the Helm wind, typhoid and influenza to take any notice.

The sound would stay for ever with those of us who heard it, of a Welsh mason who could lift three men, crying for his Ma as he was sucked into the bog of Batty Moss or Dandry Mire. The clay slides that buried whole gangs in the workings for Blea Moor Tunnel became a speciality of Jessica's, as she told me, for all the Inskip group had come round to the idea that if they were to retain any degree of privacy or make sure that yet another area of the planet were not converted into a veritable lighthouse for the Dark, action had to be taken. We had learned well from the Saurians.

Men fell and were blown from the bridge. Quite often this happened without Weerde intervention, but there were stories of grey, semi-human figures coming upon various navvies unawares. The common ground in these accounts was that the figures always suggested suicide as a means of making an end of the undoubted, extreme discomfort. They would also prey upon the minds of men already disturbed to suggest that they were not much men to have subjected their families to the dire inconvenience of Quebec life. The navvies worked often in conditions of intense cold, and humans who are suffering from exposure are very suggestible, even to the point of going to sleep and not waking up, on command. Wouldn't their families be better off without them, or happier at least in Leeds or Manchester, where they could get a decent factory job? My group would have been quite happy with mass desertion: death was not a

necessity, merely absence.

One who survived said it was as though a voice had said to him that it would simply be easier to stop trying to hang on and point stone blocks at the same time. He had seen out of the corner of his eye a figure whose approach had startled him. He had staggered and fallen, only to be held by his braces snagging against a support.

'I felt a hand push me, you see. It just seemed the right thing to do like. My hands were frozen anyway, so I fell. When I was caught by my braces I thought "there's lucky", all cool like, as if nothing had happened.'

The rumour about the wool had some basis in fact in the end because Sam had driven his entire flock of sheep into one of the holes for the piers as a last, desperate spoiling measure. Humans were so sentimental about animals. Surely this would stop them. No. The viaduct was finished in 1875, but by that time there were no Weerde at Ribblehead. There were also two hundred of the navvies and their dependents in the cemetery at Chapel Le Dale.

I can control my anger no longer. I am David Inskip, the Weerde who was forced from his home too early by human folly, and my age is one hundred and forty-seven human years. When a Weerde has given you his name, you may know that there will be a reckoning. I no longer care whether anyone finds this account, which I shall leave on my father's grave. It has served its purposes: it has clarified my thoughts and made me feel better. It is also the only memorial to my Kin.

Humans! You are on this world for so short a time and your values are nonsensical! How can you know the true worth of heart, of stone, of love, sharing and years? How can you understand that the Dark is a ravening brood that must one day return towards the world you have stolen from us and see your works as evidence of your presence? The Dark will come. They will feed. We will *all* perish for I, like all my race, curse the fact that through living with you our shape-changing nature has made us so like you that some of us, particularly some of our young have embraced your glittering trash and shunned their true nature.

I look now at the cemetery at Chapel Le Dale, for I know that twelve of the graves contain bodies of a different shape: bodies who occupy the ground with understanding, not mere oblivion. Yes, we have grown to be like you to a degree which is mortal to us. We cannot grow great again whilst constantly trying to adapt to the dangers which you pose to us. My group all died from your influenza in the end.

It has always been one of my regrets that it was not I who weakened the Tay Bridge in 1879 when it broke in a storm and the Dundee train fell into the river. What was accomplished there by proven human incompetence I have managed to reproduce over the years. My first success was when I returned for the first time to the neighbourhood of our group home and found an uninhabited ruin. It was I who set the signals to clear and gave two light engines the road to proceed to Carlisle in 1910, where they were caught on Ais Gill summit by the Glasgow express, which they should have followed. So satisfying that it was Christmas Eve.

Quintinshill in 1915 was perhaps my greatest triumph. A simple matter to arrange for a telegraph message not to be sent: one almost had the feeling of sculpting a disaster from the basic stuff of chaos. Four trains, including a troop special from Liverpool. Over three hundred dead. Very fitting, although loss of life was only ever a means to an end.

I set the trap points to derail the Penzance express at Norton Fitzwarren in 1940. I caused the driver to overrun the signals at Lewisham in 1957. I have scrambled a good few signal wires in my time, but I am quite happy for others to take the public credit.

Many years have come and gone, and I am now very old. I have wandered your world. How could I come back to a home which you had ruined and to a family whose quietness and peace you had ruptured? My hate is cold and it has matured. As I watch one of your trains struggle across the land where my father's sheep ran, I know that I am going to Folkestone where you are digging a vast tunnel under the sea for more of your trains.

When I finished the account, I put it back into the box. I was seated alone by the side of the tracks which David Inskip had hated so much. All the others had gone: I hoped that they would simply think that the batty old Reverend had finally cracked.

I don't suppose for one moment that you can conceivably imagine what it is like for the vicar of a very comfortable little parish in rural England to be faced with the blood-and-bones struggle of good and evil in the world. Even stating the problem in its fundamental nature like that seems ridiculous in the late twentieth century, when our lives have become so predictable and controlled. This was an issue of faith: an issue such as I, a dotty railway parson, had not had to face in forty years. I knew that there was evil here, but certainly it was not at all one-sided. Was there actually a greater evil against which protective steps had to be taken?

For the form of it, I repeated the prayer of exorcism over the tract, now back in its box. Somehow, amidst that scenery, only the Latin would do: In nomine *patris* et jilii ... I then said the Lord's Prayer, and was jerked back to reality by a pronounced drop in temperature (but it was only the wind) and the rowdy, southward passage of the two-coach multiple unit to Settle.

There was also such a weight of time, and desperate loneliness. The Weerde. Earth's oldest living race. Whether any of this is true or not, I am firmly convinced that David Inskip was exactly who he said he was, for since that day my own researches have tied up loose ends in the Settle-Carlisle story which have never been solved any other way. I was left with one final dilemma: his threat to the Channel Tunnel. He had reason to loathe railways, and there have been several accidents during its construction. I doubt that we shall ever be able to prove him responsible. The box is buried again but I am afraid I shall not tell you where.

The fact that you are reading these observations means that I am dead, for they are part of the papers lodged with my will and the notes of an unfinished book on the line, which I was writing myself. A superb way of avoiding any responsibility, and I was always rather good at that.

Blind Fate

Liz Holliday

Teiresias stared into the darkness of the cave. She was there, he knew it: Sphinx, curse of Thebes, riddler, throt-tler of men. The enemy he had never met. He saw her as a patch of warmth on the cold stone at the back of the cave, heard the slow rasping of her breath. The still air was heavy with her scent. It filled his throat, thick with the complex undertones of old age, and overlaid with the stink of rotting human blood and flesh. There was something in that smell of rain on slate, of crushed flax seeds and beeswax; something familiar underlying it all that he could not quite place however he struggled.

He heard her turn in her sleep, smelled the slight change in her odour as she woke.

His heart thrashed wildly in his chest; the blood sang in his ears. She was an Ancient One, and therefore as different from ordinary Kin as the Kin were from humans, if the Songs of the Lines were to be believed.

He feared her. Suddenly, he could no longer deny it to himself. He stepped back into the strong light at the mouth of the cave. His chiton wrapped itself around his legs, threatened to come loose from the fibula that pinned it at the shoulder. Trying to hold it up he trod unwarily. Bone crunched under his foot, loud as the snapping of a dry twig.

Her head came up. Light glinted like fire in her eyes. His fingers were suddenly like jelly. His chiton slipped through them, until it was held on only by his girdle. The rough wool chafed his skin. Better to think of that than the approaching Ancient One, than the prospect of failure, than the loss of his name to the Songs of the Lines.

Fear filled his mouth with thin bile. Unable to swallow it back or even spit it out, he let it spill out over his chin. Hide hissed on rock. Claws clicked on stone. No wonder the humans could not answer her riddle, he thought. I doubt they could even speak their names.

Yet I am not human. I am Teiresias, and I am sent by Zeus. I will not be silent.

Something huge and shadowy was making its way to the front of the cave. Teiresias closed his eyes, and though he could not shut out the clatter of her talons or the awful, complex smell of her, it was enough to give him back his voice.

‘Come forth,’ he tried to shout. His voice cracked, and he tried again. ‘Come forth and face me.’

The thing that moved forward into the half-light hardly seemed human. Perhaps she no longer cared. She towered over Teiresias, twice the height of a man. He stared up into her face, all thrusting muzzle and tiny eyes. Blood caked the golden fuzz of her skin, the ancient dugs that sagged against her belly. The Sphinx shook her head, and the heavy mass of her hair settled like wings folding against her back, all matted with grease to her knees.

‘So,’ she said softly. Her breath seared Teiresias like furnace heat. ‘Another has come to hear my riddle, and to die.’

‘I heard you ate the flesh of men, Aunt,’ Teiresias said, trying to hide the desperation in his voice.

‘I know you. I have always known you.’ The Sphinx brought her head up and tilted it as though she heard a noise. She said, ‘You have the taint of Kin about you, Nephew. And to what degree are you my nephew?’

‘I am Teiresias, who the men of Thebes sometimes call seer. And I am of the line of Eueres and Chariclo, which owes its allegiance to Zeus, First Father of the Kin, whom the humans call father of the gods. My name is sung in the Songs of Lines for the deeds I have done.’ Teiresias managed to get the ritual reply out without stumbling. The sun seared his back; he imagined that the Sphinx’s talons, raking him, would burn as badly.

‘And I am Sphinx, known also as Kassmia in the Songs of Lines. I am most ancient, and I do the bidding of the First Mother, Hera; she whom the humans call Most High Goddess.’

She moved slowly towards him. In all the world, there were only her eyes, cold as the fixed stars, bright as fire. They held him. He watched in awe as she came near. Her odour overpowered him. He tried to retreat, but the rock wall bit into his back, into his palms.

‘Did you think to kill me for Zeus’s pleasure, Nephew-of-Another-Line?’ Teiresias felt his eyes go wide, smelled the metallic odour of his own fear and knew he had betrayed himself. Sphinx touched his face with her hand; her skin was rough with callous, greasy with ingrained dirt. He moved his head aside. Her fingers stroked the soft flesh of his throat. ‘Did great Zeus not tell you of the pact between my line and yours before he sent you to face me?’

His breath burned in his throat. ‘No,’ he whispered.

‘In the earliest days my brother Typhon, already of great age, fought Zeus.’ She glared at Teiresias. Her breath quickened, and he smelled the odour of triumph on it. ‘Typhon disarmed him and hamstrung him with his own weapons, then fed him a poison which made him unable to sleep, unable to concentrate. Thus bound, he was unable to sleep the healing sleep. Typhon had been afraid however, that Zeus, winning, would use the poison on him in revenge. For this reason, he gave me the antidote to guard.’

She stopped. Teiresias waited. The silence was broken only by the rustling of the leaves on the cypresses that cloaked Mount Phikion, the scurry-and-stop of a shrew deep in the cave. It was unbearable. The Sphinx’s eyes, gold flecked with blood red, filled up his sight. He began to speak, knew what she expected him to say. He refused. For fully a hundred heartbeats he was able to refuse, though he wanted to scream, wanted to die rather than look in those eyes. He knew he smelled of fear and acquiescence; the stink of the losing beast in the battle.

Sphinx let her finger score his skin gently. Teiresias felt a trickle of blood run slowly down his neck. Beheading, he thought; the death of the brain: damage we can never heal. ‘Well?’ asked the Sphinx.

‘Zeus sent Cadmus, the human founder of Thebes, to you. With him was my forefather Eueres. They pleaded with you in the name of Zeus and in the name of the humans, whom they called mortals. You refused.’ He hesitated. Whatever he said, she would kill him. The taint of it came off her like sweat. He saw her mouth move in the beginning of a snarl. ‘Finally,’ he said, quickly, ‘they pleaded with you in the name of Hera, the wife Zeus has acknowledged before the humans. You relented then, but not before you had extracted promises from human and Kin alike: that they nor any of their Lines would seek to kill you.’

‘So it was spoken before the Council,’ Sphinx said. ‘And let it be so,’ she continued, in the words of the ritual.

‘And let it be so,’ Teiresias agreed.

The Sphinx touched a talon to the sticky blood on his neck then sucked it off, slowly. When she had finished, she smiled. Her teeth were etched round with crimson. ‘What business have you here, Nephew-of-Another-Line?’ she asked.

‘Zeus bids me say this to you,’ he said. ‘It is his will that you leave Thebes. If King Laius falls, it will be to the detriment of the Kin. Therefore he has commanded Hera to give up her quest for the return of the human Chrysippus.’

He had no warning. The Sphinx lashed out. Her claws caught him across the chest, ripped himation and flesh alike. He screamed in pain, moved aside too slowly, as if he were human. It was too late: she had him pinned against the bare rock. There was too much pain. He could smell his own blood, fresh and raw, and his own fear. From the Sphinx came the smell of excitement, a kill to be made; sexual arousal. He felt himself sliding into unconsciousness: remembered Zeus, who was so much more to be feared.

The Sphinx bent her head to his chest and began to lap at the blood that welled there. Her tongue was cold and rough, and sometimes her fangs touched his flesh. Vomit bubbled up into his mouth, bitter as wine vinegar. He spat it out, and it stained the orange rock dark. The rock wall bit into his hands and back and buttocks as he trembled against it, tried to hold himself up with his spread arms.

He would die, he knew it. Tears burned acid trails down his cheeks and slid into his mouth. He would die, and with him his place in the memory of the Kin; there would be only the oblivion of death, or whatever worse thing waited there. It was worse than he could contemplate.

He clung to the pain, and through it tried to think of Zeus with his complex odour of morning dew and fresh turned earth, bull’s blood and the acrid tang of lightning. He has commanded me, Teiresias thought, I may not fail.

He had commanded Hera also, Teiresias thought; he had to concentrate, to remember why Zeus had sent him there. Zeus had commanded Hera never to make use of the humans’ oracles again. She had used them to frighten Laius, so rumours in the Kin went. The oracle had told him that any son of his would kill his father and marry his mother. Laius had reacted in a very human, typically unexpected way by having the child exposed on the hillside. It was something they did regularly, though not to royal heirs.

I saved him though, Teiresias thought, in case we could use him. Him with the spike through his ankles, that parched night in summer. So I named him Oedipus for his swollen feet and took him to Corinth. For this, among many other things, my name is sung in the Lines. Many other things.

That gave him courage, so that he was able to look at the red stained face of the Sphinx when she lifted it and said, ‘Hera requires Chrysippus. He was hers before ever the human stole him. Zeus may not command me in this.’

Teiresias turned his head away with difficulty. The Sphinx pressed close up to him. He saw blood-swollen mites crawling in her hair. The acidic smell of them made his eyes water.

‘I understand, Aunt,’ he said at last. He ran his tongue over dry lips. ‘I wished only to warn you that your depredations cause these humans to call on prophecy and oracles, and try all manner of spells to be rid of you. You know what that may mean.’

‘Riddles, Nephew? I thought you did not like them.’

He could hardly breathe. The Sphinx’s weight pinned him to the wall. Her breath slowly rasped, counting out, he imagined, the last minutes of his life.

He took a breath, managed to speak again. ‘What I

mean is no riddle. We have the histories. What once was may be again.’

‘Say it.’

‘We’ve worked so hard to make these people rational, to do away with dreaming. Yet still they dream, and now you turn their dreams to darkness.’

‘Ah, to darkness. The rational begets insanity. A riddle wrapped in enigma born of paradox. Yet I thought you hated riddles, Nephew, you and all your Kin: say it.’

‘If I must. They will call the Dark upon themselves. And when it devours them, what will become of the Kin then?’

‘We will be passed over, as we were before. Or we will be eaten also. Either way, the waiting ends. No riddle there, Nephew.’

It came to Teiresias then that she was quite mad; that all she had done had been designed to force the humans into occult practices. There would be no reasoning with her.

'If you come again, Nephew, I will kill you, oath or no. I have Hera's love; I have my place in the Songs. Do you understand me, Nephew?'

'Yes,' he said. He hardly dared breathe, could hardly hear her breath for the thought that he might yet live.

She pushed him aside as suddenly as she had captured him. He crashed against the ground. Pain jolted up his arms and spine, and across his shoulders. He hardly cared. He levered himself to his feet, and stood swaying in the half-dark, knowing he should run, staring at the bones and hair that littered the cave floor, unable to move.

He heard the Sphinx take a step towards him; she still stank of triumph and decay. He moved back, though agony burned in his muscles.

'Don't go yet, Nephew,' the Sphinx said. She smiled at him. Light glinted on her teeth. 'You have not heard my riddle.'

'I do not need to, Aunt,' Teiresias said. 'I see now you have no need of further answers.'

'Nevertheless,' she whispered, 'what is it that alters thus: in the morning it goes on four feet, in the afternoon on two and in the evening on three, and yet is weakest when it has most support?'

'What?' Teiresias said. He stared up into her black eyes, cold as the Dark. He searched in his mind for some answer he could give her. Nothing came. Nothing overheard or learned by chance would answer: nothing in the histories, the genealogies, the Songs. No chance conversation with a human, who might be expected to invent answers to nonsense questions as they invented tales to explain the world to themselves.

'Can't you answer, Nephew?' the Sphinx asked. 'Then you shall die, as any human would!'

'By the oath my forefather made, Aunt, don't do this—'

Teiresias saw her taloned hand lash out. He tried to move, but he was too slow: too slow, and in too much pain. Light flashed on her claws, and then the world exploded into redness and pain. He screamed.

He brought his hands up to his face. Through his agony he felt blood and jellied slime. The darkness was blacker than a moonless, starless night; he felt as if he might fall forwards into it and be lost for ever.

Beyond his screaming, something laughed. There was a sharp shove in his back. He stumbled down the hill, into the cool of the cypress trees.

Behind him, there came the voice of the Sphinx: '*If* you come again, have an answer for me, Nephew. For my oath's sake. I'll give you further clues: this creature speaks with one voice, though its tongue is quicksilver, Mercury-ruled, and changing ever; it sleeps often, but its body is iron, ruled by Mars and changing never. What is it?

It had begun so long ago. Sphinx, sleeping without changing in the quiet of her cave, dreamed of that beginning; dreamed in the manner of the Kin, of what *had* been; though she had tried, she had never found the way to dream in the manner of humans, so that memories and desire and fear melded and became strange.

She dreamed of Prometheus, torchfire staining his golden hair crimson as the humans clustered around him in the night, listening. The chirruping of the cicadas counterpointed the shuffling of the crowd, the soft susur-rus of their breathing. Sphinx stood among them, watching them and watching Prometheus, for this was in the days when she could take the human shape.

The wind from the ocean mingled salt with the bittersweet scent of ripening oranges and the scent of burning pine, but beneath that she could taste the humans' fear and excitement, heady as wine. The small hairs along her back stood up, fingers tingled, every part of her alive with his nearness.

'Friends,' he called out. His voice was smooth as oil, with just a sharp hint of command beneath it. 'You know that some of us who walk among you can change our shape at will. Our bodies are strong. You know this in your hearts, for you call us gods.'

Prometheus raised up his arms. Even at this distance, he smelled of oil and sweat and honeysuckle. Sphinx trembled with desire. She remembered trembling; in her sleep her claws stretched convulsively and she whimpered deep in her throat, remembering what had come next.

‘You must not call us gods,’ Prometheus said, and only the cicadas broke the silence in the stadium, as if a thousand people held their breath at one time: the god spoke heresy. ‘We are fearful creatures, and we are afraid of the Dark. It will come upon us, so we say, and devour us all, raiding in the night, eating our souls. And it is you we fear, dear friends. For those who are eldest among us say it is the humans that will bring these raiders down on us all.’

He paused for breath. His skin glinted in the torchlight. Silence filled up the sultry darkness.

‘So we keep you in ignorance, like cattle or goats. We walk among you lying by a failure of truth, lying by implication. Yet I tell you, when it comes you humans will be our hope. By the bright fire of your minds you will find a way to fight, when all my Kin can do is hide in the shadows.’

His eyes were wild, earth-brown flecked with gold. The scent of him, salt tang beneath honeysuckle, roused Sphinx as he roused the humans: as he always had, no matter what shape he took. She wanted to go to him, draw him off into some quiet place; they would make love in the human way, then sleep the changing sleep together, and when they woke join again in the manner of the Kin—if it were safe. In true shape the scent would be that much stronger ... she felt her mouth go dry with desire. But it was never safe. It was one reason why they had decided to reveal all to the humans, against the wishes of the Kin.

‘By the bright fire of your minds and hearts, I call upon you to stand with me against the deluge!’ Prometheus cried out. His voice echoed slightly. ‘Will you stand with me?’

The humans cried, ‘Euoi, euoi,’ until the hillside rang with their shouts. Sphinx found herself swept along in a rising tide of brightly coloured himations; the clamour of running feet and harsh, quick breathing filled her ears, as the odour of exultation and poorly hidden fear filled her mouth. They made him a crown of myrtle leaves to wear, and spread laurel branches for him to walk on.

So they went from the hill into the city. Moonlight silvered the pale steps of the Temple. Firelight flickered within. The air reeked of spilled blood and roasting flesh, but over it all was the dull scent of animal fear.

The humans fell silent. Prometheus walked up the steps into the temple.

Zeus was waiting there, with others of the Kin.

Sphinx, in the cave, whimpered as she slept. She should have known, should have known, should have known.

The humans had run screaming in terror: this was part of Zeus’s intention. They made the Kin into gods, if they were aware of them at all. That their gods sometimes walked among them, and them all unknowing, had been a matter of rumour and supposition to them.

Zeus in glory was another thing entirely. Already growing ancient, he was taller than a human and broad in proportion. He was dressed in white, and crowned with myrtle. All around him younger cousins of the Kin stood, bearing torches and rods of purifying fig and mallow.

They were young, these children Zeus had chosen, she thought contemptuously: not more than forty, any of them. She could tell, for their scents were simple things, without undertone or resonance.

Sneering, she stood her ground among the rushing humans. The copper taste of their fear overlaid the mingled scents of burning verbena and cedar. They were like stampeding horses, she thought, flesh in flight from what it could not understand.

After a time all became quiet.

Later, in the Caucasus Mountains, Prometheus began to scream. Sphinx heard those cries in her dreams, nightly. The humans said that Zeus had chained him to a rock there. They said that Zeus sent eagles each sunset to tear out his liver; that by morning it had grown back.

Sphinx knew better. It would take longer than that to grow an organ. And she had seen the fury in the First Father’s eyes. He would take his revenge bloodily, and in person.

No eagles would fly at his bidding over the Caucasus.

Teiresias stumbled through the trees near the road to Thebes. Exhaustion and pain had almost driven him into unconsciousness. He felt blood crust his face, his hands where they covered his eyes, the massive shallow wound on his chest. The crust was constantly forming, constantly breaking to let fresh blood seep slowly out, sending tiny thrills of pain through him; they were all that kept him conscious.

In all the world there was only pain. Sometimes he paused. The forest was rank with aromatic olive

and lemon-scented cypress, and the sweet, sickly smell of juniper. Its silence was oppressive; birds and animals all fell mute before Teiresias. In the distance though, he could hear the slow clopping of donkeys on their way to the agora in Thebes, and the shouts of the farmers who drove them. The scent of the olives and raisins and oily sheep fleeces they carried drifted up to him, all mixed with the sweat of the farmers, the stink of mead and garlic on their breath.

They were human, but they lived in the normal world, a world where there was something other than pain in the eyes and chest, and the rank odour of your own blood and flesh and fear. He envied them.

A branch lashed his hand where it covered his face, caught his torn cheek below the socket of his eye. He screamed with new pain.

He would have wept, but he had no tears to cry. Instead he vented his anger on the air and on himself, screaming aloud and tearing at his clothes, his hair, his damaged face. He had failed; had failed, and his name would be taken from the Song of the Lines: nothing he had done would last beyond his time, not even his children would remember him ...

He collapsed, at last, into spasmodic, dry sobbing. Afterwards, he found that he had burrowed into the cypress and olive leaves that littered the floor. He chewed some of them into a wet ball to make a compress, then pushed it into his eye sockets. It eased them somewhat; still, he wished he had a bit of willow bark or a few laurel leaves to chew: anything to take away the pain.

He breathed deeply, allowing himself to fall into the first stage of the change sleep. In his vision, he saw himself whole, with eyes to see. It would take a long time, he knew that, and he would be weak when he awoke. Such damage would be hard to repair.

Yet he had to hurry. The Thebans would make spells and sendings, consult oracles and auguries: there would be all kinds of foretellings and dangerous occult practices. Zeus was right. They would bring the Dark down upon them all.

The humans said Prometheus—Prometheus, the old lover of the Sphinx, he remembered—grew a new liver every night.

The humans were fools.

Prometheus was still screaming. It seemed to Sphinx that she could hear his screams, no matter how far away he was, whether she slept or whether she woke.

In her dream she heard Zeus laugh as he carried out the punishment for the hundredth, the thousandth time.

She would not think of that, would not think of the time when Hera had forced her to watch, with Zeus all unaware of their presence. She would not think of his blood blackening the dark stone, nor the begging in his eyes, nor his screams.

Sphinx half awoke, thought drowsily of Hera, for whom she was doing this, and whose love she would surely earn.

She remembered a time before that, when she had watched the First Mother as she bathed. The pool was fed by a little stream that fell over a few rocks and was dashed into shards of crystal; it smelled ice cold, its cleanness accentuated by the scent of the sweet bay trees, with a sound like the shattering of glass. Yet she was most aware of Hera's scent, a scent of sun-heated clay and burned almonds; and her breathing, which was light and rapid. She knows I am here, Sphinx thought, and her desire was almost painful, a fire in her groin.

She dismissed the slave wordlessly, and walked forward.

Hera came out of the water towards her. Her hair, red as flame, lay in heavy coils across skin as pale and smooth as alabaster. Water clung to her in glistening droplets, dripped slowly down her breast, reached her nipple and fell, unregarded, into the pool with a tiny plash. Sphinx wanted to gather it up with her tongue, to lick Hera's cool flesh: to feel the water that had touched the First Mother's body in her mouth. To drink it down and make it part of her.

'Come here, Kassmia,' Hera said.

'Don't call me that.'

It's what they will call you when they sing your names in the Lines. Or do you not wish them to remember how you tried to destroy Cadmus?'

That's finished with. Besides, he was only human.'

'Indeed,' said Hera. She walked up on to the bank. Her soft footfalls darkened the pale grass, crushed narcissus and daisies. Dying, they released a bitter-sweet ephemeral odour. Sphinx stared for an instant, then looked away; but the image was burned into her eyes: Hera's nipples scarcely darker than her skin, the shadowy triangle beneath the flat curve of her belly.

How young *I was,* Sphinx thought, half out of the dream.

Hera touched her on the shoulder. Her fingers were cold from the water, yet they seemed to burn Sphinx's flesh where they touched. She shivered. She smelled her own desire and Hera's mixing together like the headiest wine. Sphinx turned as Hera swept her hair away from her neck, kissed her inaccurately on the delicate up-curve of the shoulder.

'How young you are,' the First Mother said.

'I am older than you.' Sphinx answered her, though desire bade her be silent. 'You should not forget it.'

I never, Sphinx half muttered near wakefulness. I never *dared.*

'Oh, I do not,' Hera said. 'But you must remember how much less age counts than breeding, you who are born of the lesser Lines.' Her hands drifted down, found the soft curve of Sphinx's breast, the hard upthrust of her nipple. The fine linen of the chiton chafed gently against her skin, gave off an odour of the quince and black peppers in which it had been stored. Sphinx stood still as stone, refusing to move, hardly breathing at all. Hera's fingers worked at the clasps that held the robe together at the shoulders.

The top of the chiton fell forward, over Sphinx's girdle. Hera laughed, then bent her head to kiss the slope of Sphinx's breast. Her tongue trailed fire over the bare skin; Sphinx stared straight ahead of her, but all the while her hands wound rhythmically through the wet coils of Hera's hair.

The First Mother fumbled with her girdle. When she was unable to untie the knot, she knelt and bit through the cord. It parted with a soft snicking noise. The chiton fell around Sphinx's feet like a sea of cloth.

Hera pulled her down on to it. 'Gold on blue,' she whispered, and stroked the tiny sun-gilded hairs on Sphinx's arm. Her fingers were as gentle as afternoon rain. 'You really are delightful.'

Hera smiled at her, red lips stretching back from blunt human teeth. Her hand slid on to the harsh curled hair between Sphinx's legs.

'Do not.' Sphinx said, even as her legs parted to the First Mother's questing fingers. She felt her eyes go wide and quizzical.

But oh, we did, we did, Sphinx thought, watching the dream. Her breath caught in her throat at the memory.

In the dream, her hand capped Hera's, moved it away. Hera laughed.

'Why do you want this, now?' Sphinx asked.

'Because you are mine,' Hera answered her. 'And I take what is mine.'

'I am myself. Long have I walked apart from the Families, among humans. This is well known.'

'Indeed. Yet alliances have been made, not always wisely. What has been noticed by one may be noticed by others. You should walk more carefully.'

Threats, cousin?'

It wasn't *like that!* Sphinx whimpered to herself. They had made love, there among the wet, scratchy grass, in the dappled sunlight. Hera had been tender and fierce, the scent of her filling up the day, the complex geometry of her body an unfolding delight to Sphinx. Afterwards they had had such a sleepy, strange conversation, full of sorrow for Prometheus bound to his mountain, and promises for the future, if only Zeus did not realize Sphinx had helped Prometheus.

'A warning, cousin. Zeus is insane in his anger, and he is right. If the humans knew what we are, they would call disaster down upon us all. Or simply kill us. And if Zeus knew you had helped Prometheus, that is what would happen to you.'

'He would not!'

'He would. As he will kill Prometheus when his anger has run its course. But you should not fear,

cousin. He need not find out. Of those who have his attention, only I know. And I will not tell. Not while I am happy with you.'

Sphinx stared at her. In the dream, Hera's eyes were hard as stones, unsoftened by the love Sphinx remembered there. She looked away. 'Yes,' she said.

'So you are mine. And that which I want, I shall have.'

'Yes,' Sphinx said again.

Her eyes flicked open, all at once in the half-dark. Her heart raced. 'No!' she said aloud. 'It wasn't like that!'

They had made love. Hera had told Sphinx she loved her, that Prometheus would be released in time. That he would be welcomed back into the family. But only if Zeus did not find out about Sphinx's involvement. Let him discover that, and he would believe they colluded against him. He would kill them all, rather than allow it. Sphinx had shivered in Hera's arms, until her gentle words and caresses had soothed her. It was all right.

Hera told her. Only Hera knew, and she would never say. She loved Sphinx, and she was sure Sphinx loved her too. Was it not so? Sphinx murmured that it was, it was. And so Hera had promised to protect her, and Sphinx had said she would do anything, anything at all for Hera, who loved her.

Her talons clicked reflexively on the stone. How could you dream of what had never happened, of what could never be? It was almost human, she thought. She had sought this, desired it, but now she saw that it was most terrible.

Change memory, and you changed the past. That was why the Kin had the teaching Songs and the genealogies. That was why they strove to be included in the Lines of the Names.

But the humans: it was as if they remade the world from moment to moment, forcing it to change in their image. Their art reflected things which could not be seen, their music feelings that had never been spoken. They asked questions of the world and bade the world answer. It gave up its secrets to them, and in return they made it new. Something came from nothing, and what was shifted at every moment. How else explain the tales they wove around the exploits of the Kin? How could there be any safety in that? Prometheus had been fascinated by them. He had thought the Kin's hope of safety lay in what he called the bright fire of their minds.

Salt stung her eyes. It smelled a little like him. She had never seen him again.

Heat woke Teiresias. His swollen tongue moved spasmodically over his lips. He could hardly move, and his breath came harsh and ragged. And so he lay there in the stink of his own sweat and urine, so much stronger than that of the cedar mulch that cradled him. The darkness was absolute. He tried to open his eyes. The lids would not move. In panic, he touched his face with his hand. His fingers encountered outcrops of cheekbone, chin and nose. No pain, he thought; no pain in chest or arms or face. But still he could not see.

The flesh beneath his eyes had healed over, but roughly, so that it felt like ploughed earth to his questing fingers. He probed his eye sockets and found skin grown flat across them, like the surface of a tambour.

Later, he reassured himself. They will grow back and I shall have sight again, and see the hills and the water and the vast sky. I shall.

He clambered to his feet. He was weak. He realized that he did not know how long he had slept. It would take days, he thought, to do all this. He staggered, and leaned against the twisted bole of an olive to support himself. The body was wrong.

He considered this, and explored his body with shaking hands. Breasts like melons sagged without muscle to support them almost to his waist. There were hardly any hips to speak of. Reluctantly, he slid his hand beneath his ruined chiton. His penis was a mere scrap of flesh, and behind it a vaginal slit opened to his probing fingers.

He took a deep breath, and then another. Panic rose in him, but he forced calmness on himself. Panic had done this to him: panic and pain. He would sleep again, and this time his intentions would be firm set in his mind, and there would be no error in the Change.

She, Teiresias thought through the haze of thirst, I am a she now.

She could not sleep here again. The Sphinx might find her, or some wandering shepherd, or ...

She forced calmness on herself. There were Kin in the city who would take her in.

The himation lay somewhere at her feet. She bent to find it, and was caught up in the sensation that the world was turning beneath her feet. Her hand caught at the cracked bark of the olive tree in time to save her from falling. After a moment she was able to lower herself to the ground. Her scrabbling fingers found the himation. The cloth was greasy, and bits of leaf and mulch clung to it.

Teiresias draped it over her shoulders, ignoring the smell of old sweat and sweet decay that came off it. She threw one short end over her left shoulder. It did not feel right. The cloth bunched against her neck chafed, and she felt it slap against the backs of her legs as she walked. She tried again, but she could not find the fibula no matter how her fingers searched over the mantle.

In the end she gave up. With her hands stretched out in front of her, fearing at any moment to walk into a tree, she set off south to the city.

Teiresias reached the agora in Thebes by mid-afternoon. Her mouth was full of the dust of the road; sweat stuck her chiton to her back, trickled down her face across eye-wells she dared not touch, and yet still she thirsted. She stumbled on in total darkness. The sphere of her perception had drawn in until she could barely distinguish the thick odour of the humans from that of their animals, nor pick out male from female, foreign metic from slave or citizen.

This, she thought in a moment of lucidity, this is how it is to be human: blind in all my senses. Then the euphoria of dehydration took her again, and there was only the scuff, scuff of her feet on the road, the insistent beat of blood round the body, the rubbing of wool against her legs as she walked.

Somewhere a flute was playing, and people were conversing; but the sounds were far away, and as inconsequential as the humming of bees. The aroma of roasting meat hung in the air. It came from a sacrifice at the Temple: the beast had been fed on barley for days before it had been slaughtered. She could tell from the smell of the flesh. So, she thought, I am better than the purblind humans after all. She laughed to think of it, and again when she realized that the humans were falling silent at her approach, as silent as the beasts in the forest.

Thus she came to the steps of the fountain house. She made her way up them, through the arched colonnade of the stoa, guiding herself by touch and sound.

The stone was cold and damp, a smell as sharp and clean as any mountain lake. It was all she could do to stop herself from falling to her knees and licking it.

She staggered slightly as someone pushed past her. Her flailing hands touched flesh and fine linen. There was a small gasp, and someone's heartbeat grew quicker. She knew that if she did not drink soon, she would faint.

'Water,' she heard herself croak.

A man cursed her coarsely. Someone hushed him. Then it grew quiet, except for the chaotic sounds of many people breathing, the shuffling of sandal-leather on stone, the tantalizing chatter of nearby water.

After a moment, she felt someone take her arm. She was pulled along, and then the human—yes, human by the smell—tried to guide her hand into the cascade. She shook the person off, and plunged first her head, and then her whole body under the water.

Her lips stung at its coldness, and at first she could not swallow it down. Slowly, her throat accepted it. It burned and bloated in her belly. Her head sung with icy pain. Still she stood in the fountain with the water parting over her head, soaking hair and flesh until her whole body tingled. But then her lips pulled back hugely from her teeth, so that she thought she would split open. The water she had drunk spewed out of her mouth, hot and acidic, and fouled the floor in front of the fountain.

There was a flash of pain, a clatter of stone on stone. She stepped away from the fountain. Her feet echoed slightly on the floor, so that she knew there was a space clear all around her. The odour of fear and anger was so thick she could almost touch it, and she heard the pounding of many hearts, counterpointed by much quick breathing. She caught their fear, felt her own come up to greet it, the scent bitter as hot metal. For all the water she had just drunk, her mouth went dry again. She heard a scuffling sound quite close to her, and was about to speak when another stone caught her hard on her breast. She covered the sore place with her hand.

‘Look at the hag,’ a voice called out.

Another stone bit into her side, then another and another. ‘Whore more like!’

She turned to run despite the darkness, but her outstretched hand found a pillar of the fountain. She turned again and tried to run, but there were hands everywhere, pushing and pulling her.

‘Doesn’t make more than half an obol a day, I’ll be bound!’

‘And them she turns to stone!’

Something jabbed at her side, shoved her hard against the back wall of the fountain house. She turned again.

‘Kill the abomination!’

There was sudden silence. Then Teiresias laughed. The sharp sound cut through the heavy air like a sword through flesh. Another stone caught her in the ribs. She gasped at the sudden pain.

‘See what punishment the gods have sent us now!’

‘Do I appal you so, you brave Thebans? Do I? I, poor, blind Teiresias?’ It amused her mightily.

Hands pulled at her, tried to take her down off the steps. She shook them away. Weak as she was, she could still do that to the humans.

‘Listen to me,’ she screamed into the darkness and the silence. A small part of her heard the edge of panic in her voice, and knew the humans would never notice it. ‘Listen to me! You may not kill the Sphinx, for she is the servant of Hera. Yet mighty Zeus has sent me, that I may rid you of her!’

Someone shouted that they should take her to the Temple, so that the gods themselves could decide her lot. The cry was taken up by many others. She allowed them to take her then. The darkness closed in around her, and the human stink of them, and she was led through the streets amid shouting and clapping, and given over into the hands of her enemies: the priestesses of the Oracle in the Temple.

Gravel rattled on stone. It roused Sphinx. She stared across the darkness of the cave. There had been dreams, such dreams since the nephew had gone. A dream such as a human might have, that changed reality and left nothing certain. That dream she remembered, though the others had fled like the tatters of morning mist on water.

She pulled her arm from under her head. It hurt. All her limbs were stiff, and her stomach ached with hunger. Thin bile filled her mouth. She felt as though she had cried for a thousand years, that she would drown in tears. She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms. The sound came again.

‘Hera be with me now,’ she whispered to herself; and then, even more quietly, ‘Prometheus.’

The sound came again. A smell of human came from outside, of worked metal and leather, and fear. Always the fear.

She crept silently towards it, taking care not to disturb the bones and animal pelts which littered the floor, nor to trip over the discarded armour and weapons she had collected.

‘Come forth,’ a voice shouted. ‘Haemon, nephew of Jocasta queen to Laius, King of Thebes, challenges you!’ There was a pause. Sphinx wondered how long his nerve would hold. When he began again, his voice was higher, straining up towards breaking point. ‘For the honour of those fine warriors and athletes, citizens and metics you have foully murdered, I challenge you! Let none say that Haemon of the Royal House of Laius is a coward!’

Nephew, Sphinx thought. Her nephew Teiresias, come again to taunt her. He would learn, as all the Kin would learn, that she was not easy prey.

She heard his breathing now, rapid and light; and there were others with him. Coward, she thought, and spat on the floor.

A slight figure stood below the cave entrance. He was in full armour. Sunlight gilded his helmet and shield, and glinted on the curve of his sword. Behind him, the cypresses cast black shadows against the orange rock. A slave stood near them carrying the nephew’s spears, and on the path far below the mountain, another waited with his chariot. That accounted for the human smell, Sphinx decided.

The nephew had slept the sleep of healing and of change. Perhaps he thought to trick her: a new appearance and slaves to mask his smell.

She smiled. He was brave and devious this nephew, as befitted a member of the Kin. Or perhaps he feared Zeus greatly. She would teach him to fear her better.

‘You cannot deceive me, Nephew. I have the scent of you now!’ It would not do to let him know that she did not, that all she could smell was his slave. It would make no difference in the end: he would die like a human, after all.

‘Come forth and face me!’ he cried. The point of the sword trembled, then described a tiny circle in the air. Sphinx stepped out of the cave. She imagined the effect she would have on him, bright and shining as she was, vast with age and great with power.

‘Answer my riddle,’ she demanded, and stepped up close to him, brushing aside the sword. He stared at her. His face was very pale, the eyes large and staring. Insolence, she thought, to come to her in human shape. The stink of them was all over him. ‘Answer, human,’ she said, putting all her contempt into the single word.

His throat worked as he tried to swallow. She stroked it gently, like a lover.

‘Why are you doing this?’ he asked.

‘For love of Hera. But you know this. I do what I must. As you do.’ It was a challenge, and she knew he would recognize it as such, no matter that he had come to her in human guise.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

He feigns innocence well, Sphinx thought. She smiled at him. He stepped backwards. ‘You will play one game too many, Nephew. You know well that Laius has that which belongs to Hera.’

‘My aunt’s husband makes all lawful sacrifice to the goddess, and all libations are poured at the proper time. All honour to Hera, and to Zeus the father of all!’

‘Even so, she shall have more. Laius shall give up his paramour Chrysippus, and then I shall have completed my last duty for the First Mother.’

‘No.’ There was flat denial in the other’s eyes.

‘Oh yes. And when Hera sees him, she will realize she never truly loved the boy. She will realize he is but human, and will love me for ever.’

‘It cannot be. I do not understand what you are saying, but you should tell her ...’ his voice tailed off. Sphinx caught a brief tang of fear from him. The point of the sword dipped. He straightened it carefully, and began again.’... Tell her that Chrysippus is dead.’

‘You lie, Nephew. You come to me shaped as a human, and you lie. You may not fight me, nor can you answer my riddle. How could you? You are no human, and do not have their bright fire burning in your brain to answer riddles! And now you think you will drive me out with lies!’

Sphinx heard her voice rising, the words falling out of her mouth faster and faster. A shower of spittle flew through the air, spun in the sharp light and disappeared. She took a deep breath, and forced her voice lower. ‘They will not do, these lies and deceptions. Your name will be forgotten. I shall see to it, when I am Hera’s chosen one—’

The other began to back down the hill. T do not wish to fight,’ he said. His voice was as high as a boy’s. ‘You are the chosen of the goddess, as you have said. She has forbidden us to fight you. Yet shall I—’

‘No,’ Sphinx screamed. ‘You will answer my riddle. I thought of it myself! Myself, as a human might!’

Even as she said it, a memory flashed through her mind: firelight danced across Prometheus’s face, warmed her hands: they had been travelling. An old man had come to share the fire, bringing food and wine with him. They had swapped tale for tale, song for song; but in the end he had bested them with his riddles. They had parted in the morning, friends; but it was from that time that Prometheus had become obsessed with the mystery of human creations, with their riddles, tales and art. And Sphinx, Sphinx had become obsessed with Prometheus.

‘Listen,’ Sphinx said, ‘what is it speaks with one voice, but in the morning goes on four feet, in the afternoon on two and in the evening on three, and yet is weakest when it has most support?’

The boy—her nephew, she told herself; ignore his smell, it had to be the nephew; hadn’t he said as much, in his devious way—was almost in the shadow of the trees. She leapt at him. The slave screamed, and she heard him drop the spears. Her fingers tangled in the nephew’s armour. He fought back weakly.

‘Well, Nephew?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know,’ he said. His face was wet with tears. The sudden smell of urine and excrement mingled with the coppery odour of his fear. His pulse skittered arhythmically. ‘—but he’s dead and I don’t know what you want me to say, I don’t—’

Sphinx bit down on his neck, silencing him. Warm blood fountained over her face. It tasted salt and human and good.

Teiresias felt herself begin to sway in time to the clapping and stamping of the priestesses, and the clicking of their finger-cymbals. Their breath was rapid and light, and she knew they would soon enter the prophetic frenzy. The heat was stifling. The incense burning in the fire-bowl made Teiresias feel light-headed, as if she were floating somewhere in the cool, dark space she had made her own. If she could stay there, she would be safe, would be able to remain herself through whatever indignities the humans would heap on her. Her hands began to clap in time to the cymbals, as if they were not under the control of her mind.

Soon, she thought, soon it would be over. They had brought her here, to the temple of Apollo, and they had fed her honey and barley, and given her wine and the sacred water to drink. They would sacrifice her. She knew their ways. They were human and they were mad, and in their madness they worshipped things which were not.

The incense hissed and spat.

They will call down the Dark upon us all, she thought. They would have to be dealt with. She would have to deal with them. Later.

A scream cut across the chant. We will all be sacrificed in this mad rite, Teiresias thought, I no less than they. The Dark will eat their minds, and time will eat my name, and I will be forgotten at best in the Songs of the Lines.

There was silence for a moment, and then the voice began to howl and moan. The smell of excrement filled the chamber.

The priestess is in ecstasy, Teiresias thought. The Kin told tales of it. The smell of incense was suddenly undercut by the sweet smell of sickness and the musky odour of excitement.

She heard the rapid drumming of hands and feet on the floor; drumming without rhythm. Noises came out of the dark at Teiresias; little animal noises made deep in the throat, and great howls she had not thought a human throat could shape.

Cloth slapped against flesh. Footsteps slowly crossed the room.

‘Speak, Sibyl!’ The priestess cried. ‘Let us hear the words of the god!’

The animal noises slowly stopped. They began again, and slowly took on the shape of words: ‘A black bird flies up out of the hand of the hero. “Life or Death” he asks the Sphinx. The Sphinx which is not the Sphinx watches him, watches it, and does not answer. Her eyes are the eyes of the god. What does she see? No man knows. Her heart is wild with rage. Blood falls from her mouth and waters the roots of the black cypress trees. They wither.’ The Sibyl stopped speaking. Teiresias heard her vomit. The room filled up with the smell of decaying fruit.

The priestess spoke: ‘Hear while I interpret the words of the—’

‘—Weep Thebes, for those trees are you,’ the Sibyl interrupted. ‘The hero holds in his hand a bird. “Choose,” he says to the Sphinx, “life or death?” But she says to him that the fate of what he holds lies in his own hands. He kills the bird, Thebes, as you have killed your future, and all the ground is covered with blood and stinking bones.’

‘Enough,’ the priestess said at last. ‘The gods do not demand our tears. Listen to the meaning of the Sibyl’s words: the fate of Thebes is in our hands, as the hero’s life is in his hands. Life or death, it is for us to choose. The gods demand sacrifice, as they ever have. Yet they are not cruel, despite our foolishness. They do not demand an innocent, like the bird, but a blood sacrifice of purification. And they have sent to us one fit for their purpose. Thus may the evil be expelled from our city.’

The priestess had made the oracle mean what she needed it to mean for her own purposes, Teiresias realized. If the Sibyl had something different, still the priestess would have demanded a purification. None of the Kin were capable of doing as much. The humans lived in a quicksilver world, one which they tried constantly to shape to their own desires. It was a terrible thing to contemplate, and a fascinating one, she

thought. It would drive you mad if you let it: as it had driven the Sphinx mad, trying to be what she could not be.

It was not the way of the Kin, Teiresias thought. They preferred simple problems, simple solutions. Such might yet save her life.

'I speak,' Teiresias said. T, who have been sent by Zeus to rid you of the Sphinx. Listen to me: in this city, there is a boy called Chrysippus. He is the beloved of Laius your king. Yet before that, he was the beloved of Hera, consort of Zeus. He has been most unwise, or Laius has. Hera is angry because he has spurned her. Therefore she has sent the Sphinx to do you harm. Return him to Hera, and all shall be well.'

A wild cry went up all around her.

The priestess took Teiresias's face in her hands. She stroked the skin that covered her eyes with calloused fingers. Her breath stank of garlic and the laurel leaves they chewed to poison them into prophecy.

'You are no true seer,' she said. 'Chrysippus is dead. He went up to the mountain soon after the monster first appeared. He gave himself to her, and she killed him for it. He was no answer to her riddle, though he left another behind him.'

'Then you will have to find another answer: though none may please Hera, you may satisfy the Sphinx.'

The priestess turned away. 'Let there be blood sacrifices and purification. Let the gods be appeased!' she cried out.

They will kill me, then, Teiresias thought. It was certain. The humans were not rational, but they were determined. Their minds are like their bodies, she thought. They never change.

She seemed detached from her body, watching what they did with silent amusement. Then she thought she heard the Sphinx speak: Its tongue *is* quicksilver, Mercury-ruled, and *changing* ever; it sleeps *often, but its body is* iron, ruled by Mars and changing never. *What is it?* A human! Teiresias thought it over again and again, as they draped a chiton of fine black wool over her and pleated it in the male fashion. They wound strings of black figs around her neck and in her hair. She laughed when they told her. Black figs! The sign of the male sacrifice: they wanted to pretend she was Chrysippus, was Laius.

They led her out of the *cella* and into the temenos of the Temple. Teiresias smelled the blood and burned flesh that clung to the great open-air altar. She thought of knives, stained red by the blood and the firelight.

The sound of flutes pierced the air, and the jangle of finger-cymbals.

The priestess cried out. 'See the *pharmakosl* Oh great god Apollo, witness our sacrifice. Witness how we send our evils out of the city. Let Thebes be purified. See the *pharmakosY*

They pushed her out of the Temple grounds then, and into the agora. Something swished in the air above her, then bit into her back. She heard her own cry even above the sound of the flutes. There came another blow, and another.

The priestess called out, 'See how we beat the hag with fig and mallow switches. Listen to the music of the flutes. See how we purify the city. Witness, all you citizens. Witness!'

Citizens and metics and priestesses crowded around her. Their screams and shouts and rapid breathing counterpointed their punches, and the musk of sex came off them like sweat. They harried her through the city streets. The only thing that mattered was to listen for the sharp swish of the priestesses' canes, and to brace herself for their bite. She stumbled along, forever falling forward into darkness that offered no sanctuary. By the time they left the city walls, she could hardly walk: every step brought on new agony as the cuts on her back opened and stretched. When she finally understood that they had stopped, she fell to the ground and would not, could not, stand.

They came at last to the foot of Mount Phikion. The two priestesses who were dragging her along dropped her. The flutes fell silent. While the priestesses debated, the heavy sunlight slowly dried the blood on her back.

She lay in the olive—and lemon-scented darkness until she heard footsteps approach, and the soft

huss of breathing. She looked up, hoped she was staring at the human's face; and that that scared her witless.

'Stand, *pharmakos,*' one of them said at last. Teiresias tried to pull her arms underneath her, to haul herself to her feet. Too slow. The priestess kicked her in the ribs. She got to her knees. The chiton tore away from her back, tearing off the new scabs. She gasped.

'We have considered long, pharmakos. In the way of things, we should kill you. We should burn your body, without making libations of your blood, and we should scatter the ashes to the wind.'

'I hope,' Teiresias tried to say, though her mouth was swollen and bloody, 'I hope you have a sharp knife; and that your city is ready for more devastation, for this will not please Zeus.'

'Nevertheless, a sacrifice must be made.'

Yes, thought Teiresias. More pain, more suffering.

How like a human. She could hardly think. 'What will you do when Zeus is angry with you? He did send me, you know. What will it be like, to have the hatred of two gods in your city?'

The priestess smelled old and desperate. She grabbed Teiresias by the shoulders and pulled her to her feet. The pain was almost enough to make her pass out. 'Nevertheless, we shall have sacrifice. But not as I have said. The monster wants blood. Let her drink yours, and all our evils with it.'

Of course, thought Teiresias. She could smell her own fear, but still it was a better chance than a knife of metal. If they knew that they would think of some other death for her, she was sure.

They dragged her to the mountain. Her back burned as if a torch had been played lightly over it. There was nothing in the world but pain and fear, and the Sphinx waiting for her. She begged the priestesses for unguents, and they laughed at her, and told her to stop wasting time.

Since they expected it of her, she tried to fight them as they took her toward the cave, but feebly.

A little over halfway up the mountain, she stopped. They pushed her forward, but she said, 'Let me go alone. I promise I will go. Am I not consecrated to this? Have you not, with your own hands, dressed me and fed me and beaten me for this moment? Only let me go alone, for if I disgrace myself I would not want you to see my dishonour.'

They agreed. She tried not to show her relief by any sign gross enough for a human to read. She waited until she heard them make their way back down to the path; and then a long moment more, savouring the absence of heartbeats and breathing, the lack of human stink. Then she groped her way forward, feeling her way through the maze of cypress trees. She fought fear and pain every step of the way until she smelled the cave ahead of her, and it was too late to do anything but stumble forward.

The Sphinx was there. She smelled old and mad, and not at all afraid.

'See I return, Aunt,' Teiresias said. Her voice was too high, too full of pain and fright.

'And changed, I see. Yet without your eyes. Would you not see your doom coming upon you?'

'No doom, Aunt. I have the answer to your riddle.'

'What might that be, child?'

'Humans; they walk as you have said, and their bodies never change: though you are wrong; their minds change less than you might think.'

The Sphinx bellowed with amusement. Teiresias heard her hand smash up and down on the rock as she laughed, a thin wheezing like the hissing of water thrown on a fire.

'And do you think,' she said when she stopped, 'do you think you are the first to solve this? You, rather than all the bright-fire humans?'

'No,' Teiresias said, and thought: I thought I was safe. Safe! A warm stream of urine trickled down her leg; the smell of her fear was stronger than she had ever known it.

'Who told you the answer, Niece? Which fool human did you beg?'

'None. I found the answer for myself.'

The Sphinx screamed. The sound echoed and reechoed, like thunder in the mountains. Teiresias heard her move, tried to get out of the way. In the darkness she moved in the wrong direction. The whole of the Sphinx's weight landed on Teiresias, who fell backwards. She screamed as her damaged back crashed against the ground.

Tor this, I will kill you, Niece.' Her hands grasped Teiresias's throat. Teiresias fought for breath. The

Sphinx squeezed. There was no breath in her lungs, just growing pressure and no breath at all: she clawed at the Sphinx's hands.

At last she managed to say one word: 'Songs.'

The pressure eased. Teiresias took one deep, gulping breath. Then the Sphinx lifted up Teiresias's head, and banged it against the ground. 'Speak,' she said.

Teiresias coughed. A thin line of mucus ran out of her mouth. She wiped at it, then raised herself up on her elbows. With difficulty she managed to sit up. She knew the Sphinx would smell her fear, hear the banging of her heart and the too-quick hammering of her pulse. There could be no pretence.

The Sphinx said again, 'Speak.'

'If you kill me,' Teiresias said, staring into her private darkness. It was hard to remember what she was saying. 'If you do, who will tell your tale to the family?'

Wrong, she thought. Not mention family. She tried again. 'Who will tell Hera what you have done for her?'

'You are cunning, Niece. I thought that other was you, you know. He said he was Jocasta's nephew, but I thought he was you. I am old and easily confused, I know this. But I do love her. Hera. She used me at first. I hated her, for she held Prometheus's fate over me. But when she had had enough of me, I found I had not had enough of her. I need to be of service to her, for it's the only way I know to love her. If I let you go, will you swear to tell her all this tale, even to your own degradation?'

'And let it be so,' Teiresias said in the formal manner; she wanted to give the Sphinx no reason to doubt her.

'And you will honour to the letter the oath your mother made?'

'And let it be so,' Teiresias said again, thinking: and let it be so that I have failed, that the Songs of the Lines will speak of me thus, that Zeus will show me his anger. Only let me go.

'And let it be so, then,' the Sphinx replied. 'You may go, Niece.'

Teiresias forced herself to stand. The pain in her body was very great; that in her soul no less so. She tried to remember how the land lay above the little shelf of bare rock outside the cave, but she could not concentrate. Then just as she started to move away, the Sphinx said. 'Wait, Niece. I hunger. What shall I do?' She sounded amused, and vengeful. Kin were Kin after all; and humans were not.

'I believe, Aunt, that there are some humans on the road below,' Teiresias said. Though I am not certain. Perhaps you should look?'

As the Sphinx went down the hill, Teiresias crawled away into the trees. The shadows were cool, like slipping into a cold pool on a hot afternoon. She made her way slowly, savouring the silence and the earth and lemon smells of pine and cedar and olive. She found a place that seemed safe, deep in the old heart of the forest.

She was numb with pain and failure. Her oath to Zeus was broken, and also the promise she had made to herself. Worse, she was oath-bound to tell the tale of both in front of the Kin's witnesses. Her name would not be lost or even reviled. It would simply be a thing to amuse the Kin in days to come.

Yet she lived. There could be reparation. Trying to hold that thought in her mind, she lay down. As she slipped into the healing sleep, the cries of dying humans came to her on the wind. She smiled and slept.

Thebes was a memory Teiresias was glad to leave behind her. She stood on the hillside overlooking the narrow defile that led from Daulis to Delphi and contemplated her best route. To cross it would be difficult, at least in human form; but it would still be quicker than going round by way of Delphi. Her sight had almost returned, though when she felt her face there was still a thin film of skin covering her eyes, so that she saw everything through a red veil. Her wounds had healed easily enough. She had not dared try to turn again from female to male; it was a difficult change and she wanted to be safe in a Kin house before she attempted it.

She would go to Zeus, she had decided, and tell him that Hera had set the Sphinx on Thebes. His anger would be terrible; it might even break that branch of the family. But rotten wood deserves to be broken. Besides, she had seen the rituals of the Thebans. She had smelled the power of them and she feared them. They had to be stopped before the Dark came down upon them all. Personal happiness

was not too great a price to pay.

She heard the clatter of a chariot approaching from Daulis. The way was narrow, and there were already two travellers on the road. She would not be able to get by; besides, as a woman travelling alone she was at great risk. It was not respectable for her to do so, which meant she was prey for any man. Instead, she settled herself to wait, hidden in a small stand of olives.

She could hear them clearly, despite the distance, and see them less well. The one coming towards her from Delphi was on foot. The other was a passenger in a chariot, with a slave for his charioteer. There would be no room for them to pass. It would be tolerable sport, if they had no better sense than most humans.

'Stand aside,' the man in the chariot cried. He was finely dressed, his horses well caparisoned and better bred. Teiresias smiled. She could hear the swift pace of their hearts beating, smell their bodies preparing to fight. Human arrogance would make folly, as it usually did, she was sure. As she expected, the other man did not move.

'I move for none but my betters,' he said, 'And I acknowledge no betters but the gods and my own dear parents. Now have done and let me pass.'

'Certainly I shall not,' the other replied.

Teiresias stood up to see better. The charioteer drove the horses forward. At the last moment the other man stood aside. The chariot moved between him and Teiresias. He screamed in agony. When the chariot moved on, Teiresias saw that his foot had been crushed. It was a bad wound, and worse for a human, who could not heal himself, she thought.

To her surprise, the human stumbled after the chariot. It had not yet picked up speed. He hurled his spear at the charioteer and without waiting to see the result, hauled the other man out of the chariot. They fought for a few moments, but the finely dressed man was clearly unused to fighting, and he had become tangled in the reins when his charioteer collapsed beside him.

Teiresias watched, bemused, as the man with the damaged foot tied him to his horses' harness. Then he plied the whip until the horses leapt forward.

The man from Daulis began to scream. It seemed to Teiresias that she could see his flesh shred and his blood speckle the stone, hear the bones break on the rocks. It brought back memories too painful to bear, and yet she could not look away.

The other man, the supplicant from Delphi, sat and tended his foot. Then he got up and limped towards

Thebes. Teiresias thought that he was brave. Brave and foolish: such humans might have been made to be used. She stood up and retraced her steps, and intercepted him where the path opened out at Daulis.

'Hail Broken Foot,' she called to him from the shelter of a stand of wild orange trees.

'Who calls me thus, hag?' he said when he reached her. 'I am Oedipus, son of Polybus King of Corinth, and of Merope his queen. Stand aside and let me pass.'

The harsh noon sun burnished the fittings of his armour, and made the sweat gleam on his shoulders and face. He did not smell at all afraid, or even put to much exertion by his fight. Close to, she could see the old scars on his feet, smell the almond undertone to his scent. It reminded her of the night she had taken him from the hills outside Thebes. Ah, thought Teiresias: Oedipus, you were made for me to use.

'Indeed I shall, Oedipus, for I know you honour no mortal above your parents.'

'Indeed I do not, and only the gods above them. How do you know this of me? Speak!'

'I am blind, but I know what I know.' It was the kind of vagueness the humans admired. Teiresias continued: 'And also that the oracles have said you will kill your father and marry your mother.'

It was a calculated risk. Almost, Teiresias thought she might have to fight him. He stood still as a statue in the road, while his scent told her of the battle that raged in him.

At last, when she thought she had ruined all her chances with him, he turned and spat on her feet.

'I do not fight women,' he said. 'Not even hags. Begone from me before I change my mind!'

Teiresias did not move. Oedipus pushed past her. 'I am a better seer than the Python of Delphi,' she said. "I

know of a way you can honour your parents and go to Thebes a saviour. Will you listen to me, who meant you no harm?'

That is no fit question. What man does not aspire to be a hero?'

'So. I have seen your bravery, Oedipus, and I know your will is strong. I tell you, on Mount Phikion near Thebes there is a monster called the Sphinx. She has been sent by Hera to terrorize the Thebans, for they are weak and foolish. Kill her, and you will be a hero in Thebes, and they will speak your name for ever!' How strange, Teiresias thought, to offer as an inducement to the human that which all the Kin desire.

Oedipus looked long at her. She refused to look away.

'Show me where this Sphinx is, and I shall kill her and cut her body into seven pieces, and take her head into Thebes in triumph.'

'Indeed you will not, for no man may kill the Sphinx. Yet I will tell you what all there know. She will ask you a riddle. If you answer her badly, she will throttle you and eat your body. But if you give the right answer, she will destroy herself.'

'This is no certain battle then. Why should I not simply kill her with my sword?'

'Hera has decreed that you may not,' Teiresias said. It was true enough, she thought. Alone of all of them, Hera and her branch of the Kin sought direct dominion over the humans.

She stared at the ground, and watched Oedipus out of the corner of her eye. He was a big man and swarthy with it, but he would be no match for even the youngest of the Kin. He frowned slightly, and seemed about to speak. 'The Sphinx is her chosen servant, after all,' Teiresias continued quickly. 'Besides, she is a mighty monster and I doubt you could kill her if you wanted to. Which you should not, for then the Thebans will hate you as one who has subjected them to Hera's greater wrath. But listen: I can tell you the answer to her riddle.'

'Speak or be silent, hag,' Oedipus said. 'But be quick about it.'

'This is the riddle: what speaks with one voice, but has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening, yet is weakest when it has most support?'

Oedipus frowned. He paced a little. Then he stood in front of Teiresias, and thumped the butt of his spear on the ground. 'I don't know. Tell me!'

'Man,' said Teiresias. She watched Oedipus. He frowned, and looked up the hill. Then he turned back to her, his eyes narrowed slyly.

'Good,' he said. 'It's very clever. You may go.'

Teiresias did not ask him to explain the riddle. She doubted he understood it any more than she did. He limped slowly up the hill. His feet sent little clouds of orange dust up from the path. She let him get some way distant. Then she called out, 'Oedipus! We are not yet done.'

He turned and stared at her. She held him with her eyes. After a moment he made his way slowly back.

'Do you not wish to know how I am certain I am right, Oedipus?'

'Oh very well then. Tell me.'

'I have tried this answer, and she has told me I am right. Yet she did not kill herself.' Everything about him, the way he stood, his odour and his expression told Teiresias that he was furious. Spear raised, he strode towards her. She held up her hand. To her surprise—and she suspected, his own—he stopped. 'And so I have listened to the Oracle,' she said, 'and I have thought of another way. Do you have the liver of a hero? Will you try it?'

Tell me,' he said, grasping at her arm; and so she did.

Teiresias watched as Oedipus prepared to challenge the Sphinx. The cave loomed above them, a dark blot on the pale stone. They were downwind of it. She had taken special care to make sure it was so.

The human's back was straight, despite his lame foot. His voice was strong. Sweat made the muscles of his shoulders gleam in the pale sunlight. Yes, thought Teiresias, she needed no oracle to see how it would be between them when she came back to him in some more suitable form. His fingers clutched tight around the wren she had caught and given to him. He smelled of oil and the dust of the road; there

was no scent of fear on him.

'Be careful with that,' she said more sharply than she had intended. 'It is of no use to us dead.'

The bird fluttered uselessly. Oedipus stroked its head with the tip of one finger. It was an oddly gentle gesture to come from so violent a man, Teiresias thought, and wondered how it would feel to be stroked thus by him.

'If I die, you will tell my mother and father that I perished with their names on my lips and honour to them in my heart?'

'I shall,' Teiresias said, and spoke the words of the ritual in her thoughts: and *let it be* so, for the human had given her back her honour and her hope of a place in the Song of the Lines.

He smiled at her with blunt white human teeth. Then he turned and hobbled up to the cave entrance, making much of his limp and using his spear as a staff. She heard him make the challenge, saw the Sphinx come out. For one moment, she thought he would run.

She could understand that. The elder was huge, a blackness that could blot out the daylight, blot out hope.

'I, Oedipus of Corinth challenge you, Sphinx. I will answer your riddle, if you dare to tell it to me,' he said.

The Sphinx stood for a moment, as if testing the air. Even at this distance, Teiresias could smell her, rank and ancient, complex as the Song of the Lines itself. She had to fight the impulse to run. The Sphinx screamed her challenge.

Oedipus's answer echoed back from the sheer face of the mountain: 'Man. Man: when a baby he crawls, when an adult he walks, when old he hobbles with a stick.'

He had teased out the riddle in the days it took them to walk back from Daulis.

As she expected, the Sphinx threw herself on Oedipus in a rage. He was ready for her though, and stepped nimbly aside. He jabbed at her eyes with the spear, forcing her to keep her distance. In his other hand, he held the wren; Teiresias heard its doomed twittering clearly.

The scent of almonds and musk mingled with that of the Sphinx. How is it, Teiresias wondered, that he fears her so much less than I do? Perhaps the humans with their blunted senses are sometimes better fitted for their tasks.

'I am the chosen of Hera,' the Sphinx said. Her voice was low, little more than a hiss. 'If you fear the gods, you may not kill me.'

He will kill his god, Teiresias thought. She found that her heart was beating fast in her chest: blood rushed in her ears. He will kill his gods because I have told him to.

'I honour the gods above all mortals, even including my parents. Yet I say that I challenge you,' Oedipus said. The smell of human fear and Kin came to Teiresias. 'Like for like. You owe me an answer, monster. Here, then, is my riddle: is what I hold in my hand alive or dead?'

There was silence. Teiresias, Oedipus, the Sphinx: all were still. She cannot answer, Teiresias thought. She cannot. The moment stretched out. I could run, Teiresias thought then. I could.

'You are a fool,' said the Sphinx at last. This is no true riddle. How may I know the answer?'

The fate of what he holds lies in his own hands. Teiresias heard the words in her mind as clearly as she had when the priestess spoke them. She began to tremble as she plunged into the memory of what had happened to her after that.

She stared straight ahead of her, hardly focusing on the Sphinx or on Oedipus. The Sphinx would tear him to pieces, then come after her. She would eat them, flesh and bone, as time would eat their names. All memory of them would be lost to time.

'I cannot,' the Sphinx cried out. She dropped to her knees and covered her head with her arms. 'Sweet Prometheus, I cannot see the answer.'

Your *fate lies* in your *own hands.* Yes, she thought. The humans were fools, but that did not mean they could not sometimes speak the truth.

Oedipus stood watching the Sphinx uncertainly. He began to make a stabbing motion at her with his spear. The Sphinx looked up at him. He aborted the motion. 'Will you pledge to leave this place for ever?' he asked. 'Will you go, without harming anyone who lives here, or any of their possessions?

Pledge now, and I will let you live.'

Kill her, Teiresias thought. Kill her now.

'I will not,' the Sphinx snarled. She leapt towards

Oedipus. Her legs drove her forward, past his spear. 'I will crush you, human. You are nothing, and your name will be nothing. Your parents will forget they ever bore you.'

She slashed at him, tearing through his chiton, through flesh, almost to the bone. He screamed. The bird fell dead and forgotten from his hands, a small bunch of dark feathers. He and the Sphinx circled each other, warily, assessing.

Fool human, Teiresias thought. She meant to run, but she could not force her eyes away. Thus Chrysippus had died, thus Haemon, and how many others, their names lost in their deaths. Bright fires extinguished by the night. Your *fate* is *in* your hands. Mine also, she thought; a chill slipped down her back. This is how it is for humans, she thought, as she realized how she had changed the memory. No wonder the Sphinx had been fascinated by it.

She stepped out of the trees.

'Stop,' she called. Neither did so. 'You will change nothing, Aunt,' she said. The Sphinx halted, and turned to look at her; Oedipus likewise.

'You may not oppose me,' the Sphinx said. 'Remember your bond.'

'I do not intend to,' Teiresias said. 'I only mean to say this: you cannot learn to change the world by killing him. None of us can. Not you, not Hera, not Prometheus. We can only watch them and wonder, and avert their worst calamities.'

'I can,' Sphinx cried. 'I can. Prometheus did. He did. You are young. You did not know him.'

'I do not need to. I know what we are, and we are not human.'

'I will be, though,' the Sphinx replied. As Teiresias watched, she began to try to force a change upon her body. It was much too fast and she was much too old. Still, the muscles loosened, the bones shifted in their sockets.

Oedipus moaned in fear. 'Avert your eyes, Mortal,' Teiresias said, trying to sound as she thought a human would expect a god to. This is death for you to see.

He stood gazing at the Sphinx, eyes bulging, mouth lolling open. Teiresias pushed him roughly to the ground.

The Sphinx writhed and screamed. Her body flopped uselessly this way and that. Once, she was still for a moment, and stared at Teiresias out of eyes that retained a trace of sanity. Then her mad fit continued.

Like a priestess in ecstasy, Teiresias thought. When at last the Sphinx fell to the ground and was still, she stood over her. So it ends, she thought, and went to help Oedipus to his feet. But as she moved away the Sphinx touched her on the ankle.

'Niece,' she whispered. 'Kill me, Niece.'

'I may not, Aunt,' Teiresias replied.

'All bonds are broken, Niece. All debts repaid.' She shut her eyes. Tears leaked out of her closed lids. 'I still smell him, sometimes. Prometheus, on the mountain. He smelled of honeysuckle and salt, and when I cry I smell him.'

'Don't, Aunt,' Teiresias said. It seemed to her that her heart would break. They would be so much saner without the fire of the humans to taunt them. 'You should be happy with what you are, not strive to be what you cannot.'

'Kill me, Niece. It's all there is left.'

Yes, Teiresias thought, as she picked up Oedipus's spear. And again, as she plunged it into the heart of *the* Sphinx, yes.

As they went back down the mountain, Oedipus said to Teiresias, 'I thought you called the Sphinx "Aunt". I thought you called me "Mortal".'

'You think too much,' Teiresias said. 'Or perhaps you dreamed it.'

He nodded, and stroked her face with the side of one heavy thumb. 'Shall I see you again?' he asked.

‘Perhaps,’ she replied. ‘Your fate is in your own hands.’ It was suitably vague, suitably human.

Later, in Thebes, when she saw that he had married Jocasta, and had realized that the man he had killed on the road was his true father Laius, she thought of that moment. And when she went to him to tell him that, she said again: Your *fate* is in your own hands. But he did not seem to listen.

A Change Of Season

Storm Constantine

He only ever saw the seasons change from the inside of trains. Now, the summer was fading into that frowzy, tired sort of interim period—the Earth masquerading as an overdressed and sadly declining middle-aged woman—before a brief spurt of harsh colour led the unforgiving winter in by the nose. The land rushed by beyond the dust-veiled window, and he rested his head against the glass. The urge to travel, to devour the miles, was fading inside him, as the colour faded from the land. Soon, he knew, it would diminish beyond recognition and he could settle down for a while. But first, a final roaming into unfamiliar territory; a time to step down from the train, vacate the arteries of the body, investigate the organs themselves.

The station was small, the air cold and ripe against his skin. It seemed the summer had left the north already. He was the only person to get off the train in that place, and was given a sour up-and-down glance as he surrendered his ticket, by a gaunt individual with a look of inbreeding about him, skulking in the inspector’s booth beside the station gateway. The traveller did not bother to smile or speak. As he sauntered out into the empty street beyond, adjusting his backpack for comfort, a familiar sense of unreality stole across his senses. These are cardboard buildings, cardboard props for a second-rate drama. He walked towards the sun where it was high in the sky, a solitary figure in an uncluttered scene. He felt as if this was the ending of something, not the beginning. He would walk away out of existence. Yet his boots made a solid satisfactory sound against the road and his flesh felt real and comfortable about his bones. He was a good performer.

It was not really a town, more a village, and a forgotten one at that. The sense of history was faint, although he was aware that people had lived in this place for many centuries. It had never witnessed any events of importance, he was sure, being no more than a receptacle for a few mundane souls who moved from womb to grave with less purpose than animals or perhaps, he thought charitably, the same purpose as animals. The place looked empty, but he knew that, had he walked in the other direction, he would have come across the heart of it: the lone, under-stocked supermarket, the row of pubs, a small cinema showing films considerably out of date. This conviction was not the product of some psychometric skill, but merely a familiarity with towns of this type. You had to look hard for the romance in this country. Abroad, little towns seemed to possess a bustling other-life, like insects below the grass; there were often mysteries to uncover, mysteries that could be cherished like gems unexpectedly discovered in a rock that had seemed uniformly grey. Here, the social structure demanded a different kind of behaviour—upright, polite, mannered—but that usually meant the mysteries, when they were coaxed from hiding, were all the more delightful and perverse.

He wanted to walk out on the moors—there was little to interest him in the town—and sniff the air for exciting perfumes. There might be a solitary stone manor squatting in the furze, where deranged family members feuded with sanity. There might be a cottage where a lovesick desertee mulled over the painful intricacies of the past. There might be a farm, with buxom daughters and leery sons, where a traveller might weave a little mischief for a while. The moors seemed the proper setting for such scenarios. If he walked, he was sure to find something to pass the time. The richness and variety of the human race enchanted him; he was not repelled by weaknesses or failings and was tolerant of most behaviours, even the least endearing. In fact, difficult people interested him far more than those whose conversations and ideas inspired the spirit, or whose physical beauty constricted breath in the throat. He sought out the unusual, observing behaviour with cool yet committed interest.

He had been travelling for many years; he had lost count of the exact figure. He had visited most

countries where it was easy to gain access and several where it wasn't. He wore a wide-brimmed hat that shadowed his eyes, shutting out the history of the world, if not his own history, to the casual observer. Sometimes he would play the role of the enigmatic stranger, dark and impenetrable; at other times he would be the world's fool, the travelling jester, and at these times he might play an instrument or tell stories. Some countries reacted more favourably to this persona than others. In England he observed the code of reticence and became the withdrawn one, the stranger on a train. Few people sat next to him on his travels, but those that did he generally wanted to communicate with. Now, at least for a while, he wanted to feel the bones of the planet beneath his feet. He would walk the moors and see what the future exposed to him, or exposed him to. He was never frightened.

It was moist country, rich with the fecund smells of earth. Hills swelled towards the horizon, punctuated by the moving pale dots that were sheep. The sky was a high, bleached blue and once out of the town, a waspish wind scoured the land. The traveller walked in an appreciative daze. He had a feeling in the sinews of his flesh that something intriguing would soon be offered to his senses. He saw some people with dogs striding through the heather; he heard the pixie call of excited children. The polished hides of parked cars burned in the distance, winking glares where they caught the sun. These things did not call to him. He was aware of the timeless ambience of this land. Perhaps the things he saw and heard were simply ghosts, or echoes, of high summer that would fade into the approaching cold.

He found a cluster of houses nestling in the cupped hands of a valley. The road that led to it was hewn into the land itself, its high banks thick with seeding grasses. There was a deep, loamy smell as if some elemental creature was breathing hard beneath the soil. He came to a crossroads where a black and white sign pointed towards the houses and said, 'Little Moor'. Little more than what? wondered the traveller, smiling to himself. The other roads, it would seem, led to nowhere.

The houses of Little Moor surrouned a small post office and general shop, as if they had been drawn against their will to this lone node of communication with the world. Near by, a white building protected the rise of a hill, and there was a sign proclaiming it a boarding-house and inn. Shiny cars were parked outside, beneath an ancient monkey-puzzle tree. Whenever possible, the traveller avoided the comforts of official hostel-ries, preferring to inveigle his way into private homes where there was more to enjoy. He liked a captive audience. Still, it was sometimes necessary to patronize the gathering spots of any community he visited, in order to strike up acquaintances. Picking his benefactors wisely, he seldom had any difficulty in securing lodgings. Women were intrigued by him, although the most subtle often hid this, and men considered him a 'character* who was interesting to talk to. Children he resonated with on a completely different level—their own—so he was also popular as an avuncular entertainer. His personality was entirely unthreatening, despite his air of mystery.

As a preliminary investigation, the traveller went into the post office to purchase a soft drink. The interior of the shop was stuffed with merchandise of the most unlikely variety. A mature female in powder and cardigan held court behind the old glass-topped counter, and there was a squinting crone sitting on a stool next to a bead curtain that obviously led to the living quarters. The silence caused by his entrance suggested these two had recently been involved in a dispute; it was more than the cautious silence reserved for strangers. The postmistress looked at him hard, ready to purse her mouth into disapproval, so he took off his hat and smiled. She visibly smoothed herself.

'Shut the door!' said the crone. 'Open doors let the air in.'

'Mother!' said the postmistress, in tolerant embarrassment as the traveller shut the door more firmly. 'What can I do for you, sir?'

The traveller voiced his requirements in his most velvety tone. He was charmed by the fact that the thick green bottles of sweet refreshment were stored in the cellar to keep them cool.

'Won't keep you a moment,' said the postmistress, dodging through the bead curtain, with an owlish backward glance that he guessed was meant to be sultry. A

stillness descended into the shop and the traveller could hear the low buzz of a motorbike far away.

'Don't get paid for this!' said the old woman unexpectedly. The traveller smiled at her inquiringly. 'I count the post,' continued the woman, 'count it all, every one. No pay for it.'

'Oh.' The stillness became rather stiff. Did it really take this long to fetch a bottle from the cellar, he

wondered? Perhaps the postmistress was applying a further layer of powder to her nose for his benefit.

'Here she comes,' said the old woman. The traveller thought she meant her daughter, but the door opened behind him and another customer came in. 'Hallo dear!' said the old woman, in a tone of some affection.

It was a girl, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. She carried a large wicker basket which was hung over one arm and pressed tightly against her body. She wore a long dress in a faded floral print and scuffed sandals. Her arms were bare and, he could see, rather scratched, as if she'd been playing with a boisterous kitten.

'Hi, Mrs E.,' she said, and put her basket on the counter. She gave the traveller only the shortest of inspections. Here she comes, indeed! he was thinking. This was the lure, the gem in the heart of the rock, he was sure of it. After years of practice he could sniff out items of interest very quickly. Her long, abundant hair was the most beautiful shade of dark red; probably dyed, but enchanting none the less. Her face, admittedly, was plain but her eyes were wide and contained the hidden shred of 'otherness' he had trained himself to spot. The postmistress breezed through the curtain, clutching the bottle the traveller had ordered, her mouth pasted with a fresh gout of thick, red lipstick. She smiled airily at the girl. 'Hallo, Lily, love,' she said, and then redirected her attention to the traveller. 'Staying in

Lil'moor, are you?' she inquired brightly, as he counted out his change.

He couldn't help smiling at the unintentional pun and was tempted to answer, 'Well, I will if she's amenable,' but opted for, 'It's a lovely spot. I hope to stay here, yes.'

'We get a lot of tourists,' said the postmistress. 'Where are you staying? At the White House?'

'I haven't decided yet.'

'There's no decision to it,' said the girl, quite coldly. 'It's the only place for tourists around here.'

'In that case, my mind is made up,' said the traveller, putting the bottle into one of the pockets of his long coat.

'Want me to open that for you?' asked the postmistress.

He shook his head. 'No thank you.'

'You're not one of those people that use their teeth, are you?' The postmistress touched her throat provocatively. The traveller put on his hat. 'I always carry a bottle opener with me,' he said. 'Good day to you.'

Outside, he waited for the girl, Lily, to emerge. Of course, she spent considerable time chatting to the postmistress and her mother. He sat down on a convenient boulder and opened up the bottle, swigging idly as he waited. He never wasted an opportunity. He knew through past encounters that it was best to act on impulse or else regret at leisure. It was his duty while roaming the world to cram as much experience into his life as possible. He wanted to taste every fruit there was on offer, even if it was sour. More than anything, he liked to experience the effect he had on other people.

Eventually, the bell above the post office door made a muffled 'ting!' and the Lily Maid walked out into the sunlight. She paused for a moment and squinted up at the sky. Her basket was laden with tins and she had bought a couple of oranges that had the wizened appearance typical of small-store produce kept long on the shelf. When she realized she was being observed, she assumed an almost guilty expression as if she had been seen doing something shameful. She nodded curtly, hesitated with a half-open mouth as if about to speak, and then began to walk away up the road. Once, she looked back. Satisfied, the traveller stood up, threw the empty bottle into a waste-bin outside the shop and headed for the White House.

He would take a room there for a night a least. The interior of the place was all polished dark wood and horse brasses, with a token grandfather clock ticking in the hallway. A notice-board advertised church activities in the area. He could not remember having seen a church near by. It was necessary to ring a counter bell for service; clearly the White House was not crammed with business at the moment. A man, an ex-military type, came through from a room at the back. The traveller assessed him swiftly; retired, wife somewhere else in the building, hearty group of local friends, perhaps the father of a difficult child who had grown into a difficult adult. He did not fall prey to the traveller's charms at all, however well directed they were, and maintained a *stiff*, unwelcoming mien as his new guest signed the register.

The traveller's appearance was perhaps not typical of the usual White House clientele and it was likely he'd only been permitted to stay there because trade was slack. The proprietor would undoubtedly prefer to fill his inn with family holiday-makers and respectable moor-walkers. The traveller's attire and long hair probably suggested untold dissipations to this conventional creature, who would also scorn all males who had not enjoyed army life at some time. Enchanting delusion! The traveller envisaged many interesting encounters to be had with the landlord; his name was Mr Eager.

'Dinner at six-thirty!' he said. The traveller imagined a peremptory gong would be rung at that time, and woe betide the listless guest who ignored its summons.

His room was comfortable, if not a little too flouncy. Mrs Eager would also be flouncy of course, for the decor was her signature. The traveller would strike up a friendship with her, to the disgust of her husband. He wondered whether the Lily Maid ever came to the White House. His first impression of her suggested she was not the type to drink out in pubs. Once he'd made the acquaintance of Mrs Eager he might be able to find out.

At six-thirty he presented himself downstairs just as Mr Eager was about to bang the anticipated gong with a little felt-covered hammer. He nodded cheerily to the landlord who, surprisingly, went quite red about the neck and face. The traveller wore new black jeans and an open-necked black shirt, which revealed the white hollow of his throat, the place where it looked as if someone had gouged a hole in the soft, bloodless flesh with a knuckle. His long hair was tied firmly back at the neck and he had willed himself into a pleasing state of suave, groomed, aristocratic vagueness. He defied the landlord to call his appearance disreputable; he would be faintly patronizing with the man tonight as a lesson.

After dinner, during which he had made a point of ingratiating himself with Mrs Eager (who was all that he had decided she should be), the traveller took a pint of beer out into the White House garden and sat against a wall where a late-blooming lilac hybrid exuded its scent behind him. Gradually, as the evening thickened, other guests drifted outside to sit at the wooden picnic tables, and locals also began to arrive. Car doors slammed, a few children made an appearance. Then there was a glimmer of white, and the Lily Maid herself walked into the garden, dressed in pale cotton and wrapped in a fringed, woollen shawl. She sat down alone at one of the tables and self-consciously fiddled with her hair, kicking the bench with her feet.

Delightful! thought the traveller, how unbelievably opportune! He had not imagined she would come this close to him so soon, although he knew the seeds of interest he'd planted must have taken root, and wondered whether he should approach her right away. No, perhaps a minute or two of observation first ... He watched her, savouring the moments before contact was made. She seemed so fey, so fragile, almost awkward. Once or twice she nodded and smiled at people she knew, but no one made a move to join her. A moth fluttered above her head and landed for a moment on her hair. The traveller shivered with anticipation.

Presently, a young man came out of the White House, carrying two full glasses. He sat down beside the girl and placed a drink in front of her. They did not speak but simply sat there, side by side, looking into the dusk. The traveller suppressed a *frisson* of annoyance, even though he'd known it was unlikely the girl would be alone. Her partner was hardly more than a boy, pallid and scrawny, his hair unkempt and the starved curve of his jaw like a blade. He wore old, frayed jeans and a huge, shapeless jumper full of holes. He and the exquisite girl lifted their glasses in unison, drank, did not speak.

The traveller had finished his beer. He stood up, cradling the empty glass, and walked towards the lit garden door of the pub as if to purchase another. Just as he was within reasonable speaking distance of the Lily Maid and her companion, the girl began to say something. He could not hear the words, but the boy nodded distractedly.

'Hallo there,' said the traveller, and they both turned their heads in his direction. He smiled and gestured towards the pub with his glass. 'We meet again!'

At this point, if there was no sign of welcome, he could carry on walking without loss of dignity. The girl frowned at him and then smiled wanly. She leaned towards her companion and began murmuring in his ear, dismissing the traveller from her attention. The traveller walked past without pausing and went into the bar. He did not feel annoyed, only mystified. He employed a careful choreography when

intruding into people's lives and yet on this occasion it appeared his first movements, which were often the most devastating, had somehow failed to arouse. He was puzzled by this, and checked his appearance in the mirror behind the bar. Mrs Eager, oblivious of his mood, was happily chatting into the air around his body as she filled his glass.

He had obviously made a mistake. Some people were immune to his allure because of an innate lack of imagination. It was pointless to bother with individuals like that; too much work. He'd simply made an error of judgement. He looked around the bar. Perhaps someone else? What he saw did not inspire him. Tomorrow, then, he would be moving on. A pity. His pique was destined to last no more than a few minutes.

'Don't you?' Mrs Eager said.

The traveller shook himself into the present. 'I beg your pardon?'

'I said how much I love this time of year; the smells, the feelings, don't you?' She waved dangerous, lacquered claws in the air. She smelled of heavy, oriental scent, which failed to conceal the clinging aroma of flesh past its prime.

The traveller nodded. 'Yes,' he said. Mrs Eager, he was sure, would also be an amateur poet, and perhaps ran a small writing circle in the village. She would have been easy prey, if he'd been interested. 'Could I ask you something?'

She puffed up with pleasure. 'Of course!'

'The young couple out there; a girl with red hair and a shawl, the pale boy, do you know them?'

The question was obviously not the one Mrs Eager had anticipated. Her face had fallen a little. 'Oh, you mean the Winter twins?'

'Twins? I don't think so.' Even as he said it, he realized he was wrong. Of course they were twins.

'Well, they're the only people who fit that description,' said Mrs Eager. 'Why?'

'I met the girl—Lily?—earlier today.'

'Mmm.' Mrs Eager leaned conspiratorially over the bar. 'They ...'

He wouldn't let her say what she wanted to say. 'What are they drinking?'

Mrs Eager jumped back abruptly. Later, she might wonder with her poet's mind why his softly spoken words had made her feel as if she'd been slapped across the face. 'They usually drink cider,' she said. 'Are you buying for them?'

He nodded. Mrs Eager worked the pump with a pursed mouth. 'What's that scent you're wearing?' he asked her, smiling.

He wasn't normally so obvious in his manoeuvres, but realized there was little point in trying to deny how deeply Lily Winter had aroused his interest. Her resistance called for dramatic measures. Carrying the drinks on a metal tray the traveller went back out into the garden. He would not have been surprised if the twins had already left, but they were still sitting together at the table. Lily was leaning down to fuss a mongrel dog with a madly wagging tail that had come to sniff around her ankles.

'Mind if I join you?' he asked, sitting down. The twins looked at him with some surprise and the dog slunk away. He put the drinks down in front of them. 'I hope you don't mind. I feel like a bit of company and I'm afraid you'—he wagged a finger at the girl—'are the only person I've met around here.'

She laughed without reserve, a reaction he hadn't expected. 'Hardly met!' she said. Perhaps she felt safer with her brother there. The evening light suited her. How could he have thought her plain?

The traveller shrugged and grinned sheepishly. 'I know, but everyone else in this place is ...' He pulled a face.

'We call it a pre-graveyard,' Lily said, nodding. 'I know what you mean.'

'You're Lily Winter, right?' So far he hadn't yet looked at the boy. She didn't seem too pleased he'd found out that much about her; perhaps because there were other things to discover, which she feared he'd also picked up. 'And you are ...?' she asked, a little coldly. He told her.

'Are you foreign?' she asked. 'No, of course not. Are you a gypsy, then, or something? What an unusual name.'

He shrugged again, offering no further explanation.

'This is my brother Owen,' she said, gesturing to her companion, 'or did you know that too?'

The traveller shook his head. ‘No. Pleased to meet you.’ He met the boy’s eyes for the first time, expecting territorial surliness, and found to his relief he was merely looking at Lily’s eyes again. Uncanny: a mixture of caution, amusement, and a certain cynical awareness of his purpose. He realized, half unpleasantly, that these two somehow knew him. Was this a disadvantage or not? The boy was more presentable than he’d first thought as well. How fortunate to find these creatures here; their acquaintance might provide more experience than he could have hoped for.

‘He lurked outside the post office for me,’ Lily said to her brother, flapping a hand at the traveller. She did not deceive him. She and Owen had undoubtedly discussed the matter already. Owen smiled.

‘I do not deny it,’ said the traveller. ‘As a contrast to the hags in there you were like a goddess!’

The twins exchanged a secret glance, but it did not altogether exclude him. They were willing to play, he felt. He experienced a delirious moment of weakness as if the performance was not his but theirs. It was a strange and unfamiliar sensation, but not unpleasant.

‘Are you on holiday?’ Lily asked him, drinking from the glass he had given her but keeping it low to the table. Her eyes smiled at him over its rim.

‘A travelling holiday,’ he said. The twins both made noises of interest, so he began to relate some stories about his experiences, a few of which were fabrications and distinctly less interesting than the truth.

‘So, are you lost now?’ asked the boy. ‘This is nowhere. How did you end up here?’

‘I never know how I end up anywhere. I just keep moving. It’s the best way, I find. Sometimes I discover wonderful things. I don’t look for them, I just make myself receptive. How did you end up here?’

‘We live here,’ Lily said.

‘You don’t seem typical of the natives.’

She made a careless gesture. ‘Well ...’

‘Our mother was an outsider. We inherited the house,’ Owen said.

It was perhaps rather an odd way to put it, but at least it implied they lived alone and might have spacious accommodation. The traveller had the distinct impression that Owen was thinking the words: ‘Wasn’t that what you wanted to know?’ but was aware he might be projecting his own desires on to these people, reading more into their behaviour than was actually there.

‘So what is there to see around here?’ he asked, taking a drink.

‘Nothing!’ the twins said in unison. They laughed.

‘There is always something,’ the traveller said, ‘anywhere. Always something.’

‘Don’t count on it,’ Lily said. ‘What sort of thing are you looking for?’

He shrugged. ‘Just places of interest.’

‘Monuments, ruins, that sort of thing?’

‘Yes, that sort of thing. I like history.’

‘Oh, there’s plenty of that here,’ Lily said. ‘History. No present though, and certainly no future. Nothing changes.’

‘Sounds idyllic’

‘Depends on what you like, I suppose,’ she said. ‘Living here gets very boring.’

‘If you don’t like it, why stay?’ he asked. ‘Couldn’t you sell your house?’

‘We could,’ Owen said, ‘but if we went to a bigger town, we’d have to work. Our income is enough for Lil’moor. We don’t want to work for anyone.’

‘I can’t say I blame you,’ the traveller said. It was a sentiment he shared.

‘You’re staying here, then?’ Lily said.

‘For the time being. I acted on your recommendation.’

‘It was hardly that!’ she said. ‘What do you think of the Eagers?’

‘I don’t think Mister likes me. She seems all right.’

Lily nodded. They’ve only been here five years. Now they think they own the place!’

They do a lot,’ Owen said, which implied criticism rather than praise.

‘She started all this church business. Fetes and things,’ Lily said. ‘It’s absurd. Lil’moor doesn’t even

have a vicar of its own, but this man comes out from Patterham now and again. More regularly since Mrs Eager took him in hand, I think. The old dears like it.'

'I didn't see a church,' the traveller said.

'Oh, it's a way out of the village,' Lily told him. 'Almost as if Lil'moor was bigger at one time and has just shrunk away from it. You'd like it; it's very old.'

'We could show it to you,' Owen said. Lily looked at him sharply and then smiled.

'Yes, we could. Do you want us to?'

'It's very kind of you.'

'It's just something to do!' she said, and stood up. 'Well, come on then.'

'What? Now?' The traveller was taken aback.

'Better by moonlight,' Lily said. 'Come on.'

There was no moon, but the clear sky lent a ghostly radiance to the land. As they walked together up the middle of the road, the traveller again experienced a feeling of being helplessly overwhelmed. Lily appeared to have undergone a dramatic personality change. Gone was the reticent, innocent reserve of their encounter in the post office. She chattered the entire time they walked, mainly about other people in the village.

'They don't think much of us,' she said.

'Why drink in the pub, then?' he asked.

'Because they hide the fact they don't think much of us,' Owen said, 'but we still know. They might think they don't want us around but they'd be disappointed if we weren't. We're part of this place.'

'I don't care what they think,' Lily said.

'You must get lonely sometimes,' the traveller said. The thought of them living alone together in isolation suddenly made him feel uneasy.

'Oh no,' Lily said. 'Never.'

'We have a car,' Owen said. 'We drive to places, don't we, Lily?'

'We drive to places,' she said. The traveller was beginning to wonder if they were not rather simple in the head.

The church was really quite unremarkable and not as old as the twins had suggested. Its most significant feature was that it had been built in such a bleak spot. It was surrounded by gravestones that were kept in check by a dilapidated fence. Several tired-looking yew trees provided the traditional vigilance for the dead. It was a place where lone spectres might walk, but there were none in evidence tonight.

'It's locked up,' Lily said. She was wearing her shawl low on her arms, and the traveller could see her skin was pimpled with cold. The three of them stood against the fence, looking at the graveyard. It seemed they had made rather a pointless journey.

'Let's show him the ringstone,' Owen said to his sister.

'That's a good idea.'

It seemed rather staged. The traveller was unsure what to expect, but wondered whether he was about to be on the receiving end of a joke. They went through a lych-gate that seemed unnecessarily imposing, or part of an older structure. A straight gravel path ran up to the church doors, and appeared to circle the building. The traveller was bemused to see there was a TV aerial sticking out from the church roof.

'It's round the back,' Lily said, running into the shadow of the church.

'We often come here at night,' Owen said.

'I thought you might,' the traveller replied. They were just children.

The ringstone was nothing more than a listing gravestone, its engraving long weathered into nonsense. This is it,' Lily said. She was leaning on the stone, her white hands gripping it at the top.

'And what is it, exactly?' asked the traveller.

Lily and her brother started laughing. The traveller felt decidedly uncomfortable. 'We must join hands around it,' Lily said.

'How pagan,' the traveller observed, unimpressed.

‘Oh, probably,’ Lily agreed, ‘but it’s a custom.’ She held out her hands, waggling her fingers. ‘Join hands.’

Reluctantly, the traveller complied. Lily’s fingers were icy cold, Owen’s warm and dry. ‘Do we have to make a wish or something?’ the traveller asked. He felt absurdly awkward.

‘No, we circle,’ Lily replied. She pulled on his arm.

I can’t believe I’m doing this, the traveller thought, stumbling round the stone. I have no control over these people, they are wild. ‘Whose grave is this?’ he asked.

‘Don’t know,’ Lily said. ‘It’s not important.’

He suspected that circling the ringstone was a custom traditional only to the Winter twins and strongly hoped no stray dog-walkers from the village would come along to observe this ridiculous ritual. That’s enough,’ he said after a few minutes, pulling away from their hands. They did not object.

Tomorrow we could take you somewhere else,’ Owen said.

They escorted him back to the White House and cheerily waved goodbye, promising further entertainment the following day. The traveller was not sure of his feelings about Owen and Lily Winter. In some ways they annoyed him, and Lily was not at all like he had imagined her to be. She should have been a shy virgin whom he could have gently initiated into the ways of the world. He now suspected that she was not a virgin at all. How disappointing. There would be no scholar’s bedroom with bookcases full of slim volumes. There would be no delicate watercolours on the wall, painted by her own untutored hand. The scratches on her arms, which he’d fondly thought she might have incurred playing with a favourite cat in some secluded, scented garden, had probably happened while she’d been fixing her car or something equally mundane. Still, she and her brother were unusual people even if not in the direction he’d hoped.

Mrs Eager was still hovering around the bar cleaning glasses; it was not as late as he’d thought. She offered to make him some meat sandwiches, which he gladly accepted, and while she did so he sat down in the guests’ lounge to read a local paper. Mr Eager sauntered in, pushing out his belly, and attempted to be sociable. He asked the traveller whether he played golf.

Tm afraid not.’

‘Hrrm, hrrrh.’ The landlord was either clearing his throat or playing for time. ‘Sitting with the Winters, were you?’ he said eventually. ‘Rum pair, rum pair.’ Mr Eager shook his head in perplexity. The traveller made no comment. ‘Bit of square-bashing wouldn’t harm the lad ...’

‘They seem very young to live alone,’ the traveller said.

‘Teh, yes!’ said Mr Eager. ‘The mother died two years ago, but they keep the old place up. They’re looked out for around here.’ He glanced at the traveller in a knowing, slightly threatening manner.

Mrs Eager had come into the room, carrying a tray.

She had obviously overheard her husband’s remarks. ‘Mrs Winter was a very private person,’ she said, offering the traveller a plate of sandwiches. ‘She came here when the twins were babies. Had a little money, I think. She always kept herself to herself and never mentioned what had happened to her husband, but she was a good woman. The twins have run a little wild perhaps since she died, but grief can do funny things to people, can’t it? You spent the evening with Lily and Owen?’

The traveller nodded. ‘Yes, they’re very quaint but I enjoyed their company.’

‘We look out for them here in Lil’moor,’ Mrs Eager said. ‘We have a close community.’ Her concern explained why she’d seemed a little frosty with the traveller earlier on (perhaps she’d imagined he had sinister designs on the Winters), but it was certainly at odds with the way the twins thought they were regarded in the village. Poor waifs, they lived in a fantasy world. How would his intrusion affect it? He hoped to find out very soon.

At lunchtime the following day the traveller had a visitor. He had been hanging around the White House in the hope that Lily and Owen would turn up and was therefore surprised, and even a little disappointed, when Owen arrived alone. The boy was wearing the same tatty clothes he’d worn the previous evening but had apparently brushed his hair. His flawless skin looked shockingly clean against the oily wool of his jumper.

‘Lily’s busy,’ he said. ‘I’ve got the car outside. I’ll show you around.’

The Winter car was a big, rounded vehicle upholstered in aromatic leather, with walnut interior trim. It smelled of age and Owen was quite dwarfed by it, sitting behind the steering wheel like a child. He drove, however, with the habitual terrifying confidence of the young.

'Lily's making a meal,' he said, as the car bowled along one of the lanes leading from Little Moor. 'A meal for you. For tonight.' He grinned at the traveller.

That's nice. Where are you taking me?'

'A ruin. That's what you want, isn't it?'

'Drive on!' The traveller poked his hand out of the car window, letting his fingers run through the whipping grass of the steep hedgerows.

'You could cut yourself,' said Owen, 'lose a finger. Are you afraid of blood?'

The ruin, like the church, lacked the antiquity the traveller enjoyed sensing in old buildings. It was simply a small house on the moors, a crofter's cottage set back from the road, gutted and forlorn. He tried to hide his disappointment from Owen who appeared quite proud of the place.

'Wait till you see it properly,' he said. 'It's quite remarkable.'

The traveller followed the boy from the road, and a few sheep bustled away from the empty house as they approached it.

'Is this a place you and Lily visit often too?' the traveller asked.

Owen wrinkled his nose, his hands deep in his trouser pockets. 'Not really. It doesn't have the mood for regular visitors. You have to respect the feelings of these places, you know.'

T see.' It was becoming clear to the traveller that these two children, deprived of stimuli, had invested their landscape with a rich personal symbology. He wasn't sure whether this was endearing or exasperating; he would have to wait and see.

The door to the house was missing, leaving only a black hole. 'Look at this,' Owen said. The traveller looked inside. All of the floors had gone, even tfie ground floor, so that the whole building had become a kind of dark well, littered with rubbish and pale plants. 'It's bigger inside than outside, you see,' Owen said. That's very unusual. Come round the back. There's a way in, I'll show you. You must feel it inside.'

The ground around the house was swampy and strewn with animal droppings. The traveller picked his way through the mulch without much enthusiasm. The house appeared taller from the back than at the front; the basement was at ground level. Owen ducked into a hole which seemed to have been frenziedly torn into the wall; bricks covered a wide area of ground near by. The traveller wondered whether Owen and Lily were responsible for it. Hesitating only for a moment, he followed the boy inside.

The traveller had to concede that Owen was right about the place; it did seem larger than it had appeared from outside, but he knew that was an illusion. Pigeons were roosting in what remained of the attic rafters and the moist, peaty ground was white with their guano. There were signs that people came here regularly. Crates were bunched together to form a makeshift table, their surfaces marked with candle wax. It was as if occult rituals had been conducted there. The traveller swallowed thickly, and the taste was sour. He hoped he was wrong.

'Feel the atmosphere,' Owen said, in a whisper. 'Just be still, and feel it.'

The traveller felt nothing. If this was the Winter twins' temple, its ambience left him untouched; but then it would.

'What am I supposed to feel?' he asked.

The boy looked at him sharply. 'We thought you were like us,' he said, and then shrugged. 'Close your eyes. Wait.'

Sighing, the traveller did so, and then opened them again quickly. By his side Owen Winter was standing with his head thrown back, his eyes peacefully closed, his lips slightly parted. The traveller realized the boy was really quite beautiful. He looked like a dying saint or someone inviting a kiss. Not realizing he was being observed, Owen reached out and took the traveller's hand in his own. 'You will feel it through me,' he said. The traveller felt nothing, nothing other than the warm pressure of living fingers. That, at least, was not unpleasant. My dalliance with these waifs will be short, he thought, but not without refreshment. Owen sighed and released the traveller's hand. 'Well,' he said, blinking. 'Did you

feel it?'

'I felt only you,' the traveller replied.

Owen smiled, 'I think you are too cold or something. Let's go.'

They spent the afternoon tramping around the moors, visiting several other empty cottages and farm buildings, but none of these were treated with the bizarre reverence Owen Winter had displayed for the first house. Some of the places were indeed interesting, and the weight of the centuries there pressed down upon the traveller like a welcome blanket in the thick of winter. Owen's behaviour was erratic. At one moment he appeared almost scholarly, talking about the history of the moors, while at another he might sound positively deranged, alluding to ghosts and unexplained phenomena. The traveller was genuinely confused as to whether the boy was slightly mentally ill or just deliberately contrary. It was impossible to tell. He could not believe this innocent was involved in any occult practice; he was simply an immature romantic looking for mystery. And don't I do that myself, in a way? thought the traveller. Owen did not attempt to touch him again.

In the late afternoon they got back into the car and Owen drove them home. The traveller was intrigued by what the Winter house might be like. It could be large and look haunted with ivy over the eaves, or small and cottagey hugged by climbing roses. He dismissed the possibility of it being nothing more than a grey semidetached house, bought by the mother from a district council. The reality, however, was none of these.

It was a detached house, though not large, situated on a winding lane where family homes were widely spaced. It was surrounded by tall evergreens, but had no name. It had rather a raddled appearance. Owen parked the car in a muddy drive at the side of the house, and when the traveller got out, he could see a distorted wire chicken-run behind the house where a few ragged birds were scampering up and down. There was a kennel and a chain but no dog, and a bare clematis hugged one of the walls. The back door was painted in an unsightly and flaking turquoise colour. Owen scraped mud from the soles of his pumps on a piece of metal by the door and, out of politeness, the traveller did likewise. Then they went inside.

The back door led straight into the kitchen which was steamy with the smell of cooking food. Pots bubbled on an old gas stove. The traveller took off his hat and put it down on the large, farmhouse table. He looked around himself with interest. The walls were bare brick except for one that had been inexpertly whitewashed; splashes of white marked the brown tiled floor. Bunches of herbs hung from one of the roof beams, but were so dusty it did not look as if they were used for anything. Three crates of apples under the table gave off an overripe smell; one of them was occupied by an elderly cat asleep among the fruit. A group of new kitchen units against one of the walls was the sole concession to modernity but, white as they were among so much dark and earth, they looked absurd and out of place. Their Formica surfaces were already scored by cutting-knives, and the scratches had been stained brown by tea. At one time, someone had begun to turn this dilapidated house into a home, but the job had never been finished and there was no sign of recent work. Strange. The twins' mother must have lived here for about fifteen years.

'Hope you don't mind the mess,' Owen said and went to open a door, calling 'Lily!' into the space beyond.

The traveller stood in the middle of the kitchen, bombarded by the images before him. His home, when he returned to it, would never be allowed to sink into such disarray. How could a person be comfortable in such chaos? It mystified him. He was beginning to think of home more often now. He sat down on a wooden chair by the table and Owen said. 'No, don't sit there. Go into the parlour.' He gestured to show the way.

The parlour was surprisingly comfortable; a woman had put her mark here. Perhaps the mother had begun renovations in this room. The walls were covered in framed embroidered samplers and a large, welcoming fire was burning in the huge stone hearth. Again the walls were of bare brick, but in this room it was simply rustic, a decorative effect. A beautiful old Persian rug covered most of the floor, but around its edges the boards gleamed with honey-coloured varnish. The traveller threw himself into a well-padded chair and Owen offered him some wine. 'Home-made,' he said. 'But you'll like it.'

The traveller was not prepared to disagree, although he had a refined palate which objected to brutality. Owen poured out a glass of pale liquid from what appeared to be a crystal decanter. 'We make it from apples,' he said. The traveller was pleased to find the wine tasted of fairly well-bred sherry. Then Lily came into the room. She looked enchanting, wearing a simple, long black dress, her hair held back with a silky scarf. She had painted her lips with a smudge of pale lipstick and her lashes were spiky with mascara. The traveller's heart warmed. He wished she had been with them for the afternoon.

'Did you have a good time?' she asked, sitting down on the arm of the traveller's chair. He burned with the proximity of her body. She smelled of soap and floral scent.

'Yes, it was very interesting,' he said.

'Did you show him the house, Owen?' she said.

Owen sat down on the rug at their feet. He nodded.

'What did you think of it?' Lily asked the traveller.

'I suppose you mean your little church,' he said.

Lily laughed. 'Well, it's not exactly that!'

'I think I disappointed your brother. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to react.'

'I wasn't disappointed,' Owen said. 'We only wanted you to go there. You weren't supposed to react.'

'Why did you want me to go there?' the traveller asked. He thought he might as well enter into the spirit of their game.

'We wanted to show you to the land,' Lily said.

'Oh.' A dark misgiving touched the traveller's heart. He did not approve of the implications in those words.

'Anyway, the food's ready now,' Lily said, jumping up. 'We'll eat in here, shall we?'

The meal was wholesome if rather sloppy. Lily and Owen kept up an inane chatter the whole time, plates balanced on their knees. When everyone had finished eating Lily piled up the plates in the hearth and refilled the wine glasses. Her cheeks had become slightly flushed. She curled up on the floor by the traveller's feet and, twirling her glass in her hands said, 'When are you going home?'

He smiled down at her. 'Soon,' he said.

'Where do you live?'

'My family has a place further south.'

'And you're going back there?'

'Yes.'

Owen was lying on his stomach in front of them, his chin in his hands. 'What do you do? Do you work?'

The traveller paused. 'I will do, I expect.'

'You're rich, aren't you!' Lily said, pleased with her deduction.

The traveller shrugged. 'My family has money, but that's no excuse for being lazy. Besides, I will have a family to help support eventually.' He wondered why he was telling them even this much. Why? It was the first occasion he had ever opened up to anybody during his travels, including those times he'd spent with distant Kin. Perhaps he was satisfying a need; the journey time was nearly over. Perhaps he was throwing coins at destiny. Perhaps.

'Oh,' Lily said, having digested this information. 'You have ... a girlfriend or a wife, then?'

The traveller leaned back in his chair and blinked at the ceiling. 'I will enter into a marriage when I return home.'

Lily giggled. 'What a funny way of putting it.' A silence came into the room.

'I'm not married yet though,' the traveller said, and sat up straight again with a sigh. He held out his empty glass to Owen. The boy gave him a studied, calculating look that went on for a few seconds too long before he got up and refilled the glass. Lily extended a cautious hand and traced a pattern on one of the traveller's boots. 'You are a very strange man,' she said.

'How strange?' he asked.

'Well, we don't like people much, but you are different. We like you, don't we, Owen?'

That's why we showed you things, invited you here,' Owen said. 'We like you.'

'I'm flattered.'

'Do you like us?' Lily asked him shyly. She did not look up at him but the traveller could see the colour had deepened around her face. Her little ears had gone scarlet. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder.

'I think you know the answer to that,' he said.

'We have many secrets,' Lily said. 'We think we can trust you.'

'People here think we're witches,' Owen said, 'but we're not.'

'We are very close,' Lily said. 'We always have been.'

The traveller got out of his chair and sat down on the rug between them. He gently pulled Lily against him with one hand and reached out to stroke Owen's hair with the other. 'Don't tell me,' he said. 'It's not necessary.'

The traveller woke up alone beside the fire. He lay for a few moments reliving the delicious experience of Owen and Lily Winter: their hands, their young eyes, the impossible slimness of their bodies, their utter submission to his pleasure. They had obviously experimented together for a long time. Where were they now? Had they stolen away to indulge in a more private communion? The traveller considered that, for tonight at least, it would be best if he returned to the White House. The clock on the wall told him it was not yet midnight. He sat up and pulled on his clothes, noticing that Lily and Owen's garments were still mixed up with his own. Wherever they had gone to they had gone there naked.

Strange and lovely children. He wondered how long he should stay with them. He did not want to encourage a dependence, which he suspected was a risk, but neither did he want to leave this abundant orchard right away. All too soon the time for travelling would be over. He would be given new responsibilities and commitments. There could be no more sampling the world's fruit then.

The smell of apples, very strong and slightly sickly, drifted in from the kitchen. The traveller went out there, stretching, looking for his coat and hat. All the lights were off and he did not know where the switches were. It was very dark and the house was making comfortable, sleepy sounds, wrapping him in its perfume of apples and cooking. It no longer seemed unhomely to him; its mess was comfort. His coat was lying over the back of a chair.

As he shrugged himself into it he looked out of the window at the dark garden. He saw pale shapes moving about and heard a sharp, high-pitched giggle. The twins were out in the garden, naked in the chill; naked beneath the stars. The traveller stood by the window to watch them, an affectionate smile on his face. They were so beautiful, like sprites, slim and white. They ran around a sundial, round and round. He wished he could scoop them up, put them into his pocket, and carry them home. He would like to have such wonders in his own garden one day. You have your secret little wild things, he thought, and I have mine, but tonight mine are heavy, heavy. He sighed and thought of his mother's face, one straight finger pressed against her pale lips. 'Never speak, never speak of what you are. Trust only your Kin, for the Kin stay together, and those beyond the community are a danger to all.' Her words echoed through his mind, words that had been with him since childhood so long ago.

He forced himself to look away from the window but just as his head turned, an odd movement caught the edge of his vision. He pressed his face against the glass, his mouth open. His fingers were flat against the panes.

Twirling, dancing, long-limbed sprites, they were attenuating even as he looked, their muscles flexing outwards. They were blurs upon the dewy grass reaching out for one another with fingers like blades of frost. Changing shape.

We *thought you were like* us ...

He could not believe what he was seeing and the gristle cracked in his own face as he stared.

We *have secrets* ...

Yes, yes! You shouldn't exist, not here, not alone.

Our mother was an outsider ...

The traveller ground his forehead against the glass with a groan of pain. Look away, look away. Forget! Impulsively, he smacked the flat of his hands against the window and the sharp, sudden noise of

cracking glass splintered the night air. The twins froze, caught like animals in a glare of light, looking in at the house with the startled eyes of feral animals. Loners are not tolerated. Loners unwittingly betray. They must be culled!

Lily walked up to the window and put her fingers to the glass, touching the place where his brow pressed the other side. Her small breasts nudged the panes. She looked very brave. She could not guess what was on his mind. She thought he was afraid. 'It's all right,' she said. 'Really. It's all right.'

'It is not!' the traveller said, through clenched teeth.

She looked puzzled, throwing a glance behind her to where her brother stood uncertainly by the sundial. The traveller's throat had filled with fluid. He blinked at the pale wraith outside. 'Keep moving,' he said thickly. 'Sell the house! Go away! Keep moving!'

Lily frowned. 'It's all right,' she repeated. 'We often dance outside like this. There's a wall round the garden. No one can see we're undressed.'

Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps he'd seen nothing but a pair of children enacting a private rite of their own. The glass was old, warped. He backed away from the cracked window.

'No,' Lily said, her brow puckering, 'don't go. Please don't go.'

He knew he had to leave. If he left now he could convince himself his sight had deceived him. If he stayed they would show him their secrets, all of them. They had promised as much. Now he was afraid of what he might find out. He did not want to be the keeper of unwanted knowledge, for the keeper defers to a higher authority eventually and then the time would come when a stranger would arrive in Little Moor, someone whose function was to eliminate dangers from the world. The traveller could not bear to think of that. If they *were* like him, the Winters did not know what they were; they were innocent. The people in the village looked out for them. They might be safe unless another of his kind came by.

'We want you to stay with us,' Lily said urgently, patting the glass with her fingers. 'Stay for a while. We will make you happy.'

'I know,' the traveller said, standing in the shadows. 'You already have.' He backed slowly towards the door, feeling behind him for the handle. Outside the air was sharp with the promise of frost. He inhaled deeply, feeling the needles in his lungs. Then he walked briskly away towards the White House. Nobody followed him.

The train sped south, casting a flickering shadow over the yellow cornfields, recently harvested. The traveller stared out at the dying season, his cheek pressed against the glass. The winter was coming now, coming fast. Up north, in the hidden valleys, on the bare moors, in the timeless pockets of life where very little ever changed, the secret people thrived. They could be very different, these people—outcasts from the human race, eccentrics, grievers, loners—an infinite variety of separate souls. The hard season would come to Little Moor and in the moonlight wraiths might dance in the snow, pale as the winter element, timeless creatures. He remembered the warmth of their hearth, the warm of their flesh. He remembered nothing more.

Going To The Black Bear

Colin Greenland

'This is a song I wrote about the war, it's called *A* Letter from Kenny.' She played the intro looking down at the bare board floor with the beer stains, then when she started to sing she lifted her head. They didn't stop talking though; they didn't want to hear about the war. They were just loggers and quarrymen; all they wanted was Brenda Lee or Connie Francis or some of that country music. She sang over their heads into the smoky air of the bar-room. The season was over; all the vacation cabins were locked and shuttered, the colours of fall had faded and gone from the trees. Tomorrow she'd head out for Bangor, find the Black Bear; they were cool there, they had the Kingston Trio, Phil Ochs. Bob *Dylan* had played the Black Bear. Tomorrow she'd try for Bangor and after that she'd quit. Go back home.

She sang the chorus, sang it louder. They had to listen. There was one guy, a young guy over in the booths, sitting on his own. He was listening. She sang it to him.

I'm still waiting for a letter from Kenny *To tell me* when *he'll* be coming *home* ...

He was kind of a nice guy: he had real nice blue eyes. They seemed to shine through the smoke, brighter than the beer lights at the bar. He didn't look like a logger. He had a jean jacket but he had a white shirt on, like from India or somewhere, with a little embroidery on the collar. Maybe he'd been in the war; maybe that was why he was listening. Maybe that was why he was sitting on his own, not talking to any of the log men. He wouldn't stop looking at her. She gave him a special smile. Maybe he had a car, maybe he was going somewhere towards Bangor. He wasn't from around here, that was for sure.

She finished the song and some of the people clapped. He didn't clap. She was disappointed. He just sat there drinking and smoking and watching her. He was amazing, so blond and tanned and everything, she thought he was a lifeguard up from Florida or maybe all the way from the West Coast. Everybody was talking about the West Coast, everybody but her had gone there this summer; she was up here at China Lake playing for truck-drivers. Couldn't get much farther from San Francisco if you tried. She did the short set. All the way through *Pretty Boy Floyd* she kept thinking, Please don't go.

He didn't go.

She came down from the stage, between the tables and into the crowd, holding her guitar up so it wouldn't get hit. She hated this part, when the gig was over, down on the floor with the people. They all knew her now, but she didn't know them. They didn't mean any harm, she just couldn't handle them. She smiled and said thank you, didn't look at any one of them too long.

That was real good, honey,' said Myra from the bar, passing her a Michelob. Then the juke-box came on, pretty loud: the Drifters, wiping her out of the air. She was history. She drank deep, wiped her mouth. She went along past his booth, caught his eye.

'Hi,' he said.

'Well hallo,' she said. She smiled and he smiled too, sort of. She hung around there a second, another second; he had to say something else or she had to walk on by. He gave the slightest nod at the empty seat opposite, kept looking at her. His eyes were steady as blue stones. She found herself putting her guitar in the window seat and sitting down facing him.

So that was that.

She drank fast, she was thirsty.

He spoke then. 'You ready for another?' he said.

His cheekbones were like gulls' wings. She wanted to fly on them. He was drinking an Old Milwaukee, straight out of the bottle like the logging men. She had one too. She flexed her shoulders, rubbing her back against the partition. 'I curl right up when I'm playing,' she said. 'Like a caterpillar or something.'

Most guys would think that was cute, he just sat there like an Indian. Well, he was no Penobscot, not with that hair.

'You have a name?' she asked him.

He kept looking at her a while before he answered; something was going on in his eyes like he was trying to remember his own name. It would have been kind of spooky if he hadn't been so beautiful. She could watch him a long time, she thought.

'Tom,' he said.

'Hi, Tom,' she said. 'I'm Stephanie. I guess you know that, right?' She reached up and traced the letters of her name backwards on one of her fliers Myra had taped to the window.

'You're good,' he said.

'Well I'm glad you liked it,' she said.

She drank some more beer. He didn't say anything. Usually guys tried to impress her, they wanted to put the make on her right away. Like the guy last night in Augusta who wanted her to be a star. 'Stephanie, you've got it,' he kept saying. 'You got the message.' Nobody that she didn't know had ever watched her as hard as this one, yet now he wasn't paying her any mind. She was pleased and insulted both at the same time, and ashamed of herself for being insulted. She was sure he was a veteran, some of them were kind of remote and confused in themselves. That would be a pity.

'Did you like *Letter from* Kenny?' she said. 'I saw you listening to that one. Were you there, in the

war?'

He considered, rubbed his hand over his jaw. His nails were worn right down. He moved like he was real tired, like a much older guy. 'Wars,' he said. She thought he nodded.

They didn't like to talk about it, that was cool too.

They went out back and sat on the hill, suspended right up above the lake. 'It's so beautiful up here,' she said. She saw the stars in front of them reflected down in the water, black water in the spaces in between them. Pretty deep, she supposed. She asked him, 'What sign are you? Scorpio, right? I bet I'm right.'

There was enough light from the windows of the bar for her to see he was looking wary now, like he was afraid she was going to lay some heavy trip on him. 'I'm Aquarius,' she said. Even if they didn't know anything they could usually relate to that. 'Well I'm Capricorn really, but I have Aquarius rising,' she said. Then she got frightened because she didn't usually tell men that and she wondered what she was saying. She made a D major and strummed it softly, so as not to have to say anything.

His cigarette burned down and he flicked it away. It fell through the cooling night like a dying firefly. It seemed to fall a long time, like it was going to land way down in the lake.

'I guess you're who you want to be really,' she said, conceding. 'I mean, you're not from around here, right?'

'No,' he said at once.

'Where are you from?'

He gave her a slow look, and took a drink. 'Just now I'm wandering,' he said.

'Like me,' she said. 'I'm from Boston. I'm on the road,' she said. She could never say it without feeling like she was reading the words off something, like they were true but she wasn't supposed to say them about herself. 'Tomorrow I'm in Bangor: were you ever there? Did you ever go to a place called the Black Bear, a bar up in Bangor, called the Black Bear?' He shook his head.

'That's a good place,' she told him. 'That's where I'm headed.'

Not looking at him, looking across the dark shoulders of the trees at the white lights and the red lights creeping down Highway Three, she picked the melody of Mining *for Gold*. To her surprise he started to sing.

We *are miners, hard rock* miners, *To the shaft* house *we must go ...*

He sounded different when he was singing, sad and husky like he really did have the rock-dust in his lungs. She turned and looked at him again. She wondered if he was someone she should know. 'You're really good,' she said, 'are you a singer?'

'I can sing,' he said.

'But on the road, I mean, in clubs and stuff?'

The idea seemed to amuse him. 'No.'

'You should! People should sing, in their lives, not just people like me who get paid to sing ... Sing some more,' she said. 'Do you like Bob Dylan?'

But just then with a big hiss of brakes and a low rumble from its empty bed, a log-truck pulled into the parking lot. Stephanie felt exposed, she didn't want to play sitting there with the headlights scything round the place, the engine coughing and hawking in the broken night. She sat still as Tom was sitting, with her hands still on the strings until she heard the driver jump out of the cab and go into the bar. When he slammed the cab door it sounded like something finishing. There was dew on the grass, her dress would be wet. She stood up and felt it. She stood with her arms down by her side, holding the guitar off the grass by the neck. 'I should go in,' she said. It sounded like she was apologizing to him for something. 'Got to get up early, get the good rides.'

He sat there like some old statue, arms round his knees. His white shirt was a pale glow in the light coming down from the bar.

'I love your shirt,' she said softly.

He said, 'Come with me.'

Her heart jumped in her chest. 'You going to Bangor? Or Belfast would do.'

He said, 'Sleep with me tonight.'

Her head spun like a firecracker. Man, he was cool. He was so cool her throat seized up that minute. She wanted to smile but she froze right up. She wanted to say yes, but how could you say yes when he just came out with it like that?

She never made love with men she didn't know. She always said no to the truck-drivers, no matter how sweet they were; the big old men in their big old trucks. But she knew one thing, she wanted to be free. Everybody had gone off to the West Coast this summer to be free—well she could be free right here in China Lake. If you couldn't be free, like right now, then it wasn't freedom at all, right?

She said to him, 'I have to get to Bangor tomorrow, anyway.'

He said, 'OK.' He looked like he'd been carved out of wood.

She stood up. She stood over him. She was ten feet tall, and she felt herself growing bigger every second; she was shooting up into the sky. 'I have to go and get my stuff,' she said, 'say goodbye to Myra.'

He said, 'OK.'

Still he hadn't even touched her. She was so big she was going to burst. She gave a little shaky laugh. 'Well, stand up,' she said.

He stood up. He was tall, not too tall. Just right. She held her face up, wanting him to kiss her. He lifted one finger and put it gently on her lips. She closed her eyes and gave a little shiver: he was the coolest man she'd ever seen, she wanted him now, on the wet grass. His finger smelled of tobacco and something else she didn't know, a scent like some strange kind of animal. Maybe he was a hunter. He was still enough to be a hunter, he had a hunter's eyes that didn't blink, ever. She kissed his finger. She loved him with her eyes. 'Hold this for me?' she said, giving him her guitar. Now that was really free, trusting him to hold her guitar for her, her *guitarl* She went running back inside, skipping up the back stairs light as a willow leaf.

His car was just some old Pontiac, nothing fancy, cracked plastic seat-covers bleached by the sun, a pair of jeans on the back seat, gum wrappers, empty packs of Chesterfields. Smells of cigarettes, old hamburgers and fries, smells of man. Stephanie felt shy suddenly, sat with her feet up against the dash, her long skirt pulled tight around her legs. She watched the road, up and down, up and down. Wherever the road went the pine trees went too. They looked like ranks of stern black sentries. Beside the road they loomed over huge boulders, thirty-foot boulders that just sat there like someone had dropped them.

The big trucks went grinding by. That was a good word, a good line. With their banks of lights on top and all down the sides they looked like big pinball machines, towering over your car, grinding out of the deep forest. Stephanie tried to think of another line for a truck song, but she was too nervous. She looked sideways at Tom, so he wouldn't catch her looking. His jaw made her think of a hard blade, like a snowplough, like he was part of the car now, pushing through the trees. She looked round at her guitar in its cloth case on the back seat with his spare jeans tucked under it so it wouldn't slide off the seat on the curves.

A sign said WALDO COUNTY. Someone had scraped out the second O.

'How far is it?' she asked.

'First place we see,' he said.

She felt nervous a moment, thinking, Well, what did he mean by that? Was he staying close by or did he mean he was going to pull off and start in on her right there at the roadside?

He drove past a big firebreak without stopping. She calmed down. Free, she reminded herself. It's cool. Beside the road is cool too, she imagined, in the country anyhow.

'What kind of tree do you like best?' she said.

Tree?' he said.

'Yup.'

He looked around like he'd never seen the trees before, never seen them up and down the road and all around everywhere.

'Redwood,' he said. 'Oldest tree in the world.'

She thought of California where her friends had gone. She looked around. 'I see oak, I see pine—nope—we're fresh out of redwood.' He didn't laugh. She shifted in her seat, sitting up more.

‘Can we have some music?’

He looked at her, like he thought she was strange. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘You sing us something.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘You.’ She put her feet down and felt the peeling edge of the plastic under her with the tip of her finger. ‘I’ve been singing all night.’ He sang.

They dressed Kenny up in a *uniform—*

‘Hey!’ she said again, in surprise, delight.

And *they sent him off over the sea ...*

He remembered the whole thing, every word. Sang it really well too. It should have sounded funny, a man singing it, about another man, but it didn’t.

That song wasn’t written down anywhere. It wasn’t even on anybody’s tape she’d ever sung on.

‘Ahh, you saw me before some place, right?’ Stephanie said.

He shook his head. He blew out smoke in a long plume as if he was about to speak, but he didn’t.

‘You remembered the whole thing just hearing it once?’ she said. ‘That’s incredible. I mean, that’s really amazing, you know?’

They crested another steep hill. She put out her hand and patted his arm just above the elbow, suing for his attention.

‘I think you’ve seen me before!’ she said.

He signalled and she dropped her hand. Her hand remembered the feel of his arm through the cloth. It felt soft sort of, like a kid’s arm, nothing like a lifeguard’s muscle at all. Probably she’d been romanticizing him in the dim light of the bar. She did that, she knew: romanticized men.

He was swinging the wheel round, turning off to the right down a deep gully. Suddenly she felt vertigo, as if he was going to tip them both down a big hole in the ground. The road was a switchback, just a logging road cut out of the hillside.

‘Down here?’ she said. It was dark down here.

He didn’t answer.

It’s cool, Stephanie reminded herself.

The road curved, climbed again, fell. She saw the lights of a town off through the trees, like neon snow-flakes in the distance. The Pontiac bounced, she clung to the handle over the door.

‘So,’ she said, ‘you know any more songs? You write your own songs?’

He threw her a sidelong glance, gave the smallest shake of his head.

‘Oh you should, you have a good voice, you know.’ Her voice sounded small over the engine sound. ‘Everybody should have their own songs, like for when you’re feeling happy, you know, or when you’re kinda down ... like the blues ...’

He wasn’t responding. She looked out of the window. Stiff black trees replaced each other endlessly along the road. There was something down there, she could just make them out among the trees as they came round a bend: hard-edged shapes, were those houses there?

Tom was slowing right down.

They were some mobile homes, away back under the trees. In a second she’d be able to see clearer. Logging camp, she guessed, only now it looked more permanent than that. The headlights showed aluminium siding, ribbed and dented: old paint, wintergreen, brown streaks smeared across it. Pale pink curtains at a window. Over the mutter of the car engine she heard a dog bark once, saw black shapes stirring restlessly behind chicken wire, saw their eyes give back the headlights, red and orange.

The trailers looked ancient, long ribbed things with round ends, sat there in the mud like tanks, like some kind of invasion craft. They had cables hooked up to a generator somewhere. She could see blue TV light stirring through the curtains of the one nearest the road. There was a car up on blocks, and some kind of engine lying on a couple of planks in the mud with a tarpaulin half over it. Kids’ toys lay around, garbage of all kinds: she couldn’t see what, she didn’t want to. Everything she could see looked dirty, neglected, like you wouldn’t want to touch any of it in case it gave you diseases.

She asked him, ‘Is this it?’

Lord, she hoped it wasn’t.

Tom reached for the key and turned the engine off.

Stephanie's heart thudded hard and low. He hadn't put the brakes on, they were rolling slowly and silently past the camp down the gradient of the road. He was staring out of his window at the trailers as if he wanted to know who was home, and thought he could see right through the walls if he stared hard enough. Stephanie looked away to the left, up the road, down the road. Nothing but trees. Nothing but black needles. But when she stared into the dark she felt like something she couldn't see was staring back. She looked up at the treetops, the black sky, but she could still feel it staring at her.

The car crept on down the road, twigs and rocks crunching under the tyres. Tom was sitting stiff as a shepherd dog, just staring into the camp. One of the camp dogs was starting to whine, setting the others off. The car felt thin as a paper shell suddenly, no protection at all from anything. 'Who is it, Tom?' asked Stephanie, her voice sounding high and squeaky in her ears. He didn't turn from the window. Nor did he stop the car. She could smell the strange smell of him again, real strong.

'Cousins of mine,' he said.

She swallowed. The dogs were barking; a light went on in one of the trailers.

'We going to stop?'

His hand found the key again and he gunned the engine back into life. 'No,' he said determinedly, and they were gone, surging down the hill, leaving the place behind, out of sight in a second behind the trees.

The feeling that something was staring lingered a way down the hill, then quickly dwindled to nothing. Stephanie felt relieved, ashamed of herself, of her imagination. She wasn't free at all, she was spooky as a Radcliffe girl at a reefer party. Goodness sakes.

She wouldn't look at Tom. She looked out of the window.

A half-mile further down they took a fork and soon came back out on the highway. She saw an orange gas sign standing up above the trees; meat trucks growling up the gradient; a pick-up loaded with churns; a tan VW van broken down, a fat guy in a windcheater with his head stuck in the hood, a frightened-looking woman with a permanent and rhinestone glasses in the passenger seat, gazing hopelessly into every car that passed. Tom drove on by.

They pulled in at a motel. 'You folks are lucky,' said a fat old man in an eyeshade, struggling up out of the basket chair where he had been drowsing in front of the late show. 'I was just about to close up for the night.'

He beamed widely, showing bare gums, turning a dog-eared register towards them and taking the cap off a ballpoint pen. 'Mr and Mrs—?'

She looked at Tom.

'We ain't married,' he said softly, flatly.

She saw the old man stiffen like a startled chicken. She looked at Tom warily, astonished herself. Cool was cool, but you couldn't go letting it all hang out like that in front of some old country boy, he'd probably call the fuzz. But the old man was laughing soundlessly, his shoulders shaking. He winked and gestured at Tom approvingly with the pen. 'What are ya, brother and sister, is that it?' He winked, mugging at Stephanie. 'You're his sister, right?' He nodded, smiling broadly, loving every minute. •

She grabbed Tom's arm and squeezed it. 'Yes,' she said firmly.

The old man thought this was even funnier. He wheezed and slapped Tom on the shoulder as he gave him their key, directed them across the yard to a clapboard cabin.

'Go on with ya!'

Stephanie turned the light on, but Tom turned it off again. He bore down on her, herding her on to the bed. She dropped her backpack. In the sick, pale light through the drapes his face looked intent, heedless, blind. She felt herself swelling again, this time beneath him, her breasts rising up to fill his hands. She was full of herself, filled with hunger for him, with his hunger for her. His mouth was hot, the back of his neck hot where she clasped his mouth to hers. Was he sick? Did he have a fever? He was fiery, furious, writhing in her arms. She clung to him as to a frightened horse: they plunged and reared together, sweat coursing down his sides. Veins stood out in strange patterns on his neck and forehead. He cried out in a language she did not know.

In the morning she woke feeling sore, ragged, proud. She could smell him on her, all around her in

the sagging motel bed. She turned to him but he was not in the bed beside her. She almost cried out, she felt so desolate, so deprived. The power of the feeling frightened her. Then she saw him sitting in his pants and no shirt, backwards on a chair at the window, smoking a cigarette. Naked, daring, Stephanie got out of bed and put her arms round him from behind, kissed the back of his neck. He hadn't opened the drapes. He was staring through the gap between them as if there was something special he was hunting, moose or deer, up the ridge behind the yard. She nestled her cheek against his, peering over his shoulder. There was nothing there she could see, just brown trees. It was broad day out there, she'd slept half the morning away.

'Well hallo,' she said.

He reached up a hand, patted her bare arm. Didn't look round. She felt sweaty, stale. 'I have to shower,' she said. 'So do you.' She pressed her fingertip against his naked shoulder. His skin was still warm, as if he had been working hard. 'Does this place run to breakfast?'

His voice was low, steady. 'I want you to come with me today,' he said.

'I have to get to Bangor today,' she said.

He looked at her then. His blue eyes were opaque, preoccupied, her problems were nothing.

'I can go that way,' he said. 'I have folks there, someplace.'

It was fine. Still something made her hesitate. Not that she didn't trust him, only—only something.

'Well, OK, only I have to get to Bangor today, then I can maybe get a gig at the Black Bear tomorrow. You know where that is? The Black Bear?'

His face was impervious as the face of the Angel Gabriel. He looked at her like a big shot record producer she met once at someone else's show. 'I'll take you to Bangor,' he said.

'Well, fine,' she said, uncomfortably.

She wished he would come and talk to her while she was in the shower, but he didn't look like he would think of it and you couldn't just ask. She dried herself on the little scrap of hard towel, then dressed in her road shirt and jeans. The old man was pottering around in his singlet and overalls; he chuckled and greeted them courteously, made them a pot of coffee thick as creosote.

'You sleep OK, little lady?' he asked, treating her to another exhibition of his gums. He seemed to think she and Tom were staying there expressly for his entertainment.

She sat in the car with the door open, her feet sticking outside, tuning her guitar. She looked at the motel, she saw those were blueberry bushes around the cabins. Usually that would have cheered her up; today she was not so happy. She wondered very much where they were going. And she had a problem: she didn't like a man to take her for granted, but she didn't want to start a fight and spoil their last hours together. He was someone special, she was already writing a song about him—two songs—in her head.

He came and got in the car, started up. She put her legs inside, slammed the car door. She kissed his cheek. The late morning sun was the colour of corn oil through the raw branches of the trees. A rustbucket pick-up came clanking and squealing past them as they bumped out on to the road. Stephanie held the guitar upright on her lap, trying to keep the head from banging on the windshield as they bounced and swayed.

Tom glanced at her. 'Put that thing in the back seat,' he said, coldly.

Tom? Are you mad? What's wrong, is something wrong?'

That wasn't very cool, nagging him like that. It upset her when someone spoke slightingly about her guitar.

'Nothing's wrong,' he said. Either he was mad, or he was sick. He sounded short of breath. His face was dark, dark shadows under his eyes and over his cheeks.

His hair that was as blond as cornsilk looked dark too, and coarser, maybe it was greasy. Maybe sex made his hair greasy.

She lifted her guitar carefully over the back of the seat, trying to reach the cloth case with her hand, her fingers, she couldn't do it. She abandoned it and sat round straight again, facing the front. She reached up and touched him on the cheek. His beard was strong, he hadn't shaved this morning.

She saw then where they were headed. Off the highway, back up the logging road. Back up towards that place where his cousins lived. In daylight it looked perfectly normal up here, pine, oaks and maples,

pigeons flying overhead, road signs all dented and scratched up from buckshot, nothing spooky at all.

At that moment they passed something dead, something quite big, it looked like. Stephanie glimpsed a staring eye like a deer's, four spindly legs at bad angles, a great deal of crimson blood. She flinched.

'I'm going to have to leave you for a while,' said Tom suddenly. His eyes looked haggard, unfocused. There was sweat on his face like last night. Suddenly she was aware of the powerful heat coming off him, filling the car.

Tom, what is it? Are you feeling OK?'

But he shrugged off her hand, muttering. And then they were at the camp. He stopped the car with a jerk, reached his arm across her to open the door; he was bundling her outside.

Tom? Tom, please!'

The last thing she saw of him was his grey face looking up at her through the dusty window of the Pontiac as he slammed the passenger door, looking up at her open-mouthed, his head lopsided like he was under water.

Tom! Tom, wait! My guitar!'

She stood holding her hand out grabbing at the empty air, watching the Pontiac weave back on to the road and roar away uphill. She cursed in alarm and shock. He had her guitar, she had to wait here, couldn't move from this spot until he came back. No, she wouldn't think what if he didn't. She was despondent at her own helplessness.

A bad smell hit her nostrils. There was a cage of goats next to the cage of dogs, both ankle-deep in filth. The dogs were climbing on each other, rearing up against the wire with their whole bodies, trying to get at her. She didn't much care for dogs. She also had that sensation again that something she couldn't see was staring at her from somewhere. She looked around, combing her hair frantically back from her face with her fingers. She looked into the encampment, over the blackberry bushes.

There were babies watching her, children, two, four, six of them. They were practically naked, streaked and spotted and blotted with dirt, their noses running. They all had huge nostrils. Stephanie came round the bushes and approached them. The eldest looked to be a little girl about eight, skinny as a post, her hair matted in tangles and tufts. She had an unravelling sweater that hardly reached over her dirty little pot belly, and a skirt the colour of mud. Her feet were bare.

'Whatcha want?' said the little girl, screwing up her eyes.

'Nothing,' said Stephanie. 'I don't want anything.' What was she going to say? 'I just have to wait here a while for someone.' It didn't sound good, even to her own ears. She looked nervously at the trailers. The door on the nearest one was open; it looked dark inside, she couldn't see anyone in there.

'Who you waitin' for?' asked the little girl. There was something funny about all their heads, their skulls were very long, as though they had an extra bit on the back. Their eyes were all the same colour, the ones close enough to see. They were a sort of yellow colour, like a glass of beer.

'You waitin' for that man?'

'Yes,' said Stephanie. She didn't know where to put her hands. He'd left her here without her pack, without a thing. Goddamn him!

'Who was that man?' asked a little boy, his hair cut so short he was almost bald. Stephanie took a breath, trying to breathe through her mouth, trying to shape up to all this. She still had the feeling she was being watched. 'Well, he's your cousin, I guess.'

This meant nothing to them.

'His name's Tom,' she said. They just stared.

There was a black dog with them, some kind of crazy mongrel mix. The girl pointed to it, it was bigger than she was. 'This is Dory,' she said. 'She's a dog.' She looked up at Stephanie as if for approval.

A young woman came to the open trailer door. She was wearing long, wrinkled yellow woollen underwear under a grubby mauve nylon dress and dirty sneakers on her feet, laced with string. She held her hand to her face, propping up her hair, which was flopping out of a home permanent. It had been violently bleached and was growing out dark. She had the same nose as the kids. And her eyes were yellow. Goodness sake, these were genuine hillbillies, just like Woody Guthrie sang about, that were in

Oklahoma. Or was it Kentucky? Even as her disgust faded Stephanie began to feel sorry for them. She saw herself back in Boston at the Blue Jar: 'This is a song I wrote for a hillbilly family I met up in Maine ...'

'Nadine,' said the young woman, 'you best tell Carter.'

The eldest little girl ran off behind the trailer.

'Hallo,' said Stephanie, with a sympathetic trust-me smile.

'What you want?' said the woman.

'Your cousin Tom just brought me,' she said. 'He'll be back in a little while. He had to go off somewhere, I don't know where he was going, he didn't say.'

She heard herself babbling and stopped abruptly.

'Don't know no Tom.'

'I don't know his other name,' said Stephanie apologetically. 'Blond hair. Beautiful shirt, white shirt. Drives a Pontiac, it's brown, with orange hubcaps. He said he's got cousins here.'

The woman was no older than her, yet some of the kids were probably hers. She was standing there behind them as if she'd go for an axe if Stephanie moved any closer. She was looking at Stephanie like she was the nut, as if she had two heads, as if she was some old dinosaur that had crawled out of the woods. Probably they were all retarded. Jesus, what a terrible life.

The woman didn't seem to be worried. 'You have ta come in,' she announced, as if it were a fact of life. She disappeared inside her long immobile mobile home. Taking a deep breath, Stephanie stepped up after her, Dory and the kids following.

Inside, the sense of invisible eyes on her did not decrease.

The first thing she saw was an unmade bed, a greasy quilt and comforter tumbled on it. There was an ashtray spilled on the quilt, an empty beer can lying at the foot of the mattress, up against the footboard. The place smelled of cigarettes and beer and animals, obviously it *wasn't just Dory* that slept in here. There were Coke bottles everywhere, paper sacks bulging with unconsidered garbage, piles of newspapers, some of them old. So old they were brown. Alongside the bed was a chest of drawers, two drawer fronts missing, limp clothes dangling out. You could see no one had cleaned the windows for years.

It was horrible that anyone should be so poor as to have to live like this. The government really should find them proper homes. She wondered how long they had been living here, for ever it looked like. Where had they come from originally? Maybe their parents had been transients, she wondered if they knew any songs. She couldn't see a banjo, an accordion, even a kazoo. Nothing but the TV flickering on the chest. A woman in lace and a man in buckskins were arguing playfully on the porch of an airless frontier set. *If you think I'm marrying you,* Mr *Grace, you can think again!*

'Sit down,' the hostess said.

Stephanie sat at the head of the table. The kids immediately took the rest of the seats, Dory too, squashed up on one chair with one of the babies.

'My name's Stephanie,' said Stephanie.

They all sat looking at her, three of them sitting in the same attitude: right elbows on the table, sucking the edges of their hands. The table was littered with dirty plates, an oily black handgun, a ketchup bottle, a mangled Red Indian doll of bright red polythene with one leg missing. No child claimed the doll. Stephanie sat tight, not wanting to touch anything. Everything smelled just awful. The woman was opening a cupboard under the sink. 'You want some coffee?' she said.

'Yes please,' said Stephanie. 'That would be very nice.'

There were clattering footsteps. Nadine was back. She had brought Carter with her. Carter was very tall.

He stooped, avoiding the electric heater on the wall above the door. He didn't look so old either, though older than the nameless woman at the cupboard, plus he was almost bald. He wore a black cord shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a pair of jeans that had once been blue. He had the yellow eyes, the gaping nostrils. What hair he had was a dark grey that looked like motor oil rather than age. It hung down in straggling hanks from little asymmetrical patches around his head. It did not disguise the shape of

his skull. The woman's husband or her brother? Or both?

When he smiled Stephanie saw his teeth, and wished she hadn't.

This is her,' said the woman, rising from the floor, her hands still empty.

'You must be Carter,' said Stephanie.

Carter said nothing, nodded, smiled vacantly. Stephanie wondered if there was something seriously wrong with him, but his eyes were very steady on her, unblinking, inscrutable, like Tom's eyes. Hurry up, Tom. Behind her the TV made a squeaky burst of helter-skelter discords, slithering strings, racing brass.

'I don't suppose you get many visitors way out here,' said Stephanie.

Carter spoke. 'Not too many.' His voice was high and musical, like a child or a whimsical old woman. He went to where the woman was standing in the kitchenette and put his arm around her, pinning her arms to her sides. 'Get our visitor a drink?' he said, not taking his eyes off Stephanie. •

The woman was indifferent to his grip. 'I was just goin' t'make coffee ...' she said, lethargically.

'What a shame,' said Carter to Stephanie. 'We're all out of coffee. You'll have to have a real drink.'

He fetched out an unlabelled bottle of something clear as water and thumped it on the table. Stephanie looked at it, looked at the icebox. 'Maybe a Coke, if you have one.'

The couple looked at each other as if they didn't know what it was. Stephanie would have said water but she didn't trust their water. 'I don't need anything, really,' she said. 'I'm fine.'

Carter leaned in front of Nadine and poured an inch of the colourless spirit into a plastic glass. It had a chipped decal of Donald Duck on the side. Stephanie smiled weakly. Be free. The drink smelled of nothing, nothing at all. She took a sip, inhaled sharply and choked, her throat gripped by claws of fire.

'Good, heh?' Carter said.

He did not sit down, stood leaning on the sink with his arm around the woman, smiling his hideous smile. Stephanie took another drink. This time it went down pretty easy. Her throat was completely numb already. T mustn't drink too much,' she explained, 'I have to keep a clear head for tonight, I have a date. I mean a gig. In Bangor, at the Black Bear. Maybe you know it?'

Carter leaned forward again. He topped up her glass.

'I'm a folk singer,' she said, drinking. She smiled bashfully at the children around the table, at their probable parents. 'Some of us think it's terrible the way the old songs are just being forgotten, like the old Kentucky miners' songs, maybe you know—' She drank, nodding. 'And blues. Nowadays it's all Tin Pan Alley, right?'

She smiled. They didn't understand her.

'The Hit Parade. You know? Some guy in an office writing songs for money.'

She drank.

'It's chaos now!' she said.

At some point during this she thought she had turned around in her chair and watched TV for several minutes. She had a distinct memory of doing it, of watching two men chase each other through an obvious studio swamp and pointing it out, laughing. She remembered doing it, but she did not know when she could have done it. She was sat facing the table again now, the way she had been all along. Perhaps she had hallucinated it, the way people said you did when you took drugs. Perhaps the drink was drugged. Her glass was empty. The children and their dog were sitting motionless, staring at her. Her body was quite relaxed. There was a warm fug in the trailer; it wasn't unpleasant at all, nothing was watching her, there wasn't anything out there. It seemed to have got dark outside pretty early. Where was Tom? Where was her guitar? Her glass was full.

She saw Carter standing in front of her, drinking a bottle of Coke. She finished her drink. So did Carter. Then he held the bottle horizontally between his hands and broke it in half. He snapped it just as if it was made of sugar. Stephanie cried out, no one else reacted at all. Something outside scratched on the aluminium wall, scratch scratch. Those newspapers, she remembered, seeing some by the door. Some of them must be older than the trailer. Some of them were brown as old leaves. Her head was whirling. Carter grinned, letting the big chunks of glass fall spinning from his hands on to the table, clatter to the floor among the garbage. His nostrils gaped like drains. His hands were completely uninjured. He wiped them on his hips and went outside.

The woman went past Stephanie's chair, pushing her hair behind her ear. She opened a drawer in the chest and pulled out something long and white. She held it up to show Stephanie. It was a long *white dress, shiny like* saffn, like a wedding dress. It was soiled like everything round here. Where the hell was Tom? Why was the woman showing her her wedding dress? Were they even married, the two of them? 'Pretty,' Stephaine said, humouring her.

'Put it on,' said the woman.

'Me? No.'

'You hafta,' the woman said. Stephanie could see her thinking before she spoke. 'Carter says the women hafta wear the dress.'

In terror Stephanie slammed down her glass. She grabbed hold of the seat of the chair. 'No! No!'

The woman picked the gun up from the table. She handled it loosely, as if she thought it was some kind of kitchen utensil.

'Ya hafta put it on,' she said.

Stephanie stood up. Time jerked. She was changing into the dress, there with them all watching with their yellow eyes. The dress was tight and smelled of cheap soap. 'You're not going to shoot me,' she heard herself saying. The woman said nothing, just stood there with the gun stuck on to the end of her arm. Stephanie was trying to fasten buttons behind her back. Her fingers were frankfurters. She was very drunk and very scared. The woman pointed the gun, motioning her to go outside.

They were all out there, women and men both, in bib overalls and shapeless mud-coloured dresses, bizarre make-up on their faces, lipstick and eye-shadow in the wrong places. Their heads were long and their eyes were yellow and their noses were snouts. Carter was with them. One of the other men had a flashlight; there was a fog, you could hardly see the trees all around. Stephanie's eyes prickled as if the fog was irritating them. Perhaps she had been watching TV in the trailer all afternoon and night had now come.

Tom!' she shouted. Tom!'

Gently they ushered her through the wood. The children followed, Dory pattering alongside. From behind the next trailer Stephanie could hear a noise she recognized, fear focusing her senses, as a grindstone. It was the continuous scraping sound of someone pedalling, stopping as if to check the blade, pedalling again.

The shed was older than any trailer in the world. There was a rotten old well beside it too, under a sumac bare as a bone. The well-cover lay cracked in two in a drift of red leaves. The shed was half-collapsed, inside it had ancient junk, farm stuff, chains, scythes. The place was lit by rows and rows of candles, big black ones standing in catering-size syrup cans and oil cans, soup cans, dogfood cans. There was a powerful ammonia smell, like industrial cleaning fluid. Stephanie saw bones on the dirt floor. She looked away.

Carter's twin brother climbed off the grindstone and came towards her around the block that stood in the middle of the shed. The block was waist-high, long and completely empty. Its wooden top was scrubbed raw. It looked quite clean apart from some dark stains. When they stretched her out on it Stephanie tried to pull away. She was shouting and screaming. They held her head. She could see small tendrils of dark fog curling through the holes in the ruined roof.

The women daubed paint on her face. They were chanting low, mumbling something all together in the back of their throats. Their hair was matted with dirt into slabs like tobacco. Stephanie was beside herself. She heard herself sobbing, whining, pleading, but they were holding her tight by the wrists and ankles. Suddenly Stephanie jerked her head free and vomited straight out sideways, clear liquor and clots *of motel* eggs and doughnuts. They grabbed her again, someone cursing. She heard high, thin voices laughing wheezily, felt them tug as if they were trying to pull her in quarters. She thought of the Coke bottle. She was breathing hard, snivelling, puke in her nose, she thought she was going to throw up again.

The chanting continued though it sounded faint, even half-hearted like prayers at high school, as if they were only doing it for Carter's sake, or someone's sake, because they were told to, because they always did. When she saw the knife Carter was holding, a big chopping knife with a long pointed blade, she made a shrill sound and shouted sharply, 'Oh, God, no!' In disgust, appalled that this was all life had

held for her. She felt moisture seep up the fabric of the white dress. Her bladder had let go.

'*Escouriath* nemeth *hi* jevelion/' shouted Carter.

There was more, nonsense language, what he was shouting didn't mean anything.

A man took a handful of Stephanie's hair and pulled her head back over the end of the block. Upside down she could see the women, their painted faces like clowns pretending to be whores. She could see Nadine picking her nose. The blade was cold on her throat, then hot as it pierced the skin and blood began to seep out along it, spilling down both sides of her neck.

When the creature came in it slammed through the doorway, sending jars cascading from a high shelf and snapping one of the posts with its shoulders. It cleared the block lengthways at a spring, candles flying in all directions, and knocked Carter to the floor. Stephanie saw it pass over from underneath, it was like a long dog with long hair and no tail. Above it the dark clouds were writhing in at the holes in the roof. Then, abruptly, her head and hands were free. She jerked up away from the thing that had landed on the floor behind her snarling, gnawing savagely at something. Carter was shouting, gurgling. People were moaning, yammering in high voices.

Stephanie kicked out and freed her feet, slid from the block, banging her hip. The din was incredible; Dory and the newcomer were fighting. Stephanie could see them, their bodies surging and slamming down beyond the far end of the block. Dory was getting the worst of it. She was squealing, a horrible, thin sound like air rushing from the valve of a rubber tyre. The creature was standing up on its back legs, Dory hanging from its mouth. It was cuffing her savagely. There was a gunshot, incredibly loud; Carter's woman was shrieking, waving her gun around. The thing threw Dory aside and lunged at her.

Stephanie turned to flee. The babies were at her feet, reaching up to her with little white hands. Suddenly the shed was filled with black dogs—someone had opened the pen. Some of the dogs seemed to have breasts like a human woman, more like chimpanzees than dogs. Stephanie kicked out, shrieking, and fought her way outside. She flung a glance back over her shoulder as she fled. They were all going for it, heedless of its strength and size. Some of them were on fire. She ran into the road, crying, sobbing incoherently, blood splashing from the cut on her neck and dripping down her white dress and around her bare feet as she fled through the fog. Blackberry bushes loomed. She swerved and ran out into the road.

Tom!' she shouted. Tom/' There was no one about, only confused screaming and howling at her back, behind the trailers. Gasping, she staggered up the road.

Up around the bend there was a car parked, facing uphill. A brown car, a Pontiac. She ran up to it, sobbing and swearing. It was just left there like he hadn't even been anywhere. All the windows were closed. There was no one inside.

She grabbed the driver's door handle. The door opened and she fell inside, blood dripping on the seats, slamming the door behind her, banging all the locks down. His clothes were on her seat, white shirt, jacket and jeans; she was kneeling on them. She crawled into the back seat, found her guitar and held it up in front of her like a shield; there was nothing else. She could see his shoes and socks on the floor by the pedals. Nothing happened. No one came after her.

She pulled his jacket around her shoulders. It smelled of him. She rubbed her face, smearing blue paint on her hand. She clapped her hand to her cut. It felt long, but not deep. If she held her chin down, maybe it would hold closed.

She panted and cried and shivered. A dog ran out into the road from the bushes and she shrieked. It looked around in all directions excitedly and dashed straight back in again. She could hear a muffled, heavy crashing as if the shed was being pounded severely with a big, soft weight.

Stephanie felt she was about to throw up again. She looked around, wound down the window fast and vomited out of it. Then she wound it up again and collapsed back in the seat. Her head was pounding. Adrenalin or no, she was still extremely drunk. Poisoned. She tried to stay awake, but her eyes kept closing. She was jerking herself out of a series of dreams, Nadine trying to strangle her, a big, jolly fat man with a face like Santa dangling a length of something dripping cockroaches in her face; she was a little girl again and her mother was beckoning her to follow her along the crossbar of a goalpost. Eventually, still holding her guitar, she slept.

She did not know how long she was asleep. She only knew her eyes were open again and the sun

was hammering at her eyeballs. The sun was high, and Tom was standing there holding the car door open.

In the silence Stephanie could hear the TV still playing in the deserted trailer. A woman's voice was excitedly recommending Kolynos. The sound was way over there, but it drilled into Stephanie's head. Her throat was dry from the drink and sore from screaming. She nearly screamed again with shock. Tom's face was covered in dark brown blood, it was caked around his mouth and on his hands. Tom! Tom ...' she croaked.

He leaned in over the driver's seat, took the guitar away from her and put it in the front passenger seat, on top of his clothes. He looked into her eyes like a veterinarian looking at a pet. He looked like he hadn't slept. He was wearing a plaid shirt that was too small for him and a pair of greasy jeans torn in the crotch. He took hold of her head gently, spanning her paint-smudged face with his dirty hand. He turned her head to the left and then to the right. It hurt. Blood seeped from her cut. He touched her neck and she flinched.

She kept saying, 'Where have you been?'

He didn't reply. He was a soldier. He let go of her and sat down in his seat, shut the door. His head and shoulders blocked out the sun. He lit a cigarette and started the car. The engine noise made Stephanie's brain throb in her skull. She could smell the strange smell of him, the blood on him. Now he was here his presence seemed to fill the car; she couldn't think what to say, what to think. She was wearing his jacket. Her clothes were left behind in the trailer. She looked back among the trees as he drove down the hill. Nothing was moving there.

They tried to kill me, Tom!'

Her voice sounded foolish and feeble. She was starting to cry again. She swallowed hard, trembling.

'Are *you* hurt?' she said. 'You're all—'

He shook his head, not looking round. He wasn't hurt or else he wasn't saying. He wasn't saying anything. Stephanie felt a surge of panic.

'What was that thing?'

It was like a creature in a dream. Flashes of drunken memory, like stills from a movie, scrambled, meaningless. It was all like a dream. She had heard the TV chirruping, a crow calling harshly, echoing above the noise when he started the engine. Underneath everything was a big hollow space that nothing in the world would fit.

'Bear, i guess,' said Tom around his cigarette.

'No. No. Tom, it wasn't a bear.'

'Wolf, then, I guess.'

It was because of her he was making like he didn't care, because she was a stranger. She was ignorant of things that happened in the backwoods. Life and death were different there and he wasn't even going to try to explain it to her. She wanted to scream at him, 'Why did you leave me there?', and she was too afraid of him now. He wasn't cool, he was made of stone.

The big, dark space moved away, closed itself off; they left it behind. Stephanie felt exhausted, she felt numb. She looked at the back of his head. He looked like someone she didn't even know.

'We going to the cops?' she asked, very quietly.

He didn't answer. Maybe he didn't hear. She couldn't say it again.

The bright day opened wide above the road.

Stephanie sat up and reached for her guitar. She pulled it to her over the back of the seat. Her backpack was in the trunk, but she didn't dare ask him to stop so she could get it. Her cut throbbed. She shut her eyes and her head spun. She opened them. 'I need a doctor,' she said. Her voice shook. It was her last demand.

He pushed the gearshift. Sitting forward, she could see his hand. His nails on the stick were long, thickly rimmed with brown.

'I'll take you to Bangor,' he said.

He turned his head and smiled at her, a tight, meaningless smile of dried blood cracking around the white stick of his cigarette. She felt a wave of cold come from him over the back seat. She could feel it

against her skin, the cold.

'I have folks in Bangor,' he said.

Ancient Of Days

Charles Stross

There were less than two weeks to go until Christmas, and flakes of snow were settling silently on the window-sill. Sue leaned against the wall next to the casement so that her breath formed patterns of condensation on the glass. The red glow of the newly lit street lights turned the falling snow to blood, drifting down across the deserted alleyway behind the lab. She blinked slowly. Was it her imagination or was there a new shadow behind the dumpbins? Holding her breath so that it would not fog the glass, she stared out of the window. The shadow disappeared and she breathed out. Then she undid the catch and swung the window open in invitation. 'You're late,' she said.

The shadow reappeared in front of her, resolved into the shape of a man shrouded in a donkey jacket against the cold. 'Rush hour traffic,' he said, his voice somehow deadened by the softness that settled on every surface. 'Help me in?'

Sue extended a hand. He took it and levered himself up and over the sill. He swung himself into the room and dropped to the floor, looking around as he did so. 'You're wet,' said Sue. 'Did you bring any equipment?'

He nodded and held up a small briefcase. She looked at his face. Something wasn't quite right. 'You look strained,' she said as she shut the window.

He nodded tiredly. 'I am not as young as I used to be, Sally. If you knew what I had to do to get here—'

'I can guess, and as for the name I'm called Sue,' she said, a trifle too sharply. He stared at her for a moment then nodded and forced a smile. The shape of his cheekbones turned it into something hollow and unconvincing.

'Please accept my apologies then—Sue. It's late and I've got a job to do and we've all been under considerable stress recently—'

'Accepted. Just remember who it was who laid their neck on the line to get a job here ...'

'It is noted,' he said curtly.

'No it's not!' she flashed. 'This unit is licensed to work with pathogenic organisms. They wanted a blood sample and insisted upon giving me a series of vaccinations—'

'Ah, I'm sure it hurt.' He shook his head, oblivious to the finer points of immunological stress. 'But in view of what you found that's immaterial now, isn't it?'

She turned away angrily and busied herself with an untidy pile of papers that sat on the desk in the corner by the centrifuge.

'Believe me when I say that this could be the greatest threat we have ever encountered,' he said softly. 'Greater than any ancient encounter with half-glimpsed horrors ...'

She nodded slowly, wondering if she had it in herself to forgive him the slight. 'You might have a point,' she said. 'But only time will tell.' She rummaged through a drawer in search of a paper-clip, bound the documents together, and slid them out of the way. Then she walked to the battered metal locker and removed a creased lab coat. 'Let's make a start on it, shall we?'

Kristoph grinned and removed his donkey jacket. 'Let's,' he said. He opened his briefcase and pulled out a pair of disposable plastic gloves. 'Now who shall we apportion the blame to? How about some animal rights activists? Or shall we make it look like an industrial job this time, do you think?'

Kristoph was not his real name. He had no real birth certificate, although he had carried several. He was much older than Sue, and he had lived through interesting times. He had lost a large part of his heart on the Eastern Front, so that fifty years later he still wondered if he could ever be whole again: he had survived the decades since the war by auctioning his soul at Checkpoint Charlie, running jobs for the Stasi and the CIA and another less familiar Organization. With the collapse of the Wall he had been set

free to wander, and finally to turn his hand to Family business. As he prepared for the job in hand he whistled a half-forgotten marching song to himself.

'Will you stop doing that?' asked Sue.

He glanced up from his kit and caught her eye. 'Why?'

'Anyone would think you were an old Nazi,' she said.

'Oh.' He glanced down again so that she wouldn't see his smile. *Now* he remembered what the tune was. Time flies,' he said, clipping the briefcase shut. Then he stood up. 'How long have you been here then?' he asked.

Sue walked to the window and stared out of it again. 'Two years,' she said, 'but that's only in this job. I had to go to one of their universities to qualify for it. My family—'

'Demonstrated a laudable degree of foresight,' opined Kristoph.

'In this day and age anything else condemns you to life as a menial. Times have changed. If you want to get ahead you've got to play by their rules. The net's too tight.'

Kristoph, who knew better than she, held his silence.

Tve heard all the old tales,' Sue continued. 'My parents are really keen on them. But things aren't the same, are they? It's hard to maintain a sense of ... community ... while all around us ...'

Kris stood up. 'I think you'd better show me to the offices. We don't want to start too late; this could take all night.'

Sue turned slowly, looking around as if she had forgotten where the door was. When she opened it she glanced swiftly down the corridor outside. 'Clear,' she called over her shoulder as she slipped out of the basement laboratory. Kristoph looked around curiously as he followed her through the deserted passages of the department.

The concrete floor was scuffed and dirty and the whitewashed walls had seen better days. Fluorescent lights flickered overhead, casting what Kristoph saw as a gangrenous blue-green glare across the crowded bulletin boards. An ancient ultra-centrifuge keened to itself in a shadowy niche as they hurried past. Sue pushed through two pairs of fire doors and turned a corner on a concealed staircase. 'Meet me in room D-ll if we become separated,' she said. 'It's two flights up. There's a walkway from the corridor opposite it to the Geophysics block if you need a quick getaway.'

'I don't think that will be necessary,' he said quietly.

'You know there are security guards?' she asked, pausing on a landing halfway between floors.

'Whatever makes you think we'll encounter any trouble?' he replied, looking her straight in the eyes.

She appeared to be slightly flustered. 'Nothing,' she said. 'I just thought you spook types always liked to know a way out of a tight corner—'

Kris held her gaze for a moment then nodded. 'The ones you read about are the ones who get caught,' he said. 'Don't worry about me, Sue. I can take care of myself.' He waved a hand in an abrupt cutting motion. 'Carry on. We haven't got all night.'

Presently they arrived outside a locked door. This is it,' she said.

Kristoph bent over the lock for a couple of minutes, fiddling with a set of fine-tipped pliers. 'You've got to be careful to leave all the *right* signs,' he murmured. 'Otherwise the Polizei get suspicious. Is there a vending machine anywhere near here?'

'Sure,' said Sue. 'Why?'

'Get me a cup of coffee please,' he said. 'White, no sugar. We're going to be here a while.'

The lock snicked open and he turned the door handle as she walked away. The room within was darkened. He pushed the door open and reached around it for the light switch, every nerve straining for signs of potential trouble. But there was nothing amiss: it was just another night-time office, plastic covers drooping over the copier and word processors. He breathed out slowly, willing the muscles in his arms to relax as he looked around. There were papers in every in-tray, filing cabinets full of pre-publication data: he rubbed the skeleton keys in his pocket. The soul of a research group lay exposed to his midnight fingers, so prosaic an institution that it seemed ridiculous to connect it to some hideous, numinous threat to the survival of the Kin. But that was what Ancient of Days had said—and Kris knew full well, with the bitterness of experience, that when Ancient of Days spoke, everyone listened.

Kris went to work with a precision that was born of long experience. First he closed the Venetian blinds; then he switched on the photocopier and went to work on the first of the filing cabinets as it warmed up. His briefcase he placed upon a nearby desk, opening it to reveal two reams of lightweight copier paper: Why *bother with toys like Minox* spy-cams, his trainers had once explained, when any well-run *office* provides all *the tools you* need? He whistled as he worked, in an effort to forget the snow on the window-ledge. If it wasn't for that damned snow, with its burden of remembered horrors preying on his mind, he might even admit that he was happy.

There was a knock on the door. Kristoph spun round then relaxed, recognizing that it was Sue: a slight catch in her breath and the way she shifted her balance on the floor outside gave her away. 'Come in,' he said, turning back to examine the suspension files in the top drawer of the first cabinet.

She opened the door. 'Your coffee,' she said, placing the cup next to his case. 'Any idea how long you'll be?'

He yawned, baring teeth as white as those of an actor in a toothpaste commercial. 'You tell me. If there's not much to lift from the project files, then ...'

'You're in the wrong cabinet for the research data,' she observed, looking over his shoulder. 'That's all Departmental admin. The interesting stuff is filed in the drawers marked Homoeobox Research Group. Funded by the Human Genome Project, natch.'

'It's all Greek to me,' said Kris, turning to the indicated cabinet. *Greece, yes* ... and *the* partisans in *the hill* country ... he stamped on the memory. *Maybe I've been around too long,* he thought bleakly. *The generation gap is widening all the time.*

'I shouldn't worry about it,' she replied, sitting down in a chair in front of one of the word processors. 'Change overtakes us all. This shit is so new it's all developed since I left school.'

'How long ago was that?' Kristoph asked, picking out the first file and carrying it across to the copier.

Ten years since I took A levels,' she said, 'then a BA degree, MPhil and research for the past two years. I'm in a different field, though.' She rolled her chair round, craning her head back to stare at the ceiling. 'Polysaccharide chemistry, not ontological genetics. They've made huge breakthroughs in the past ten years, you know. How long is it since *you* were at school?'

Kris laughed. 'I was never at school,' he said, stacking papers face down in the feeder tray. 'At least not as you know it. I learned to read and write in primary school with the other children, but then the dictator's men came. Ideology was in the driver's seat, and there were secret police—night and mist—and identity papers to contend with. We couldn't move as freely as we did before all this modern nonsense. I went into the army at sixteen because I was a young fool and thought it was a good way to get away from home, to lose myself among millions of other young men; I didn't understand about humans then.'

He fell silent for a while, watching the sharp-edged shadows moving on the wall behind the photocopier. I don't *think I should have told her that.* 'We suffered in that war,' he said quietly. 'I don't know how many died; there's no way of telling. But all through that area—the pain—'

'Then you must be, what? Seventy years old?' Sue asked. She wasn't spinning the chair any more: she was staring at him, her face a sharply pointed question, hungry for answers. 'And still, you—'

'Still,' he said. 'I'm not even settled down with a family. If I was human I would be an old man, now. Retired to tend my bed of roses.' Abruptly, he leaned forward and grabbed the stack of ejected documents, stuffed them back into their file and returned them to their drawer in exchange for another bundle. They created the roses, you know? The humans. They bred them, from earlier plants.'

'I know,' she said. 'Just as now they're trying to redesign themselves to fit their own desires. It's an interesting preoccupation ...'

Kris shuddered at the sight of her expression. 'Pass the next file. What's your real name?' he asked without looking up. She told him.

'Well,' he said, running his long, thin tongue along his lips as he stared at the control panel, 'you would do well to remember who you are, Sue, and think carefully about where your loyalties lie. We're letting them play with fire, and you are sitting very close to the hearth. There are those who would say

that if you were to be burned it would be only your own fault.'

She walked away from him, towards the window. 'I say that as a friend,' he added. 'There are other groups at work as well ...'

She turned round then, and Kris felt himself frozen by the black spike of her gaze. He stared back at her unwaveringly. Something very ancient and very chilly passed between them and he made a small gesture with his right hand, a relic of an upbringing in backwoods Silesia. Behind them the photocopier whined on, unattended in its shadowy corner. 'You don't know what you're talking about,' she said, her face relaxing into a shape that was both alien and intimately familiar to Kristoph. 'Believe me, genetic manipulation is perfectly safe,' she added, baring inhumanly sharp teeth at him. 'You can tell that to Ancient of Days. It's safe as stones as long as we're in control. Safe as stones ...'

Later, as soon as it could be arranged, five strangers gathered in impromptu committee. There were no validated safe houses available in the city at present, and Ancient of Days had insisted upon full security precautions being observed: therefore they met in the place normally maintained for serious emergencies, where interruption was unlikely.

The city sewer systems were more than a century old, and a lengthy programme of refurbishment had been under way for ten years now. Old brick-lined tunnels crumbled gently beneath the pounding wheels of trucks and cars, and the new prefabricated concrete sewers bypassed them completely. The original maps were in poor condition, many of them lost during the war, and the old lore of the tunnel-walkers had dwindled as a result of modern career mobility, but there were still some who knew where the ancient tunnels ran. One of those summoned to the conference had spent years in similar tunnels under Bucharest; and another had been around when they were built. And tonight, two nights after Kristoph's twilight raid on the research group's offices, they were about to meet.

Slime wreathed the sewer, forming a tidemark three-quarters of the way up the rotting brick walls. Five metres below the streets of the city it was completely dark, and Kristoph was forced to stoop over his lantern in order to keep his head from brushing the ceiling. Jagged black shadows danced along the tunnel behind him like a retinue of silently mocking mimics. Once a pair of close-set red eyes gleamed at him from an outflow: Kris nodded at them as he shuffled towards the meeting place. There was no telling where Ancient of Days might cast her eyes and ears. He pushed onwards, ever deeper into the maze of fetid burrows beneath the city, wading knee-deep in ancient effluent. His thoughts were grim.

He arrived at a dead end. A pile of rocks and mud had collapsed through a hole in the ceiling, blocking off the tunnel ahead. Cracked and rotted timbers poked out of the heap, and a pool of black mud had gathered at its foot. Kris paused, then reached out and pushed down hard on one of the exposed timbers. With a gurgling sigh the water around his feet drained away; whirlpools swirled briefly about his ankles as he braced himself against the powerful current leading to the concealed grate. Presently the floor was dry—dry enough. Bending down he felt through the mud for a projecting iron ring and pulled up on it. The trapdoor was ancient but well-maintained, and he let it swing shut above him as he descended the steps below. Now there was no need for a torch. Ancient of Days had passed here before him, and where she walked darkness was not permitted. Kristoph shivered, not from cold but from awe and a faint dread. He had met generals of State Security and deputy directors of Central Intelligence, and he had worked with assassins and spies and defectors and the other shadowy predators of the cold war jungle; but none of them possessed even a fragment of the legendary power which Ancient of Days controlled. And never before had she taken a direct interest in his affairs, to the point of requesting his attendance ...

He looked around. He stood on dry stone flooring at the bottom of a high, narrow room similar in shape to an oubliette in a medieval castle, except that it was considerably larger and there was a door set in one wall. It was a modern door, plywood and aluminium, and it was as jarringly out of place as a plastic denture in the jaw of an Egyptian mummy. He shook his head disapprovingly then reached into a pocket for the key he had been given. Then he unlocked the door and went through.

'You can leave it open,' she said. Kris's head snapped round and he froze, staring at the woman who stood in the corner of the room behind him. 'We're expecting three more guests,' she added.

'Who are you?' he asked.

‘Call me Helena.’ She came forward, out of the shadow cast by the weak light bulb that hung from one corner of the ceiling, and Kristoph realized that she couldn’t possibly be Ancient of Days; for one thing she was far too young, even though she bore the marks of encroaching middle age. Her left cheek was scarred by a patch of psoriasis, an angry red margin around a silvery, scaly patch, and with a sudden jolt Kris realized that she might actually be human. ‘Don’t worry. I’m not as ... human ... as I look.’ She rubbed the back of one gloved hand against her cheek. ‘There are two others coming, then Ancient of Days herself. You brought the documents, I take it?’

Kris glanced round, taking in the rest of the room. It was furnished, albeit sparsely, with camping seats and an upturned tea chest as a table. It was also very cold. ‘I’d prefer to leave that until the others arrive.’

‘Very well then,’ she said, thrusting her hands into the pockets of her coat, ’it can wait. I hope you appreciate the gravity of the situation—’

‘Lady, I’m the one who turned over the office,’ he said with heavy irony. ‘I was on the Kennedy assassination committee; I set up spy swaps during the fifties. Before that, I was site officer on Operation Silver. Trust me, I’m a professional.’

She laughed, which was not unexpected, then abruptly looked away, which was. ‘Bullshit. Spy stuff. Fun and games.’ She turned back to him. ‘This is the real thing,’ she said intensely, ‘you’d better believe it! This is so important that—’

He held up a hand and she stopped. The noise of hands and feet descending a ladder was clearly audible. ‘We have company.’

The new arrivals didn’t wait around. Both of them came through the door, then stopped and stared at Kris and—whatever her name was—Helena. ‘Ivan Salazar and David Jakes?’ asked Helena.

‘Yeah,’ said the shorter one, removing a yellow construction-site helmet and running a pudgy hand through his thinning hair. ‘I’m Dave. That’n’s Ivan.’ The taller one stood with his hands thrust deep in the outer pockets of his trench coat. Kris stiffened, automatically focusing on the bulge in Salazar’s right pocket. ‘Sorry we’re late.’

‘Any trouble?’ asked Helena.

Ivan slowly pulled out his right hand. It was empty, and Kristoph relaxed slightly. ‘Not much,’ Ivan said in heavily-accented English. ‘Not much *now.’* He grinned sharkishly and Kristoph looked back at his pocket. Must be *a .22,* he thought. *Anything* bigger would *show. Now where have 1* seen *him before?*

Kristoph looked back at the tubby American and unexpectedly realized that he was being stared at. The man had exceedingly cold eyes. ‘No offence,’ he said, ‘but we ran into some identity verification problems a while back. Ivan hasn’t had time to change yet.’

‘Did you deal with the problem?’ asked Kris.

Ivan nodded. ‘He terminated it,’ said Jakes. ‘He terminated it so efficiently that half the police department are after him.’

Kris looked round and caught Helena’s eye. She shook her head very slightly and shivered. ‘The person you’ve all come here to meet should be arriving any time now. I hope you don’t mind waiting; she’s a bit slow *on* her feet these days and likes to take time to look her visitors over in advance.’

‘Huh.’ Ivan stared at the plywood door, irritated by his treatment but trying not to let his resentment show. ‘Now you’ve introduced us, how about telling us why we’re here? I mean, this four-star accommodation is all very flattering, but—’

Salazar chuckled to himself, a warm, throaty sound. ‘Guess, man,’ he said. ‘Just guess.’

‘Are you corporate?’ Kris asked, raising an eyebrow. ‘If so, from which entity?’

‘Ah.’ Jakes shook his head. ‘We’re not here to talk about peripheral business. It’s bad practice. Observe compartmentalization at all times. We are all Family, it’s true, but we might be on different sides—’

Kris spat on the floor. ‘*Human* sides. Always building walls between each other. Huh.’ He turned to Helena. ‘How long until She arrives?’

‘Not long now,’ she said. ‘In fact—’

The door opened. Ancient of Days stood waiting. Nobody moved: the sight of her condition was too shocking.

'Holy shit,' whispered the one called Dave. 'I had no idea—' He took a step forward.

Ancient of Days raised a warning arm and spoke. 'Wait. *Come no* closer. My *condition is of* unknown *aetiology and may prove to be infectious to your kind. Please make yourselves comfortable—'* one obsidian pupil swept the room; a scale-encrusted nostril flared in remote amusement—'*insofar as that may be possible.* We *have much to discuss.'*

Kris could hold his peace no longer. 'What's happening?' he demanded angrily, meeting her huge eyes full on. 'Why weren't we told things had gone this far? The situation may be irrecoverable!' Then he stopped, shuddering in his boots as he realized what he had *just* done. Ancient of Days looked down upon him and for an endless instant of terror he could hear his heart stand silent, the blood in his veins freezing as he waited for her response to his presumption.

That is not *yet the case. But, be that as it may, you are now needed here* urgently. Please listen *carefully; you will have your turn to reply. What* I caiJed *you here to tell you about* is a *matter long overdue,* and one *that should have* been *dealt with years ago, before the* humans *reached their current dangerous state of power/* She looked round at those who were gathered to her, then refocused on Kristoph. 7 must *start by asking you a leading question, in order to judge how much you need* to know at this stage. Tell me, how much do you know about genetics? And what, in particular, do you know about the so-called "Human Genome Project"?'

A welcoming house ... a hot bath ... a lover's arms. After the raid Sue went home and tried to lose herself in the eternal present, far away from the grim shadows that Kristoph had raised by his passage. But there were a number of obstacles; Eric, for one thing, couldn't let things be, and for another thing she couldn't help wondering just what it was that Kristoph had been sent to look for.

Eric entered the bathroom as she was rinsing conditioner out of her hair. He sat down on the closed lid of the lavatory and carefully shut his book before he turned to face her. 'What is it?' asked Sue, switching off the shower attachment. Unlike Eric, she didn't read many books when she was home; only people.

He looked at her and smiled. 'Just wondering what it was all about this evening. Was it really Family business?'

It was characteristic of Eric, an ill-timed curiosity that pried into hidden corners just when she most wanted to leave them alone. She'd become used to it in the eight months they'd lived together, and expected it to drive them apart over the next few years. This relationship was an anomaly, after all; neither of them were mature by the standards of their people, who were traditionally promiscuous, and their intimacy was more a consequence of their isolation than of any convergence between them. 'No,' she said, and then, on second thoughts, 'I'm not sure. The man they sent—he said he was called Kristoph, but I don't believe him. He's some kind of spook, can pick locks and knows how to burgle an office and make it look like someone else's fault. He was hunting for something in the HGP contract notes but I think he didn't know quite what he'd been sent to get.' She sank back in the bath and shivered, then reached out to run some more hot water into the tub. 'He was really creepy, you know? And the stuff he was spouting—'

Eric put his book down on the window ledge, carefully avoiding the patch of condensation that trickled down one corner. He always seemed to be carrying a book around the house with him, but never seemed to read from it; she had speculated whimsically that he made himself invisible when he was reading, as a defence against being disturbed. 'Where is this Kristoph from? Who sent him?' He leaned forward and picked up the conditioner bottle and began turning it over in his hands, inspecting it as if he expected to discover a hidden message embedded in its soft pink plastic.

'I don't know who sent him, but I expect it was some hard-line oldster shit. He kept referring to the Dark: you should have heard him going on! "Take care, sorceress, lest they send for the Witch-finder General and burn thee at the stake!'" Her voice deepened an octave and her cheeks sagged into nascent jowls as she delivered the injunction to a wisp of steam that hovered over the shower fitting. They're still living in the prehistoric past, Eric, not the New Age crap the humans keep spouting on about but the real

thing—' she yanked the plug out angrily.

Eric watched in silence as she sat up and let the water drain around her. She saw him eyeing her breasts as they sagged slightly, no longer buoyed up by the fluid around her. 'Any thoughts on the matter?' she asked, trying to conceal her anxiety. 'Come on, don't just sit there!'

Eric passed her a towel. 'Thanks,' she said, standing up and wrapping it around herself. The air on her skin felt cold even though the room was half-filled with steam.

'I think we ought to investigate this carefully,' he said. There were times when she hated his imperturbability; just this once it was a shred of comfort. 'It sounds like the kind of intrigue that could affect us if we ignore it—the old wolves still have teeth.'

'Huh.' She shook her head and stepped out of the tub. 'Will you stop speaking in tongues and give me a straight answer for once?' She reached out and gently cupped his cheek in her hand. 'What's worrying you, love? All the old stories coming back to haunt you?'

'No, it's not that.' He stood up, accidentally dislodging her hand in the process. 'It's just a nagging feeling I've got.' His face hardened slightly so that the soft, pampered look of the mathematics professor was eclipsed for an instant by some harsher, more primal expression of his identity. 'Maybe we should look into precisely what the HGP group are working on for their industrial grant. I doubt that the Ancients would be interested if it was harmless to us. But there might be something we can spot which your spook wasn't educated to identify. Something that will put the programme in an entirely different perspective.'

Helena, assistant to Ancient of Days, nevertheless didn't live in the tunnels along with her mistress; she had a daylight identity and a job that payed the bills the night-blind humans levied in return for warmth and peace among them. After the meeting broke up she found herself inviting Kristoph back to her house; she deliberately refrained from exploring her motives. Kristoph, for reasons of his own, accepted the invitation.

Perhaps it was the remembered chill of the news that Ancient of Days had borne, or perhaps the central heating was malfunctioning; in either case, the hall felt cold as she took off her coat and hung it behind the door. 'Something to drink, perhaps?' she asked as he patiently scraped his boots on the doormat. 'Or some coffee?'

'A drink would be great.' Kristoph unbuttoned his coat and hesitated a moment before hanging it on the door. She heard him test the Yale lock before he turned and followed her into the living-room. 'You live here alone?'

She shrugged and bent down over the sideboard. The stereo was still switched on and the room filled with the faint strains of Vivaldi. Two tumblers of Scotch appeared, followed by ice from a small refrigerator. 'I like to keep the world at a distance,' she said, turning to pass him one of the glasses. 'I'm no lonelier than I want to be.'

'And how lonely is that?'

'You're here. There've been others, but none of them cared to compete for my attention with Her.'

'Ah.' Kristoph sat down at one side of the sofa, then glanced at her inquiringly. She took a mouthful of burning spirit in order to cover her indecision, then quickly sat down next to him.

Presently Kristoph asked, 'Did you choose to serve Her, or did she choose you?' He stared into his glass and swirled the thin layer of liquid around until the bottom was exposed. 'I mean, I wasn't aware that she has any tradition of priestly attendance ...'

'She doesn't. And to answer your question, I didn't choose to serve her and she didn't choose me. It just happened.' Helena stared at his glass for a moment in fascination. 'Are you going to drink that?' she asked.

'Eventually. I'm sorry, it's just a bad habit of mine. One of my acquaintances said I was like a cat; I play with my food. That was some years ago.' He stared moodily at the window-sill. 'I try to cultivate my private eccentricities. They're a kind of defence, if you will, against this modern habit of living in crowds. It strikes me that the bigger the city you live in, the more anonymous you become. It's as if it's an infectious disease, and the most common side-effect is loneliness.'

'Perhaps you're right.' She rubbed her cheek reflectively. 'I certainly don't know of many other Kin

living in this man-swarm. Perhaps that's why She asked me to help her. She needs eyes and ears among the humans, you know. They used to be easy to deceive, but now their intelligence is as good as or better than anything we have—'

'No it isn't,' he said. 'Please believe me, their intelligence people know nothing.' He said it with a degree of venom that made her tense instinctively before she realized that it was not directed at her. 'I'm sorry, Helena. I've been alone among them for a long time—perhaps too long. The time when it was possible to live exclusively among Kin-folk is long past.'

'It lends a certain tension to life, doesn't it. There have been times when I've gone months without seeing another Weerde face. I felt like I was going crazy, you know, like that patient of Freud's ...' she turned and stared at him intently.

'Steppenwolf. Yes, I knew him well.' Kristoph tossed back what was left of his glass and stared at her. 'It's late, Helena. Would you mind if I stayed the night?'

That's why I invited you here,' she said, her face tingling with anticipation. It's very cold outside, even though the war's over. Can you think of anywhere you'd rather be?' Kristoph was of a certain age, as was she, and even if he didn't understand what it was like to be single and unmated at eighty years of age, there was time for plenty more opportunities ahead.

'I can't,' he said, a strange roughness edging into his voice. 'I've been searching for a long time now—' He glanced away, suddenly shy. 'I don't know you, but I feel as if I've known you for years,' he tried to explain.

'In the morning you must tell me where you've spent your life,' she said. 'Then maybe we can think about the future.' They stood up simultaneously and came together in an endless, clinging embrace. 'But first—' she kissed him. Gradually, her face relaxed into its primal form, her cheeks flowing and her teeth expanding to grate against his lengthening jaw as she felt something vital return to her. A flame of desire that had been bottled up behind an alien mask for too long had finally discovered its own identity: and by the time the two lovers raked the clothes from each other's backs, an onlooker would have seen nothing human about them. But that was as it should be, for neither Helena nor Kristoph were—or ever had been—human.

Two days after the raid and, astonishingly, nobody had noticed Kristoph's carefully laid trail of clumsy clues. In fact, none of the staff so much as noticed the unlocked filing cabinet or the opened door. It might as well have been a non-event. Sue, who had been steeling herself for vans with swirling blue lights in the rainy night and a plastic tape cordon around the premises, didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Instead, she took the first afternoon off with a well-rehearsed migraine and followed it up the next morning with a headache. Nothing too serious, though. Working in a lab with biohazard stickers on the door meant that any serious symptoms could land her in an isolation ward, exposed to an examination that she was not prepared to undergo.

Eric worked on the other side of the campus, in a cramped office in the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science. How he'd ever got into academia still mystified her; a knack for passing exams, he used to say, smiling faintly when she probed for an explanation. Nobody took any notice when she stopped by his office on her way in to work that afternoon, looking pale and a trifle nauseated. A lecturer carrying on with a post-grad was nobody's business but their own, after all, and stranger things had been known to go on in university staff rooms.

'Up to a rummage tonight?' Sue asked, sitting in his favourite visitor's chair and idly stirring the papers on his desk. 'We could go on to a restaurant afterwards—'

Eric pulled open a desk drawer and withdrew a black plastic case. 'No trouble at all,' he said. 'You think it'll be safe?'

'Sure,' she said. 'I swallowed enough of the buzzwords to ask the right questions. We'll say it's about a grant extension for your department, and we've got to dig the right names out to put on the letter. How's that?'

'I've been doing a bit of reading around the subject,'

he said, gesturing at a fat book balanced on one end of the desk. 'Developmental genetics?'

'Figure a mathematical slant on it,' she said, shrugging. 'Otherwise, be yourself.'

'Hah. OK. We'll leave the copying for some other time. But for now, are you sure you can remember just which drawer it was that your visitor took a particular interest in?'

'Pretty much so, yes. He was after HGP-funded stuff, specifically anything to do with Geiger-DESY Research and a Doctor MacLuhan. He didn't seem to know why, but he photocopied everything in sight and shoved it in a briefcase. I couldn't tell you what the notorious Doctor was up to, though; I've never heard of him, he seems to be some kind of industrial connection ...'

'Hah. Thicker and thicker, my dear Watson.' He sat up and spun his chair round to face away from the desk. 'How are Geiger-DESY connected with the Department?'

Sue thought for a moment. 'If it's anything like the way industrial funding goes elsewhere in the field, it's a simple directed research project. In return for a first shot at information from the Homoeobox Research Team, Geiger-DESY pays a huge whack and provides equipment. The university pays for the staff and gets the kudos while the company get the patent rights. How's that sound?'

'And what line are Geiger-DESY in?' asked Eric, thoughtfully. 'I thought they were into drugs—'

'There's not much difference these days, I mean, the times when they used to go out in pith helmets and poke around the jungle in search of some new wonder plant are all but dead, aren't they? It's all molecular modelling and receptor-affinity analysis. As often as not they start out with a complete biochemical description of a problem and work backwards towards isolating a genetic—' she stopped, realizing that she'd lost Eric a while back. 'Well,' she concluded, 'it's no surprise that Geiger-DESY are into the Human Genome Project. That's where everyone's expecting the next big therapeutic breakthroughs to come from.'

'Like a cure for AIDS?' asked Eric.

That, and other things,' she acknowledged. 'When the Human Genome Project is complete, they'll have a total map of the human genetic structure. They'll be able to play with it, working out what causes what and how it acts not as a blueprint so much as a program for generating human beings. If you insert a bug in the software you get a malfunction—AIDS is a bug in the immune system, spliced into the program by viral reverse transcriptase—but, equally, if you've got a faulty computer program you tackle the problem by trying to debug it, not by hitting it over the head with a blunt instrument like a drug.'

'I think I see,' said Eric. 'One other question, though. What's a homoeobox when it's at home, and why's everybody so interested in it?'

'Ah, well, you do pick the easy ones, don't you?' Sue stood up and looked out of the window. There was nobody outside. She flicked the lock on the door then turned and faced him. 'Watch.'

Slowly, her face began to flow. At first it simply looked as if she was relaxing, all her muscles slowly slackening: but gradually the process accelerated, until it was as if all the underlying tissue was falling away from the bones of her skull. Cheeks sagged then began to stretch as cartilaginous flaps brought her jawbone forwards. Eric watched, petrified, as her lips pulled away from her gums—'*Stop iff* he hissed at her, glancing hastily at the door. 'What do you think you're—'

Sue raised her hands to cover her face. 'Don't worry,' she said, 'there's nobody about. I checked first, I swear it. Look, you asked me a question. *That's* your answer.'

'Pardon?' Eric stood up and checked to make sure that there was nobody outside the window.

'It's a little-known fact that humans, ants—even us—share most of the same genes. What differentiates us is the homoeobox: a complex of genes which are, I guess, meta-genes. They control how, why, and when other genes are switched on or off; the flow of control in the genetic program, so to speak. What's the difference between a blood cell such as a lymphocyte, and a muscle cell? Or a neuron?'

She lowered her hands and Eric saw that her face was back to normal again. He smiled with embarrassed relief. 'Please don't do that again in public. Someone, a student, could call at any time ...'

Sue shrugged. They didn't. Look, what I'm getting at is this. The stuff Kristoph was looking at, it was all to do with research on mapping the homoeobox. Got that? The one section that tells a human foetus that it's to grow up into a human being and not a gorilla or a flatworm. We're not the only people working on it, but-'

Eric turned round. 'I think I've heard enough. Will there be anyone in the office if we go there now? I

mean, right now?'

'It's anyone's guess. Hey, what's the sudden hurry?'

Eric shook his head. 'I've got a feeling that this could be bad. I think I know why Kristoph was sent to look through those files, and if I'm right it could be very serious indeed. In fact if they're doing what I think they're doing and we don't stop them right away those clowns could land us all in a real mess.'

The department office was open but nobody was in when Sue and Eric arrived there. One of the word processors was switched on, and it looked as if whoever was using it could return at any moment. 'Act as if this is something you do all the time,' Sue murmured as she opened the unlocked filing cabinet drawer.

'Is there any particular reason why you think I wouldn't do that without being told?' asked Eric, standing behind her with a conspiratorial air.

'Not really,' she remarked, slightly nettled, 'you're blocking my light. Here, I think this is what we want.' She opened the folder and turned over the contents. 'Doctor MacLuhan, Suite Four, Geiger-DESY Research Foundation Laboratories. What he's asking for—looks like a breakdown of one particular sequence, doesn't it?' She flicked more pages. 'No, that was last month. This month ... applications with respect to polymorphism, phocomelia, *regeneration*—'

'That's it,' said Eric. 'Phocomelia, isn't that when, you know, like thalidomide—'

'Failure to develop limbs, yeah.' Sue made a quick note of MacLuhan's address then slid the folder back in the cabinet. 'I'll bet you anything you care to mention that this is what caught Her attention—'

She turned round. One of the departmental secretaries, a woman Sue recognized but couldn't put a name to, was standing in the doorway staring at her. 'Hallo,' said the woman, 'I thought you were off sick?'

Sue slid the drawer shut and smiled at her, then carefully turned the smile into a wince. 'I was,' she said: 'I had a migraine.' She rubbed her forehead. 'You know. But professor Sampson wanted an address out of the files so I figured—' she shrugged.

'Oh, that's quite all right,' said the secretary, sitting down. She looked up at Eric, who was standing beside her desk with one hand behind his back. 'Can I help you?' she asked brightly.

'It's OK,' said Eric, 'I'm with her.' The woman nodded then turned back to her screen.

Sue beckoned surreptitiously, and Eric followed her out of the room. 'What's that you've got in your hand?' she whispered once they were outside the door. Eric slowly brought it into view, then uncurled his fingers so that she could glimpse what he was holding. Then he dropped the lock-knife back into one of his jacket pockets and set off down the corridor at a brisk walk. Sue hurried to catch up. Eric, she thought grimly, you and I *have got* a lot of talking to do; but she also had a feeling that his caution might be justified. This was not a time for half measures.

The orange glare of street lights filtered through the windows, casting a rippling shadow on the wallpaper above the bedstead as it passed through the cloud of cigarette smoke that hung motionless in the air. The bed was occupied: Kristoph lay on it, chain-smoking Benson and Hedges and staring at the ceiling. He was naked, and the sheets lay in tatters beneath him. He sensed a presence near by and tensed, then turned one eye towards the door. Helena was standing there, a bottle in one hand and two glasses in the other. She too was naked, and smiling.

'What's so amusing?' asked Kris, in a language that he had used so little of late that it came haltingly to his tongue.

'It's nothing,' she said, putting the glasses down beside the bed. *'It just looked* ... I don't know. *It was the* cigarette that did it. *I'm too* used *to* looking *at* people through human eyes; seeing *you* as you are is—strange.'

She climbed on to the bed and squatted, adopting a pose that would have been very uncomfortable if her joints had been of human articulation. Her long tongue lolled from one side of her mouth as she regarded him.

7 *find it that way too.'* Kristoph couldn't pull his eyes away from her nakedness. 7 *had nearly forgotten what my own kind looked like, other than in a mirror.'*

'It's over now. You've found me.' She reached out with uncanny agility and snagged a glass, then

filled it from the bottle. It was a whisky tumbler and the bottle was red wine, but somehow such considerations seemed petty to Kristoph. The sensations, the tingling beneath his skin and the heat of his ardour, had taken him by surprise. Not an unpleasant surprise, but a surprise none the less. It had been a long time since he had mated with another of his species, and he was astonished to discover that it was far more pleasant than he recalled. But then, he was of an age to be bonding, and such changes should be expected. Helena extended the glass to him and he took it; their hands stayed in contact for longer than was necessary simply to pass the wine.

'The waiting is over. I had almost given up hope of meeting one of my own age and predicament. That there could he others—' he shrugged. It was considered desirable among the Weerde to form group relationships.

'At least *we can continue the search together,'* she said, nestling up against him. 7/ in *your* wanderings you should meet anyone—'

'Hah.' A short barking cough that was the same in any language. 'A sad fantasy. J *thought my solitude was the product of my travels, and now that I've met you you think your loneliness the consequence of your* stability! Is there no *happy medium?'*

Helena considered this for a while, then gulped back her entire glass in a single mouthful and said: *'No.'* She extended a hand and Kristoph passed her a lit cigarette. *'What do you suppose we* should *do? Settle here* among the humans, or *travel at large* within their world in *the hope of finding partners before we fully come of* age?'

'Neither seems *very* hopeful,' Kristoph remarked. He sat up and leaned close to her, then fell silent. She nipped gently at his ear to get his attention.

'What of the woman *who showed you into the office?'* she asked. The one *who* works for *the* university?'

'She's *too* young,' said Kris. 'And she is *already living with another of* us. It's strange *how the* young *behave, isn't it?'*

'They're closer to the humans than *to* us,' Helena suggested. *'Imagine if you were one of them, born in the past forty years. The* Ancients go on *about the dark history of our people, how we were foredoomed to live amongst those we mirror in the flesh and how dangerous it would be to* invoke any kind *of solution to our problems from outside—the* universe is a dark and *fearful mystery, shrouded in ancient death—yet the* young, the young *live with* television and credit cards *and* research.' With each of these words she lapsed back into English, for her primal tongue held no equivalents to them. *'Everything they are raised with tells them that the* Ancients speak *nothing but* senile nonsense. *It is not merely that they have no respect for* the Ancients, but *that they speak a different* tongue altogether. It is no longer possible for them to separate themselves from the humans—' she broke off.

Kristoph stubbed his cigarette out on the ashtray beside the bed. 'What *did you just think of?'* he asked.

Helena stared at him. Her eyes were huge and dark, with no visible whites around them. 'I *think that it would be a good idea to pay these two* youngsters *a* visit,' she said thoughtfully. 7 *would like to meet them. And* besides, J *have a certain* sense *that if we don't they might become embroiled in something that will not be good for them. What do you think?'*

Kristoph threw his head back and poured a glass of wine between his sharp white teeth. *'If you like,'* he said. 'When shall we *go?'*

Helena twisted and rolled off the bed, then rose to a crouch. Hei spine slowly began to straighten. 'As soon as possible,' she said slurring as she fought to control her shifting vocal chords. 'My sense *of* urgency is *great ...*'

As soon as the door swung open, Sue realized there was something wrong; *it smells strange.* That was a lovely meal,' said Eric, behind her. She held out a warning hand and entered the hallway, switching on the light as she did so.

'You can come on in,' she said. 'I just thought I smelled something ...'

'Gas?' he asked.

'You can't be too careful. But no, it wasn't gas.'

She hung her coat up as he closed the front door, then she switched on the living-room lights and walked straight in. 'Hallo,' said the balding man with the gun, 'did you enjoy your meal?'

'Oh shit,' she said, starting to back away. 'Hey, Eric—'

'Don't move,' said the other one, the tall thin man standing behind the door. 'You move, you get hurt.'

'Ah.' Her stomach felt like lead and her knees were about to give way.

'Hey, what's going—' Eric, standing behind her, looked over her shoulder and saw the man with the gun. 'Shit,' he whispered.

That makes it unanimous,' said the bald one. 'Won't you come on in? I'd like it if you'd sit on the sofa—there—where I can keep an eye on you.'

Slowly, with exaggerated care, Sue sidled over to the sofa and sat down. Eric followed her. She could see him out of the corner of her eye. J *hope* he doesn't *do anything* stupid, she thought. Then, *how do I stop this happening?*

That's good,' said the bald one. That's real cool. Now maybe we should have a chat, you know, loosen things up?'

'Who are you?' Eric asked in a low voice. 'What do you want?'

The tall one strolled over from the doorway to stand behind the seated man. 'You know who *we are,'* he said, in a language which sent shivers of recognition down Sue's neck. 'We come *to talk* sense.'

The man in the chair shrugged. 'You'll have to excuse my partner,' he said: 'he can be a bit blunt. Someone you might have heard of—one of your neighbours in this city—called us in to do a service. Ancient of Days. Perhaps you've met her?' He cocked his head, looked slightly disappointed when neither Sue nor Eric responded. 'A shame. She's very—impressive. Anyway ...'

The tall one pulled his right hand out of his coat pocket. There was a small black pistol in it. He pulled his left hand out of the other pocket: it was holding a cylindrical object. He began to screw the cylinder on to the muzzle of the pistol. 'You'll have to excuse him,' said the seated one, 'He's a bit nervous.' He blinked at them: 'the police don't like him very much. Anyway. Where was I? Ah yes. We owe you one for showing the point man in, where the files were held. However, you don't seem to have got the message: this is not a matter you want to get involved in. Oh no. In fact, you should do your best to forget about it, unless and until Ancient of Days sends for you. Is that understood?'

'I understand,' said Sue. Suddenly her mouth was dry, but it was a dryness born of anger: she found that she wanted to spit. 'I understand that what I see is a bunch of superstitious fools chasing around in the dark preparing to kill—yes, that's it, isn't it? That's what you do for a living—to kill a harmless scientist because some clapped out fruit cake thinks human genetics research is going to conjure up the devil ...'

'Wrong,' said the seated assassin. 'You understand nothing. You cannot possibly remember what it is we face; you will be nameless to history if you insist on giving aid to the humans in pulling down everything we have tried so hard to preserve!'

He raised the pistol and Sue unconsciously stopped breathing and steeled herself to jump; but before she could move there was a flash of light reflected from the gunman's face and a voice screamed 'DOWN/' in her ear.

She rolled forwards and tried to hug the carpet. She heard three muffled spitting sounds overhead, and then a crashing of glass and heavy objects as the tall assassin fell, knocking the television set off its stand.

'Idiot,' snarled Kristoph. 'Were you trying to get yourself killed? Why didn't you duck?' Then, gently but urgently, 'Oh, see what he's done. Quickly, fetch a towel. Now!' Sue heard footsteps hurrying, doors banging, then a low moan behind her. She rolled over and sat up and saw Kristoph bent over the back of the sofa, gripping Eric—collapsed across it, his eyes closed—by one shoulder, both hands wrapped around an upper arm from which a huge, dark stain was slowly seeping. 'A towel will do but a compression bandage or a torniquet would be a lot better and I need one or the other of them in a

hurry,' Kris muttered. 'Otherwise he may bleed to death all over me.'

She remembered standing in the bathroom, watching blood trickle and swirl down the white porcelain sink as the rushing water numbed her hands. She remembered ransacking the cupboard for bandages and finding nothing but a small tin of Elastoplast, suitable only for grazes. And the towels were all pink, the same colour as her vomit when she heaved up her entire meal into the toilet. Then a strange woman was holding her by the shoulders and saying "It's all right, the bleeding's stopped and it's a clean puncture" as she slowly led Sue through into the living-room. Eric wasn't on the sofa, but his blood was. Unaccountably, she began to cry. After all, it wasn't she who'd been shot, was it?

After a while she realized that she couldn't see the bodies. 'Wh-what happened?' she asked, trying to dry her eyes and realizing as she did so that her blouse was ruined, spots of blood everywhere on her right sleeve.

'Don't you worry about it,' said the woman, 'everything's going to be all right. Your friend is in bed, Kris is stitching his arm up—he's done it before, he says—he's going to be OK. A flesh wound.'

'We've got to get him to hospital—' Sue began, before she comprehended how foolish her words must sound.

'Don't you worry about it,' said the woman. 'I'm Helena, by the way. I came here with Kris. Is there—' she stared at the bloodstained sofa—'anywhere else in this flat where we can go? Apart from the bedroom or the kitchen?'

Sue didn't think to ask what was wrong with the kitchen. 'The back bedroom,' she said automatically. 'We can—I need to—sit down ...'

Til say you do.' Helena took her by the arm as she stood up again and stumbled through the hall to the spare room. When she got there she collapsed on the bed and curled up and began to change, so that Helena was hard-put to get her clothes off her. But that was OK. It was only a little more than she'd bargained for, after all.

Shock and exhaustion forced Sue into a deep sleep. Helena sat beside the bed, watching the shifting form that lay there, its flesh slowly crawling in an unconscious attempt to shut out the outside world. J can't even look *at my own kind without seeing them through the eyes of a human,* she realized. *How much* worse must *it be for one of these, raised in a modern city and exposed to* their *education,* their entertainment, their *friendship all their life? Our ancestors would barely recognize them. Worse, they would barely recognize the* ancestors ... She shook her head in sympathy and stood up. Then she left the room, closing the door behind her as she tracked through the hall and into the main bedroom. Kristoph glanced up as she entered, then continued to wrap his makeshift bandage around Eric's shoulder.

'She's taken it rather hard,' Helena commented.

Tm not surprised,' said Kristoph. His voice was rough, as if he was fighting an inner battle and did not wish to be disturbed.

Eric rolled his eyes. 'Ah—it's not easy,' he whispered. This mess ... we were going to come looking for you ...'

'Lie still. How is he?' she asked Kristoph.

'I've seen worse. Small calibre bullet, went clean through the quadriceps. I think he froze when the flash went off, otherwise he'd have been down on the floor with her and this wouldn't have happened. Nicked a vein, but no arterial bleeding. Knowing how we heal, you should be fine in a few days,' he said for Eric's benefit. The real question is what happens in the meantime,' he continued under his breath. 'Depending whether those bastards were here of their own accord or at someone's command.'

'We can fetch two tea chests for the bodies,' said Helena. 'Then we ditch the sofa. Nobody's called the police so we may be able to conceal it—'

Kris looked at her coolly. That's not what I meant.'

Helena sat down on a low stool in front of the dresser, then turned to face Kristoph and the bed. 'You know I've served Ancient of Days for sixty years. It wasn't necessarily through choice.' She paused and looked at him, but he made no response. Eventually she continued.

'I was twenty-two when the call came. My family told me what to do, and in those days one obeyed.

Reluctantly, but—I grew up on a farm. I was told to go to the city and present myself to Her. I didn't want to; I was afraid, and perhaps a little rebellious, but not too much so. I did as I was told, in the end. When I met her, She told me what I was to do. It seemed she had a servant before me, her eyes and ears among the humans, who had gone insane or died. I was to take his place. She hasn't been able to walk among them for a very long time—over a century, I think—and so she needs a set of proxy senses, preferably young, which can be exposed to the swirl and rush of the human civilization above her head.'

At the other end of the bed, Eric yawned and shut his eyes. Kristoph glanced up. 'I'm listening.'

'I gathered news,' she continued. 'I read all the literature and newspapers. I arranged for Ancient of Days to have a colour television, supplied by cable—not that she watched it. I dare say the images it brought to her were simply incomprehensible. Her curiosity is vast, but she needs me for the /eel, the idea of what it's like to live among the humans. She hasn't ever seen an aeroplane except in pictures, has never ridden in a car. This degenerative condition of hers is quite recent, but she refuses to summon anyone who might be able to treat it. I think she wants—'

'She wants what?' asked Kris.

'I don't know. It's just that I thought ... she wanted me not as a pair of eyes but as a mind, to understand what was going on in the world. You understand that; you've lived among Them, haven't you? But last time she was on the surface she rode in a horse-drawn carriage and there were new gaslights along the streets. And I don't think she quite understands how far things have changed, or how fast.'

'Hence the pet thugs,' Kris speculated. 'Yes, that would explain a lot. In which case, these two—' his gesture encompassed Eric, and the wall behind which Sue lay sleeping—'have a more valid perspective on the world than she does, at least with respect to the humans. Doesn't that follow?'

'I don't like that line of reasoning,' Helena said uneasily. 'It's what it leads to ...' *My destination barely five* minutes *ago,* she chided herself. How long had these flowers of doubt been germinating? The dusty towers of the city had never struck her as a fertile soil for new ideas of any kind, much less for thoughts of treachery. *She needs me, but how can I possibly serve her? If my loyalties belong with anyone, they should lie with the young. It's not for me to decide.* Maybe—

'I think we should take these two to visit Ancient of Days,' she said slowly. They might be able to resolve this situation where I could only fail. In any case, it was her servants who died here tonight. She should be informed; at least, if you mean to involve your friends that you told me about.'

Kris stared at her. 'Do you really think so?'

She met his gaze. 'Yes. Otherwise she will assume the worst and act accordingly.'

'And you think it isn't already too late for that?' he asked. That her thrashing around doesn't offer a threat to the continuity of the race? Come on. If that's what you believe, I want to know—'

But to her shame she had to glance away; and when she looked back at him the time for second thoughts had long since passed.

Times changed, Kris thought as he waited for the phone to ring, but people never did. That was the root of the problem. A glass of whisky sat among the shadows next to an overflowing ashtray, the last cigarette in the pack balanced burning on its rim. The faint howl of a descending jet cut through the night and rattled the windows in their frame as he stared out across the city. A ringing tone cut the air; he forced himself not to pick up the receiver. It gave out a second ring before the answering machine cut in. The voice at the other end of the line was faint, as if its owner was shouting down a buried pipe.

'Hallo, is this—'

'THIS IS SUSAN SPEAKING. I'M SORRY I CANT COME TO THE PHONE RIGHT NOW, BUT IF YOU'D LIKE TO LEAVE A MESSAGE, PLEASE SPEAK AFTER THE TONE.'

[1]—Oskar speaking. Call me back.' *Click.*

Kris picked up his cigarette. He felt a little ill at the prospect of what he was about to do, but he couldn't see what alternative there was. For Helena, sure: for these two kids who'd gotten themselves into a whole lot more trouble than they'd dreamed of, too. For the pair of hitters Ancient of Days had sent round—but they were beyond sympathy, beyond regrets. No, it was the fact that what he was about to do was irrevocable that made him sick with worry; him, who'd seen men eating each other on the

Eastern Front and other things too terrible to talk about.

He picked up the phone and began to dial, careful not to enter any wrong digits. Oskar picked up the phone on the fourth ring. It was three in the morning in Berlin and Kris could visualize the crumpled beer cans on the floor, smoke curling beneath the ceiling, the smell of oil from the black metal machine parts scattered across the newspaper pages on the sofa. 'Hallo?'

'Oskar, this is Kris. I have a candidate.' His mouth was dry and his throat burned from the cigarettes, but that wasn't why his heart was pounding.

Oskar grunted. 'After all this time? Are you sure?'

'You better believe it. The location is—' he gave directions. 'You'll need to bring tools. And watch out, you'd better be clean. It's already gone critical; we had a *securitate* airhead trying to scare the canaries earlier this evening.'

'A *what?* They must be crazy!'

'No way. He was travelling under falsies, ID of Ivan Salazar from the Langley entity, but that wasn't his real name at all. I fingered him on a liaison job oh, years ago. He was one of us, but shit sticks if you roll in it for long enough. I figure he's one of the ones who skipped out after they fragged the Ceausescus during the coup, maybe figured he could cut it as a wet operative for the Families. Anyway, it's really hit the fan this time. We're talking a Hummingbird situation, got that?'

There was silence from the other end of the line as

Oskar absorbed this information. 'Yes, but which side are we on?' he finally asked.

Kris froze. The winners,' he said slowly and deliberately. 'Spread the word. We've got a Hummingbird situation, here and now. Get the wagon rolling then hop the next flight out of Tegel. We need you on the job.'

'Check,' replied Oskar. 'The fuses are burning. Good luck and goodbye.'

The phone went dead, but Kris didn't put it down. The sound from the buzzing receiver was unlocking memories from his childhood, stories he'd been told by his mother about what happened to his uncle Hans in the terrible night of the first Operation Hummingbird, Uncle Hans with his proud brown uniform and Storm-trooper strut who had vanished in the Night of the Long Knives, never to be seen again. Is this *how it happens?* he wondered; must *the* young *always eat the old?* His palm sweated as he squeezed the smooth plastic of the receiver. *It* wasn't always *like this* among our people. There was a time when *the gap* wasn't so *wide. It didn't have to grow this way, did it?*

But he'd set the wheels in motion and now there was only one way out—and death was an integral part of the process.

Helena was clearing up in the kitchen when she sensed somebody standing behind her. She straightened up and thrust a blood-stained wedge of kitchen roll into the waste disposal then rolled off her soiled rubber gloves before turning round. It was Sue, looking pale but collected and wearing a thick dressing gown that was too big for her. 'How do you feel?' she asked.

'Not bad, considering.' Sue breathed deeply. 'Mind if I ask your name again? I didn't catch it before.' She looked around distractedly, but not down, never down.

She looked as if she was trying to walk on air. Helena was still a long way from finishing.

That's all right; my name's Helena,' she replied. 'And you're Sue. Are you sure you ought to be up? That was-'

Sue waved a hand. Tm tougher than I look. And so is Eric, I think. He'll be fine and so will I. But he—' she looked at the body lying on the mat of newspapers Helena had spread on the floor—'he's not going anywhere. I think we deserve an explanation.'

Helena sighed. 'You're not getting one here. I'm in this over my head, I just tagged along for the ride.' She laughed self-consciously. How could she possibly justify what she was doing on the kitchen floor? Then she frowned. 'Look, I'm not explaining this very well, am I? Kris and I thought you could—could do with some help. We weren't expecting things to have gone this far, not yet.'

'Uh huh.' Sue nodded, finally glanced down, then turned and fumbled in one of the cupboards above the work surface. 'I need a drink. How about you?'

That's—' Helena paused—'a kind offer.' She rummaged in the cupboard for a minute then found

two tall glasses and filled them half-full with rum. It wasn't Helena's favourite spirit, but she took it all the same. 'You've been very lucky so far. Ancient of Days probably doesn't realize how isolated she is. The oldest ones—' she took a sip of rum—'seldom do.'

'Who is this Ancient of Days?' Sue asked. Helena looked at her sharply.

'Exactly what Her name implies. The one I—help me—am sworn to serve.' She took another sip, then a mouthful of the neat spirit. It burned in her stomach, like the dull fire of revenge. 'One of us, left over from a former age. She serves the Kin by searching out threats to our collective survival. But in latter days she's become unreliable.'

'"*Hence* ,.. this?' Sue asked. 'You mean she *thought* she could simply order us to kill all the scientists working on homoeobox structure and the rest would lose interest or be too frightened to continue working in the field?' She finished on a note of disbelief.

That's about the size of it,' Helena admitted.

'What does she think they are? A bunch of medieval alchemists?' Sue downed her glass in one gulp and slammed it on the work top. 'Jesus Christ!'

Helena didn't say anything.

'It's a complete sack of shit!' Sue exclaimed. 'Scientists don't work like that, hiding dingy secrets from each other and bolting at shadows! All it would take would be two, maybe three suspicious incidents and we'd have every police agency in Europe breathing down our necks. What does she think she's doing?'

'Protecting us,' Helena said drily.

Sue glared at her. 'And what are you doing?'

Helena sighed. 'Protecting you, I think. Times change, and the Ancients can't adapt. For most of our history responses which worked a millennium ago have been equally valid today. But not any longer. You—your generation—are our future. You don't need to exist on the edge of human society, you can slot right in with them! But in the process ...' she shrugged.

'But what's in it for you?' Sue looked agitated, uncertain whether to be grateful or suspicious or angry. 'Why are you helping us? You said you were sworn to serve her! What are you doing here?' She sounded close to hysteria.

'Cleaning up after the party,' Helena said calmly as she bent down and picked up the electric carving-knife again. It was strange how little blood there was, she noted. Weerde tissue fluid clotted far faster than human, and the bullets had been low-calibre. Tor what I'm doing now, the punishment would have been forget-fulness,' she added. To have one's very name expunged from the memories of all who one held dear, *to be* cast out into the wilderness on pain of death, there to wander through the empty forests until even the memory of speech faded and one was nothing more than a beast.' She glanced up. 'But that doesn't mean very much to your generation, does it? You've grown up among the urban sapiens, after all, and they do things differently.' She shook her head. 'I wish I knew where it was all going.'

Sue didn't reply, but a moment later Helena felt her crouch down beside her, and there was another pair of hands to help expunge the evidence of the crime.

Oskar caught the red-eye shuttle out of Tegel. It was delayed three hours by snow, and when it lumbered into the cold dawn sky the outline of the redundant Wall was clearly visible on the ground below. Less than two hours later he was landing in the city. Somebody was waiting for him.

Howard was already in the country, running a high-value, high-risk shipping agency from a motel bedroom near Milton Keynes. When his brokers discovered he was gone they were furious: but not as furious as they were three minutes later when the Special Branch broke down their door. But Howard wasn't around to care. Now he was a truck-driver called Mark, and within a day even his fingerprints wouldn't match those on Interpol's files.

Fiona got the call when she returned to her lodge in the Pyrenees after a good day's skiing. She fobbed off her current boyfriend with a tale of an elderly aunt and a stroke, made an air connection out of Toulouse, and caught the Chunnel link from Paris.

Frederico didn't head for the city. But then, *that* wasn't his goal. His target was in the Vatican.

There were a hundred others in the Organization who, like him, weren't heading for the city; but all of them had targets. And when they reached them, the targets would die.

It was agreed within the Organization that a purge was long overdue. It would have been sensible to have held one during the turbulence of the Second World War, when it was already becoming obvious who was trustworthy and who was unreliable, but back then the Organization had still been weak, a compact of like-minded Weerde who understood the ways of the modern human world less imperfectly than their forebears. Therefore the Organization lay low, recruited individuals disaffected with the way of the Families, and waited.

Times changed. The war ended, and with the falling of the iron curtain came opportunities for expansion and re-entrenchment. The Organization made very good use of them. The Ancients, however, were oblivious to the fundamental changes in the world at large; their response to the Cold War was identical to their response to the British and Spanish Empires, the Romans, Alexander the Great ... it was a practised response, and it had worked before. Unfortunately, some times changed faster than others.

Eric opened his eyes and blinked until the ceiling swam into focus. BuJIet *wound. I* never *thought it would hurt like this.* More like ... he tried to clear the bloodstained drill-bits from his mind's eye. He felt weak, drained, but fine, except for the bruising ache in his left arm. He tried to sit up and the arm almost exploded; he gasped and forced himself to hold still until the pain passed. Then, very carefully, he propped himself up against the headboard and began to explore the damage inside. Torn muscles grated against one another, sending surges of pain up those nerve trunks that had not been severed by the bullet. A fibrous matrix of clotted blood had spread through the tissue around the ruptured vein, holding cells in stasis while the complex machineries of his immune system went to work. Already the first new cells were infiltrating the mass, spreading along the boundary of ripped flesh and commencing the job of reconstruction. Eric concentrated: without guidance the wound would heal badly. There might even be a scar. He was still tired and his head ached, but it was essential that he—

'Aha, he's awake. Aren't you?'

Eric opened his eyes again. 'Very probably,' he said, speaking so quietly that it was almost a whisper. 'Who is it?' As *if I couldn't* guess.

'I'm Kris.' He sat down at the foot of the bed, stretching the quilt. 'If it wasn't for me you'd be dead.'

Eric tried to sit up properly. 'I suppose I should be grateful, but it would help if I knew what was going on.'

Kris nodded understandingly. Eric looked at him and wondered what it was he didn't like about this man. This Weerde, he corrected himself. *One of my own kind. But he looks more like a wolf!* The thought was distinctly uncomfortable. There was a hot tingling in his arm as the muscles began the slow process of knitting together again.

'What is it you want to know?' asked Kris.

'Well—' Eric struggled, at a loss for words. 'What all the fuss is about,' he said finally. 'I can understand an

Ancient becoming interested in the homoeobox data, but her response seems rather excessive, wouldn't you *agree? IVs not* as if it can achieve anything, after all.'

'I don't know,' Kris said. 'It used to work ... three hundred years ago, against alchemists and would-be magicians.'

Eric snorted disbelievingly. 'Come on. What does she think this is? The Middle Ages?'

Kristoph didn't say anything; he didn't need to.

'All right then, be the smart guy! See if I care. Thanks for saving my life, by the way.' Kris raised an eyebrow as Eric rolled his feet over the side of the bed and sat up experimentally. 'There's more to this than one out-of-control Ancient and a couple of former secret policemen,' Eric added as he waited for the dancing black spots to clear from in front of his eyes.

True,' Kris stood up. 'Here, let me help you. I think you lost a fair bit of blood.'

'Yes, I can't say I'm looking forward to cleaning the sofa—' Eric stopped talking as he stood up, taken aback by his own astonishing irrelevance. He wobbled a bit, but the black spots didn't come back

and he was able to shuffle around after a fashion. I must be crazy, he thought, floating. This isn't me here, is *it?* His arm burned like a torch. 'Tell me about everything in particular.'

'There's an Organization,' began Kristoph. 'It's been around since the twenties, waiting for something like this. It's probably happened before, but each era creates its own orthodoxy, doesn't it? Maybe some such group is where Ancient of Days came from originally. Some bunch of plotters who were afraid that their elders were going to give them away to the Roman secret police.'

Eric shuffled over to the chest of drawers and fumbled one-handedly over the chair in front of it. 'Dressing gown,' he muttered. It seemed a much more concrete concern than any ancient tale of police and thieves. He berated himself: Your *future depends on* this/ But somehow it didn't seem like an immediate problem; more like a light farce, seen through a few too many layers of cotton gauze. *I must have lost a fair hit of blood.*

'Here. Like I said, we've been waiting. The signs have been around for a long time. Crocodiles seen in the sewers under New York, Yeti sightings in Tibet; the breakdown in human family structures in the developed world—'

'You make this Organization sound like a bunch of shamans steaming over the entrails of the Sunday Times crossword,' Eric winced as he tried to ease his damaged arm into a baggy sleeve. In the end he gave up and wore the robe over it, tucking the cuff of the empty sleeve into the belt. 'I mean, are you trying to tell me they deduced from all those signs that some of the Ancients were liable to go loopy within the next few years?'

'Something like that,' Kris assured him. 'There were no overt signs of loss of control—not until recently—but little things were slipping everywhere. All those signs were warnings of a certain ... malaise. Now its unmistakable. Their responses have become so inappropriate that I'm afraid there's no alternative to action.'

'What are you going to do to them?' Eric asked with false levity, pausing in the doorway. J *feel drunk,* he realized. *The truth will set you free! And isn't that better than* wine? He glanced over his shoulder at Kris-toph, who stood behind him holding an unlit cigarette in one hand.

'What can we do?' Kris replied. There were quiet voices coming from the kitchen. There's one thing you can be certain of,' he said, striking a match. The shadows it cast across his face gave him a calculating, lupine expression: 'we're not going to do anything to them that they wouldn't do to us first if we gave them the chance.'

Eric felt himself go cold everywhere except his arm, which was feverishly hot. Suddenly, despite his injury and blood-loss and the intoxicating sense of his own survival, he felt entirely sober. An atavistic urge, from god-knew-what recess of his hind brain, made him want to bare his teeth and snarl. Instead, forcing himself to do the right thing—come on, Mister Cool! a part of him sneered contemptuously—he went into the living-room. It was unlit, but the street lights were bright enough to let him see that there was a dust-sheet flung over the sofa and a rug on the carpet, and the vase of flowers was gone from on top of the television. He walked over to the windows and looked out across the street, then fumbled with the latches and pushed one of them open. A chill breeze cut through his dressing gown, swirled past him and numbed the stench of blood and gunpowder.

'What do you think?' asked the quiet voice behind him. He didn't turn round.

T think—' he paused, seeking the words with which to express his anger, his rage at this violation of his carefully maintained humanity—'there is no precedent for the current situation.' He stared down at the streets, watching the traffic scurry and hum along in illuminated columns far below. 'We're a conservative people, aren't we?' The word we hung strange and heavy on his tongue. 'But the world we live in is undergoing eruptions and upheavals. And when conservative peoples are placed under such a stress they tend to ... well, look at the first Russian revolution.'

The breeze was beginning to work through to him. He was still weak, and his arm ached; he couldn't summon the resources to keep himself warm. He reached out and pulled the window to until only a slit was left open. 'Is this happening everywhere?'

'It is,' said Kris. 'Maybe you're right, maybe there hasn't been an upheaval like this since the—since the ancient times, the days of legend and darkness. The old race. But someone—' his voice faltered, and

in a flash of astonishment Eric realized that he was pleading with him, pleading for his approval, his understanding—'someone has to look to the future! And you are the future, more surely than any conclave of Ancients.'

Eric turned his back on the window. Kristoph had lit his cigarette, and in the darkness the glowing coal resembled an ancient saurian eye. 'But where does that leave you?' asked Eric. 'If your organization takes credit for this killing, where can you go from here? Where is your thought for your own future?'

Kris blew a thin plume of smoke from his nostrils. It swirled lazily about his head then drifted towards the door. 'I suppose we'll have to be the scapegoats, the nameless ones who will be driven from the present to atone for the sins of the past. Doesn't that sound right to you? Something's got to go, after all.'

'Not if you succeed. The whole thing sounds so extreme—'

'You're uncomfortable with the idea of killing, aren't you?' said Kris. He began to button up his coat, preparing for the cold of the streets outside. 'Listen, I've got to go out now, to arrange for some waste disposal. But there's something you should remember, professor, when you go to work in your warm office next week and sit in your comfortable chair behind your tidy desk.' His face began to slide into another, ancient shape; or else the shadows cast by the city lights were shifting across his cheeks. 'Remember you're a predator, professor, one of a long line of free-ranging killers. And remember that one's natural instincts can sometimes be very hard to ignore ...'

Presently, Eric struggled to his feet and walked into the kitchen to see what was going on. Sue and Helena were just finishing with the knives and moving on to the bin liners. They both looked up, then Sue had her arms round his neck and was kissing him, tracking bloody stains across the front of his garment. 'You're doing well,' she whispered in his ear. Louder, 'has Kris gone for some boxes then?'

'That's quite likely, I think.' Helena rose and peeled off her gloves again, shaking them out carefully. 'Ah, I don't think we've been introduced. Have we?'

'Eric, Helena,' said Sue. 'Helena stayed to help clear up,' she added, letting go of him as he glanced around. But Eric wasn't dwelling on the mass that occupied the centre of the floor. 'I can see we've got some socializing to do,' he said. 'It's a long time since either of us have met anyone who wasn't—entirely—human. Still,' his expression became unreadable, 'do you suppose Kris-toph will be long?'

'No, I don't think he will,' said Helena. She smiled sharply. 'He said he had one more job to do, then it's all over and we can just lie low, "go to the mattresses" as the mafia call it, until everything dies down.' She put the knife and the gloves in the sink and turned the tap on them.

'Then it'll all be over,' said Sue, an expression of relief dawning on her face. She turned back to Eric and hugged him, burying her face in his shoulder, all petty irritations forgotten for the moment. I'm so glad it's finished.'

But she was wrong. In fact, it was only just beginning.

Epilogue: The Lady And/Or The Tiger: II

Neil Gaiman and Roz Kaveney

Lamb stopped reading. His head hurt and he had a cramp in the back of his leg. He had read enough. He checked his watch; dawn must be breaking by now. Chepstow was asleep in the armchair in the corner of the room. Lamb stared at him, wondering if he were truly human, if any of us were.

The Librarian's eyes opened.

'So, Mr Lamb.' He looked at Lamb inquiringly.

'So what comes next?' Lamb said. 'Something bursts through that door behind us, and tears my throat out?'

'Not necessarily,' Chepstow said. 'It all rather depends on you. Why don't you open the desk drawer?'

Lamb pulled it open; inside the drawer were a revolver and, next to it, a pair of white gloves.

'You need not take the gloves,' said Chepstow. 'And if you take the revolver, you may do with it

what you will; we give you one bullet and that is all the help you will get from us.'

Lamb hesitated.

'You were a marked man long before you came to the Library,' Chepstow said. 'You have disturbed what you looked at. They were watching you long ago. You may, if you wish, take the gloves, and stay with the Library; it may not be the life you planned for yourself, **but** it is life. If not, well, one of the tokens of white gloves is that we have washed our hands ...'

'It's not enough,' said Lamb. The knowledge is not enough, and that is all I would ever have. There's more than that.'

'Ah,' Chepstow said. The woman.'

'Who shot her? Who was it? And what was she? Was she trying to get away from them? Or was it one of these damned factions, wiping out a member of another? Now that I know this much I have to know the rest. I have to find out who killed Caroline.'

'And then?'

'I'll kill them.' Lamb paused. He stood up, and closed his eyes. 'Once her face was done with changing, she looked so calm it was almost as if she was alive. She was still beautiful, you know, when I left her lying there.'

'It is,' said Chepstow, 'at least conceivable that she is beautiful still.'

Lamb opened his eyes, and looked at him.

The Weerde are, after all, rather hard to kill,' Chepstow said. 'And the person who was following you did appear to be female, not that that means very much.'

Lamb paused.

Thank you,' he said, and began to walk the length of the long underground room, one step at a time.

Take the revolver,' Chepstow urged. 'You may need it still.'

Lamb shook his head. 'What's behind the door, Chepstow?' he asked. 'Is there ... is there anyone there? Really?'

That question is not one I could presume to answer, sir. I am afraid I must leave the matter with you.' *The* Librarian of the Conspiracy stood up and walked to the other door, and opened it. 'If I do not have the op—

portunity of seeing you again, sir, may I say it has been a pleasure. Goodbye.' And he was gone. The lock of the door snapped shut behind him.

Lamb stood alone, and he waited in the silence beneath the earth. He thought about Caroline. He remembered her perfume, remembered it so vividly that he imagined he could smell it now. He looked at the revolver on the table, and the gloves. Then he walked back to the table, and made his choice.

There was a gentle tap on the door. Lamb went to answer it in a joyful decisiveness, although he truly did not know which to expect—the lady, or the tiger.

About the Editors

Neil Gaiman is co-author of the bestselling apocalyptic fantasy Good Omens, with Terry Pratchett, but is better known for his work in the comics medium, particularly for his ongoing dark fantasy Sandman, which has won lots of awards. He comes up with quite a few of the ideas for Midnight Rose, while other people do the real work: Alex Stewart did all the heavy lifting on Temps (also published in ROC), and Mary Gentle and Roz Kaveney had to get their hands dirty with The Weerde and the forthcoming ROC anthology *Villains!*

Mary Gentle is known for her science-fiction novels Golden *Witchbreed* and Ancient Light, and most recently for the Renaissance technoBaroque fantasies Rats and Gargoyles and The Architecture of Desire. She edits for Midnight Rose Ltd, and reviews for Interzone. She has and MA in seventeenth-century studies and continues with unrelated research. In her spare time she runs around a lot, swordhghting, and shooting people in laser-gaming events. She is a born-again redhead.

Roz Kaveney is probably best known as a journalist and reviewer writing on science fiction, comics and other topics for the *New Statesman*, *Foundation, City Limits* and The *Sunday Times*. At one time or another she has read for most of the SF lists in London, and edited the two *Tales from the Forbidden Planet* anthologies. In what would otherwise be her spare time, she is an anti-censorship and civil-liberties activist.

Hidden Truth

IN THE LIBRARY OF THE CONSPIRACY MANY THEORIES ARE PURSUED IN RARE BOOKS AND DOCUMENTS SUPPLIED BY A CASTE OF WHITE-GLOVED LIBRARIANS. MANY WILD-EYED

RESEARCHERS PIECE TOGETHER THEIR ELABORATE NONSENSES OF TEMPLARS, VAMPIRES AND ILLUMINATI.

But one such theory weaves like a constant thread of darkness through human history, The rumour of an ancient race, more powerful than we are: elusive, terrifying, offering sexual frenzy but bringing madness and early death, These are the tales of the Weerde. They gather at the edges of our settlements, they appear nightly on TV. They are not werewolves. But they are the shape-shifting predators of which occult legend speaks. They are plausible, charming, different ... and very, very dangerous.

*The Weerd*e contains eleven chilling stories that expose the terrifying truth behind the conspiracy. Their authors are Storm Constantine, Mary Gentle, Colin Greenland, Brian Stableford, Josephine Saxton, Charles Stross, Roz Kaveney, Paul Cornell, Chris Amies, Michael Fearn And Liz Holliday.

The Weerde, Book 2

A Shared World Anthology
Devised by Neil Gaiman, Mary Gentle and Roz Kaveney
Edited by Mary Gentle and Roz Kaveney

an ancient race of shape-changers that have manipulated humanity throughout history.

/EERDE LURK THE giant semi-immortal mutants whose vast size and dark knowledge make them the gods and the dragons of myth.

In this sequel to the acclaimed *The Weerde: Book One*, we learn the truth about our own century—from the rise of Chinese communism to the gang wars of 30s LA, from the astronomers of Hawking's Cambridge to the bureaucrats and secret policemen of Gorbachev's Russia, more has been going on than meets the eye. And the Ancients are behind it all.

The best young names in British science fiction and fantasy—

Stephen Baxter, Colin Greenland, Molly Brown, Charles Stross, David Langford, Paula Wakefield, Graham Higgins, Roz Kaveney, Michael Ibeji, Liz Holliday, Marcus Rowland, Elizabeth M. Young—are brought together in this second book of revelations. These are dark secrets it is dangerous for you to know.

HE TURNED. MARION WAS THERE, CROUCHED LIKE A SUCCUBUS AT THE END OF THE BED.

He watched without speaking, pleased with what he saw. She was in her true shape. She was beautiful, her musculature picked out by moonlight, her flesh sheened with golden down, her face

thrusting and strong. The scent of her filled up the room, now that he was properly awake ...

'Hallo, Stephen,' she said. Her voice was husky, the words distorted by a mouth not made for them. Moonlight glinted coldly on her incisors.

(Liz Holliday, *Cover Story)*

CONTENTS

Prologue: Raised Voices In A Reading Room: I

Roz Kaveney

Snow fell on the colonnades of the British Museum, grey in the half-light of a winter afternoon. The country had sunk into the hibernation of the Christmas break, and into that paralysis which any variation on temperate calm traditionally inflicts on public transport. The streets of Bloomsbury had the silence of vacancy.

The apes *have* been *talking about* us *again,' a harsh voice said.* 'And we need *to be rid of their dangerous chattering. Their science and their bureaucracy will back* us into a *corner. The apes must die, now. And their own* meddlings will give us *the means.'*

The streets of Bloomsbury were not as empty as they at first seemed. These were not streets where the homeless nested, and yet shabby men paced up and down Great Russell Street in unusual numbers; the shop where the Swedenborgians sold their apocalypses was dark, and yet a light shone on in its back office, and though the occult bookshop down a side street had finally gone bankrupt, a smell billowed from it, of incense and of attar. Shapes moved among the rooftops and there were eyes in the lime-tree in the garden of the house by the museum, where Trotskyites usually lived.

That would be a *little too drastic, my Lord of Stasis,'* another voice said. Their *civilization is quite fragile,* reaJJy. Electromagnetic pulses in *the right place at the* 1

right time, and they would crumble. *If,* in *the* process, most *die, no blood* is on our hands.'

Over the preceding weeks, the British Library had migrated. Lorries had taken away its index cards and its microfiches, the Debretts of dead generations of gentry and the maps of countries that had changed their names and borders. Even the desks had gone—a few to be preserved in honour of those who had worked there, most to be disposed of. There was no need of their patina of dust and

scholarship in the new, concrete library between the Euston Road and the great Northern railway lines; it was a product of a new age, and had no need of dust.

'Humans reduced *to* a *few* primitives, my Lords Man-hater *of* Stasis and *Sweet* Preytaker *of* Chaos/ a *third voice* said, *'would be* humans on *whom the wrath of the gods* had descended. And *the fear that would* ensue is one *we cannot afford.'*

The lorries were all gone, and yet the streets were full of pantechnicons. Several of them had pulled into the courtyard of the museum and parked there. As Mr Chepstow walked past them, heading for the small door to which, as courtesy to a Librarian of the Library of the Conspiracy, he had a key, useful when the museum was temporarily closed, he caught a strong whiff of ammonia or some other nitrate. The circus has come to town early this year, he thought idly, as he walked down the steps to the small door.

'Like I said,' said *the Lord of* Stasis. *'Exterminate the* brutes/

The strange smell was omnipresent in the echoing galleries of the museum. On his way to the office of his colleague, the Chief Under-Librarian of the British Library Department of Curiosities, Chepstow was wont to take side trips. Librarians live in a world without time, and are above mere punctuality, save in the matter of closing times and the return of loaned books.

There were wet footprints on the floor of the room that still contained the stolen marbles of the Parthenon and a cigar stub floating in the remains of a tumbler of brandy beside the statuette of an Egyptian hippopotamus god. It was a vulgarly large brandy glass, and it had been vulgarly full, Chepstow ascertained by running a finger round the upper rim.

The *only ways to be sure of getting them all/ said the third voice, 'would ruin the planet for* us. And can *we be sure that to commit mass slaughter would not attract—shall we say—attention?'*

Chepstow's friend, Mr Glossop, was ill at ease when Chepstow remarked upon these departures from good museum practice.

Another voice piped up. 'We think you are all getting things out of proportion. The humans pay for their keep.'

'Of course,' Chepstow said, 'I lead a sheltered existence and am not answerable to the whims of visiting dignitaries.'

This is *all much too serious/ another said.* 7 only *came along for the party. Who ordered this double cheese with pepperoni?'*

'It isn't the conference,' Mr Glossop said. 'I am told they will mostly be Arabs, and Arabs don't leave brandy around, or go looking at sculptures. It is their security men. They were most put out when I mentioned that you were planning to look in on the old place; I didn't tell them that you have a key, because I did not think that you would be especially pleased to have some jumped-up secret policeman knowing of the existence of the Library of the Conspiracy.'

'Even among us/ *the Lord of Stasis* said, *'corruption and decadence has set in. I have* seen *the effect on our* children *of the* apes' *so-called fiction—a polite word, a scab over festering lies and* cultivated delusions—and *of their tawdry jungle* rhythms.'

'I have met,' Mr Chepstow, 'in my time, secret policemen who were remarkably well-informed on such subjects.'

'So voting for *killing the* humans,' a quiet *voice added, 'is actually a vote for* giving Stasis unlimited rights *to* purge *the Kin,* again? *If we vote with you, we give you the right to decide, as your next* move, *which of us has been corrupted?'*

'Be that as it may,' Mr Glossop said, 'the place pullulates with them. I am not even sure that they will let you pay your respects—I understand that they are using the former Great Reading Room for this secret peace conference, and no one, not even the Chief Librarian himself is admitted.'

'I move *that we proceed to a vote/ the Lord of Chaos said. 'Deal with the apes first, as Manhater of Stasis says, then settle our own accounts afterwards,* in *the good peace and eternity that will be left to* us.'

'If that is how things are,' Mr Chepstow said, 'I suggest that we pay our respects in another traditional manner. Let us find a public house, and I will sip mineral water and watch you drink your

warm beer.'

'Nonsense,' *the quiet voice said. 'If we are* putting *humanity on trial for* its *life, we* should *at least listen to some evidence.'*

They *will not need evidence,' the Chaos Lord said, 'when they learn of us, and come for us. 1 was* in *Poland in 1943 and humans are as ruthless as they are efficient.'*

'If we try and fail/ the quiet voice said, 'we ensure *that they will come for* us. And then *we will need a voice to defend us, as they need one now,* among *us.'*

*

It is not usual for a man to become a Librarian of the Library of the Conspiracy, or even to become an alcoholic who no longer drinks, without having, or learning, a fair measure of what friends call persistence and enemies obstinacy.

Mr Chepstow had spent many happy hours, in youth, under the dome of the Great Reading Room, and was not about to let the exigencies of politics, a class of affairs of which he and his colleagues had, after all, washed their hands, stand in the way of a decent last paying of respects. The small hours of the night accordingly found him returning, well-fed and with his warm gloves on, towards the small side door of the museum to which he had a key.

London always made him feel young again, and in the mood for a jape or an adventure.

When he walked down Great Russell Street, he felt eyes upon him, but he proceeded with the slow dignified tread and actions of a man who has every right to be where he is, as indeed, as far as he was concerned, he had. He ignored the watchers in the lime-tree and did not allow himself to feel hot breath on the back of his neck, or hear footsteps that dogged his own gently echoing ones. He almost missed the numbing of alcohol—Dutch courage has unpleasant consequences, but there are times when it is the only sort one has.

He had hardly stepped out of the staircase up into the main body of the museum from the underground complex of offices to which his key had admitted him, when he was firmly seized by two sallow men in a uniform he did not recognize. There was something in the particular firmness of their grip on his upper right arm, and lower left wrist, which reminded him of talons, and one of them produced a large gun of some sort and held its muzzle to Chepstow's forehead.

He had been ill-advised, it seemed.

The other guard reached into Chepstow's pocket, and checked his wallet for personal information.

'I am,' Mr Chepstow ventured, 'a great admirer of your people.'

'And which particular attribute of my people,' one of them said, 'might that be? Our calligraphy? Our exotic cuisine? Our wonderful sense of rhythm?'

'I was thinking, as it happens,' Mr Chepstow said, there being really no point in beating about the bush, 'of the Fifty Lives.'

It was at this point that he saw his first Ancient.

For a moment he thought that the curators had rearranged the exhibits yet again, but what he took for an Assyrian bull-god came lumbering down the gallery towards them. Theoretical and empirical knowledge have odd gaps between them, and into that gap fear and surprise can, at a glandular level, creep.

'What have you here, children?' a large but quiet voice asked, from lips that seemed too heavily hung to move easily.

'A Librarian of the Library of the Conspiracy,' Mr Chepstow said. 'A neutral observer in all things.'

'In all things?' the quiet-voiced Ancient said.

'I invoke the Truce of Knowledge,' Mr Chepstow said, knowing that his neck could be snapped like a match between those teeth before he finished speaking.

'Do you, indeed?' the Ancient said. 'You are clearly quite remarkably well-informed.'

At a nod of the Ancient's titanic head, one of the two guards placed a blindfold around Chepstow's head, and they dragged him, with more force than was strictly called for, down the corridors and up a flight of stairs. From the changing quality of the echo, he deduced that they were in the main entrance hall, and a sudden kink in their path, and a change from stone to carpet, indicated that they were entering the

Reading Room.

It stank of cigar smoke, spilled red wine, manure and the bitter sweat of sustained rage; the cacophony that filled the dome like thick smoke could not be so readily sorted into component parts. When the blindfold was removed, Chepstow gulped slightly at the profusion of flesh that stood, sat, squatted and towered before him, scales and wet pelts shiny in the winter moonlight from the skylights.

It is one thing to know that Weerde Ancients are the originals of most human mythology, another to see in the body Archangel and Titan, Dragon and Windigo, Legba and Huitzilopochtli. Rugose and squamous they were, and probably ichthyose as well if he could be bothered to look carefully.

He was seeing more Ancients, he knew, than any other human in history, or perhaps even in myth. There were no books in the Reading Room any more, yet the accumulation of knowledge was as great as it had ever been.

As the door swung quietly shut behind him, silence fell, not the silence associated with the room in happier days, but an altogether different silence of reined, but imminently catastrophic, energy.

The Ancient who accompanied him looked around at his peers, most of them, Chepstow deduced, his seniors.

'We have a Librarian of the Conspiracy among us,' he said in that monumental yet quiet voice. 'And he has invoked the Truce of Knowledge.'

'That is ridiculous,' a scaly specimen rumbled at the back of the room. 'Obviously not meant to apply to the apes.'

'No one ever said it couldn't,' a more gracile Ancient tiikkied iu a voice like steel wire. 'That *omission may* prove a useful legal fiction.'

'Precisely so,' said the Ancient whom Chepstow was already thinking of as his.

'What can the ape add to our proceedings?' the scaly one said in a temper.

'Knowledge, clearly,' Chepstow said.

There were howls of rage from some of the Ancients.

The Library of the Conspiracy,' Chepstow said, 'has always encouraged its employees to conduct their own research. I am by way of being something of an expert in the interactions of your people and humanity.'

'We do not allow humans to know of these things,' said another Ancient, squat and hairy and seemingly eyeless.

'And yet we still know,' Chepstow said. 'And it does not matter at all, because those of us who know, also know the importance of discretion.'

'How much do you know?' the gracile one demanded.

'Enough,' said Chepstow, 'to know that this must be the largest gathering of Ancients since ...'

Chepstow thought about when the last large gathering had been, and shut his mouth urgently and tightly.

'It is an intolerable affront,' the scaly one bellowed.

'I am a Librarian of the Conspiracy,' Chepstow said, 'and neutral in all things, save knowledge.'

'I accept that as generally the case, but I am sceptical about the present circumstances,' said Chepstow's Ancient.

'In all things,' Mr Chepstow reaffirmed, 'save knowledge, and thus the preservation of the Library itself.'

'And there you have it,' the Ancient said, 'for the preservation of the Library of the Conspiracy is predicated upon humans to staff it and humans to read in it and, for the most part, humans to proliferate the material it keeps on its shelves. And it is not certain that that precondition is one we are any longer prepared to countenance.'

'It is an experiment whose time has passed,' the scaly one said. The apes must die.'

'When you held your last Great Council,' Chepstow said, 'and decided that you could no longer go on destroying every attempt at human civilization ...'

'We fixed the Towered City of Circular Canals,' the scaly one said, 'and we will fix you.'

'On *that* occasion,' Chepstow said, his voice raised above the hubbub and his glare managing to

stare down even the angry scaly Ancient, 'you allowed humanity an advocate.'

'Precisely so,' the gracile Ancient said.

'And now that we have our counsel for the defence,' said Chepstow's Ancient smugly, 'I suggest that you produce your evidence.'

A couple of smaller Ancients at the back of the crowd looked up from eating a stack of pizzas.

'Courtroom drama,' one of them said, 'performing humans, all the scandals that we never get to hear ... I told you we'd have a good time.'

'I'd still rather be watching *Terminator* 2,' sighed his companion.

The scaly one drew himself up to his full height.

'I summon my witnesses,' he said.

Imaginary Time

Stephen Baxter

'We want you to assassinate Stephen Hawking.'

Harris, cradling a beautiful, antique vase, listened carefully to the voice. Even through the phone's tinny distortion he could distinguish a characteristic, resonant growl, a booming that came from a deep, old chest.

An Ancient, then.

He said, 'Payment?'

He heard the hiss of air through misshapen nostrils. 'Fifty per cent will arrive tomorrow. The rest will follow when Hawking is dead.'

There aren't that many Ancients. Their speech patterns, accented by their foreignness to the present, tend to be distinctive. Individual. Harris made it his business to know those patterns. Such information was useful. This was the female known as Gulliver. Eight centuries old or more; not one he'd dealt with before. He imagined the dragon-form, uncomfortable with age, huge and hulking in some deep room.

'Well?'

'If the payment's acceptable you will see the results,' Harris said. 'You know how to deliver?'

For a few seconds he heard the hiss of breath; then the dialling tone returned.

Harris learned about Stephen Hawking. *Hawking was* one of his generation's finest theoretical physicists.

Perhaps the finest. Harris, leafing through Hawking's popular writings, built up an image of an elegant mind, a vision of the universe like crystal clockwork. There was beauty in Hawking's vision, Harris saw. It was a type of beauty which Harris, used to the visual and tactile beauty of fine art, found oddly delicious.

But disturbing.

The payment was left in a safe-deposit box in a small local bank. Inside the box there was a small, flat package, wrapped in stiff card. Harris took it home and opened it. He found a sparse, elegant wooden frame about six inches square. Mounted inside the frame was a scrap of faded parchment the size of his palm. The parchment bore illuminated text. Harris held it close to his face.

To the Child the World is StiJJ

To the Man the World Grows

In *the Eye of GOD the World Eternal is ...*

A pulse thrummed in his throat.

This was one of the more enigmatic verses of the Fifty Lives—perhaps it was some remnant of wisdom preserved from the archaic times of the reptiles. And so this parchment could only be a fragment of the Skye transcript, the result of one of the few attempts, by a cell of twelfth-century monks under discreet Weerde supervision, to transcribe the huge oral history of the Lives. Various factions had spent the intervening centuries trying to ensure that no scrap of the manuscript survived.

Maybe Gulliver had preserved this from her youth. It was beyond price, of course. But more than that: it was beautiful. Something moved in Harris's heart. He found a place for the parchment among all his other beautiful

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artefacts. He wondered why that particular verse had been sent to him.

Harris thought about Hawking, and Gulliver.

The Weerde were divided in opinion over the threat of human science. It wasn't easy for the Weerde to hide, in a society growing in technological sophistication. There was a grouping—clustered around the one known as Ancient of Days—that had grown concerned by the Human Genome Project. Perhaps the humans, in unlocking the secrets of their own genetic heritage, would expose the Weerde at last.

The conservatives among them were moving against the human scientific community, using methods millennia old. Harris had worked for this grouping.

Other factions, like the shadowy Organization, believed that human science would benefit the Weerde, overall. Perhaps human science would provide a way to challenge the Dark itself one day. The Organization believed that the conservatives' efforts to destroy human science and engineering by assassinating individuals were futile. Even dangerous to the species. The debate was bloody.

Harris had worked for the Organization. Surely one of the conservative groups must be funding this operation against Hawking.

Gulliver was not attached strongly to any one faction. Gulliver was old. The Ancients tended to exist in a web of old alliances, antique enmities, complex and fragmented beyond mere faction boundaries. And, if anything, Gulliver had a reputation as a supporter of the groupings who saw the development of human science as a benefit to the Weerde. There were tales, for example, that a century earlier she had discreetly encouraged the Darwinians, dribbling them *fragments of* Weerde prehuman memory.

So why should such a one as Gulliver now ally herself with a hard-line conservative faction? And why should she want Hawking dead? Harris frowned. He didn't understand Gulliver's motivation; it didn't make sense. Harris liked things to make sense.

Stephen Hawking was based in Cambridge.

Harris drove up from his London base. He arrived mid-morning. It was late October—term-time; the narrow streets of the old centre of the city were choked with cars, with bicycles.

He parked in a multi-storey, and bought a pocket map. He strolled past the Gothic elegance of the colleges, past lawns green with a patina of centuries.

In mid-afternoon he entered a college. He looked smart, white, in his early twenties; he wasn't challenged by the sleepy inhabitants of the porter's lodge. He walked into a hall of residence, a small, modern block within the college's old walls. At the entrance, fixed to a wall, there was a wooden frame; removable slates bore the names of students and their room numbers. Harris stood before the frame for a few seconds.

He climbed the stairs to the first floor. He passed a girl on the stairs; she smiled at him and brushed past. He came to Room B16. This was the room of a Mr P Walters, the slates had said. Harris walked up to the door and tried the handle. The door was locked. He walked on and tried the next door. B17, Mr G Berkhout. The door opened; a young man, sitting at a desk, looked up in surprise. The desk was piled with books and papers. An anglepoise lamp, brightly shining, loomed over the cluttered surface like a metal bird.

'Mr Walters?' Harris asked, smiling.

Berkhout shook his head, pointed with a pen. 'Next door. B16.'

Thanks.' Harris closed the door.

He climbed to the second floor.

Room C32. Miss A Hinch. He tried the door. It was open; the room was empty, still. Harris walked in and closed the door quietly behind him. The room was small, lined with pine panels; there was a small, hard bed, a plain desk and a single chair. On the desk there was an anglepoise lamp like Berkhout's; books, papers and folders were stacked in ordered piles; pens and pencils peeped from a fur-covered case.

Beside the bed, on a shelf, there was a small travelling alarm clock. There was a picture of a boy, smiling, and a fat paperback. The book's spine was too cracked for Harris to make out the title. On another shelf there was a mirror, heated brushes, bits of make-up. There was a faint scent of hairspray, overlaying a deeper scent of furniture polish. The room was neat and tidy. Blonde hair was wrapped around the brushes.

Harris sat on the chair; he crossed his legs and waited. It grew darker.

Harris thought about the Weerde's evolving attitude to human science. The conservatives feared the specifics, the human scientists themselves and their bewildering technological toys. Like the Genome Project. Other Weerde, less fearful of change, sought opportunity in the new technologies. But beyond those straightforwardly opposing factions, Harris knew, there was a growing feeling among many Weerde that science itself had gone too far.

The Weerde had encouraged Bacon and some of the others—Descartes, Newton. They had liked the idea of the scientific method, of the universe as a piece of clockwork to be taken apart, shell by shell. Reductionist science, with its implicit belief that there was a law, a meaning, an explanation for all phenomena, had steadily removed the perception of gods, of supernatural beings, from human paradigms.

Some Weerde still believed that the Dark was attracted to minds dominated by mysticism. The Weerde observed that where science took hold, religion declined. The Weerde had imagined human minds dimming in the questing eyes of the Dark.

The Weerde were comforted.

Then, in the twentieth century, the Newtonian clockwork universe imploded. Suddenly there was relativity, a beginning to time. And quantum theory: uncertainty, the interaction of consciousness with reality. Daring, audacious, brilliant conceptions. The anthropic principle; the idea that out of a range of universes, some force had selected this one for humans to inhabit. The ideas of de Chardin, of the evolution of consciousness towards godhead at the end of time, at the Omega Point.

A new conception of God, of godhood, was emerging from the astonishing sea of ideas. The Weerde, the factions and Ancients, feared the Dark would be attracted once more. More and more of them concurred that scientific progress, and its influence on the evolution of human consciousness, had to be slowed, stopped.

Harris wondered what Gulliver believed.

At about five o'clock a key rattled in the lock of the door to the room. Harris heard a soft, self-deprecating mumble when the door turned out to be unlocked. The door opened. Miss A Hinch, swathed in a shapeless duffle-coat, bustled into the room. She was carrying a Sainsbury's carrier bag, awkwardly because one of the plastic handles had stretched and snapped. Miss Hinch closed the door behind her before she saw Harris. She gasped, fumbled with the bag.

Harris, still sitting with legs crossed, hands on his knees, gasped. Miss Hinch took an uncertain step for—

ward, brushing a ringlet of blonde hair from her forehead. She was about five feet two, a little plump, with a delicate, pretty face. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' Harris said.

The girl frowned. 'Who are you?'

'Who are you?' Harris frowned. Her accent was Home Counties neutral, her voice flat and nasal. He repeated, 'Who are you? I'm sorry. Sorry.' Still not quite right. He pushed his tongue further forward. 'Who are you?'

The girl's smile had gone. She was frightened now. Still holding the Sainsbury's bag, she turned and reached for the door handle. Harris was at her side. He lowered her silently to the wooden floor.

'Who are you?' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

He would wait until night, and get the girl out of here. And he'd need a change sleep. He sat at the desk and crossed his legs. It grew darker.

'I'm sorry. Who are you? Who are you?'

Harris wanted to learn more about Stephen Hawking. He found it useful to get to know as well as he

could the people he needed to destroy. It made it easier to be discreet.

The next morning Miss A Hinch was at the doors of the Fitzwilliam Library as soon as it opened.

In the rows of purple-bound technical journals, Harris found some of Hawking's original papers. Hawking, he learned, had contributed much to the modern picture of the Big Bang.

A century ago most humans had believed the universe to be unchanging. Einstein, an earlier version of Hawking, had deduced that that couldn't be true. Static universes must be unstable. Einstein—a patent clerk—had deduced this. Sometimes Harris wondered what it must be like to be human, to have such a mind. It invoked wonder in him; it frightened him.

The universe, not just matter and energy but all of space and time themselves, had blossomed from a single event: the Big Bang. Like the 'man' in his fragment of the Lives transcript, Harris thought vaguely, humans had put aside their childlike notions of a fixed, static universe. Their world grew now. But on immense time-scales, he realized; time-scales that dwarfed even the long traditions of the Weerde.

Everything, all the world-lines, had emerged from the initial singularity. The Big Bang. And the world-lines would merge again into a fresh collapse, a new singularity; or perhaps the universe would continue to expand, to push itself, purposeless, into emptiness; to define another boundary to space-time: the Omega Point, infinite age.

Perhaps God could be found in the Big Bang, men had begun to wonder. Or at the Omega Point.

The Big Bang model was beautiful, Harris saw. But there were problems still unresolved. Clarity of thought shone through Hawking's technical language, through the equations. Beauty shone through.

Harris, staring at the yellowing pages, absently brushed a blonde ringlet from his brow.

Another student died.

Harris, tall and dark, a wispy beard straggling across his chin and a college scarf around his neck, walked across the Market Square. Following his memorized street map he found the Department of Applied Mathematics. It was a ramshackle, rather dingy collection of buildings. Harris walked in unchallenged.

The corridors were narrow, the walls covered with notice-boards. There were wheelchair ramps here, unusual in a university not noted for its accessibility to the disabled. He found Hawking's office. There was a red postcard-sized sign pinned to the door. The sign said: BLACK HOLES ARE OUT OF SIGHT. Harris didn't try the door. Hawking, if he was there, was bound to be attended.

Harris looked back in time with Stephen Hawking. He learned about quantum uncertainty. He learned that there were scales—the Planck length and the Planck time—below which it was no longer meaningful to talk about 'length' or 'duration'. It gave a kind of graininess to reality, he thought. Stephen Hawking had wondered what the universe had been like when it was smaller than the Planck length, younger than the Planck time.

Uncertainty dominated, of course. You couldn't be certain that the Big Bang had occurred at this instant, or that; here, or over there. Maybe the universe had grown out of a virtual particle pair, a wrinkle of instability in the emptiness. In the intensity of Hawking's thought the initial singularity had melted away, into a hiss of uncertainty ...

Harris, entranced, the scarf draped over his chair, read on, learning to see the universe through Stephen Hawking's eyes. It grew dark.

Harris learned, at last, of imaginary time. He closed his eyes and tried to hold the beautiful vision in his head. It was like cradling a vase in the palm of his hand: but the vision was at once more fragile, more rarefied, and more lovely for that. He hadn't imagined such beauty could exist.

Harris came to a decision. He stole a car and left the city. He found a hotel, and reverted easily to Harris's form. He left the car and took another. He extended his trail, then covered it over.

It took him some days to return to London. Some days after that, the phone rang.

'I know you have your methods,' the Ancient hissed.

As Harris had expected, she didn't sound angry. 'I know you take time, research your—subjects. But your sponsors are not infinitely patient.'

Harris ignored this. 'I'm not going to kill Hawking. You never intended me to kill Hawking,' he said.

Gulliver's huge, hollow breath resonated for long seconds. 'Is it so obvious?'

‘You knew I’d research Hawking. You knew I’d find his material ... pleasing.’ Harris clutched the phone tightly. ‘You were able to predict my actions.’

There was a laugh, a sound dredged from time. ‘Not entirely,’ Gulliver said. ‘I know you’re not like others of your—profession. I know that your motives differ from theirs; that you do not share their vision, their devotion to the cause of the species. You’re an aesthete. I know that from your preferred mode of payment. And that is your motivation to work. I had to gamble that your sense of aesthetics would extend to the non-tactile ... to the intellectual.’

‘There is a faction that plans to kill Hawking,’ Harris said.

‘Oh, yes. And others. Penrose. Tipler. Some of the younger, less well-known ones too; the ones driving the whole enterprise now. They’re getting too close to God.’

Harris knew that. ‘Hawking believes there was no beginning to space-time,’ Harris murmured into the phone. ‘The world-lines are like lines of longitude, scratched on a globe; our lives, following “real time”, are like journeys from North Pole to South Pole. And the Poles are the places where the world-lines meet: the singularities.’ The Big Bang. The Omega Point.

But the lines were an illusion, the singularities artefacts of perception, Hawking taught. There were other times, ‘imaginary times’, like paths on the globe away from the longitudinal. In imaginary time there was no beginning and no end. The universe of space and time was closed and complete like the surface of a sphere, without boundary or edge in space or time.

Harris turned the vision in his head, let it shimmer. ‘It is beautiful,’ he said.

‘Yes.’ The Ancient quoted, ‘ “To the Child the World is Still / To the Man the World Grows / In the Eye of GOD the World Eternal is

‘That’s the meaning of the ancient verse,’ Harris realized suddenly. ‘It’s Hawking’s vision.’

‘Yes. The same vision. But *transmitted through time, from archaic* days.’ The voice of the Ancient grated with animation. ‘Harris, the reptiles knew this too. That’s what the Lives are telling us. The reptiles too went through evolutions of thinking: from the simple, static, childlike perspective of time to the exploding, dynamic vision of the Big Bang model—and finally to the vision that is emerging now, of motion, change; of beginnings and ends as illusions against a canvas of stillness. That’s what the old verse describes; it’s our last, imperfect echo in time of what the reptiles knew, and lost.’

Harris frowned. ‘How could the reptiles know about the Big Bang, without radio-telescopes to observe the background microwave radiation, and—’

Gulliver laughed. ‘They thought about why the night sky is dark.’

‘You never intended that I should kill Hawking, did you?’ Harris asked evenly. ‘You allied yourself with this conservative faction in order to get yourself into a position where you could recruit the assassin—in order that you could manipulate the situation, manipulate me, to achieve your end. You even chose that fragment of the Lives, as a subliminal clue for me.’

Gulliver sighed; it sounded like waves breaking on an old shore. The showdown with the humans is going to come anyway, I can’t stop that. In a way the progressives are right to oppose us, we Ancients. We’re doing too much damage to the human scientific community; we are impeding too many specific projects.

‘We are coming to their attention. As soon as the humans understand what’s happening, they’ll come after us ... Maybe we’ll win. At least we’ll push them back. But I wanted to sabotage this assassination. Harris, listen to me. Over the last few years, as I’ve followed the work of Hawking and others, and as I’ve seen their new world-picture emerge, I’ve realized this: a beauty is returning to the world, a beauty lost for seventy million years, that we Weerde could never construct for ourselves ...

‘Harris, you’re an aesthete. You can understand how I felt when I saw all this, can’t you ... the sense of loss?’ She laughed again. ‘Seventy million years of loss!’

‘And the Dark?’

‘Bugger the Dark,’ Gulliver snapped. ‘Why should we endure like this, terrified of the new, the strange, the beautiful? Let the conservatives fret over trinkets like the Genome Project ... But I can’t bear to see Hawking’s vision destroyed. You can understand that, can’t you, Harris? Isn’t all this wonder worth the risk? Isn’t it? Harris?’

Harris hung up. For a few minutes he sat, reflecting. Gulliver had been able to anticipate his reactions, to manipulate him. He had become lazy. He had become predictable.

Harris, working alone and without support, had survived as an assassin for five decades.

He got out of his chair, walked out of his house, locked the door carefully. He drove away.

In the house, dust motes drifted over the abandoned things of beauty, over the crystallized deaths of human and Weerde.

The Girl Who Changed Everything

Colin Greenland

Duncan Turner was a solitary individual. Even in childhood he felt like a stranger in the world. He accepted that there were others, grown-ups and many other children, who had had the secret rules of life made plain to them; but they were never to be revealed to humbler creatures like him. He shrank from people, fearing to expose to them that he lacked the key they so obviously had. Duncan would cross the road to avoid three girls walking to his sister's school, a tableau of windswept mischief and mysterious clothing. Their laughter would echo after him as he ducked into the alley down beside the allotments, avoiding the trailing arms of blackberry bushes.

He spent the holidays indoors, with the wireless or a library book. He liked to read about boys of his own age who went to boarding schools, formed secret societies and caught surly men who robbed trains. Minute by minute, Duncan only seemed to be doing nothing. In reality he was a secret agent for a mysterious and very powerful organization, with many unexpected skills and concealed weapons. Or he was the actor in a television story, with hidden cameras on him every moment, and no one around him aware that they were being filmed.

In his later teens he would take himself off for days out, roaming the damp streets of some nearby town, looking for second-hand bookshops. In Bexhill and

Hastings Duncan felt adrift, self-conscious. The empty afternoon yawned ahead of him; he needed someone to tell him what to do next. He would loiter for an hour in a public library looking for sex in Colin Wilson and Mary McCarthy, then trail from newsagent to newsagent, leafing hotly through *Parade* and Men Only. From the pages of these magazines the sirens smiled at him, posing naked with a cuddly toy or half-dressed, sitting on the stairs with their legs apart, letting you look up their skirts.

In the park sometimes he caught a glimpse of the real thing. It was a small park—an oblong of grass, narrow flower-beds, a sundial—on a piece of ground where some houses had been knocked down. When it was warm Duncan liked to sit there and read, Hammond Innes or the new Ian Fleming. Sometimes women walked by, young mothers with toddlers on reins, or girls in headscarves wheeling bicycles. Sometimes a woman would sit down on his bench. He never said anything to them. He tried to smile once or twice, at girls plain enough not to take offence, but the smile felt horrible on his face, the tense grimace of a knife murderer.

When the girl who was to change everything sat down next to him, Duncan had no idea; which of us would? He was only aware of her body, a peripheral sense of a flowered dress and bare limbs a couple of feet away; and she was not old, he was sure of that. Duncan kept his concentration on the page in front of his eyes.

Then she said: 'What are you reading?'

Her voice was low, almost conspiratorial, and quite unhesitant. It was not a child's voice, nor an adult's voice, asking with authority that demanded an answer. It was the voice of someone his own age, who was curious. Duncan knew at once that she too liked to read: she knew his pleasure. He looked up. His first impression was of fair skin and fine blonde hair, and eyes as blue as slate. She was much closer than he had thought. Duncan felt the sun suddenly on his head, and heard a bird call, and that was all part of it somehow. He had a sense of being lifted up off the ground, like a small bird rising, or like a flower that someone has picked.

Duncan would have liked nothing better than to be able to answer the girl's question, cheerfully and

candidly. But there was a problem.

What he was reading was a story about an ocean liner sinking in the Pacific, and about what happened to everybody. In one lifeboat there were two survivors, a man and a woman, drifting for days. The author went into a lot of detail about what they did to one another. It was one of the parts about them that Duncan was reading. He could hardly tell her that. He would have liked to say, It's about a shipwreck; but in the shock of her sudden address the word *shipwreck* had completely vanished from his mind. Wordlessly, Duncan closed the book and gave it to her.

She read the title and the author's name. She did not open it; she laid it in her lap. She said, 'Is it exciting?'

As she spoke she gave Duncan such a sultry look he realized she had been sitting close enough to read what he was reading, and knew perfectly well he found it very exciting indeed.

'It's all right,' he said. Duncan blushed frequently, but he did not blush now. In fact he felt himself go white, and there were butterflies in his stomach. He wanted it to be all right, but he was not at all sure that it was. He smiled a weak and apologetic smile.

Some satisfactory message was transmitted, at any rate. The girl was still looking at him, and not at the book, and her smile was friendly. Duncan supposed he must be hiding his distress well, though of course he was doing nothing of the kind.

'My mother was in a shipwreck,' said the girl, easily, stretching out her legs in the sun. They hit an iceberg. People froze to death in the water/

Duncan was horrified. His book seemed tawdry suddenly, its characters like little dolls jerked about for his entertainment. He felt guilty for reading it.

'Did she—die?' he asked, unable not to.

'Oh no,' said the girl, and laughed. '*She* was all right.'

Duncan felt relieved again, but confused. She seemed so contradictory, this girl, sitting there with his book still on her lap, coming out with all that about her mother. He wondered if she was teasing him, but he was sure she wasn't.

He had to get his book back before she opened it.

'Have you ever been on a ship?' he asked her.

'Me? Oh yes,' she said. 'Hundreds of times.' Then she smiled again, dipping her head a little, and said: 'Well, dozens, anyway.'

Duncan was sixteen. She looked no older. His eye passed from her face to the slight swell of her breasts beneath the dress. It was a light, white cotton print, and through it he could see her bra quite clearly. He looked away, at the sunlit grass. He couldn't look, not now that she was talking to him.

But her eyes drew him back, reassuring him, coaxing his gaze back to her face. Perhaps she was a year or two older than him. Girls matured earlier, he had read that. He thought about that word, mature, with all its mysteries.

'I've never been on a ship,' he told her.

She put her hands on her knees and leaned towards him. 'You come here a lot, don't you?' she said, simply, expecting only confirmation. 'I've seen you here before.'

'I don't think I've seen you,' said Duncan. He was sure he hadn't. He would have remembered if he had. She was so pretty. Beautiful. She made his breath catch in his throat. His palms started to sweat. He wiped them surreptitiously on his trousers. He glanced at his book on her lap.

'It's a good place to read,' he said.

'It's a good place to be alone,' said the girl, echoing his tone of voice. She didn't make it sound like something to be ashamed of, wanting to be on your own. She made it sound desirable. 'You can't be alone at home,' she said, explaining. 'Your brothers and sisters won't let you.'

'I've only got one sister,' Duncan said. 'She's not in much.' He looked at her hands, then up at her face. 'My name's Duncan,' he said.

'You're a lucky boy, Duncan!' the girl said. She made it sound like an announcement, like a promise, almost; it made him nervous. He blinked helplessly and glanced around the park, glad no one was there to hear her.

Gravely she held out his book, returning it to him unopened. Then she laughed at him, wrinkling her nose. For the first time in his life, Duncan didn't mind being laughed at. He laughed too, shakily, and realized he was staring straight into her eyes. Her eyes were the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. He felt them wrap him all round with approval, even while she was laughing at him. Then she bit her bottom lip and put her head on one side, studying him mischievously as if he were a puzzle she was going to enjoy undoing.

And then she was gone. She rose up from the bench and brushed both hands down the front of her dress as if she thought she had crumbs on it, but more slowly, so the motion became something more vivid and meaningful; but while Duncan gaped at her, she waved and ran off down the path.

He watched her leave, a sliding flicker of pink and red flowers and a swirl of hair, up the steps and away. He wanted to shout after her, Wait/, but he had been brought up never to shout. He never felt at ease, shouting at anyone. What would he have shouted, anyway? He didn't even know her name.

He found he had got to his feet, far too late to run after her. Duncan hated to run, his knees seemed to swerve around all over the place. Again he thought, he should have shouted; but he couldn't blame himself for it. He was still feeling happy because she'd been sweet to him; blessed by her frank inspection. It was as though she had selected him for something wonderful. He felt like a prisoner released, standing outside at last under the blue sky. He clasped his book tightly under his arm.

No sooner was he walking back up the street between the tall red houses than apprehension swallowed him. She knew him by sight, and now she knew who he was. What did he know about her? Not a thing. Only that story about her mother and the iceberg, which she had made up, probably. She had just come out with it, then—stroked herself like that. Then she had run away. Duncan giggled to himself. Perhaps she was potty. Must be potty to sit down next to people and start talking about her mother. Is *it exciting?*

Duncan looked down at the book under his arm, and remembered how her hands clasped it, how they laid it in her lap. She was so beautiful. And he hadn't even got her name, let alone her address. He did not know what to do. He would have to come and sit in the park every day. He was convinced she would not come. No doubt he would never see her again. It was the safest thing to think, he told himself, and shivered slightly. How stupid he had been! By the time he reached his doorstep he had managed to smother the thrill in his memory under a light cloud of misery.

His father was listening to Gardeners' Question Time and reading the paper. His mother was ironing. Duncan ate his tea and went upstairs to read; but he couldn't read. The girl's face kept coming back to him, calling him until the words swam on the page. He saw her eyes, her blue eyes, steady and shining as pebbles under water. Was her forehead broad, or like this, narrower? And her nose, when she wasn't wrinkling it? Straight? Snub? Had there been little gold rings in her ears? How could he have failed to notice?

But he fell asleep with her eyes fixed in his mind. He did not dream about her. Still, he woke feeling excited, ready to return to the park. By the time he had had his breakfast and made his bed and cleaned his shoes, Duncan felt slightly silly about the whole thing, and ashamed of himself for hoping, especially after what he had resolved on the way home. He was ready to be disappointed.

He was. His mysterious visitor did not reappear. Duncan sat in the park all day, with nothing to eat but a packet of crisps he had bought along the way. He was there every day that week. Old people came with their sausage dogs, their pipes or their knitting. Little children stumbled into the flowers and tried to pull themselves up to see the sundial. Duncan finished his book and read another. The girl did not come.

Every word of their conversation, such as it was, was engraved in his brain. He replayed it, thinking of the things he ought to have said. In particular he blamed himself for not finding out anything about her. Did she have a job? Where? What did she do? When was her lunch-hour?

Why had she said he was lucky, if she wasn't going to return?

When the girl finally came down the steps in her miniskirt and suede jacket, Duncan hardly recognized her. His heart faltered when he realized she was walking towards him, she was looking at him—it was her, it was! She looked taller, her legs longer, and she moved with a confident sway in her

step. Duncan glanced down at her feet; he thought she might be wearing heels. Then she stopped in front of him and he looked up into her smiling eyes. Her collar was turned up, framing her face, and she had her hands tucked in her pockets. 'Hallo, Duncan,' she said.

A warm glow spread down through Duncan, starting at his eyes and tweaking his lips into a smile, and slipping past the constriction in his throat to splash down and pour all over his heart.

'I thought I was never going to see you again,' he said; and hated it at once, because it came out whiny and complaining.

She wrinkled her brow. 'Did you *hate* that?' she asked seriously, and smiled at him artfully. Duncan realized she was making fun of him again; and again she melted his defences with the brightness of her eyes.

She sat down beside him, crossing her legs. She was wearing nylons. He had thought she seemed older when she came walking down the steps, but the impression vanished as they talked. She asked him a riddle, about a monkey and a concertina, and smirked when he groaned at the answer.

Her name was Marania. She said it was Russian, she had been born there, 'but we live here now,' she said, lifting her hand up nonchalantly. The way she spoke, the way she sat on the bench and raised her hand, two fingers bent into the palm, was like a queen on a throne, or Mary in the painting behind the altar at church. Duncan remembered what she had said about ships. Yet she did not look rich. Her shoes were cracked and the jacket was worn, the shine showing through where the pile had gone. Perhaps she was a Russian aristocrat in exile. Duncan would keep her secret. He was entirely in love with her.

'It's a very pretty name,' he said.

Marania seemed tired at first, but soon she became animated. She wanted to know where Duncan lived, and all the circumstances of his family. Were his grandparents still alive? Were his parents very rich? Or poor? Duncan stammered. He didn't know what she meant by these questions. It sounded as if she was measuring him for something. Part of him was uneasy about it, but he was happy just to talk to her, to tell her anything at all about himself, anything that might bind him to her. She did not speak about herself or her own life, not in any direct way. Duncan did not mind. He would have been happy with anything.

'My dad is like that,' said Duncan. He pointed to a man sitting on a bench reading a newspaper. There was a bright blue butterfly perched on a leaf, not an inch from his ear, spreading its shining wings in the sun. Marania laughed and softly clapped her hands. 'My dad is like most people. He never notices anything,' said Duncan. 'People don't really look at things. They don't notice what's all around them.'

Marania lowered her head and looked up at him through her fringe as though he had said something marvellously wise. Duncan could not think why he had not recognized her, on the steps. Her hair was different today, that was it. Longer than he remembered. And the way she moved was different, in her tight skirt, with her hands in the pockets of her jacket. It was very tight, her skirt, and very short.

She had not touched him, and Duncan could not touch her. While he talked, he could look into her blue eyes and bathe in the radiance of her incredible beauty, and that was all. He was stunned by her. Twenty minutes ago he had been resigned to never seeing her again. Her presence washed away that feeling, along with everything else that was past.

'Duncan,' said Marania at last. 'Have you got a girlfriend?'

A warm flush bloomed inside him. Duncan was remembering that boys were supposed to take the lead, and he didn't know what on earth to do. He couldn't have led a baby. His skin felt prickly all over, his hands were quivering. His heart was pumping hard and loud. All he could do was shake his head. Marania seemed content to let it go at that. Surely her breasts were bigger too today?

Duncan willed his quivering hand to lift from his knee and reach over to cover Marania's hand, which was perfectly quiet and still. His hand wouldn't move. Duncan was relieved. He was repelled by the perfection of her skin, terrified to touch her in case that was the thing that would break the magic spell and drive her away. Duncan was in love with her. But while they could sit there talking, not touching, not moving, it would remain safely latent, merely potential.

She started talking about pop music. Duncan hadn't heard of any of the people she mentioned, but then he found most pop music noisy and overbearing. He said he liked Lulu. It almost seemed like a

betrayal, to mention the name of another woman in her presence. But Marania approved, as she seemed to approve of every—

thing Duncan said and did. She nodded excitedly. She looked back over her shoulder, the collar of her jacket standing back from the curve of her neck. There was no one within earshot. She said, 'She's very sexy, isn't she?'

For a moment Duncan could not breathe. Lulu was his favourite fantasy. In newsagents he would imagine opening a magazine and finding pictures of Lulu taking off her clothes, baring her luscious breasts for him to admire. He could not say so. In confusion and shame he heard himself deny it. 'Lulu? You're joking,' he said, trying to sound heartless.

Marania leaned back, lifting one knee, wrapping her hands around it. Her skirt tightened across her thighs. 'Have you ever had a girlfriend?' she said. She said the word *girlfriend* delicately, as if suggesting something else.

Duncan hated her now. She was torturing him. He could not lie, not about that; not to her, whatever he might pretend sometimes at school. He knew that in the next moment, or the next, she would decide he was not worth her attention. She would say something that would bring all his wishes crashing down into dust; say it was time she went home, wish him good luck, and walk away with his heart. 'No,' he said, hollowly.

Her blue eyes gleamed brighter. 'Are you a virgin, then?' she said. Duncan blushed and glowered.

She said: 'A virgin! I knew it!' And she gave him a hug, rather more sketchy than Duncan would have preferred. She put her arms about him lightly and briefly, as if she was awarding him a Sunday School prize. When she let go his ears were burning hot and he knew his face was crimson.

Then she knelt up on the bench and said: 'Let's *see* what we can do about that.'

Duncan melted. His hand wavered up off his knee, as if fumbling for her shoulder, but all his sinews were cut, and the hand dropped back, irresolute. Duncan knew somewhere inside that what she was saying was exactly what he longed for, but he was full of dread. He was so frightened he could not remember how he longed every day and every night for someone, anyone, a woman.

He said: 'Here?'

Her eyes said yes. Then she leaned over and started to kiss him on the mouth.

It was not as he had read, that a girl's kiss would be soft and delicate and sweet. It was another person with her mouth on top of his. Her lips were mobile and wet, strong and sure. Her breath was on his tongue. He felt her hands on him, running down over his hips and stroking his bottom. In terror he felt himself struggle and pull away. 'Someone will come!' he whimpered.

She sat back, undismayed. Her mouth seemed very large on her face, as though it had grown by feeding on his.

Tonight, then,' she said.

Duncan couldn't imagine how he might get out of the house at night. Right now, they had the park to themselves. Was he being silly? He thought of boys at school. What would they do?

Marania seemed to know. 'Come behind the bushes,' she said.

Duncan looked at the bushes. They were thick and rose close against the wall, with no space behind. The branches were many, and all twigs and leaves. If there was any room back there it would be dark and unpleasant and they would have to crouch. Still she was leading him there. He was frightened, he did not believe he could do whatever it was you had to do. He resisted her. 'No, no,' he said.

She stood still, waiting. At once Duncan felt ashamed. He had panicked and spoilt everything. He couldn't stay there with her. He was humiliated. 'No, I've got to go now,' he said. 'I've got to go home. I'll see you later, all right? Bye.' Then he turned and rushed from the park, not looking back though it tore his heart to go.

As before, his mood changed even while he was walking up the street. A woman was standing on a chair, cleaning her sitting-room window with a yellow duster. Ladders and dustbins stood silent in dark side-alleys. Duncan thought: We *could have gone* anywhere. He remembered a couple he had surprised once, screwing in a car under a railway bridge. He thought of what he was turning his back on and felt his cold prick begin to stir in his pants.

He ran back to the park, but Marania had gone. Duncan cursed himself aloud. Then he saw her, along by the shops, and he started to run after her; but something stopped him. He was sure she would be angry with him. She had offered herself, and he had spurned her. If she saw him coming she would run away, and avoid him for ever. Duncan hung back, keeping close to the railings, not crossing the road until she was on the other side. Between shuffling pedestrians her scissoring legs flashed messages to him, hurry, be careful, hurry, be careful. Duncan did not know what to do.

A bus pulled in and he saw her run for it, grabbing the chrome pole with one slim hand and disappearing inside. Duncan ran too, feeling jolted and clumsy. Diving on to the bus, he ducked his head as he went upstairs. He took the seat directly over the door, and every time they stopped he pressed his head against the window to see if she got off. He didn't see her. The conductor came to take his fare. 'All the way,' said Duncan, desperately. He had enough, luckily.

The bus went into a part of town Duncan didn't know. The shops were small and shabby; some of them were empty, with boards across the windows. People walked slowly along as though there were no place in particular they meant to get to. Duncan was convinced he'd missed her. Then he saw her getting off, and ran for the stairs.

Marania did not look round. He followed her to a dead-end street of two low, bare brick terraces, grey net curtains at the windows. Duncan glimpsed a face looking out at him warily from an upstairs room, a strange face, deformed somehow, he only saw it for a moment. In the road a gang of children were playing with a disintegrating grocery box. One was sitting inside with his arms resting on the rim, holes in the elbows of his pullover. They all turned to look at Duncan as he went by. All the children were wearing masks of different creatures: a frog, Duncan saw, and something that looked as if it was meant to be a turkey. They were very lifelike, even when they opened their mouths and started to shout.

The door Marania had come to opened and a woman in a slip appeared. Duncan turned about and started to walk back down the street, quickly. The children were still shouting, hooting and howling like the creatures whose faces they wore. Duncan kept his head down. *Marania,* he thought. Don't look back at her. Don't. At once he looked back. More adults were coming out on to the street with big hairy dogs. They were all standing looking at him. Duncan lost his nerve and broke into a run.

He thought about Marania a lot during the next week. Sometimes, when he recalled how he had behaved, he hoped he would never see her again. He lay on his back on the bedroom floor, clutching his cardigan to his chest and rolling from side to side in anguish and embarrassment. When he felt bolder, or simply lonelier, he wondered how he could win her back. He could never go to her house again. He felt he should purify himself. He stopped his habit of going into newsagents and leafing through dirty magazines. He tried to stop masturbating, but then he dreamed of Marania in black lace underwear which seemed to multiply while he tried to undo it, and he woke stiff and disconsolate.

It rained, off and on. When it cleared up he went and sat in the park. He took a plastic bag to sit on and a notebook in which to write down his thoughts. He wanted Marania to come, and see him writing a poem. She did not appear. Duncan went back to reading. He tried to read Under Milk Wood, but he found it hard to follow, and there was too much sex in it. He read *Ice Station Zebra* and *The Most Dangerous Game*.

One evening he was alone in the park. The summer was ageing, and the late sunlight glowed like honey among the leaves. Lulu came down the steps.

She did not take the most direct route, but walked around the corner of the lawn and then down a diagonal path towards him. She stopped at the sundial, resting one hand on it and looking straight at him.

'Hallo, Duncan,' she said.

He stared at her, almost rising up out of his seat. It was Lulu, there was no doubt about it, even in the crowding shadows of the park. She was shorter than he had imagined, but her legs were plump and her mini-dress was tight under her arms, and cut low to show the tops of her breasts.

'How do you know my name?' asked Duncan.

Lulu smiled her chubby-cheeked smile, full of sparkling white teeth, and sat down beside him on the bench.

'Your mother said I'd find you here.' She sat quite close. She said: 'You're a lucky boy, Duncan!'

Lulu's dress was green, to match her eyes. Her eyelashes were drawn out in little points with black mascara. She smelled of some kind of perfume. Her lips were pink and ripe. Duncan could hear her accent; the way she said 'Duncan' reminded him it was a Scottish name. He had seen her real name in one of his sister's magazines. He could not remember what it was. Marie Laurie, it kept ringing in his head, Marie Laurie. But that was someone else.

'Would you like to come with me?' Lulu asked him. 'Come on,' she said, bouncing to her feet again and holding out her hand.

Duncan stood up and let her take his hand. He was still gazing at her face, in shock, understanding nothing. Her eyes were blue now, blue as piled storm clouds. Duncan's own eyes grew wide; and then he knew. He screamed and jerked his hand free. He sat down, his hands spread wide, almost crawling up the back of the bench in his agitation. His horrified gaze never left her face. Because it was not hers, it was Lulu's. But this was not Lulu. Duncan sat and shook, and stamped his feet on the paving stones. Then he flung himself sideways and vomited over the arm of the bench.

Dizzy, he felt her hand on his arm. He lay there rigid and shaking and would not look round. 'Duncan,' she said. Her voice had changed. 'Duncan, it's all right,' she said.

He looked round then, full of fear: afraid to look, afraid not to. It was a monster squatting there at his feet, someone he didn't know, like a trick photograph, half Lulu, half Marania. He retched again and let his head hang down.

'I'm sorry,' he croaked. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

Eventually she calmed him down. She stopped him apologizing, gave him a tissue to wipe his mouth, and held him in her arms until he relaxed. In the dying light of the empty park she told him an incredible story, told it briefly and without any drama at all.

'I'm not human,' she said. 'We are another race. We can make ourselves look like other people. Anyone else at all.'

Another race. Duncan thought of Tarzan, of paperbacks they sold in heaps at Woolworth's, with yellow edges and crude pictures on the front. Men with unknown weapons and eyes like owls pursued a terrified woman in a torn blouse over black and scarlet rocks. Duncan thought his head would burst. 'Where do you come from?' he asked her.

'We were here before you.'

He refused to understand this.

She cradled his head. 'I've sat and watched you, over there, and you didn't know. You didn't know it was me.' She held his head to her breasts and rocked him to and fro. Duncan didn't want that. But he couldn't look at her face. He would not burst into tears, he would not.

'I'm sorry I frightened you,' she said, and he snatched a look. She was biting her lip as if she wanted to laugh and knew she mustn't. 'Will you forgive me?'

She was holding him. Her breasts felt real against his shoulder. 'Well?' she said. 'Duncan?'

'... Course I will,' he said huskily. In the ringing crater of his mind he groped for words. 'I just—'

'Shh,' she said, and laid a finger on his lips.

She lifted her head then, as if she'd heard something, or perhaps she was only gazing up into the darkening sky. He looked at the white curve of her throat in the twilight.

Quicker and quieter, she said, 'Will you be here on Thursday?'

Thursday was a week away. He stared at her, feeling her about to depart from him. 'Yes,' he said desperately, 'Thursday, yes.'

She blinked at him slowly, as if she were feeling slightly sorry for him; as if he were a dog she had hurt and wished she hadn't. 'You won't be ill again, will you?' she said, sceptically. Then she bent and whispered in his ear. 'Just think, Duncan. Any woman you like. Anyone at all.'

Duncan started shaking again. He gripped her hand tightly in his own. 'No,' he blurted out. 'No. I want you to be you.'

She sat back. The contours of her face slipped suddenly, the bone of her brow realigning itself like a rib straightening inside an umbrella. Duncan flinched, but made himself watch. It was nothing, he told himself, though it twisted his stomach and he began to sweat. It was soon over. Now she looked exactly

as he had seen her at first, her forehead sleek as a child's, her eyes blue, her chin coming to a slight point.

'Like this?' she said.

'Yes,' said Duncan, and he kissed her. It took all his courage, but his love came rushing willingly, helplessly in, like the sea.

'All right,' Marania said. 'I'll try.' Then she stood and said softly, 'I'll go first,' as though there were a guard on the park, or somebody to be deceived. 'Till Thursday,' she said, and slipped away into the clotting darkness in Lulu's dress. It looked too big for her.

Reeling, Duncan went home. He told his mum he had a headache, and went straight to bed and slept for twelve hours. When he woke he wanted to shriek his secret from the rooftops. Instead he went running around here and there all week, talking excitedly about nothing and nursing the pride that billowed in his chest. His mother looked at him curiously, an anxious smile never far from her lips. Twice she felt his forehead for a temperature.

Tve got a girlfriend,' he wanted to tell her. But he could not tell anyone. He remembered his old daydreams of being a secret agent on an undercover operation, and he watched everyone he met to see if they too might be not human. He kept finding reasons to go past the park and just look in, in case Marania was there. She never was.

Thursday came and went, with never a sign. Duncan, who had been abstaining, masturbated ferociously all night, and later wept. She did not come the next day. All weekend, she did not come.

On Monday morning Duncan took the train to London. He liked going to London, though he couldn't afford to do it often, not as often as he'd have liked. He found comfort in the anonymity it conferred, the fact that no one knew who you were, or cared. In London, sooner or later, Duncan always ended up in Soho. This time he went straight there. For hours he roamed its crooked, confusing thoroughfares in a kind of frenzied daze. Here, they had whole shops full of sex mags. They had packs of black and white photos sealed in Cellophane bags: ordinary women, young housewives, posing in their underwear, getting out their breasts. In a public toilet Duncan paid them his tribute, with the hissing of the cisterns and the echoing scuffle of men's feet on the concrete floor for accompaniment.

On Tuesday, Duncan stayed at home and did some reading for the next term. On Wednesday he had to go out to the library, and do some shopping for his mum. Within minutes he met Marania, coming out of a clothes shop. She was with some boys, older than him. They looked Arabic, Duncan thought, or Italian. Marania stood with her feet apart and swung her handbag in front of her with both hands. 'Hallo, Duncan,' she said, happily.

'Hallo, Marania,' he said, as coldly as he could. He looked at her companions, wondering if she was going to introduce him. They put their heads back and looked at him.

'What happened on Thursday, then?' Duncan asked. It came out pitched rather high.

Marania considered. She rolled her eyes up and opened her mouth slightly, and ran the tip of her tongue around her teeth while she consulted her memory. Then she said, archly, 'You wouldn't believe me if I told you.'

For some reason the very phrase made Duncan angry. She was taunting him. She thought he was so innocent she could lead him by the nose. He had heard that some girls liked to try to do that.

Duncan put out his hand and took her by the sleeve. Instantly her brothers, or her bodyguard, or whoever they were, were standing around him in a crowd with their hands in their pockets.

Duncan ignored them. 'I've got to talk to you,' he said to Marania.

'Tomorrow,' she said.

'No, now,' said Duncan.

Marania moved her chin in a strange oval motion, flexing her shoulders like a cat. She looked at her companions. One of them said something terse in a foreign language. Marania gave him the smallest shake of her head, and a sweet smile. Then they turned and vanished, melting away into the crowd of passing shoppers before Duncan could see where they went.

She hugged him. For the first time it didn't thrill him.

He wanted to punish her for letting him down, and himself for going to Soho. Everything was going wrong. Duncan became utterly miserable. Everything was spoiled. They walked aimlessly through the

streets.

'I think I'm going mad,' he said. 'I keep thinking I see you. Why didn't you come?' he said angrily, and his eyes filled with tears.

She stroked his cheek and down under his jaw, with the tips of her fingers. 'I'm here now,' she said, and put an arm around his back.

Duncan ignored it. 'I don't understand you!' he said. 'Are you trying to drive me mad?'

At one point he had her pinned against a wall, not touching her, but standing in front of her with his arms propped either side of her shoulders. He was demanding she change her face again. She wouldn't. She stood there with her hands folded, and a distant, insouciant expression.

Dimly Duncan knew he should have left her some while ago, but he found himself stuck. He couldn't leave without getting something said, but he couldn't seem to say it. 'What are you, then,' he demanded sullenly, 'if you're not human? I don't know what you are,' he said. 'I don't think you do either.'

She changed then, her face becoming harder and more lined. 'Oh yes we do,' she said, her voice suddenly grown very deep; and she laughed.

More miserable than ever, Duncan had hit her before he knew it. He had raised his hand and slapped her deceiving face. She looked straight at him, mute and level. By mistake or on purpose she had turned towards the blow, and his hand had split her lip. Duncan felt very detached from it all. He knew he was being cold and cruel. He watched himself thinking he could get out a handkerchief for her and deciding not to. Horrified, he put his hands to the side of his head, his fingers rigid, and started to grizzle.

Marania dragged him firmly into a shop doorway and stood there with him, shielding him from the street with her body, hugging him hard. 'You don't have to be so impatient,' she said. 'There's lots of time.'

She was speaking in an easy, matter-of-fact way, as if he had never hit her, as if he had hallucinated it. Duncan knew that in a moment it would be as if it had never happened at all. She would never acknowledge he had hurt her, and that he could not bear. 'I can't stand it!' he protested, sobbing.

'Be valiant, Sir Knight,' she said. 'Be strong. Be at the park at six o'clock.' She wiped her mouth and kissed him, fitting her mouth precisely to his. By the time he looked at it, her lip was healed. There was no mark there at all.

Wretchedly he trailed home, with no heart for the errand he was on, or hope for the assignation to come. He hated himself for hitting her. Should he even go at six? Was there any point? Even if she did turn up, all they could do was hurt each other. What sort of girlfriend could she be? Did he love her at all, any more, really? He simply didn't know.

Boys at school had girlfriends. They kicked footballs for their approval, or felt them up in empty classrooms. Duncan didn't want to be the one who was different, who had a girlfriend he couldn't even tell anyone about. Couldn't, even if there was anyone who'd believe him. For her sake. 'People get very frightened and hunt us down,' she had said, very positively. 'It's happened before, it'll happen again.'

While the clock struck six Duncan stood alone on the steps with his hands in his pockets, looking into the deserted park. It was just coming on to rain. Witches, he thought. Werewolves. Doppelgdngers. Gypsies. You could see them everywhere, apparently, fiends in human shape, once you started to look for them.

Marania wasn't in the park, though.

Then she was. She was standing behind the sundial; she'd been there all along and he hadn't seen her. He wondered if they could make themselves invisible too.

Smiling despite himself, Duncan started up the path towards her. He felt ashamed of the way he'd treated her earlier. He loved her, that was all. She must know that. She must forgive him.

It started well, with a kiss. He put his arms around her neck and Marania rested her hands on his ribs for a while. Then convulsively she slipped them around his back and pressed her body to his. She teased his tongue into her mouth and sucked it. He had to come up for air. He pulled back his head and arched his back as he hugged her hard. He saw she was wearing the same clothes as she'd had on that morning, black calf boots and a short black raincoat. The coat was buttoned up to the neck, the collar turned up.

Duncan shivered. Rain splashed on his ears and his neck. 'Raining,' he said, nervously.

‘Good for you,’ she said, slyly. ‘Make you grow.’ Then she put her hand most decisively on the back of his head, and her tongue in his mouth.

His hands explored her body, tentatively at first, then desperately. The coat was thick and muffled everything. He remembered her in her jacket and miniskirt. At the same time he remembered every picture he had ever seen in a sex mag, the bodies of a thousand women flickering black and white in the cinema of his mind. Would Marania be wearing a suspender belt? If she would be Lulu for him, what else might she not do?

‘On Thursday I went to visit my aunt in hospital,’

Marania said, slowly, emerging from the kiss. In her mouth an utterly banal excuse could sound insulting, provocative, and maddeningly sexy, all at the same time. Duncan tried to stop her; he didn’t want to think about Thursday. But Marania continued.

‘She’s not ill. She just lives there, in the hospital. She imitates one disease after another, just to keep them happy. Sometimes she does several at once. When anyone begins to get suspicious, she goes to another ward and pretends to be someone else. I pay her visits: kin visits and courtesy visits, but sometimes just visits.’

She slipped out of Duncan’s embrace, took his hand firmly in her own, and walked him slowly down the path to a bench. It was not the nearest bench. It was the bench where they had first met.

‘While I was there on Thursday at the hospital, a cord assassin from a Chaos flank caucus came in and tried to kill my aunt. She’s not really my aunt, but that’s the closest word you have. People are always trying to kill her. I had to grab this one and kneel on him until the nurses came with some reinforcements. The nurses went back to work, convinced a doctor had taken charge. Then we took the assassin to a place we go to, by the river,’ she said, and she was coy suddenly, avoiding his eyes as they sat down, though sitting close to him. ‘We read him his future in his own entrails.’

Her voice was soft and silky, and her breath steamed slightly in the cold wet air. She extended a gloved forefinger and ran it down his arm.

T told you you wouldn’t believe me,’ she said.

Duncan could have made any effort she asked of him. Truth, madness, he didn’t care, it made no difference what it was. Like spies, he thought. ‘Are they trying to kill you?’ he asked.

She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head to one side. ‘Goodness me,’ she said. ‘Listen to him. Are they trying to kill me?’ she repeated, and chuckled, shaking her head, dismissing his question. Duncan simply couldn’t tell whether she meant they weren’t trying to kill her, these Chaos assassins, whoever they were; or whether she meant it was all too much to explain.

He tried to kiss her again, and found her eager. This at least was true, this moist, mutual searching. What was more, it was beginning to be nice. And it might be snatched away any moment, if Marania was running true to form, so Duncan determined to put scruples aside and take advantage.

In a while they separated again. It was still raining, Duncan realized. There were raindrops on her face, tiny ones in her eyelashes. Her face was so clear, even in the clouded evening. She moved aside from him, shifting around three-quarters on the bench, with one foot on the ground. She pulled the little finger of her right-hand glove. Then she pulled the thumb. Then she pulled each of the fingers in between, and slid the glove off her hand, and gave it to him. Duncan held it. He put it in his lap. It held the shape of her hand for an instant, then seemed to sag. Marania was taking off the other one.

‘Perhaps you are a Chaos assassin,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you are just pretending to be so—fixed.’ And she pressed her hand to the crotch of his trousers, her fingers going straight to the tender underside of his erection. Duncan gasped, a fountain of silver light shooting up into his brain.

‘So rigid,’ said Marania, in a low voice curling with satisfaction. She withdrew her hand, and stood before him.

Her raincoat had three big buttons. She opened the top one, the middle one, the bottom one. She flipped open the coat. She had nothing on underneath.

And she looked just as Duncan had always known she would look, just as he had imagined her in the solitude of his bed at night, firm uptilted breasts, flat stomach, the junction of her thighs a soft dark blur, a shadow of the encroaching night.

She sat him back on the bench, undoing his own coat, then pressing his chest lightly with one hand while opening his belt with the other. Duncan could smell the musk of her body, sweet as fresh bread, rich as the smell of mushrooms. She unzipped him, released his tingling cock into her hand. Her hand was very warm. She bent and kissed the end of his cock, as if she was blessing it; and she licked it lightly with the very tip of her tongue. It kicked in her hand.

'My valiant captain!' she said, fervently, as she straddled him.

Clasping her hips beneath her coat Duncan threw back his head and gasped. Rain fell in his mouth.

She moved on him, on the bench, holding his chin in her cupped hands, muttering aloud in a wiry, whistling language of her own. She kissed him all over his face. She was lithe and he was clumsy. Her muscles moved keenly under his hands, stretched and settled, stretched and settled.

He had thought, or feared, that if it ever finally truly actually happened he would come at once; but now that it was happening, happening, continuing, his climax seemed altogether remote, uncertain. The turmoil in his nerves, the friction of skin on skin, set his body stirring in a new and mysterious way, quite unlike anything he had managed on his own. But while Marania's moans and grunts grew more complicated and urgent, he felt no certainty he was ascending the gradient of his own release.

Photos of women cascaded in his mind again, and more dramatic images of his own, real little scenes, brightly lit, like excerpts from dreams. Girls he had seen in the library, Marania herself, in postures even more lewd than her present one. Duncan's erection hardened. Marania towered over him, ducking her head and sucking wetly at his neck. Blinded by her hair, he lost his way again. He lifted his hands to her neck, and felt it curving backwards from her spine. At that instant she reached her climax with a wild, high, breaking hoot of pleasure and despair.

They came then, gliding across the grass, her brothers, out of the shrubbery to reclaim her. Brothers, sisters, it was hard to tell. They still looked like people, except for their faces, which were long and pouchy, like the faces of fish. One of them threw back its head and pawed the air with its hand, crying in the same key as Marania, in a voice between whine of dog and yowl of cat. They stood in a semicircle on the grass and summoned their sister.

She slipped from Duncan's lap, brushing her hair out of her eyes. His cock felt cool and wet suddenly, shrinking swiftly. Marania kissed him quickly but tenderly on the mouth, and briskly slapped his cheek with her upright palm, a bizarre kind of salute. Then she went away with them, buttoning her raincoat. They'paid no attention to him at all.

Duncan zipped up his trousers and straightened his clothes. Then he went up into the street and followed them. One of them saw him, and they flowed away up a side-alley, vanishing into the back gardens as quickly as they had that morning among the crowd of shoppers. It didn't matter. Duncan had remembered the number of the bus. He rode, following landmarks until he reached the stop where she had got off before, then walked, uncertain at first and then more and more quickly, until he came to the dead-end-street. The rain had left off some time before, but the street was deserted. Yellow lights glowed behind the curtains, moving here and there as if someone were carrying them around.

Duncan came to the door he had seen Marania open. It was an ordinary front door, four panels, painted dull green a long time ago. It had a combined letter-box and knocker in pitted chrome. Duncan knocked. There was a scurrying, slithering sound beyond, and then complete silence. Out of the corner of his eye Duncan saw the front window curtain twitch. He kept his eyes on the door. It opened, by and by. A thin man with long grey hair stood there, wearing a greasy suit.

'I want to see Marania,' said Duncan.

The man stared at him, dully. He looked over his shoulder as if for someone to consult, but there was no one behind him. He wiped his hand down his unshaven cheek and his lips moved inarticulately. He looked behind him again, this time over the other shoulder. Then he looked at Duncan, resentfully, Duncan thought.

'You can come in,' he said, as though it was Duncan who was delaying.

The house smelled of spicy cooking, and beneath that of something acrid, like a blocked toilet. The hall was filthy. Breathing through his mouth, Duncan stepped inside past the grey man, who closed the door.

A large hairy animal had come nosing into the hall from somewhere. Duncan supposed it was a dog. He didn't know much about dogs. When this one moved, suddenly, Duncan thought perhaps it had too many legs. He pressed himself against the wall, and followed his conductor. They went into the living-room.

That was what it was, presumably, though it was not like any living-room Duncan had ever seen. It was dark and airless, cheap curtains taped shut across the window. Long scrolls of waxy yellow paper, illegible writing and small black shapes all over them, had been hung from the picture rail, and nets of herbs from the ceiling. There was obviously some furniture in the room, but it was difficult to say exactly what kinds because of the great number of its occupants.

They were all ages, it seemed, including one that was a babe in arms. Some looked like people, in ordinary clothes, and some like bald apes, and some of the apes looked like the fish-headed people that had taken Mara-nia from the park. There were more big hairy dogs. The fireplace had been half demolished, but there was a fire in it anyway. The room was as hot and steamy as an oven, and smelled like a bonfire in an elephant house. There was straw and old food trodden underfoot, and young ones playing in it. In the corner beside the door, bizarrely, was a TV set, on spindly legs with a two-pronged aerial on top. It was turned up quite loud, tuned to a quiz game where the audience laughed when a man banged a gong. Duncan's family hadn't got a TV, so he didn't recognize the programme. In any case, no one was watching it.

Most of the eyes in the room were watching him.

The rest were turned towards a towering, bulky figure who was, if anyone was, the centre of the gathering. She—Duncan knew for certain it was female, though afterwards he could never think how he knew—was sitting by the fire with a frame of beads and knotted string propped on her lap. Her great thick body was wrapped in shawls and draped in sheets, her heavy head wreathed in a grubby turban, sparse white hair escaping from its folds. After everyone else, she too turned to look at the newcomer.

She no longer looked like a woman, though presumably she had resembled many in her time. She did not look much like an ape or a fish. She looked more like a giant lizard. What he could see of her face and hands was blackened leather. Her skin was thick and quilted like a crocodile's, creased into a million folds. Her eyes were huge, big as drawer knobs, with no white to them at all. When she looked at Duncan, he knew she could see everything, everything and everyone there had ever been in the world. She was the hidden one; there was no hiding from her.

Gasping for breath in the stifling den, Duncan looked round for the grey man, to let him out again at once, but he could not see him there. He looked for Marania, looked all around for her. There was no one in the room he recognized. No one at all.

Duncan broke for the door and they let him go. He never knew why. He never knew why they did not lay hands on him and do away with him there and then. They had no reason to trust him. Perhaps they did not realize he was a human. (Duncan thought of the Old One, and remembered her eyes, and felt this speculation wither away.) Perhaps, whatever Marania said, they were not hostile. Perhaps she herself had meant him no harm.

But he never saw her again. He never looked for her. He left her house (if indeed that was her house), and didn't try to find it again. And though he lived in the town all his life, he never again set foot in the little park at the place where the houses had been knocked down. He went to work or stayed at home, in all weathers, and rarely went up to London for the day.

He turned it all over in his mind a good deal, through the years. He never spoke about it to anyone, never a word; and whenever he saw anything that made him think they were near, that he was even, perhaps, talking to one, he would sit tight and say nothing and, at the first convenient opportunity, leave. He often thought what he would have said, though, if he had ever been put into the position of having to say something. How, Duncan would have said, could he ever have trusted her? Perhaps she had been in that hellish room when he came in, and said nothing to rescue him while he stood there sweating and twitching, in terror of his life; or perhaps she had not. And he would see again the way her companions had embraced her as they went out of the park—or had they been restraining her, taking her prisoner? He could never decide.

As time went by, there were other women, inevitably, who wished to associate themselves with him. Duncan did not encourage them, and none of them stuck, particularly. They could so easily have been her. Each of them could have been her. He could have let himself go too far with one and only then discover. It was unlikely, he supposed, as he turned out his bedside light, but then again, how on earth could you be sure?

Deep In The Native Land

Michael Ibeji

When she dug *the* tunnels, her hair was *still* brown.

Today her head* is *white as snow …

The partridge in the night cries out the love of the native land. *The* Mother, she digs her gaiieries, defences, ***Protecting each step of her children. Immeasurable is our* native land.** *The* enemy must drive his probes in everywhere. Your *unfathomable* entrails, Mother, *Hide whole* divisions under this land. *The dark* tunnels make their own *light* … Immeasurable is our native land. Your entrails, Mother, are unfathomable.

Excerpts from *The Mother—The Native Land* by Duong Huong Ly: translated by T. Mangold and J. Penycate.

PHU MY HUNG, SOUTH VIETNAM, 13 AUGUST 1968 At 10.30 hours, Company A of the 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red One), on an extended sweep north of the Ho Bo Woods, was ambushed and engaged by an unknown number of Vietcong. Initial contact revealed the presence of a tunnel complex in the vicinity and, accordingly, the area was secured while Diehard Six of the 1st Engineer Battalion was notified. Alpha squad was immediately dispatched into the area. Initial attempts to enter the complex at 12.45 hours resulted in the wounding of Private Robert Barr, establishing **that** the tunnels were 'hot'. Sgt. Pete Rivero volunteered to take point, and began to probe the tunnel complex at 13.25 hours. At 14.07 hours, Sgt. Rivero encountered enemy within the complex, and was mortally wounded. When the other members of the squad went to his aid, they were caught underground in a grenade blast, killing two members of the team, and wounding the third, Private Dick Seward. After their bodies had been recovered, CS gas was pumped into the complex, denying its use to the enemy.

The After Action report stank. Non gratum anus roden-tum in the words of the Tunnel Rats' own motto: not worth a rat's ass. Any veteran Rat could tell you that CS gas was useless in those tunnels, and I wasn't one hundred per cent convinced that all the bodies had been recovered. That's why I was in Rocket City talking to the survivor, Dick Seward, while the gooks outside the perimeter treated us to a pretty fireworks display and demonstrated how Lai Khe base got its nickname. They tell me that prior to Tet the base had endured over a hundred rocket attacks per day.

Seward was lanky for a Tunnel Rat, stretched out on the hospital bunk to a length of about five-eight, but he had the wizard's touch with explosives. I'd memorized his resume, and it read like something out of the movies. The guy'd been blown out of more holes than Elmer Fudd, but if Bugs Bunny had ever gone up against him we'd be eating rabbit stew. He once lit the fuse on 300 pounds of explosive underground with a cigar, then calmly told his commander they had sixty seconds to get out before it turned them into ketchup. The blast had blown them out of the hole like corks out of a bottle, rupturing both his commander's eardrums, but leaving Seward with nothing but scratches. Where explosives were concerned, Dick Seward led a charmed life. That's why they kept him in the Tunnel Rats.

'So tell me about it,' I said, as another rocket made like the Fourth of July outside. 'How'd you get hit?'

I was a Special Forces Investigator, attached to Military Intelligence. I'd just returned from a tour up river, chasing some motherfucker who'd been sent after some gook general and had never come back. I could have told Pendleton what had happened even before I went up there, and saved myself a whole lot of hassle. Set a psycho to kill a psycho, and the best you'll get is one rogue psycho. Our agent had gone native, completely over the edge. I'd had to dig him out of his hole and kill him. He'd been falling apart

long before he logged that mission, and he should never have been sent in the first place. I swear Pendleton's got worse since we transferred into Military Intelligence.

Pendleton's my boss, and he was turning into a bureaucratic asshole. Basically, he was losing touch. He was so far removed from the war on the ground, that he failed to realize what it was doing to his operatives. That was fatal.

He sat behind that big mahogany desk of his, with his hands steepled over his paunch, and he said: 'So, Arnold, what do you make of the report?'

I hate being called Arnold. Call me Ferret, call me Arnie, call me Lt Gertz, but don't call me Arnold, unless you're a fat rear-echelon motherfucker called Pendleton who's just about to land another pile of shit on my poor, unsuspecting head.

'Reads like something out of a textbook,' I said,'"How Not to Go Ratting in One Easy Lesson." You ask me, the gooks are still down there, and they haven't even been mussed.' I tossed the report back on to his desk, already memorized. 'So what is it you haven't told me?'

Pendleton let a smile crease his fat lips. 'Very astute,

Arnold. That is why I am assigning you to this case. I need your quick mind, and your obvious abilities. You might like to cast your eyes over this.'

This' turned out to be the transcript of a Hoi Chan debrief taken two days after the events described in the After Action report. Some gook had defected, claiming to come from the very complex that had been hit, burbling some crap about a *raksasa* and begging for asylum.

Pendleton was looking supercilious. He was beginning to get on my nerves. Recently, he'd got a big 'Need to Know' kick, which meant that screwing decent information out of him was like getting a gook peasant to give a straight answer. I, for one, had had enough.

'Look,' I snapped, 'why don't you cut the crap, and tell me what all this is about? Then, maybe, I can start doing my job.'

'Do you know what a *raksasa* is, Arnold?' he asked.

'No.'

'It is a piece of Eastern mythology: a jaguar spirit conjured by the soul of a great warrior who is unjustly killed. It seeks vengeance on those who have slain him.'

'And this Hoi Chan convert wants us to protect him from one, right?'

'Correct, Arnold. Specifically, he wants us to save him from the wrath of a raksasa which is haunting the Phu My Hung complex, and according to his testimony has already killed his cell commissar.'

'Oh brilliant,' I said, 'another fucking weird case.'

'I couldn't have put it better myself,' smiled Pendleton.

So here I was, dodging rockets in the base camp of the 1st Engineer Battalion, Tunnel Rats, talking to a loony who thought it was a big joke that he'd just been blown out of yet another hole with nothing but mild concussion, while his buddies had been turned into Jello.

'It was Barr's turn to go point,' he told me, 'so we lowered him down the hole, and all of a sudden he started kicking and screaming, and thrashing about on the rope like there was no tomorrow, and we tried to pull him up, but he wouldn't come, and he started screaming even louder. Then, suddenly, the screaming stopped. Charlie must have been waiting there for him at the bottom of the shaft, with a big bamboo spear which he shoved through his groin, pinning him to the wall. We couldn't drop grenades down there, for fear of hitting Barr, but we couldn't pull him back up without sending somebody else down first to cut him loose. And of course, Charlie was probably still waiting at the bottom. Well, that didn't bother Ratman ...'

I interrupted. 'Ratman? That's Sergeant Rivero's nickname, right?'

'Yeah, that's right. The Ratman, he lived to go down those holes. There was nothing he liked better than a hot hole. When he got the smell of a VC down there, he just came apart at the seams. He'd start growling and giggling, and jumping up and down, all jittery until he got down there, and then he'd just go still. Fucking strange. He used to smell 'em. He'd just sit there for a while, and get accustomed to the tunnel, then he'd go after 'em. Hated torches, reckoned they made you a sitting target, can't say I blame him. We worked out a system where he'd sneak on ahead, one bend in front of us, and we'd follow

behind making as much racket as we could. The noise would distract Charlie and cover the Ratman's approach, and he'd sniff 'em out and take 'em by surprise. He was damn good at it.'

I knew the feeling. I'd been a Tunnel Rat once, before they transferred me into SPEFINT. You could smell

Charlie down in those tunnels. You could smell his sweat, his urine, and his breath: and he could smell you too, taste the scent of fear borne on the carbolic tang of your soap. I stopped washing when our team was on call. There were times, down in those dark holes, when you could feel the flutter of his eyelid, and the two of you would stare at one another, face to face over the eternal gulf of the dark, and you knew he was there, and he knew you knew. Those ones you left alone. You edged back out, and you told them the tunnel was cold, and you lay awake at night, because in your nightmares he grinned at you as he squeezed the trigger.

'You OK, Lieutenant?' Seward was looking at me oddly.

I nodded. 'So the Sergeant went down the hole and freed Barr,' I said. 'What happened next?'

'Well, the Ratman, he refused to come back up,' said Seward. 'He just sat there in the dark and waited till we was ready. He was like that. When he knew Charlie was near by, he got real strange.'

'How long did it take to get Barr out?' I asked.

'

'Bout half an hour. The Ratman freed the stake and did what he could down there, but he couldn't take the stake out, so we had to lift Barr out real slow. By the time we got him to the surface, he'd lost so much blood, there wasn't much hope for him.'

'I doubt there was much anyway,' I mused. 'The Sergeant didn't encounter the gook down there straight away, then?'

'No. Charlie was long gone. He'd fallen back to his second position. That was the problem. When we finally followed him up, he was waiting.'

Weren't they always? I let Seward continue.

'We were doing everything by the book. Our book. It had worked before, so why shouldn't it work again?

The Ratman snuck ahead, as always, and we followed up, firing volleys at the floor with our pistols, and generally making as much ruckus as we could. I was third man, with the demos. Jim Thornton and Jerry Ellis were up ahead, which was lucky for me. All of a sudden, we hears this terrible scream, like a howl, coming from up in front, and we reckon that the Ratman's hit trouble.'

This scream. Was it human? Did the Sergeant make it?'

Seward eyed me strangely. Fair enough, it was a strange question. 'Hell, damned if I know,' he said. Tt could've been coming from the Devil hisself for all I care. It just came echoing down the tunnel, and it was chased by this crunching and gurgling, and soft, squidgy sounds that bounced along the walls. It weren't very nice, scared the shits out of me.'

'What happened?'

'Looks like the Ratman got careless. He found a trapdoor going up, and he must not have smelled Charlie through it, 'cos he stuck his head through the hole, and Charlie threaded another bamboo stake through his neck. He was hanging there, with his legs kicking, when we reached him, and just as we got there, Charlie rolled a grenade down through the trapdoor and blew the whole thing to shit.' He grinned. 'Lucky for me Elly and the Thorn was in the way, 'cos they took all the frags and the blast just shunted me ass backwards along the shaft. Me and the blow, we got an understanding. I give it a good time once in a while, and in return, it don't frag me. You dig?'

Like I say, the guy was a fucking loony, thought explosives talked to him. Apart from that, the last bit of his statement didn't add up. 'Did you say the Sergeant got caught by the old trapdoor trick?'

Seward sat up, his frog-like face jaundiced in the pale lamplight. 'Yeah, looks that way. Not that I could tell that much. Elly and the Thorn was in the way mostly, all I could see was his legs, kicking and jerking through that hole. When I crawled back after the blow, they was all spread over the tunnel walls, and there weren't much left to see. You could've put what was left into a Willy-Pete bag.'

I could imagine it. In the confined space of the tunnels, the explosive force of a grenade gets

concentrated, bouncing off the walls and ripping anyone in the centre of the blast to shreds. I'd seen it myself. I'd scraped more than one man off the walls in my time. The bags they kept white phosphorus smoke-powder in were little larger than a small satchel, but you really could pack the remains of a tunnel-blasted Rat into one. How Seward had escaped the blast, I didn't know, any more than I knew how Sergeant Pete Rivero, better known as Ratman, an experienced Tunnel Rat with over two tours' experience, had got himself pig-stuck by the oldest trick in Charlie's book.

Unfortunately, I could think of only one way to find out.

I woke up. It was night. The malformed moon hung bright in the sky, shining the colour of pus. It hurt my eyes. They would be all right down in the tunnels. Nothing moved. I didn't expect it to.

The Hoi Chan defector's statement had said the tunnels were cold, abandoned by him and his buddies once they realized a raksasa was in there. The Big Red One had avenged the attack on its Rat squad in the usual subtle manner, and bombed Phu My Hung into oblivion, not leaving so much as a blade of grass standing. I wasn't expecting company. Nevertheless, I'd been here five days and nights, waiting, watching, making sure no slit-faced little gooks were still hanging around. I hated going back into those tunnels. Out here on my own, unloved and unsupported, I wanted to be damn sure I had nothing but a folk memory to face down there.

It was clean. Nothing was moving. Charlie usually came out at night, to take a dump, to cook, gather food and generally get some fresh air that hadn't been breathed by at least three people already. I'd sprinkled talcum powder around the entrance, an old trick just to make sure, but no footprints had sullied it in the last four nights, so I was pretty certain the complex was cold.

The entrance had been easy to find. Usually they were a bitch: you could be within three feet of one and still not know where it was. You knew it was there because of all the frigging booby traps in the area, the gooks liked to protect their tunnel entrances, but finding the sucker was like looking for a clean whore in Saigon. However, this entrance had been blown off its hinges by the Big Red One, and the gooks' hasty repair job gave it away. The signs were obvious to anyone with experience. The stand of bamboo which camouflaged it had been newly planted, and was just a little too regular, a little too well-ordered to have occurred naturally. That was lucky.

I'd already located the booby traps and worked out my route. It went over a punji pit to the left of the trapdoor, one of those nasty little foot-sized ones with half the barbs pointing downwards so you couldn't pull your foot back out. It had been smeared with festering shit just to make it more interesting. This put me in position to dismantle the tripped crossbow set to go off when you lifted the trapdoor. Then I could lower myself into the hole.

It was pitch black down there, but like Ratman Rivero, I don't believe in torches. Even if you hold them as far from your body as you can, they still give the gooks too much to shoot at. I keep one handy, in case I need to dismantle a booby trap or come across something interesting, but down here in the entrails of Mother Earth, I rely on smell and touch and hearing honed to perfection. What they can't tell me is going to kill me anyway.

I was sweating already, as much through overheating as through fear. I'd taped down all the orifices of my clothing with masking tape, to keep out the fire ants. You couldn't keep out the Chiggers, invisible little bastards that got under your skin just by touching you and itched like shit, but you could keep out the fire ants and all the other creepy-crawlies that infested these tunnels. It was an uncomfortable way to do it, but not nearly as painful as having an ant nibbling at your crotch.

It was foul down there. It smelled of mud and shit and death and rotting things. You forgot what it was like, up there in the clean air of the jungle, where the smell of blood and napalm mingled with the scent of wood-smoke and the tang of cordite. Down here in the tunnels, the stench literally took your breath away. You just had to sit and wait while your nose got used to the olfactory war that was being waged against it and began to filter out the natural odours, making room for the dangerous ones that told you death was waiting round the corner. In a bad tunnel, it could take you forty minutes or more, just sitting still, your eyes watering* trying not to choke.

Eventually, I moved on.

The tunnel wove through the earth like the ripple of an anaconda. I counted the turns off in my

memory: one left, one right, two left, two right, three left, and so on. The tunnels twist so much that ordinary grunts like Seward just take it for granted and ignore it, but I like to have some idea of how far I've come. Even with my memory, I didn't know where I was in relation to the surface. Down there in the dark, you lose all sense of direction. You just put one knee in front of the other, slide your hand along the earth, up the walls, across the roof, breathe a sigh of relief when you don't find anything, and repeat the process again and again and again.

I smelled it before I heard it. I could taste it on the air. A rat. It was sitting round the corner, malevolent, waiting. I eased my torch into my left hand, wrapping my fingers around it, and slid up to the bend as softly as I could. It let out a screech of fury when I flicked the beam on, rearing back on its haunches and punching the air, slavering teeth bared under an agitated snout. Its eyes were bright points of glistening yellow, darting to and fro as it strained towards me, pulling on its leash.

It was attached to the wall by a length of wire extending from a bamboo tube, and was completely blocking the passage. We had all heard rumours of plague-infected rats used to guard the tunnels. The story goes that the Tropic Lightning Division found an underground laboratory where the gooks had been infecting the critters. I wasn't going anywhere near that thing, but I didn't want to shoot it. The complex may have been abandoned by the gooks, but I didn't want to alert whatever they had left behind. I began searching the earth around me. The gooks had to have some way of getting round the thing, and the bamboo tube suggested that the leash could be retracted, pinning the rat against the wall.

I found the loop in the ceiling, but I wasn't stupid enough to pull it without checking it out first. Sure enough, those gooks had been double sneaky. The wire was set to trip a box trap, dropping a nest of scorpions on top of your head if you didn't insert a safety pin first. I set the pin, but I still wasn't taking any chances. I fixed a length of wire from my own supply to the loop, and played it round the corner before I pulled. There was no bang, no snap of sharp stakes, no thud of a crossbow or hiss of a deadly snake. I hadn't really expected one, but you didn't stay alive down there without being paranoid.

The rat had been pulled back to the tube, held there by the neck. I slid up to it, keeping the wire taut. It was still struggling to get at me when my knife nailed it to the wall, spilling its guts all over the floor.

I probed the area very carefully. I figured the gooks weren't going to go to all that trouble unless they had something to protect. I was right. I noticed it first because of the gouges in the floor. The rat couldn't have made those, no matter how big it was. Something had been here before me. Something big and mean which had torn at the earth with long, sharp tools. I shuddered, thinking of jaguars, but it could just as easily have been made with a knife.

It had exposed a trapdoor. Some attempt had been made to conceal it again, presumably by the gooks, and it would have passed any but the most rigorous examination: but it was there, bevelled into the floor, the sort you lifted with a finger and swivelled sideways. I checked it with a fine toothcomb. There had been a trap, a sneaky *little* trick with a one-step snake inserted into the most obvious fingerhole. They called them one-step snakes because that's about as far as you got after it bit you before you died. Someone, something, had slit its head open with a razor. The real fingerhole was more carefully hidden on the opposite side of the trapdoor.

On a hunch, I checked the rat-trap before I opened the trapdoor. Sure enough, there was an old bloodstain on the wall. Somebody, presumably Sergeant Rivero, had found this trap before me. The gooks had reset it since, replacing the dead rat with a new one. Presumably they did it during their clean-up, just before they found out about the raksasa and abandoned the complex.

I opened the trapdoor, and immediately wished I hadn't.

A wave of fetid air rushed out at me, dark and musty, carrying whispers on the wind, promises of death and torture, sinister secrets shared in a sea of pain. I slammed the door and sat on it, shivering violently. I knew what was down there. I'd been into tunnels like that before, the lower levels, where the ones who waited for you didn't blink, and fed on your fear, reeling you in until you were right on top of them and there was no escape but death: yours or theirs.

I would have to go down there. I knew I would. The gooks had protected that entrance with three different kinds of trap, so it was damned important to them. It was bound to hold the answers I was looking for, but I sure as hell wasn't going down there until I really had to.

I moved on, looking for any excuse to avoid going back to that hole. Two bends further on, I found the place where Ratman Rivero had been ambushed.

It was a small hole in the ceiling surrounded by tree roots. It probably led up to a spider hole; a marksman's firing-post overlooking the dead zone around the main tunnel entrance. The corridor carried on, but I had no doubt it led to a dead end, with a trip-wire intended to make that terminal strung across it. I didn't intend to find out. I checked for signs of damage. They were everywhere. The tree roots were smashed and bloodstained, with shards of bone and metal embedded all over them. In one cranny, I found the remains of a finger which the clean-up crew had missed on the hasty evac. This was where the team had been fragged. I took a couple of deep breaths, reminding myself that they said this place was deserted, then thrust myself up and through the hole, hoping to hell there wasn't any booby trap waiting for me above.

I emerged inside a hollow tree, bathed by the slimy light of the moon. Even as I spun round, a clammy hand clamped itself on my shoulders and a ravaged face thrust its nose into mine. I went ape: screaming, yelling, blasting and crying. Its head exploded, showering me with gobbets of blood, brains and bone; and all the while it kept on batting at me with its hands, until I ran out of bullets and it stopped jerking and slumped against the inside of the bole.

The stench this close was overwhelming. In a mixture of fear and revulsion, my stomach rebelled and emptied what little it contained over the corpse in front of me. It was the upper torso of a man, what was left of it, or at least I think it was. Its head had been blown away in my panic, making it impossible to identify, but close up you could see it wore the rags of a Vietnamese peasant. Its lower chest, stomach and legs simply weren't there, leaving it balanced precariously above the hole. When I came through, I must have dislodged it, causing it to flop forward on to me, and the force of my gunshots had kept it jerking after my initial fright.

It had been there for a couple of weeks, and the bloated flesh was now sloughing off the bone and turn—

ing into a grub-feast, but enough was left to reveal the marks of violence. Someone, or something, had cut this geek up pretty bad. The remaining shreds of its lower torso were consistent with the traumatic amputation of an explosion, but the upper torso was criss-crossed by deep, diagonal slashes which had peeled open the flesh. No wonder the other gooks had thought a jaguar spirit was on the loose.

Pieces were beginning to fit together: Ratman Rivero, the trapdoor behind me, the abandoned corpse in the tree trunk. I didn't like what I was thinking. I liked it even less because I was going to have to go down into the lower levels to prove it.

It was dark and fetid and sinister in the lower levels. The air hung lifeless in the black void, magnifying every sound, so that the nervous rasp of my breath sounded like the anguished wheezing of a dying man. Up above me, the pale hole of the trapdoor, with its dead rat and its box of scorpions, looked as inviting as the door of a dust-off helicopter.

I was ready. I didn't feel it, but I was ready. My body wanted to hyperventilate, but I wouldn't let it. Clutching gun and torch in sweating hands, I began to feel my way into the gloom.

I came across the first corpse almost immediately, filling most of the passage. Playing the torch over it, I could see at once that it wasn't human. I hadn't expected it to be. It was shorter and more sinuous than most of our kind, with a fluted bone structure adapted by generations of evolution within the tunnels, yet it was unmistakably Weerde. Its oriental features had become elongated in death, with a pronounced snout and a gaping mouth arrayed with sharp canines and carnassials, and the complex muscles of its limbs had reverted to a more feline physiology. I thought of jaguars.

The gooks didn't know what they nurtured deep underground. We have been fighting a secret war against the Mothers and their servants for centuries, even before the Mongols swept into Indo-China at our behest. The Americans are simply the last of a long line of human proxies helping us to root out their enclaves before they call the Dark upon us: the last and the most dangerous.

As I squeezed past the body, I could feel its skin peel from the flesh with the friction of my passing. The odour of death was so powerful that I almost fainted, and had to close my nostrils against the smell,

holding my breath till I was past.

The corridor branched, but I followed the smell of death, and the taste of the dark. I pushed past more corpses, gagging on nothing, my stomach already empty. A little further on, a vertical shaft plunged into the earth. I took it. What choice did I have?

I was crawling through a corridor so narrow I was having to shrink my shoulders, when I felt the tingle along my spine which told me I was being watched. I stopped, senses straining against the dark, and it seemed to me as if the corridor moved. The whole shaft began to seethe and bubble, hissing and scrabbling, clawing at my face and limbs and body.

In a panic I switched on the torch, shining it on to the walls in an effort to find out what they were doing. The hole seemed to be darker than any I'd ever been in before, heaving in upon itself, then pulsing outwards like an artery. For a moment I thought I was losing my mind. For a moment I thought the walls were moving in on me, collapsing around me, and I was going to be buried alive. Purple spots danced before my eyes. I thought I was asphyxiating. Then I realized they were spiders, one huge, great mass of black spiders, each as big as my thumb, each with a purple spot on their back.

I was screaming and kicking and scrabbling to get out of there, flailing desperately forwards on a sickening, slick morass of crushed spiders. If they were poisonous, they didn't bite me. But there are times when such things fail to matter. I slithered out of the hole into a rough-hewn chamber, scraping bits of broken arachnid off my skin in great handfuls.

And in the darkness, it laughed.

I froze. I could hear it close by. I could feel the hiss of its breath. I still clutched my gun, a Browning .38, anything else being too cumbersome to take into the tunnels, but I had dropped the torch. It had rolled into a corner and was shining feebly at the wall. Its pathetic light was enough, if I widened my irises to see the creature I had come to face.

Crouched in the opposite corner of the chamber was the bleached and bloated body of a Mother. It was at least three times as large as I, slumped on all fours with its massive, ridged head sloping towards me, sightless eyes bulging uselessly from their sockets. Blood congealed in multiple wounds lacerating the front of its body. Its forehead was split wide open, revealing the flaccid, engorged tissue of its brain, upon which, feeding, was its executioner.

He still wore the uniform of Sergeant Pete Rivero and retained much of his human physique. Massive claws and teeth disfigured his hands and face, clotted with the gore of the dead Mother and her children. He glared at me with wide, bug eyes and grinned a slavering grin.

'You've come,' he hissed. 'I knew you would.'

Pendleton had fucked up again. The Ratman should have been sent home when his last tour of duty ended, but instead he had been allowed to stay on and I was having to clean up the mess. Down in the tunnels, slowly changing, hunting the human scum in search of the real prize, he had found one. It had been easy to dispatch the gook in the spider hole and dangle him as bait for his American team-mates. In the gloom they hadn't been able to tell Vietnamese rags from American combat fatigues until it was too late. Once fragged, he knew they would med-evac out. He knew they would gas the hole, but by then he was in the enclave and hunting. And here, deep in the native land, he had found his prey. When I got back, Pendleton was going to die.

'Lets get this over with,' I said.

This war humanized us too much. Pendleton was corrupted by bureaucracy; his agents in the field by brutality. The Gulf of Tonkin had been a mistake. It had brought the Americans into the war as intended, but had introduced bureaucracy and brutal technology into the highly personal mixture of death and heroism that was involved in digging out the Mothers. We couldn't cope with it. One by one, us motherfuckers were going over the edge.

Set a psycho to kill a psycho, and your best result is one rogue psycho.

I shot him as he came at me, deliberately aiming for the heart. Even so, it took three bullets to slow him down. A fourth stopped him, then he started going backwards. He was on the ground, writhing horribly, refusing to shift out of his human shape. Blood frothed on his maw. His staring eyes drilled into me as he scrabbled to pull himself upright. I put a bullet into each shoulder, just to keep him down long

enough to empty the rest of the magazine into his brain.

I was shaking, quivering with shock and revulsion, disgusted as much by the humanness of my reactions as by recent events. The tunnels did this to you. They warped us all. I had to get out of them, but I didn't have the strength.

In the unfathomable entrails of her native land, I sank to my knees before the dead Mother, buried my head in my hands, and cried.

Ignorance Of Perfect Reason

Roz Kaveney

There are pursuits conducive of relaxation, Charlotte thought to herself, but principal among them is not making love with an over-eager female werewolf, in the back seat of a stolen White Russian army staff car, while her five sisters prowl outside, slapping arms against sides in the steely cold of the high Mongolian plain.

'If you like,' Watcher said, earnestly, 'I could do that ... And then *that.'*

'Honestly,' Charlotte said, kissing her on the lips and then caressing one of Watcher's moderately prominent canines with her tongue, 'honestly, you don't need to show off to me, and I can't see how, if you are going constantly to adjust your anatomy in ingenious ways, you can possibly concentrate on the matter in, as it were, hand.'

Watcher's bodily configurations ceased to flow under Charlotte's fingers, and she turned her attention to an intensification of her hitherto rather desultory nuzzling of Charlotte's left breast, and the emission of a series of rather gratifying short gasps of pleasure.

'You know,' she gasped eventually, 'this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.'

Then she started more delicious licking, all too soon interrupted by a loud cough from one of the sisters, *i* know they disapprove, thought Charlotte, but one had hoped that the family into which I appear to have married could conduct its disapprobation with a smattering more style.

'What is it, Singer of Songs of Vengeance and Despair?' Watcher said.

'I am sorry to disturb your connubial couch,' Singer said with a toothy grin that seemed entirely to dilute the verbal apology. 'But Sojourner in the Wilderness of Truth and Starvation found something rather disturbing a little further along this miserable apology for a road. You and your human friend really ought to unrumple your clothing, and come and offer your views.'

It was not really a road, merely a flattish track on which it was, with care, possible to drive. But there was enough distinction between the road and the scrubby grass of the plain it crossed that, as they drove the car along it, headlights shining, one could clearly see reasonably fresh marks where a lorry, or perhaps it was two lorries, had driven off the road. After all they were not, it seemed, alone on the eastern road from Urga, or the first to choose this approximate location to rest for a few hours.

The marks of tyres, the crushed grass and the spent ammunition were not the disturbing things, nor the excrement half-buried under soil kicked loose. The disturbing thing was the torn corner of paper that Sojourner had spotted among the spoil. A part of the paper was still legible, and Charlotte conquered her distaste to look at it more closely.

'Attention, even to small, and even unpleasant matters,' Sojourner said, 'has been a requirement of our *lives, these* many years of hunting and of vengeance. And the writing is in English . ,.'

'It is, indeed,' said Charlotte with a moue of fastidiousness, 'and, as you presumably surmise, it is indeed the handwriting of my murdered brother. And what is a page of his journal doing out here on the plain, so many miles from where your enemies killed him?'

'Presumably,' Watcher said, 'it is part of the contents of this lorry—or lorries.'

'It was premature to hope,' Singer said, 'that we had managed to identify and kill each and every one of Darkcalling and Chaos that was in Urga.'

'The place was a rat-hole,' said Settler of Debts and Credits, 'with too much smoke in it to see clearly to kill'

‘I thought,’ Charlotte said, ‘that the whole point of killing my brother was to preserve the secret of your kind’s existence.’

‘It may have been,’ said Mourner of Kindred and Hope. ‘If he had been killed by Stasis, it would have been. We of progress might have chosen to kill him for that reason, since premature disclosure might complicate our plans. But the reasoning of Chaos is inscrutable, and the Callers of the Dark have many plans, most of them sinister.’

Charlotte looked coldly at the six of them. She was not going to weaken her already low prestige by actually asking for an explanation. Watcher looked entreatingly at her sisters—how charming her eyes were when she was abashed—and then took a deep breath.

‘I suppose,’ she said, ‘you have gathered that the pursuit of vengeance for the deaths of our parents is not merely a personal matter, but one of politics as well.’

‘I gathered that in Urga, my love,’ Charlotte said, ‘but I will admit to a degree of real ignorance as to what the internal politics of werewolfdom might be. But I am all ears.’

‘It is partly a matter of attitudes to humans,’ Tracker of Scents and Spoor said, ‘and partly a matter of the Dark.’

‘Why,’ Charlotte said, ‘do you have the tendency to give the mere absence of light the dignity of an initial capital?’

There is this Presence, somewhere in the void between suns,’ Watcher said. ‘And It comes when It is called, and It comes hungry.’

Charlotte looked even more coldly at her, and raised a sceptical eyebrow.

‘I know, my love.’ Watcher said, sighing. ‘I know what this sounds like—the very rankest of superstitions, entirely inappropriate to the beginning of the third decade of your twentieth century.’

That is my immediate reaction,’ Charlotte said, ‘more or less.’

‘But when you come to know my kind better,’ Watcher continued, ‘you will see that we are not prone to superstition, or, alas, imagination. After all, there had to be a key to all your human mythologies, and it is this. There is something out there. It is hungry. It came, once before, when It was called, in the falling of stars. It ate the minds of the First, the people we once served and still remember, and It let us be. We do not know why. And we fear, most of us, that It will come again.’

‘For humanity,’ Mourner said. ‘And perhaps for us as well. It has been a long time. We may have changed, or Its taste may have. But stars still fall.’

‘But surely,’ Charlotte said, ‘if there are a group of you inclined to summon this Thing, allowing for a moment the hypothesis of Its existence, logic dictates that over several million years they would have managed to kill the right virgin or virgins. Mere random gabbling should have evoked It by now, assuming It comes to a call, like a faithful dog, or pigs at feeding time.’

‘It doesn’t work like that,’ Watcher said. ‘The Callers of the Dark can’t actually call It. No Weerde could, we hope; our minds smell wrong. Imagination may be part of it; and religion; and the powers of the mind.’

‘They call themselves the Callers of the Dark,’ Sojourner said. ‘But that is a boast merely. The First called It, and perhaps humans could. That is why most factions of the Kin agree on this—that we should do everything in our power to stifle religion in humans, and the powers of the mind.’

‘Your brother’s discoveries were a triumph of deductive reason,’ Mourner said, ‘and admirable as such. But even he worried that they might be a breach through which despair and superstition might enter. Imagine the effect if a supposed Tom Matthews were to arrive, showing his discoveries with glee in the capitals of Europe, and preaching unreason.’

‘In that case,’ Charlotte said, ‘why on earth did you sacrifice one of your siblings to an attempt to kill and impersonate me?’

‘We needed a Charlotte Matthews to play against their fake Tom,’ Mourner said.

‘We had not realized,’ Sojourner said, ‘even Watcher, who had a chance to observe you, the extent to which you were a person of resource and sense.’

‘It was a risk that Dancer of Shades and Half-Seen Faces took,’ Singer said, ‘when we decided it expedient to kill an innocent. Innocence has teeth.’

Charlotte accepted that they were trying to put her at her ease.

Mourner had been facing away from Charlotte, into a wind as keen and rough as a file. Suddenly, she raised her nose into the wind and turned. She reached into the capacious pocket of her greatcoat and tossed Charlotte a revolver—Charlotte had, in the nature of things and a moment of amorous inattention, left hers in the car. Like Watcher and her siblings, she turned outwards, raising her gun. There were shadows out there on the plain, flowing in towards the headlights like ink across a page.

The sisters looked around them with the embarrassed air of those who realize too late that they have been too busy explaining things to take normal precautions. Even at the cost of all our lives, Charlotte reflected, it is nice to see that air of effortless, superior competence punctured just this once.

There came, from the darkness beyond the headlights, a series of snarls and barks that had the sententious, sarcastic air of being language.

'Our lineage's distant cousins,' Watcher said, 'the People of the Plains.'

Into the dazzle of the headlights, shielding their eyes a little, there strutted two figures of what were obviously yet another breed of Kin, but one that disdained the convenience of clothes in favour of a lot of hair and the odd useful strap.

They say that they want blood for their blood,' Singer explained to Charlotte, before snarling back in the slightly diffident way that in other, human languages attempts to give verisimilitude to alibis. Particularly to those unlikely to be listened to.

'He said,' Tracker explained to Charlotte, 'that, to the People of the Plains, it does not matter that the killing here two days ago was carried out by our enemies. We are all as bad as each other. The factions and their quarrels are all disturbances of the calm of the landscape. It was strangers to the High Plain that killed Grarrl, and strangers who will die for it.'

One of the two snarled; it was a snarl that had clearly been practised with the intention of producing instant, terrified compliance and involved more facial muscles than Charlotte had guessed even the Kin's face possessed. How interesting to have exhibited for one the useful arts of primitive peoples.

Singer and Mourner barked back, their faces becoming more toothy and feral. Charlotte reached across and took Watcher's hand for a moment, noticing as she did so that it was becoming harder and its fingers more claw-like.

'I take it,' Charlotte said, 'that your cousins of the Plains can be killed.'

'We are a tougher breed than you apes,' Tracker said, 'but a bullet through the eyes, or a knife through the heart, or poison in the drink or the blood will none the less usually serve.'

Suddenly there came a loud baying in the middle distance and the naked Weerde fell back, abashed.

'There is no need,' a massive and articulate voice, out in the darkness, remarked desultorily, 'for alarm. The People of the Plain know perfectly well that their companion's death was not at your hands and they are a people noted for a tediously punctilious sense of justice. They are merely hurling accusations to oblige you to do them a favour; officiously, since it is I who require the favour of you, and my place to ask it.'

Out of the darkness there loomed a face. It was inhuman in any case, and its inhumanity was all the more utter for seeming set in granite, but what took it away from humanity more than its look was its sheer size. Heads are not normally that large, or that far from the ground, Charlotte thought.

Yet it spoke English with an intonation more perfectly that of London than the all-purpose Continental Berlitz precision of Watcher and her sisters. The mere fact that it was bothering to speak English seemed to indicate a certain disingenuousness, or abnormally good hearing.

'What's that? You have a human with you, I see. Good Lord,' it continued. 'Hardly wise, some might say, but I suppose you know your own business. Quite like humans, myself, and the People are positively besotted with them. What I say is, fire was nice, but what have they done for us *lately?'*

The two hairy snarlers turned towards Charlotte, observing her properly for the first time as their eyes grew accustomed to the light, and bowed their heads in what might be shame or worship. She for her part nodded graciously, and put the revolver she was holding into the pocket of her greatcoat.

Two lorries encountered one lorry here,' the titanic face continued. Charlotte knew that there was a body attached to it in the darkness, but did not care to consider its size or its configuration. 'And the

driver of the one lorry was compelled to join with the two. They, as Mr Belloc tells us, had the Maxim gun and he had not. Unfortunately, our late companion was seen, and they managed to wound him mortally; he struggled back towards our encampment, where he might have been saved. Dis *aliter* visum.'

'The gods wished otherwise,' Charlotte explained, helpfully.

'Strange as it may seem,' Tracker said, 'in the course of our misspent youth, we too found time for a classical education.'

The face's naked companions howled into the night.

'Hang on,' Charlotte said. 'I can just about swallow you six having found time amid your vendettas for a little light Latin. I am somewhat more amazed that the giant chieftain of primitive nomads should seem so well-informed on recent light verse and the scraps of classicism.'

Watcher and the others looked at her with the nervous air of schoolgirls whose friend has whistled in church.

'He's an Ancient,' Mourner said.

'You don't cheek Ancients,' Singer said.

Ignoring them, Charlotte continued. 'Well, I don't think it disrespectful to remark that he seems rather pukka sahib for a mysterious giant werewolf encountered in the steppes of central Asia.'

'Good Lord,' the voice said, 'that's never Charlotte Matthews.'

'It is, actually,' Charlotte said.

'Dear me,' the voice said, 'little Charlotte, well I never.'

Then it barked some orders and suddenly the headlights' beams were full of the naked hairy ones, all of whom insisted on shaking hands.

'I used to be your Uncle Wilfred's friend, Saunders,' the Ancient explained.

'Uncle Saunders! But they told me that you disappeared, oh, years ago, climbing in the High Pamirs, and I cried for two nights.'

'Requirements of Empire, originally. I was playing the Great Game, though Simla were not aware on whose behalf I was playing it.'

'What happened to you?' Charlotte asked.

'Dashed inconvenient,' said the former Saunders, 'chap usually gets some warning if this Ancient thing is going to happen, but there it is. Broke my leg in several places falling off some damned precipice, went into change sleep to get over it. When I woke up, there it was—I had started to grow. I had to limp my way practically across Central Asia looking for somewhere safe to hole up. I could hardly turn up at the mess—my regiment are not noted for brains, but they would have noticed something. The People of the Plains range widely, and had heard rumours; they haven't had am Ancient of their own for a century or two, and I agreed to travel with them, for a while. One avoids humans at such times, of course nothing personal—but one is a little conspicuous.'

As he moved closer into the light, in what was something between a lope and a crouch, Charlotte had more sense of his actual size. Not as big as she at first thought, but massive none the less—squat, muscular, fat, jowled, reptilian and as animal as an Egyptian god, yet still the traveller whose tales had frightened her in the schoolroom.

He was sufficiently dominant in his hairy near-nakedness that she found herself bristling into opposition at a purely glandular level; much the same level as that at which the sisters, even, she feared, Watcher, were responding with a rather contemptible fawning and respect.

'People of the Plain,' he went on. 'Now, they're fine fellows of course, salt of the earth, noble savage sort of thing; low on amenities though. Anything more than fire or a handaxe they regard as dangerously close to Darkcalling. Bit boring too—their version of the Fifty Lives is mostly a record of cattle-trails and useful oases.'

Watcher got her nerve back. 'Charlotte,' she said, 'are you telling me that the shaman Ancient of the People of the Plain is some sort of old family friend of yours?'

The former Saunders looked at her witheringly. 'I know,' he said, 'that Progress tends to appeal to the more counter-jumping tendency among lineages. But as humans go, the Matthews are a family of real

distinction.'

'Besides,' he continued, after a pause in which he tried to make his glare at once more withering and more benevolent, in a doing-this-for-your-own-good sort of way, 'as it happens, I was also a friend of your family, years ago, before the unpleasantness in Siberia.'

'You knew our parents,' said Mourner anxiously.

'I corresponded with them, occasionally,' he said. 'I was less convinced than they were that radical parties were the best vehicle for progress, and they argued that colonial empires were doomed, in the long run. And of course, on the latter question, they were probably right. I can't see the British keeping India for more than another century or so; no time at all to do anything useful.'

'Look,' Charlotte said, 'this is all very pleasant, Uncle Saunders, but we have a little problem on our hands. The sisters and I formed an alliance, and settled the Darkcallers' hash in Urga, but a few survivors seem to be driving east with the fossil evidence my late brother, whom they killed, was indiscreet enough to dig up, and with God knows what else besides—'

'—Young Tom, eh?' Saunders said. 'So the Darkcalling rabble have killed Wilfred's godson as well as my good friend Grarrl. The vermin really are getting out of hand.'

He barked some more orders and the People of the Plain melted into the darkness, all save two who stood there silently, with expressions of concentration on their faces. They shivered as their faces and bodies altered towards the human and clumps of their body hair drifted to the ground.

'Still,' he said, 'it is an ill wind and so on. The lorries are still not going east—the People's scouts saw them turn south on a goat track some miles from here. Probably striking down to the railway—the late war tore up the track south of Urga, but some of it is operational, particularly once you get past the Chinese lines. We'd better head off in that direction. And the People will accept a modest vengeance as my fee for residing among them, just as you will pay me for my help by driving me to a more civilized location.'

'But there isn't room for you in our car,' Charlotte said.

There is a lorry, parked some five miles away,' Saunders said. 'I had the People of the Plains steal it for me some months ago, in the middle of the war when things were not likely to be missed. The People may not use artefacts, but they are perfectly prepared to steal them, you know. They have this prejudice about mechanical objects, and I am myself these days indisposed for driving. I have just been waiting for someone who can drive, and now I have six of you.'

'Seven,' Charlotte said.

'Wilfred always said you were a bit of a tomboy,' Saunders said. 'Grew up to be some sort of New Woman, did you? I blame the war, myself. But we can't have you as a driver—never get past the border guards. I don't think you appreciate, with all the war lords competing for control, just how many borders we may have to cross. You, my dear, are going to have to be loot. Plenty of people driving south with the odd ci-devant White Russian gentlewoman slung across their back seats.'

Charlotte was getting progressively unhappy with the way that this oversized bully was taking over the whole enterprise and even more unhappy with the shamefaced way that Watcher and her sisters were letting him. They were standing there, looking up at him with great fawn-like eyes. Any minute now the ones that were quick to grow hair would grow forelocks so that they could touch them.

Watcher already knew her well enough to look at her in apologetic appeal.

'He's an Ancient,' Watcher said.

'What is that?' Charlotte said, 'Apart from some sort of glandular malfunction overcoming werewolves in middle age?'

They live a long time, and they know a lot. Besides, he knew our parents. He's on our side, so we're supposed to do what he says. It's how things are. You'll understand, my darling, when you get to know a little better how things work among us.'

'Watcher, my sweet,' Charlotte said patiently. 'Herr Doctor Freud explained this sort of thing to me in Vienna last year. You personally lost your parents at an early age, so you need a father figure, to salve obscure guilt; your people lost the First, in the dawn of time, and so they need father figures of one sort or another. But wouldn't it be more mature?—'

Saunders limped over to her and fixed her with a glare. ‘One of the reasons for not telling humans too much is that they will insist on arguing. You must be very tired after all your exertions, Charlotte.’

‘How considerate,’ Charlotte said, forced to look up as he loomed over her, his breath steaming rhythmically like an ox in a byre, ‘but I am not tired at all.’

His breathing grew even louder, pounding in her ears like her own heartbeats.

‘But you are tired, Charlotte Matthews,’ Saunders said. ‘You are very tired indeed.’

Suddenly Charlotte noticed that she had extremely painful cramp in her fingers and calves. As she waved her hands in front of her face, and kicked nervously against the seat in front, she noticed that it was daylight. The road they were travelling on was considerably smoother, and they were no longer surrounded by scrubby plain but jolting slowly across a metal bridge, behind a ramshackle lorry and an unusually slow ox-cart.

Visible in the distance ahead of them, out near the horizon, were some quite respectably sized mountains. The vast shallow river beneath them was succulent and stinking with mud and silt.

Charlotte was very hungry and thirsty, and there was a pronounced feeling of bruising around her left side and buttock, but she could tell from the feel of her underclothing that at least someone had kept her clean. One of the sisters handed her a water-bottle. Charlotte rinsed her mouth out, and then gargled a little of the water in her throat, both times spitting none too elegantly from the side of the car. Then she allowed herself to swallow, just a little.

‘I see we got across the border all right,’ she remarked in the most congenial voice she could manage, a little husky and cracked around the edges.

Watcher, she noticed, had reverted to the features she had known as Schmidt’s, while the others were all looking desperately male and Chinese. A little more practice, she reflected, and I might be able to tell my sisters-in-law apart, but as things are ... They looked at her stony-faced—one of them, she realized, was not one of the sisters at all, but one of the People. Something about his eyebrows ... The other sister must be in the lorry, which, presumably, contained Saunders and the other nomad.

They rattled off the bridge and on to the road, and joined a ragged line of vehicles that were being inspected, with the usual gross casual brutality of the officious, by a group of Chinese soldiers in scruffy khaki and an unlikely mixture of headgear. Their officer, a dapper young brute, whose hair was smoothed down with an overly-sweet pomade that Charlotte swore she could smell several yards downwind, inspected papers that were brought to him with a disdainful cursoriness.

One of the soldiers poked his head through the lorry window and then proceeded to peer through the slats on the side, and to poke at whatever he saw there. A loud and convincing bellow followed.

‘Surely not,’ Charlotte said. ‘I know his Grace the Ancient is large enough, but I refuse to believe you people can grow horns to order.’

‘Misdirection,’ Watcher clarified. ‘It’s the whole trick of it. People see what they expect to see; you just have to fade reality a little round the edges.’

‘I see,’ Charlotte said, trying very hard to convey her entire moral disapproval of such a procedure.

‘In the old days,’ Mourner said, ‘Ancients just used to say that they were Beneficent Dragons of the Sixth Button and in charge of the Rains of the South Wind. And people used to swallow it. Progress means they have to pass as domestic animals.’

There was a sardonic edge to this, Charlotte noticed, but it was a little bit too much like the blasphemy of the true believer.

Evidently it had been successful, because the officer waved the lorry on, and the soldiers moved down the line to the car. Charlotte had already closed her eyes and slumped over to one side, as if still asleep, her hair straggling over her face. One may disapprove of deceit without rushing into the answering of awkward questions.

Watcher heaved a sigh of relief as they drew away.

‘I didn’t like the smell of that officer one little bit,’ she remarked.

‘His hair-oil was rather oppressive, wasn’t it?’ Charlotte said.

‘That is not what I meant at all. Look, Charlotte, I really must apologize for what happened.’

‘I don’t think apologies are really in order. I cannot conceive of an apology that would be adequate.’

There is little I can do, save kiss my beloved's hands in humility and hope in desperation for her forgiveness.'

'Why, Watcher, you say the sweetest things and, if I was not so furious, you might even succeed in turning my head.'

'I was hoping that I had achieved the soft answer that turns away wrath, but I would settle for turning your head ...'

As they jolted along the rutted highway, a figure suddenly dashed from the scrubby bushes at its side and leaped on to the running-board of the car, ducking into a kneeling position and gripping the door with both hands. Instantly, there were shouts behind them and the biting sound of rifle-shots.

Whichever of the sisters was driving accelerated wildly, overtaking the lorry, whose driver instantly followed suit, after a while taking the lead again. The nomad sitting closest to the fugitive, who was hanging on as tenaciously as was possible with his head bent over, moved to hammer at the young Chinese man's hands with his fists; Watcher took his arm and made him stop.

'We are already in trouble,' she said. 'And we may as well find out precisely what sort of trouble we are in, before disposing of this inconvenient young man.'

'Can we not simply throw him to his enemies?' Mourner said from the passenger seat. 'It might at least buy us time while they do the unpleasant things they do to fugitives in these parts.'

'I would have thought,' Charlotte said, 'that they would be only too keen to postpone the disposal of a fugitive they have already identified as such pending discovery of exactly who his unsuspected allies are. That presumably would involve not merely questions, but interrogation of an unpleasant, physical kind.'

Several of the sisters nodded, and Watcher reached over and helped the young man climb over the side of the car and into the well between the seats, where he lay, among the boots of his unwelcoming hostesses, for their inspection.

He was a good-looking enough young chap, Charlotte reflected, though his face had a couple too many moles for her taste and his hair tended to the long and lank. The abolition of the pigtail had clearly not been followed by any tonsorial renaissance in these parts.

They continued to drive recklessly fast. What traffic there had been ahead of them had pulled to the side at the first rifle-shots or was driving with equal speed. As Charlotte watched, a lorry some yards ahead of them clipped the side of an ox-cart that had tried to pull out of the way and spun out of control into the ditch, fetching up against a telegraph pole.

A lorry full of soldiers, whose firing either lacked precision or was intended to frighten rather than maim, probably the former, followed in the middle distance. It seemed gradually to be gaining on them, and Charlotte had the distinct impression that the sister who was driving was, if anything, assisting this process by slowing down. As she watched, the nails of Watcher's hand grew longer, harder and more pointed.

Suddenly Charlotte realized that the pain in her side was in fact her revolver, and so she reached into her pocket and removed it. She turned, sighted over the back of the car and fired. To her disappointment, it took two shots before she hit a tyre and another before she managed to place a bullet neatly into the lorry's radiator.

As she turned back, Watcher and her sisters were looking at her with amused indulgence.

That was very impressive, Charlotte dear,' Tracker said, 'and I am sure that none of us could have managed it. But you really must try and conquer the urge to protect us from our enemies. It is redundant, and likely to lead to your getting in the way.'

'I was not trying to protect you from them,' Charlotte said. 'I was under the impression, knowing you as I do, that I was protecting them from you.'

The plain was interrupted by a small rise, on which the lorry with Saunders in it started to labour somewhat. On the descent, a barrier and several more soldiers, came into view, some of whom were already levelling their rifles.

Perhaps, Charlotte reflected, there is something to all this healthy living, because when she had seen the sisters dispose of their opposition in Mongolia, it was like watching a performance of some slightly recherche art; whereas when the two nomads, without even bothering significantly to change their human

forms, flowed out of the moving vehicles, up to the sides of the road and down again, into and through the line of soldiers, it was like watching a high wind level corn.

The young Chinese man started to raise himself up to see, perhaps to enjoy, the slaughter. Charlotte looked at him severely and shook her head.

'What,' she inquired of Watcher, 'is the Chinese for "there are some things that humanity is not meant to know"?'

'I don't know,' Watcher said. 'I don't speak Chinese. Dancer was the only one of us that ever bothered to learn it. We were too busy in Siberia and the Ukraine ever to need it.'

The Plains nomad swung himself back into the car. Followed by the lorry, it passed through the barrier, which creaked gently on its hinges. The road block seemed deserted now; in their flow of violence, the nomads had put the bodies somewhere out of sight.

The road ahead was more or less deserted, and there was no sign of the lorry full of soldiers. Charlotte doubted that she had successfully disabled it for more than a few minutes, but presumably she had discouraged them enough that they had dropped behind in expectation that the soldiers at the road block, presumably warned, would do their work for them.

'I hesitate,' Charlotte said, her voice loud enough to carry to the other vehicle, 'to advocate delaying further. But the miracle of wireless telegraphy seems to be working to our disadvantage. If we do not do something about it, we are going to have to stop every few miles and kill people. This seems wasteful to me.'

The heavy door at the back of the lorry flung open, and with a thump Saunders heaved himself into the daylight. From somewhere he had acquired a large horse-blanket which he was using as some sort of improvised loin cloth. He waddled over to the side of the road. Charlotte noticed that his right leg was still lame.

He seized the telegraph pole by its base and proceeded to haul it from the ground. It came out with a slow gulping of the thick, rich clay which underlay the mild slope of the gravel embankment.

Suddenly, from the brow of the hill, there came a sinister swishing sound, the shouting of men and the firing of pistols. Charlotte threw herself down on top of the young Chinese man, who was mercifully somewhat on the plump side, followed expeditiously by Watcher, who was fumbling in her clothes for a revolver.

Down from the brow of the hill there swept some twenty gleaming bicycles, each of them ridden by a soldier, some of whom were trying to sight pistols over the handlebars, or steering with one hand while the other brandished a sabre.

Some of them braked rapidly at the sight of the half-naked giant at the side of the road, but none fast enough to avoid the almighty effort with which he finally wrenched the pole loose from the soil and swung it, with a power that tore it free from its wires that lay sparking, in a low sweeping curve that sent half of the bicycles crashing to the floor in an instant, to be followed in a pile by the ones immediately behind them. Even those that had braked could not help smashing into the pile of crumpled machines and men.

At least one of them had got off a shot that had hit home, because Saunders was bleeding from his left shoulder and his right calf; this latter wound seemed to send him into a frenzy of temper, and he brought the pole down time and time again on the writhing mass of flesh, metal and rubber, pounding them to shreds like spices in a mortar. Then, suddenly, he turned away, and let the great pole fall.

There was blood, and worse, in pools in the dust of the road. Charlotte had seen the injuries of shells and machine-guns in Italy and had thought that she could not be shocked or disgusted ever again. Yet somewhere in that mass of offal there were still men with enough breath to be screaming. Watcher climbed from the car, as did her sisters, and walked determinedly across to the butchery.

Watcher fired three times and Mourner twice, and the screaming stopped.

Charlotte picked up a discarded rifle, opened the door of the shed and went inside.

There was a stove there, and some bedrolls, and a cold stove with a pan of millet broth on it. There was also a small table on which rested headphones and the rest of the telegraph equipment; she brought down the rifle butt on it until it was a heap of metal and glass fragments—but it did not relieve her feelings in the slightest.

There were also several jerrycans of petrol, that she carried out into the sunlight, one after another. Watcher saw what she was doing, and helped her distribute them between the car and the lorry. Waste not, want not, her governess had always said, and Charlotte imagined that petrol was not easiest come by, in China.

Then Watcher turned slowly and decisively and looked at Saunders. The expression that her Schmidt face wore was unreadable save for its narrowed eyes.

'You are an Ancient, and the friend of our parents,' she said. 'But we only kill when it is necessary. And we kill clean.'

'My old wound pains me,' Saunders said. 'And there is nothing so unimportant as the way in which one kills those one has decided to kill. I share your interest in killing the Darkcallers, and these soldiers stood in our way. This is a serious venture we are engaged upon. And vengeance is not a tea party.'

He waddled across to the car.

'This youth,' he said, 'has incommoded us far too much already, and seen appreciably too much for his own good.'

Charlotte closed the boot of the car, and turned.

'Watcher, I think I have had enough of all this. Saunders, for what little it is worth in your eyes, this young man is under my protection.'

Saunders continued to move forward, a look of cruel regret in his eyes.

'And Charlotte,' Watcher said, levelling her revolver at Saunders, 'is under mine.'

The two nomads started to move forward, only to stop when the sisters all raised their guns as well.

'This is all quite unnecessary,' said the young Chinese man.

'You did not say that you spoke English,' Charlotte said.

'No one bothered to ask the ignorant coolie,' the young man said. 'You took for granted that I was the object of conversation, not a participant in it. And I am accustomed to such, and find it useful not to speak the language of imperial oppression in front of the oppressors.'

'Who are you?' Charlotte asked.

'Personal names are irrelevant,' the young man said. 'I am the delegate from Hunan, merely. And we are wasting time. You have just destroyed a cadre of the bicycle cavalry of the Nationalist warlord Feng Yuxiang; and that makes you even more of a fugitive from this justice than I, whose death is merely a favour owed by him to the Comintern. He has ordered my capture, and I can expect little mercy if caught. But for one warrior, even an oversized crippled freak, to smash his best soldiers like an idle child's toys, that is to earn considerably worse than death. Forget all these quarrels, and drive as if death were behind you, because it is.'

Saunders stared hard at Charlotte, who refused to meet his eyes.

That,' she said, 'is a trick I propose to let you work only once, Mr Saunders.'

Saunders looked around him and the faces of the sisters were all stony. He sighed, and turned away; he limped back to the lorry, reached inside and produced a flask of spirits. He took a sip from it, and poured more of it on to his two wounds. He put his mouth to one of his great hands and sucked out a splinter, then bathed the hand in the spirits as well. He drained the last drops, and then tossed the flask behind him into the lorry. He sighed again.

'What's an old man to do,' he said, 'confronted by all you decisive young people? I had hoped for a little consideration and respect ... Enough of that: very well, let us be off. And place this—ah—delegate's fate under consideration until we know more about him.'

'Of course,' Watcher said, as the cars drove onwards across the plain, speedily but without any obvious pursuers, 'of course, Charlotte, there is a very good case for what Saunders proposes.'

'I refuse,' said Charlotte, 'to have a private conversation about killing someone in front of them.'

'If I had not spoken English,' the delegate pointed out, 'you would have done so.'

'But you do,' Charlotte said. 'And if you hadn't, we would have had no option.'

'You could have bothered to learn the language of a country before crossing its borders. China deserves more respect than to be invaded perpetually by the ignorant.'

'We did not choose,' Charlotte retorted, 'to come here for personal pleasure or out of idle curiosity.

We pursued our enemies from Mongolia and will continue to pursue them until we catch up with them or lose their trail altogether.'

'Your enemies?' the delegate said. 'Would these be two lorries similar to the one containing your large friend?'

'Three lorries,' Watcher said.

'I saw two, only.'

'But surely there were three,' Mourner cut in.

'There is much literary matter, and much advocacy of the brutal suppression of the people in the works of the master strategist Sun Tzu,' the delegate said. 'His emphasis on the importance of accurate observation as a prerequisite of leadership is a lesson to all of us.'

A silence fell, which seemed to last several hours. They stared at each other, and periodically the c&s would stop and a different sister would take over the driving or pour petrol into the tank from the dwindling supply.

Charlotte loathed inquisitiveness and small talk, but eventually she felt obliged to ask questions.

'What are you a delegate to? And what is your problem with the Bolsheviks? Are you an opponent of theirs?'

'Hardly an opponent,' the delegate replied. 'I regard them as my comrades. But there is a strategic disagreement of some importance.'

'So you are a Communist,' Watcher said with interest. 'I did not know there was a Communist party in China.'

'We started a year ago,' said the delegate, 'and I have already personally recruited sixteen members. I understand that there will be at least ten other delegates at the plenary conference in Shanghai.'

'I tried to read Marx, once,' Charlotte said, 'but I got bogged down in the Labour Theory of Value.'

'I haven't read Marx, yet,' the delegate said. 'I know that the Russian Communists think he is very important, but none of us have had a chance to read him yet. We stand for a programme of the abolition of unequal treaties, and modest amounts of land reform. But the Comintern have promised to provide us with some pamphlets.'

'Don't listen to Charlotte,' Watcher said. 'She is, bless her, an unreconstructed bourgeois. You really would find it very helpful to read Marx.'

'You are going to Shanghai,' Charlotte said. 'We seem to be heading in that general direction.'

Watcher looked suspicious.

'If you are going to Shanghai,' she said, 'and have *come from* Hunan, you have taken an awfully roundabout route.'

'I was warned,' said the delegate, 'that there might be an attempt to stop me turning up in Shanghai. Some—

times it is useful to take the long route round to get somewhere. It will have been useful to travel among the people.'

There was a certainty in his tone at once admirable and repulsive.

'Besides, there is so much of China it will be useful to have seen. A gazetteer will tell one how much soil is washed away by the Huang-Ho river, but it is necessary to see it to determine that one day systems of dams and catchments will change it from a menace to a benefit.'

Charlotte reflected how difficult it is to take a pompous young man seriously when you have recently used him as a safety cushion.

'You have travelled widely?' he asked.

'Reasonably so,' Charlotte said. 'In Europe and Siberia and Mongolia. But I have never been to China before.'

'Mongolia is China,' the delegate snapped, his eyes wide in anger.

Then, in a more conciliatory tone, he added, 'Eight years ago, when I was nineteen, I saw a map of the whole world. Even allowing for the lies of imperialism, I was truly impressed by how much there is outside China, even allowing for what would be rightfully ours, were it not for unequal treaties.'

'Aside from Mongolia, then,' Charlotte said, feeling an obligation to the social graces, 'I have never

been to China. Is there much to see? Apart from potential irrigation projects?'

Watcher gave her an amused, but warning, look.

There are many sights of historical interest,' the delegate said. 'Most of them have to do with feudal tyranny, but even those are often most important to the understanding of what it is to be a nation. Take the mountains to our right, for example.'

The suspension on the lorry was not entirely healthy, so they had taken the road across the narrowing plain rather than the more frequented road into the foothills.

'I was most impressed,' he continued, 'by the inscriptions on Mount Taishan. Most go there on the pilgrimages of superstition or on some mission to do with the arts, but I went there because the inscriptions, even as they glorify feudal rulers, tell us of power, and of responsibility.'

He struck an attitude, and intoned.

"'I am troubled by my lack of virtue. I am ignorant of perfect reason. I know not whether I have committed any offence against the gods or the people, and my heart is tossed on the floods as though I were crossing a great river. I deployed the power of my five imperial armies, I made the nine regions tremble with fear; the colours and standards were raised up; horses and soldiers were silenced. What majesty, what spectacle, what pomp! In this way did I arrive at Taishan and all was as it should be.'"

He paused, then continued, in his normal voice.

That is how it should be, you see; the ruler aware of responsibility, ignoring superstition, responsibility to the people. And none the less doing what is necessary, not in the name of personal glory, but in the name of the people. If there were a man in China capable of doing what needs to be done, he could build a new nation, like George Washington did, in the face of imperialism—but none of the warlords is that man. Dr Sun was briefly, but is now personally exhausted and politically spent.'

An awkward silence fell again.

'If it is possible to say so without seeming patronizing,' Charlotte said, 'you speak English awfully well.'

'Thank you,' the delegate said. 'It is not often that I get the chance to practise it at such length.'

For some time the road had been running alongside a railway, and, quite suddenly, they caught up with a train that was chugging gently south. Some of the carriages had roofs that were covered with people, some of them asleep, and some of them sitting with their feet dangling off the edge; some of the passengers were travelling in mere cattle-trucks. The road was so close to the line that the passengers started pointing at Watcher and Charlotte with a mixture of ridicule, hostility and incredulity.

The delegate stood up.

'You were discussing killing me,' he said, 'to preserve some secret or other. I have no idea what your secret is, and I care even less. There is nothing that human beings ought not to know, save what is unnecessary to their work. But try and kill me now, and these people will tear you limb from limb, even your giant. There are simply too many of them, and they do not like foreigners.'

He clambered over the side of the car on to the running-board and held out his hand; ten hands reached out to him to pull him on board the train. He looked down into the car from the roof of a carriage.

'It is often useful to have moved among the people,' he said, and leaped down into one of the cattle-trucks, disappearing like a fish into the ocean.

'Saunders won't be pleased,' Watcher said.

'But it is by far the best solution,' Charlotte said. 'You didn't really want to kill that silly little man with his silly schemes—he was much too busy making speeches to even notice anything out of the ordinary about the rest of you, and he thought Saunders was just a gland case. And now we simply don't have to bother with him at all, ever again.'

After a while, the railway swung away from them. The road proceeded ever on through a plain of remorseless agricultural monotony, and Charlotte decided that after all, hypnotic trances are an overrated way of resting and it had already been a long and stressful day. She snuggled her head into the crease between Watcher's left breast and armpit, and fell gently asleep.

It was night when she awoke, and the car and the lorry were jolting through the streets of a small

settlement at the edge of which the road they were on crossed another, rather more evenly laid-out one. In the far corner of the crossroads, slightly back from the road, there was a larger building than those they had passed in the town. It had shutters on the windows, in something that had once approximated the European style, though the paint had flaked and many of the slats were missing. From it, there came the unmistakable smell of ginger, hot vinegar and the sweet charring of pork.

Charlotte thought with enthusiasm of the possibility of dinner—she was not starving and so had presumably been fed something during her trance, but she did not care to wonder what it had been, and whether it had been cooked first. Saunders's lorry turned into the large courtyard and Mourner, who was now driving, followed suit.

Charlotte realized with mild disappointment that it was not the smell of roasting pork that had made them stop, but rather the presence in the courtyard, next to the roasting-pit, of an almost identical lorry, which stood, its back doors gaping open, clearly entirely abandoned. The two nomads, who had no trouble at all speaking Chinese, climbed from the vehicles and interrogated the plump, smiling Chinese men who came out to greet them. After a while, they came to the car and reported back in the high, barking Weerde language they had used on the plains. Presumably Saunders had good enough hearing to make out what they were saying, and the innkeeper, prepared to believe any strange noise to be the language of foreigners, would have been disconcerted had they chosen to explain themselves to some large domestic animal.

'He says,' Watcher said, 'that the other lorry left at daybreak—clearly the Darkcalling scum have dawdled, delayed by acts of random wickedness and we, almost uninterrupted, have made up a part of their lead.'

'But why have they left their lorry?' Charlotte said.

'We have experience, my love, of the Darkcallers and their Chaos co-conspirators. Rational behaviour, or anything we would recognize as such, is not to be expected from the Darkcallers. And the followers of Chaos, even if on the basis of rational premises, explicitly disavow rationality as a procedure.'

After a rapid conclave, held at a volume sufficient that Saunders could find a way of objecting, if he did, it was agreed that they pause and refresh themselves for a few hours. Charlotte was glad of the chance to wash herself, and rinse out her clothes. After she made signs to this effect, the sour-faced wife of the tavern-keeper hobbled off on her tiny, deformed feet and procured from some press or cupboard a none-too-clean robe of reasonably good silk. Charlotte took it and nodded her thanks. When the woman had left the room, Charlotte took a deep breath to rid her lungs of the sickly smell of the woman's feet, fungus-ridden inside their constraining bandages.

She slung her belt by its buckle from nails at the side of the window, and hung her blouse and her riding-breeches from it, to dry. There was a knock at the door and Watcher came in, with the apologetic expression that Charlotte was growing to know and despise.

'You do realize,' she said, 'that I am going to have to bring your food to you here.'

Charlotte looked at her coldly.

Watcher went on. This is not a very respectable tavern, and a European woman, whether dressed in a robe, or wearing what the Chinese are likely to see as rather masculine attire, is liable to cause comment.'

Charlotte did not say anything, and turned to adjust her clothes on their improvised line.

'Wouldn't you do better,' Watcher noted, 'to dry them an item at a time? Or spread them out more. I don't mean to be bossy, but I am only thinking about your best interests.'

Charlotte, pecked her on the cheek and then looked at her in a way that had little loving about it.

'I'm sure you mean well,' she said. 'But it is clear to me that whatever is between us is less important to you than the desires of that overgrown oaf with whom you and your sisters seem so completely infatuated.'

Watcher looked at her helplessly.

'You don't understand.'

'I think,' Charlotte said, 'that I understand only too well. I have worked in hospitals, and I have seen

the giggling nervousness of young nurses when the chief surgeon does his rounds. I found it distinctly unattractive in them, and in you it seems uncommonly like a betrayal.'

She put her hand to Watcher's shoulder, then let it drop, and went across to the bedding where she sat with her head in her hands, next to the small pile of her possessions she had taken from her pockets.

'It is not like that,' Watcher said, 'and there is nothing in my relationship to Saunders that you need feel anything resembling jealousy about.'

'Jealousy of a sexual kind would be preferable,' Charlotte said. 'Either you would have tired of me, or I could compete. But I cannot and will not compete for your attention, when there seems to be something plainly pathological going on.'

'He is an Ancient. He is old and knows a lot, and I respect him.'

'I will not compete for your respect. I offered my throat to your teeth in love and attraction. I will not compete with anyone for you.'

'Charlotte, I love you enough not to mind if you want to think badly of me.'

'I don't want to blame you, Watcher; I want you to blame yourself.'

'You are impossible, Charlotte Matthews.' Watcher left the room, slamming the door.

After a while, she returned with a tray and some food, and had the sense to leave it and not say anything. Charlotte reflected that she was, after all, rather hungry, and ate her way through the roast pork and the rice and a few greens—the latter were unpleasantly fibrous but would doubtless help her digestion.

Her clothes were not entirely dry, but not so damp as to risk her getting a chill, so she dressed again, taking care to collect her possessions. She pushed the shutters aside, climbed up on to the window-sill and let herself down gently, hanging on to the sill with both hands and dropping the remaining seven feet or so.

It was dark in the courtyard save for light from one window, from which there also came the noise of people eating and drinking. Out of the corner of her eye, Charlotte saw a movement in the field beyond the courtyard—a large dog, or something.

She was somewhat surprised to see the back door of their lorry open, and the bonnet up; wherever Saunders had gone, he was clearly not there. Seizing a hoped-for opportunity, she clambered into the lorry, which stank of his sweat and worse, hoping to find what she was looking for. Her hand fell upon it almost instantly, where Saunders had tossed it into the lorry.

There was little light in the courtyard, but she hardly needed it. All she needed to do was remove the cap from the flask and run her finger across the initials that she knew were embossed on its interior. TM.

It was, as she had feared, her brother's flask.

She reached into the pile of straw at the back of the lorry, and removed the two petrol cans she had placed there earlier, putting them in a dark corner of the courtyard, in the shadow of a bench. She walked across the courtyard to the window that was showing light.

The innkeeper and his wife, several other Chinese men who were presumably travellers or local merchants from the moderate affluence of their clothing, and a young woman minimally clothed, sat stupefied in a corner, their eyes vacant and their heads nodding from side to side. Saunders was crouched in the middle of the room, tearing at a whole roast pig and feeding scraps of it to the nomads who sat cross-legged beside him. The six sisters sat opposite, deferentially listening to him, their eyes glazed in a way not unlike the vacancy of the humans.

'Fast,' he said, 'you must travel fast and on foot if we are to come up with the Darkcallers in time. We must overtake them before we reach Shanghai, or we will have to chase them through a warren where they have more lairs than I do. We are at Hicheng already, in Shantung province; we have not come up with them yet and we have not a moment to lose. The day after tomorrow, the road that we travel will be too near the city, too busy for quiet killing—you must travel the rest of this night and take to the hills by day. You must be my hounds, and I will set you on. Sleep now, sisters, and rise changed to take final vengeance on the slayers of your kin.'

She realized that the heads of Watcher and her sisters were nodding to the same rhythm as the innkeeper's and as she watched, Mourner, Singer, Sojourner and Settler slumped to the floor, gradually

losing their specifically human features. Watcher stood, shaking her head to keep her concentration.

This is not right,' she said. 'We cannot abandon Charlotte, and your plan lacks logic. And—and I cannot abandon Charlotte.'

She was staggering on her feet, and Saunders put down the pig, licked an excess of grease from his left hand with an excessively long tongue, made a fist and clubbed her to the ground.

'Four volunteers are worth one pressed man is what I always say. And do come in, young Charlotte, no point hanging around out there in the cold night air.'

Charlotte pushed a shutter aside and clambered over the sill. Saunders reached over and took the flask from her hand.

'I see you recognize it. Careless of me.'

He looked at her ruefully.

'It's not what you think,' he said. 'I had nothing to do with Tom's death. But a fellow can have his own interests, and his own plans, and the least you girls can do is be a little helpful, instead of selfishly pursuing your own pleasure all the time.'

Charlotte looked down at Watcher, who lay very still with a thin trail of blood trickling from her right nostril and from the side of her mouth. She dropped to her knees and kissed the quiet white forehead, just next to the depressed area where Saunders had struck.

'Murderer,' she said.

'Not in the least,' Saunders said. 'Her sisters went into the change sleep when I told them to, their natural deference to an Ancient's suggestions somewhat enhanced by the last of my opium in their rice wine. Your partner in viciousness—it is clear to me what is going on, Charlotte Matthews, and as a friend of your late uncle's, I feel some obligation to be shocked—needed rather more physical measures. But she will live—I know my own strength very well and precisely how much damage to do so that she will sleep until Shanghai.'

The two nomads started to drag the sisters out, but to the truck the Darkcallers had abandoned. Saunders saw Charlotte's inquisitive stare.

'Odd,' he said. 'But when we checked that one, it wouldn't go. Singer says that someone had taken out some of its parts; still, the other one was awfully bouncy for an old chap to ride in, and this one will be altogether smoother, now we've swapped the parts over. And we shall be taking the car as well. When I say we, I do not, of course mean you Charlotte.'

'Of course not,' Charlotte agreed.

'You really are the most vexing and irritating child,' Saunders said. 'Unnatural vice, questioning of authority, altogether too much curiosity. I really ought to dispose of you for good, but I think that leaving you here will serve perfectly adequately.'

Charlotte looked across the room at the fat, snoring innkeeper.

'He is not even as nice as he looks,' Saunders said. 'Last week, he sold his concubine and her child to the whoremongers, because the child disturbed his rest. When he wakes up, I think the innkeeper will be very distressed, and you will be here to take the brunt of his displeasure. If you survive it, it should be character-forming and may teach you some overdue lessons in manners.'

One of the nomads seized her by the arm and the chin, forcing her to meet Saunders's gaze.

'Goodbye, Charlotte,' Saunders said.

She awoke on her back, with something trying to force a bottle between her lips and someone else pawing at the fastening of her riding breeches, looking for her money belt, she assumed. She took a hefty swig of the fiery, violet-scented liquor into her mouth and then, as the landlord took the bottle from her lips, she spat the spirit into his eyes. His companions laughed as he tottered around the room, unable to see.

She reached up and shoved at the shoulder of the landlord's boon companion who was fumbling at her clothes, sending him spinning to the ground; sitting down, she looked around. Several more of the landlord's friends or customers were lounging against the far wall of what proved to be her room; all of them had identical, obnoxious male smirks on their faces.

The landlord had collapsed to the floor, frantically wiping at his eyes with an unclean sleeve. His

expression as he looked at Charlotte was murderous.

Her revolver was gone from her belt, but they had not yet gone through her jacket pockets. Unhurriedly, she produced her two-shot derringer, that she proceeded to point at the innkeeper's low forehead. They might not appreciate, after all, that it had only two chambers. His friends laughed, and he got up. All five men left the room, locking it behind them.

She had left some of her food earlier, and she wolfed it, guessing that they would soon have the idea of trying to starve her into submission. The stench of the liquor that had spattered her clothes almost managed, but not quite, to diminish her appetite.

She went to the window. The car and the Darkcallers' fcmck had gone. The truck Saunders had ridden was still there. Two of the innkeeper's friends were there, watching her window, and one of them tossed a handful of mud to discourage her. She dodged it easily, and continued to watch the darkness at the entrance to the courtyard where, if she peered, she could see a shape dithering in the darkness, inching nervously in a half-crouch into the courtyard and behind a bench in the far corner.

After all, she reflected, when one bothers to think through the meaning of one's observations, the Chinese are not noted for the keeping of large dogs. The shape half-stumbled; there was the clink of one petrol can against another and a muffled noise of cursing. She whistled loudly, and the two men turned to look at her.

'I met a traveller from an antique land,' she said, at a venture. The two men looked up at her, as if she were mad.

She went on, 'Who said, "two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert."'

They continued to stare at her, oblivious of the shape that crept up behind them, picked up a broom that someone had left against the bench, and clouted them across the head with it. Charlotte clambered through the window again and dropped to the ground, her fall this time somewhat softened by the two men who lay groaning on the ground, to find herself confronting a somewhat undersized and seedy looking Weerde, who was shaking himself with a certain determination into a more human form.

He was entirely naked, save for a twist of cloth with something in it hanging from his neck. Charlotte reached down, tugged the jacket off one of the two *semi-conscious* men and handed it to him. He got the idea and helped her remove the man's shoes and trousers. The other man tried to get to his feet, and Charlotte kicked him smartly in the jaw without more than half-turning. On an afterthought she bent down and retrieved her revolvers from his belt, put one of them in her own, and stood watching the Weerde, who, as a human, was a small man with a weak chin and large, sensitive, untrustworthy eyes.

He barked at her. She recalled the conversations that the sisters, irritatingly, had continued to have around her and tried to follow suit, breaking out after a few moments into a paroxysm of coughing.

'We had better stick to English,' he said in a rather unappealing Hun whine. 'What with your accent and that nasty sore throat I can't understand a word you are saying.'

'I am Charlotte Matthews,' she said. 'And I believe that you have something that belongs to me.'

She did not point the revolvers at him, but held them ready, as an implicit threat.

'It was not I,' he said. 'I had nothing to do with it. I didn't even know what was in the crates.'

'Fine. You don't seem to have enough character to be a demon-worshipper. So you can take the distributor-cap and the rotor-arm from that piece of cloth around your neck, and you can fit them into this truck. Right this minute.'

'But the truck will not go. I saw them siphon the last of the petrol from it earlier.'

'You should have been paying attention, when you were loitering earlier,' Charlotte said. 'Or at least when you fell over the two petrol cans that I had the forethought to put behind the bench.'

The innkeeper and several of his friends came out of the door at the end of the courtyard, waving cleavers and an old pike. Charlotte fired into the dirt at the iimkeepeT's feet, and he retreated.

She climbed into the front of the truck, and continued to keep a weather eye open while the seedy young Weerde carried out her orders. In a few minutes, they were ready and started to back out of the courtyard. As they did so, they noticed a crowd of people running from the settlement, led by the innkeeper with his cleaver.

'I think,' Charlotte said, 'that we have outstayed our welcome in Hicheng.'

They accelerated, leaving the mob to eat their dust. Suddenly, he looked at her.

'Scheiss, you are a human, is that not so? All I could smell before was the liquor, and I did not stop to think.'

'Yes,' she said. 'But I don't think either of us can afford to examine each other's pedigrees too closely.'

'You don't understand. They'll kill me.'

'Who will?'

'Everyone. I don't belong to a very exalted lineage or anything, but at least none of my Line has ever been dishonoured, and no one is actually wanting to kill me, Fritzi, specifically. Except perhaps a croupier in Odessa, but that wasn't anything to do with being Kin. But if they thought I was a Revealer ...'

'I won't tell anyone, if you don't,' Charlotte said. 'And you may have gathered that I know a fair amount already.'

Fritzi started to gather the muscles at the base of his jaw and lengthen his features. Charlotte glared at him, and placed her hand on her revolver.

'Sorry,' he said, 'just a nervous twitch.'

She smiled at him reassuringly.

'You were going to explain what you were doing with my fossils.'

'I have not the slightest interest in fossils,' Fritzi said. 'There is no obvious profit to be made from them. I was only in Urga to get away from Irkutsk—I had to leave

Irkutsk because of a little misunderstanding over baccarat.'

'So you're a card sharp,' Charlotte said.

'Not at all. But I have a weakness for the tables, and have, on balance, been fortunate there.'

She looked at him sceptically.

'No, honestly,' he said. 'If only I had ever had a proper stake ... I have a real gift, when I am in a proper casino. I only ended up in Irkutsk because I was tired of marching across Asia with the Czechs. Anyway, Urga was full of Darkcallers and Chaoticists; not a healthy place at all, but no obvious way of leaving. Then I saw that they were loading a crate into a truck, with obvious care, and the truck looked worth stealing and the crate might have been.'

'And then they caught up with you?' Charlotte prompted.

'They caught up with me,' he went on in the tone of a man with a grievance, 'and they held their guns on me, and tied me hand and foot and slung me in the back of their truck. The Darkcallers wanted to kill me, but the Chaos couple said that it was random chance that had brought me there, and when the time came for sacrifice what better victim than a chance one? And what better chance victim than a gambler?'

'What sacrifice?' Charlotte said.

'I don't know. A sacrifice to the Dark, or to Chaos, I suppose; you have to understand that not all of us are interested in all this theology. It'll take place when they get to Shanghai, presumably. They are taking something there, apart from the fossils. It was important enough that, when the People of the Plain attacked them, they left one lorry and its contents to safeguard it.'

'This lorry.'

'I suppose so, and then nothing happened until we got here and stayed overnight. They were busy carousing, so I untied myself, disabled one of the lorries and buried the bits, wrapped in some cloth, out in a field. I thought I might get a better chance to escape, so I tied myself back up, sort of. They just assumed the lorry had stopped working—I've noticed that Darkcallers tend not to be terribly mechanical. They think it's beneath them.'

'So you escaped,' Charlotte said. That was resourceful of you.'

'Not really. A few miles on from Hicheng, we met some travelling procurers, and they had a child with them—Shumeng, the daughter of the innkeeper back there—and her mother. They bought the pair of them, saying that they would do better; a woman dog and her child dog, the procurers said. They would have killed me, but the two from Chaos had taken my dice as a trophy, and they cast them, saved me from them, and threw me naked beside the road with my dice in my mouth, to die or be saved as chance decreed. And so I came back to Hicheng.'

‘As chance decreed.’ Charlotte handed him her last two squares of Swiss chocolate.

There was an old man with a bicycle standing in the rain on the less fashionable side of Nanking Road, opposite the Young Women’s Christian Association Shanghai hostel and the offices of Flossing, Reeves and Matthews. The pouring rain had largely emptied the streets and laid the dust, and reduced the scent of incense, spices, sweat and dung to a mere water-shadow of itself. Native police were moving other street vendors along, but they left the old man to stand there, turning a grindstone that was mounted on the front wheel, with unpleasant-looking little sachets of herbs in a basket at the back.

Charlotte dismounted from the lorry and turned to say goodbye to the essentially harmless Fritzi, but the moment her feet had touched the ground, he slammed the door behind her and drove off as if the Dark were after him.

Charlotte looked at the old man with the grindstone and he looked back at her with interested, if filmy, eyes.

‘Potions, Missy,’ he said. ‘Love potions.’

‘Heavens, no,’ Charlotte retorted. ‘When I am unlucky in love, I handle the matter for myself.’

She turned to cross the road, then turned back to him, reached into her jacket pocket and handed him the straight-edged razor she found it useful to carry there.

‘Now that I have returned to civilization,’ she said, ‘you had better put an edge on that for me.’

‘Has Missy the money to pay for it?’ he asked.

‘Oh, I think so,’ Charlotte said, passing him the very last of the cosmopolitan small change and notes that she found on a diligent search of the rest of her pockets.

He grumbled slightly, but proceeded to work on the razor slowly and steadily with the grindstone and some sort of jeweller’s rouge that he produced from a small pouch. It glimmered dully when he had finished, but he pulled a hair from his head, split it, and then split the section he was still holding, before folding the blade and passing it back to her. She pocketed the razor, and then worked her way through the traffic to the other side of the road and entered the bank. A young Chinese clerk looked askance at her clothing and stepped decisively into her way.

‘I would like to see the managing director,’ she said.

‘Do you have an appointment to see him? Miss—ah.’

‘Matthews. Your name please?’

‘I am Sammy White,’ he said. ‘I wish to cause no offence.’

‘Good. I am glad about that, Mr White. And now, the managing director, if you please.’

‘If there is a problem with your account—’ White said.

‘I do not have an account,’ Charlotte said.

‘I am sorry. The managing director is in a meeting just now, with a very important client.’

‘White, my name is Charlotte Matthews and I own a sixteenth of the shares in this bank. No, of course, stupid of me, an eighth. And I wish to see my Uncle Gerard.’

White bowed alarmedly, and offered Charlotte his hand to shake. She shook it vigorously, if uninvolvedly, and then followed him through the bank to the back office. Uncle Gerard was making his farewells to a short Chinese man with an unusually bushy beard, who was wearing rather shabby trousers, and boots so well-polished that Charlotte suspected someone else had done it for him, and a black jacket with improbably large gold epaulettes.

‘Good Lord,’ said Gerard, ‘Charlotte! Whatever are you doing here?’

He turned to the skinny pock-marked man who was serving as interpreter.

‘Tell the General that this is my niece, an important shareholder. Charlotte, have you met General Feng Yuxiang?’

‘No,’ Charlotte said. ‘But I have heard excellent things about his enlightened and modern rule of the areas he controls.’

The interpreter conveyed this, and the General smiled, and replied.

‘The General wishes,’ the interpreter said, ‘that you bring your niece to dinner this evening. Even though she is too old to be marriageable, she shows a becoming sense of the proprieties.’

Then, with the usual bowing, the General and his interpreter left. White clapped his hands, and

servants appeared with a pot of tea and some English biscuits. Charlotte slumped gratefully into one of her uncle's armchairs.

'Don't mind Wu Fang,' her uncle said, noticing the way she had narrowed her eyes as the clerk bustled around before leaving. 'Good lad, keen as mustard.'

'I thought he was called Sammy White,' Charlotte said.

'Goes by it. Spirit of deference, he seems to think. Lot of nonsense if you ask me, when a chap's got a perfectly good name and nation of his own.'

'Indeed he has.'

'How on earth,' Uncle Gerard asked, 'do you come to be here? The last I heard, you were pursuing your researches in the Bibliotheque Nationale.'

'I had news, bad news, about Tom.'

'Tom?'

'He is dead, Uncle Gerard, killed by wild beasts in Western Mongolia, and so is his friend Grobel, at the hands of the strangler-in-chief of the White Russian commander.'

'Are you sure?'

'Grobel told me that Tom was dead, a few minutes before he was killed himself. I tried to prevent Grobel's death, and was sentenced to death myself.'

'I gather things are a bit sticky,' Gerard said, 'up in Mongolia. This von Sternberg chappie who runs things at present seems to be an excitable sort of fellow, even for a Russian. You seem to have come through quite remarkably well, for a woman travelling by herself.'

'I had companions,' Charlotte said, 'part of the way.'

'Ah, well, that explains it.'

She sat, systematically and mechanically devouring the biscuits, and charmed by the way he refrained from mentioning her travel-stained state. He went over to his desk, and worked on some correspondence while she slipped into a near-drowse.

After a while, he said, 'It will be a while before we can have Tom declared dead, you know.'

The war will be over in a few months,' she said, 'and we will be able to check his grave.'

'Funny thing,' Gerard said. 'Coincidence, sort of, though I suppose it happens in troubled times. There were several cousins, but they never applied for him to be declared dead, and now he's turned up again, or so this letter says.'

'Who's turned up?' Charlotte said.

'Wilfred's friend, that loud-mouthed bore Saunders. He always kept an account here, and now he wants to clear it out. Not sure I can let him, just on a signature, but the poor old chap says he has some terrible disfiguring disease, and doesn't want to be seen. All most irregular.'

'Is he in Shanghai, then?'

'Seems to be. He always came here a lot, in the old days. Had some sort of interests here. Even when he was supposed to be dead, people kept on paying money into the account. Fairly disreputable bunch of people, come to that.'

'And he's here now,' Charlotte said.

'If it really is him. Says he's staying down the road, on Bubbling Well Street. In some clinic. Probably a glorified Chinese pox doctor, if my memory of Saunders serves me well.'

Charlotte wandered over to his desk with a satisfied smile, and memorized the address. Stupid male arrogance never ceased to amaze her.

She had been wearing her riding-breeches for so many days that it was almost a shock to wear a skirt again. She refused her uncle's offer of having a dressmaker produce some piece of frou-frou, and insisted on a sensible outfit. As a compromise to fashion, she put her hair up.

'General Feng does not want to look at my legs,' she said, 'but he may take a full view of my face for all the good it will do him.'

Her uncle's carriage took them to a large restaurant, full of gourmands and drunkards on each of several floors. They were shown to a large, European-style table, where Feng sat with a variety of business backers and local politicians. This was a male gathering, except for Charlotte, and Feng had

already seen her uncle, so that they were, for the most part, ignored. This suited Charlotte, because it meant that she could concentrate on the first hearty meal she had had in she did not know how long; it did not really matter that it was the usual Chinese mess of rice and noodles and unidentifiable fragments of meat covered in thick goo—it tasted pleasant enough, and it was filling.

Her uncle of course insisted on showing off by using chopsticks. He tried to show Charlotte how, but she refused even to acknowledge the attempt. There was something she was trying to remember, and acquiring new dexterities would only confuse her.

After a while, the young officer who was sitting beside Feng came down and summoned her uncle to the far end of the table, to exchange a toast with Feng, who seemed to be ignoring most of the delicacies on offer in favour of a large dish of American ice-cream streaked with nuts and pastel-coloured, unhealthy looking syrups. He was shovelling this mechanically into his mouth, save when he paused to speak or to drink from a copious jug of lemonade.

Gerard came back and sat beside Charlotte.

The General is not a happy man,' he said, 'and he wants to borrow even more money.'

'Why?'

'He had bad news after visiting us. Bandits massacred a crack platoon of his bicycle cavalry. There are plenty more soldiers where they came from. But he needs to buy new bicycles.'

Charlotte realized that the vague uneasiness she had felt when her uncle was summoned away had been prompted by the smell of hair-oil. The general and the young officer were talking to two Europeans who had just arrived and to whom Gerard had been momentarily introduced.

'Who are the Europeans?' she said.

'A Russian and a Dutchman. Vointsky, I think it was, and Hareng. Don't know who they are; Bolsheviks probably, though we are not supposed to know Feng keeps that company. Best be off, then; Feng wants to take everyone to the New World for gambling and dancing, and I am sure you wouldn't find that amusing.'

'Not tonight,' Charlotte said.

'The New World is a comprehensive den of the world's most depraved vices,' her uncle explained. 'It has gambling on five floors, and what is alleged to be music on most of them. There is only one place in the city that is worse.'

'Surprise me! What could be worse than gambling and loud music?'

'It's rival, the Great World, just around the corner from it, which is exactly the same except that it has opium and jugglers on the second floor, public suicide on the roof and unspeakable atrocities in the cellarage.'

T would have thought atrocities in the cellarage more or less standard.'

'No,' her uncle continued, 'the cellars of the New World contain nothing more worrying than good French wines, though they tell me they are building an extension for the new vintages from California. Doubtless they will find room for unspeakable atrocities while they are at it.'

'What sort of atrocities are they?' Charlotte asked.

'I am sure I don't know, I have never considered a detailed acquaintance with such matters an essential part of good banking practice. Small boys, dead bodies, human sacrifice, that sort of thing, I would assume.'

'I would find night life a little strenuous after a long journey.'

'There is a spare bedroom in my rooms at the bank,' her uncle offered.

'I prefer a hotel. Less of an imposition, and it preserves the proprieties.'

'You ought to be under my roof, really you ought. Shanghai is a dangerous city, particularly for a scholarly spinster who spends her life in libraries, and doesn't know the world.'

As they left, Charlotte caught the young officer watching her in a considering sort of way.

Bubbling Well Street is merely a portion of Nanking Road devoted less to banks and offices than to shops and merchants of fripperies. There was a herbalist clinic at the return address on Saunders' letter, and it did indeed appear to be what her uncle had called a pox doctor's, but as she had feared, it also operated a profitable sideline as a poste restante.

She thought a while, and then wrote a short note on the back of one of the posters for the New World that were all the herbalist could offer her by way of stationery. It ran:

Dear Saunders,

You will be glad to know that I have arrived in Shanghai without too much difficulty.

I am sure that release of your funds can be expedited by the bank—in which, you may be unaware, I have a significant interest—if satisfactory proofs can be offered of your identity and your good faith.

You have something of mine that I wish returned.

This was not perhaps wise, but it was the best she could manage. If Saunders had killed her brother, he had presumably already killed Watcher and her sisters as well, and had lied to her; but the fact that she was still alive was not a wholly comfortable reminder of the possibility that he was telling the truth.

She handed the note to the herbalist, who allowed that it might in due course be collected, and tried to sell her leopard hairs, the gizzards of hunting birds and the stone teeth of dragons. None of these seemed to meet her current needs.

She was only notionally closer to finding Saunders, and even less so to finding the Darkcallers, assuming them to be distinct entities. She would, on balance, prefer to find them other than by their finding her first.

Thinking hard, and trying to avoid an impotent distress over Watcher that might cloud her mind, she paid little attention to where she was going. She paced the street, pausing occasionally to finger a roll of cloth, or buy small items from the exigent stallholders. The most amazing collection of the rubble of six continents seemed to have ended up on these stalls. On one stall she even found a London bobby's whistle that made her feel a momentary nostalgia for home, to the extent that she weakened and bought it.

Out of the corner of her eye, as she was haggling with the stallholder, she saw the two Europeans from the restaurant marching down the street with fixed glares and determination. They turned off to the right, pushing their way through the crowds, off towards the French Quarter. She was watching them so intently that she was taken by surprise when someone took her by the arm, and placed what felt like a revolver in the small of her back. She could not see who it was, but there was a smell of hair-oil that she knew well.

'Miss Matthews,' the young officer said in a quiet voice, 'how convenient to find you here. It would not incommode me at all to shoot you here and now, but I would prefer you to accompany me to a place where your death will serve a greater purpose. Killing two birds with one stone, as you English put it, is a project of real elegance, I always find.'

There seemed little she could do for the moment save comply, so Charlotte allowed herself to be walked through the streets of the Quarter that combined, unap-petizingly, the composite stink of a Chinese city with the unpleasant municipal architecture of a French provincial town. She noticed, ahead of them, Vointsky and Hareng turn into what appeared to be a girls' school, a vaguely ecclesiastical building in red brick into which, she noticed without surprise, her companion pulled her in turn.

The school was empty, presumably for the summer holidays, and their feet echoed on the polished wood floors of the empty corridors. Vointsky and Hareng did not look round, and turned into a classroom from which Charlotte could hear the voices of a number of Chinese men, arguing fiercely. Charlotte's captor pulled her into an adjacent room.

He pushed her to the floor, and put his hand over her mouth.

The story of a politically motivated gang-rape and murder of a leading financial interest,' he said, putting his revolver to one side while he tore at her buttons, 'followed by a fatal quarrel between the deranged criminals will be most convincing if there are some signs of an attempt to violate you.'

She bit down on his fingers, hard.

The noise he made did not sound even like the Chinese version of profanity. His grip was still firm, though, and it was without any real surprise that Charlotte felt the blood that briefly flowed from his fingers dry up, and the fingers constantly shift and mend between her worrying teeth.

She kicked out wildly, and made a sudden connection with something solid. With a terrible clatter, the slate of the blackboard toppled from the easel she had kicked and landed on top of them. It was a

heavy piece of furniture, and the young officer was lying on top of her. With a major effort, Charlotte wriggled out from under him.

The door opened, and eleven Chinese men rushed in, among them the delegate from Hunan. Vointsky and Hareng followed them.

There followed a loud argument in Chinese, in the course of which Charlotte picked herself up, brushed herself off and sat down on one of the desks in the front row. The delegate from Hunan looked at Charlotte with mild amusement.

'You have interrupted a most interesting debate,' he said. The fraternal delegates'—he nodded at Vointsky and Hareng—'were proposing the dissolution of the party, and I was opposing them.'

'Fraternal delegates, are they?' Charlotte said. 'Last night I met them at dinner with General Feng Yuxiang and his messenger-boy here.'

The delegate smiled, turned and spoke volubly to his colleagues, who looked at the two European men suspiciously. Charlotte noticed that the unconscious young officer's face was drifting a little, but no one else in the room was paying him any attention whatever.

'I have told them,' the delegate said, apologetically, 'that you are reasonably trustworthy, for an imperialist, but they are not especially convinced. I think they are likely to return to the last motion that was put before the disturbance. As amended, of course. To take note of changed circumstances.'

'What motion?' Charlotte said. 'What amendments?'

'To ignore the majority given me by my block vote of sixteen members and kill me, as a left deviationist, whatever that is. And of course to kill you and this running dog of war-lordism.'

'I see.'

She reached into her pocket, pulled out the police whistle and blew a healthy blast. Then she sat back and smiled.

'Gendarmes are always, I have found, prone to prompt arrival and a fair degree of hostility towards covert political activity. Suggest to your colleagues that they had better leave,' she said.

The other delegates, and Vointsky and Hareng, looked at each other, and then ran quickly from the room. The delegate from Hunan looked at her with respect, as Charlotte picked up the young officer's revolver and pointed it at the man on the floor.

The police will be here, in a moment,' she said. 'I trust it will be agreeable for me to explain to them that you are my hired interpreter, and nothing to do with any illegal meeting that may have been going on here. Indeed you merely followed, when I was abducted b^ a drunken officer with rapine on his mind. Oh, by the way, my name is Charlotte Matthews—I think they will expect us to know each other's names.'

'My name is Mao,' the delegate said, brushing a curlicue of long dark hair from his forehead, 'Mao Tse-tung.'

'Fine.'

'Our friend on the floor appears to be coming back to consciousness,' said Mao. 'Another interesting glandular case, I see. I took him for Chinese at first, but this appears not to be the case.'

The young officer sat up and looked around him with some confusion.

'Very quickly,' Charlotte said. 'Who are you working for? Feng? The Comintern? Or someone else?'

'You have no idea,' the young man said, 'of the power of the organization I represent, Miss Matthews, and of the folly of trying to oppose us. And you,'—he glared at Mao—'you are an insect on whom we shall tread.'

'I rather thought something of the kind,' Charlotte said, and shot him between the eyes at point-blank range.

'After all,' she explained to the somewhat startled young man, 'the French police are men of the world. And I shot an attempted rapist with his own revolver.'

The French police were easier to appease than her uncle, though he was somewhat mollified when General Feng sent round a large basket of flowers to Charlotte with a note offering his profoundest apologies that an officer of his army should have behaved so badly. Indeed, he further insisted that they

should be his guests that night, at the New World.

Charlotte summoned a tailor to her hotel suite.

'But I don't want to wear a dinner-jacket,' said Mao Tse-tung.

'Come come,' Charlotte said. 'I saved your life this morning; the least you can do is help guard my back for an evening.'

'But I don't know anything about the decadent pursuits of such places.'

'Indeed I should think not, and that will make you all the more useful, because you will be attentive and not take anything for granted.'

'But I still don't want to wear a dinner-jacket.'

'What is good enough for me,' Charlotte countered, 'ought to be good enough for you. We are going to see General Feng, and one thing he will not be expecting is a Communist in a dinner-jacket. It was you after all who taught me valuable lessons about hiding in plain sight. Another thing he will not be expecting, of course, is a woman wearing one, but I shall tell him, not inaccurately, that it is all the rage in Paris. I detest skirts, and I need pockets.'

Mao had a surly expression on his face that seemed to betoken a lack of interest in such matters.

'In the meantime,' Charlotte said, 'I have a small job for you. You are, are you not, a professional agitator?'

He nodded.

'So go down to the New World in your present attire and wander around to the service entrance, and strike up a conversation with the waiters, or the cooks, or the croupiers.'

'What would I want to do that for?'

'So that you can agitate them. Exploit a legitimate grievance; incite class hatred; do whatever it is that you people do.'

He departed, less than wholly convinced.

She telephoned the gendarmerie and discovered, not **totally to her** surprise, that the body of the young offccei had been handed over by the morgue to one of his brothers, also a captain in the forces of General Feng. At her request, Sammy White went to the pox doctor's clinic and checked that the letter had indeed been collected by, the herbalist said, an uncouth Northerner with bad manners and protuberant eyebrows. The herbalist had offered a potion that would remove this imperfection and had received a dusty answer; later, White returned with a letter which had been handed to him at the bank.

My dear Charlotte,

Imagine my surprise at learning you had made such good time on your journey to Shanghai. Our own journey passed without incident, you will be glad to hear, though sadly we failed to cross the paths of our errant cousins. Doubtless we will come across them soon. Like all great or wicked cities, Shanghai is a very small place.

It would be convenient were you to encourage the release of my funds without unnecessary ofhciousness; I have some information that may be essential to your survival.

As you say, I have something of yours, but it is not yet in working order and I am loth to let something of such sentimental value pass out of my hands without a consideration.

My congratulations on your recent intrepid adventure; you are indeed a formidable young woman. But you are still not immortal, and you have some very powerful enemies, among the least of whom, I number myself.

Frederick Saunders

Uncle Gerard made a terrible fuss when he discovered that Charlotte was going to the New World in men's clothing.

'Anyone would think that you revelled in decadence, or that your head had been turned by your experiences,' he complained.

'Nonsense, Gerard, I am an independent woman, in command of my own fortune. And in a society like this one, to wear anything other than the clothing of privilege is to advertise yourself as a dependant. General Feng will just have to swallow any principles he may have regarding the matter because there is no reason for me to kowtow to him.'

‘I suppose not,’ said Gerard, resignedly. ‘Can we rely on this Mao chap you have hired? Do we know anything about his people?’

They are perfectly respectable farmers in Hunan,’ Charlotte said. ‘And he is himself a respectable married man.’

‘Sturdy yeoman stock, eh? Offer him a job with the bank if you like. Ambitious young chap like that; should go far.’

‘I don’t think so. That is, I don’t think he wants a job in the bank. I think he regards his people as having a prior claim on his time. And, speaking of the command of my own fortune, you will recall that Tom signed a power of attorney when he went off in ‘14. I may need to make some investments.’

You could hear the New World a block-and-a-half away. Charlotte reflected that it was bad enough going into what she assumed to be the lion’s den, without being deafened at the same time. From the third floor came the discordant strains of a German band, a Chinese orchestra and a piano player, imported at considerable expense from New Orleans, who was playing some sort of ragtime. You could hardly see the full moon overhead for the blaze of lights from the nightclub’s windows, and the flaming gas torches around its door.

In addition, from a block or so away the streets were crowded with rickshaws, carriages and parking cars. Charlotte and Mao had reluctantly allowed Gerard’s chauffeur to drive them the few hundred yards to the entrance; Gerard had had a sticking-point—the prospect of the fearful shame of allowing Charlotte to arrive at the New World on foot.

‘Good evening, Sir,’ said the young man at the door, who wore an elaborate green brocade robe over black trousers, ‘and good evening to you,—ah—Miss.’

‘We are part of General Feng’s party. I am Miss Charlotte Matthews, of the bank, and Mao here is my interpreter.’

‘You have come at a convenient time,’ the young man said. ‘The General has just finished his prayer-meeting and is about to proceed to the roulette wheel.’

As Charlotte walked past him, she noticed that there was mud on the heels of his European shoes. Beyond the pink marble staircase that curved up to the principal gambling halls, there was an entrance covered by a brown velvet curtain.

She walked towards it.

‘I will just avail myself of the cloakroom facilities,’ she said.

‘Ah, no,’ said the commissionaire, catching up with her. ‘They are upstairs. We will show you.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ she said, ‘speak more clearly.’

He started to pull at her arm, and she yielded to his entreaties. She had had time to see that behind the velvet curtain was a staircase leading down, and that the bottom of the curtain was stained with the same thick mud as his shoes.

The general was wearing a rather better pair of trousers, a resplendent purple cummerbund, a jacket whose epaulettes and orders dripped as bright as the chandeliers overhead, and a benign and fatherly expression. He looked askance at Charlotte’s clothing and then pulled his face into its normal smile.

‘He says,’ Mao translated, ‘he is glad to see that you have chosen to dress in a manner that could provoke no further attempts on your virtue.’

‘May he live a thousand years,’ said Charlotte, reasoning that politeness costs nothing.

‘He wishes to present the brother of the man you killed,’ Mao continued, ‘who wishes to proffer his apologies.’

An officer almost identical to his brother, wearing a different but equally repellent hair-oil, drew them aside.

‘The old man claims to speak no English,’ he said, ‘but there is no reason to trust his veracity.’

‘Indeed,’ Mao said, ‘foreign languages are an accomplishment which I myself consider better exercised than acknowledged.’

‘You do not,’ the officer said, ‘appreciate the seriousness of your situation. You are, both of you, doomed as soon as we can make the appropriate arrangements.’

‘Revolutionaries,’ Mao said, ‘are dead men on leave.’

‘Appositely quoted,’ Charlotte said.

‘I had thought it original.’

‘Besetting problem of the aphoristic. Anyway,’—she turned back to the officer—‘what about this doom then?’

‘You do not understand,’ he said. ‘It is our intention to dispose of all of these Bolsheviks. They are unlikely to disturb the endless peace of China, but it is as well to be sure. You, Miss Matthews, you seem to be altogether too inquisitive for your own good, or even too well-informed.’

‘Just so,’ she said.

The officer narrowed his lips, rather more perhaps than was normal in a human being expressing wrath.

‘Avoid dark corners,’ he said.

Charlotte and Mao bowed to him politely and walked back to the general and his party, who were about to leave the roulette table for a room on the next floor. Charlotte stopped to place a small bet, for luck, and found difficulty in getting the croupier to meet her eye. She was not surprised to notice that he had bushy eyebrows.

Tell your master,’ she said, ‘that we need to talk.’

‘No speakee English,’ the croupier said.

‘I think you do.’

She noticed with satisfaction that the young officer was still watching her; she stuck out her tongue at him, and then, with Mao dogging her footsteps, she sauntered up the stairs.

Halfway up the stairs, she paused.

‘Mao,’ she said. ‘I know you are not enjoying all this very much, so go and talk to all the friends you have made here. Persuade them that they need an evening off; national holiday, or mass protest, or something.’

The very first person she noticed in the room upstairs, where a game of baccarat was in progress, was young Fritzi, whom she seized by the arm the moment she spotted him.

‘Fritzi, darling, how nice to see you. Was it in Menton? Or was it in Venezia? I thought I might find you here, and I brought this for you.’

She drew him aside and thrust an envelope into his hand.

‘You need a stake, don’t you?’ she said.

‘I can manage,’ he replied.

‘You would like a proper stake.’

‘Yes.’

‘And I need a bargaining counter. We are surrounded by our enemies. I hope you are as good as you say you are.’

He tore open the envelope and looked inside. He gave a long slow whistle.

‘Just be as good as you say you are,’ she said, ‘and we might all live out the night.’

Then she went over to the bar, and sat for an hour sipping fresh orange juice mixed with Vichy water. She had learned in Italy during the war that it was often possible, without the use of spirits, to abstract one’s attention for a while until it was needed. The alternative to abstraction would have been to catalogue the lapses of taste in the room’s decor, a long list, in which gilt dragons and red lacquer trimmings would have competed for priority.

After an hour, Fritzi took a break from the table, and tried to explain in tedious technical terms what he had done. Charlotte patted him on the arm, and sent him back to the tables.

When, after a while, he went down to the roulette tables, she followed him at a distance, just to be on the safe side. He seemed to be doing rather well, and she noticed after a while that General Feng, and various of the casino staff, were sweating.

The tension was increased by the gathering silence—the bands had stopped playing, and the chanteuse in a cheongsam who had been singing ‘Tea for Two’ and other risque modern ditties packed up her music and went and sat at the bar. After a while, it became impossible to get a drink—the bar staff appeared to have gone off somewhere, and a press developed at the bar of men unable to cope

without alcohol. Charlotte finished her orange juice and wandered over to the table.

'I will see your boss, now,' she said to the croupier.

'Fritzi,' she added, 'you can take a break now.'

He bustled up, full of himself.

'I really would like to go on,' he said. 'I've never broken the bank before.'

'If you must,' she said indulgently.

'You can have your money back.'

'That will be acceptable.'

'And I thought I would make you a present of what I won from General Feng.'

Charlotte had a sudden feeling that things had got out of control, as the entire group of officers from Feng's entourage, including the one who had threatened her, walked up to her and Fritzi as a body.

'I may have need of you later,' Charlotte said. 'But you may reassure General Feng that it is in any case a loan, and you had better hang on to them, to protect yourself and the General. You, on the other hand,'—and she pointed to the officer who had threatened her—'may come with me right away. I have a proposition to put to you.'

'I have nothing further to say to you,' he said.

'And I will say one thing to you. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, except when he is the enemy of all.'

The officer narrowed his eyes.

'I think you take my meaning,' Charlotte said. 'Sometimes, there is a need for truce. It is a full moon, for those who take account of these things, and a party of Darkcallers came here from Urga bringing something precious, and they brought a virgin child as well.'

'We have underestimated you, Miss Matthews,' the officer said. 'I had thought you knew too much, but this is intolerable.'

'In life there are priorities. I have priorities, and you have priorities. And the keeping of secrets may be a high one with you, but there are higher ones yet, are there not?'

He followed her up the staircase, then seized her by the arm.

'But how do you know that I am not one of them?' he said.

'You have the stink of hidebound, privileged, brutal reaction on you,' she said, 'of a pathetic desire to keep things always the same. But in Urga I smelled the stink of madness. They are surprisingly different.'

'And at the top of these stairs, what do you smell at the top of these stairs?'

'I smell the tired, corrupt stink of business as usual.'

They were on the top floor now, and the staircase led to a penthouse on the roof. In a sudden flurry of footsteps, Mao joined them.

'I have done as you asked,' he said.

'Good,' Charlotte said, and knocked loudly on the door that led into the penthouse. It was opened by another of the People of the Plain; they all really did have those eyebrows in common, it must be inbreeding or something, thought Charlotte. Inside, there was the noise of someone shouting very loudly, and in some distress, into a speaking-tube.

'Tell Mr Saunders that we are here to see him,' she said.

Against a far wall, shouting into the speaking-trumpet, the vast bulk of Saunders lolled on cushions. The air was thick with scent and incense, but it could not hide completely the animal stink of him. In such surroundings, he looked less human than ever, the green silk robe he had thrown over his bulk glimmering in the dim light like a serpent's scales.

Two more of the People of the Plains stood beside the cushions; one of them had a large and exotic curved sword, a yataghan, Charlotte supposed, or something of the heathenish sort, and the other a tommy-gun. Against the wall to her right, in what looked like extreme discomfort, the six sisters lay groaning in what would have been human shape, save that individual limbs were clenched and paw-like. A closer examination revealed that each of them had, around those limbs, a tight manacle too narrow to fit human shape. Watcher was nearest to Saunders, and her eyes were focused enough to signal extreme

distress to Charlotte.

'I have come for what is mine,' Charlotte said.

'You have found me with your usual dispatch,' Saunders said.

'A person as large as you leaves large footprints. In the present case, large, ill-printed handbills at the herbalists where you have your mail sent. I know that it pays to advertise, but there are exceptions to every rule.'

'You have brought my money, from the bank?'

'No, on the contrary, from him that hath not, I have taken away even that which he had.'

More voices gabbled at Saunders through the speaking-tube.

'My agent has broken your bank,' Charlotte said. 'And my colleague here,'—Mao bowed—'has spread social unrest among your domestic staff. I hold you, Saunders, in the palm of my hand. My uncle will never allow you access to my funds without seeing you, unless I assure him that I have seen you and that you are not an impostor. I do not know what egotistical game has led you to reduce my lover and her sisters to their present unfortunate state, but ...'

'I needed them,' Saunders said, 'and I could not be sure of their compliance. You have no idea of how important ...'

'I think I do. Otherwise I would not have involved the captain here.'

'Stasis,' Saunders hissed.

'Just so,' confirmed the captain.

'I think,' Charlotte resumed, 'that if we are to go through your little tunnel, we had better make a start now.'

'How do you know about the tunnel?' asked Saunders.

'It is merely basic prudence to know about a tunnel for which I appear to have paid.'

'The best of luck.'

'You will be coming too. This is too important for the most effective fighting-machine we will have to think of himself as on the staff.'

'But he must not be seen,' the captain said.

Outside and below, the noise of discontent had started to become almost a riot. Charlotte stepped to the door of the penthouse, drew her whistle from her pocket and blew three stentorian blasts.

She turned to Mao.

'Would you do the honours?'

'It's a raid,' shouted Mao Tse-tung, in several languages.

'Thank you,' she said.

Outside, the tumult grew and then gradually dwindled into the street.

'We have a few minutes,' Charlotte said. 'Your keys, Saunders, and be quick about it.'

'There is still a tommy-gun pointed at you,' Saunders said.

'Don't be childish. Your interests dictate that you transcend murderous spite, and that we all settle our grievances afterwards. Your keys.'

The guards handed their weapons to Mao, who retained the tommy-gun, and then they took the keys and released the prisoners. The sisters stretched and yawned, their tongues lolling over their teeth, and eased their cramped bestial limbs into a more human shape. Watcher tore the gag from her mouth.

'Charlotte,' she said.

'I said,' Charlotte reiterated, 'that we will settle our grievances later.' Then she softened, walked over to Watcher, and smiled and embraced her for a moment, moving her hands delicately over the much-loved body and the suit that travel and chains had worn almost to rags.

Below, the rooms had cleared, leaving little except a few overturned chairs, a bottle of champagne that dripped on to the floor and a cigar burning in an ashtray to indicate a passing human presence. Halfway down the stairs, the party was joined by the group of officers, Fritzi and General Feng.

Charlotte loathed speeches.

'More is at stake than I can discreetly speak about,' she said. 'One thing you need to know. There is a child in danger; that should be enough.'

General Feng looked at the vast, monstrous bulk of Saunders, tottered to the table where the champagne bottle was dripping and proceeded to gulp from its neck. This was no time for a breach of lifelong teetotal-ism, Charlotte thought, but refrained from commenting beyond a sour look. The old man was a valued client of the bank after all, and probably best left behind.

The young man with the muddy trousers had dispensed with his robe, and locked the doors of the New World; he stood at the curtain passing out extra firearms.

'You seem well prepared,' Charlotte said with surprise.

'We have an extensive Lost Property department at the New World,' said Saunders.

'Some people seem obsessed with collecting lost property,' Watcher said, almost sourly.

'And some of us,' Charlotte said, softening her words a little with a smile, 'do not relish being treated as luggage.'

Watcher smiled back, and laid her hand on Charlotte's wrist.

'I had some leisure to think, through the ache of my healing head, and you were right. I have cause to think ill of myself.'

'It does not matter,' Charlotte said. 'I am sure that, over the years, I will do things that you have to forgive, and it is best to establish a precedent of reasonableness.'

At the bottom of the stairs there was a wine cellar, which stretched under vaulting for some yards. At the end of the stone vaulting there were pit-props holding up a tunnel that continued in the same direction for twenty claustrophobic yards, took a short turn for six and then ended in clay.

'There is not far to go,' Saunders said. 'It is important that they don't hear us coming until the last possible moment.'

He took the lead and charged at the clay face, tearing at it with his vast shovel-like hands. He began to sweat, and Charlotte noticed how patches of his back had acquired a surface as much like scales as skin, though only moderately like either. With a cry of triumph he pushed aside hunks of masonry, that fell away from him with a splash. He dived forwards, wading up to his waist in the channel that lay immediately before the tunnel's mouth.

Opposite, rather than the blank wall of the storm-sewer, was a raised embankment with a high water mark near its brim, and beyond that a vast chamber that smelled of mortar gone to flakes, and stone worn to round evenness by the sheer weight of age.

The young man from the door had brought two large planks with him from further back in the cellar and these he proceeded to lay across the sewer. The party clattered across them with the best speed they could manage. At the far end of the chamber, they heard chanting. If it resembled the howling of wolves, they were wolves that had not only eaten carrion but smeared it on their muzzles, wolves whose eyes would have the yellow sheen of rancid butter. The figures stood around a great altar, a vast shape of stone, whose seeming formlessness had implications that chittered nervously at the borders of the unconscious mind. At its head stood a smaller stone that glimmered in the torchlight, and on the great stone lay a naked, but as yet apparently whole, girl child. As the interlopers rushed at them, they shrieked and turned; to her surprise, Charlotte recognized among them, their faces shifting into beasthood, both the herbalist and the knife-grinder.

What ensued was a whirlwind of teeth and knives, bullets and sudden rushes. Charlotte saw Mao firing his tommy-gun into the coming wall of constantly mutating flesh, but was whirled away by a clawed hand that seized her throat until discouraged by a bullet. She found herself briefly in the eye of the storm, and dived out of it on the other side, managing a reasonably accomplished rugby-tackle—how fortunate at such times to have had an aggressively athletic brother—on the Dark-caller with a large and unpleasant-looking knife, who seemed to be about to kill the child. In a wild scrabble for position on the stone-flagged floor where they had both fallen, he grabbed the knife he had momentarily dropped and turned to stab Charlotte, but she seized his arm, and was surprised to find it frail and all too human seeming.

Someone reached past her, and stove in the Dark-caller's head with the smaller stone that had been the idol by the altar's head; when she looked at him to give him thanks, he nodded, his face resuming a human aspect, and she realized that it was the herbalist.

Charlotte seized the child, who had begun the most frightful caterwauling, and took it out of harm's way in the shelter of the altar. She tried ineffectually to soothe it, and to stroke its hair into some kind of order; a somewhat battered Mao joined her on the floor.

'I have more experience with children,' he said. 'And I think you have other concerns. I am quite surprised at the extent to which I find myself taking your orders, let alone the extent to which everyone else seems to be.'

'When I first met Mr Saunders,' Charlotte said, 'I cited the works of Heir Doctor Freud, but after thinking a good deal about the giving and taking of orders, I have since decided that the works of Mr Jack London have greater relevance. There is always a struggle as to which wolf leads the pack.'

'Ah yes, I understand that London is a great favourite of Lenin's.'

Charlotte looked across the room at the battle, that was the usual melee; she paused to look at the idol, a black stone of possibly meteoric origin, that someone had carved rather badly into what might have been a walking lizard, or maybe a bird.

Saunders, in the middle of the melee, threw away from him two Darkcallers who had been hewing at the back of his neck with ineffectual hatchets, and they landed against a far wall with a fatal-sounding crunch.

'Get away from the altar,' he shouted.

Charlotte turned. With a slow, massive and decisive effort, the nearer end of the altar raised itself from the ground, and looked at her with blank hideous great eyes. Mao raised his tommy-gun to shoot, and a huge paw batted it away and clubbed him to the ground; an eye turned from Charlotte to the child.

What had seemed shapelessness was merely a failure to think through logically how Saunders had been in her childhood, what he was now, and how, perhaps over centuries, he might continue to change. She remembered the destruction of Feng's militia, and reached into her pocket, producing the razor and flicking it open. If, she thought, one is to die messily, one may as well inflict a little pain in the process.

There was an echoing incoherence to the voice that then spoke, like sunken temples of evil reputation, or the bottom of poisoned wells.

'Ceremonies can be overrated,' it croaked. The Dark may yet come, if I take the child.'

Its open mouth stank and steamed in the cold of the cellar; vermin crawled among its scythe-like teeth. It reached for the girl Shumeng, but she darted beetle-quick away from its clutch, forcing herself into a crevice in the stonework.

'Leave her alone, you overgrown pond-spawn,' said Charlotte.

'Ay, yes, the redoubtable Miss Matthews. Doubtless, one virgin is as good as another.'

It reached for her with a slow, lazy paw, drawing back in sudden sharp reflex as Charlotte slashed the web between its finger and its titanic thumb with her razor.

'I am not precisely a virgin,' said Charlotte.

It reached for her again, and she slashed across its horny palm, drawing a thin line of blood.

'I am starting to find this annoying,' it said. 'You mindless little ape!'

Then, suddenly, a look of entire amazement came over its features. The vast maw that gaped across its moon-like features fixed in a rictus that showed its teeth, darkened by the years as by smoke. It raised itself up on its hindquarters, and collapsed on to its side with a resounding crash. Charlotte walked across and listened to the pounding of its mighty heart shudder and cease. She wiped the blood off her razor on to one of the few patches of fur remaining on its scaly flank and looked at the blade. It had returned to its usual bright sheen.

'Curare,' Saunders said. 'It gets them every time.'

Beyond him, the battle had ended. There were a large number of corpses, few of them identifiable by affiliation or species. Watcher limped across, with a vast bruise building across her shoulders, and a claw half-torn from her hand; the sisters followed her, Singer semi-conscious and supported by Mourner and Sojourner with her arms across their shoulders. The knife-grinder was there, the filminess of his eyes now less like cataracts than some quick smear of membrane.

Most of Feng's officers were somewhere in the pile of the slain, but the pompous little martinet who had threatened her earlier had come through with hardly a scratch.

These cattle have seen too much,' he said. 'I invoke the Truce of the Lines. I really must insist ...'

'Must, is it, little creature?' Saunders posed. 'I think you will find that matters will arrange themselves without further bloodshed, but if you insist, I can arrange for that bloodshed.'

'I really must insist,' the Stasis captain said.

'He means,' Charlotte said, 'that he can arrange for your blood to be shed. And Mr Saunders is so efficient in such matters that I would take him at his word.'

'Just so,' Saunders said.

'But the cattle ...' the officer objected.

The child will not remember more than a fever-dream,' said Mao Tse-tung. 'And I have other fish to fry.'

'And I,' Charlotte said, throwing her arm around Watcher with an abandon that forgot until too late the bruised state of her lover's shoulders, 'have my own reasons for discretion.'

'Go away, little creature,' Saunders said. 'Run back to Peking, and tell them that Shanghai is mine, mine utterly.'

Mao seemed about to say something demagogic and tactless, but Charlotte kicked him gently in the shin. The captain and his few surviving cohorts slunk away.

Charlotte nodded to Settler, who raised her revolver so that it pointed at Saunders. One of the People of the Plain had survived the battle, and also raised a revolver, pointing it at Charlotte.

Charlotte ignored this. 'As a representative of your banker, I think it is time that you settled your accounts.'

'My dear little Charlotte,' Saunders said, 'I must congratulate you on your skill. You are indeed a worthy huntress, a fine player of the Great Game. But presumably it will have occurred to you by now that every step you have taken, give or take the odd Chinese Bolshevik, was allowed for in my plans. The razor alone should tell you that.'

'The facts could indicate that we have all been walking around your web,' Charlotte said. 'Or they could indicate that you are an arrogant braggart with a certain gift for improvisation.'

'We have not forgiven him our confinement,' said Watcher, 'and there is a more sinister explanation for his actions. What group has been active in this affair that places everything in the hands of chance?'

There is a lot of loose talk about Chaos,' said Saunders. [4]It does not, as such, exist; there is merely a group of like-minded chaps who have taken notice of the extent to which chance rules in human affairs, and whose plans take account of it.'

That is not good enough,' Settler said, maintaining her grip on the revolver.

'But it is. What can you accuse me of, Charlotte, save the same ruthless willingness to use that your lover and her sisters possess? And that you have so thoroughly shown? And both your sense of justice and self-preservation should tell you that it is best to assume I am telling the truth. Leave me alone. And let well alone.'

Charlotte nodded to Settler, who shrugged and lowered her revolver.

'Everyone wins,' Saunders said. The Darkcallers and their Ancient are gone from Shanghai, and the last of those who killed your brother and Watcher's parents are dead; you have proved again to your lover and her sisters that you are a worthy leader of the hunt.'

'So this is all supposed to have been some sort of colossal favour to me.'

'Of course, Charlotte. I have broken them to your leash. Hunt well.'

'But I love Watcher; I don't want her will in my keeping.'

'Of course. As you wish ..'

A pause followed, in which Charlotte looked lovingly at Watcher, who looked back at her with a combination of devotion and suspicion.

'As for myself,' Saunders continued, 'I have added the Great World to the New as a possession—you realized, I take it, whose cellars these are. I have even, I suspect, acquired a useful manager in young Fritzi here; I have always regarded merit as more important than blood.'

'So we chased all the way here,' Charlotte said, 'to procure for you the command of a bordello?'

'The fossils will be broken up and sold as medicine by my herbalist here. Except for a few that will

find their way into the possession of a Jesuit of my acquaintance; when I met him in southern England, he showed a rare gift for confusing things. The idol is interesting; it is one of the larger fragments of the Siberian meteor, sculpted into its present form by, I hope, pious fraud. I shall wrap it in old newspapers and ship it off to California, where, I trust, it will cause no further problems. I myself will vegetate here, devoting myself to pleasure and hallucination ...'

Charlotte and Watcher looked at each other, shrugged, and joined hands.

'This simply is not good enough,' said Mao Tse-tung.

'I seem to have everything I want,' Charlotte said. 'And no one has died who was not trying to kill someone else. Usually you.'

'You,' Mao turned to Saunders, speaking in high rage and taking gulps of breath. 'I do not care who or what you are. These games of conspiracy and transformation are a luxury that one who aspires to serve the people cannot afford to reckon with. But it is intolerable. That you should have such power and use it all for selfish ends. To loll, smoking opium, and playing chess with human lives. Where is the responsibility in that? What of the people?'

'Those who rule men,' Saunders said, 'have no power, and do not rule. Chance rules.'

'I will not believe that.'

'Find me in fifty years and tell me so again.'

The child Shumeng had crawled from her hiding place and now stood with them by the great corpse, into whose dead open eye she now spat.

Mao turned to the child, and spoke to her in Chinese. She listened, evidently struggling to understand his dialect.

'I have told Shumeng,' he said, 'that I rely on her to keep me honest. She may come to me at any time, and I will listen to her advice. She is of the people, and who better to advise me?'

'You overestimate your capacity to combat destiny,' Saunders said. 'You had best ask her what name she will choose to bear as an adult. Shumeng is a child's name, and you would not wish to miss her advice. By chance.'

Mao turned to the child, and asked her.

'Jiang Qing,' she said.

'Now off with you,' Saunders said. 'Your comrades are reconvening at North Lake; you will lose the vote, but they will not press for your blood. I will arrange for the child and her mother to return home. They will be safe.'

Mao limped away, back to the bridge across the sewer. He turned then, his eyes filled with anger.

'I have remembered a line of the immortal Shakespeare which sums up my feelings.'

He paused.

Til be revenged on the whole pack of you,' he said.

Charlotte embraced Watcher even more tightly and the sisters huddled in around them. On the bridge, Mao passed the servant from the New World, who brought Saunders a pipe, lit it and handed it to him.

Tower, money, responsibility; honour, love arvd tfc-venge,' Saunders said.

He drew deeply on the opium pipe. And then he said, The stuff that dreams are made of.'

Sounds And Sweet Airs

Graham Higgins

BBC World Service news item:

The death has been announced *of David Daniels, the actor and director. Daniels* began *his career as a singer, recording three internationally successful* albums be/ore turning his *attention to acting. He was known in the* industry as a supremely *versatile actor, appearing in such diverse films as the* award-winning Crime and Punishment, *which was also his debut as director, and the* Arabian Nights series *made by his own production company, and for which he is perhaps best remembered.*

Many *film fans were disappointed when he announced his intention to abandon his* public career, and in recent years he became a *recluse, devoting himself to ocean voyages in his private yacht. A close friend said of him: 'Like Sinbad, he sailed in search of* treasure, *which in his case* meant *privacy.'*

David Daniels' ashes were *scattered at* sea.

A close friend. That was me. The quote was his. I wouldn't have come up with something like that. He'd left me some helpful notes. Typical.

I've kept a little jar of sand from the island. Here on my window-sill, even on bright days, you get no impression of the colours of that shore: blinding white at noon, warm pink in the sunset, a blue whisper by moonlight. But what you can see, even with a half-decent magnifying glass, is that the sand is made up mostly of crushed shell and coral. Amongst these shattered fragments of ghostly architecture there are shards of delicate pink and amber, and a speckling of volcanic jet. The shore is sugary underfoot. When you lie by the sea you can hardly resist taking idle handfuls of sand; hand-fuls of time measured out in tiny lives, seismic torment reduced to pretty powder.

It was a few handfuls of sand I sprinkled with due solemnity on the waters. Why David should want this appearance of sacrament I can't say. Nor why he should choose me to officiate. The official story—his discovery of the island, the sudden and virulent tropical disease and hasty cremation—covered the contingencies, and I needn't sort out the loose ends because the lone voyager still maintained a staff to handle his affairs. I don't know who my version of events is for. Posterity? My bones will run through the fingers of posterity and crunch underfoot.

As soon as I picked up the package off the front doormat I could see it was from David. How he managed to keep a track of my addresses over the years has remained a mystery, but it comforted me, as no doubt it was intended to. I propped the package against a pile of bills and magazines on the kitchen table and lingered over breakfast, the better to enjoy the anticipation of breaking the seal. I could hear the rattle of a cassette inside, so I wanted to be ready to play it through uninterrupted.

The package was made up with rough, fibrous brown paper which hadn't travelled well. The stamps featured brightly coloured images of racing cyclists, a weight—

lifter, and a pair of Siamese twins joined at the shoulder. These last two were in soccer strip, so they may have been leaping for possession of a ball, now lost for ever beneath a slick of mauve franking-ink. David's even handwriting remained clear and legible on the scuffed wrapping, which had been carefully folded and sealed. Inside was another layer, this time of crimped maize paper, and inside that, the cassette.

The glinting perspex case and the crisp German manufacturers' graphics on the inlay made a curious contrast to the plainly handmade parcel. There was no track listing, only a telephone number written on the label of the cassette itself. I supposed it was a telephone number. No letter.

I hesitated between the telephone and the tape deck before I realized that's exactly what David would expect. His way of sending up my chronic indecision. His little joke. Like the tour T-shirt said: *David Daniels: Provocation* = Evolution. I opted for the tape deck and stretched out on the couch to listen. My fortieth birthday. That was the first time I heard the music.

So much has been written about David that I can't think of anything I could add. Our paths started to cross when he was David Daniels, Rock Singer. That was the phase before David Daniels, Movie Actor and David Daniels, Film Director and Designer. At forty-two, David quietly sold up his business interests and took to ocean-voyaging as a retirement hobby.

Maybe he kept in touch like this with lots of people, but I was always pretty flattered when I heard from him, partly because I was so far removed from all that. Not that I have any principles about showbiz. If I could've met up with a dark man at a crossroads offering some of what David had in exchange for my soul, I'd have had *xny* plasma on the dotted line before you could cry mercy.

Instead I have what the music papers call 'a small but dedicated cult following' which means I've put out half a dozen albums, that a handful of writers think are soundly put together, and that an equal number of their friends buy to tape for friends. When you start to earn any kind of living you are said to 'leap' from cult status, a polite euphemism for 'honourable failure'.

The other title I hate is ‘musician’s musician’, but I know what they mean. This flat was wired by an electrician’s electrician; it’s an admirable piece of work in its way, once you work it out.

It would be naive of me to skirt around the fact that these are albums by a woman. Filtered through the Boys’ Own world of music writing this reads ‘Women’s Albums’. Membership of a special-needs gender is not an asset to marketing, I gather.

The last three albums were made with my money and along the way cost me my marriage, a house, and some threadbare patches in my shop-soiled sanity. I can’t complain.

I knock about on clarinet or drums with a rackety little trad-jazz band of Bix-fixated old maniacs, not so much jamming as preserving, doing the kind of clubs whose members will have us.

For money I do technical knock-ups on the desk at a local sound studio, and I get dead-time in return to do radio jingles and incidental music for industrial videos. These tracks go on to production companies’ library shelves and have titles like ‘Mellow Blue: floating synth theme over string and brass build. 2.27’ or ‘Prairie Highway: positive rolling piano, country rock backing. 1.43’. Officially they’re by R. Porlock. (You know about the tradesman who interrupted Coleridge and stopped him finishing *Xanadu*. Coleridge says ‘Where the hell did you spring from?’ and the tradesman replies ...)

When the other flats are empty during the day I can noodle away with my own little mixing-desk following the argument wherever it goes. I’ve never managed to take it for granted that you can drop a piece of plastic into a box of electronics and hear music from almost anywhere in the world and history. If I was a writer I might write about it, but for me it was easier and quicker to make records about it.

On my last album, say, *(1691*, Plumbob Records Pb003, at discerning record stores) there’s a track called ‘Nerval Quadrille’. It’s a zydeco two-step version of a twelfth-century Breton troubadour ballad with a vocal arrangement based on evangelical gospel ‘quartettes’. Really, it sounds better than it sounds. QED.

One writer described me as a musical de-ranger. As I said, the public isn’t much impressed by my conclusion so far. I am the victim of wicked genes.

All of which accounts for my pleasure when I still hear from David, but not for why he bothers. I’m writing me in here because nobody else will.

The tape was beginning. It was a field-recording. Probably on an Uher. The music began with a bamboo flute, played so that the in-breath put down a rhythm, joined on occasion by spoken syllables. Then the tone changed so that I wondered if I’d been mistaken, because the treble of the flute seemed now to be more like a human voice singing counter-tenor. The recording-level was all over the place and for a while it occurred to me that far from being a raw recording it was a clever series of edits, another joke. Next time the music faded I listened for the splice, which didn’t come. Instead the sound evolved into a set of hefty pan-pipes. If he’d edited it then he’d taken a lot of care over continuity in the ambient noise. If it was a practical joke, he’d taken some pains over it.

This was stupid. I wasn’t listening at all except to the chatter in my own head. I rewound the tape, and for a second wondered if I should take it out and call that number.

Listen first.

I played the tape end to end twice before I picked up the phone and by the time I got through I still wasn’t sure what I’d heard. I’d heard enough to want to call the number. You never knew what to expect with David. He said that people used neuroses like coffee granules so he liked to put them in hot water from time to time. He sounds like a tyrant king, but he’d also said how quickly imaginary fears dissolve in real predicaments. Some people who’d worked with him said he made them paranoid. During the ringing-tone I tried to expect anything and anticipate nothing.

I hadn’t expected a firm of solicitors.

Mr Daniels had instructed them that my debts should be underwritten and my household expenses disbursed for a period of two months in the first instance, commencing on the date of my embarcation on a flight to Dakar (to be arranged at my earliest convenience). Mr Daniels would arrange for me to travel on, and there was a sum deposited with the firm to defray incidental expenses. My discretion was expected and appreciated. Did I wish the first tranche of this sum to be deposited in my account?

When I put down the phone I was in several minds, all of them belonging to someone who’d just

won first prize in a competition he didn't even know he'd entered. She. Me.

So there were a few days of packing, and shopping (clothes! I'd forgotten what it felt like to be dressed head to foot in new clothes), and time on the phone, and unpacking and repacking. All the time there was nothing in the post or on the answering machine from David.

I had an idea about transcribing some of the music on the tape into notation and used some of David's money to get a book of Messiaen's bird-song transcriptions. Needless to say when I got to the airport I fell for a spy thriller, but I paid for that myself.

On the flight, I listened to the tape again. The thriller read itself while I helpfully turned the pages. The music became an unexpectedly effective soundtrack to the tribal feuds in the novel. Gradually there seemed to be a more plaintive tension in the music than I'd heard before. I closed the book and listened.

One of the things that had made me suspicious about the tape was the number of times a passage or phrasing would recall music I already knew. The discs I looked out made an unlikely heap: Bach, Toots Thielmans, Cootie Williams, Lully, Alfred Deller, Yma Sumac, Ales-sandro Moreschi ... a tape I own purely on the strength of these four following words, '... the last Papal cas-trato' on the label. Those are some of the European-American stack.

Here in the gently thrumming sterile tube of the fuselage I was hearing something else. In my mind's eye I could picture the sleeves of the other records I'd have to add to the growing pile: Penderecki, Ligeti, Arvo Part, those polychromatic devotional chants from Russia and Tibet. Someone once told me Janis Joplin sometimes gave off those phantom harmonics too, but they never made it on to disc.

I shook off the earphones and got back into the novel for the rest of the flight.

There was an overnight stop at Dakar. I was booked into a *place* you were careful to call 'an' hotel: air-conditioned room with view and en suite facilities including a TV with a hypnotic Adult Video channel. Plus, when I slipped the floor porter five American dollars—I've played (sing it) for pennies on the street, so tipping was a hair-raising novelty—he matter-of-factly handed me a stick of herbal bojangles. After a meal garnished with piped Bert Kaempfert in the hotel restaurant, I retired to a memorable night out in my room. Never underestimate the potency of good pot and glossy porn. Later, as I drifted off listening to the tape, a little earlier than I'd intended, I was adding to the pile of records: Stax horns, Etta James, Robert Johnson, Son House ... And I told David aloud in the dark, 'I'm confronting my fears, David. I'm terribly afraid I might become a slave of luxury.'

I was picked up in the morning by a driver who shook my hand thumb-to-thumb and introduced himself as Duane? from Brisbane? We drove down the coast in a Chewy Cherokee and Duane helped me finish the stick, telling me stories about how to get a taxi in Bali, where to find the best religious fanatics in Calcutta, and his girlfriend Shereen? whose face I might have seen on the video last night?

We were stopped once, at an army roadblock. A rangy officer in fatigues and a pair of cheap and cheerless shades leant in through my window. How he could see anything through those slabs of black plastic beat me, but his eyeless gaze scoured the back seats before resting on us. No, me. Beyond the clicking sounds under the bonnet from the cut motor, the silence stretched out for miles. He flipped open the door and while Duane lit a cigarette I stepped out into the heat. The soldier took my flight-bag from me and poked around inside. He took his time. What else was there for entertainment? Only a reedy radio I could now hear playing in one of the trucks. He pulled out the Messiaen and forced the book open with his thumbs, like a fig. He spoke for the first time.

'Music,' he said.

'Yes. Music by Oliver Messiaen. I'm a musician, you see, visiting a friend, another musician, who ...'

'Sing this music'

I looked at Duane, and at my pathetic reflection in the dark glasses, and whistled a few bars.

The soldier called to his partner and the pair of them stood in the dust and listened to me, with their Uzi's rattling on their webbing as they slapped their knees and laughed and laughed. A couple of times they caught their breath long enough to pat the book in my hand, their big hands slapping the spread pages, repeating in unison 'Mu ... sic[1].

I waved farewell as we drove off, and thanked Duane for keeping a straight face. He told me he'd been terrified. Words to that effect.

There was another stopover that evening at a beach house somewhere along Cape Verde while a motor yacht was made ready for the last leg of the journey.

Duane unloaded the Cherokee and made for the ocean to get in a little snorkelling. He said he needed to burn off some energy. I slumped on a lounger on the terrace and watched him saunter over the sand down to the ocean. The yacht gleamed peachy white off the shore. It was like falling into a page of the National Geographic.

I closed my eyes and found myself thinking about the flat. It was strewn with Stuff. Keeping track of the Stuff was a part-time job I tried to hold down between taking care of business and taking care of me. I tried to picture it as I'd left it, and thought about what I'd have to do when I got back. I made a start on the stacks of records that needed filing. What was I dreaming of? I realized that most of the records had only been lifted from the shelves in my imagination, so in my mind's eye I filed only the real discs back on the shelves. It was grey daylight in the flat; the titles were hard to make out, but I was certain sure that some of the discs weren't ones that I'd looked out.

I awoke to the sound of murmured conversation behind the glass doors to the terrace. As I sat up and rubbed at my face, the captain of the yacht stepped out into the darkness.

'Ah, Miss Pearce, you're awake. Sorry to disturb you. You'll be able to sleep on board.'

I watched the wake of the boat and behind it the lights of the house shrinking away. I hunched my shoulders against the cold night, and then turned in.

Lying in my berth, I wondered how David would look now, and how I'd look to him after all this time, and whether it would be a disappointment.

On stage David looked like Hendrix played by Elvis dubbed by Jim Morrison. And he used that voice as it had always been intended to sound, like a Vegas ballad-bruiser. I once spent an evening at David's watching a tape he'd edited together from concert videos—heavy metal, cabaret, opera, a few seconds at a time—arranged in a catalogue of stage gestures. '... one bar rest before the big finish. And ... he ... CRUSHES the flesh of the lyric in his fist, keeps a close watch on it as he raises it to eye-level and ... FLINGS it to the ground. See? Fingers spread out as if he were flicking the bloody remains off his hand.'

David knew his stuff all right. He made his well-cut black tux as rock'n'roll as black leather.

As an actor he got so fiercely into his roles that he appeared to change physically. He caught tiny inflections in the voice, subtleties of expression in the face and posture, and he made it look as though the charac—

ter was sculpted by these habits. The public liked him best in his Adventure Film Hero guise. He pumped iron for the Sinbad films until he looked like a young Jim Brown poured into Steve Reeves' torso.

My last image of him was a photo in a letter from Padang. Dressed in white, waist nipped in with a thick webbing belt, peaked cap pushed back on his head, his smile was relaxed but his lean body was taut and muscular.

In the excitement of my adventure I'd not had time to think of this as anything more than a treat. David knew, as David would, that I needed a break, and he knew it before I'd admitted it to myself. I wished now I'd paced myself a little better over the past thirty-six hours. I felt very low and lonely in that cabin. I found the World Service on the bedside radio and fell asleep to a gardening quiz.

When I awoke the next morning the sun was already high and the morning's shipboard duties done. I could hear the crew playing backgammon under a linen awning on the foredeck. The heat and light and the sound of the dice and the sway of the deck made me lean on the handrail for support. I noticed these sensations in all their dreamlike clarity as though through the porthole of a bathysphere. To starboard the island rose from the sea, flat and bounded by a margin of white beach where we were moored, rising away to the west to a peak, lush and hazy green. For a few minutes I wished I were back home again. If I could have been transported back there for say, ten minutes, that would have been enough.

I didn't feel hungry, but the skipper said I should eat before I went ashore, and while I breakfasted on apple juice, toast and cream cheese, a motor boat with a chugging Bevis outboard came out and drew alongside the yacht.

When the boat had been loaded I climbed into the bow with my flight-bag and suitcase. In the stern sat a salty-looking old codger who gave me a look as I settled and gathered my Stuff about me. He'd crossed his arms and hung them over the tiller while he looked. The look said in international Codger Code, 'I know where I'd rather be, pal. Somewheres else. And I know what I'd rather be doing, too. Nothin'. Any questions?' I sat down with the mound of supplies and provisions at my back. I realized I'd been expecting some version of *Aloha Hawaii*. Now at last under that homely scowl I began to relax and feel quite at home. I turned to wave to the crew, but they were already preparing to set sail.

Home, I discovered, was a village set back about half a mile from the shore, following a creek as it meandered idly between banks bursting with orgying flora. The local botany seemed to specialize in bright tongues and pouting succulent lips, inquisitive vines and silky pri-apic eruptions. And what began as a dizzying profusion of floral invention became after a few minutes oppressively relentless.

It was a relief when we rounded a bend in the creek and the tangle of greenery gave way to the sandy slope of a hillside running down to the water's edge. Between the trees, domed huts grew like dusty mushrooms. A tall kid dressed in a nondescript shirt and shorts introduced himself as Franklin, while a small crowd gathered to unload the launch, paying me scant attention except as an obstruction. Franklin led me away up the hill, lugging my suitcase while I panted behind.

My accommodation was a hut set a little apart from the others, a distance you felt more than measured. I couldn't tell if this was intended as hospitable privacy or ...

'Franklin?'

He emerged from the hut where he'd left my case, smiling broadly. Down by the boat the ant-like activity of bearing away the cargo continued.

'Franklin, where is Mr Daniels?'

'He will come soon I think.'

'Does he know I'm here?'

'Oh yes.'

It was pretty clear that I wasn't going to get much more. Before I could give way to useless frustration my senses caught me unaware. I could say that I heard something, but it was hardly even that.

It was the music, a long way off, barely a tingle in the breeze, here and gone.

'Franklin, where is the music coming from?'

'Music? Oh ...' He lifted his arm toward the mountain. 'It is the old ones. I think they are talking about you. So ...' he shrugged.

'About ... can I see?'

Franklin shrugged again and led me up to the brow of the hill where a track led inland. The foliage was less dense here than it had been by the creek, and gave welcome shade as we walked, climbing steadily along the spine of the ridge until we came at last to the lower slopes of the mountainside.

I hadn't seen from the yacht that these slopes were cut into terraces. This is where the islanders grew a variety of grass related to rice, whose grains grow to the size of borlotti beans. Women and children work the paddies alongside the men, but only the men, it seems, run the risk of infection from a parasitic worm which lives for most of its life in the gut of the eels which live in the fields. Most of the men are unaffected by the parasite, a fact which induces the kind of fatalism associated in our culture with tobacco-related diseases. Normally the disease strikes the elders, who accept it with stoicism. The young men of course believe themselves invulnerable, immortal and favoured by the gods because they are young, and men.

The effects of the disease vary in individuals, but blindness is characteristic; the bones become heavier and the skin coarser, with a leathery grain and tufted with coarse hair. Though the features lose their mobility and take on an almost simian appearance, the change is symmetrical. I was never quite decided about whether this was less alarming than the baroque improvisations of neurofibromatosis. (I had to look up the word. It was the Elephant Man's affliction.)

No longer able to work, these elders sit out their days swathed in distinctive bedouin robes of black and red, on raised seats which reminded me of Wimbledon umpires' chairs set at intervals around the terraces.

They are the musicians. They pass on news and messages by passing notes to one another; fluting, trilling notes, sometimes on little reed pipes, but mostly by 'singing'. It is as if nature, in taking from them their physical dexterity compensates in some way with an astonishing vocal range, possibly achieved through the enlarged network of bone passages.

They live apart from the other islanders, hermit-like, only joining the community while they work. The islanders feed them, believing that in their new guise they embody the elders who first planted the ancient grain which in itself represents fecundity.

Here I'm compressing what I learned later with what Franklin told me that afternoon. As we walked along the terraces, the voices faded in and out just as they had on the tape, and the work in the fields went on as it must.

How is it that a single piece of information can induce a few impulses in the brain to fire a little differently so that your whole mood swings around? Hearing that this mystical, exotic song was the sound of an agricultural community's notice-board reminded me of the time when I first heard a record of Burundi drummers beating up a storm, driving each other on with salvoes of call and response.

Somehow I couldn't quite recover the first thrill after I was told that these were a bunch of wedding and bar mitzvah entertainers whose wild vocal outbursts amounted to: Don't forget *to thank the guy* who's paying for *all this! ... Helluva guy! Generous? Let me tell you* ... and so on.

By evening there was still no sign of David. Franklin took me to his mother's hut to eat: fish and herbs and giant rice. I was glad it wasn't eel, though Franklin had told me that the parasite was removed with the guts, and the flesh was perfectly safe when cooked. Tasty, too, I discovered later, but that first night I felt that small, vulnerable sensation creeping over me again.

Franklin and his mother, and some relatives and their children who dropped by were polite but reserved, and only Franklin knew any real English. One of the kids produced a reed flute which fingered pretty much more like a penny whistle, and I gave them a couple of lumpen morris tunes. They greeted this with the amusement and interest which I suspect they would have aroused in the Home Counties by demonstrating the use of knife and fork.

I was glad to turn in, finally. My hut was equipped with a truckle-bed under a cone of mosquito-netting, and I lay in the dark listening to the World Service on the earphones. Being the outsider in a society you understand is a conceit you can afford. Being truly an outsider, even amongst benign insiders, hit me worse, I guess because as well as the loneliness, I sensed the world sniggering as it called the career-outsider's bluff.

I awoke in the dark from dreamless sleep with the certainty that I was being watched; fumbling for my torch, I knocked the radio flat with a clatter on the board floor. I could hear the tinny rasp of a voice from the earpiece somewhere, found the off-switch and flicked it, sat upright and peered into the gloom.

'It's OK, Rachel.'

'David!'

'Glad you could make it.'

David's voice was a husky whisper in the dark, like Miles Davis's smoke and gasoline drawl, but it was David for sure. I lay back on my elbows, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

'Glad you could make it, baby. I was beginning to wonder. What's all this about, and it had better be good by golly.'

'What do you make of it so far?'

'How could I make anything of it, wise guy? If this is some sort of ... I dunno ...'

'I'm not sure that I know either, Rachel. I don't know why I thought of you or why I didn't think of anyone else. Maybe I thought you might be curious and you might have nothing to lose. As for me ... I feel better already. It's good to see you.'

I could just about make out an outline by starlight. He was kidding of course. Doubt and caprice were not in David's make-up.

As if he were reading me, David gave a throaty laugh. 'You get some sleep now. We'll speak later.'

'Yes,' I said, and found myself smiling in the dark, 'yes we will. I'd like that.'

I heard David stand up in a single movement, sensed him towering over the foot of the bed for a

moment, and for an instant I saw his outline as he ducked out of the door, clear against the star-blown sky. My happiness, my sudden sense of belonging, of self-assurance, crumbled as I took in a single inconclusive detail.

He was wearing a dark bedouin robe.

I need hardly say by this stage that David was nowhere to be seen the next day, or the day after, or ... Days ran, I guess, into maybe a couple of weeks? More? Franklin was no use at all, grinning and assuring me that Mr Daniels come real soon and not to fret. I didn't fret, but the truth of the matter was that I was a hostage on the island, with no means of escape, and no clear idea of where to escape to if I had.

I don't know if Franklin's mother thought I was out here to marry David, or if she just didn't think I should be out on my own, but she plainly didn't approve, though she fed me and suffered my presence when I watched her cooking. We got on fine. We couldn't talk much, and I wasn't sure what to make of what I thought she might be telling me.

One afternoon I was whistling a version of Big Boy Cleveland's 'Quill Blues', one of those snatches I'd remembered from the tape, and Franklin's Ma, Chori, took my arm and tried to tell me something. There was something about the old ones, how they didn't have much to do with them, how they lived or came from the mountain or some such, or was she telling me about how their affliction came from the fields up there? She patted her head and made steps in the air with her hand; something about children, many children? It seemed important to her briefly, but in the end she shrugged and turned back to pounding roots in a pestle.

I spent my days exploring the island, gradually extending my territory, fitting the pieces together. I knew *that if* I *stayed* huddled by my books and radio I would grow wretchedly mad, wanting to be anywhere but here.

As my confidence grew I went through a phase of feeling unpleasantly like the lady of the manor swanning about my estate, but I quickly grew out of that.

Maybe there was something in the food, or trace elements in the water, but in combination with long hours of sleep, exercise, and nothing to do but what I ordered myself to do, I was on a constant high after only a few days. Not the soupy euphoria you get from dope or mushrooms, nor yet the sprocketing can-do of speed. This was the thrill of unerring certainty which might easily have been paranoia.

Though I wasn't 'doing' anything in any sense that I was used to, I felt a growing sense of purpose, like surfing effortlessly along on the moment. My muscles relaxed, my breathing fell into rhythm with my movements, which flowed easily yet seemed to grow in strength. The sensation was like sustained *deja* vu, which wouldn't evaporate even when I was conscious of it, and very soon it became irrelevant even to look for it.

I knew what I was about. I was hunting David across the island and through my memory's hall of distorting mirrors. I was beginning to realize how untrustworthy all that old information was. While I was scouring the island I was walking away from all that, like walking off a large lunch of candyfloss.

I saw him at last early one morning as I made my way down to the shore. The sun was already high, but still slanted through the tree trunks, illuminating and dazzling by turns. In his robes, at this distance, he was only a dark shape moving around a small skiff, preparing to cast off. A sudden impulse made me want to run on to the sand, to attract his attention and run to him, but an older instinct overtook me and I kept my cover and prepared to follow him along the shore.

He powered and steered the boat with a single oar mounted at the stern, and paddled towards the mountain. I tracked him, even amazing myself at the ease and quiet of my progress, until the ground suddenly rose up in a cliff ahead of me. I plunged inland, managing to find a gulley in the rock which gave access to the top of the promontory, but by the time I made it back to look down on the sea, there was no sign of David or the skiff. I stood and snarled and hissed like a cat in my rage, which may have looked ridiculous had anyone been there to see, but felt good and right.

I had come further in the past hour than I'd ever ventured before, and as I looked up to the peak and back along the island I was smiling deep inside.

I ranged over the mountain slopes that morning knowing I had no fear in me. David's effect again?

Like the good weep that washes away the habit of hurt, I had dispensed with fear at last, dropped it like old baggage. No wonder the islanders had kept their distance. Like the weirdos on city streets, I had been invisible to them. They knew that paranoia is socially transmissible. In my society, and especially as a woman in my society, switching off the fear is as impossible as switching off literacy. You can't not fear the streets like you can't not read the Harpic tin.

I splashed down through the paddy-fields, hearing the music, listening for the impulse that would guide me to the musician I needed, and I found him as I knew I would. I wanted him to hear me coming, and I guessed they knew the core of certainty that had formed amidst the seething whirl of questions in my unclear mind.

I'd arrived on the island after a journey during which the thought of David had sustained me, blinded me *even to* possible dangers, and I'd mistaken this for confidence. It was dependence, and when he'd not been here for me, I'd felt betrayed. I'd felt he was hiding from me not because he'd kept his distance but because my one tantalizing glimpse of him had convinced me that his changing guise left me behind and shut me out. In recent days my memories of him had taken on a new aspect. A folk memory had stirred in my mind. A familiar object seen from an unfamiliar angle: the Enchanted Hill ...

Like millions of punters I had his words in my memory and had confused them with my own thoughts. Like the big baby in the lyrics of 'Well' I'd thought often of David in the words '... I twist in tangled sheets / To see your face / In the tangled maze I trace / In my heart.' I wanted to look at his face now without that weak dependence. If there was any truth in my growing certainty then I was surely mad.

The old one must have heard me come, though he gave no sign, and sang on. I planted one foot on the lowest rung of his seat and said quietly but quite clearly:

'Who is David Daniels?'

His answering silence spread outward across the island like a shock wave. Work stopped in the fields and I felt the prickle of scrutiny on my neck. Fortunately I wore my cloak of invisibility, the immunity of madness.

He lowered his face to stare blindly at me.

I think the noise that escaped the thick, lipless mouth was laughter. I stared into the darkness under the ridge of his brow.

The single note which sprang from his throat was a tangle of tones and harmonics which made me wince, but I couldn't look away now. I was convinced he could hear me as I stared. My breath came deep and strong.

The note was taken up all around now, beautiful, terrible. I didn't care, even when I heard my own voice caught up in it. My voice, screaming, crying, singing, calling, what the hell. My breath, deep and strong. My stare, deep and strong.

He reached out to me with his swollen, shapeless hands, calling me on, summoning my song.

We were calling David, together. I don't know how long we called.

I was drawing breath when the fields fell silent.

The old one dropped his hands into his lap and looked out over the island. We heard the answering note.

I started back toward the mountain, aware but heedless of the bovine stares of the islanders I was leaving behind. As I climbed I could not help but think of the Enchanted Hill. Its image had grown clearer in my mind's eye, more concrete in my thoughts. I was indeed the traveller lured into the faerie hill with promises ... After a while I heard the song resume behind me, but I could hear David clearly, calling to me. To me, clearly ...

The sun was blazing overhead, but it was no effort to follow David's clear voice as it went through its changes, like the music on that tape. I moved steadily through undergrowth that had so recently made my eyes and brain throb, and now seemed rich and vital. I wondered what sense I thought I could have made of the music back in the dark and dismal little flat. The world and time reduced to little slivers of plastic.

I found David seated cross-legged on a slab of granite which thrust out over the water-line, so that the swell echoed under it or slapped around it by turns. He faced the horizon, face lifted to the sun, his

body swaying gently as he sang, a song so plaintively tender and a voice so strong that my back tingled. I walked to the edge quite close to him and sat down while he *sang*. I caught only a glimpse of his profile under his head-dress, and then closed my eyes and felt the sun on my face.

When he stopped singing we sat for a long time with our silence between us, and the sounds of the sea all around.

'Glad you could make it,' he said at last.

'Uh-huh?'

'What do you make of it?'

'Well ... you're not in the market for a recording engineer. Tell me this, David. Am I free to go?'

'It might take a couple of days, but yes, of course you're free to go, Rachel. When I decided to stay, I thought a transmitter might be a useful tool.'

I lay back on the warm rock and closed my eyes. 'Tell me about it, David. Which came first, the retreat or the dis ...?'

'Disease? You can use that word. It's a retreat from disease. Don't you feel it too? I've not felt so comfortable with myself for years. You too I guess.'

His shadow fell across me and my eyelids flooded with violet light. I opened my eyes and looked into his face as he crouched beside me. I couldn't have prepared for that moment, and tried hard to look as if I had strength enough for it.

The eyes which looked steadily into mine were golden, their pupils tiny and (really?) vertical slots. His face and hands were covered with ochre hair and coarse skin stretched over jutting bones like threadbare coconut matting. The whole of his lower face thrust forward, but the lips, at least the margins of the mouth, remained ... yes, the word was *horribly* mobile.

'Oh David, 1...'

'How many of my faces have you seen? You know this is me don't you? Oh Rachel I'm so tired of wearing your masks. But how else could I have peered through so many doors, looked straight into so many carefully fashioned masks? My advantage is that I can hang up my mask and you can look me in the face at last.'

'You mean ... the disease means you can't pretend?'

'Come along. You'll burn. Let's walk awhile.'

He led the way down from the rock platform and we walked along the shore below the mountain. Once again my strength had fled from me, along with that illusion of certainty which had sustained me on the island. David folded his bristly hands into his robe while he talked.

'I had to get out of all that. When I started pumping up for Sinbad I was already planning for escape. It was a shape I could drop easily, so I wouldn't have to live with it; so the character would carry on its own life when I was gone.'

Its own life. I could imagine how much that would mean to David. His characters appeared to have their own life because he chose and refined their characteristics with a watchmaker's precision. The Rock Star, Raskolnikov, Sinbad, David Daniels ...

'When you know you're good at something it's not so easy just to let go. And it was so easy to do, that glamour thing. You wonder how far you can take it before you're found out. People are so hungry for dreams. I could've thrown the whole thing away with one good scandal, but it would have left its mark on the films. I didn't want to waste those royalties.'

If the outcome had been less horrific for David, had he simply gone paunchy and alcoholic, say, I would have smirked at his smugness. But to lose everything like this ...

'Can you imagine what the press would make of this David? I mean, I won't say anything.'

'I don't think it will matter very soon. David exists in your memories. It's what I'm becoming that's important now.'

'Oh god, I'm so sorry David.'

He smiled at me. It was difficult to take.

'I'm at rest now. My body is very strong. My mind is at rest.' He paused. 'I'm translating, of course, Rachel.'

‘Sorry?’

‘I’m trying to explain this in ideas that you can understand. “My” mind, in “its” body.’

‘It’s just a figure of speech.’

‘OK. Then give me an alternative.’

‘I ...’

‘Doesn’t matter. “Your” mind is in “your” brain, or maybe it’s the other way about, but where are “you”? You want to see mind-control? Do what they tell you in posture school. Straight back, head up, deep breath, relax. Just do it, and try to feel depressed. Really try. Look at me, Rachel, and tell yourself, “I seriously want to be miserable.” Look at us, Beauty and the Beast.’

David uncovered his huge, heavy head, and his golden eyes blinked. How could ... this ... be so unmistakably David?

His gravelly rasp, threaded with stray harmonics, was still recognizably David’s voice.

David’s charm remained intact.

‘Now we laugh.’

‘We *what?*’

‘Laugh, Rachel. We laugh.’

And he began to laugh exactly like a baby. Out of that cavernous mouth came a bubbling spring of laughter. It was such a good party trick, done with such deliberation that I giggled, and he laughed back, laughter begetting laughter, the way David lifted the crew backstage, when things were fraught, with effortless charm.

I laughed despite myself, and when it subsided, I shook my head and said, ‘How do you do that?’

He shrugged. ‘I am as I am. Nothing has changed, except some piece of your mind.’

He even looked a little different.

‘It’s the simplest flim flam. “Your” brain hears “your” body laughing and thinks “you” must be happy.’

Was it that I had, in the words of the song, just grown accustomed to his face? So quickly? It was after all David’s face.

‘Evolution gave you three brains, and divided them in two. Your consciousness is arrived at by committee, with voting cards dealt out by DNA.’

I loved his stupid face. His expressions were still the same as ever.

‘What does that old saurian brain stem make of that flashy young cerebrum, trying its best to get a grip on the world with a handful of senses designed for life on the veldt? No wonder you find it so hard to concentrate, easier to imagine yourself somewhere else, in yarns spun from scraps of memories, most of them stuffed into the back pockets of your ancestors’ hand-me-down genes.’

So David was into anthropology now. He used to go on like this about music. There was one time ...

‘That’s what made it so easy to operate in your world, Rachel. And because you choose to live together and hope the world will be less confusing if you can only agree on the names of things, all I had to do was to tell you what label to see. Look at me, Rachel. Do I really look so different to you now?’

I shook my head. We had never been lovers. I guessed it was too late now.

‘When you return, look at the faces of the ones with the leaders’ labels—the salesmen, the priests, the politicians—all, notice, running their patch of the world like the skirmishing city-states under their skulls. Remember that crack about how your fortieth birthday brings you the face you deserve? Their faces are shaped not by wisdom but by their struggle to conceal what they think and control how they appear. Even when they’re lying, they’re judged by their skill at faking sincerity. When you can’t control the thoughts that haunt your own brain, you need mummies and daddies who look like they know what to do, even if they send you to bed without supper. They all want you to see the world labelled their way.’

‘Why are you telling me this? I liked it when we were just sitting on the rock.’ I looked up, thinking of the Faerie Hill, where the traveller is entertained with tales, and feasts in magic company far into the night. ‘I mean, you didn’t bring me out here as someone to lecture.’

‘No, I was telling you only that the ability to change your label is only a matter of intention. Some of us are more single-minded than others.’ He smiled and tapped his forehead.

We were walking along the water-line. I pulled off my trainers and let the wavelets wash over my ankles. David's skiff was up ahead, and amongst the trees was a hut on stilts.

'Is that what you've been doing here? Building?'

I'll live here until the time is right for me to join the old ones.'

'Will you be blind then?'

'They see visions. I think you would call it imagination. Is that blindness?'

'Will I see you again?'

'No. It's time to bury David. When I've told them everything David has seen, he'll live on amongst us. There's nothing magic about that. That's how he lives on in your race memory. Only our memories are longer.'

There's this jar full of sand, see. There was the burial at sea, the announcement released to the news agencies. The judgement was correct; David's death was a matter of record rather than mourning. The films were out on video and the radio played tracks from *So* Long *Pop* during the day, and still turn up amongst listeners' all-time top tunes.

It would be nice to be able to say I came back and made my long-awaited breakthrough album. Instead, life closed over my head without a ripple, an obscure footnote to the epilogue of a closed book.

It is possible to release the hostage from the Enchanted Hill by taking three turns around it by night, before halting with the moon at your back to play a slow air on the fife or flute. For the hostage, release is a mixed blessing.

Under the hill a hush falls on the revels as the footfalls without at first pound slowly, like a muffled drumbeat. The clatter of knife and spoon on gold and silver plate falls still, the pipe and tabor fail. All heads turn at the sound of far-off music, and as they do the hostage finds that the fine silks and damask are poor rags and tatters, the marble walls are mud, and the feast is heaped filth and twigs.

He or she sees the moonshine through the hillside and may tear it aside like a veil and so escape.

But the world has changed, and maybe many years have passed in a night. Time itself is but a flimsy veil, and the hostage imprisoned now in a body ill-made and weak.

I keep the cassette by the jar of sand, but I won't play it again now. Occasionally I remember the first time I heard the music. That will do.

Serpent's Blood

Molly Brown

Georgia Adams, five foot eleven, black, and American, stood to one side as Marcel raised his ebony walking stick and pounded on the door of a wooden shack. Her companion waited patiently, his deeply lined dark face showing no hint of expression. She had no idea how old he was—he looked at least eighty, but moved with a fluid grace she envied. Dapper in his white linen suit and panama hat—the top of which barely came up to her shoulder—he made her feel clumsy and ungainly by comparison. And there was something about his eyes, the way they shone with a feverish brightness, yet gave nothing away. She never had a clue what he was thinking. But so far, he had been extremely helpful, getting her into places she never could have gone on her own, as an outsider.

There was movement within the shack. The door opened slightly and a man peered out. From where she was standing, Georgia couldn't see much more than the man's nose and one bloodshot eye. Marcel and the *man* spoke in hushed tones for several minutes. Finally the man stepped back and allowed them to enter.

In the centre of a small, dim room full of cluttered shelves piled high with bottles and dusty bric-a-brac, a round-faced, round-bodied woman sat on a cane chair. She wore a voluminous white dress and no shoes. Her hair was hidden beneath a white turban. Three teenage girls, also dressed in white, sat on the floor at her feet. Two men stood against the back wall.

This is Madame Marie Herard,' Marcel whispered in Georgia's ear, 'it would be wise to treat her with respect.'

Marcel nudged Georgia with his elbow. She stepped forward, bowed slightly, and began in halting French, 'I am a doctor from New York. I work for an American drug company, researching and developing new medicines. Marcel tells me you know about plants and herbs; I was hoping you could help me.'

'What help do you think I can give you?'

'As a student, I read everything I could of Macandal and the slave rebellion of the late 1700s. Macandal has always been my hero.' Georgia smiled. Marie Herard stifled a yawn. Georgia cleared her throat and continued, 'More than one history of the time mentions a zombie who lived in the mountains where the rebels had their camp.'

The round woman shifted in her seat. 'So?'

Georgia took a deep breath. 'They say he is still alive.'

Marie Herard snorted. 'You are very foolish, to speak of zombies in this day and age.'

'Why am I foolish? You don't deny that zombies exist?'

The woman shrugged.

'Oh come on, we both know they do. But they're not the dead called from their graves by a lot of magic and mumbo-jumbo, they're people under the influence of a plant-based drug affecting the central nervous system. That's fairly well established. But this is the first time it's been suggested that the zombie drug actually prolongs life. If what they say is true—that a zombie can live for hundreds of years—well, think of the implications!'

Marie Herard slapped one hand down hard on the arm of her chair. 'You don't know what you're talking about! Who has told you these fairy stories?'

'Some people I met in Limbe.'

The round woman chuckled. They must have seen you coming. Go home, little Doctor. And don't forget that those who spread lies often choke on them. I fear your friends in Limbe may swallow their own tongues if they're not careful.'

She sat down with Marcel in a sea-front tavern. 'Why would she deny the existence of zombies? Surely her livelihood depends on keeping the old myths alive.'

'I thought you wanted medicines,' Marcel said accusingly. 'If I had known you were looking for zombies, I would never have taken you to Marie. She may be *voudon*, but she is Serpent's Blood first.'

'What's Serpent's Blood?'

'A secret order, like the Bizango and the Cochons Gris. You do not want to cross these orders, they all serve with the left hand. And you never want to meet them by night. If you are wise, you will abandon all this. Forget about zombies, forget about everything, and go home before it's too late.'

'You've got to be kidding, Marcel. I can't give up now. I must be close to the truth, or you wouldn't be warning me off, now would you?'

'If that is your final word,' he said.

A sixteen-year-old boy approached her in the lobby of her hotel. 'You are American?' he said in English.

Georgia's eyes crinkled in amusement. 'Is it so damn obvious?'

'You have much money?'

The amusement drained from Georgia's face. She gave the boy her steeliest expression. With her short-cropped hair and considerable height, she could look quite formidable when she wanted to.

The boy looked around before speaking in a low voice, They say you have been to Limbe, searching for the zombie who knew Macandal. Do you have money? I can take you to him, but you must pay.'

It was nearly midnight when Georgia turned the ignition in a rented jeep. The boy, who'd told her his name was Jean, sat beside her and pointed to the mountains outside the city. That way,' he said.

They drove in total silence. Georgia couldn't get more than two words at a time out of the boy; she'd finally given up trying.

Making her way along twisting dirt roads, winding higher and higher above the sea, she began—not for the first time—to have doubts. She was in way over her head, and she knew it: travelling alone with a total stranger, going who knew where to encounter who knew what? The canopy of trees above her

head, and even the night air itself, seemed to take on an aura of palpable evil. Then she heard the sound of bells.

For the first time in over an hour, Jean spoke. 'Dear Jesus, it's the Bizango. Quick! Turn off your lights, they mustn't see us.'

'What?'

'Hide! They mustn't see us. And don't look at them or they will kill us both!'

Georgia drove off the road and into the forest, behind a cluster of trees. She shut off the engine and huddled down in her seat. Bells rang and drums pounded. There were voices, singing. The voices and the drums drew closer, grew louder. Georgia could hear some of the words they sang, but she couldn't understand them—

they didn't sound like English or French or any language she had ever heard. Beside her, Jean closed his eyes and lowered his head. He might have been praying.

Georgia's mouth dropped open. The road they'd just left became a moving stream of light. Grotesque figures, their faces obscured by masks portraying animals and demons, marched in a solemn procession, illuminated in the glow of flaming torches.

There were dozens of them. They wore flowing red and black robes; some wore horns on top of their heads, some wore crowns, one wore a tiny coffin and cracked a whip repeatedly against the ground. Some carried banners; others carried bells or drums. They all sang the same song. The music had a terrible beauty; it was strange and complex, yet Georgia knew that she could never forget it, it would haunt her for the rest of her life. She also knew her camera would be useless at this distance in the dark, but she reached for it anyway, pressing the shutter release again and again.

The song came to an end. There was a moment of total silence, as if the world was holding its breath, and then the marchers began to chant, repeating one word, ominously, over and over: 'djab'. The chant faded into the distance; the eerie procession had passed them by. Georgia breathed a sigh of relief and nudged Jean with her elbow. 'It's OK,' she said, 'they're gone.'

She felt a hand on her shoulder and screamed.

'Hush, ma *cherie.* It's only me.'

She gasped in shock. 'Marcel! What are you doing here?' She nudged the boy at her side again. 'It's OK, Jean. He's a friend of mine. Jean?' The boy slumped forward. 'Jean, are you OK?'

The old man gripped her shoulder *more tightly*. 'I told you not to go on with this, didn't I? I warned you.'

'Marcel, I think Jean is ...'

'Dead? Yes, I think so.' He reached over and pushed the boy's head to one side, revealing a tiny dart embedded in his neck, below one ear. He crossed over to the passenger side, dumped the boy's body on the ground, and climbed into the jeep. 'He's fulfilled his purpose. You don't think our meeting here was an accident, do you? Now drive.'

Georgia did as she was told; Marcel was pointing a gun at her.

'What's all this about, Marcel?' she asked. 'What are you doing out here? Who were those people? And what are you going to do with me?'

'I could ask you one or two questions myself, *ma cherie.* Why did you lie to me? You said you were a doctor looking for medicine. Instead you are a journalist, looking for sensation. You work for a newspaper! Did you think I wouldn't check?'

'I wasn't lying. I am a doctor ... of journalism. And I do know people in the drug industry who would love to get hold of a life-extending compound. And they'd pay very well for it. More money than you've ever dreamed of, Marcel. And you could have it all—I'd give it to you.'

'You're very generous, *ma cherie.* Turn left up here.'

'Where are we going, Marcel?'

'Where you said you wanted to go, *ma cherie.*'

Georgia turned off the main road, driving the car beneath a stone archway with the inscription: Order and Respect of the Dark. Beyond the arch, a cluster of huts stood in a circle. In the centre of the circle a bonfire raged, tended by several women in black robes. She stopped the jeep and they got out.

Inside the largest hut, a gigantic man lay across an oversize bed. He must have been eight feet tall and nearly as wide. The only light in the room came from three small candles on a table near his head. Georgia found it difficult to see; she could barely make out the man's features. But she could see that his dark skin seemed to reflect what little light there was in the room; she decided he must be sweating profusely. 'What's wrong with him?' she whispered to Marcel.

'Nothing. He's just old. Go ahead, speak to him. He's the one you were so anxious to meet.'

'He's the zombie?'

A low rattling sound came from the giant's chest. 'Zombie. That's a good one.'

Georgia jumped at the sound of his voice. She thought zombies were supposed to be catatonic. She hadn't expected one who could speak and hear. 'You're not really two hundred years old?'

'Older than that, my dear. Much older. But no wiser.' The man struggled to lift his head. 'Come here. Let me look at you.'

Georgia stood by his bedside, struggling to conceal her shock. There was something very wrong with his skin; it was covered with scales. And his eyes were too far apart—they almost touched his ears—giving him a vaguely reptilian appearance. He struggled to roll on to one side in order to see her better. She overcame her revulsion and leaned over to help him, pulling with all her might. He weighed a ton and he was ice-cold to the touch.

'You remind me of a woman I knew when I was young and handsome. I think perhaps she loved me.'

Georgia nodded. She had no idea what to say.

'And now I will tell you something important. When the Bizango take to the roads,' he told her, *'their rallying* cry is, "Animals of the Night, change your skins!" But they cannot, nor can the Cochons Gris. They say that only those born with the blood of the serpent can truly change. These ones are known as the *loups-garous*, which some say means werewolf.

The loups-garous believe that one day *djab* will come. Some say *djab* will destroy the earth. I say *djab* will save it. And so I call *djab* from the side of this mountain. Night after night I call him, while the sky above is dark.'

The old man reached out with one claw-like hand, holding Georgia by the wrist. 'I have enemies, Georgia Adams. Powerful enemies of my own kind. If you write or speak of what you see here, it will mean my death. Do not betray me to them.'

'Never. I wouldn't dream of it.'

The old man dropped his hand and closed his eyes. 'Marcel, do what we discussed.'

A group of thirty or forty people were gathered around the bonfire. A round-bodied woman walked up to Georgia, holding out a bottle. Georgia recognized her at once; it was Marie Herard. 'Drink,' Marie ordered her.

'What is it?'

The Ancient wishes you to become one of us,' Marcel explained, 'thus binding you to silence. In order to join us, you must change your skin. The contents of that bottle will cause it to happen.'

'It's a drug.'

Marcel nodded.

'I won't take it.'

'Look,' he said, with exaggerated patience in his voice, as though he were talking to a small child, 'it's part of the ceremony. Everyone has some. *I'm* having some.' He put the bottle to his mouth and took a long drink. 'See?'

Stripped of her clothes, Georgia floated around the bonfire. She watched, entranced, as those around her changed. To one side, she saw a giant lizard with a huge flap of skin bobbing below its chin, to another, she saw a pack of wolves. She giggled at the sight of a man becoming a pig. Marcel was a sleek black cat, meowing and rubbing his forehead against her leg. She saw a unicorn, a llama, an elephant. She saw dragons and angels and demons.

She looked down at her arms and watched them turn into wings. She was a bird of prey; a night-hawk.

She watched the sun rise from a high cliff, overlooking the sea. She felt her hawk's wings beating. She left the ground and felt the rush of salt air through her feathers. She flew and she flew in a spiral down to the sea, for ever bound to silence.

Cover Story

Liz Holliday

The house was full of the stink of human death. Stephen Audsley—he called himself that—walked across the darkened hallway. Moonlight caught the pictures on the walls, turning their strange abstractions dreadful. His nostrils flared. Beneath the stench of rotting flesh there was another very faint smell, that of citrus with musk. His lips pulled back into something that was not a snarl, but certainly not a smile.

Quietly, so that not a floorboard creaked, he walked to the stairs. A sound came from behind him, high pitched, mewling. He turned. In one fluid motion he scooped up the cat that had followed him in. It yowled, squirmed, flailed the air with needle claws. His fingers clenched on its neck. A muscle jumped in his cheek. Then, with a flick of his wrist he threw it away from him. It twisted as it fell, landed four-square, shook itself and bolted down the stairs, tail high.

'Stupid little cat,' he whispered. 'I didn't mean to hurt you.'

Then he went on upstairs.

He found the body in the bedroom.

The door stood ajar. Moonlight glinted off something on the floor by the window. He went and picked it up. It was a photo. The frame was dented, and the glass was cracked, but the woman in it was beautiful. Stephen grunted and set the photo on the dressing-table.

He flicked on the table lamp and took in with a glance the heavy velvet curtains, the book open on the stripped wood dressing-table, the flashing light on the answering machine. He ignored all these things and moved directly to the huddled figure on the bed.

There was a whisky bottle on the side-table, and next to it a pill jar. Both were empty. They told their own tale. Close to, the smell of alcohol almost obliterated the stench of decay. It was not until Stephen pulled back the sheet, revealing the dead body, that he smelled the other scent: citrus and musk, that unmistakable odour of the Family, clinging to the bedlinen.

'Who's been sleeping in your bed, little human?' Stephen whispered to the night.

The dead man, mute, stared across the room. His flesh was grey, already past rigor and softening into decay, but he was recognizably Daniel Harrington, the man Stephen had come to find. Had he been alive, Stephen would have found out what he knew about the Family, and to whom he had passed the information. Then he would have killed the human and burned down his house. He would have made it quick. He was not cruel, and unlike some of his Family he did not hate the humans.

With Harrington already dead, Stephen would have to find another way of discovering what he had known. Besides, Stephen was curious. What could be so bad that the prospect of living became worse than what lay on the other side of death? He shivered.

He was not an imaginative man. None of the Family were. Yet he had heard the tales when he was a child, the tales of the Dark that devoured minds, and worse things that might live in the spaces between the stars. He had learned of them as surely as he had learned who he was, and his lineage, and the deeds of all his forebears. As surely as he had learned how to hide his differences from the humans.

He began his search with the open book on the dressing-table. There were three envelopes lying across it: one was addressed to Harrington's parents; the second was his will, as Stephen discovered when he opened it. The third was addressed to a Paul Cunningham, care of Warnfield Hall Counselling Centre.

The first two envelopes contained no surprises. The will left Harrington's modest estate to be divided between his parents and his siblings and their children; his art was to be sold or not, at their discretion. Stephen opened the last envelope. The message inside it read: You *have to do* something. There was a

photograph. Stephen held it up. It was a close-up of a face, smoke-blackened, twisted with fear and suffocation. Clearly, the face of one of the Family in the last stages of the swift, unstoppable reversion that came with death.

Stephen sighed. He put the photograph in his jacket pocket, next to an envelope containing other, similar pictures. They had been sent to him by Raymond Morant, an administrative assistant at King's College, London. He had intercepted correspondence between the head of the Zoology Department, Professor Hill, and Harrington. Hill had died in a car crash a short while after; police believed there was no connection between the accident and a break-in at his home a little earlier. They had not even realized that his office had been similarly raided.

Raymond was good, Stephen thought. A pity he was such a Family man. He sighed again, and moved on to the book. He stared at the words, all he might ever know of Daniel Harrington's mind, who had decided to face the Dark rather than live his life. He picked up the book and settled himself on the foot of the bed with it.

I can't go on. There are people who will say I've been a fool, that I've taken the easy way out. They know nothing. Nothing.

It isn't living without her, I think I could do that, if there were any point to it. No, it's the fact that if I carried on, I would have to face the failure of every other dream and aspiration I ever harboured, every hope I carried into adulthood from my childhood.

I dreamed of greatness, of my art touching people's souls. Of changing people's lives in a single moment of transformation.

And all my life they've said my work is trite, shallow, meaningless. I can see that they are right, now. Everything I do seems overstated, too polished, hopeless. I'm a victim of the shit-bird. Sits on my shoulder all the time I'm painting, screaming, *this is* shit, this is shit, this is shit. It touches no one, transforms no one, makes nothing new.

It is as hollow as I was. Until she came. She filled me up with light, with laughter, with happiness. She changed me. I was wrong. I can't go back.

Marion, Stephen thought. He thought also of the pervasive smell of citrus and musk, the far stronger traces that clung to the bedlinen. He skimmed backwards through the journal until he found the first mention of her name, then read forward from there.

Marion clearly had reasons for her actions, but Harrington had not understood them. In his journal he only told of how he met her, and came to love her; and then the devastation of being publicly betrayed by her.

'What's your game, cousin?' Stephen asked the quietness. Only the faint sounds of traffic from the street below answered him.

He shut the book, and turned off the light. Moonlight turned Harrington's flesh nacreous, flecked his dead eyes with silver, etched deep the shadowy places of his body.

Stephen stripped off his clothes and stood naked for a while, staring at Harrington, staring at himself in the wardrobe mirror. The other man was slightly shorter, broad with muscle, not fat. His hair was darker than Stephen's, his eyes lighter, but those things could be dealt with.

Stephen slid between the cold sheets. He heard the beat of his heart, the blood sighing in his ears; he was aware of the silence of the corpse beside him.

Sleep did not come. He turned. The message light of the answering machine was blinking. He pressed the play-back button, thinking as he did so that there would be a sample of Harrington's voice. But a woman's voice came from the machine, light with the merest trace of an Irish accent: Dan? This is Marion. I just *wanted to* say *that I* ... weJi, *that I'll see you around* maybe. *If you'd like. Take care now.*

Impossible to tell from a recording; impossible without the body language and the scent and the subtle stigmata of the Family. It would keep, he thought. First he would deal with the problem of Harrington's contacts, and then he would find out what game this renegade cousin was playing. He turned over and laid his head against the cold, dead flesh of the corpse, and folded his arms around its unmoving chest, and he slept the Sleep.

Sunlight and the sound of a vacuum cleaner woke him. He came awake easily, all his predator's instincts alive at once. The door stood open, as he had left it the night before. He rolled out of bed and into his jeans.

Cursing himself for a fool, he went to investigate, this time shutting the door firmly behind him. There was no lock, which he regretted.

He padded silently down the stairs in his bare feet.

Sunlight pooled on the thick carpet. The kitten regarded him suspiciously, then stalked away when he came near. The vacuum cleaner droned on.

He tracked the sound to the living-room.

'Good morning,' he said, pleasantly enough, to the woman he found there.

She turned. 'Morning, Mr Harrington,' she shouted, kicking the foot-switch on the cleaner. The noise died.

It was only then that he realized he had not so much as stopped to check his appearance in the mirror. He ran his hand through hair he hoped was dark enough.

'Look,' he said, 'I've got bit of a headache this morning. Why don't you take off early? It won't hurt this once.'

The woman smiled, bright red lipstick on narrow lips. She was thin and bird-like, and she reeked of nicotine. 'I was just going to do a bit of dusting, as it goes,' she said. 'I'll be nice and quiet. And I really should defrost the freezer. Smells like something's died in there.'

'Yes, yes, you're probably right,' Stephen said. It must be worse than I supposed, he thought, if a human can smell it.

Til see to it myself, a little later. But I really would appreciate it if you'd leave me to it.'

'Well, all right,' the woman said, allowing Stephen to herd her towards the door.

Once she had gone, Stephen made a thorough search of the house. He found an address book almost at once. There were phone numbers for both Marion Ryan and Warnfield Hall.

He dialled the Clinic number. A woman's voice answered. He asked to be put through to Paul Cunningham.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Dr Cunningham is on holiday until the twenty-third. Can anyone else help?'

'No,' he answered. 'I don't think so.' I hope not, he thought, and broke the connection. A moment later he thought better of it. He phoned back and made an appointment, the last available on the twenty-third.

He found a photo album. The final few pages were devoted to Marion. The last of them was a single large portrait shot. The woman in it was stunningly beautiful. Actresses would pay a fortune to gain a face like that, Stephen thought; but looks had never been important to the Family. Her hair was thick and lustrous, the chestnut highlights setting off her huge sapphire eyes and generous mouth. A photo on the previous page showed that her body matched her face. Stephen flipped backwards through the book. Little by little Marion grew more dowdy, until at the end—or the beginning—she was a round-faced mouse of a woman in a C & A skirt. The only question was over what length of time she had spread the transformation.

He rang her number, and got her answering machine. He listened to the message and put the phone down just as the bleep started. I *will* wait, he thought. There are other priorities; but then beware, cousin. Nevertheless he played her message back twice more.

After that he continued his search. Harrington was self-employed, and he kept thorough records. Stephen immersed himself in the accounts, the appointment diary and Harrington's journal. He practised the man's signature and listened to his voice on the answering machine. He found out that he had often met Marion at Hildebrandt's, a restaurant in Covent Garden; that they would frequently go from there to look around the galleries. Harrington was not very rich, but he had acquired a small collection of modern art. This surprised Stephen. He had thought all the work he had seen was Harrington's own.

The cleaning-lady was Mrs Bailey; she came in once a week, got paid at the end of the month. Harrington was seeing a counsellor once a week, but the man was on holiday. He ate often at a cafe round the corner from his workroom rather than cook during the day, if he was working. He was

vegetarian. Stephen grimaced. He could live with it. He had done worse things for the Family. But not much worse. He hoped it would never find its way into the Song of the Lines, though.

He continued to assimilate Harrington's life, memorizing faces in photographs, names, dates; which critics had said what, which publishers he had worked for, was working for when he died.

He had taken on many identities in his long life, but Stephen had never before tried to impersonate anyone. He stared down at the diary. An entry dated 12 June read: *The Tower of Creeping Doom: Book 22 In The Antmage Trilogy*—COVER. Other entries followed. Daniel Harrington might have been panned by the critics, but he had a full order book.

Stephen had under a fortnight to turn himself into a creative artist, or to give a reasonable impression of being one. He was moderately old by human standards if not by those of the Family. He had lived in many countries and had been known by many names. He had killed in self-defence and he had killed to protect the secrets of the Family. He had even, once, refrained from killing and made the Family live with that decision. But he had never in all that time created anything, had an original idea or acted on intuition, though he deduced with a clarity that would have put most humans to shame.

'I can't do this,' he muttered. 'I can't do this.' Later, he wrapped the body in plastic and then in a large rug from the dining-room. He hauled the roll downstairs. It bumped on the treads, and he wondered if the noise would alert the neighbours.

He was strong—at sixty-one, he was in his prime—but even so he stopped for a rest on the half-landing. He thought vaguely that he was probably showing the body great disrespect by human standards. They had some strange ideas about what was essentially dead meat. *What the hell*, he thought. It was better than eating it, which he had also considered. Pity it was already on the turn.

He had intended to wait until nightfall, but the street outside was empty, and he reasoned that he would look less suspicious going out in the daytime. He brought his van round from where he had parked it several streets away. He heaved the rolled-up body on board, taking great care not to let the sheer weight of the package show. He had never worked out just how strong the humans were, but they were weaklings compared to the feeblest of the Family.

He drove down to his parents' house on the coast. He took great care to stay within the speed limits and to do nothing to arouse suspicion.

The house was large and ivy-covered, set away from the nearest village in its own grounds. Had it not been an old people's home, it would undoubtedly have been the focus of stories of ghosts and ghouls.

Stephen pulled up outside it. He left the body in the back of the van, and went inside.

Some of the more active humans were gathered in the old drawing-room at the back of the house. The television blared out. Mother Lena was bending over one of the old women, adjusting a blanket. He had considered going straight upstairs, but there were courtesies to be considered, and no reason to make himself even less welcome than usual.

One of the old women grabbed his hand as he walked in. 'I'm going to St Petersburg,' she declared. She stared up at him with watery blue eyes. 'I will go back as soon as the snow stops, and announce to the people that I have returned and their troubles are over—' She clutched at his hand. They killed my family, you know, but they didn't get me ...'

Stephen pulled his hand away. The woman muttered something in Russian under her breath.

'I told you not to get up, Mrs Smith,' Mother Lena said, turning. 'Oh!' she said, and then again: 'Oh.'

'I'd like to see the proprietor,' Stephen said. The old humans spent their days floating on drugs. They would probably never notice anything odd about his sudden arrival, but his life had been built around eliminating or minimizing risks.

'Just go straight up,' said the cousin. 'The offices and staff quarters are right at the top of the house.'

'I'll find my way,' he said.

He found the others in the lounge. Only his blood-mother was missing. They were watching television. EastEnders.

'Hallo,' he said from the doorway.

Heads turned. There was a moment of startled silence. They smiled at him, but he smelled their irritation.

'Stephen! Good to see you, lad. Come in and sit yourself down!' said Father Albert, his voice full of fake cheerfulness.

'Shh!' said Father Jonathan. 'I want to hear what Sharon says to 'Chelle.'

Father Albert looked embarrassed. 'Just our little bit of research, that's all. Have to keep up with the times, you know.'

He got up and went to turn off the television. 'Oh,' he said, with his hand on the switch. 'There's that nice Nick Cotton. He's so good to his Mothers ...' He stood watching the screen for a moment.

Stephen cleared his throat. Albert switched off the set, then turned to face him, looking embarrassed.

'Still killing humans?' Mother Julia asked. She was nursing again, probably the last litter the Family would have: a singleton, his twin having died a few weeks after the birth. Stephen pitied the poor lonely little thing. His own life had never been the same after his litter-mates had been killed.

He sat down next to her. The baby stared at him. I ought to get this over with, he thought. But he said, 'How old is he now?'

'Nineteen months. I'll be weaning him soon. You'd know if you came home more often.'

'Your Mothers miss you, boy. *I* miss you.' His blood-father's voice was a deep rumble from the depths of the Chesterfield chair. Father Geoffrey was the oldest male. Even when Stephen was a child he had been a vast brooding presence, and he was still the same now. Stephen expected him to go Ancient one day.

'Where is Mother Susan anyway?' he asked.

'Gone,' said Father Albert. 'She took the triplets up to your Aunt Cynthia's family for fostering. They sent Katriona back with a message that she had gone Walking. Pretty little thing Katriona's made of herself. She was asking after you, by the by.'

'Susan had the right idea, if you ask me,' said Mother Julia. 'I'll be joining her when William's old enough. Just you wait.'

'Don't say things like that, Julia,' Father Geoffrey said. 'Much more of this and we won't have a family left at all.'

'So what have you been getting up to, anyway?' Father Jonathan cut in. 'You never did say?'

He grinned at Stephen. If his tales were to be believed, he had been a rakehell in his day, leaving a string of broken Society hearts of both species and both sexes behind him. Then again, he would have it that he had played a triple game in the Great War, on two human sides and the Family's as well. Stephen had never known how seriously to take him, but at one hundred and forty he was still trim and boyish.

'Oh, much the same as usual,' Stephen said. With Father Jonathan, he always found a need to appear blase. 'There's a body to dispose of, a girl to track down—'

'Nothing changes with you does it, boy? Still setting yourself up as judge, jury and executioner?' It was Mother Julia. When he had been a child, it was always her anger that cut to the core of him; not even Susan, his blood-mother, had been able to scare him as much as Julia in a rage. Now her voice was ice-cold.

'Let the lad alone,' Father Jonathan said. 'He'll settle down when it's his time to settle.'

'No!' Stephen said, and realized he had raised his voice. He went on more quietly. 'It isn't just a game. If we don't wash our own dirty laundry, one day the humans will come and do it for us, and—'

'All we want is what's best for you, son,' said Mother Lena. She always had been the peacemaker among them. When she goes, he thought, this family will fall apart. 'It's time you were settled, time you had a career. A sensible career.'

'If I were you, my lad, I'd pay a visit to that cousin of yours,' said Father Albert. 'She's as sweet a smelling little thing as you'll find anywhere, and of an age when a good—'

'Albert!' said Father Geoffrey. 'But you'll stay the night, at least, Stephen?'

'I can't, Father. I'll have to go straight back to keep my cover up. You will help me, though?'

'Yes, of course we will,' said Father Jonathan. He heaved himself out of his chair. 'Take no notice of this lily-livered lot. You do what you think you have to.'

‘Thanks, dad,’ said Stephen.

‘Come on, I’ll help you get the body round to the orchard. You can tell me about the girl on the way.’ Father Jonathan led the way out of the room.

‘Albert’s right, you know. Katriona smells so sweet she’s positively fragrant, and she has an excellent lineage. You could do a—’

‘Don’t you start,’ said Stephen.

The next morning Stephen went round to Harrington’s workroom, one of several cheap artists’ studios in a purpose-built block. He nodded to a woman he met on the way in, and she smiled at him. Rock music blared from an upstairs room. He smelled clay and hot metal, felt the thrum of a motor in the soles of his feet. He let himself into Harrington’s room.

The place was organized chaos that smelled of paint and photographic chemicals and Harrington. Canvases were stacked here and there, the strange abstracts Harrington considered his serious work mixed up with the realistic originals of his commercial painting.

A rickety table held a kettle and a miniature fridge, along with things for making coffee and herbal tea. Somewhat surprisingly, there was a phone on the wall by the table, but no answering machine. Stephen supposed it fit what he knew of the man: from his diary he was a social butterfly, but from his journal he was totally insecure. Work or not, he would never dare let himself be cut off from other people.

One end of the studio had been partitioned off to form a darkroom, and its outward-facing wall was plastered with photographs and sketches; a shelf next to it held two Pentax cameras and a clutch of lenses.

He stared at the cameras, at the photographs. Harrington’s reputation lay in his paintings. As far as Stephen knew, the man had never sold his photographs or had an exhibition of them. The ones on the wall were an eclectic mix of portraits, landscapes and detail shots of architecture. Only when he had stared for a long time did he realize that Harrington had been using the photographs as reference material. Here, an old woman’s face, shot in black and white, was reinterpreted in charcoal, in pastel, as a water-colour; there, a seascape was shot in saturated colours and then copied in pastel to form the backdrop for a mer-folk castle rising out of the waves.

Stephen grinned. Perhaps if he had to he could make a painting after all. The grin faded as he wondered how Harrington decided which photographs to use.

It was a question for later on. There was still a chance that he would find something here which would enable him to walk away from Harrington’s life: something which would tell him whether Harrington really had passed material on to Cunningham; or something, perhaps, which would solve the enigma of Marion.

He searched the room thoroughly. He found the brief for the book jacket Harrington was working on, and the loose pages of the book itself, which Harrington had apparently scarcely begun to read, scattered all over the desk. He found rough sketches for the cover, none of them based on photographs.

Then, when he had almost given up, he found the photographs pushed right to the back of the desk drawer. They showed much the same scene as the others: billowing smoke and flame in the background, while a woman of the Family underwent the rapid, automatic change to natural form that came only with death. Some of the photographs showed detail: the long muzzle, pointed teeth, hands malformed by human standards. These seemed to have been taken once the woman was dead. Others, a batch clipped together, depicted the change as it happened.

Bastard human must have had a motor drive on the camera, Stephen thought. He hunted through the drawer. There was nothing to indicate where and when the pictures had been taken. Nothing to say what Harrington had done with the negatives.

Harrington was cautious, then. Stephen’s lips peeled back from his teeth in a smile that had nothing of the human in it.

Stephen went home by way of Oxford Street. He bought a dozen books, ranging from *The World of Chris Achilleos* and *Lightship* by Jim Burns to *Acrylics For Beginners* and *The Illustrator’s Handbook*.

He was going to pay by credit card when he remembered seeing one of Harrington's portfolio albums alongside the Burns. He put the Access card away and paid cash.

When he got in there was a message on the answering machine from Marion: *Don't he a stranger, Dan. We* reaJJy *do need to talk, you and I. I'll see you at* Hildy's *tomorrow, usual time. We'll he fine.* You'iJ see.

He listened to the message twice more, trying to get some sense of who this woman was. Then he settled down with a glass of Harrington's good malt whisky, and began to read the book for which he had to produce some kind of cover. He had spent the whole of the afternoon examining Harrington's previous work. There was plenty of it around. Although he had sold many of his original paintings, there was a complete set of slides. He had also kept his working sketches and notebooks. Stephen wondered if he had thought they would be valuable one day, even though what Harrington considered his serious work had been routinely rubbished by the critics. Yet his suicide note had indicated that he had been dissatisfied in the end even with that. It's shit, he had said. *All of it.*

Stephen thought he understood. Harrington must have been obsessed, compelled to strive for perfection against all advice. The illustrative work, no matter how successful, had not satisfied him. It was the other, the need to communicate, that had burned in him. I *wanted to transform them.*

He had said that, but it had taken Marion to transform his life. Did that make her an artist? Perhaps by Harrington's definition it did. But then by his definition, Harrington was more of an artist for his paintings of overlapping red squares, which everyone hated, than for those of dragons arcing against the midnight sky, which brought pleasure to many.

It was beyond Stephen. He settled down to read the book. Perhaps something in it would give him an idea of what to do.

An hour later he gave up. The story was far too fanciful for him, full of elves appearing in New York, failing to do what they set out to do, and going back to some imaginary land, where they also failed to do whatever they had to do there. It was the twenty-second book in the series; Harrington had done covers for the last nine.

How could there be a land which did not exist? Why should humans invent elves, dragons, evil wizards?

Weren't there enough problems in the world? Stephen put the book down. Outside, twilight was deepening towards night. Cunningham, he decided. If nothing else, he could deal with him.

Warnheld Hall, despite its impressive name, was a converted end-of-terrace house that had seen better days. The others in the row all seemed to have been made into offices, so that at midnight the street was deserted. Stephen had considered changing his face slightly, so that if he were caught his position as Harrington would not be compromised. But he was more concerned that he would not be able to achieve a good likeness of the man again. Face dancing was never easy for him, but he had learned the skill out of necessity, as he had learned so many other undercover arts.

He disabled the rudimentary alarm system and entered through a first-floor window which yielded easily to his crowbar. His feet swung out over nothingness as he moved from the drainpipe to the window-sill. Adrenalin sent the blood singing round his body. This, this he understood! Let the humans have their books and their art. He wanted only to live in his body, to know that his people were protected, and that his name would live after him.

He moved through the silent rooms, rooms where countless humans had told their trivial secrets, and left them untouched behind him.

When he found Cunningham's office, he searched it thoroughly. He went through the filing cabinets memorizing everything in them that related to Harrington. He had no need to make copies—he despised such methods—what would do for the Lines would do for the less complex secrets of the humans.

Cunningham believed Harrington was paranoid; there was even a suggestion that he might have fabricated the photographs in order to shore up what Cunningham referred to as his clearly delusional personal belief system. Cunningham also made plain that in his opinion, Harrington had been displaying symptoms of that neurotic paranoia for years, and that his apparently inflated opinion of his artistic ability was an overcompensation for deep-seated insecurity and anxiety about its actual worth; all of this

resulting in his inability to relate adequately with others or form a stable intimate relationship. Cunningham believed the Kingsmead Hotel fire had simply triggered buried fears about ageing and death. Harrington had had a very happy childhood, unmarred by bereavement or tragedy. Paradoxically, this had meant he had never learned to deal with emotional pain. Faced with death in the fire, he had gone to pieces.

What would you make of my Family's attitude to death, Paul Cunningham? Stephen wondered. Are all of us then psychotic by definition? We all believe the rest of the world is out to get us, and our home life would seem very abnormal indeed to you.

He moved on to the most recent batch of files. As he opened them, he thought that if they were similar—if Cunningham had continued to think Harrington was just a little bit crazy—perhaps he would take a risk and leave well alone. He would kill where he had to, but that did not mean he relished it.

But it became clear that something had happened to change Cunningham's opinion. He made no further mention of the photographs, and where before there had been transcripts of his conversations with Harrington mentioning them, now there were none.

Something had happened, Stephen thought, something that had convinced him of the validity of those photos. He felt the hairs on his back stand up in that ancient fight-or-flight reflex he shared with the humans: suppose this had gone too far? Suppose he had shared this with too many others, others who could do something about it?

He had no time for politics, for debating the sense of Progress over Stasis, for intellectual arguments about the likely return of the Dark. He believed the greatest enemy of his people were the humans, their greatest safety in secrecy. He had shaped his whole life around maintaining that.

How could it be otherwise? As a child he had watched his blood-mother kill two innocent humans because they had seen his dead litter-mates revert to natural form. The images of that night had compacted down into a memory of driving without lights at night—some Family business had sent them out into the curfew—dodging Home Guard patrols and the police; rain on the windscreen and a shadow moving on darkness in the unlit road ahead of them; a squeal of brakes and blood on the tarmac: then the scent of fear, and the screams of his dying brother and sister. He blocked off the memory, as he had blocked it off for fifty years. All that remained was the scent of human blood on his mother's face, the sound of her soft voice in his ears, telling him it was all right, would be all right, the humans were gone. But Robert and Angela were dead, and after that it was never all right again.

In the treatment notes, Cunningham had said he intended to try hypnotherapy. Stephen had no idea if it would work on him or not.

'Over your dead body,' he whispered.

He continued his search. Forty years of covert activity had taught him much. When he had *finished, the room* looked just as it had when he had begun. But he had obtained Cunningham's home address, he had satisfied himself that none of the photographs were in the room, and he had copied the contents of his hard disk on to floppies. He had also found, hidden in the pot of a very large spider plant, the key to a bank safe-deposit box.

He locked the door behind him, and left the Centre the same way he had come.

When he slept he dreamed of rain and screaming, and the warm scent of Mother Susan corrupted by death and tears.

He woke drenched with sweat, and lay trembling in Harrington's bed. He had read somewhere of human dreams that were like fictions, twisted distortions of reality. He wondered if they were easier to bear than the memories retold that were the dreams of the Family.

He had believed once that if he could remember all of that night of death, he would banish it for ever. Perhaps he should consider hypnosis.

What would you make of me, Cunningham, he wondered aloud as the dawn light bled through the gap in the curtains.

And he slept.

Stephen arrived deliberately early at Hildebrandt's, despite Harrington's habitual lateness. He was concerned that he might not recognize Marion from her photograph, and so he waited in the cool white restaurant, with his black coffee and his newspaper. In truth, he was too tired to concentrate. He had

woken late, with eyeballs that felt as though they had been sandpapered. She would know what he was as soon as she scented him, of course. There was no hope that it could be otherwise. He did not much care, as long as he could get her out of the way before he had to deal with Cunningham.

She walked in as arrogant as a model stalking down a catwalk, all flashing eyes and jutting cheek-bones. Her waist-length hair bounced behind her. She sat down opposite him in a flurry of dropped bags and coat and scarves. She flashed a smile that belonged on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* as she ordered a Perrier. 'It's good to see you, Stephen,' she said. Her Irish lilt was soft, at odds with the calculated hardness of her exterior.

'I've missed you,' he hazarded. He stared at her, refusing to look away, though he was suddenly unnerved: he had never met anyone like her, human or Family. What does she want, he wondered.

She stared back. One long scarlet nail tapped the snowy tablecloth. 'Same old Stephen,' she said. Her smile was sardonic.

They talked, then, of many things, none of them important. The waiter came back.

'Steak, medium, with salad,' Marion said. Her lipstick was blood red. 'Same for you, Stephen?'

She isn't worried, he thought. What does she think is going on here? Does she know what I *do? Why* isn't *she afraid of me?*

She raised an eyebrow. He thought about Harrington's freezer full of Veggie-Burgers. 'I'll have mine rare,' he said.

'How's the work going, Stephen?' she asked him a little later. He could only bluster.

Afterwards, outside, he told himself he should kill her. The woman had clearly been set on Revealing herself to Harrington; if not directly, her game-playing would have done the job. Sooner or later he would have connected her with what he had seen in the hotel.

He should kill her. It was what he did. But the sky was the brilliant blue of high summer, and his senses were full of her chestnut hair and blue eyes, the scent of citrus and musk. He watched her walk ahead of him, heard the clacking of her heels on the pavement. He shook his head.

'Why don't you come back to the studio with me?' he said. I'll show you my work, if you like.' Get her alone, get it over with. Even as a child he had always eaten the despised vegetables first.

'I think I know your work well enough by now, wouldn't you say, Stephen?' she replied. She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips. 'I'll be seeing you around, be sure of it.'

She walked off into the crowd. He watched her go, the taste of citrus still on his lips.

That night he raided Cunningham's home. He entered the flat as carefully as ever—it was a first-floor conversion in a terrace, and he watched until all the windows were dark; the people downstairs were out, those above, asleep.

It was simple enough, and he was expert. He went through the place like a quiet storm. When he had finished there was a pile of assorted junk in the middle of each room, and not a drawer still holding its contents.

He found no photographs and nothing to tell him whether Cunningham had passed his information on to anyone. He could have screamed then. He could have thrown china at the walls or torn the furniture to pieces. But to do any of these things might have brought the humans.

He did nothing, but stood in Cunningham's front room breathing deeply, letting the pain of his nails biting into his palms drive the anger from him.

When he left he took the video, television and hi-fi, along with a handful of jewellery and a few pounds in cash. He faked a clumsy entry. Then, to complete the illusion of a straightforward burglary, he did the same thing to the downstairs flat.

He let himself out of the front door. The fool humans upstairs had heard nothing. Impulsively, he lobbed half a brick through the window as he was leaving. Lights went on upstairs.

He laughed and ran. It was an idiotic thing to do, but it relieved his inner tension no end.

In the morning he paid a preparatory visit to Cunningham's bank. If it was large enough, he was prepared to risk taking in some identification and getting access to Cunningham's safe-deposit box that way. But as soon as he saw the place, he knew he did not dare try it. The place had a handful of staff on duty, even though it was lunch-time. He withdrew some cash and left, cursing inwardly.

For the next week he worked at the studio by day. He taught himself to copy any picture he saw. It was easy enough, a matter of fine muscle control and observation: nothing to a face dancer accustomed to sculpting the muscle beneath the flesh. Between drawings he studied how Harrington developed his ideas, but this he found harder.

In the evening he fulfilled Harrington's social obligations, hiding his unease with a kind of synthetic amiability his fellow-guests seemed to find natural.

Halfway through the week he admitted his unease to himself, and shortly thereafter realized it was because he was constantly looking for Marion. Every time one of the matriarchs who dominated things said, 'Of course you've met ...' his heart lurched. But the women were never her.

He fell asleep at night with the images **he'd** worked on, perfectly remembered, burning behind his eyes. Why should a series of tree drawings be—apparently—the inspiration behind a sequence of spaceship illustrations? Why render the face of God, of all improbable human inventions, as polished bone?

Sometimes, drifting on the edge of sleep, he thought he almost understood. It was as if there was a void in his mind, an empty space waiting to be filled: and what would fill it would be something new in the world, never seen, never heard until he brought it into being. Then he would jerk awake and lie terrified, staring into the darkness, until the sound of his own rushing blood and the rhythm of his heart calmed him. Then he slept; but when he woke it was always with echoes of dreams fading in his mind, ragtag memories that would not come clear.

Always, when he came home, back to Harrington's house, the first thing he did was check the answering machine. He spent the early hours restlessly wandering from room to room with the stereo turned up, staring at the paintings.

I could call her, he thought. I could even visit her. Harrington would never do such a thing; he was weak, Stephen knew that much from the man's journals.

I'm not Harrington, he thought. Damn my cover to Dark and beyond. I can phone her. But he did not.

The next morning he slept late. He was still sitting in the kitchen with a cup of the heavy black coffee Harrington favoured when Mrs Bailey arrived. He heard her banging around upstairs. Any minute she would get out the hoover, and his head already hurt. He ought to go, but he would have to pass her, and she would want to chat.

He fed the cat instead. It twined itself around his legs, then attacked the cat food without delicacy. Stephen remembered the taste of rare steak. He realized he was once again thinking about her.

Mrs Bailey came in a moment later, surrounded by a haze of tobacco smoke. She put her cigarette on the lid of the cat-food tin.

'You ought to throw these things away. Filthy habit, Mr Harrington, I must say.' The cigarette sent little wreaths of smoke into the air.

Stephen sighed and took the post from her. The cat stopped eating and stared up at them. Then it stalked disdainfully from the room.

Among the bills and circulars were a couple of fan letters and an invitation to the celebrity launch party for Winds *of Change: a Book for Africa*, a coffee-table book Harrington had illustrated. A handwritten note paper-clipped to the card said: *Thought I ought to warn you*—Marion says she'll *definitely be there. Sorry the two of you aren't getting on so well See you*—S.

Stephen found that his heart was racing and his fists were clenched. He was grinning like an idiot. He tried to slow his internal responses, but he had never been good at that; he had always been better at muscle control. He forced the smile from his face and left the kitchen rapidly, pursued by Mrs Bailey.

Stephen grabbed his coat from the rack. Mrs Bailey droned on. Just as he turned the doorknob, the phone rang. Reluctantly, he turned back. He went into the lounge and took the call on the downstairs extension. Mrs Bailey followed him in, and began ostentatiously dusting the picture-frames on the other side of the room.

If I were Harrington, I'd have sacked you long ago, Stephen thought.

He picked up the phone and identified himself.

This is Southbrook Retirement Home, Mr Harrington.' It was Mother Lena. 'I believe you were inquiring about a place for your father? We have the information you requested, but we think it would be best if you visited us again before you make your decision.'

Stephen, with his back to Mrs Bailey, smiled. He arranged to go down to the house the following day. He put the phone down and turned. Mrs Bailey was no longer in the room. Stephen frowned. Pain began to beat at his temples again.

In the dining-room, the hoover started up.

Stephen leafed through the stack of drawings. They were Harrington's, sketches for the Antmage cover. He had decided that he still did not know how Harrington chose what to paint—and did not care. There were a variety of scantily clad, pointy-eared women in the sketches, all of them russet-haired, despite the fact that the elves in the book were uniformly white blonde.

Was this why Harrington's work was considered sentimental? Stephen still did not know.

He had to do something. Anything. He gnawed his thumb. He laid the drawings out, one by one, so that he could see them all at once.

They all looked equally good. He took a penny out of his pocket, shut his eyes and tossed it into the air. He opened his eyes. The coin had landed on a close-up of one of the elves, a female warrior wearing three loops of strategically placed chain. Her sword, also strategically placed, was taller than she was. It hardly made sense to Stephen, but he supposed Harrington had known what he was doing. He took a sheet of art board, fixed it to the drawing-table, and began to *copy* the sketch.

Once that was done, he laid down a wash of ground colour over it. After that, he would be able to paint in the background detail, and the figures. While it dried, he stopped for coffee. When he came back, the wash had obliterated every trace of his original sketch.

He started to look up what had gone wrong in the Manual *of Materials and Methods in the Modern Art Studio,* then shut the book with a bang. The hell with it, he muttered. Painstakingly, he sketched the picture in again.

Stephen wrapped his hands around his coffee-mug. He was cold despite the warmth of the night, with the shaky chill that only comes with absolute tiredness.

Night? he thought. But dawn had crept up on him, and it filled the studio with soft grey light. He looked at the art board. The painting, half complete, seemed much more garish than it had by electric light. Must be *right. Has to he, it's just like every other Harrington.* He drove the heels of his palms into his eyes.

It was 12 June. The cover was due at Quantum. He had to take it in, or they would know there was something wrong. But if he took it in they would see it was not good enough, not real, like nothing he ever did was good enough. And it wasn't even finished ... he found himself drifting, staring at the transforming face of his litter-mate Robert, with the blood tracing down his face; and all he could do was promise his mother that the humans would never find out about *him,* but he never was good enough, never got rid of all the danger—.

He jerked awake. The hell with it, he told himself. He had to get his priorities right. Marion first, then Cunningham. The painting was only important as long as it helped him get to them. Marion. Cunningham.

He shook his head as if he could get rid of the tiredness that way. Cunningham first. He had to remember that. He put his coffee down, then found that, irresistibly, his head was following, cushioned on folded arms.

He slept.

It was mid-afternoon when he woke. He did his best to smarten himself up, then set off for his parents'

house. He stopped at a Happy Eater on the way. He had steak done rare, with chips and a dessert made of sugar and E-numbers.

Father Geoffrey was waiting for him when he arrived. He was in the front room with the patients, spoonfeeding Mrs Smith from a plate of mashed potato and finely chopped meat.

'You're late,' he said. 'I thought you were desperate.' He shoved a forkful of food in the general direction of Mrs Smith's mouth.

‘I am. I had other things to do.’

Things your poor parents might be proud of, I hope.’

‘*Borzhemoi,* I want my food in my mouth, man, not in my ear,’ said Mrs Smith.

Geoffrey scowled at Stephen, who replied, ‘It’s a dirty job, but someone’s got to do it.’

‘You’ve been watching too many old movies,’ Geoffrey said.

‘Just my little bit of research. How’s Princess Anasta-sia today?’ He gestured towards Mrs Smith, who was attempting to wipe a mashed-potato moustache away.

Father Geoffrey dabbed clumsily at the old woman’s face with a tissue. ‘Same as ever. Same as they all—’

‘I am not Princess Anastasia,’ Mrs Smith drew herself up in her chair. ‘I’m Catherine the Great. Anyway, there’s that nice Mr Yeltsin now, so there’s no point going back, is there?’

‘I’ll come upstairs with you,’ Father Geoffrey said. ‘I have a few things to tell you.

‘This Marion Ryan of yours is working for Her Ladyship,’ Father Geoffrey said. ‘You don’t want to mess with her—’

‘You should find a few nice girls to marry,’ Father Albert said. He winked. ‘That Katriona would make a good start. She always has been sweet on you, you mark my words.’

‘Geoffrey meant Her Ladyship, Albert, as well you know,’ said Mother Lena.

‘It’s about time I got back to the old girl,’ Stephen said. He looked his blood-father in the eye, knowing it was no good, that his scent would make his sudden dread plain to everyone in the room.

‘Nice try, boy,’ said Father Jonathan. He grinned at Stephen from behind Geoffrey’s back. ‘But I wouldn’t try to fool her.’

‘It’s a bit late for that anyway, dad,’ Stephen said. ‘Though I haven’t had much to do with her lately.’

‘The message we got said one of our children was already known to her,’ Julia said. She smelled of milk and baby-shit. ‘I might have known it was you.’

‘Oh for goodness’ sake, it’s a bit late to be nagging him now,’ said Mother Lena, without turning away from the television.

‘At least the boy’s got some go in him,’ said Father Jonathan. ‘I never should have let you talk me into getting married, Geoffrey old man. No disrespect, of course.’

‘None taken. Nevertheless—’

‘None of you need be involved any further,’ Stephen said. His mouth filled with the copper taste of his own fear, and he knew his parents would certainly smell it. ‘After all, I do have a long-standing arrangement with Her Ladyship.’

‘Nonsense lovey,’ said Lena. ‘Geoffrey will go with you. With Susan gone, it’s his place—’

‘That’s balderdash and you know it,’ Geoffrey said. ‘It’s just storing up trouble for the future. Anyway, there’s no reason it has to be me.’

‘Well then, Jonathan could go,’ Lena said stubbornly. She turned to him. ‘You’re *always* telling us how you worked for the Family in the war. This will be just like the old days.’

‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world, you know that,’ Jonathan said, ‘but as it happens I have an appointment with the bank manager in the morning.’ He stopped and looked around at them. ‘Well, one of us has to deal with the humans. Why don’t you go, Lena?’

She looked flustered. ‘By myself? A very good impression that will make, I must say.’

After that the talk turned to more inconsequential Family business—births, deaths and marriages. Especially marriages.

Next morning, while Stephen was sitting alone in the front room, Mother Lena’s two girls came in. They were true twins, cornsilk blonde and cute in the human fashion. At seven they were already adept at changing.

They regarded him solemnly. ‘Mother Julia says you’re a sassin,’ one of them announced.

‘That means you kill people,’ the other explained.

‘Do you kill people?’

‘Not often,’ Stephen said, and smiled. ‘But I could make an exception in your case.’

Lena came in and shooed them out. ‘Sorry,’ she said brightly. He wondered if she had heard, and

was surprised how much it hurt.

Stephen drew up in the forecourt of Chevington House, alongside all the other tourists. He felt as if he were watching himself from a long way off as he got out of the car and found a tour guide. It was an effect of the absolute terror he felt at the idea of confronting Her Ladyship. He knew that.

It didn't help.

He told the tour guide he was a friend of the housemaid, and the man went off to find her. He came back far too quickly, and led Stephen round the back of the house.

The woman who met him in the basement kitchen was between his age and that of his parents. She smiled at him. Her name, she said, was Eileen. By her scent Stephen could tell that she was married, not yet with children though there were young in the group. He found the idea exciting. *Shit,* he thought, J *really am going fertile.* He clamped down on the idea, knowing she would sense his arousal.

'Come,' she said. 'We mustn't keep Her Ladyship waiting.'

Eileen left him standing in the corridor while she went in to announce him. He remembered the last time he had been there. He had been glad to get out with his life, let alone his freedom ...

There was a rustling noise from inside the room. Eileen came out and ushered him in. The room was as huge as he recalled it. Despite its ballroom proportions the smell of Her Ladyship was overwhelming. They were in the cellar of the house, and the room was ventilated only by slits near the ceiling. The opulent drapes that hung on the walls covered false windows. The room was lit by candles, hundreds of them in a huge crystal chandelier suspended from the ceiling, more in wall-sconces and candlesticks on the heavy furniture that filled the room.

Her Ladyship was scared of electricity.

She was sitting at the back of the room on a scroll-back brocade couch. Even sitting, she was much taller than Stephen, and her hair added another foot to her height. She was broad in proportion, breadth made greater by the leg-of-mutton sleeves of her dress. Heavy make-up accentuated, rather than concealed, the thrust of her jaw and the roughness of her leathery skin.

'Stephen, how *delightful* to see you againf *she cried* .. 'Do come and sit next to me.'

Stephen went in, edging carefully around an aspidistra on a drum-table and a chair that looked as if it would collapse if any weight at all were put on it.

Tea things were set out on a low table in front of her. She smiled, revealing teeth as long as Stephen's thumb. She patted the seat next to her. Stephen perched on the couch as far away as he could from her.

'Do make yourself comfortable, dear boy. I so rarely get visitors these days.'

Stephen moved half an inch along the couch. He kept his hands clenched in his lap. Beads of sweat studded his face. He smelled terrified, even to himself. She must be able to smell it, he thought. She must.

'One shall be mother, shall one?' Her Ladyship said. 'After all, one has been housekeeper to the nobility.' She poured the tea.

She handed him a cup made of porcelain so fine he could see her fingers through it. He took it carefully, holding the saucer in one hand and the cup in the other.

'One lump or two?' she asked, with the sugar-tongs already poised.

Stephen sipped his tea. It was too hot, too strong, too sweet. The cup rattled against the saucer, loud as gunshot.

'I trust it is to your taste?'

'Fine. Fine,' Stephen answered. 'It's fine.'

'Of course, one can't get decent tea, now.' Her Ladyship picked up her own cup. It was as tiny as a doll's in her massive hand. She sipped delicately at the tea. Her fangs clicked on the china. 'Not like when I was a girl. *It* just doesn't have the time to mature in the chest on the voyage over any more.' She put the cup down. 'Tell me about this girl you are trying to find?'

'She is involved with a human,' Stephen began. 'One

I killed, and whom I am currently impersonating. I think—' he took a sip of tea, aware that his next words would surely trigger her rage. I'll never get out in time. I should have stayed near the door, he thought, '—that she might have been about to reveal herself to him.'

'Really?' said Her Ladyship. 'How simply too fascinating. Might I tempt you with a scone? A

savoury? Perhaps a sausage roll? A waste of good meat I call it, but Eileen's very proud of her pastry.'

'Not ... not for me. Thank you.'

'Got a taste for vegetables, have you? You won't grow big and strong if you keep eating up your greens, you know.'

Stephen leaned forward and helped himself to a sausage roll. He choked it down in two bites. Her Ladyship smiled.

'That's better. Now, I do have a smidgeon of a problem with this situation. Perhaps you can help me?' She picked up a chicken drumstick and ate it in one bite, bone and all. Then she smiled at him. 'Can you help me, Stephen?'

'Yes,' he said, round a mouth full of pastry like wet cardboard.

'Good. The problem is, much as I would like to help you—much as I once thought you might have a place with me—Marion already does work for me. Too many of my ... contemporaries know she is my protegee for me to give her up. Not without proof, at any rate. The embarrassment would ruin me. Do you have proof, Stephen?'

'Yes!' he said too quickly.

'Think carefully,' Her Ladyship said. She glared at Stephen. After a moment he looked away.

'No/ he said quietly. There was silence. 'But logic says that was her intention—' he rallied.

'Logic never leads to Revealing,' Her Ladyship said. Her voice rose to a scream. 'Never!'

Stephen began to edge away from her on the couch. He could hear her taking deep breaths, smell her anger ebbing away, but he did not dare look at her.

'Forgive me,' she said. She fanned herself gently with her hand. 'I believe I might try one of those cream puffs. Would you ...?'

Stephen tried out a smile, but regretted it instantly. He immediately found a plate piled with cakes being pressed into his hands.

'Now, as I was saying,' continued Her Ladyship, 'Marion is working for me. Indeed, I had sent her to deal with Harrington because of the Kingsmead Hotel fire business—'

Stephen stared at her. The plate tilted dangerously.

'—Oh yes, I know you've come to regard it as your own preserve, but we needed to move faster than that. Just how long do you think it would have taken the humans to work things out?' She licked cream off her upper lip.

'I had no idea,' Stephen said.

That's the trouble with you young people today—you think you're the only ones who can do anything.'

'But Marion didn't kill him,' Stephen said. 'He killed himself because she was playing games with him.'

'More tea? No I thought not. You have to be going soon, anyway.' Her Ladyship poured a cup for herself. 'Let's spell this out plainly. I want Marion alive, but only if she's trustworthy. If she can prove that to you, well and good. If not, I want her dead with as little fuss *as* possible, and I want the proof brought to me.' She rang a little silver bell on the tea tray. 'Eileen will see you out.'

Eileen came and Stephen followed her to the door.

Just as he was about to leave, Her Ladyship called to him.

'I am depending on your discretion, boy. Don't fail me.'

The painting looked almost as bad in full sunshine as it had by the light of dawn. Stephen stared at it from across the studio. Terror had left him as exhausted as if he had missed a week of sleep.

Despite all that, though, he had intended to try and work on the painting. If he could not keep his cover intact, there was no hope for the rest of what had to be done.

To hell with it all,' he growled to no one in particular.

He slammed the door behind him as he left. When he got home, he slept for ten hours straight.

It was not until he woke that Stephen noticed the light flashing on the answering machine. Marion, he thought. Then, remembering Her Ladyship, *Oh shit.*

He was wrong. 'Dan. Clive Thornton here. Remember me? The Art director at Quantum? The guy

who gets your invoices paid? We may not be living in the same universe here, but in mine the Antmage deadline was yesterday. Get on it and get back to me, willya?'

Stephen rolled over, put the pillow over his head and made a good attempt at going back to sleep. All it got him was a headache.

Stephen stared at the picture. He had re-created Harrington's sketch faithfully, even positioning the figures in the same place on the art board. As Commercial Illustration had suggested, he had left a reasonable amount of space at the bottom for lettering, and an even more generous amount at the top. You can always *crop to fit afterwards,* said the book.

Perhaps that was why the figures looked so small, Stephen decided. He looked from the sketch to his painting and back again. There was too much space at the top. For the first time, he wondered if he ought to have scaled Harrington's drawing up. Hastily he reached for *Graphic Design for First-Year* Students, which informed him that it would be most convenient to make a series of half—or quarter-size working sketches in the early stages of any project.

He would have to do something, but there was no time to start all over again, and besides he could not bear the thought of it. Hastily, he grabbed the nearest sketch. It was the wrong size and shape. He flipped through the stack. Nothing, nothing, nothing. His eyes lit on the charcoal sketch of the old woman. As far as Stephen could remember, it had nothing to do with the book. Not that that had ever bothered Harrington very much, Stephen told himself firmly; besides, there was sure to be an old lady in there somewhere.

He was getting better. It only took him a couple of hours to sketch in the outlines.

The phone rang. Stephen dropped his pencil and hurried to pick it up.

'Hi, Dan,' said Marion. 'Aren't you the stranger?'

'I've been busy,' he said.

'And there I thought you'd been out of town. Visiting relatives, at a guess.'

He could see her so clearly he felt he would be able to touch her hair, if he only put out his hand. 'Oh. And who have you been talking to?'

'News travels. Anyway, I missed you.'

She would smell of musk and lemon, and her eyes were the blue of sapphires, of the sea. 'You surprise me.'

'I wanted to make sure you would be at the Winds *of*

Change launch. I'd not want you to be washing your hair that night, if you follow me.'

'I wouldn't miss it for the world. You'll be going to it, I suppose.'

'Oh sure. It would take more than some old woman to stop me.' *Aah,* he thought; but he remembered the way the sun caught the copper in her hair.

Take care,[5] he said more urgently than he had intended.

'White or red, sir?' the waiter asked. Stephen was already regretting the double Scotch he had had before he arrived, but he took a glass of Riesling anyway. Then he wandered off into the crowd. He smiled vaguely at various people, hoping to chance on someone he recognized, if only from a photograph.

His bow-tie was unbearably tight. He resisted the temptation to scratch under it, or better yet to take it off altogether.

'Good to see you, Dan darling,' cooed a woman in a dress she was poured into. 'But I'd watch out for Clive if I were you.' She smiled sweetly. '*You* know what he's like when his schedules get behind.'

He muttered something at her, all the while looking for Marion over her shoulder. He escaped from her and, realizing he had finished his drink, headed back to the bar.

'Hi, Dan.' Stephen nodded to a vaguely familiar man. 'Olive's been asking after you,' he said. He held two full glasses up over everyone's heads, and was away before Stephen could reply.

Stephen exchanged his empty glass for a full one. As he turned away from the bar, he spotted Marion on the other side of the room. For all he knew the man she was speaking to was Clive. *Hell with it,* he thought, *and plunged hack* into the crowd.

By the time he had pushed his way to the far corner she had gone. He cursed mentally and knocked

back the wine. He grabbed another glass from a passing waiter. Someone in the crowd said, 'Well, Clive—'

Stephen backed off. A woman jogged his elbow, and his wine went flying: most of it ended up down her dress, but she apologized relentlessly anyway, dabbing at his shirt with a tissue.

He saw a flash of red. He picked up the woman's hand, removed it from his chest and went in pursuit. It took him a long time to get across the room; somehow everyone wanted to tell him how marvellous his work on the book was. He nodded, smiled, shook hands, signed copies. In between times he managed to acquire, empty and dispose of three more glasses of wine.

Naturally, by the time he arrived on the other side of the room she had gone—if she had ever been there. He leaned in a corner against a large potted palm. He stank of alcohol and fear, and the place stank of alcohol and far too many humans. He did not want to think of why he smelled of fear, or of the excitement that so clearly underlay it: that frisson he got only when he was closing in on prey. Most especially, he did not want to think of how the evening might end.

The best thing about these dos is the free wine,' said a soft Irish voice beside him. He looked up. Marion offered him a glass of the red. 'So I'm told anyway. But then, you smell as if you've had enough for three, as anyone here could tell you.'

'We should talk,' Stephen said. He was getting a headache again. 'But not, I think, here.'

True. We can go and sit out by the river, if you like. Mind you, there's some fellow named Clive asking after you. I can wait if you want to talk to him first.'

Stephen stared across the river. The wine had made him light-headed. He strove to control his internal re—

sponses, wished he were better at that side of things. Moonlight shone down on the river and the floodlit buildings. He wondered if it would make a good painting. *Perhaps I* should *ask Harrington*, he thought. *He'd* know. He giggled aloud.

But then he remembered the awe he had felt when he first saw Harrington's work, how he had yearned towards it. That was before he had learned it was worthless.

'Know-nothing humans,' he muttered.

He heard footsteps. Marion stopped beside him, with her back to the river. Her perfume enhanced, rather than disguised, her natural scent. The curve of her breast pressed against his arm. He felt it move as she breathed. He turned slightly, and saw that the reddish hairs on her arms were standing up, despite the warmth of the night. It was only then that he isolated the smell of her fear from his own.

'Why did you do it?' he asked.

'Come here tonight? Why, it's a good party, and I thought it was time we talked, you and I, Dan. Should I still call you Dan?'

'If you want. Why did you do what you did—instead of doing as you were told?'

Marion turned, so that they were facing the same way; but now she was pressed up close to him. He felt her hair brushing his cheek, the flesh of their arms separated only by a few thin layers of cloth. When she spoke, her breath was hot on his face.

'You're good, you are,' she whispered, 'asking me such things out here where anyone can hear. Or is it just that you're drunk, like any fool human might be?'

'There's no one to hear, and you know it.' He covered her hand with his. 'Now answer me. I have decisions to make, and I don't want to make the wrong ones.'

'Aah, so you have been talking to Her,' she said. 'I

wondered if I was just guessing well or—' Her voice deepened slightly, and swapped its Irish lilt for glottal cockney, '—whether I 'eard you right, talking to that lot up at Southbrook, weren't it?'

'You! But I never smelled you! The cigarettes couldn't do all that ... could they?' The adrenalin surge cleared the last of the alcohol from his head. He sought to calm his panic. If she could do this, how many others might there be? How many feral, how many revealers or Dark-callers or outcast?

'Aah, you face dancers, you think you're the only ones with any skill, don't you?'

'You can change your smell? Your smell? That's not possible.'

'Not change it. Blank it out. That's why I needed the cigarettes. You'd think it bloody strange if I'd

no smell at all, now wouldn't you? Not that it's easy, mind. I wouldn't do it for any old human who came along.'

'OK,' he said. She must know he was worried. His heart was still hammering, and his breath was coming fast and shallow. He gripped the stone wall. 'But why, Marion? Why didn't you just do as you were told?'

'There's more to life than following orders. I've always been interested in art. Studied it at college—oh, don't look at me like that! I studied art philosophy, art theory. That kind of thing. When Her Ladyship needed someone to deal with Harrington, I jumped at it—'

'She knew I was sorting out the Kingsmead thing. She told me so herself.' Stephen felt peculiarly aggrieved.

'So she did. But humans who clearly knew about us started turning up, and we traced them back to Harrington. It was as easy for Her Ladyship to put me on it as it was for her to call you in and tell you—specially since you'd like as not have ignored her on principle.'

'That unreasonable old bitch—'

'You've spent your life putting yourself outside society, Dan. What do you expect? Anyway, you wanted to know why I didn't just kill him, and if you'll give me a minute, I'll tell you. It was the art, as I say. Have you never wondered how they take this, add that, mix in a little of a third thing—and then turn it into something other. I have. They have made—me laugh, and cry, and wonder, when there had been no such thought in my head the moment before. And I have hated them for it.'

'Because you don't want them controlling you?'

She shook her head, setting her mane of hair bouncing. 'Because I can't understand it. I can't *do* it. But he could, however bad they said he was, however manipulative. He was an artist. Do you realize what that is? It means making things that are wholly new. It means making people see things differently—'

Stephen laughed harshly. 'Then you're a greater artist than ever Daniel Harrington was. Do you know, in his suicide note he said he had wanted to change people's lives. Transform them, that was the word he used. But he never did. It took you to do that. You made him see he could never have what he'd dreamed of.'

She stared at him. 'That can't be. All I wanted was to force him to make art. So I went to him. I was a dowdy little thing then, Stephen. You'd have recognized me, but he wouldn't. I changed myself, slowly. I became what he could not resist. I answered his every desire, echoed his every mood. When he was down, I cheered him. When he was happy, I intensified it. When he needed to tell secrets, I listened.

'I studied him as prey, and I caught him as a cat catches a mouse; and like a cat, I played with him. I set up the Mrs Bailey persona so I could watch him when I wasn't around. It worked all right. In the end, there was no escape for him. If you'd told him what I had done—even without the physical changes—he would not have believed you. He was happy.'

'A transformation indeed. Did it work?'

'I don't know. It all looks the same to me, anyway. The critics didn't seem to think so. The visual equivalent of candyfloss, one of them said. Anyway, that was only stage one of my plan. I figured I would only know if I was right afterwards, so I moved to stage two.'

'And Her Ladyship let you be while all this was going on?'

'I told her I was tracing his contacts. I was, too, but slowly. Having heard you tonight, I think perhaps I fooled her less well than I imagined. Anyway, it couldn't last for ever. When I realized that his art was as it had always been, I decided to shock him out of it. Out *of despair, great* art. Vincent Van Gogh said that. I thought if I could bring him low enough, he'd lose that edge of sentimentality they all said he had.'

'So you humiliated him,' Stephen said. Marion looked surprised. 'It was in his journal.'

'I did. I went to a party with him, a very swish dinner party with a lot of media types. I pretended to get drunk, and then I asked one of the art critics for a true opinion of one of his paintings. The man bluffed and blustered. Then I read out one of his critiques. It had been in the Independent, and oh, it was a piece of cruelty beyond anything of my devising. When I'd done, poor Dan was terribly upset. He

begged me to stop, but I wouldn't. When he started shouting at me, I hit him. Not hard, not by our standards, but you could see the finger-marks. I told him I agreed with the critic, challenged anyone there to disagree. No one did. I left then.

'When Dan came to see me, I accused him of mental cruelty, of caring nothing for me, for my feelings. Perhaps that was true. I don't rightly know.'

'You do know what happened?'

'Yes. The morning after the row, I went round as Mrs Bailey, and let myself in. I had no real idea what to expect. Dan was an early riser, though, so when he wasn't around I went upstairs to find him.'

'I'm sorry,' Stephen said.

'Surprisingly enough, so was L' She laughed shortly. 'Anyway, I saw him and you in bed, and figured you for what you were. Her Ladyship had told me to watch for you.'

'Would you have killed him?' Stephen asked. He could hardly bear to ask; if she said no—

'I don't know.'

Stephen wanted to grab her, to hold her and make her say yes; yes she would have killed Harrington, yes she was an obedient servant of Her Ladyship. Yes, she would go home with him tonight and—

'Did Her Ladyship tell you to kill me?' she asked.

'She told me to use my judgement. And that if she considers I got it wrong, well I suppose my name will be taken out of the Lives no matter what else I did right.'

'And what is your judgement?'

'Mostly that I couldn't kill you here and now and get away with it.'

'Would you believe me if I promised?'

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

'Words are just words. I could say anything.'

'Yes you could.' *Say anything*, he thought at her. *Give me a reason not to kill you.* 'So say something.'

She pulled away from him. Her hair haloed out around her, turned orange by the sodium glare of the street-lights. The smell of musk and citrus hung heavily in the air.

'Not tonight,' she said, and walked away.

The smell of paint did nothing to help his hangover. Stephen dabbed dispiritedly at the mer-folk castle with his paintbrush. It was the only sketch he could find that would fit the space in the right-hand corner. The only trouble was that Antmage was set in a desert. Maybe he could persuade them that the sea was blue sand.

That night there was an agitated message on his answering machine from Clive. He was desperate to have the painting, and demanded that Stephen phone him the next day.

On principle, Stephen spent the next day painting. Somehow he could not quite achieve Harrington's purity of line, and it irritated him. That, after all, was more a matter of muscular control than anything else.

About midday, the phone rang. He let it go on for a few seconds, convinced it would be Clive. Then he answered it.

'Dan? Marion. I've been thinking about our conversation.'

'Uh-huh. And you're going to tell me that there's nothing to worry about, you'll follow instructions from now on.'

'Something like that. I have a way to give you the proof you need. Something better than words. I know Harrington had contacted others. You'll have to deal with them. Let me help with the next one.'

'All right,' said Stephen. He felt the smile rising up inside him. 'I have a plan already, but another pair of hands is always useful. Meet me at Hildebrandt's the day after tomorrow and I'll fill you in.'

The next day Stephen took the painting down to Quantum. He was made to wait in the lobby of their offices, which were too modern to be imposing.

Eventually a secretary came down and took him up to Clive's office. The art editor was a large, trendily dressed black American.

'Dan! I was beginning to think you were avoiding me!' Clive said, in a voice loud enough to turn heads.

Stephen smiled weakly. ‘As if I would.’

‘C’mon,’ said Clive. ‘Let’s see this latest masterpiece.’

‘Careful, it could do with another day to harden off properly,’ said Stephen. Any minute now he’s going to ask why it was late and I won’t know what to say, he thought; my cover will be blown and that will be the end of it. His palms were wet. He almost wished he were human.

‘You got it. I’ll treat it like a Faberge egg.’ He unwrapped the painting, and carefully set it up on his desk. Stephen thought the light did not quite do it justice.

Clive was silent for a long moment.

‘What do you think?’ Stephen asked anxiously.

‘It’s sure ... different,’ said Clive. ‘I wish you’d asked me before you tried this collage effect, ’cause I’m not sure what the typographer’s going to make of it. But yeah, I like it. It’s so ... relevant. Really reflects the content of the book. Marketing will love it.’

‘Oh good,’ said Stephen.

Clive walked up to it and peered closely at it. ‘This scumbling effect’s neat too. I’m not sure about how it’ll reproduce, though. Hell, we’ll manage.’ He turned and grinned.

Here it comes, thought Stephen. Here it comes. He got in first. ‘Sorry it’s so late, Clive,’ he said.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Clive said. ‘Besides, with you we know what to expect. I mean, I’d hate for you to think it was OK, but we know we always need to cut our Dan a little slack, you got me?’

Stephen stared at him. Cut him a little slack? He had had nightmares about this painting. He had sweated blood trying to do what no member of the Family had ever done. Why hadn’t Harrington mentioned in his journal that he always missed his deadlines? And then he thought, Well, would you want lateness remembered in your place in the Fifty Lives?

‘Now, would you like to discuss your next commission?’ Clive asked.

‘Maybe later?’ said Stephen.

‘I won’t be more than an hour or so, one way or the other,’ said Stephen.

Marion twisted around in the driver’s seat to look at him. ‘Save some for me,’ she said. Sunlight gilded her hair, turning the copper lights to brass. The heat drew out the smell of the vinyl seats, so that Stephen had to strain to catch her citrus scent. She patted his hand.

‘See you later,’ she said.

Stephen went to keep his appointment with Cunningham.

‘So who did you send my photographs to?’ Stephen asked. He was half an hour into his therapy session with Cunningham. What *do the humans get out of this?* Stephen wondered. He settled back and watched the human.

‘Why do you keep going back to the photographs, Daniel?’ Cunningham countered. ‘You haven’t mentioned them in a long while. Has something happened to upset you?’

How would Harrington *react?* It was the question through the whole therapy session. ‘Obviously because they are important to me.’ The light was deliberately dim; perhaps humans found it soothing. To Stephen it was merely unsettling.

‘I know you feel that they are,’ Cunningham answered. ‘Perhaps we should talk about how you came by them.’ He tapped the end of his biro on his jotter. He stared at Stephen from behind aviator glasses. His eyes were pale and watery, at odds with his physique. Stephen had found a membership card to a gymnasium in his flat.

‘We’ve been through this before,’ Stephen hazarded. *Come on, tell me. What happened to* convince *you they are genuine?*

‘I know,’ Cunningham said. He pursed his lips around the words as if they were lemons, yet his voice stayed soft. It was like the light: deliberately kept low in an effort to soothe. Like the light, it failed. ‘But I feel it might help if you told me again.’

Tell me again, tell me again, Stephen thought. *Do you really think Harrington would have forgotten? Is that what making the world twist in your mind does to you humans? Makes you forget,* makes you *mad?*

He wondered, briefly, what Cunningham would say if he asked him for help: I saw *my* mother *kill a*

couple of humans one night during *World War 2; Yd like you to help me remember it so I can tell the rest of the Family about it properly.*

'I saw creatures that changed when they died.' He strove to keep calm, though he was doing the thing most forbidden, the thing he had dedicated his life to stopping. He was telling a human about the Family, and he had to make the human believe him. He felt his throat constrict. Easier to kill him now, make a quick getaway, deal with the consequences later. But that would be leaving hostages to fortune, and it would deny Marion her chance to prove herself to Her Ladyship. 'Creatures that looked like werewolves.'

'Do you really think that's possible, Daniel?'

Cunningham asked. There was no hint of mockery in his voice. The man was a *tabula rasa,* clean of any hint of his own personality. Stephen wondered what he was like at home.

'Do you?' Stephen asked, and thought You certainly *do.*

'Let me have you hypnotized. That will prove what you saw, one way or the other.'

'I can do better,' Stephen said. 'I've got one of the bodies. I can show you.' It was hardly a lie. He felt the panic breaking out again. He stank of dread. He was sure even Cunningham could smell it.

'This is new.'

'I never needed to tell you about it before,' said Stephen. T always thought you were on my side then.'

'I am on your side, Dan. We have to work together to help you get better.' His expression had changed though, and so had his scent. His eyes strayed to the buzzer on the table; it was supposed to let the receptionist know Cunningham was ready for his next patient, but Stephen presumed there was an alarm code. He looked back at Stephen who realized that he had gone too far; Cunningham was almost afraid of him.

'I know that,' he said, allowing a trace of impatience to creep into his voice. 'The truth is, Paul, I've been thinking of going public with this. You're just the first person I'm showing.'

Cunningham relaxed visibly. 'That's good, Dan. That's very good. You must be excited.'

'Oh I am, Paul. In fact I was wondering—I know this is an imposition but I was wondering anyway—if you'd come with me to look at the body tonight?'

Stephen was quite prepared to use force if he had to. He had a revolver with him. Not that he would need it, but the humans seemed to behave better when there was a weapon involved. Otherwise they seemed to think they might win, which encouraged them to fight back. That inevitably got messy. Besides, a bullet in the brain was the surest way of making sure a Family member stayed dead.

'Now I really don't think that's on,' said Cunningham. 'I have other patients to see this evening.'

Liar, Stephen thought. 'I don't think so,' he said. He crossed the room in two strides. Before Cunningham could react, he had the gun out of his pocket and pressed to the human's neck. 'Now, you wiiJ come with me,' he said.

'Don't do this, Daniel. You don't really want to do this.' The man stank of fear, and his forehead was sheened with the first traces of sweat.

'But Paul,' Stephen said, 'you've always said this is my hour to use as I wish.'

They walked slowly down the road together. The receptionist had been startled when they left together, and there had been a dangerous moment when Cunningham might have spoken. But Stephen had pressed the gun into his back through the pocket of his jacket, and the moment passed.

He was holding the gun in the same way when they turned the corner to where Marion should have been waiting in Harrington's blue Rover.

The car was empty.

Stephen stared at Cunningham. The human's breath came in ragged little gasps. Blood trickled from his nose, from a split lip. His head lolled forward.

He had not dared go back to Harrington's. There were too many neighbours, too much chance they would hear Cunningham. Instead, they were in Stephen's flat. It was in a tower block in Tottenham. He had chosen it for its location. It was noisy enough and run-down enough that no one was likely to notice anything he did. There were already too many squatters and all-night parties and crack dealers.

‘Don’t,’ the human mumbled. ‘Please don’t.’

‘Who did you tell?’ Stephen asked.

‘I told you. I told you.’ The man smelled of tears and terror and shit.

Stephen hit him so hard his head snapped back and his eyes rolled up. Blood dribbled from his nose. Stephen grabbed his hair, forced his head round, hit him again. And again. Suddenly his rage was uncontrollable. Marion was gone, gone when he would have trusted her, would have gone against his best instincts and the judgement Her Ladyship was testing—

He stopped. Cunningham was unconscious. ‘Damn,’ Stephen muttered.

He contemplated bringing the human round. Cunningham had already given him four names. There was a zoologist at Manchester University, an anthropologist in the USA and a popular science writer. Also Barbara Jones, a photographer; she was the one who had convinced Cunningham the pictures were not fakes. Stephen ground the heels of his hands into his eye-sockets. It was about as bad as it could get, and he had no way of knowing whether Cunningham had given him all his contacts. If he really believed the photos, he might have held out.

Stephen slammed his hand into the wall. He would start again in the morning. If Cunningham said the same tomorrow, Stephen would have to believe it.

He checked the ropes tying the human to the chair, then left the room. He locked and bolted the door behind him. It was the only exit from the room, unless you counted the window. The flat’s eighteenth-floor location was another reason Stephen had chosen it.

Stephen’s eyes flicked open in the dark. He heard a soft susurrus of breath, and knew that someone was in the room with him. He tasted citrus and wondered if it was an echo of dream. He did not move. He counted a hundred heartbeats, and still the faint sound of breathing was there with him. Nothing but that, and the draught from a door he had shut before he went to bed.

He turned. Marion was there, crouched like a succu-bus at the end of the bed. He watched without speaking, pleased with what he saw. She was in her true shape. She was beautiful, her musculature picked out by moonlight, her flesh sheened with golden down, her face thrusting and strong. The scent of her filled up the room, now that he was properly awake.

He wanted to reach for her, to take off her human garments, to answer the urgent need of his body. He wished, most ardently, that he also was in the true form; that his senses were not dulled by their humanity. It occurred to him then that in true shape she was much stronger than he was. He wondered if that were why she had come to him in this way.

‘Hallo, Stephen,’ she said. Her voice was husky, the words distorted by a mouth not made for them. Moonlight glinted coldly on her incisors.

‘You didn’t wait,’ he said.

‘Will you work for Her Ladyship?’ she asked. He felt her looking at him, taking in the sight of him.

He pulled himself upright. ‘If she asks me, I suppose.’

‘She’s wrong, you know. You’re wrong.’

‘Explain.’

‘You think it’s enough to make sure the humans are ignorant of us. You think about today, maybe about tomorrow. But we have to look to the future.’ Her gaze never left his face. ‘We have to try to understand them, what drives them, what they want. That’s the oi\iy way to protect ourselves.’

I want you, he thought. I want you so much. But he forced himself to say, ‘And to do that we should reveal ourselves to them?’

‘No! I never said that.’ She moved forward on the bed until she was close enough to touch him.

Stephen was startled. He put out his hand towards Marion’s face. She evaded it. ‘But you would have revealed yourself to Harrington.’ Flat statement: she couldn’t deny it. He wet his lips. She wanted him, he could smell it. She must be able to sense his desire. What would be so wrong with that? Yet she was a revealer—

‘Says who? Did Her Ladyship tell you that? Did she?’ Anger flared on her face, in her scent. It only made him want her more.

‘Well, no.’ It was true. He really had no evidence for his belief, beyond the fact that she had changed

herself injudiciously so Harrington would want her. 'But you didn't take a great deal of care when you *improved* yourself for him.'

'He thought I'd been on a diet, got a perm and some highlights. Don't overestimate the humans, Stephen. Just because they make art, make science, doesn't mean they see more than they expect to.'

'Would you have killed him?'

'Probably. In the end. Will you kill me?'

'No. Even if I could, which I doubt.'

'Her Ladyship will not be pleased,' Marion said, but he felt her shift on the bed as she relaxed slightly.

'She will trust my judgement. I will make her.' He put out his hand to her, and this time she took it. He pulled her towards him. 'Come,' he said.

'Yes,' she said, 'I believe I shall.'

They got up late the next morning. Marion kept her true form. She refused to tell Stephen why, and he did not know if she could sense his unease with that.

'You did a job on him, didn't you,' she said. There was a hint of disapproval in her voice.

Cunningham turned his head heavily to look at her. His eyes went wide. Stephen realized that only exhaustion kept him from hysterics. Even so, there was a sudden acrid stench of shit and urine.

Marion went and stood in front of the human.

'Christ, get it away from me! *Get it away from* me/' he screamed. He twisted against the ropes so violently that Stephen thought he might actually manage to break them.

'You see how we scare them, love? They're so weak.' Marion took Cunningham's face in her two hands. She forced him to look at her. 'There are easier ways than brute force,' she said. She lowered her face to Cunningham's and kissed him gently on the lips.

The man gagged. The room filled with the hot metal stink of human fear.

'You said I was an artist because I transformed Harrington's life,' Marion said. 'Perhaps you were right. But what have you done to his?' She put one sharp talon close to Cunningham's eyeball. The man squirmed in her grasp. The talon tracked along, never going more than a quarter of an inch from the human's iris. 'There does have to be some artistry involved, after all. I've always found this very effective.'

'Please.' Cunningham whispered. 'Get it off me. I'll tell you anything you want to know. Anything.'

Stephen touched Marion on the arm. She released Cunningham.

'Tell us,' Stephen said. 'Or I will let her practise her art on you.'

'For pity's sake,' whimpered Cunningham. 'I told you. There was Wilkinson at Manchester Uni, and then St\et-rington in the States. That pop science writer Gina

Mitchell. And the photographer—' he stopped. 'You're going to go after them all aren't you?' His eyes were wide. Marion took a step or two towards him. He started to struggle against the ropes, but he stopped before she got there. 'Don't. Don't. Her name was Jones. Like I said yesterday, Barbara Jones.'

'See,' Marion said. There's no real need to hurt them.'

Stephen nodded. He went outside and came back in with the revolver.

'Oh no, oh no! I told you what you wanted! Don't do this, don't *do* this!' The human's voice was a constant whine as Stephen loaded the gun.

He went over to Cunningham. As he put it to the man's temple, Marion said, 'Don't.'

'Oh, thank God. Please, I won't say anything to anyone,' Cunningham's voice started again.

'There's no need for that, love,' Marion said. 'You wanted proof. I'll give it to you.'

She took off her human clothing piece by piece. Then she knelt in front of Cunningham. His face, watching her, was a mask of horror. She placed her hands on his chest. Stephen listened to the syncopation of their hearts. He wondered how much Cunningham understood, if he knew why he had to die. Marion placed her lips with utmost delicacy on the human's neck. His scream began, sharp in the silence, and ended in the fountain of blood that burst out over Marion.

With the human's body still jerking against its bonds, she turned to Stephen. She held out her hand to

him. Blood dripped from her nails. He licked her fingers clean, and then her lips.

Later, they took the bones down to Southbrook. The parents were not pleased, but they accepted it in the end. Marion and Stephen buried the body themselves.

They stood in the orchard piling old leaves over the freshly turned earth. Marion had gone back to human form, a different appearance to her last.

The smell of new-turned earth and last year's mulch mingled, but it could not hide the new smell of her. 'You're fertile, aren't you?' he said. He had noticed the night before.

'Yes,' she said, 'but don't worry, I'm not pregnant, yet.'

'Will you marry me?' he asked her, without ever having consciously formulated the question.

'Settle down, have babies? It's not a future I ever thought of. I like my life as it is.'

'Would you have to? We worked well together, in the end.'

'I'll let you transform my life, if I can transform yours,' she said.

'There are still babies to consider. We aren't human, after all. We won't be able to hold out for ever.'

'Just the two of us, like a human couple?' Marion asked. She cocked her head on one side. 'I never meant to take the research so far.'

Stephen caught sight of Father Albert standing by the French windows. 'I believe my parents know someone who might be interested,' he said.

The If Game

Paula Wakefield

If wishes *were horses*
Beggars *would* ride;
If turnips were watches
I would wear one by my side;
And if ifs and ands
Were pots and pans,
There would be no work for tinkers.
Children's Nursery Rhyme

Your letter, asking for a reconciliation, arrived yesterday, and then the police came and told me that Maria and Philip are dead. Two gut-busting shocks in one day—in less than an hour.

I'm still in shock, perhaps—but I have spent twenty-four hours remembering, and after all I've decided not to tell the police anything other than what they already know or guess.

Maybe you know about Maria and Philip ... I think that in some way you do—you must—and part of me calculates that I ought to be ... wary, if not frightened, but I'm not. I could not be, because I have loved you. And because I have loved you—still love you, I suppose, I want to warn you.

It is me I am afraid of.

And as it is so long since any sensible communication took place between us, I want to explain some things too. Besides, who else do I have to grieve to?

The men who came to see me yesterday know that we were together during that time, before Maria and Philip died. At the very least the police might call on you, (and your agent certainly wouldn't be happy about that sort of publicity) and I am sure there would be questions that you could not answer ... like I said, I've loved you.

I was shocked to hear about Maria but not surprised. I hadn't seen, or heard from her since I'd visited them in Nova Scotia. That was our first publicized split, remember? It was one of the last times I allowed you to be unfaithful to me (though, I guess you'd still deny it) and I'd flounced off (trying to disguise my pain), disappearing with my jealousy and humiliation, yet again.

But even what happened across the Atlantic—even what I saw in Maria, and him—couldn't compete with the burning images I had scorched on to my imagination: those other women tasting your

skin, other women testing you, invading my pleasure-grounds, robbing me of the power that exclusive rights over another's body and emotions confer. And though I hate to admit it, the memories still hurt, a little. If love (human love) makes you like that, Jack, then I loved you ... to distraction. And I was distracted when I went over there to see Maria and him, and for a long time I attributed my view of the things that happened there to my own distress, my own sickness, madness.

Of course, you hardly knew Maria. You met her just the once, but I don't suppose you remember that either ... She came down to tell me she was getting married. And it was too late when I realized she had wanted to see me on my own, to share the news, her big one-time news, properly, privately ... to celebrate as only two friends, two women, can. But I had to have you there. I

couldn't bear to be parted from you. I had to show you off, and my glow, my sparkle.

Did you know she met Philip at about the same time I picked you up in that wine bar? They were working at the same school and I had just won my first big ad account. Have you noticed, the company is still using my slogan? Anyway, that was why I was in the bar, celebrating. And it was one of those rare moments when you really are on top of the world—on top of everything—in control, the whole thing spinning around you, sparks flying, and everything within your grasp: as it was for me that night, when I saw you, wanted you, and knew that I only had to breathe in your direction and you'd be there, like magic, and of course I did, and you were, and that was the start of you and me.

I don't know how it happened with them, Maria never got the chance to tell me. Or, perhaps, in the end, she decided not to.

And I don't know when they started planning to go abroad or when the decision to leave was made, but now I do know why. At that time (when you met her) they were scouring the countryside for antiques (if you can call the bits and pieces they collected, antiques); those ugly remains of other lives that the rich and the dealers never want. Philip was at some farmhouse sale when Maria came down to us. We took her to that swanky cafe-bar for lunch. Christ, how she must have hated it! I only realize that now. And it's only now, after all these months of missing you, and not communicating with her, that I have thought about her at all, thought about what happened, about any of it. Now she's dead.

It never occurred to me then that she wanted to sfcfc me for some particular, some special, reason. I suppose

I believed it perfectly natural and inevitable that the whole world should gravitate towards you and me. Anyway, we insisted we all went to that place—whatever it was called—and we loved it; the best place, at the time, to see and be seen. We were still at that point in an affair when visibility, as a couple, is one more aphrodisiac.

We ignored the fact that Maria hardly touched the expensively unpalatable nouveJJe food. Poor Maria, she was far too dull for the way we were then. We ignored her. She was, after all, a distraction from ourselves. The less she said the more we could chatter about our successful careers, our enviable acquaintances, our fashionable politics and the pretty, pompous people who paraded about that place waiting to be discovered. I wouldn't say I was happy, or proud, so much as—excited ... constantly exhilarated; showing you off again in the best setting available.

And I know you were puzzled about my friendship with Maria. But she could be tenacious. She held on to our friendship long after I was ready to let go of it. And I was to witness how determined she was to hang on to Philip, regardless of the cost.

By the time you met her I saw very little of her and our communications were generally limited to Christmas and birthday cards. And I was as intolerant as you of all that quasi-romantic hippy stuff about 'getting back to nature' that she wanted to bury herself in. I have always loathed Laura Ashley frocks.

But you see, Jack, Maria and I were still linked by those bonds that teenage girls forge between themselves, and I suppose we held on to those old loyalties, though at the time Maria's grip was firmer than mine. And as the police said, I was really all the family she had, apart from Philip. God, Jack! It's only now that I

realize how little you know about her, about me. What did you and I talk about? Just us?

But I am forgetting. If I am right, you do know something of kinship, although your notion, your experience may differ, is bound to differ, I guess, from mine—ours.

Anyway, back in that different land of Then, we excluded Maria simply by taking her to that bloody awful bar, and it wasn't until you went to the loo and I was ostentatiously paying the bill that Maria had a real chance to speak.

'Actually, Sue, I have some news of my own.'

'Oh?' I was indifferent to anything that might possibly compete with the glitter of you and me. Besides, the waiter was flirting with me and I was wondering whether she had noticed.

She fiddled with a bit of her badly permed hair. 'That was really why I wanted to see you. Philip, my friend, the one who has gone to the sale—well—he's more than a friend ... he's—well, actually—we're getting married.'

She stuttered and stammered and I got hot with embarrassment and the shame of realizing why she had come.

'Oh, Maria! Oh, God! Wow!' And then, stupidly, 'Why didn't you say something earlier—' and making it worse, '—we could have had champagne!' And then the crass, automatic afterthought, 'You're not pregnant are you?'

'Sue.' It was only then that she showed her disappointment in me. She glanced awkwardly at the neighbouring tables, checking to see whether anyone had overheard.

I tried to be blase. 'Don't worry about them, they're probably pregnant every other week!' She looked as though she might cry.

'Oh, God, Maria, I'm sorry! I wish we could have met him. Is he nice? How long have you known him?'

Poor Maria. She had wanted to share her happiness, one of the few significant moments of her grown-up life, with me, and I—we—had spoiled it. She was just a minor character, stuck in the wings. I had dictated the script, chosen the stage and cut her out. There was room only for you, my star performer.

'Well, I think he's nice.' She was looking strained and clearly wanted to be out of that place and her discomfort, at last, made me want to escape too ... but where were you?

'Well, we must all get together sometime. We must meet him ... Philip,—oh, I think Jack's on his way back, God, he'll be so pleased when I tell him your news—'

'Sue, please don't make a fuss ...'

She was being polite. And my concern about your absence made it easier for me to ignore what was going on between me and Maria. We went and collected our coats and I thought my neck would break with the strain of looking for you. When I did see you (head and shoulders above everyone else, as usual) meandering beautifully back through the crowd, I relaxed a little.

'So, what about the big day? When is it? You must let me know the arrangements.'

'I'll write to you, Sue. Oh, hallo, Jack ... I'm sorry Sue, I really must go. I told Philip I would meet him at three.'

It was already half past ... and she was the one who was apologizing.

The Pouilly-Fuisse had turned sour in my throat and I was desperate to turn things around. 'You will write won't you, Maria? Promise.'

'Of course I will. Goodbye Jack. Thanks for lunch, Sue.'

She didn't promise, and I watched her go, pulling on some woollen gloves and bowing her head to the wind. Then I started a row with you about the blonde in the green dress I'd seen you talking to at the bar.

She did write, but it was months later when I got the card telling me they were leaving. I've still got the card. It's here, beside me now. It asks me to go and visit them.

I was surprised about the planned move ... Maria had never lived anywhere else before, and I was suspicious that it was her house and possessions they were selling, and that he—Philip—had contributed nothing.

Anyway, I didn't go and visit them. It wasn't just that I still found it hard to go back to that provincial world with its prospect of duty visits to my parents, brother, and sister and her never-ending string of kids. It was mostly because I was too busy thinking about you, and who you might be screwing. You

were doing a short run in Sheffield—Doctor Faustus. At the time I bitched that you had been miscast.

I caught a train and travelled it seemed for ever to get there for your opening night and knew as soon as I saw you with the B-movie actress that you would take her to bed. I knew it the way we always know these things; I'm not sure if it's the same for you—whether you have the same sense—that special ability one has when one is in love. All the senses are so receptive that the combined sensitivities are capable of detecting the slightest tremor of change in the beloved's attention-range. Believe me, Jack, when a woman is so smitten she can smell her lover's desire for another woman. So I knew that you would have to have whatever-her-name-is—who was playing a very voluptuous duchess—just as I knew, or felt, or imagined that I wouldn't like Philip.

But, as I said, I was far too preoccupied with you to spare any attention for Maria, for them. I ignored the card, this card, and I dare say would have lost touch with Maria for good, had it not been for her nerves or fear, or whatever it was that prompted her, months later, to call me.

Hoping it was you, I was disappointed to hear her voice at the other end of the line, where yours was supposed to be.

'Sue? It's Maria. I've only got three ten p's. We're on our way to the airport. I'm sorry we haven't been in touch—we've been really busy—and I'm sure you have too, but we're leaving today—I wondered, could you—would you come and see us off, Sue? It might be years before I see you again.'

I felt like I do when my mother asks me to visit at Christmas. 'Oh, Maria ... I wish you had let me know sooner. Things are terribly tight at the moment. There's a new account up for grabs and—'

'Oh, I know how hectic your life is. And you've got Jack to think of—I wouldn't normally ask—I know I'm a nuisance, but please, Sue. There's no one else to say goodbye to.'

How could I say no to that? Besides, I had already begun to think my absence from the flat might serve as a punishment for you on your return. It wasn't until I was on the tube to the airport that I realized that on finding me gone, you would simply go out and find another pretty face to discuss your performances and notices with.

But that was later. 'What time does you plane leave?'

Twenty past nine.'

I was already imagining the look of disappointment on your face. 'OK. I'll meet you by Tie Rack, you'll be able to find that, won't you?'

'Yes, yes, I think so. Thanks Sue. It wouldn't have been—right, without saying goodbye—'

I was glad the money ran out.

By the time I was on the tube I had worked out that you would have left again by the time I got back and that I would be the one who was hurt. I spent the whole journey re-mapping your body in my mind: your unfathomable musculature with its ever-shifting masses, your tantalizing length, and your smooth, smooth skin, with barely a hair to hide in, even in the gulleys of your armpits and your groin. In the first days, after we had made love, I would underline my pleasure, my achievement, by searching the ligaments and fillets beneath your skin. You never commented on my fascination, just as I never admitted to my disappointment at finding you gone from my bed in the morning. You would be lying on the sofa, or showering, or already making breakfast, but never there next to me, never with me, the way I wanted you to be.

Tm not used to sleeping with someone else,' you said, the first time I mentioned it, and to my raised eyebrow added: '... sharing a bed all night.'

Afterwards it was always: 'I couldn't sleep.' Or else: 'I had some lines to learn.'

You never apologized. I don't remember you apologizing for anything. But then, why should you? You are superbly suited to this time. You will always expect admiration, adoration, love. And you are unquestionably qualified to receive it. Just as the camera loves your face with its unique combination of smoothness and lines, the ability of your jaw and cheekbones to realign according to character, so will women and men. I have hated you for that.

'If only you loved me better,' I thought then, rattling and swaying towards Heathrow. 'If only you would trust me, give me some commitment. Ah, if only you could feel how I love you.' I didn't understand then. Couldn't, and carried on mentally fingering the self-inflicted wounds in my belly.

I know better now. About you and about games like that. I don't even find it odd any more that I played that game with myself about you. I had never done it before. But with you I couldn't see—did not feel—that I had choices.

Recalling all this reminded me of something Maria said the last time I saw her. I had forgotten until yesterday. Now, I think you should know about it. But I must take my time. You must believe me. And I am not sure you will, unless I tell you all the things I ... censored, before.

The airport was heaving with people so I made straight for the store where I had arranged to meet them. I waited there for more than an hour, occasionally sipping some scalding liquid from a machine close by.

I saw Philip first. Not that I knew that the hulk towering above everyone else was Maria's husband. Her tiny frame was hidden among the crowds.

Like everyone else in Philip's vicinity I tried to ignore his compelling vastness. Even taller than you, he appeared to have a girth to match his height. The man was huge. I shrank back a little into the display stands in the doorway of the shop so that I could watch this giant's progress without being thought a voyeur—by now, he was close enough for it to be obvious he had some kind of illness. The body lurched slightly to one side as if the spine was twisted and one leg dragged a little as he persisted along the concourse. It was hard not to stare, he did look alien, and I imagined all the mothers of the children near by desperately trying to divert the fascinated and horrified gawpings of their offspring. I couldn't school my own attention away from the panels of rough skin that looked as if they had been nailed to the superstructure of his face. Inevitably his eyes met mine in mid-stare and I shrank further into the displays, concentrating on a tie you would have hated.

When I heard Maria's voice my stomach dropped.

'Sue! Thank goodness you're still here. I am sorry we're late. There were terrible traffic jams on the motorways and then, when we did get here, we went to the wrong terminal and I was sure we'd never find you but I told Philip what you look like, and he spotted you as soon as we got to the top of the steps—oh, I'm sorry, blabbering away, nerves I suppose, let me introduce you. Philip this is Sue, the Sue I've told you so much about, the friend who looked after me at school ... and when gran died—' she smiled, a tight, wistful, blink of a smile and added, 'and Sue, this is my husband.'

She craned her neck to look up at him, rather as a child does to reassure itself of its elder's presence and mood.

I had expected Maria's husband to be small and wiry, rather like her, but Philip was a giant and, beside him, Maria was a moppet.

With some effort I forced myself into social action and stuck out my hand. 'Philip, pleased to meet you ... I'm, er, sorry I can't say "I've heard so much about you"—my fault, I've neglected Maria, and you—' he shook my proferred hand which felt vulnerable between the rough plates of his palms and fingers. I forced myself to meet his gaze and, unaccountably, my skin burned just as it did when you held my head between your hands the moment before kissing me very slowly and deeply. Oh, yes, I was confused. I think I said: 'No excuses. I am sorry, and now you're going.'

'Don't be silly. You lead a busy life and you've got Jack to think of and anyway you're here now, that's what counts.' Maria was excited and nervous and obviously (I thought) had no idea what the mention of your name, at that moment, was doing to my insides.

Automatically, I took refuge in time. 'Maria, it's getting very late, what time did you say your plane was?'

She checked her watch against an elevated digital display unit. 'Oh, you're right! Oh, no, Philip, this is so silly, we'll have to hurry. Oh, Sue, I've dragged you down here and we've hardly got time to say two words to each other—'

The three of us were already shuffling in the direction of their departure lounge, Philip on one side of Maria, me on the other. Philip and I were content or relieved to let Maria carry on talking.

'But you musn't think that just because I'm married—oh, Sue, I'm no good at making speeches, you've always been the one who's good with words, what I mean is, we'll always be friends, and you really must come and see us. Bring Jack! I've told Philip all about you. I'm sure the two of them would

get on.'

She sounded silly and trite, and I didn't know whether it was because of my mood, or Philip, or what. She prattled on, triggering long forgotten images of two girls listening to an old woman's collection of seventy-eight records, talking clothes and memories, and boys and futures ... Maria helping me with my maths homework, me helping her with her English. And most of all, if I am truthful (and what point is there in not being truthful now?), me continuing the friendship for the quiet refuge of her grandmother's house, after the noise and congestion of our overcrowded bungalow.

Anyway, at the airport, Maria was enjoying her role of wife: arguing with staff about a special seating ar—

rangement for Philip, exhibiting a proprietorial, even slightly bossy, air I had never recognized in her before. Perhaps, I thought, marriage had given her an assertive-ness she'd never found elsewhere. Philip did not speak but continued to look as if he was permanently in pain and making an effort to contain it ... to control himself. I did not like him—and my dislike had nothing to do with his appearance. I was glad when they had gone. But I hung around for a while, stupidly hoping that if I left it long enough, fatigue might have carried you home to the flat before me.

Eventually I pulled myself together and caught the tube back. Unable to make room in my head for analysis about Maria and Philip, I took the easy, painful option and let an image of you settle behind my closed eyes.

I didn't tell you about where I had been and you didn't ask when you came quietly in just before daybreak and I was ready to crack open with desperation for you.

There are moments, spaces, events that can be altered, suspended I suppose, by need, by desire. For a time the slights, the wounds, the betrayals don't matter, nothing matters for a time—like that time—until the body and the heart are comforted. And for a time I was all right.

But in the morning you were dressed and drinking orange juice and I saw you had slept on the sofa again and I was depleted: frustrated. Hurt. Mad.

Oh, Jack. You must remember how I screamed at you? After a while we were both throwing things, and through my taunts and your justifications and the broken crockery all I recognized was the renewed ache for your body; I knew it was all I could have of you. The act of love was better than nothing, and as you are now proving to the world, you are a consumate performer. So, through your sweat, and my snot and tears, we tore into each other and transformed the anger.

Afterwards I went to work and when I got back we rowed again. We rowed and fucked for weeks.

And then, quite suddenly, you were becoming famous. A colleague of mine told me he had seen you in some hotel with that gossip columnist. So I had to escape. Either that, or break. I needed sleep and someone to confide in. I wanted to forget. Not you—your treasons. I wrote to Maria, taking her up on the verbal invitation I had ignored at the airport. I had packed my bags and run before I received a reply, confident at least that Maria would meet me in Halifax.

And she did. Philip was with her, waiting for me at the gate in the clinging heat of what was going to be an unusually hot and humid Nova Scotian summer. He looked better than I remembered—still pained but not quite as grey or tortured.

'I hope you've brought more practical clothes than those.'

They were Philip's first words to me. If I had found him taciturn before, I had put it down to the awkwardness of the situation, or his discomfort, or concern at the prospect of a long flight. I had acknowledged my dislike of him but it never occurred to me, until this moment, that he would not like me, or that he might have recognized my feelings. Maybe it wasn't that. But these words were punched at me and I felt as unwelcome as I later discovered I was. It was all the more disconcerting because his voice was not gruff or deep as I suppose I had imagined: neither was it light, and there was a concord to it that must once have bent itself to seduction.

Their new existence, it struck me, although agreeing with Philip, had metamorphosed him into a wild man. He was just as big, and possibly heavier, and since I had first met him he had grown a great fleece of a beard.

Then there was Maria with a tired smile on her face. It would have been obvious even to you that she

was finding her new life cruel. She was much thinner than ever before and dripping with dull rags. The busy wife buoyant with her new status and the prospect of a semi-dependent husband had disappeared. Next to Philip, she was a wraith. It upset me to think that you would have found it impossible to hide your shock and distaste at the state of her. I grinned, and shrugged for want of another gesture, and she let me hug her in the old way and I smelled the grease and dirt in the string of her hair. But, you know, if I wanted to cry then, whatever had happened—was happening—there, to my oldest friend, it was still for you. For me.

Philip broke us up. 'Maria, we must get on with those vegetables. At least the extra hands will be useful.'

Maria helped me with my bags while Philip preceded us across the car park. It struck me then that he looked slightly less awkward, not so constrained and uncomfortable in that landscape which, even in the confines of the airport, bragged a vastness that dwarfed England with its chaotic cities and busy countryside and crowded, cloud-filled skies.

There are only two seats in the van, I'll sit in the back, it's a bit mucky,' Maria apologized, looking at my clothes.

'No, no, it's OK. A bit of muck never hurt anyone and these will wash!'

Anything, even chicken-shit, as it turned out to be, was better than travelling next to Philip.

'I've been thinking we might get a cart. We don't really need the van and with no proper income we can't really afford petrol. A horse might be cheaper.'

Was Maria hinting that they needed cash for fuel? I made a mental note to give her some money but I couldn't answer her. I was already reeling from culture shock, so I climbed in and held my breath, trying not to think about the stench I was sitting in, or what lay ahead.

It was a silent journey that I spent, watching the unfamiliar territory roll by. There were two small windows in both sides of the van's back panels, so it was like watching the landscape on a piece of film, or looking through those little viewing boxes that people used to put slides in. We travelled for miles, very slowly. Despite the heat, the sky was a grey roof and its uninterrupted paleness only served to emphasize the blatant expanses of land, and the long, empty roads we moved along. At other times we drove through acres of pine forest, grown tightly as a crop, but much of it scorched and blighted by acid rain. It was in the middle of one of these huge plantations that I dozed once and when the scrape of a gear roused me I wondered if we had moved at all. Philip negotiated two towns, one not much more than a mega-shopping mall. Even in those places the people looked lost. Out in the wilderness there was just the occasional roadside store—God knows who those shopkeepers ever speak to—with the more entrepreneurial displaying handwritten signs for maple syrup by the pint.

The cramps in my shoulders were murderous and the only reason I didn't ask Philip to stop, so that I could stretch and gulp a breath of fresh air, was that a break would only prolong the journey.

But the sight of the smallholding brought me no relief. We had travelled maybe the last ten miles on a dirt track, walled in by yet more pine. Their land was all that was left of the original farm, the rest was completely given over to the dense trees.

Stranded in the middle of the clearing was the house. It was long and low at the front, rising to what must have been once handsome gables at the side and back. Now it was ugly, despite an eager and uneven coat of white paint smeared across its wooden walls. Philip parked the van on a patch of scrub in front of the house and Maria let me out.

'We'll take your things up and then you can come and help us with the vegetables.'

She started telling me about the history of the place and how they had cleared out the well. They had cleaned up the inside, she said, but they were not going to buy a generator (it was too isolated for wired electricity or piped gas) because there was so much wood around, and they liked candles, and it was getting back to basics—rejecting all the things they had escaped from. That was when I began to wonder exactly who had escaped and what freedom had been won.

A concession to modernity was a black lead range where Maria cooked, and I began to panic when I guessed there would be little, if any, hot water to spare. But like a good house guest I followed her, without a word, across the cold tiles and up the bare wooden stairs, listening to the boards creaking their

disapproval at my heels.

My room, my box, was just that and despite the curtainless window it was as dark as a church. There was a mean bed that Maria said Philip had made, a washstand with a jug and a basin, and a candle on a little wooden table beside the bed.

'I hope it's not too primitive.' Maria's murmur could have been a question or a comment.

I replied as truthfully as I could. 'It's fine. Anyway, I've come to see you, not assess your house.' Already it was impossible to refer to that place as a home.

I'll see you downstairs in a minute. Sorry to throw you in at the deep end but Philip's determined to get all these peas in for drying by the end of the week.'

She gave me the tired smile again and went away.

I pulled on some old tennis shoes, but as my clothes were already filthy there seemed no point in changing. Clearly this was going to be a working holiday. Then I went and joined them and picked bloody peas.

The day felt as if it would be endless to spite me, and there was no time to talk to Maria. After a supper of soup and bread, Philip wandered outside and I helped Maria clear up. She was very quiet but then so was I, what with the journey, and that wretched pea-picking. I thought my back would break.

'I'll show you over the house, if you like,' she said, when the last dish was stacked, and lit another candle.

Yes, I did wonder what was the point in trailing around a house in almost pitch darkness, but Maria's mood was so peculiar and, believe me, I was too tired to openly question any of it, so I followed her.

The sitting-room was full of ugly furniture they had taken with them but there was nothing else remarkable about it. There was no bathroom either upstairs or down. A tin bath hung just outside the kitchen door but all the time I was there, no offer of filling it was ever made, and from the smell of Maria, I doubt it was used at all.

I followed her across the carpetless floorboards, once or twice stubbing my toe on boxes of books that hadn't, even after those few months of living there, been unpacked.

Upstairs their bedroom was much the same as mine but slightly bigger. I was a little surprised at the two single beds but assumed that, what with Philip's size and his disability, it was probably the most comfortable sleeping arrangement.

We traipsed along the landing, missing a room, and then climbed a narrow flight of stairs to what was the attic bedroom. When Maria opened the door I gasped. Even in the limited light of the candle it was obvious the contents must have been worth a small fortune. But I couldn't even recognize—let alone name—most of the ancient musical instruments arranged across the walls and floors.

'Maria! Does Philip play all these, or is he just a collector? What a shame they are all hidden away up here, they're amazing, beautiful!' I meant it.

But she wasn't pleased or enthused, just indifferent, tired. 'He used to play most of them, I think. He's been collecting them for years, but his hands, you see ...'

Yes, I did see. The thought of those great stiff paws made it impossible to imagine Philip fingering these delicate pieces.

'Do you know who he is, Sue?'

'What do you mean ... you mean his other name? I don't understand, Maria, he's a teacher like you, isn't he?'

She stood in the doorway staring at the instruments. 'Oh, it's so very complicated. There's so much to tell you ... I've wanted to tell you for ages—•'

'Maria, I'm really sorry. I should have been in touch sooner. I'm to blame—'

'It doesn't matter now anyway.' She paused then announced: 'Philip Wittenberg. Do you know the name? He was quite famous, once. He conducted and composed and everything, once.'

I was struggling to take in what she was telling me and for a minute or more the name meant nothing, and it was only when she started speaking again that I dragged out a hazy recollection: big brittle records on an old lady's gramophone, a dark red label showing a little dog and the name, Philip Wittenberg.

'He's never been a teacher. He was working as caretaker at the school I was teaching at and ... oh,

that's not the beginning—you're not the only one who can land a big catch you know—but I don't know where to start, and it doesn't matter now anyway ...'

I thought she was just babbling and she certainly looked as tired as I felt.

'Let's go back down,' I said, with half my mind on Philip's likely anger should he find us there, though I did wonder how often he forced himself up those stairs.

Back on the landing I stopped at the door we had ignored earlier. Imagining that it was a room they hadn't got round to cleaning up, and thinking I could lighten the atmosphere with a conversation about decorating, I tried the handle. The door was locked.

'Oh! What's in here, Maria? Come on, what are you hiding?' I teased.

It's odd how desperate humour is often unintentionally accurate. She looked at me as though she were questioning all our years of acquaintance and then she sighed resignedly and pulled a key from her pocket and opened the door.

It was much more of a museum than Philip's room and its contents would ever be. But I didn't think that then. This room had had more attention and care lavished on it than the whole house, or the land, was ever going to get. There was a cot as well as a beautifully carved crib. Lace curtains disguised the windows and pretty hand-made rugs were scattered across the floor. Draped across a rocking chair was a colourful antique quilt and, here and there, on the shelves above the cot, were old books and toys: neat, tidy, preserved.

Partly to hide my surprise and confusion I exclaimed. 'Wow! Maria! Did you do all this? It's beautiful! Well! I should be congratulating you, Mrs Wittenberg—you should have let me know, I would have brought something for the—'

'Sue, don't!' She pushed me out of the room and I listened to her fraught breathing while she locked the door after us.

When she turned she dropped into my arms like a tree being felled, and despite the stench from her body I held her, squeezing out a little love from my badly diminished reserves. Her bony body shook against me and I could feel the wetness of tears through my shirt.

'I'm not pregnant Sue. I can't be. I won't be ... Philip doesn't ... we're not even married.'

That was when I realized ... the smell, mixed in with her sweat, was stale menstrual blood. I badly wanted to vomit.

Oh, Jack, it was awful, dreadful. I had to force myself to be practical. I helped Maria downstairs, cleaned her up and tied her hair back, and made some tea. We sat quietly for a time with just the clock ticking as it had done in her grandmother's house until, eventually, I suggested she went to bed before Philip got back.

We had been avoiding each others' eyes but that was when she looked at me again, as if from a huge distance beyond her retina, and said, 'He won't be back. He doesn't sleep here, with me.' She looked out of the open door into the deeper shadows of the outbuildings. 'He's always slept in the barn but more often now he goes down to Rushfall, it's a little settlement down the road. We didn't pass it earlier—it's in the opposite direction.'

I was too tired to take in any more. At that moment I felt more alone than I had in all the hours I'd spent waiting for you. Perhaps it was the realization that Maria couldn't help me—save me?—she could barely help herself. Or perhaps, for the first time ever, I was half admitting that there was something in Maria's personality I did not like—and yes, I felt guilty. Perversely, having just escaped from you, I wanted to run to you then; escape to your treacherous arms. And if that had been possible, I would have. Instead, I persuaded Maria upstairs again and tucked her into the sheets that must have been her grandmother's. Then I crawled into my own bed, anaesthetizing myself with the duty-free gin I'd crammed in my bag.

Thankfully, I didn't dream, but my sleep was as heavy as the weather and I didn't feel refreshed when I woke the next morning. When I felt able to go downstairs and face my hosts again, I found Philip already lumbering outside and Maria doing something with the dough that was destined to become our next loaf of bread. I emptied the cold water from my bowl and helped myself to some biscuits and maple syrup.

‘I want to go to Rushfall. I want some more booze.’ I was in no mood for prevarication.

Maria looked across the table at me. There is a liquor store there. You can only buy alcohol from the government-run stores.’ She glanced across to the barn. ‘But it’s about ten miles the other way and you know I can’t drive.’

‘I’ll drive, or we’ll walk. Leave the chores until we get back.’ And before she could argue I’d snatched the van keys from their hook and half run outside, quite prepared to take Philip on should he confront me.

But he was either in the barn or one of the other sheds and we didn’t see him, though he probably saw us.

The van wasn’t all that difficult to manoeuvre but Maria had to keep reminding me to drive on the other side of the road. Rushfall was probably more like fifteen miles away. But the forest on that side ended after five or six miles and Maria cheered up once we were out of the pine walls. She started pointing out the scattered maples whose leaves were colouring early and even agreed to let me do her hair and nails that evening ... a sort of girls’ night in. In fact, she was more like her old self until we got to Rushfall and, I suppose, she remembered Philip and his visits to the place.

I parked at the roadside and Maria seemed unable to decide whether it was better to stay in the van, alone, or risk exposure and join me in the liquor store.

‘It’s your fault, you made me come!’ She was suddenly vicious with hatred, contempt.

I took a deep breath. ‘Maria, what’s wrong? You seemed quite happy to come with me. I thought you would feel better for getting out for a while.’

‘Happy. Ha! You know about “happy”, don’t you? Don’t you understand? They’ll see me! It’s humiliating!’

I looked about, bewildered. ‘Maria, there’s hardly anyone here.’

‘Oh, you ...! You’re so stupid!’ She stopped and grabbed my arm, turning red-rimmed eyes on me. ‘Oh, Sue, please don’t leave me on my own here. Let’s go. Let’s go back. We’ll go to the mall or somewhere, instead. Please, Sue, please!’

The mood-swing was as violent and unexpected as the outburst but I refused to give in to her. In the end she chose to stay put and I wandered down the almost deserted street that was the town, wondering why Philip came here and telling myself to stop imagining watching eyes.

And again you were with me. Walking with me. Your fully animated image filled my head; hurt my heart. Did Philip come here to whore? Was that it? Was that why Maria went crazy? Was she embarrassed, about herself, *or some* predilection of the man she lived with? At the liquor store door my stomach lurched as I feared lone women might not be served booze in this backwater that resembled a hastily constructed film set.

But it was OK. The men, who were almost as big as Philip, did serve me and one even touched his cap as I left.

As much to convince myself I wasn’t unnerved by the town as a desire for decent food, I stopped and bought two huge lobsters from a place that had them swimming about in a tank. I would have sworn, as I left, that it was Philip across the street, playing checkers—or whatever that game is—until I got halfway to him. The stranger’s hair was lighter than Philip’s, but apart from that slight difference, the similarities he and his opponent, in fact all of them, shared with Philip were remarkable. I turned away, retracing my steps. I had seen no women or children but I reasoned they must be about somewhere, and had half convinced myself that Rush-fall was Philip’s birthplace, and that the people I had seen must be relatives of his, when I walked into a wall of black serge. I stretched my neck back as far as it would go before I met the cataract-covered eyes in the large domed head. I side-stepped, startled, apologizing, noticing Maria frantically waving at me, calling, wondering why she hadn’t told me about the people here.

I hurried back to the van, hearing her screech turn into a scream when she saw the lobsters. She was in the driver’s seat and revving the engine before I got to the door.

‘I’ll drive! I’ll drive! Get in! The other side—get in! Quiiick!’ She was shrieking, drumming her fists on the wheel. She accelerated, shouting at me all the time, even when we were out of the town and she was braking, ordering me to get out and drive. She didn’t leave the van but crawled across to the

passenger seat while I ran round. It was Maria who frightened me but I had no time to deal with her hysteria then. And I hadn't recognized the lie. I just wanted to get out of there.

So I drove, Jack. I drove back to that terrible smallholding that was less threatening than that hick-joint town, furious with everything and wondering whether home and you wouldn't be easier after all.

Philip's face was like the thunder that had begun to roll along the ridge in the distance at the front of the house. He was angry about the van and about us going to Rushfall but he was pleased with the lobsters and threw them into a pan of water on the stove, slamming the lid on, severing a quivering antenna.

Then it was time to get back to the vegetables, though I had no idea what it was we were cutting and hacking at.

For three days we all worked together on that land: Philip dishing out orders, Maria deliberately silent. On the fourth day, despite the ever-present pall of cloud, it was hotter than ever. I eased my abused limbs out of bed and pulled on some shorts and sandals, and an old T-shirt of yours that I had packed by mistake, and made my way outside to the lavatory. It was an earth closet by the way (there were few compromises there) and the stench was becoming unbearable. I perched myself on the edge of the wooden bench, holding the door open with my foot, watching the silver arcs of lightning fuse into the branches of the pines at the very top of the hill, convinced by the hairs on the back of my neck that Philip was watching me.

The heat was leaden, but by the time I had convinced my bowels to be civilized again, Maria was already back in that bloody garden, cutting and chopping. I sat on the porch for a while, shelling the last few peas Plaiiip had pulled, into a jar. My hangover was competing with the thunder that was now permanently grumbling through the forest and when Philip appeared with his knife I rounded on him.

'What do you do with all this?'

Philip was contemptuous. 'We eat it, Susan.'

It was the child's name. It was the trigger and I was ready to let rip at him anyway: for turning Maria into a drudge, for the joylessness of their existence, for his enormous selfishness, for my god-damn aching back, and of course, my still seething anger over you.

'Isn't it a waste of time? It can't taste better than the stuff you can buy! Why don't you grow something commercial—make a profit, enjoy yourselves? I can't see what you are achieving!'

Maria carried on hacking at the green heads.

That is not the point. We wanted to get away from all that. We wanted a better life.' There was no condescension but he sounded authoritative.

Nevertheless, it was claptrap; not for the usual reasons but I followed the usual logic anyway. 'Better? Is exhausting better?'

All the time he had been straightening up, straining to force himself completely upright. 'It is productive, unlike advertising. Everything we do is productive.'

I waited for a minute, enjoying my own anticipation, then I went for him. 'Oh? Like reading? You read, don't you, Philip? I've seen your books. Writing, singing, playing music, composing—your argument dictates we should give them up. They are not productive in the way you mean!'

I savoured every syllable of sarcasm. Then I watched the knife slip and slice through his hand.

It was one of those flesh-wounds that look worse than they really are but Maria screamed and trampled through the vegetables, grabbing at Philip's bleeding fingers. He made no sound at all and appeared unmoved by Maria's distress and her ineffectual attentions. I swear, to this day, that it was the sight of me watching him that brought his fist across her head.

'Leave it!'

He lumbered away while Maria lay crumpled and breathless in the dust. That was when I started shaking, when the anger left me. I kept hearing the sound of bone hitting bone; imagining the crack that must have crept along her skull. Perhaps it was only a few minutes before Maria struggled to get up and I half carried her to the scrubland where we propped ourselves up against a tree-stump. There was nowhere else to go.

‘Maria, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have provoked him. I’ll go and get some water and a cloth, OK? Maria?’

She was very dazed and she should have seen a doctor. Eventually she said: ‘No. Don’t go. Not yet. Not just yet.’

‘It’s all right, Maria. I’m sure he won’t come back now.’

She coughed, then sighed through a weak grin. ‘You still don’t understand.’

I was sure she must be concussed. ‘Has this happened before, Maria? Has Philip hit you before?’

‘No! No, of course not.’ She was offended, indignant. And, predictably, I did not believe her.

‘You mustn’t blame yourself, you know. It’s not your fault.’ The words—those words, that I had repeated to myself so often like a mantra, reminded me of you. ‘Has he ... has Philip ever been unfaithful to you? Is that why he goes to Rushfall, do you think?’

‘No, no, no! It was me he needed. Nobody else could help him—had wanted to help him—I was the only one. It was me.’

I pulled her hair away from her face. ‘Why did you *come* here, Maria? Perhaps you should move away from this place—start teaching again.’

Two small semicircles of sweat were staining her dress, spreading from under the fleshy flaps that had been her breasts.

‘I loved him, Sue. I would have done anything. Gone anywhere. He was gentle and kind and he listened to me. He listened.’ She turned a mask of sudden resentment towards me and the bitterness poured out. ‘It had been a long time since anyone—any adult—had paid me any attention, real attention—had listened to me.’ She looked away again.

‘We were going to be married. He promised. It didn’t matter to me that he wasn’t famous any more. It wasn’t important to me what had happened to his money. I felt safe with him. He was interested in me—in me, he really was. I wanted him so badly. I would have done anything for him, anything.’

She swivelled round, staring at me, daring me to contradict her. ‘You do know what I’m on about, Sue. Despite your fancy job and clothes and all that show, I know you know what I’m saying.’

And yes, I did know, Jack, of course I did. Back then, you were where I belonged. The poets and the pop stars have it right: It’s you, you, *you*. But I pushed the thought of you away.

‘And did Philip choose to come here? Did you sell your grandmother’s house to get here? Was that it, Maria?’

‘Yes. Philip said he had found an advert somewhere. He wanted to be here more than anything.’

I flapped at some gnats gnawing at us and said, ‘Perhaps if you hadn’t come here ... if you sold this place, *you could find* somewhere else, less depressing, away—’

Maria was looking at her hands, tracing the drying patches of Philip’s blood along the lines. ‘You don’t understand. This is where he has to be.’

I was completely baffled. ‘Why, Maria? Was he born here?’

She stared out at the track, beyond the outer ranks of trees, and was quiet for some time, as if she was listening for the answer. She still looked puzzled when she replied: ‘I don’t know. I—I hadn’t thought about that. I haven’t worked that out.

‘But it was—what I wanted, and I wanted what he wanted. I thought I knew what he wanted—needed—you see, but I was wrong. I got it wrong.’ She was shaking her head. ‘It can’t be any different now. And don’t say I can go back. There’s nothing for me to go back to.’ She laughed, ‘Besides, you shouldn’t play the If Game, Sue, it doesn’t work.’

I understood that there was nothing for her in England, not even me, especially not me. There was nothing I could do to help her. She had made that clear. By the time I had packed she was kneading more dough with her unwashed hands.

‘You won’t see me—us—again. Goodbye, Sue.’

And through all of that I carried you with me, Jack. You were in my head even as I was witnessing Philip’s violence and Maria’s despair.

Someone from Rushfall was waiting to take me back to the airport. A crater-faced youth with a gangling body who seemed more wary of me than I was of him. Once or twice I tried to question him but

he refused to speak, and cynically I guessed that Philip had arranged my chauffeur, and thoroughly drilled him about not conversing with the enemy. The truck was more comfortable than Philip's van and the last conclusion I vaguely formed, before ennui finally muffled my brain, was that I had been ... tolerated.

But it wasn't until yesterday that I understood, fuity*

I think I was tolerated, not because of my friendship with Maria, not even because of Philip, but because of you, Jack.

I am sure I'm not wrong on this. You see, I'm trusting my instinct, Jack and, God knows, where you're concerned it hasn't let me down before.

Anyway, I was almost glad to get home to the turmoil and trauma of you and me. But it had been so long since we had shared anything other than anger, jealousy and resentment, that I never told you about my visit, or why I had left early and of course, you did not ask.

We dragged on, becoming jaded, tardy.

People were surprised I survived when your agent insisted your public image was of a single, high-profile hero and pulled you out of the flat, my flat. I had no choice in the matter but now I'm—not glad, but aware that I was lucky that that decision was made for me. That was what helped me wean myself from you; eventually changing jobs, moving. I shudder to think of how, despite my status, my style, how like Maria I was, perhaps still am.

Oh, there's one more detail that helped me work things out about Philip. The forestry worker discovered two bodies, one large, the other small; he guessed, one male, the other once a woman—both were badly mutilated. When the police went back to the smallholding they found only the woman's corpse, but forensic tests proved the forester wasn't lying and I gather he has now been cleared of suspicion, even though the other body has never been found.

My guess is that Philip was taken back to Rushfall, though the police wouldn't understand that. Trapped in England, little England, he used Maria to get out there, to that huge country where there were others, like him, waiting. The police wouldn't understand that Philip had gone to that place to be near his kin. You see, Jack, I know he was waiting to die.

I asked the police, very obliquely, about the things in the house. Apparently, no musical instruments were found but Maria's museum was still locked up and intact. I've told them (should it come to it) that I don't want anything of hers.

Do you know, it is only now that I have allowed myself to ponder the lies she told me? And it is only now that I realize she was as emotionally manipulative as Philip was intellectually domineering. They had used each other; the only difference was that once out there, Maria had been abandoned. And she knew, in the end. She knew. And still she would not betray him, even to me.

But as you will appreciate only too well, there is simply no point in telling the police that I think Maria killed Philip and then set about butchering herself. It wouldn't make sense to them.

And I've told them very little about you, my love. For although you were wowing West End audiences at the time Maria and Philip died, you never know where those questions might lead.

So there you are, you see? I do love you, still. But I cannot allow myself to love you like that again, Jack. That is what I'm afraid of. I could never betray you. But I could destroy you—us.

And the danger would always be there, because I have never been sure, never could be, of you, your love. Which leaves me with my other puzzle. Why me, Jack? Just as I'm learning to sleep without longing for you, just as I'm learning to wake without thinking of you, why do you want me again, huh? What makes you think I'm the one?

I am not like you, Jack—not one of your kind, and even if I were, well ...

In your letter, you play the If Game, Jack. You say things would have been different for us, if ...

And that really is the point. None of us can go back, not even you. Neither Maria nor Philip had any choices left about the future. Philip's fabulous life was all but over anyway, and Maria had severed herself from anything other than him. Nothing could change that.

We have new lives now and that is why I wanted to tell you about Maria. She was right about the If Game, Jack. You shouldn't play it. I won't.

The Lions In The Desert

David Langford

'... further information on *the* elusive topic of polymorphism is said by some sources *to* be *held* in *the* restricted library of *the* Jasper Trant Bequest *(Oxford,* England).' (Various references, from about 1875 onward.)

'How shall one catch the lions in the desert?' said young Keith Ramsey in his riddling voice, as he poured hot water into the unavoidable instant coffee.

After a week of nights on the job with him, I knew enough to smile guardedly. Serious proposals of expeditions, nets, traps or bait were not required. Despite his round pink face and general air of being about sixteen, Keith was a mathematics D.Phil, (or nearly so) and had already decided to educate me in some of the running jokes of mathematicians. It could be interesting, in an obsessive way. The answers to the riddle were many and manifold.

'I thought of a topological method,' he said. 'See, a lion is topologically equivalent to a doughnut ...'

'What?'

'Well, approximately. A solid with a hole through it—the digestive tract, you know. Now if we translate the desert into four-dimensional space, it becomes possible to knot the lion by a continuous topological deformation, **which would** leave it helpless to escapel'

I have no higher mathematics, but dire puns were allowed, 'parallel lions' and the like. 'Er, geometrically the desert is approximately a plane,' I suggested. 'With the lions on it. Simply hijack the plane, and ...'

He groaned dutifully, and we both drank the awful coffee supplied by the Trant to its loyal security force. Keith had converted his to the usual syrup with four spoonfuls of sugar. After all my care in dosing the sugar-bowl, I was pleased that he took the correct measure.

'Deformation,' he said again, with what might have been a shiver. 'You know, Bob, I wish they hadn't shown us that picture. For me it's night-watchman stuff or the dole, but every time I put on this wretched imitation policeman rig, I can feel things crawling all over my grave.'

'I never feel things like that—I'm too sensible. The original Man Who Could Not Shudder. But I sort of know what you mean. It reminded me of that bit in JekylJ and *Hyde,* if you ever read it ...?'

He looked into the half-drunk coffee and sniffed; then snapped his skinny fingers. 'Oh, ugh, yes. The awful Mr Hyde walking right over the kid in the street. Crunch, crunch, flat against the cobbles. Ta *very* much for reminding me. Yes, I suppose it was like that.'

'They say down at the Welsh Pony that the turnover of guards here is pretty high for a cushy job like this. I have the impression they last about six weeks, on average. Funny, really.'

'Hilarious, mate. Look, what do *you* think happened to that bloke last year?'

'Maybe he opened one of the forbidden books,' I offered. 'A hell of a thing when even a trusty pair like us gets told to keep clear of Area C

A grey man in a grey suit had hired me on behalf of the Trant Trustees. Amazingly little was said about career prospects, union representation or even—the part I was naturally curious about—the precise nature of what the two night guards actually guarded. Books were said to enter into it.

Instead: 'I should warn you, Mr Ames, that certain people are intensely interested in the Trant Bequest. Last year, just outside the ... that is, outside Area C, one of your predecessors was found like this. His colleague was not found at all.' He showed me a photograph without apparently caring to glance at it himself. The spread-eagled remains did not slot handily into anyone's definition of how a corpse should look. Someone had, as Keith would have put it, tried bloody hard to translate him into two-dimensional space.

'How shall one catch the lions in the desert?' he repeated, now badly slurred. The sugar treatment had taken longer than I had expected. The method of the Sieve of Eratosthenes is to make an exhaustive list of all the objects in the desert and to cross off all the ones which on examination prove ... prove not to

be ... To cross off ...' Abandoning thought experiment number umpty-tum, he slumped to the table, head on arms, dribbling slightly over the sleeve of his nice navy-blue uniform. I thought of hauling him across to his bunk, but didn't want to jog him back into wakefulness. With any luck he'd reach the morning with nothing worse than a touch of cramp. I rather liked young Keith: some day, maybe, he'd make a fine maths tutor with his games and jokes. If he could rouse interest in a dull pragmatist like me ...

Certain people are intensely interested in the Jasper Trant Bequest. I am one of them. I slotted my special disk into the sensor-control PC and moved quietly out of the room.

Area A of the big old house on Walton Street is mostly an impressive front hall, crusted with marble, chilled by a patterned quarry-tile floor too good (the Trustees said) to cover up with carpeting. Maggie, the black, shiny and very nearly spherical receptionist, reigns here from nine to five, Monday to Saturday—grumbling about the feeble electric fan-heater, nodding to the daily Trustee delegation, repelling any and all doomed inquiries for a reader's card. I had yet to research the turnover time of Maggie's job. The 'guardroom' and a small, unre-furbished Victorian lavatory complete Area A.

Once upon a time, it was said, Jasper Trant saw something nasty in the woodshed. The people who strayed into the bequest between nine and five had often gathered as much from odd sources—a footnote in Aleister Crowley, a sidelong reference in (of all places) H. P. Lovecraft. They came hoping for secret words of power, the poor fossils. Modern spells are written in bright new esoteric languages like C++ and 80486 Extended Assembler. This was the glamour I'd cast over the real-time monitoring system that logged all movement in Area B.

'It's like something out of fucking Alien,' Keith Ramsey had said the day before. 'All those narrow twisty corridors ... it's designed to make you expect something's going to jump out at you from round the next corner, or chase you through the bits where you can't run because you've got to go sideways.'

Naturally I'd been thinking about it too, and had replied: 'My guess is, it was designed that way to make it hard to bring in heavy cutting equipment. Or a trolley big enough to truck out the library. Assuming there really is a library.'

'Mmm ... or maybe it was just fun to design. Everyone likes mazes, and why not old Trant? He was a maths don, wasn't he? You know there's a general algorithm for solving any maze. No, not just "follow the left-hand wall", that only works without unconnected internal loops. To find the centre as well as getting out again, what you do is ...'

I was fascinated, but Area B isn't quite that complex. It fills almost all the building, winding up, down and around to pass every one of the (barred) windows, and completely enclosing the central volume in its web of stone and iron. You might get lost for a while, but there are no actual dead ends, or only one.

'You wouldn't get planning permission for *that* nowadays,' Keith had said gloomily. 'Bloody indoor folly.'

I moved along the eighteen-inch passageways now. The dull yellow lamps, too feeble and too widely spaced, bred a writhing mass of shadows. (When the gasbrackets were in use, it must have been far worse). Our desultory patrols were set to cover the whole labyrinth, with one exception: the short spur where the sensors clustered thickest. Daily at 10 a.m. the grey-headed Trustee and his two hulking minders went down this forbidden path to—consult? Check? Just pay homage to? '*Feed* the Bequest,' came Keith's remembered voice, now artificially hollow. 'His expensive leather briefcase, Bob, simply has to be packed with slabs of raw meat. Flesh which is ... no longer of any human shape!'

Remembering the photograph of a certain ex-guard, it was possible to feel apprehension. I thought also of my reconnaissance down at the pub off Gloucester Green, where it was almost a standing joke that people didn't wear a Trant guard's navy uniform for long. They did not all suffer freak accidents: that would be absurd. By and large, they merely tended to leave after that average six weeks. You could speculate, if you chose, that something had frightened them. The heavy, regulation torch was a comfort in my hand.

Somewhere the real-time watchdog system dreamed its dreams, fed a soothingly 'normal' pattern of patrol movements by my rogue software, registering nothing at all in the dense minefield of IR and ultrasonic pickups that guarded the way to Area C.

Left, right, left, and there in the torchlight was the door: big, grim, banded with iron, deep-set in its

massive frame, with a lock the size of a VCR unit. I was half inclined to turn back at that point, because it was a joke. Modern burglars flip open those jumbo Victorian lever-and-ward efforts almost without breaking step. As part of my personal quest, I'd entered other restricted libraries (including sections of the BM and Bodleian known to very few) and had never seen such a lumbering apology for a lock. But after all, and hearteningly, there was the maze and the electronic network ... something here was surely worth guarding.

'How shall one catch the lions in the desert?' I quoted to myself as I felt for the lock-spring, remembering one of Keith's sillier answers: the hunter builds a cage, locks himself securely in, and performs an inversion transformation so that he is considered to be outside while all the lions are inside, along with the desert, the earth, the universe ... Perhaps Jasper Trant had liked mathematical jokes. He was here at just about the right time to have known Lewis Carroll, another of Keith's heroes whom I must look up some day.

I was here because of a rumour that Trant's preoccupations, Trant's bequest, had a personal connection with—well—myself.

Click and *Click* again. The door swung ponderously inward, and the first torchlit glimpse swept away half my uncertainties. Area C, where the movement sensors did not extend, was indeed a library—a forty-foot square room with wooden bookcases scattered along its iron walls. Ceiling and floor were likewise made of, or lined with, dull iron. A vault.

All this profusion was a disappointment. I had flicked through libraries before. The literature of the occult is stupendously boring and repetitive ... it may contain many small secrets but I had very much hoped that dead Jasper Trant knew one big secret.

Musty smells: old books, old iron and a thin reek of what might have been oil. Keeping close to the wall, I moved cautiously clockwise to the first bookcase. An average turnover time of six weeks. Easing out a random volume with a cracked calf spine, I shone the torch on its title-page to find what blasting, forbidden knowledge ...

The Principles of Moral and Political Philofophy by WiiJiam *Paley, D. D.: The Twelfth Edition, corrected by The Author. Vol* I. MDCCXCJX. Crammed with edifying stuff about Chriftianity.

Jesus Christ.

The next one was called *The Abominations of Modern Society*. These included swearing, 'leprous newspapers' and 'the dissipations of the ballroom', and the author didn't approve of them at all. Then another Volume I of Paley ... sermons ... more sermons ... numbing ranks of sermons ... a *third* copy of the identical Paley tract.

The Bequest library was a fake. Not even a volume of dear old Ovid's Metamorphoses.

On the other hand, where does the wise man hide a pebble? On the beach. Where does the wise man hide a leaf ...?

Perhaps. In the centre of the far wall, opposite the door, my circle of torchlight found a cleared space and a long metal desk or table. On the steel surface, an old-fashioned blotting-pad; on the pad, a book like a ledger that lay invitingly open. Cautiously, cautiously, now. There was something almost too tempting about ...

What I felt was minute but inexplicable. I might have put it down to nerves, but I never suffer from nerves. A sinking feeling? I backed rapidly away, and my boot-heel snagged on something, a slight step in the floor. The floor had been smooth and even. Now the torch-beam showed bad news: a large rectangle of iron had sunk noiselessly, with the metal table and myself on it, just less than half an inch into the floor. I thought hydraulics, whipped around instantly and blurred towards the door faster than anyone I have ever met could have managed. Too late.

It was all very ingenious. Victorian technology, for God's sake. The 3-D maze construction of Area B must have concealed any amount of dead space for tanks, conduits and machinery. Now, tall vertical panels within the deep door-frame had hinged open on either side to show iron under the old wood, and oiled steel bars moved silkily out and across, barring the way. By the time I reached the door, the closing space was too narrow: I could have thrust myself a little way in, only to have neat cylinders punched out of me. The heavy rods from the left finished gliding into their revealed sockets at the right. And that was

that.

The space between the bars was about four unaccommodating inches. I thought hard. I still knew one big thing, but was it needed? 'Well, I was just curious,' I imagined myself saying with a slight whine to Grey Suit in the morning. 'It's a fair cop. I don't suppose, ha ha, there's any chance you could keep me on? No? Oh well, that's the luck of the game,' and bye-bye to the Jasper Trant Bequest. Everyone gets curious after a while. Practically anybody would end up overcome with curiosity after an average time of, say, six weeks. Thus the staff turnover. Thus ...

No, I don't pretend to be an expert on human psycho—

logy, but surely sooner or later the Trant would end up hiring someone too loyal or too dull to take a peep, and they'd duly hold down the job for years on end.

For the sake of form I tested the bars—immovable—and went back to learn what I might from the disastrous ledger. It was all blank sheets except for where it had lain open. That page carried a few lines of faded blue-black ink, in the sort of clerkly hand you might expect from Bob Cratchit.

Jasper Trant says in his Last Will and Testament that once, as a magistrate of the Oxford court, he saw a shape no man could believe, a thing that crawled from a cell window where no man might pass and left nought behind. All his life he puzzled over this and sought a proof. Here is his bequest.

Here was what bequest? Was this slender snatch of gossip the root of all those rumours about Trant's secret lore of shape-shifters and changelings? Something was missing. Or perhaps I had not thought it through. The path seemed clear: wait till morning, own up like a man, and walk out of the building for ever. No problem.

It was then that I looked properly at the steel table which supported the book. It was dreadfully like a medical examination couch. Two huge minders always accompanied the Trustee on his morning visit to Area C. Suddenly I was sure that no errant security guard was allowed to say goodbye without being carefully prodded and probed. Which would not do at all.

The Trant Bequest had circulated its own damned rumours, and fed the fires by refusing any access to its worthless collection. Bait.

How shall one catch the lions in the desert? There was one answer that Keith repeated with a tiny sneer because it wasn't pure maths but mathematical physics.

I know even less physics than maths, but swiftly picked up the jeering tone ... protective colouration. The theoretical physicist's answer: build a securely locked cage in the centre of the desert. Wave mechanics says there is always a tiny but non-zero probability that any particular wave/particle, including a lion, might be in the cage. Wait.

With the long patience of the dead, Jasper Trant had waited.

Shit, I thought, seeing another facet. After six weeks on average, if they hadn't given way to curiosity, each successive Trant guard would be sacked on some excuse or another, to make way for the testing of the next in line. No one who wanted to infiltrate the Bequest would have to wait for long.

I sighed. Four inches between the bars. This would take time and not be at all comfortable. I could not stay around for a possible medical examination: every instinct screamed against it, and I trust my instincts. The Trant Bequest had nothing more to tell me about myself.

So. Off with that smart uniform. The dull, painful trance of change, writhing to and fro on that death-cold iron floor, in the dark. Bones working as in a dream. Muscle masses shifting, joints dislocating, rewriting the map of myself. The ribs are one thing; the pelvic and cranial sutures are very much harder work to part and rejoin. It went on and on, until at length I was a grotesque flat parody of the Bob Ames who had entered an eternity before. Even so, it would be a long hard wriggle. By now I must look like ...

Well, specifically, like the dead and flattened guard in that photograph. Could he have been—? No, it wouldn't make sense, there was a real autopsy and everything. But I did examine the bars more closely, in fear of some hidden trap. Then I stood back and glimpsed the trap too obvious to be noticed.

Jasper Trant himself had seen something slip from an Oxford gaol cell, through the bars, no doubt. Bars, no doubt, set just as far apart as those now blocking the Area C door. There was another subtlety here. If this was a snare for people like myself, set by his long-departed curiosity, why the loophole?

I could almost hear Keith's voice, the eager voice of the mathematician: Didn't you read the mention of 'proof in the book? Wasn't I telling you last night about the austere kind of maths reasoning we call an existence proof? Trant wasn't collecting for a zoo ... he was a mathematician and all his Trustees want is the existence proof. Which they'd certainly have, if after walking in there and triggering the hydraulics you got out through that impossible gap. Don't you see?

I saw, and was profoundly grateful to Keith for the patterns of reasoning he'd shown me. It was heady stuff, this reason. I couldn't stay and I couldn't go. After the long years' trek from the orphanage in search of more of my kind, whatever kind that might be, I did not propose the betrayal of confirming to these ... others ... that my kind existed. Which left me caught, like the lion in the desert who ('Ever heard the psychologist's method, Keith?') builds around him, deduction by deduction, the bars of his own intangible cage.

Yes, I owe a great deal to young Keith. Education is a wonderful thing; he taught me how to be a lion. And at the last I remembered one more thing that he'd explained to me, sentences falling over each other in his enthusiasm ... the technique of reducing a difficulty to a problem that has already been solved. All else then follows. Q.E.D.

It was solved, I think, last year.

Caught in this exact dilemma, what did my anonymous cousin do then? He could escape the cage, but at the cost of leaving the Trustees their proof. I salute him for his splendid piece of misdirection. Then as now, there was a second guard, no doubt asleep back in the control room. No live man could have slipped through those bars after springing the trap, but a dead man, topologically equivalent but stamped and trampled and flattened ... In the morning, outside the barred doorway of Area C, there lay an object that might just have been—that to any rational mind must have been—hauled and crushed with brutal force through one narrow space. Hauled from outside the cage. A bizarre and suspicious circumstance, but not one which quite proved anything.

So logic points the way. I'm sorry to be doing this, Keith. I'm truly grateful for all our conversations, and will try to make quite sure that you feel no pain.

The Missing Martian

Marcus L Rowland

That morning the sky was the colour of cotton candy, pink with white streaks. I had a feeling we might be due for a bad storm. As usual I stashed my car in a garage a few blocks from my office, and rode the rest of the way by streetcar. I've made some enemies, and leaving my car outside the office all day might just have put a little too much temptation in someone's way.

Clients weren't forming a line to see me, so I propped my feet on the waste-paper basket and settled down with the *San Francisco Examiner*, which had another boring story about the stupid things people did during the War *of the Worlds* panic. You'd think that after a week they'd be tired of it. Two hours later I was working on the crossword when the door opened.

'Mr Ginsberg?'

I dropped the paper into the basket, sat up straight, and tried to look more alert. She was blonde, about twenty-five, attractive in a quiet way but not a real looker. Well-dressed, but dressed for work, not a night at the opera, with medium heels and a small plain purse, topped with one of those expensive little hats with a silly scrap of lace veil. No rings. She had good legs, and the shoes were expensive. Her complexion should have been peaches and cream, but she had a deep suntan. Her tone of voice said Vassar or some other fancy college, the scent said Paris.

'What does it say on the door, sister?'

'Lou Ginsberg, Confidential Investigations.'

Then who do you think I am?'

'For all I know you could be the janitor, and I don't have business with a janitor.'

'I'm Ginsberg. What can I do for you?'

She came in and shut the door. ‘Prove it.’

‘Prove what?’

‘Prove you’re Ginsberg.’

I dug out my wallet, and showed her my investigator’s licence.

‘Good enough. I wasn’t expecting a fake.’

Then why ask?’ I wasn’t sure if I should be amused or insulted.

The Ginsberg I’m looking for is supposed to be a professional. I don’t expect cheap sarcasm from a professional.’ Ouch. Game, set, and match to blondie.

‘OK, sister, you win. I’m Ginsberg, who are you and what can I do for you?’

She sat down in the good chair I keep for visitors, angling her legs so that I didn’t see anything interesting except some reasonable ankles. ‘My name isn’t relevant at this stage. I represent someone who wants to talk to you, but can’t come to your office.’

‘Can’t?’

‘He thinks that he may be followed.’

‘And what do you think? Is he nuts, or is his wife on his trail?’

‘Neither. I’m sorry, I’m not prepared to answer questions. This is an extremely delicate matter. We must be sure that you won’t talk to the police or reporters, or describe this case in your memoirs.’

‘I don’t do that sort of thing. Bums like that guy Spade who writes for *Black Mask,* or that geek Goodwin who shills for Wolfe and puts every detail in his god—

damned memoirs, they give this business a bad name. It says “confidential” on the door, and confidential is what you’re buying. Even the cops have given up on trying to make me talk about my clients.’ That last was a little exaggerated, because only the week before Detective Monroe of San Francisco’s finest had been in the office making a nuisance of himself, but I meant the rest of it.

‘Good. Very good. Are you prepared to spend an hour or so out of your office, and earn fifty dollars even if you decide not to take the case? Two hundred a day if you take it?’

‘I’m like the Boy Scouts. I’m always prepared.’ Business was lousy. People didn’t even seem to be getting divorced any more, and I had no special reason to stay in when I could be out earning fifty bucks. For two hundred a day I’d think seriously about going to Outer Mongolia.

‘Splendid.’ She pulled a small roll of bills out of her bag, peeled off five tens, and put them on my desk, then gave me a small card. ‘Be at this address at one, and ask for John Sloan. Show him this card. He’ll take you to meet your client.’

The address on the card was one of the largest banks in the city; the only other thing on it was Box J131, handwritten in black ink. She got up and headed for the door.

‘Wait a minute. How do I know this isn’t some sort of hoax?’

‘What have you got to lose?’ She slipped out, and closed the door behind her. I waited thirty seconds then followed, intending to see where she went and find out a little more, but all I saw was the indicator on the elevator, going down. By the time I reached the lobby she was long gone.

Sloan looked like he worked in a bank; if that isn’t much of a description, it’s because I can’t honestly remember much about him. Short, thin, and balding, I think. It’s only in the movies that detectives have perfect memories, and he really wasn’t important enough to matter. He was obviously expecting me.

He led me down stairs that had more marble facing than a mausoleum, past the vault, then through a door marked ‘Employees Only’ and up two flights to some extremely fancy offices. Eventually he showed me to a door that had the name of the chairman of the bank on it, held it open while I entered, then bowed himself out so inconspicuously that I hardly knew he was gone. Most of my attention was on the man on the other side of the office.

‘Good afternoon.’

‘Oh. Good afternoon, Judge Dell. What’s this about?’

She’d said it was delicate, and she hadn’t been kidding. Dell was one of the top judges in the city; in the country, for that matter. Everyone knew he was headed for the Supreme Court. He looked about forty, was pushing fifty-five, and I’d never heard anyone even hint that he could be bought. I’d testified in

his court once or twice when I was on the force. He was as impressive up close as he was in court. A massive bull of a man, the type who looks like he can walk through walls if he really puts his mind to it. His handshake was surprisingly gentle.

'Please, take a seat. Have you eaten?'

'Now you mention it, no.'

'There are some sandwiches here. Nothing kosher, I'm afraid.' He gestured to a trolley, loaded with trays of food.

That's all right, I'm not religious.' I took some ham and pastrami on rye. 'Why all the food?'

'I'm here for a working lunch with the directors of a charity for the dependants of bank guards. I've arranged for us to spend a few minutes alone before the meeting begins.'

'What's this about, Judge?'

'Hmmmph.' He looked at me for a few seconds. I felt like a dishonest accountant when the auditors start looking through his books. 'Mr Ginsberg, I suppose I must trust you.'

'It's usually a good start.'

'My son has been kidnapped.'

'How old is he?'

'Eighteen months.'

'Jesus. What the hell do you need me for? Every cop in the city must be looking for him, not to mention the FBI.'

'I haven't told them.'

I choked on the sandwich I was biting, spluttered a little, then got my mouth closed and my mind back into gear. 'Isn't that a little ... umm ... unusual, Judge? Considering your position, I mean.'

'The circumstances are unusual. He isn't being held for ransom, but for the release of a prisoner, Claude R Worlsman. You may know the name.'

'The shrink.'

'The murderer. If he's convicted, of course.'

I knew the name, all right. Worlsman was scum, a crooked psychologist who'd earned big bucks getting more criminals off the hook than any five attorneys. Then he got really greedy, and hit on the idea of blackmailing some of his former clients. One of them was Mark Lee, a psycho who really should have been locked away in the funny farm. Lee took it badly, and went after Worlsman with an axe, but Worlsman got him first, with a syringe full of strychnine. The cops stopped

Worlsman's Buick, and found the body wrapped in an old blanket, with Worlsman's fingerprints all over the syringe.

'I thought it was a foregone conclusion.'

'Any judge can disrupt a case. For example, the defence will undoubtedly protest the evidence of the officer who found the body. He was actually after another Buick and stopped the wrong car.'

'I thought that accidental discoveries were admissible as evidence. Umm ... Weeks versus the United States, back before the big war, I think. That case only ruled out deliberate illegal searches.' I felt proud for remembering that one, maybe the Police Academy really had taught me something.

'You know your law.' It was a compliment, coming from him. 'Even so, Worlsman's lawyer will undoubtedly object. Normally I wouldn't hesitate to accept the evidence, but the District Attorney would have serious problems if I ruled it inadmissible. There are other points at which I could intervene.'

'So who's got your boy? It can't be Worlsman himself, he's in prison, and I never heard he had any partners.'

'Worlsman has apparently threatened to ... ah ... "spill the beans" concerning some of his patients if he's convicted. This would appear to be their response.'

He got out a piece of paper, with a few lines of neat typing, double-spaced with no corrections.

WE HAVE YOUR BOY, JUDGE. HE'S UGLY, BUT WE'RE SURE YOU WANT HIM BACK. IF WORLSMAN ISN'T FREED THE KID GETS IT. IF YOU GO TO THE COPS, DELAY THE CASE, OR DO ANYTHING THAT ISN'T PART OF YOUR NORMAL ROUTINE, WE'LL SEND YOU SOME TOES TO PROVE WE MEAN BUSINESS. DON'T CROSS US, WE ARE WATCHING AND WILL KNOW IF YOU GO TO THE POLICE.

The typeface looked like a new Remington, but I could have been wrong.

'It isn't a bluff. I'm fairly sure that I was followed here this morning. A black Packard has been

parked across the road since I arrived.'

'Great. When did you notice your son was missing? And why the insult?'

'His nurse left him in a play-pen in the garden just before nine this morning, and came indoors to get a cup of coffee. When she went out again he was gone. The note was left on the sand.'

'How long has this nurse worked for you, Judge?' Naturally I was thinking that she had to have been planted by the mob.

'Nurse Jukes has worked for us since my daughter was born in 1913. She's nearly sixty, and has taken this very badly.' So much for that idea.

'Any new employees?'

'No.'

'What about old ones?'

'We have a chauffeur, a cook, a maid, and my secretary. All of them have worked for us at least ten years.'

'Fired anyone recently?'

'No. My household hasn't changed in many years.'

'Any other family members live with you? Your wife, of course, and you mentioned a daughter, but are there any others?'

'None.'

'That was your secretary that came to see me this morning, was it?'

'No, my daughter. Rowena lives on the campus at Stamford, and it seemed safer for her to make the initial contact.'

So blondie was Rowena Dell. I'd never have guessed, though maybe there was a slight family resemblance.

'Was she at home when the kid was snatched?'

'No. I called her and told her what to do.'

'How do you know they weren't tapping your phone?'

'We spoke in Latin. If they understood that they're better educated than any criminals I've ever encountered.'

'Oh. Anyway, write down the names and addresses of anyone who might be familiar with the layout of the house, and their connection to you.'

He wrote a few lines on a big legal pad.

'Any other kids?'

'None living. One other son, stillborn, in 1925.'

'Sorry. You never know when these things might be relevant. Now, you didn't answer part of my original question. About your kid's looks.'

'Is it relevant?'

'I think that there's something you're not telling me, and that's no way to do business.'

He hesitated for a while, then looked down at the floor. 'Richard is deformed. He suffers from a condition called acromegaly. His bones are growing too quickly, and it affects his looks. You'll appreciate that this is another reason why I would prefer to recover him before there is any publicity.'

'How bad is it?'

'At the moment his face looks ...' he hesitated '... rather odd. His jaws, teeth, and cheek-bones protrude, and he seems to find it hard to talk. Our doctor hopes that surgery and hormone treatments will eventually correct the condition, but he must grow more before surgery is possible. Fortunately it doesn't appear to be painful.'

'Hormone treatment? You mean something like insulin? Does he have to take it regularly?'

'Something of the sort. And no, he doesn't need regular treatment at the moment.'

'I'm sorry, Judge, I didn't mean to upset you. By the way, put your doctor's name on there, and anyone else that might have seen the kid in connection with the treatment.'

'As suspects? I must admit that I hadn't thought of them. It's very unlikely, my doctor is an extremely old friend.' He added three more names.

‘Who knows? Look, Judge, I think you ought to go to the police, no matter how much publicity you get. The kidnappers are probably bluffing, and you need more help than I can give you.’

‘And if they’re not bluffing?’

‘If not, they’ll probably kill the boy even if you let Worlsman go.’

He winced. ‘I’m aware of the possibilities, but there is no question of my letting Worlsman go, even if I wanted to. You must understand that the kidnapping disqualifies me from trying this case, regardless of the result. Fortunately the case has been adjourned because his attorney has influenza. On Monday we resume. I’ll carry on until the jury are ready to deliberate, if it will keep my son alive, but at that point I’ll have to declare a mistrial, explain the circumstances, and call in the police and FBI. I’ve spent most of my life serving the law, and I am not prepared to compromise it now.’

‘And if your son dies?’

‘I’m hoping that you can prevent that.’

I thought it over for a couple of minutes, then said, ‘You just hired yourself a detective.’

I left the office, and wondered what to do for a lead. If Dell’s house was watched I didn’t dare go near the place. Ditto the people on the list. If one of them had fingered the kid for the mob, they’d soon pass on the word that I was on the case.

There was one possibility. Dell thought that he’d been followed. If he was right, there might be a way to use the tail. I found Sloan and got him to show me out through the staff entrance, then crossed the road and strolled back towards the Packard. I casually glanced in as I passed it; the driver was a ratty little guy with pebble glasses. I had an idea that I’d seen him when I was a cop, but I couldn’t put a name to him. There was someone else in the back, but his face was turned away from me. I walked on to the corner, found a call-box, and asked a friend to check out Dell’s doctor. It was a long shot, and nothing ever came of it, apart from an extra item on my list of expenses.

I looked down the road. The Packard was still there. I made another call, and told the police that someone was casing the bank. I hung up when they asked my name, and hopped a cab to the local precinct house. Halfway there two police cars went by, headed towards the bank.

Detective Monroe wasn’t delighted to see me, but for once I had something to give him; the address of a guy who was fencing hot cars near the docks. I’d been saving the information for a rainy day. While we were talking, the patrol cars returned with the pair from the bank, now handcuffed together.

‘I know that bozo from somewhere,’ I said, as casually as I could manage. Monroe isn’t Einstein, but he really does have the sort of memory dime-novel detectives dream about. There was no way he could resist the challenge.

‘Which one?’

‘Pebble glasses, looks like a rat.’

‘Easy. Wallace Rosen.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘Drum Rosen, the door-to-door salesman.’

‘Oh. Umm ... the guy who used to sell encyclopaedias on a five-dollar deposit, then change the cheques to read fifty before he banked them?’

That’s the one. Really small-time. We nabbed him when the regional supervisor of the Fuller Brush Company spotted him as a phoney.’

‘Yeah, I think I saw him at the line-up. What about his friend?’

‘Porky Pig.’

‘You’re kidding.’ The guy was as thin as a rake.

‘Spelled P-I-G-G. Real name Harold. He was in prison when you were on the force, serving a ten-year stretch for armed robbery. Got out last year. Hangs out with the Cream mob. I’d heard he and Rosen were buddies, they shared a cell or something.’

Waldo Cream was a bad bastard, who ran one of the largest vice rings outside Chinatown. Four years ago Worlsman helped to get him off a charge of aggravated assault, one of the last cases I worked on before I left the force. The memory still gives me nightmares.

‘What have they been doing?’

‘Why are you so interested?’ As I said, Monroe isn’t an Einstein, but he usually gets there in the end.

‘It never hurts to know what’s going on.’

He strolled over and exchanged a few words with the arresting officer, then came back to me. ‘Someone spotted them casing a bank, and Porky was packing a concealed weapon. That’s a parole violation, maybe more if we can prove they planned to rob the bank.’

‘Good work. One of these days they’ll promote you to Lieutenant.’

‘Fat chance.’

I chatted a minute or two longer, then glanced at my watch and said, ‘I’ve got to run, a client’s coming to see me this afternoon. See you around.’

He watched me leave, and I could feel the little wheels turning in his head, ever so slowly. Fortunately he likes crooks even less than he likes me, and there wasn’t a chance that he’d tell them that I’d been interested. The danger was that he’d sweat them so hard that they told him what was going on, then all hell would break loose. With any luck one of Cream’s lawyers would spring them first.

When I left the precinct house it really was starting to rain. I pulled down the brim of my hat, turned up the collar of my coat, and looked for a cab. Before one came along, a battered old Ford stopped by the kerb and the door swung open. ‘Get in, I’ll give you a lift.’

It was Rowena Dell.

‘Where to?’

‘Just drive, and tell me what you want.’

She put the car in gear, and drove off a little jerkily, then said, ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing? They said they’d kill my brother if the police interfered.’

Dell’s daughter worried me. When I saw her that morning she’d acted way too cool for someone whose little brother was kidnapped. Now she was apparently much more concerned, but I wasn’t sure why. Dell wasn’t a millionaire, so far as I knew, but with an address on Russian Hill he had to have money. From what he told me she’d been an only child most of her life, but now there was competition for her parents’ affection. To add insult to injury, the kid wasn’t even pretty.

‘How did you find me?’

‘I knew when you’d be with my father, and waited to see you leave. I wasn’t expecting you to go straight to the police.’

She’d followed me five blocks without me noticing. That implied training, or considerable natural talent.

‘Don’t worry about the police. I haven’t told them anything, and I’ve got a lead on the man behind the kidnapping.’

‘Oh! Who is it?’

‘Why should I tell you?’

‘But he’s my brother ...’

‘That doesn’t mean I have to trust you. For all I know, your boyfriend is holding him. You certainly didn’t seem too worried about it this morning. Whoever snatched the kid had inside help.’

The note must have been typed in advance, and they knew what he looked like when they wrote it.

‘I don’t have a boyfriend. Look, he’s my brother, but apart from that I don’t really have a lot in common with a child that age. I’ve been in Egypt most of the last year, so I haven’t even seen him much. I’ll be upset if something happens to him, but being emotional won’t help to get him back.’

‘I can think of reasons why you might want a brother out of the way. Inheritance, for example.’

‘Don’t be stupid. My father’s will leaves fixed bequests to members of the family, and the rest to charity. I wouldn’t gain anything if Richard died.’

That killed that idea. I tried another.

‘What were you doing in Egypt?’

‘Archaeology. That’s what I teach. There was a big German dig near Cairo a while ago, but they abandoned the site for some reason, and left a terrible mess. We were helping to record the inscriptions before the sand buried them again.’

‘We?’

‘Oh, I went out with a team from Marshall College in Connecticut. One of their professors visited the dig while the Germans were there, and suggested th^ expedition.’

There was nothing for me there. I never could see the attraction in digging up the past, though come to think of it that’s what a detective mostly does. I decided to try another tack.

‘All right, let’s assume that you’re clean. Who would you say was their inside man in your house? Someone must have described the family’s routine, and told them when they’d be able to snatch the kid.’

Her knuckles went white. ‘I can’t believe that anyone would do that. Everyone loves him.’

‘What about your mother? How did she react when she found out her kid was a freak?’

She slammed on the brakes, and slapped me as soon as we screeched to a halt. I was too busy fending off the windshield to stop her.

‘You despicable ... you revolting ...’ She tried to slap me again, but I got my arm up first. Just as well, she packed quite a punch.

‘Just asking. Some parents would hate a kid like that.’

‘Not my mother. She loves him, truly she does.’

‘When I was on the force most of the killings I saw were in the family. You have to know someone well to hate them.’

‘That’s a horrible thing to say.’

‘Yeah. It’s a horrible world, sister, and there are some horrible people running around in it. When you feel like driving again, turn left at the lights.’

She started the car again, and soon had us moving through the traffic. By now the rain was heavy, and I had to peer past the wipers to watch where we were going.

‘Where are we going?’

‘You’re going to drop me on the next block, then head back to Stamford. I’m going to visit a cripple and ask a few questions.’

‘A cripple?’

‘Just stop here.’

This is a convent.’

I climbed out of the car. They call it a hospice. Scram, you won’t be welcome here.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m going to see a girl who hasn’t got much of a face. The bastard who did it might be the one that has your brother.’

‘I’m not afraid to see her.’

‘Don’t be stupid. You’re no Garbo, but you aren’t that bad. How do you think she’d feel if she saw you?’

‘I’ll wait out here.’

‘No you won’t. If she helps me I’ll want to move fast, and I won’t be able to protect you.’

‘I can take care of myself.’

‘Nuts. I have enough to worry about without pushing you out of the way of bullets. Go home.’

She seemed to be ready to argue, but I slammed the door and headed for the entrance. I half expected her to come after me, but she put the car into gear and drove off. I would have been happier if she’d reversed first, because she was headed the wrong way for Stamford.

Sophie used to be a beautiful girl, before she made the mistake of holding out on Cream. After he was finished with her she had one arm, one eye, no face, and legs broken so badly she’d never walk again. You had to listen closely because he cut her tongue to stop her talking.

‘Ginsberg. Long time, no see.’

‘How are you, Sophie?’

‘How you think, asshole? Got any booze?’

I took a look around. There weren’t any nurses in view, so I slipped her my hip-flask. She took a quick **snort, coughed, and** pushed it away.

‘Can’t take that like I used to. What you want?’

‘You remember Worlsman?’

‘Do I ever. Creep tried put me away for saying was Cream that cut me up. Hear he’s in the slammer.’

‘Maybe. He’s got some powerful friends. One of them is trying to help him beat the rap.’

‘Which one?’

‘Who do you think?’

‘Bastard. Hope they rots in Hell, both them.’

‘Maybe you can help me send them there.’

‘How?’

‘Cream has a lot of girls in his string, and some of them must get pregnant occasionally. What does he do when that happens?’

‘What you think? There plenty doctors in city to fix a girl for fifty bucks. Cream takes it out their hides.’

‘What if it’s too far gone for an abortion? Did that ever happen?’

‘Now again. Give me another shot.’

She took another long gulp from the flask.

‘So what did he do?’

‘Sell kid, maybe cuts momma if she pretty no more.’

‘What do you mean, sell the kid?’

‘He know someone runs baby farm. Take kids, pretty them up, sell to folks that want a child. Money in it, ‘less you gets careless, lets them die of measles or something.’

That had to be it. Someone in that racket wouldn’t think twice about hiding a child. After all, that was half their business.

‘Got a name for me? An address?’

‘What’s worth?’

‘What do you want?’

‘When Cream in jail, an’ Worlsman, you gets me a big dose horse, or some sort pills, ‘nough to see me dead. I hide it till you long gone, keep you out trouble.’

‘Are you sure that’s what you want?’

‘Yeah. Only way I’ll stop them nuns prayin’ over me.’

‘Done. As soon as the bastards are out of the way, I’ll pay you another call.’

‘OK. Doctor usually Dan Mosler. Not real doctor, but he good. Fix girls real quick, no trouble.’

‘Mosler like the locks?’

‘That him.’

‘Where do I find him?’

‘Dempsey Bar and Grill, Market Street.’

‘What about the baby farm?’

That I don’know. Mosler was front man for that. He take care of things.’

‘OK, you’ve earned your fee.’

‘Fuckin’ right. See you soon, sugar, an don’ forget my gift.’

I left a twenty-dollar bill in the collecting box in the lobby, said goodbye to a couple of nuns, and headed out into the rain.

I thought that Rowena might be waiting outside to follow me, but the only woman around was a stranger, one hell of a lot more attractive, who was looking at flowers outside a nearby shop. Maybe a relative of a patient. I gave her the eye, and she sniffed and went inside while I went on my way.

I was soaked by the time I got to Dempsey’s Bar and Grill, and the barman tutted as I dripped on to his nice clean carpet. It wasn’t quite the dive I’d expected; it was only a few years old, and the decor ran heavily to padded leather and chrome. The prices were chrome-plated too, or maybe they used a little platinum. There weren’t many customers; a couple of smart businessmen in a corner, talking percentages, and a solitary drinker working his way through his third or fourth boiler-maker. I ordered a Scotch, helped myself to a few nuts, and asked the barman if Mosler was around.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know the name, sir.’ He had a fake English accent, which I suppose was meant to

give the place a little class.

'Mosler. Dan Mosler, I heard he's always in here.' I tried to sound just a little drunk, without making it obvious.

'I can't recall anyone of that name, sir.'

'Look, I have the name from a friend. Dan Mosler, like the locks.'

'I really don't know ... oh, I believe that there's a Doctor Mosler.'

That's the one. He drinks here, does he?'

'No, I'm afraid he doesn't, sir.'

'Then how come you know his name?'

'If I'm right, he has an office on the fourth floor.'

'Oh. Maybe I got it wrong, I thought they said the bar.'

'Above it, perhaps? Would you care for another drink?'

'No, I've gotta see the doctor.' I picked up my hat and headed for the door.

Naturally he was right. The bar occupied part of the ground floor of a five-storey block; if I'd kept my eyes open I would have seen the lobby entrance next to the bar. The notice-board said that D. Mosler DO had an office on the fifth floor, not the fourth. I couldn't remember what DO meant, but I decided to take a chance and go upstairs anyway.

There were a half-dozen diplomas from the American Osteopathic Association on the wall of his waiting-room, which was all the help I needed. Doctor of Osteopathy. His receptionist should have been a looker, with peroxide-blonde hair and a build like Jean Harlow, but she was eating a doughnut when I came in, and I got an idea that her figure owed more to Maidenform than nature. She asked me the usual questions, and I gave her a fake name and address, and said I had a persistent pain in the small of my back. I was vague about where it hurt. Doctors love that sort of thing, they can spend hours poking around, then charge you even if they don't find anything wrong. While we were talking I noticed a covered typewriter behind the desk; I couldn't see the trademark, but it looked about the right size for a Remington. She asked me to wait while the doctor finished with another patient, so I spent a few minutes reading some medical magazines. You wouldn't believe some of the things that can go wrong with people's bones. It was educational, and some of it was very surprising.

After twenty minutes or so I heard a door click, and the doctor buzzed her on an intercom. She told me that he'd finished with his patient, and showed me into his surgery.

Mosler couldn't have been more than thirty, and looked like the sort of doctor you see on the cover of those medical romance magazines; the kind where the guy has a stethoscope round his neck, a mirror strapped to his head, and a nurse in his arms. Handsome, and then some.

He had a lot of equipment, including a sterilizer and other stuff I wouldn't have expected to see outside of a hospital. Maybe that was normal for an osteopath, but it was the sort of stuff that would fit in well with a sideline as an abortionist.

He asked me the same questions, and I gave him more of the same lies until his receptionist shut the door. Then I decided to take a chance, and said, 'Get rid of her, Doc, Cream sent me over to see you, and he doesn't want any witnesses.' I opened a button on my coat, and let him see the butt of the revolver.

'Cream?' He licked his lips nervously. He knew the name all right.

'Come on, Doc, cut the crap. Cream's upset, and if you mess him about, things'll get one hell of a lot worse.'

He looked around, a little wide-eyed, then pressed the button on the intercom and said, Take an early afternoon, Monica. I'll see to the rest of my appointments myself.'

'Are you sure, Doctor?' the intercom said.

'Quite sure.'

'Don't forget Mrs Jones at four. I'll see you tomorrow.'

I heard movements outside, then a door closing.

That's smart, Doc. Now, Cream wants me to get the kid. Seems he's a little unhappy with your arrangements. Someone got too talkative.'

‘Who ratted? Bates? Chalker?’ No pretence that he didn’t know what I meant.

‘I’m just a messenger, Doc. I don’t know the whole situation, I just know I’m supposed to get the kid.’

‘Maybe it’s just as well. Let me get my coat. Have you got a car?’

I thought fast. ‘No, Cream said you’d drive me.’

‘Oh. Well, we’d better get going if I’m to be back by four.’ It was just after three now, so the kid couldn’t be too far away.

He led the way out of a door that opened directly on to the hall. I followed and something heavy and hard hit me behind the ear.

‘... bastard bit a lump out of my hand when I tried to make him eat his mush. I’m telling you, if the Judge doesn’t play ball I’ll ice the little brat myself.’

‘Shh. I think he’s coming round, Gladys,’ said Mosler, I kept my eyes shut, and pretended I was still out.

‘Who cares? Kill him now, Cream won’t mind.’ I recognized the voice of Mosler’s receptionist. Calling her

Monica must have been some sort of code, and of course she’d been waiting in the hall when we came out.

‘Cream will want to have his fun.’ Something poked into my eye, and I pulled my head back before he put it out.

‘Ah, I thought you were awake.’

We were in some sort of cellar, and I was wedged into a corner with my hands behind my back. It felt like they were cuffed to a pipe. Naturally my gun was gone; I could see it in Mosler’s belt. I wondered if the cuffs were the pair I usually keep clipped to my belt, or the pair from my pocket. There was a difference, but I couldn’t find out while Mosler was watching.

There was a big machine to one side of the room, that looked like a boiler for a hot-water system. It made a deep throbbing noise, and I felt fairly sure that it would drown out any screams or shouts. The only other features of the room were a couple of rickety chairs and a heavy-looking steel door in the far wall. I wanted to throw up, but managed to keep the impulse under control. My head felt like she’d slugged me with a ball-peen hammer, but it was probably just a sap. With any luck I didn’t have a skull-fracture.

‘Where are we?’

‘Not far from my office, Mr Ginsberg. Mr Cream was very pleased to hear that you were ... available.’

That the Dell boy I heard you talking about? You must be out of your mind to snatch a judge’s kid.’

He kicked me in the stomach, not particularly hard, but enough to make me puke over his nice shiny shoes. They were dry shoes, until I spoiled them, which either meant that he’d worn galoshes, or that we were in a basement of the office building. He kicked me again, much harder, then said, ‘It wasn’t my idea, but in principle I agree with it. Doctor Worlsman is a fellow professional, and it would be unfortunate if he were executed. If the Judge cooperates the child will be released unharmed, if not I’m sure that we can find a use for him. As dog food, perhaps.’ He was a real sicko. Gladys wasn’t turning a hair, and I guessed that she was as deep into the racket as Mosler. Sophie hadn’t said he had an assistant, but I’d forgotten to ask her.

‘If you let me go, I can get you off the hook.’

He didn’t buy it, of course. ‘If we let you go you can undoubtedly find enough evidence to interest the police, then I’m afraid we would probably be facing several decades in prison. Killing you should be a lot safer.’

‘Wonderful, add murder to kidnapping.’

‘Don’t say any more, Danny. Cream might want to leave him alive, and we don’t want him talking.’

‘Don’t be silly. Even if Cream does leave him alive, he won’t be in any condition to talk.’

I thought of Sophie, and I felt sick again.

Mosler said, ‘Check the child again, and do try to get him to eat something. For the moment we

really must keep him healthy.'

She grumbled, and went out, giving me an uninspiring glimpse of a passage with rough brick walls. I strained to listen for any sign of the boy, but there was nothing but the rumble of the boiler. Mosler turned one of the chairs to face me. I gave the cuffs a quick tug while his back was turned; they felt much too solid for comfort, but I couldn't give them a real test while Mosler was in the room.

He sat down, put the gun on his lap, groped in his pocket, and stuck some gum into his mouth.

'Any chance of a piece of your gum?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'How about a drink of water?'

'Later, perhaps.'

'Come on, my mouth tastes like a cat's sandbox.'

'Tut, what a shame.'

Gladys backed into the room, with a nasty-looking little automatic in her hand. She said, 'Look, we've got company.' She stepped away from the doorway.

Mosler said, 'Do come in, my dear,' and pointed his own gun at the entrance.

Rowena Dell stepped into the cellar.

'I thought I told you to go home.'

'I'm sorry, Ginsberg, I thought I might be able to help, so I followed you here.'

'Amateurs. That's all I need.' My professional pride was hurt. She'd been able to follow me twice without me noticing. I wondered how she'd done it, and how she'd found her way to the basement.

Mosler laughed, and said, 'What a touching scene.' He tossed a pair of handcuffs on to the floor. Mine, I guessed—I hoped. 'Pick these up, very slowly, then move over to the other corner.'

Rowena did as she was told. 'Now put one cuff on your right wrist.' Eventually she was cuffed to the other pipe, with her hands behind her back.

'Who is she, Ginsberg?'

'My secretary.'

'How did she get into the cellar?'

Gladys looked up from the handbag she was examining, and said, 'She bust the lock with a tyre-iron. I took it off her before I brought her in. By the way, the ID says she's Dell's other kid.'

Mosler said, 'You shouldn't tell lies, Ginsberg, your nose will grow like Pinocchio's.'

Gladys laughed, and said, 'Cream will love her. Maybe he'll want to keep her. A judge's daughter ought to fetch big bucks, especially if he lets people hurt her a little.'

Rowena said, 'Better let us go, the police will be here any minute.'

'Really? And what did you tell them?'

'Everything.'

I twisted my wrists, and strained at the cuffs again. Still no result, though I couldn't use my full strength without them noticing me moving.

'Indeed? Well, then we'd better kill your brother, hadn't we? After all, that was what we said we'd do if the police became involved.'

I said, 'She's lying.'

'How would you know, Ginsberg?'

'If she was telling the truth she would have waited for the cops to get here. Besides, I didn't see any public phones in this building, and she can't have had time to use a call-box.'

'That may be true. Gladys, go up to the office, and see if you can see any signs of police activity. Bolt the cellar door behind you, and put the padlock on. I'll use the other way out if it's necessary to leave. Call down and let me know the situation.'

That meant there was a telephone somewhere down here. Gladys went out. This time I thought I heard a noise like a kid crying, but the pitch was higher than I would have expected from a child that age. Then I remembered that there was supposed to be something wrong with his face, which might affect his voice.

'If she has called the police I'll find the time to make you feel very, very sorry before I leave.'

Five minutes or so passed, then I heard a bell ring; not the steady rhythm of a public phone, but an irregular jingle. Probably an old hand-cranked bell. 'Perhaps I'd better get it, I think you're both a little tied up.' Mosler tittered, and went off down the passage.

I gave him twenty seconds, while I made a last try at pulling my cuffs apart, then whispered: They're trick cuffs. Pull on them, as hard as you can.' She nodded, and did as she was told. For a few seconds nothing happened, then there was a loud click, and a broken link flicked across the room and pinged off the boiler. Mosler was still talking, though I couldn't hear what he was saying. 'Get over here, I've got the key for this pair in my shoe.'

She started to get up, then crouched again and put her hands behind her back. Smart girl. Mosler came back into the room.

'Well, it appears that you're right, Ginsberg, Miss Dell doesn't seem to have called the police. Gladys says that Mr Cream has just called, and will be arriving shortly. We'll have a little party, I think.'

'You won't laugh when my father is through with you. You won't laugh at all,' said Rowena.

'Miss Dell, I'm pleased to find you in such good spirits. So many young women in your position would faint or start to scream. Your faith in your father is touching; mistaken, since you do seem to be my prisoner, but touching.'

'Let me go. I'll pay you.'

'I don't see any money, and I'm sure that you'd try to kick me if I were foolish enough to come any closer.'

'It's under my sweater. A gold crucifix with diamonds.'

'Is it, indeed. We'll have to take that little trinket at some point, there's no point in leaving it with you. Later, perhaps.'

I decided that it was time for a diversion, and pretended that I was trying to break out of my cuffs. Mosler stepped towards me. 'If you don't stop I'll shoot *your bails* off, Mr Ginsberg.' Behind him Rowena silently rose, picked up the chair, and smashed it over his head. I hardly noticed, because the chain of my cuffs broke and I was busy falling on to my face.

By the time I got up again Rowena was making goo-goo noises at the kid, in a poky little nursery down at the other end of the corridor. I checked Mosler. He wasn't dead, but the side of his skull was smashed. If he ever woke up it would be a miracle.

I took a peek at Rowena and the kid. His father was right about his looks, any circus would have paid a fortune to have him as their dog-faced boy. Ugly, and then some.

The rest of this story doesn't take long to tell.

We didn't find Mosler's other way out, and we didn't have the tools to open the door from the inside, but I did have my gun. When Gladys and Cream arrived fifteen minutes later we were ready for them. I was through playing games, and had an old score to settle for Sophie. They came in looking the wrong way; I shot Cream before they realized that we'd escaped, tried to make Gladys surrender, and ended up having to shoot her twice before she dropped her gun. Cream and Mosler were dead by the time the police answered my call, Gladys was still in a wheelchair when she came to trial.

I expected to spend a few nights in jail, while the police decided whether or not they believed my story, but Judge Dell packed a lot of clout. They found four other children buried in the cellar, so no one was too concerned about anything that we'd done to get the kid back.

The Press was there in force by the time the police were finished with us, and I couldn't stop them getting a few shots of Rowena and her brother. He looked a lot more normal by daylight, no worse than any other screaming kid with a dozen flash bulbs exploding in his face. It was mostly me they wanted to talk to, which suited the Dells just fine. I kept quiet about some details that weren't really relevant to the kidnapping, and we went back to the Judge's place for supper. Afterwards I told him the whole story.

'... I think I was wrong about an inside man. I took a look through Cream's coat while we were waiting for the police, and found a notebook with a timetable of your family's movements. There were pictures of your garden taken from above the street. There's a telephone pole in the road. Was anyone working up there in the last few days?'

The Judge's wife thought for a moment. 'Yes. We had a lot of trouble with bad lines last week, and

there was someone up there two or three times.'

'He was probably listening to your calls too. The police will want a full description, though I'd guess it was just one of Cream's hired hands. The police have pulled in a few already.'

'Undoubtedly. Well, Mr Ginsberg, you've done a wonderful job, and I think that you've earned a substantial bonus ...' The Judge reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet.

I said, There's something that's still bothering me.'

'What's that?' asked the Judge.

1 got up and walked over to the fireplace, and stood with my back to it. I wasn't feeling cold, I just wanted to be sure that no one was behind me.

'Years ago a cop I knew was chained with his own cuffs, then they set fire to him with gasoline. I remembered that, and I didn't want it happening to me, so when I quit the force I bought a pair of fake magician's cuSis. I keep them on my belt, where it's easy to find them, and a real pair in one of my pockets. Mosler cuffed me as soon as they knocked me out, and he used the first pair he found. The trick pair. I just wasn't pulling the right way at first. Rowena was wearing the real pair.' I fished the broken link out of my pocket, and tossed it across to her. Toughened steel. You bent it like it was a paper-clip.'

'A poor weld, perhaps?' suggested the Judge. He looked a lot warier. So did everyone else in the room.

'Not a chance. Then there's the door she broke, and the way she smashed Mosler's skull. Normal women aren't that strong.'

'I get a lot of exercise,' she said. I ignored it.

'Your son's face was another clue. The shape of his bones was odd, and it seemed to change once Rowena calmed him.'

'Acromegaly. I told you this afternoon.'

'You did, Judge, but Mosler had some magazines in his waiting-room. Medical magazines about bone diseases. One of them had an article about acromegaly. It messes up the faces of adults, but children don't have that problem. They just grow extra tall.'

'I see.'

'Put it all together, and the answer I'm getting is rather odd.'

The Judge said, 'What answer would that be?' He rose to his feet, and poured a drink.

'Rowena is stronger than any human has a right to be. Your son's face changes shape, unless one of you tells him to stop it. I didn't see Rowena following me, but I did notice a woman outside the hospice when I headed for Mosler's place. Her coat looked a lot like Rowena's, only the face was different. Maybe the kid isn't the only one that can change his face. You gave me that story about acromegaly, and it's nonsense. You're reluctant to have the police or the Press investigate your affairs. Any other judge would have gone straight to the FBI if his kid was snatched, and that makes me wonder what else they'd find if they really started looking at you. I can't think of a rational explanation that covers all the facts, so I've settled for one that's downright silly. I think you're Martians, or something of the sort.'

'Martians?' His face was blank, completely impassive.

'Like *The War of the Worlds?'* said Rowena.

'No. If I thought that my gun wouldn't be in its holster. You work for a living, you love your children, and you don't seem to be doing much harm to anyone who doesn't deserve it. You're stronger than us, and you can change your looks, but I don't think that you're super-powerful. If you were, you wouldn't have needed a detective.'

The Judge's wife laughed. 'A peaceful invasion. What an odd idea.'

'I don't think you're invading. Maybe you just like living here, and want things nice, or maybe you're out to civilize us a little. I don't care. You've put away scum that needed it badly, and you gave me the chance to ice Cream. There's no way that Worlsman will get off now, even with another judge running the case, because everyone knows who set the ball rolling. I'm not complaining, and I couldn't prove anything if I wanted to.'

'I'm pleased to hear that ...' said the Judge, relaxing a little,'... but it leaves me wondering what you

propose to do with this peculiar theory?'

'Nothing. I told you when you hired me, I don't rat on my clients. I just want you to know that your stories need work. Think about it, because I'm not the only *detective in* the world, and some of them are as good as me, and much better equipped. Give me my fee, and that bonus you mentioned, and think about what I've said. And if you ever need a detective, find someone else. You lied to me, and that's something I don't like.'

'I'm sorry you feel that way, Ginsberg. Honourable men are hard to find.' Dell gave me seven hundred and fifty dollars, which was rather more than I'd expected, and shook my hand. His grip was still surprisingly gentle.

Rowena offered to show me out. In the hall she stopped and said, 'Wait a minute,' then took my hands. Her face started to writhe. I wanted to get free, but I might just as well have tried to break out of my handcuffs. The real pair. When her face settled down, a half-minute or so later, she was a dead ringer for Garbo. She pulled me close and kissed me, and I tasted blood as her teeth nipped my lip. I thought of vampires, but she pulled away after a few seconds.

'Now that's a neat trick,' I said.

Her face writhed again, and her looks returned to normal, but she kept hold of my hands. 'You'd be amazed, but perhaps I'd better not demonstrate. Thank you for helping to find my brother. He means a lot to all of us.'

'It's my job.'

She smiled coldly. 'My parents are too relieved to worry about anything you might do. I'm not quite so sentimental, although I feel some gratitude. I've just shown you that I can be anyone, Ginsberg. A woman you meet in a bar, or one you pass on the street. Think about it, and think about how easily I can get to you if I want to. I know your voice, I know your scent, now I even know what you taste like. If I ever think you're becoming a threat, I'll find you wherever you hide, and then you're dead meat.'

'I'll bear it in mind.'

'See that you do. Goodnight.'

She let me go and opened the door, and I walked out into the drive. Monroe was still there, talking to a couple of his men, and I talked him into giving me a ride back to my car. Along the way I started to feel shaky, and decided that I wanted a change of scenery.

Worlsman never did get sentenced: he rocked the boat too badly, and someone made sure that he wouldn't talk—the hard way. They found his body in his cell, a couple of days before they sent Gladys down for twenty. A week later I said goodbye to Sophie, and moved to a little town in Nevada, where a small detective agency was advertising for a new partner.

I never saw any of that family again, but I did keep tabs on them through the papers. Dell never made the Supreme Court; they don't like judges with odd reputations, and his use of a private detective raised just enough doubts to keep him out of contention. He retired last year. Rowena still teaches archaeology. She publishes a book every two or three years, but I don't know enough to say if they are any good. So far as I know, Richard Dell is still in school.

As for me, life in Las Vegas wasn't as quiet as I'd hoped. But that's another story.

The Deconstruction Of The Known World

Elizabeth M Young

The jam sandwich came hurtling down the street as if driven by a poltergeist. It did a pirouette around a microdot roundabout and jerked to a halt. The policemen flowed out and stood around helplessly, like flies round a broken ice-cream. The siren kept screaming and passers-by, having slowed down to stare, covered their ears in protest. What was happening? No one seemed to know. Slowly, the steady drift towards the underground station was resumed. The day was darkening. The siren suddenly died away and the moment of disruption passed. It had just started to snow and one could hear all the city clocks striking five.

When *will you pay me, said the bells of Old Bailey?*

It was at that moment that Bobby Fever approached the professor.

'Got a light, sir? Please?'

'As it happens I don't smoke. But—look here—'

Instantly they both recoiled. In all that busy street there were only two non-humans and each recognized the other's alien status. Apart from that they could not have been more different. For a start they were on opposite sides of the law. Bobby Fever was very well-known down at West End Central. Dr Marvin Vonder-hyde was known to nobody. Bobby recovered first and shrugged. What the hell. He smiled his sweet, professional smile. The professor was thinking fast and distractedly. (What's the harm, what's the harm ... a cup of tea, a cup of tea ...) 'Look here, you're frozen. Let's get you warmed up.'

Bobby Fever allowed himself to be led through the thickening snow towards the warm, melting lights of a Burger King. He could always spot a closet case, human or not.

Both Bobby and Dr Marvin spent their lives, as they saw it, slumming amongst humans, although for very different reasons. If they were disconcerted by this unexpected encounter with one of their own kind they were not going to show it. However, even had they kept to their own species, their paths were unlikely to have crossed. Their families were at opposite ends of the Weerde social scale. Really, of course, anything might have happened to Bobby who lived on the wild side. He may have wondered briefly why an adult male like this guy could not satisfy his desires amongst his own people without trolling through the rush-hour crowds on the Embankment (a closet case, right?) but he wasn't going to dwell on it. His focus was the wallet not the psyche. Leave that one to the shrinks. However, for Dr Marvin, this was the first time he had ever initiated a social encounter—of any kind. And, as he limped and puffed up the hill, casting sidelong glances at Bobby through snow-crusted lashes, he was already having doubts.

Snow *had* fallen, snow on snow, sno-o-o-w ... on snow ... Marvin could remember another white city by a river. Bremen. Before the war. In the bleak mid-winter ... long, long ago. The Vonderhydes, along with a million other refugee undesirables had been driven across a blighted, frozen Europe by the Ubermensch, the Nazi devils. They had escaped on one of the last Save the

Children Fund boats out of Holland, with Marvin, an anxious, pale-haired little scrap, tucked beneath his mother's greatcoat, next to her heart. It was so cold her pet parrot froze during the crossing and fell like a stone into the sea. His brothers and sisters had all been caught and sent to the camps. The remains of the family blew like soiled rags, or fallen leaves, into North Kensington where they collapsed. They were a notoriously decayed branch of the tribe anyway and the war had finished them.

It had been left to Marvin alone to surmount the general despair and go out into the world again. He was a success.

Bobby, looking across at the plump, fair man in the baggy tweed suit, would never have guessed it. With hair-oil cascading stickily down both sides of his face and eyes darting around like nervous fish behind his enormous, round redwood-framed glasses, he was a joke.

'And so,' Marvin retained precise European pronunciation. 'What is it that you do, young man?'

Bobby smiled emptily. 'Oh, this and that.' He gathered his energy for the pitch. 'It's hard these days. I'm like, you know, homeless.'

'Yes, yes. It is a tragedy, this government.' Marvin looked deep into his coffee-cup. He cleared his throat. 'Perhaps I can help?'

Marvin was now in a panic. The boy—so young, so pitiful. *So beautiful so* seductive. He needed help, that was clear. He *needed love; someone strong, someone* gentle. What were his family thinking of, letting him wander around like this? Marvin could give him some money and send him on his way. That was enough, surely. Marvin is singing Lieder, songs *of love and loss and yearning. Bobby is drifting* past in a swan-shaped *gondola. They are eating strawberries together on a carpet of* warm grass; the heavens open, *cherubs* upend silver conches and *shower them with* pearls and *white marshmallows. Laughing, they* run hand-in-hand *through a rainstorm, Bobby spills a bouquet of wild flowers as* Marvin draws him *into an* urgent embrace. *They* stand beneath *pastel* umbrellas *at a* garden *party,* Bobby is in a *white suit, he* has an *erection, there is a crash of thunder, they are on a turbo-charged fuel-injected bed* above *Rome,* Marvin is tearing *at Bobby's thin jeans with his teeth,*

the whole world smells of piss—

'Why are you singing?'

'Was I? I am distracted. I have terrible problems—at work.' Marvin stood up. His legs were shaking. A sensation of doom overcame him as he gasped out, 'Shall we—would you like to come to my house?' He fumbled for his asthma inhaler.

Bobby uncoiled himself and stood over Marvin. The harsh lights had drained away his colour. His eyes were crystalline, silver-white. 'I have to see someone first. I—owe them some money.'

'I'll come with you.' Resigned, Marvin followed him out to the pavement, his eyes fixed on the tight buttocks outlined by ageing, clinging denim.

If Marvin had known Bobby's surname he would have understood much more. It was the Weerde equivalent of Lowell and Cabot in America or Howard in England. Few families have ever named themselves so unequivocally after their greatest triumphs as Bobby's arrogant relatives. The Rickets and the Clapps, the Dengues and the Shingles—the branches of the family were spread all over the world and together, comprised a true aristocracy. One could trace Bobby's ancestry back through the centuries. His French mother, Bernadine Peste was particularly high-born and closely related to the first known family of the tribe, the still patriarchal Cankers. The whole tribe were purists. Throughout known history they had all steadfastly opposed humankind and done everything they could to spread suffering and disease throughout their ranks. They isolated viruses, they supported right-wing dictators and left-wing tyrants, they poured money into the pockets of capitalist despoil-ers. They had helped exterminate some of Marvin's own family who'd just, unfortunately, gone down with the flood in the Nazi holocaust.

No true Canker ever let the small-scale pathos of their own kind detract from their long-term aim which was to smash every last filthy little human biped off the face of the planet and establish Weerde hegemony. The twentieth century had been a battle of Titans. Penicillin had been met with the atom bomb, contraception with sexually transmitted disease. The entire Canker tribe was at its most powerful and influential, privy to all the secrets and conspiracies that wreathe Weerde politics at the very highest level. The individual families, worldwide, were all enormously rich and relentlessly well-organized, and somehow, overall, depressingly reminiscent of Mormons.

Bobby's own family, the Fevers, had been in London since the seventeenth century and were exceptionally fine, upstanding members of the proud Canker tribe. On reaching adolescence everyone had to undertake a lengthy spell of community service before retiring to research and breeding. Bobby had to choose between resettling mental patients in local communities or joining the 'J[ust] Say Yes' faction of the vast 'War on Humans: Drugs Division'. Detesting social *workers, he became a* drug dealer. All too soon he was hanging out with clients, night-clubbing in Brixton, wandering around like a zombie, seemingly forgetful of everything he'd ever been taught. Priceless bibelots and Clichy paperweights started vanishing from his mother's bedroom. He gave one little cousin, Joey Warbles, some E and he was sick all over a pure-bred Sharpei. Another, Mario Rubella, he sexually abused in a greenhouse, amongst the sun-dried tomatoes. By then, Bobby was down and out as far as the Fevers were concerned. He was excommunicated, denounced and disinherited.

Now, leaning back in the cab as it flew down Queens-way, Bobby lit a Gauloise. He imagined his mother standing next to the great swagged drapes in her cool, grey drawing-room, gazing out mindlessly at the snow whirling through Campden Hill Square. *1 did everything for that hoy*, everything. He had my heart's *hlood. Come hack,* mon petit. His great-aunt Agnes comes in and starts playing some moumful Chopin on the Bosendor-fer. His mother cries. Bobby glanced over at Dr Marvin, wheezing and sucking on his inhaler in the corner of the seat. Another day, another dollar. It's too late to stop now.

By the time they climbed the steps to the tall, narrow house near Kensal Green cemetery the wind had whipped up a blizzard. Chunks of snow and ice were pouring down from broken guttering. Bobby noticed that the house was unlit and several of the windows broken and stuffed with newspaper. He drew back, looking anxiously up and down the deserted street. This guy couldn't have any money after all. In fact—and Bobby started to turn around—he was probably a maniac. Marvin laid a hot hand on his arm. 'It's OK. Really. It's just my family. A little eccentric, you know?'

As soon as they stepped into the hall Bobby did know. A familiar smell assailed him, remembered

from childhood visits to primitive relatives. Fur and feathers, blood, meat and straw. And beneath it, the rancid scent of age and unreconstructed feral beings. The professor's family were just ... like—antique. He smiled, even as he banged into a brimming dustbin in the gloom. Glass and cans clattered out and the hall filled with the angry screeching of awakened birds and the rush of their wings. Bobby untangled a small owl from his hair as he squelched forward on what seemed like layers of damp cardboard and newspaper.

'My mother—she is fond of birds, offered Marvin, holding open a door at the end of the corridor. Bobby felt his way past tallboys and wardrobes into what was evidently a kitchen. At least it was lit, by small blue gas jets. Marvin was filling a tin kettle at a flat scullery sink.

'Have some Ovaltine?' he said.

'Don't you have a drink?' Several huge hounds had risen from their nest around a paraffin heater and were all nosing damply at Bobby's crotch. A row of parakeets were perched above an Aga range and their droppings hissed like eggs on its surface. Marvin produced a bottle—nt cobwebs, no ancient seals. Thank Christ, thought Bobby.

'This place—it's a fuckin' fire-trap.'

'Better than the streets, surely?'

Bobby cast his eyes upwards. If this jerk didn't realize that someone who looked like Bobby never had to sleep on any streets—well, he just didn't know anything.

'It's a dump. A tip. They'll turn you out—for hygiene or something.'

Bobby was secretly amused. So this was how the other half of his people lived. The lower classes.

'I grant you it's unmodernized but we own it.'

'Psycho City,' said Bobby. 'You do have a bathroom?'

Dr Marvin wrenched open a back door, allowing a furious blast of snow into the kitchen. 'In the yard.' He wrestled it shut again. 'No way, Jose!' Bobby unzipped his fly and turned towards the sink.

Marvin modestly averted his eyes and started feeding Cheezits to the small owl that was perched on the back of a rocking-chair. 'Groo,' it said, several times while Bobby peed.

'Well, hey—you must have a stylish little boudoir tucked away somewhere.' Marvin flushed. 'I have a room, yes.'

Marvin was very proud of his room, reclaimed from the general decrepitude, but he wasn't at all sure, now, that he wanted to expose it to someone who seemed less wounded and vulnerable, more smart-assed and high-toned by the minute. Sighing, he put the glasses, bottles and Cheezits on a blackened silver tray and added a candle-sconce to light the back stairs. Bobby Fever glided behind him, parting a grey sea of dog.

They were unlikely to meet any of the Vonderhyde relatives. Most of them had long regressed into saurian prehistory, rooting and snuffling in their dreams of countless aeons, behind padlocked doors. Marvin fed them from the pet-shop stall in Shepherd's Bush market. Only his mother, Alice, could still pass in public but she was a heavy drinker and rarely seen. Marvin worried incessantly. He knew that he alone, respectable and rotund, and his status as Associated Professor, stood between his monstrously decayed family and bureaucracy, publicity, razing and ruin. He paid his poll tax, locked the doors and hoped for the best. Repairs were impossible; he couldn't get into many of the rooms as some of his uncles no longer recognized him. Alice too was aggressive and determined to re-create the comforting conditions of her peasant childhood.

Marvin had seen few rooms outside his home, so his was modelled on his university office. The bare brickwork, wooden shelves and metal waste-basket gave him a warm, familiar sense of academic cut-backs. There was a typewriter on the desk, surrounded by books and small hurricane lanterns. A Calor-gas heater breathed hot air from a corner. A poster for Young Guns II was sellotaped to the wall above a rough shelf containing a huge vase of canna lilies and another lantern. The monastic bed with its tartan cover was obscured by a fur rug of softly intertwined cats.

Marvin lifted a limp Siamese and sat on the bed, the cat on his knees. Bobby stood by the unsteady mantelshelf, shaking the damp out of his dark hair which shone black and auburn in the lamp's steady light. He took off his leather jacket and dropped it to the floor. To Marvin he seemed clothed in heavenly

light, his white cotton shirt and thin black tie giving him the look of a depraved schoolboy or a raped angel. Bobby turned around and ran his fingers along the shelf of books. 'Barthes, Baudrillard, Derrida ...' he read aloud, with difficulty. 'Who are they?' Marvin was gazing, stunned, his mouth hanging open, at the frail shoulder-blades and narrow hips.

'Oh—just ... my work.' He tried to pour some drinks, his hands shaking, the bottle rattling against the glasses. Bobby moved to the bed and laid out the spoon and cup of water he'd brought from the kitchen on an adjacent crate. 'You don't mind if I get comfortable do you?' The boy-whore's phrases came easily to him. Marvin sprang up as if electrocuted.

'No. No. Do what you like.' He knocked back a tumblerful of vodka. A gust of wind shook the house. He could hear Aiice singing a sea shanty, faintly, next dooY. Marvin paced around in anguish.

'Bobby ... Bobby—there is something I must tell you.'

Bobby looked bored. Well, yes, perhaps it was a slightly embarrassing situation but what was there to say? Sex is sex, right? The prof had said he'd a good job—he must have plenty salted away. He certainly didn't spend it on upkeep. There couldn't be a cash problem. So—why the fuss? Why didn't he just get on with it? Bobby went on heating the powder and water in his spoon with a Bic lighter.

Marvin clenched his sweaty hands together. He unclenched them. He leaned forward awkwardly, hugging himself tightly. How could he possibly confide in a stranger? How could he explain that he was not only a virgin but that he—he couldn't even trust the boy! He might do anything—out of malice, or carelessness! He might talk. Word would get around. The authorities would descend on the family. Raze the house to the ground. Publicity, terror. Oh dear, oh dear, oh God, oh God. Marvin had a position to maintain. Careless children cost lives. On the other hand how could Marvin refuse what was being so casually offered?

I'll have him and then I'll kill him. The atavistic whisper from his unconscious horrified Marvin.

Bobby put the spoon down carefully and looked up at Marvin, smiling slightly.

'I don't care what your problems are. I couldn't give a shit.' He started to suck up the liquid in the spoon through a cigarette filter into the syringe. 'Don't you even want to know my name? It's Bobby Fever.'

A Fever! A Canker! An infamy! A scion of the loathsome, power-mad renegades who would put them all in jeopardy. But Marvin, turning away to hide his expression, could not prevent a rush of hysterical joy. He would—*he would*—bestow his precious virginity upon this aristocratic execration. He would subjugate him—subjugate them all. They despised his kind, his family. He was poor but he was honest and he would fuck Bobby till he cried tears of blood, till he begged for mercy, till his rectum split. *He would get his own back.* Marvin began to tear at his tie.

'Don't thump about.' Bobby's own tie was around his arm and in his mouth and he spoke indistinctly, his pale eyes focused on the crook of his arm. Marvin unbuttoned more soberly. Yes indeed, he had heard a rumour about this little *momser*. An abomination no doubt—but so pretty. He must calm himself. He spoke again.

'You must try and understand about my family. And about me. You've noticed I have a limp?'

'Yeah. I guess. Quasi—Quasimo—what's his name ...?'

Marvin turned around and saw Bobby lying on the bed as if his figure was lit by a sudden flash of sheet lightning. The body lay outstretched like a sacrificial victim with one long, black-denimed leg crooked. His hair fell like feathers over the rough pillow and his beautiful eyes were half closed. His skin seemed pearl-ized in the soft light. He looked so frail. One thin hand fumbled at his fly, trying unsuccessfully to unzip it. The cats were grumbling on the floor. Marvin was overcome with compassion and tenderness. His anger and tension vanished. Bobby would understand everything. He was a gentle, sympathetic boy. Marvin started to undress.

Bobby watched him covertly, through his lashes. His own family had access to every means, medical and financial, with which to perfect their human incarnations. He had never seen a naked primitive before.

Such shape-changing abilities as Marvin might have possessed were no match for the raging chaos of his genes. Bobby had absolutely no understanding of what a seriously decayed family could produce. The recessive genetics, the cross-breeding, the generations of incest—Marvin's DNA resembled psychedelic

macrame. Outwardly, in his voluminous tweeds, he could pass. Under them, Vonderhyde had been strapped and tortured into a facsimile of a human being. It was a real DIY job, the work of a born bodger. Marvin shucked his jacket and shirt revealing women's foundation garments of uncertain age and provenance, designed for the fuller figure. They were a grubby pink and insanely restricting. Marvin loosened the strings.

This corset was my grandma's. I like to keep nice, you know. And decent. You never know when you might get run over.' The flesh gushed out in sweaty rolls. Marvin appeared to have several breasts as well as a vestigial limb, a small, pink, nubby arm and hand extending from his belly button.

'Good foundation wear is what sets a woman—I mean a person—apart.' Bobby covered his mouth and groped in his shirt pocket for his Ray Bans.

From the waist down Marvin wore the bottom half of a black rubber diving-suit, specially customized. He had to cut it open with scissors and more flesh roiled out, nearly reaching the floor fore and aft. The pendulous buttocks were rough and scurfy, the texture of a cow's tongue, covered in nodules and sprouting clumps of hair. The heavy stench of long-unwashed orifices filled the room. The layers of the lower belly completely obscured the sexual organs and were thickly matted with coarse, damped-down hair.

Marvin's genetic inheritance was so scrambled that it had never really decided how many individuals Marvin was, or of what gender, or even what species. All his energy went into maintaining a passable public face while the directionless maelstrom of his genes churned away beneath the tweeds. Marvin's legs were the hind-limbs of a beast. Beneath the rubber they had been crudely splinted and clamped with screws and vices so that they were tortured out of shape, enabling Marvin to walk upright. The bones were winched backwards to breaking point and he walked—or rather limped—with considerable pain.

Bobby looked on as Marvin loosened the screws and took off his shoes to reveal cramped pads with horns of yellowed nail and dropped gratefully to all fours. Marvin wallowed about on the floor using his vestigial flipper to root around in his belly looking for the sexual parts which seemed to have got lost somewhere in all that incontinent flesh.

Bobby closed his eyes. He didn't know quite what to do. He could hardly refuse one of his own kind, particularly someone so pathetic, so desperate. God knows, he'd never been particular before and Marvin obviously had enough money with which to indulge him. But—*really* ...

Marvin seemed to have shed his inhibitions and overcome his shame. He seethed over to the bed.

'Phew,' he said. It's nice to relax. I never usually undress in winter, just loosen the screws when I get home.'

To Bobby, Marvin's horn-rimmed glasses looked incongruous atop the rolling mountains of flesh some of which had started to decay during its long confinement. He nearly laughed.

'Why don't *you* relax, Bobby? Regress a **bit?'**

'I can't. I've forgotten how.'

Degenerate.

Marvin looked worriedly at him. 'I've trusted you, **Bobby. I've trusted you** with everything. **You can't know** how **I** feel but—oh, be good to me.'

He presented, a little shyly, a split-head penis, pink as wax, bubbling with anticipatory lubrication. He angled it towards Bobby's delicate mouth.

Two grammes,' said Bobby. 'No—half an ounce.'

'Anything.' Anything.

Buried in that noisome groin, Bobby thought hard about his drugs, until he gagged on a ropy syrup of professional come.

Turn over.' Bobby felt several eager hands slide his jeans over his hips. Pinned to the bed by the great *membrum virile* he listened hopelessly to the shrieking of the wind and to someone chanting, far away, the day's racing results.

Finally, sated, Marvin enveloped him in a damp, oc-topoid embrace. Bobby couldn't see his head but it spoke.

'I love you.'

... When the professor was safely strapped up again, he reverted to a look of academic respectability although he was in a wildly expansive mood.

That was absolute bliss. I have never known anything like it. How was it for you?'

Total bliss.'

'Now, Bobby, I have many plans for you. I have so much to teach you, so much to tell you. Now that we have found each other, you will never leave me, will you? I know I'm ugly—no one knows it better than me, but ... You think I'm ugly, don't you? Don't you?'

'Of course not.' Bobby flashed a curious, mocking glance and Marvin shrank.

Inwardly, however, Bobby sighed. Work, work, hustle. Still, things could be worse. He could wheedle a lot of money out of the guy—what did he *do* with his salary? And, anyway, he had nowhere else to go. Richer men were not always so accommodating about drug use. Sexually, Marvin was terminal, he was *the* pits but as Bobby's taste ran to pre-adolescents, so was everyone else with money. He would stay—for a while. Bobby had the infinitely flexible nature of the natural courtesan and the whore's ability to divine unspoken needs. This wasn't really about sex anyway. And Marvin was of course—in his grotesque way—a kindred spirit. Fundamentally, they were the same. Indeed he could even be useful in reconciling Bobby with his family. Low-life had rather palled by now.

And so their strange life began. Marvin was on sabbatical and typed an academic paper all day. He bought Bobby a Walkman and a battery television and a Ralph Lauren green and white silk robe. He bought ice-cream and liqueurs and smoked duck with kiwi fruit and creme *fraiche* and take-away *tapas* and white chocolate. Bobby's contacts came to the door and hesitantly handed in their packages. Bobby was in heaven. He lived on the bed, stoned out of his mind on coke and smack, playing with the kittens. Marvin could rarely be bothered to take off his undergarments. It was a major undertaking and usually he was content to kiss and cuddle which was fine with Bobby. He'd got used to the old guy anyway. Marvin told him a little of his background.

'You know, ever since universities were established in medieval times, there have been some of us placed there to monitor the work and to ensure that no one was engaged in Dark practices. We had some close calls—Descartes, Dee. My family were at Heidelberg for centuries and now—I continue the tradition in Gower ***Street .. /***

However, Bobby dimly perceived that Marvin's mood was blackening as he sweated over his paper. One evening, he spun around in his swivel chair and announced: 'Bobby—I need your help. I now know that the Dark has been summoned by academics all over the world. We are in peril.'

'Nonsense. What have novels and poetry to do with the Dark?'

Marvin looked strained. Spittle dribbled down his chin. 'You see me as an Associate Professor of Literature. *Enfin*. But—I am a critical theorist. I know whereof I speak. You must take me to some powerful mediator—I no longer have the contacts I had—and I must warn them. It is my job. Perhaps it can be stopped.'

'No one will see me.'

'Give them my message.'

'They won't listen.'

'Of course they will. It is part of our raison *d'etre.'*

'Our what? Oh—all right. I guess I owe you. There's only one person who'll speak to me, though. A relative, a social worker. He's, like, a total creep.'

Silently, Marvin handed him the new cellphone.

Alcott Alzheimer was more than thrilled to hear from Bobby. Bernadine Peste was always begging for news of her son.

'Bobby!' he breathed, 'I knew you just needed some space. I knew you'd work things through. Adolescence is a very tricky period and conflicts are not unusual ...'

He was even more ecstatic when Bobby turned up in his office, fiendishly attractive in a new six-button Armani suit with Marvin in tow.

'Bobby—you look wonderful! Have some decaff 11 can tell you've matured beyond your—sociopathic episode.' Al punched Bobby roguishly on the shoulder. Bobby stepped back and lit a

Gauloise in a sullen, James Dean sort of way.

'Lighten up, Bobby, lighten up! I know a great hyno-therapist for the little nicotine prob. And you can come to my Thursday night "Rediscovering Our Feral Selves" group—or perhaps not, in your case!'

Fuckin' *faggot*. Bobby said, aloud, 'Al, this is Dr Vonderhyde from the University. He needs to see Grandpa Canker—can you fix it up?'

'So you're in the groves of Academe at last Bobby! Glad to hear it. As for Beau—that's a tall order, a very tall order. He's at the European Summit this week—but I'll certainly see what I can do. I'll have to come along though. Now, how about some ping-pong with my teenage recidivists?'

'I told you,' said Bobby, in the cab, 'I *told* you he was excrement.'

'It doesn't matter. How else would I get to the main man?' Marvin's vocabulary had become more idiomatic.

They went home and played snap in the kitchen with Alice who was delighted to have some company and did a number of music-hall turns.

By the day Al was due to collect them Dr Marvin was in an acute state of nerves. How could he possibly explain to this august elder statesman—Beauregard Canker himself—admittedly one of a renegade clan but powerful beyond belief in worldly affairs, how could he explain what was actually happening in the universities? Few enough academics could grasp it, let alone anyone else. Marvin had lost so much weight that he barely needed his foundation garments any more. Bobby persuaded him to snort some coke 'to give you confidence' but it made him more jittery than ever.

Beauregard Canker, who had inherited the ancient English title of Lord Debris, lived in considerable, if idiosyncratic state. He had served in various far-flung outposts of the Empire before the sun went down, inciting the indigenous peoples to riot and uprising, and now affected orientalism in his Eaton Square town house. He kept an Indian swami and a Chinese sage in his household and the parrots and monkeys should have made Marvin feel at home. Actually it was difficult for anyone to feel at home in those marbled halls, thick with incense.

Canker, dressed in white ducks, sat in a chair made out of elephant tusks, drinking whisky and playing backgammon. He was very, very old with the same high cheekbones and ice-chip eyes as Bobby. His white hair streamed beneath his pith helmet and his long fingers were as hard and yellow as the ivory.

'Great-grandpa Beau? Can you hear me?' started Al. 'I see you are making a positive adjustment to retirement—' Canker clicked a counter into place and motioned to Al to shut up.

'Sit down, sit down,' he said and his voice was like a whisper through the savannah grass.' Ah—Bobby. I knew you'd come back. But you're still a very sick boy. Don't think I can't tell.'

The Indian mystic brought them all some whisky.

Bobby wasn't going to be intimidated.

'Sir—this is Dr Vonderhyde. He's a Professor of Literature. He says the Dark is coming back.'

Canker gestured to his manservant, 'Bring me my pipe.' The half-naked servant-boy knelt over a spirit-lamp. He pierced a black pellet with a long needle, warmed it and plugged the pellet of opium into a heavily jewelled, ornamented pipe and handed it to the old man.

What a degenerate family, thought Marvin. And they call us decayed. Canker's eyelids, as fragile as eggshells, drooped over his cold eyes. Bobby passed Marvin a heap of coke on an ivory letter-opener. Startled, Marvin sniffed it and broke into a sweat.

'Come here, Dr ... er and tell me all about it.' Canker motioned to a footstool.

Marvin found himself sitting next to Canker and muttering disconnectedly. 'It's deconstruction, my lord. In the universities. Everything is mediated through language, particularly through written text. Firstly, de-construction threatens an oral culture like our own. Secondly it threatens everything. Words have no intrinsic meaning, these people say. Words slip about. Without meaning there is nihilism.' As if very far off Marvin could see Bobby and Alcott seated on an ottoman. Alcott was edging closer to Bobby. Bobby kept moving away. Sweat poured from Marvin's brow. He felt small, grubby and insignificant. He struggled on. 'Language controls everything. We are controlled by language. Language, not knowledge, is power. Speech behaves like writing. Words speak to us. The world is text. History is fiction. So is our

own oral history. We can have more control if we desert it. We must have text, to have power. These deconstructionists have more power than ourselves and they are abusing it and condemning us all to nothingness. We must stop them. This is the worst magic ever.'

Marvin halted, on the verge of tears. Why couldn't he give a better account of himself? But—surely—Canker could see that language was everything, was all-powerful? Canker was looking at him benignly.

'My dear young man, I can see how much you care. It is good of you to go to all this trouble. I see you have the same vices as my great-great grandson there, eh?'

Marvin blushed. Damn Bobby.

'No matter. I understand that you are a decent, respectable man. Now, what is it you say? That we—our people—must have written text in order to control? I seem to control well enough anyway ... Words have power, is it? Ah—it recalls to me the poor, dear Zulus. Well, let us try it out.'

He pulled a pad of rather tacky Basildon Bond from under the backgammon board and took a Mark Cross gold pen from his top pocket.

'Now I shall write something totally improbable and we shall see how much power it has. Let's see now ...' He started on some shaky capitals. 'DR—how do you spell it?—VONDERHYDE IS A RAGING PSYCHOPATH AND UNABLE TO TEACH.'

'That's not quite what I meant,' murmured Marvin but Canker scrawled on. 'BOBBY FEVER IS NOT A DRUG ADDICT.' He pulled the page off.

'There we are. Fair trial, fair trial. Now, do those words have power? Do they speak truth?' He looked at Marvin, standing meekly by his side and at Bobby, nodded out on the couch, one hand clutching his fly. 'Well, sir, perhaps we'll stay with our oral tradition for now. Goodnight, all. Hamit, another pipe.'

As they trailed out Marvin saw the Chinese and Indian wise men conferring anxiously. They, at least, had listened with attention.

'I told you it was pointless. Anyway, even I don't know what you're on about.'

'You least of all. Why can't the fool see that we *are* language, we are text and without that knowledge we are doomed.'

'Try someone else.'

But Marvin did not know anyone else. He had long lost touch with other Weerde academics and did not know how to go about finding them. He went into a decline. His Assistant Professorship time was up and was not renewed mainly due to his opposition to decon-struction which continued to rage like a brushfire through academia. Marvin returned to teach on a lowly Reader's salary. Bobby had just about cleaned him out financially. The honeymoon was over. Bobby would have to cut right back on his expensive habits.

'Why should I? I know a perfectly good way of getting all the money I need.'

'No! I couldn't stand it. You wouldn't come back.'

Bobby shrugged. He'd got quite fond of the old boy but his affection stopped far short of penury.

'Your family would give you money. Your mother.'

'Not to live with you they wouldn't. It'd be all on their terms—sanatoriums in Switzerland, sessions with Al—save me.'

And, soon:

'What the fuck am I supposed to do all day? Lie around here like a dildo listening to your ghastly relatives crack bones?'

'You could come to college with me. Enrol.'

'Don't talk balls. I'm a party girl.'

Bernadine Peste circles her chilly rooms, endlessly. She rubs her hands together. The curtains are always drawn now. Alice goes to the book-makers, the off-licence and, on sunny days, to Kensal Green cemetery. Their sons continue to battle it out.

Marvin started to study late into the night. The bright, modern paperbacks on his shelves were replaced by heavy, dark volumes, crusted with leather and metal, closing with keys and hasps.

‘What are those awful dirty black books? Dictionaries?*

‘They are called—don’t make a joke—*grimoires.*

There must be a way to convince the tribe. There must. I’m trying something very risky—’

‘Dark practices?’ said Bobby, hopefully.

Marvin looked scornful. ‘Who remembers our own Dark practices? We *didn’t write them down.* However, there are other sources ...’

Bobby stretched. ‘It’s all crap anyway. Don’t bother. Forget it.’ Marvin glanced coldly at Bobby.

‘You don’t understand. You see, if we had written everything down too, we’d have access to our own occult history. We wouldn’t have this half-remembered mishmash of odds and sods and we’d be able to use our ancient powers and abilities coherently. As it is, I have to depend on these others. It’s my last chance. If I do something really spectacular, they’ll listen.’ He put down *Culte des Goules.* ‘I’m prepared to try anything. Fight fire with fire. If I don’t, we’re doomed. The old ones forget and youngsters like you just aren’t interested in maintaining even the oral history. We’ll lose everything.’

Bobby yawned. ‘You’re an important guy.’ His eyes were fixed on the tiny television. He was chewing gum and occasionally blew a perfect, translucent, rainbow bubble. ‘Can I have some money?’

‘There must be a way to convince them. To show them how the power—old and new—can work. Should work, could work together even. I could give our race mastery, security. If they’d only listened to me. I’d teach them how words work.’

‘Et ta soeur/ said Bobby rudely. He’d learned a few things from his mother.

But, late at night, when the winter winds rattled the casements Bobby could hear Marvin mutter endless, disjointed words and phrases as though all his learning had scattered and fragmented. They made no sense at all and even when Marvin lay silent, Bobby knew that he was not asleep.

Marvin’s behaviour became more erratic. Once he brought a homeless alcoholic home—*why?*—and Bobby had to throw the derelict out. Another time Bobby had come into the room to find Marvin had shaved two parakeets and crudely clipped their wings. Bald and bleeding they staggered over the desk, picking feebly at themselves and each other. Marvin was holding a syringe.

Tve given them some of your stuff,’ he said without looking up. ‘And some rum. They’re not pretty now, are they?’ He started to laugh.

‘Oh my God,’ cried Bobby, ‘the poor things. Put them out of their misery. What’s wrong with you? Sometimes I think Grandpa Beau was right. You’re crazy.’

‘It’s an important part of the ritual.’

The end came suddenly. The first night—it was a Friday—that Dr Marvin returned home to find Bobby gone he had a violent attack of asthma. He then went into the kitchen and started to eat all the junk food that Bobby had left lying around. Cheerios, Cheezits, Tortilla Snax, Phileas Fogg cinnamon and garlic poppadoms, Nachitos, Twixes, Picnics, Topics and a lot of small sweets shaped like milk-bottles. He crammed them all into his mouth, washing them down with gin, gagging and choking. He ate some cans of Pal, Kennomeat, Pedigree Chum and some Whiskas salmon-flavour for the gourmet cat. His eyes were resting thoughtfully on a rare plumed cockatoo when he snapped out of it and went upstairs to wait. *[Bobby is waving goodbye from the deck of a* ship. He *flourishes a vast wad of* money and *with an extravagant gesture, kisses it Bobby is walking out, closing the door. He is bathing in* a *river of molten gold, his head encircled by fireflies, he is* swinging high in *a beribboned* cradle pushed *by* several *heavily* muscled men in sailor suits. *They are* singing ‘Mad *about the Boy’.* Bobby is leaving *the room,* closing *the door. A tall* man embraces him on a balcony, thousands *cheer, Bobby is* leaving *the room*—.) Marvin started to sob.

When Bobby came in at 2 a.m. Marvin threw a potty full of urine over him and then embraced him forcefully, smothering him with ardent kisses.

‘Leave it OUT!’ Bobby twisted like an angry cat. ‘I can’t take this. You’re all sticky. God—I’m soaked. Gross. I didn’t go anywhere *anyway.* I just went to Paul the Dog’s, see if he *had* anything, but he didn’t.’

‘I’ll wash,’ said Marvin humbly.

‘Don’t bother, fuck-face.’

By the following evening Bobby was really sick. He sat shivering on the corner of the bed, his arms wrapped round his knees, wearing his Ray Bans against the desk-light glare.

'Get something out on your cashcard.'

'No. Anyway the bank took it back.'

'Cash a cheque at the Queensway bureau de change. I don't need much.'

'What difference does it make? If it's not today it's tomorrow. I'm nearly—what do you say?—skint as it is.'

'It makes a difference to me. I'm like, sick NOW. Not tomorrow. I'll think of something by then.'

'No:

'Asshole, pig-face, cunt, deformity.'

By about midnight Bobby had had enough. He got up and lit a cigarette from a candle.

'I don't have to take this sort of treatment. Someone'll help me. You just don't care. You don't know how much you disgust me, fuckin' shit-sack, fuckin' heartless, immoral—'

Bobby walked unsteadily towards the door and turned on Marvin again.

'You ought to try it, you ought to just fuckin' *try* it, you try throwing up and then shitting in your pants, oh I forgot, you do anyway. Sorry, Miss Mess.' He narrowed his eyes.

'You'll never get anyone else you know. You're just, like total repulsiveness, you know that? No other boy would be crazy enough to touch you, you're just a deadend faggot freak—me, I'm straight—I can go home and marry a rich girl, so there, penis-breath!'

Marvin swung round in the swivel chair. His face was mottled red as though he had been slapped.

'We'll go up to Queensway,' he said, quietly.

'What?'

'Queensway!'

'Sweetheart!'

Bobby ran down the stairs singing The One and Only'.

It was a cool spring evening. There was a light, misty rain falling as they walked, hand in hand, up the street, crushing broken blossoms under their feet. Marvin cashed his cheque, handed the money to Bobby and waited patiently outside a Bayswater squat. When Bobby returned his hair was combed and he smelled of soap. They caught a night bus to the Embankment and walked, slowly for Marvin's sake, towards Hungerford Bridge.

'Look at the river.'

'Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song,' said Marvin automatically, 'It's always there. It's an old river.'

'Older than you?'

'Bitch.'

They smiled at each other and climbed the steps to the bridge. The rain was coming down more heavily now, like an ink wash over the city dawn. Bobby looked far into the distance. The familiar cityscape lay, as if blessed, shot through with shafts of light from beyond the heavy clouds. Beneath them the river moved like a nightmare; shadow and bones, liquid and light. The church bells were ringing. They had been ringing for centuries. *I do* not—know ... Said *the great bell of Bow* ...

'A city,' murmured Marvin, 'half as old as time.'

'Romantic, yeah?' Bobby turned round. 'You can suck my knob if you like. I don't care.'

Marvin shook his head. 'Your language—it's always been terrible.'

Marvin placed his heavy, red hands on each side of Bobby's face—You're so *beautiful I hate you, it's too late*—and gently stroked the dampened cheeks. He started to lick them, hungrily sucking at the flesh. Bobby jerked back—'Leave it out'—and Marvin punched him, hard in the eye. Marvin tore at Bobby's shirt with his teeth. Swiftly he pulled some piano wire from his cuff and bound one of Bobby's wrists tightly to the railing before reaching up and encircling his neck with the wire, then bringing it back down to encircle Bobby's other hand, the wire cutting cruelly into the pearly flesh. All the time he was muttering, huffing and puffing and trains kept rumbling and squealing over the bridge, their lights sweeping over the struggling figures. Bobby could hear nothing.

‘Disrepair—disregard—disinter—disintegrate; humiliate, destroy, damnation, abomination, break on a wheel, out like a light. Far from home, remember the ways, the path to the caves, deeds not words!’ Marvin was sobbing as he tore the skin from Bobby’s abdomen with teeth and nails.

A passer-by approached. Marvin loomed over Bobby, biting his lips shut before he could cry out and grinding his own groin lasciviously into the sagging figure. The footsteps quickened and faded away. Marvin started to moan and chant. He could feel his engorged penis throbbing and pounding behind the hot black rubber. He started cracking the bones. ‘Show the world, take the mantle, steal the skin, quick the soul, engorge the essence, assume the other—’ Half-remembered, scattered phrases rushed through his brain, he was lost, he was shunned, he parted the clouds and swallowed the sun—worrying furiously with his teeth like a terrier he sought sorcery and eternity, found only frail flesh and splinters, pierced the heart with a gush of black blood and dragged it out with his incisors. Chewing, gagging on gristle he stood up slowly and with both hands pulled the heart from his mouth and raised it to the morning. Heavenly music crashed around him, loud as thunder, and a sudden gust of rainy wind showered him with confetti, petals and scraps of lace. Gradually his breathing calmed and he began to walk thoughtfully away, the heart now tucked close to his own. Bobby was left, splayed on the bridge, a sacrifice to the city.

Marvin began to breathe freely, deeply, intoxicated by the bright air. He was tall, sleek as a greyhound, he glided down the steps, a ghost, a swan. Bobby—pssst. He spat. An outcast amongst outcasts, too human by half.

Now he—as beautiful as the day, as dark as the oldest night—he knew what to do with beauty. First—a lavatory; he needed to smell the soap, to stare deep into his own chipped-diamond eyes and feel the rich sweep of his soft black-auburn hair through the comb. Then, calmly—no more asthma, ever—he strolled northwards, smiling seductively at each passer-by. Blinded by the light they turned away in confusion.

Marvin put on his Ray Bans. It was the morning of the world. He had rediscovered the long-lost rites and forced them to a resolution. He must tell someone—no! He just needed to stand here—or there—in ornate rooms and the caressing, loving gaze would always fall on him. They were born to serve him. His mind felt sharp as an adze. With such beauty, with such brains—what might he not do? He had emerged ... *almighty* ... *victorious.* What grace, what favours, what futures ... what now ...

My *love*

The waste

My life

For ever and ever

My *self* ...

Dr Marvin limped slowly towards the Strand, a rotund, placid figure, remorseless in his respectability. A police car streamed past, its siren shattering the morning. The city was waking up. He felt free and light-hearted for the first time in his life.

He started to whistle.

He knew that there was one last rite he must perform. He had ingested what he needed of the heart to complete his transformation and ensure its permanence—oh yes, they would listen to him now when they saw what he had done. He had made the words work. He had brought ancient rituals to life and now, he and he alone, had the knowledge to unite these glorious powers with the new world. He would offer a sacrifice to the new gods—O Belial, O Barthes!—to the most powerful gods now in the world. The Gods of Language. He must carry the heart to the books. He alone could unite the old and the new, complete the cycle and in doing so, transcend it and achieve immortality for himself and his tribe. He would break into a library, a very large library and once safely inside he was going to crawl right up into the middle of the warm, warm text and there he would rest for a while until the world came to claim him for its own.

Red, Hot And Dark

Charles Stross

Moscow: Monday morning, *20* August 1991:

The soldiers on the back of the personnel carriers stared around, wide-eyed, clutching their rifles like drowning men hanging on to buoyant life-rafts. They were out of their depth, teenage conscripts from the sticks being trucked in by the grey men in the Kremlin, none of them sure what they were meant to be doing there. The emigre group seemed to be taking it quite well as the BMPs rumbled past their hotel. They clustered in the bar, talking quietly in small groups, occasionally pestering a vodka out of the distracted staff. Reporters swarmed and darted everywhere, like wasps around a rubbish bin in summer. And Oleg Meir ...

Oleg Meir ignored the soldiers as he left the temporary safety of the hotel. The phones were down, only international calls from the city's contingent of foreign correspondents getting through. *They must he crazy,* he thought, *cutting off communications at a time like this.* Trembling with a chill, he thrust his hands deep into his coat pockets as he walked back towards the University. He glanced up at the clock jutting from the face of one of the office buildings on the opposite side of the road. It was almost ten o'clock! He'd have to hurry. Oleg increased his pace until it was little short of a trot. *Got to get the papers,* destroy them or something. Change myself, *get lost* in *the crowd. That way they* won't *find me. If I can do it before Andrei catches up with me ...*

Yesterday's events had brought everybody out on to the streets; everyday life had ground to a halt. The air was filled with tension, as if an abscess was about to burst. Never had he seen crowds of people who all looked so *angry;* it scared him almost as much as the horror of a remembered guilt, the phone call in the early hours from his mysterious patron—just before the public lines went down.

Tanks were drawn up in the square outside the University, their engines ticking over, soldiers milling around uncertainly in front of a throng of defiant youths; they made no attempt to detain the bespectacled professor as he made his way past them towards the concrete monolith of the Institute of Space Sciences. Nobody stopped him as he went in, but he noticed a few anomalies: a distinct shortage of staff, a surfeit of students milling around the foyer, chattering.

Can't *he good.* Oleg made for the elevator, half-remembered skills blending him with the shadows like a third element of light and darkness. *Too many people about.* The elevator began to rise. He yawned uncontrollably. The elevator stopped; its brass gate slid open. 'Professor Meir?'

Oleg jumped. 'Who is—oh, Anatoly. What is it?'

The student stared at him. 'You looked a bit preoccupied, that's all,' he said. 'About the course work, I know it's overdue—'

'Don't worry about it.' Oleg looked away. 'Heard the news?'

'What news?'

'Don't worry.' Moving down the corridor towards his office, the student following him, Oleg had things on his mind. 'Have you got a few minutes?'

Tor you, Professor?' The student's elaborate shrug was wasted. Oleg was too busy unlocking his office to notice.

These filing cabinets. Do me a favour, get everything out of the top drawer there, stacked in order, and put it on the table. Please? I'll make it worth your while.'

'How worthwhile?' Something nudged Oleg's attention, but when he looked up Anatoly looked back at him innocently. 'A regrading?'

'You said it, not me.' Anatoly turned to the filing cabinet eagerly. 'Now if you will excuse me—'

The terminal on Oleg's desk was an antique, but it still connected him to the machines in the basement. To his surprise, Oleg found that his palms were sweating as he sat down and logged on. This has gone *too far.* He shivered and glanced over his shoulder. *If Andrei gets his* grubby *hands on these there* won't *he an excuse* under heaven *that'll save* me! Still he hesitated. Something in the air tickled

his nostrils; scent of wood smoke and gasoline far away, screams remembered in the moonless night. From *her*. Behind him, Anatoly was systematically stripping his files from their steel nest. Oh *well. It had to* happen—*now or later*.

Oleg began to type, carefully—the sluggardly machine could barely keep up with his key pressure—a short e-mail message. He stared at it for a few minutes after he finished it, trying to understand what he had done. To *KGBVAX*, the police monitor on the net. User: Vaien-*tin016*. An anonymous label. *Danger*. He'd been sweating before he started. Now he pressed enter, consigning the message to the invisible guts of the connected mainframes, where it would find it's way eventually to the destination—

To Valentina. Who'd know what to do, if anyone did. Oleg logged out and turned around, stood up and stretched, and stared at the student working on his files. *Time to think about avoiding Andrei. Why did I ever let it get this far?* he wondered. Hands deep in pockets, he wandered over to the window and stared out towards the distant Kremlin. *Dancing with the devil ...*

Twenty *five years ago:*

Oleg had first met Andrei back in sixty-three, maybe sixty-four, back when he had been a young student of astrophysics, fresh in from the sticks. Always the terrified compulsion to look up at the stars—attending Shklovskii's bull sessions about intelligent life in the universe made him feel out of control, his thin veneer of sophistication in danger of cracking open to reveal the depths of his superstitious fear. The feeling had a shud-dery attraction to Oleg, who was unable to join in the merry banter of his colleagues.

'You see, comrades, if we are not alone in the universe, the very fact of our lack of uniqueness has implications for our way of life! No longer are we part of an isolated, unique trend. Other intelligences, once their existence can be proven, would provide a powerful stimulus to our exploratory tendencies. Such intelligences, should they be more advanced than us, may be expected to be in constant communication even if physical interstellar travel is impossible—yes? What is it? Meir, again?'

Oleg cleared his throat. 'I think you overlook something,' he said, suddenly aware that his heart was pounding. 'Perhaps, all is stillness and quiet not because we are alone ... but because they are scared. After all, ideas can be dangerous, can they not? Just as socialist ideas are considered dangerous by the capitalists, so may there be *darker* things lurking among the stars. Things that listen, like us, for the transmissions of the unwary ...'

'Like Voice of America?' some wit interrupted, and the whole room burst out laughing.

Oleg sat down, his face turning beetroot. He looked round, searching for support against the hilarity—there was a man he had never seen before at the back of the hall, and his expression was set and thoughtful. Something about him was vaguely familiar, like a half-remembered family photograph. Oleg looked away rapidly, and tried to ignore the good-natured joshing he received after the lecture from those who believed that the laws of dialectical materialism applied to interstellar communication. But somehow the face stuck in his mind; and he was not surprised when, two days later, he was awakened by a peremptory rap on the door of his room.

Struggling out of bed, Oleg made his way to the door. 'Who is it?' he called, half-hoping that it was the apartment warden about to complain again about him lying in on a perfectly good Saturday—

'Open up!' called a voice outside. 'We haven't got all day!'

Oleg tensed, shivering with more than cold—muscles bunching and coiling like ropes beneath his skin—then opened the door a crack. 'What's it about?' he asked. 'I was in bed—'

'Never mind that. You can get dressed now. You're going for a drive in the country this morning, how about that? Don't bother packing, you'll be back before sunset, I promise. Come along now!'

Goaded into sudden action, Oleg grabbed his clothes and began to yank them on haphazardly. 'You can come in,' he called when he had his trousers belted. The door opened. 'Have we met?' he asked politely.

The stranger shut the door behind him. 'Two nights *ago, at the* Institute, I was in the row behind you/

Oleg's shoulders slumped with something like relief.

‘I thought you were with the Cheka,’ he muttered as he buttoned his shirt.

The stranger looked at him and smiled, exposing his teeth. ‘You thought right—sort of. The people I’m with ... the KGB don’t like us, but we don’t have to put up with them. Do the initials GRU mean anything to you?’ Oleg stared uncomprehendingly. ‘Good. *Now* they do. We’re going for a little drive in the country, and we’ll have lunch at a dacha and I’m sure you’ll enjoy our little chat; I’ll drop you off back here this evening. How does that sound, comrade?’

Mouth dry, heart pounding again: ‘You want me to be an informer?’ Oleg pulled on his boots, not looking at the man from the GRU, whatever that was, trying to memorize his face in case he had to—

‘Don’t be an idiot. We’re not the fucking MVD; we’re the *army*. What you were saying about contact with extraterrestrial civilizations interests us ... we just want to ask you a few more questions, bounce some ideas about, see what you can come up with. And you know something else?’ Oleg jumped round as a hand landed on his shoulder, then froze. A faintly familiar smell tickled at his nostrils like the memory of a forgotten sin. ‘I was right,’ said the stranger who had stolen his identity. Then, in a language far older than Russian—‘*How long have you* been living aione among *the* humans, *my friend?’*

Moscow: lunch-time, 20 August 1991:

Cosmology and guilt and a blind fear of the unknown blurred together in Oleg’s mind as he tried to concentrate on what he was doing. A trip to see the big military radar system at Semipalatinsk blurred into the dogeared files he was lifting out of the back of his cabinet, vast banks of humming tubes meshed with the sleek

Western computer chained to his desk. Time was of the essence: panic was ...

Possible. The big old radio beside the window was tuned to Radio Free Europe, but the MVD were jamming it again for the first time in years, the *pock-pock-whirr* of microwaves blasted into the ionosphere to stop the people learning of the crimes committed against them. *Radar* stations in *the* hands *of Andrei and his Dark-worshippers*. Oleg shuddered, uncertain. Just as long as he doesn’t know where *to point them*. He looked up, clutching a sheaf of papers about Cepheid variables. ‘Get me everything you can find under Krasnoyarsk,’ he muttered.

‘Under what?’ Anatoly looked perplexed.

‘Krasnoyarsk,’ Oleg repeated. ‘It’s a radar installation. You know? One of the big ones the military let us borrow.’

‘Oh, *that*. Isn’t it one of the ones comrade General Secretary agreed with the Americans to dismantle?’

Oleg sniffed, bitterly amused by the way Anatoly still referred to Gorbachev by his title. T see. What do you expect to find there, boss? Is that where they’re holding him?’

‘Not on another planet,’ Oleg muttered, thumbing through notes made years ago. The pile of paper was inches thick, held together with rough string and stale lies. Some of the documents were twenty, thirty years old: some were new, and of these a number bore CONFIDENTIAL stamps. Oleg had removed these from his safe.

He sighed as he contemplated the documents with a mixture of fear and pride. My *life’s work, and this* is *all* there is *to it?* Itchy fear made the skin in the small of his back *crawl; his leg* muscles twitched, aching to be elsewhere. *If Andrei gets hold of these* ... they were the originals, not the precisely-faked duplicates he had filtered to the GRU Colonel over the past years. Careful cooperation, playing the useful idiot to find out how much Andrei knew, who his friends were, that was one thing. But this was for real; the probable coordinates of the end of the world ... he stopped subvocalizing so suddenly that he nearly bit his tongue. Maybe they knew where he came from, what he had done. Frightened, he looked over his shoulder, but only a bust of Lenin was watching. He scooped up the bundle and began to squeeze it into his briefcase. Halfway through the process he discovered that it wasn’t going to fit unless he emptied the case first; he up-ended it over the carpet. Anatoly watched with what Oleg assumed to be amused tolerance. He had to leave out the confidential papers, the ones about Krasnoyarsk, but finally everything fitted together and he bent down to close his case.

Behind him, Anatoly cleared his throat. There’s something you should know, Professor.’

Oleg turned to Anatoly, who stood behind him, and sniffed, although he could tell perfectly well what was happening. His guts loosened abruptly. 'What's going on? Where did you get that gun?' He tried to conceal his dismay as his companion stared at him. 'What's happening?'

This way, Academician.' The gun was small, oily-looking, the hole in its muzzle horribly dark; he could see the rifling in the barrel, which pointed straight at him. 'Your services are required. Happenings more significant than the current ... ruckus, are being expedited under cover of the confusion. Events of cosmic importance. You could say the trigger just fell into *our hands.'* Anatoly—the being who wore the student Anatoly's face—gestured Oleg backwards.

Oleg glanced left and right, but there was no way out. He backed slowly towards the door. The stranger was holding his briefcase, and Oleg had a gut-deep feeling that his living cooperation was not essential. 'What do you want with me?' he whispered.

'Just cooperate. Through the door. Into the lift.'

The lift grilles rattled open behind him. The gunman crowded in close, thrusting the muzzle of his weapon into a coat pocket to conceal it from bystanders. 'Press the first-floor button.'

Oleg did as he was told, obedient, tense, knees trembling. 'What are you doing?' he mumbled.

'Taking you somewhere safe.' Anatoly sounded bored by the question.

'But—this is crazy! Why are you kidnapping me? Who are you?'

The rough walls of the lift shaft rose up on either side. 'Don't be naive, Oleg. You made a bargain years ago: your research to continue, with our support, in return for obedience—when the time came. And what happens? You call your KGB kitten! That's not what I call obedience. And the falsehoods you've been feeding us this past year have not amused us greatly. Anyone would think you were trying to play a two-way game ... and you know what happens to people who get caught in the middle.'

The lift came to a stop. Oleg looked around frantically. The lobby outside the elevator cage was deserted but for four Interior Ministry soldiers, rifles at the ready. One of them crossed the floor and pulled the doors open. Anatoly gestured him back with his free hand. 'Forward, Professor. We have a long journey ahead of us.' He smiled as one of the guards opened the front door to reveal an armoured personnel carrier backed up against it, engine *running. "Glad you* could make the party!'

Leningrad: Monday *morning, 20* August *1991:*

Valentina was waiting impatiently in the station lobby at the airport, a woollen coat pulled tight around her; when she saw the uniformed man she waved. He approached her rapidly. This had better be good,' she said.

He looked away from her. 'Maybe not,' he said, so quietly that the words were nearly lost in the omnipresent traffic roar. Louder: There's a message for you from Moscow, high priority. You want to read it here?'

Valentina stared at him. Just *another uniformed flunky.* 'Give it to me.'

He passed her the sealed slip and hung around, evidently pleased with himself. She hadn't bitten his head off, which was an unexpected bonus: Major Valentina Pavlova was notorious for expecting of her subordinates the same efficiency that she was known for herself.

She read the message quickly, face expressionless in the gloom. The officer glanced around, nervously; there were few people in the airport today, and when he looked at them they turned away pointedly. 'What's going on?' he asked. 'First the putsch, then this priority traffic—'

She stopped him with a brisk shake of the head. 'I wouldn't worry about the coup if I were you. It will all be over soon. I need to get to Moscow as soon as possible. Take a message! When you see me leave, tell Major Gromov I'll report back in three days, until then I'll be in deep cover.'

'You'll be—' she stared at the messenger until his eyes watered and he looked away.

'Don't ask. Tell him it's urgent. Is that understood, sergeant?'

He straightened up, saluted. 'Yessir!'

'Good.' She was already moving, walking towards the check-in desk, coat billowing out behind her.

'What is it?' he called over her shoulder.

'Got a plane to catch,' she said, hurrying through the door.

'Authorization—'

'No problem.'

'Papers? Channels?'

'No time.'

'As you say, Major.' They approached the milling crowd at the ticket counter together. The queue was long and agitated, worried travellers anxious to return to their own republics; but when Valentina produced her official pass everybody scattered to one side. Despite the resentful glances, some things never changed.

'Yes? What is it?' sniffed the clerk. She looked tired and irritated.

'This. Where is your manager?'

She thrust his badge under the clerk's nose. It didn't have the desired effect. The woman snorted, as if amused: 'You don't expect that to get you anywhere, do you? Chekist. We've had enough of your kind ...'

Valentina reached out with a fluid motion and grabbed the clerk by one wrist. 'You do as I say,' she said quietly. 'Otherwise I break your arm. Do you understand?'

The clerk mouthed something silently, her eyes growing round with surprise and sudden pain. 'What—what do you want?' she stuttered.

'To see whoever is in charge here,' she said, 'of the air defence facilities. I have a plane to catch, to Moscow.'

'But no flights are scheduled!' protested the clerk. Valentina let go of her wrist, but continued to stare at her unblinkingly.

'*Now there* is. J repeat; where is the manageT? 1 have a plane to catch.'

The clerk picked up a telephone handset and began to dial, glancing up warily at Valentina as she did so. Til see what can be done, but I make no promises,' she said.

Valentina caught the sergeant's eye; he nodded imperceptibly. Tell Gromov,' she emphasized. 'It is essential.'

The clerk paused. 'But *whyV* she asked, curiosity getting the better of her fear. 'What's so important?'

Valentina glanced over her shoulder at her assistant. 'She asks what's so important,' she said quietly, all the time conscious of the crowd watching over his shoulder, not yet nasty but quite capable of turning if they saw something not to their liking ... 'What's important? I'll tell you what's important,' she said. 'If we don't get to Moscow by noon, both you and your boss can look forward to an extended holiday in Siberia ... whoever's in charge ...'

Moscow: three *o'clock:*

The ancient Kamov chopper she'd requisitioned clattered into the Moscow air defence region. The phones were down: whether it would have made any difference was questionable. Valentina sat in the middle of the narrow, glassed-in cockpit, beside the pilot. Her jaw was rigid, as tense as steel; her eyes were focused on a point a million miles away, replaying cinema reels of memory. Glacial, slow memories. Memories of an interview, not long after she'd come to Moscow: memories of a militiaman long forgotten, one of the kin, who'd helped her change her life ...

They'd been lucky to find her. Not so much gone to the dogs as abandoned to the humans ... twenty-nine, addicted to heroin, living as a street prostitute, a member of the officially non-existent underground encouraged by the Brezhnev faction during their twenty—

year reign of hypocrisy. My, but *they did a good job of westernizing* us fast.' *All the vices and* none *of the virtues* ... lost in her memories, she blinked, astonished by the strange value systems her own mind was capable of throwing up. *Hey, live* among humans for iong *enough, you even start* thinking *like one—*

It had been pure coincidence. One of the street-sweeps they'd been so keen on under Andropov; the Weerde who finally found her was a militia lieutenant assigned to mopping up the untouchables who weren't meant to contaminate the crime sheets of the squeaky-clean new order—after all, prostitution and drug abuse were Western problems, weren't they? She remembered the cigarette smoke rising in spirals from the ashtray on the scarred desk, the long interviews by lamplight as they tried to work out

who she knew and why she had been tolerated for so long: unable to admit publicly that all cultures have a dark side, that everyone needs something to be afraid of, to lust after, some forbidden fruit ...

The policeman looked at the woman in the fur coat, black minidress, tights and make-up that weren't even in the shops for people to queue for. The first thing that had caught his attention was how *attractive* she was. Thin, but not gaunt, young-looking but not a child. She shouldn't be pretty, not with the kind of lifestyle she had—a three-bag-a-day habit, not to mention the chalk mixed with the damned Afghan dust by her scumbag dealer. 'We know all about you,' he said, tapping her folder meaningfully, and she had laughed at him like a wolf in the depths of a winter forest.

'No matter how much you think you know about me you will never know all about me,' she said. She stared *at him with black,* glittering eyes, ice-cubes that didn't melt under the lamp.

'Really?' he asked. To a human it would have sounded like something between a cough and a grunt.

Her eyes had widened, but not from fear: he had seen her fingers flexing to strike, and tensed. 'If my brother sent you to get me back,' she had said, 'you can tell him I'm not interested.'

The cop had leaned forward, exposing his throat: 'Really?' he asked. 'And why would your brother do a thing like that?'

'Because he loves me. Or he thinks he does. I don't think he would know love if it bit his throat out. All he's in love with is the Dark.' She relaxed her hands, looked down; noticed for the first time how bony they looked. As if her skin had become a translucent film, a winding-sheet for her skeleton, in the undead time since she came out of the forest. 'That's why I left. After our parents died.'

The cop had leaned back, the hardest bit of the interview over: making her decide to talk. 'And since leaving, is that when you began to hang out on the street?'

She shrugged. A certain tension had gone out of the interrogation; now it was more like a conversation. 'It's a living. I have no papers, as you may have noticed ...'

'That can *be remedied.*[1] She blinked rapidly, surprised by a stab of resentment. Trapped. 'But first, it would help if you would answer a couple of questions. Strictly on a cooperative basis; it makes it look better on the record.'

'Like what?' she asked, forcing herself to relax. The sense of being caught in a trap intensified.

'Like beginning with when you last saw your brother?'

'Huh.' She snorted. It would have been a laugh if she'd been human. 'He wrote to me until a year or two ago; I burned the letters. He always knows where I am; where he is I don't think even the KGB knows.' She stared at him. 'Do they?'

'Really!' The Kin who was also a militia lieutenant shrugged. 'Hey, don't look at me like that. The word has gone out from on high that people like you don't exist. So what are you going to do about it?'

'Why should I do *anything* about it?' she asked, feeling a chill run up and down her spine as she met his gaze. This was what she'd been afraid of for a long time, since the icy nights so long ago: the loss of her freedom of action. Tm doing very well as it is.'

'No you're not.' He had stared at her until she was forced to look away. 'You're ill. Your shit-head of a pimp is cutting your fix with chalk, you know that? Your apartment has slime on the walls and the residents hate you—that's why you're here. You were fingered.'

'So what business of yours is it, how I go about destroying myself?' she asked, mustering a calm as brittle as her paper-fine skin. 'Why do you want to stop me?'

The cop reached out and took her hand—gambling that nobody would be watching this interview, that it was not a hidden test of some kind—'because *you're one of* us and youVe been hurt by *those fucking animals,'* he grunted. Her eyes flickered left and right, but she didn't pull away. She could feel his pulse against her skin, fast, like any other of her kind. 'How long is it since you had a proper meal?'

'What's one of those?' she asked. 'Hey, don't lay that shit on me!' *Now* she pulled away. 'I can look after myself. What are you after?'

The lieutenant glanced at the ceiling, abashed. 'Nothing,' he said after a moment. 'I don't want anything *from you.* At least nothing you can give me. I yctst thought—'

She reached out and touched his hand. 'OK,' she said. 'Comrade. So that's what it is?' She looked at him askance. 'That's *all* it is?'

'And a full list of all your partners in crime,' he added, 'but that's no reason to run away from me. I'm not a monster. I'll settle for the humans.'

'Uh-huh.'

They sat in silence for a minute as Valentina collected her nerves for the next step in the process. There was an inevitability to it, a determinism, which scared and exhilarated her; *will* everything begin *to get better, now?* 'There is one thing, though,' she said quietly.

'What's that?'

'For the records, we need an excuse. I can't just disappear.'

'So?' The temperature in the cell seemed to drop a couple of degrees.

'I want to cut a deal.'

'Oh.'

Then Val leaned forward intently. 'My help,' she whispered, 'in return for yours. I'll need a hand afterwards, you see. I'll give you everything you want. But in return I need something.'

'And what would that be?' asked the cop, leaning back in his chair, staring at her with cool expectation.

She licked her lips. 'I've been thinking,' she said. 'This is no career for a lady. But tell me, do you know how easy it is to get a job in the undercover police?'

She was awakened by the change in engine noise as the chopper came in to land. From the military field it was a half-hour drive into the city. She was out of the police car as soon as it pulled up outside the Institute building; before she reached the doors some students emerged. They gathered in front of her, blocking the path. 'What do you want here?' demanded one of them, a fat, balding man with a beard and the look of an agitator about him. 'Who the hell are you?'

She stared at him, breathing hard. 'Is Academician Meir in his office today?' she asked, 'I need to speak to him urgently.'

'I'll bet you do,' began the fat man, only to be cut off by one of his companions, a woman. 'Wait! Who are you? Why do you want to see the Professor?'

'He's in danger,' she said simply. Nameless emotions threatened her control; she fought back ruthlessly, steeling herself for the big half-truth. 'I want to get him out of it.'

Almost at once the students crowded in. 'You're too late,' said the woman. 'Militia came for him oh, half an hour ago! In an APC She positively bristled. 'Fuckers threatened to shoot anyone who got in their way—' There was an angry rumbling from behind.

'Do you have any idea where they were taking him?' she asked, excitement and dread washing through her.

'No, but, hey! What—'

She pushed past the fat man. 'Where's Oleg's office?' she asked.

'Here. I'll take you.' It was the woman student again. They hurried indoors, then waited interminably for a creaking lift to arrive. 'We've barricaded the stairs—if they try to root us out we'll shut off the lift motor,' said the student. 'Who *are* you?'

'A friend of Oleg's. Not all the security forces are against you,' said Val. The lift doors opened and they crowded in. 'Where did they go?'

'One of them—an informer, looked like one of us—came and took the Academician downstairs. Oh, there's ***his office.'***

'Looks like he left in a hurry,' observed Valentina, as the student swung the lift doors open and darted into the room. 'Hey, what a mess! What ...'

The woman leaned over the desk, concentrating. These are all his papers. Shit.'

Valentina stepped closer, her right hand thrust deep into her pocket. 'What are they about?' she demanded.

This—these are all confidential! I didn't know Professor Meir worked for the army—'

She turned and made a dash for the lift; Valentina followed her, grabbed the back of her coat. 'Wait,' she hissed. 'What kind of papers?'

The student twisted round, then saw Valentina's expression. 'Uh—'

Breathe. Relax. Val forced herself to smile. 'What were they about?'

'Uh ... oh. Something about the radar base at Krasnoyarsk. You know it? Big rocket forces base. They're going to dismantle it soon. Uh. I could have sworn you-'

But Valentina wasn't there any more, wasn't in the lift; was back through the office then halfway down the stairs and out to the police car before she stopped to think, before the student could even blink back afterimages of what she had *thought* she'd seen in Val's face.

'Airfield,' Val snapped at her driver, 'fast!' Rubber screeched. 'I've got a plane to catch.' *Why Krasnoyarsk?* she puzzled, consulting her inner oracle, her memory of her brother. But all he did was shrug and smile and say something: and all she could make out was one phrase. *Three thousand megawatts.*

Oleg Meir peered out of the small, dim porthole and tried to ease the pain in his wrists. The handcuffs were too tight, and the fleshy part of his hands tingled with pins and needles. A simple exercise, thinning out his own flesh, would ease it—but his captors knew who they were dealing with, and there were limits to what could be done in an hour or two. Besides, with fists the size of a baby's he'd be in no position to put up a fight.

This is *the* worst part: *the waiting.* He looked down across the white emptiness below, tried to ignore the itching in the back of his throat and the pain in his ears. Outside the fuselage, four giant Turmanskii gas turbines howled across the tundra. The sky overhead was the deep blue of an ice age. Pines clustered across the low-lying terrain to the south, but the flight path of the jet was carrying Oleg ever closer to the Arctic circle. *How long will this take?* He tried to calculate it in his head; assuming an air speed of five hundred knots, that would make it ... seven hours. Give or take. To the land of ice and sky fire, where nuclear-powered pyramids brooded beneath the eternal sun. Vast, many-tracked crawlers bore fiery cylinders of nuclear death. Oceans of ice beneath which submarines crept in cold-war pursuits. Ancient tribes of ice-dwelling hunters, bemused by the entry of the modern world into their dream of ages, forced out of the wire-wrapped military reservations. Solzhenitsyn had written about the Gulag archipelago, the islands of prisoners locked in the sea of Siberia, but this was something else. This was the continent of the military, gripped in the paranoid embrace of an eternal winter of the soul.

I *ought to stop them from doing it,* Oleg told himself for the thousandth time. It was a pathetic mantra, but repetition made it seem more practical; if only the sense of doing it would not so stubbornly elude him ...

Up front, a door banged open. Oleg looked up; it was *Anatoly, or* whoever passed for him. The shadows standing out beneath his high cheek-bones gave him a lupine appearance. Oleg turned his head away and closed his eyes. His captor ignored this; seconds later he sensed warm breath centimetres from his face.

'You don't have any choice in the matter, you know.'

Oleg opened his eyes. 'Don't I?' he asked.

Anatoly—whoever he was—seemed to find this amusing. 'Avoid the end of the universe? Huh!' He drew away a fraction and Oleg flinched, expecting a blow. It never came. 'We are not cruel, Professor. We are not the Dark. Our intentions are good.'

Oleg held up his chained wrists. 'Then why ...?'

Anatoly shook his head slowly. 'You don't understand. We can't afford to take any chances. It has been many years since we tried and failed ... too long ago. Our German colleagues who set the agenda at the Wann-see conference—now *they* were evil. In human terms, at least. But us? You do me a disservice.' He leaned forward until he was nose-to-nose with Oleg. 'We are here to help you.'

'Help me!' He snorted. 'How?'

'Help you—' Anatoly paused for a moment—'help you do what you didn't have the guts to do on your own. Even though you've known how to do it for years, now ... even though we gave you all the facilities you could possibly need. Don't play the innocent, Professor. You know what I'm talking about.'

'I do?' Oleg found himself unable to look away from Anatoly's dark eyes; the expression on that face, the shared fear of the pit over which he had been walking these past years, black as his worst fears ... 'You really think that I can summon down the Dark?' His stomach turned over, a vast uneasy sense of

urgency growing inside him. His heart raced, and the handcuffs slid around his slippery wrists as if on a thin coating of slime.

Anatoly leaned close to him. 'I know you can, Oleg. Because you want to do it, don't you? Otherwise you'd have turned me in long ago, to that Chekist major you can't leave alone, you think we don't know about that?'

Anatoly's face rippled slowly before Oleg's eyes, twisting into another shape that it had worn for a long time before it's owner had chosen to pass for a student; a visage at once familiar and frightening. 'I know you better than you think, Comrade Academician. You like your cosy office too much, and you're still afraid of the Dark the way they taught you to be. But part of you wants to get it over with very badly, doesn't it? You don't like human people, although you try to hide it—isn't that so? You don't even like your own kind very much. So you crouch in dark corners and search frantically for the key to the thing that scares you most, telling yourself that you need the information in order to *hide* better—such nonsense! I'll tell you what you wanted to know. You wanted to work out where the Dark had gone, in those long aeons since it first came, while the sun swung around the core of the galaxy—isn't that right?—because you knew better than most of us where the technology was leading the humans.'

Anatoly-Andrei turned sinuously and sat down beside Oleg. Oleg stared, trying to fix every tiny detail in his mind: the pores in Andrei's skin, the faint, acrid smell of the Kin, the slight, nervous way he fidgeted with his left hand. Andrei stared back, eyes wide in a display of inhuman concern.

'Another twenty years and their geneticists, they'll be able to pin us down everywhere. Have you thought of that? It would mean the end of us, the end of everything. But not if we have the guts to do what we should do, *and use those three* thousand megawatts, no? li we get our blow in first, we can be safe again. All of us. To sleep away another age without fear of interruption by the hairless apes.' Andrei—visibly Andrei now, still as youthful as when Oleg had first met him in the mid-sixties—stared like an obsessive, fear and calculation mingled in his gaze. 'Isn't that right?' he asked. 'Don't you know it's true? We can't let them carry on—'

'You're—' Oleg stopped, at a loss for words. He thinks he knows *everything*. Andrei blinked rapidly, as if looking for a further justification.

The function systems, Professor. We've seen your interest in Lyupanov space and chaos theory. We even heard about those programs you ran—after you erased them and shredded the results. We can guess. You know *exactly* how to go about summoning the Dark; where to point the antennae, what message to send, how long it will take. The radar site at Krasnoyarsk interested you, so we guessed. Big, powerful transmitters. That's it, isn't it? You are our people's only hope, now.'

'Why? I don't understand. What's in it for you?'

'Nothing, probably. Freedom from fear.' Andrei shrugged, suddenly abashed. 'Come now, Professor. We're all afraid together, aren't we? Those who think the Dark will kill us, and those—like you—who fear it but understand the need. I just—' he sighed and looked away for a moment. Then: 'I just want to get it over with. The fear, not knowing. We live among animals who could turn on us at any time. What could be worse than that? Face it, Professor. When it comes down to it, we are all Kin. And that's all the humans will see if they learn of us.'

Oleg held up his hands again. 'With these, how can I trust you?' he asked, simply.

Andrei held up a key. 'How can I trust *you*, if you won't even tell me what you're running from?' he asked. 'Say it. You can't hide for ever.'

'Say what ...' Oleg's mouth was dry, his heart pounding; he barely noticed that the tension of years was melting away from him as he let his real face peep through, let the darkness that had been raised in his childhood soul reveal itself to his captor.

'We know about the taiga.'

'The taiga ...' Oleg swallowed, breaking out in a sweat. 'What do you mean?' He looked at Andrei, terrified beyond rational cause; he had expected them to kill him, not dig up his past.

'We know what you did. All we want you to do is do it again. How does that sound?' It was a plea rather than a threat, and it spoke to Oleg. 'Is it so bad that you must forget even who you were, what you did?'

'You're mad,' Oleg whispered, falling back on his last defence.

Andrei shook his head sadly. 'If I am mad, then so are you,' he said, turning away. 'Think about it, Professor: it's not so much. And you will do it, won't you? Because you want to. See you later ...'

He left. And Oleg sweated out the rest of the flight, cold as ice and frightened as a ghost. Because, when he forced himself to confront the issue, Andrei was substantially correct. Nothing would please him more than to do away with these turbulent humans, except for the cost of returning to his own worst nightmare ...

'They took off two hours ago, outbound for the Kola peninsula on a 192 with long-range fuel tanks and a detachment of military police. Looks like they're clear of you.'

'Shit.' Valentina thumped the table so hard that the telephone on it bounced. 'Can't you do anything about *it?'*

'Like what? Take them down?' The voice on the other end of the line was sardonic. 'Be sensible! He's only a dissident—'

She hung up angrily. 'Well?' called the base political officer from across the room.

'Air Defence says no,' she muttered; 'Well fuck 'em!'

'You could follow them,' suggested the captain, complacent in his insularity. 'It's only a slow cargo plane.'

'No. I'd still be too late. All they need is the authorization to run a quick sky-search; that's what Oleg had. An astronomer. Then blast three gigawatts of pulsed microwave energy in the direction of ...' she shuddered, searching for an excuse. 'The American early warning satellite.' What a *good lie.* We should never *have let them discover the wheel ...*

'I didn't know it was that serious,' the base political complained. 'If they'd warned us, through proper channels—'

'Forget it,' she snapped. She stared out of the window of the office, towards the runway where the MiG-29s squatted on their landing gear like menacing green wasps. 'Those birds. Any of them ready to go? With a passenger?'

'But they're single-seaters—' the political stood up, paused for a moment of indecision—'I think one of them's a trainer, though. You're going to requisition a fighter?'

Valentina turned and stared at him. 'Why not?' she asked, deceptively innocent. 'The man's got to be stopped. He's dangerous. I've got to get where he's going—fast. Can you suggest anything better?'

'Can *you?'* challenged the captain. 'I mean, it's all very **well** for **you, but** me—I've got to answer to **the** boss! Who will be unhappy, unless—'

'Name a price. Bill Department Seven Special Circumstances for the budget.' She was already halfway to the door when she paused. 'Where do you keep your flight suits?' she asked.

The base security officer was smiling. This way,' he said. 'You're really going after him? To get there first and arrest him?' Valentina nodded, unwilling to trust her own tongue. 'That's great! Just like in the movies!' And he held the door open for her as she went to collect her flight kit.

Six twenty-three:

Almost before it taxied to a halt beside the dispatch terminal, a personnel carrier drew up beside the jet. The evening sun scattered in orange shards from the truncated pyramids in the distance; a fine powder of snow dusted the runway beneath the aircraft's nose. An ancient military stairlift drew up beside the cockpit canopy as it swung open. As Valentina clambered down the ladder she discovered a welcoming committee. 'Major Valentina Pavlova? Major Rostopov, base security. I hope you have an explanation for this.' The spokesman wore a coat with major's epaulettes and a smile as charmless as a rattlesnake. His guards were decked out in full winter combat gear, rifles held at the ready.

'There's an explanation all right. Who are you?' Valentina shivered in her flight suit: it was a summer's evening, and the temperature had already dropped below freezing.

'Your papers—'

Valentina stared at him coldly. 'Contact Leningrad Central KGB. The exchange code is gold nine zero five. Ask to be connected to the office of Marshal Dmitri Yazov. Explain that Major Pavlova is here and you ***require clearance to*** **proceed.'**

Rostopov recoiled slightly, then caught himself. 'And if I don't?' he asked sharply. This is a cold country, major. Have you noticed which way the wind is blowing?'

'Or you can contact Moscow Parliament. Ask for the office of the President. Tell Comrade Yeltsin's secretary to read you Presidential Emergency Decree forty—'

'Enough.' Rostopov raised his hands abruptly, as if surrendering. 'If you would care to get inside the carrier—I'm sure we can discuss this in my office—' He looked as if he had tasted something extremely bitter.

'No time. I want to go to the Priority Installation, not the airfield. Can you take me there directly?'

'The Priority ...' Rostopov stared at her. 'What is this? You've got the Emergency Committee and the President in your pocket and ... shit, I don't believe this!' He clambered into the body of the APC, still muttering vaguely. 'You *bet* I'm going to check your credentials, comrade, this is extremely irregular—'

Valentina followed him into the passenger compartment. As she did so she removed her right hand from her pocket. The Stetchkin automatic that nestled inside had not been needed—this time. *It's amazing how gullible the confusion makes them ...*

The carrier rumbled off towards the compound gates, under the gaze of the perimeter guards. She sat very still, waiting for the hot-air blowers to blast the chill out of the rattling metal box. It felt unnatural, in a way that she had never really learned to block out; too much living among humans numbed the senses, trained them to ignore alien smells and ways. She'd have told her brother it was a bad idea if he'd ever asked, back when they were young—but he wasn't likely *to ask such* penetrating questions, and she was not about to volunteer her opinion without it first being requested. That was the basis of all her relationships, after all. She remembered all too well where breaking that rule had got her in the past.

As they travelled, Major Rostopov tried to wheedle information out of her. This Valentina found vaguely amusing. 'What is going on, comrade, that can't wait until the current situation blows over? You nearly gave the Colonel a heart attack when he heard what kind of speed that bird of yours was doing—he thought it was a yankee F-lll coming down his throat—what gives?'

She yawned. 'It's been a long day, Major. And very unpleasant. Wet working conditions, if you take my meaning.' Rostopov blanched and shut his mouth with an audible snap, then scrambled forward into the driver's section.

The carrier rumbled through a tight turn and stopped while the outer gate opened in front of it. Rostopov reappeared. 'I can take you as far as the commandant's office,' he said. 'They won't let this vehicle go any further. You'd better have your papers ready.'

Valentina nodded. 'That will do.'

The diesel wound up into a full-throated howl and the armoured personnel carrier went to full speed. It was all she could do to prevent herself from being thrown from wall to wall like a rag doll; conversation was out of the question. For a gut-freezing moment she tried to remember whether she'd set the safety on her gun: a Stetchkin *looked* like a pistol, but it could discharge a full magazine in only a second, spraying white-hot lead around the whole compartment. That was why she'd chosen it. I *might only get the one chance*. Somehow the thought elated her at the same time as it *scared* her to death: it made her think of blood-red nights and flesh-hot mouths, of predatory passions that humans *could not and* should not understand. She'd come a long way for this, unimaginably far.

The one chance—she remembered her brother, the last night. He'd gone away when she was a baby, leaving her alone with their parents: gone away to school in the city where buildings of stone scraped at the sky until it wept stars of blood. Left her to years of cloying intimacy, the family that lived alone on the tundra in a hovel that froze from the inside out in winter: strange, inbred folk ignored by humans, shunned by everyone but the nomadic trappers ... it couldn't last for ever. When he returned from the unimaginably distant city she was older and wiser, but not old enough. He took her by the hand: 'I love you, sister,' he said, 'you're the only one.' Twenty years older than she was and he was right, there were no other kin within five hundred kilometres. When he touched her her skin caught fire and burned with an alien heat. 'Let me show you why,' he said.

They had gone outside in the woods, he and she, alone at dusk in summer, when the mosquitos bred

in swarms above the stagnant ponds that lay among the roots of decaying pine trees. The summer tundra was stagnant and fetid, like a bloated corpse. He'd led her by the hand, deep into the woods along a path that human eyes could never follow, to a small glade surrounded by dead trees. There he set fire to her senses with his hands and body: it was not a new experience, for she was Weerde and fey and coming into adulthood in a land where the ice rarely melted. When she came she bayed like a wolf at the midnight sun.

Afterwards, as they lay side by side together, he said *to* her slyly: 'I have a secret, sister. Do you want to know what it is?'

Still warm from his embrace, she had said yes, she did. 'It's the humans. The trappers. Do you wonder why so few have visited us this spring?'

She'd nodded, mutely. Their absence had worried her unaccountably. They're not our people,' he said. 'Ancient, primitive ... they think they know it all. But we scare them. They mutter curses and keep their women behind the covers of their yurts because they think we possess the evil eye. Maybe they'd tell the communists, but they're afraid of us ... the hex is still stronger than the red star. You know something? They're right.'

He stood, naked, above her: shape melting into the trees like the ghost of something unimaginably ancient. No longer human, but raw and elemental as the winter. 'I hold the key, sister. I know where It dwells; the thing with no Name, of which the legends speak.' Leaning down, he helped her rise. Inhuman eyes glittered in the un-night. 'One day this will return, whether we will it or no. They sensed this, I think. I had no alternative.'

Together they walked deeper into the forest, where the trees wove overhead into a canopy of darkness and the ground was a rancid mulch of needles, he leading and she following. 'They came in the night to lead the kommunisti to us,' he said.

Deep foreboding chilled her to the core: 'What have you done?' she demanded.

'Didn't want to lose you,' he said, reaching for her hands. 'They were doomed anyway. In the nature of their people. Look.' She looked. Saw what he had done to the traders who had been their only contact with the outside world. 'I did it for you, my love. Didn't want to lose you. What's wrong?'

She remembered bending her head forward to kiss the dead thing that passed for an altar, no longer breathing, gagging on the stench of decomposition—'One *day this will return, whether we will it* or no'—striking out, *changing* her face, her mind, her memory to expunge the memory until the day a year later when she woke up to see a letter lying on her straw-filled pillow—her fingers flexed involuntarily, opening and closing like talons. Why *did it fall to* me *to he born to the parents of a monster?* He couldn't leave her alone; through all the years he'd tracked her, from a distance, known where to find her. Bracing herself against one green-painted wall, she reached into her pocket for reassurance. But he'd never dared to face her down, to venture an explanation. Happiness is a warm gun. Yes, there it was: the sick feeling in her stomach subsiding momentarily. A flash of malice made her shudder with its intensity; J hope he's still there, *the bastard. So many lost years to* answer for, and when he *finally calls it's only to tell me* ...

She noticed Major Rostopov was back. He was staring at her. She let herself smile back at him; let it all shine out, then closely observed the fear sketch livid shadows beneath his eyes.

Seven-fourteen:

Tracking Control was a cavernous chamber in a bunker deep beneath the permafrost, protected by layers of air defence missiles and interceptor squadrons against the day when the B-52s came over the horizon. Oleg Meir felt anything but safe, though. Even with Andrei behind him, smoothing the way at every turn and smiling-joking with the Colonel in charge, it felt wrong. Perhaps it was guilt. Oleg knew exactly what he was doing ... and he had a feeling that Andrei, however strong his faith in the Dark might be, did not. Besides which, Oleg knew who was coming. Fear and guilt roiled inside him until he felt almost hollow. *What if she's right?* He worried. What *if she hasn't forgotten?*

'So I would like it if you could load the ephemerides and begin transmitting for a period of one hour as soon as the message is loaded. Think you can manage that?' asked Andrei.

The captain in charge of the post nodded. 'And bill the Institute ... for SETI? Think we'll find

anything, Comrade Academician?' He seemed to be more bemused than anything else.

Oleg shrugged uncomfortably, glancing at Andrei, who smiled down at him with tight-pursed lips. Tt's a theory. We need to complete it for a thesis, big international conference, you know the sort of thing. Anyway, the Americans haven't done it yet—they've listened, Project Ozma back in the sixties was the first—but transmitted? If this trial is a success we'll be able to get backing for a full research project. Who knows? We might even get to keep the big dish, whatever arms treaties they come up with.'

The captain's eyes glittered. Like far too many of the hairless apes, Oleg realized, he thought of his machines as being more human than other people. 'So what is the text of the message, exactly?' he asked.

Andrei nudged Oleg surreptitiously. Oleg tapped a couple of keys on the shielded terminal, calling up a listing. He'd loaded it off tape barely an hour since, under Andrei's wary eye. He hadn't given him an inch of slack, whatever he might have said on the flight in; Oleg was precisely as free as he had been before, handcuffed or otherwise. 'It's a fractal. Random looking, in the most unimaginably deterministic way. There are very few ways you can decode it, and all of them imply that it is no coincidence ... the message is the medium, in this case. With three gigawatts punching it out, it should be quite deafening out to a couple of hundred light-years' range. If I get the chance to repeat, we'll need to sustain it for a full year.' But *we* won't need *to,* thought Oleg. *Not if the old legends are correct. If thoughts alone could summon it, even a* fraction *of a megawatt beaming the right message should he overkill ...*

That's settled, then,' said the captain. 'All I need is the authorization—oh.' He stopped, looked up.

Andrei leaned over Oleg's chair and turned the full force of his personality on the hapless officer. 'I'll see to that at once! I'm sure Colonel Blavatsky will agree; after all the project release has been signed by the ministry, hasn't it?' He smiled, baring spotless teeth, and the captain nodded back helplessly. 'Perhaps you'd like to load the transmission sequence now and run it through the modulator stage, just to check that there are no unforeseen problems ... you're sure you can transmit on twenty-one centimetres? The, uh, water hole?'

'H-band, yes.' He nodded so violently that one of the technicians glanced round in concern before bending back over his diagnostic station. 'Of course. You want me to load it? Sure.'

He began tapping keys on his terminal at a surprising rate. Oleg watched, fascinated and terrified at the same time: his authorization on this system didn't extend to actually issuing commands. It was all automated—a phased array radar was nothing more than a series of pulses propagating through silicon, after all—but still it made him catch his breath, to see a pallid-looking captain sitting at a desk steer a billion roubles of electronics to point at an ephemeris from which no American missile could possibly originate ...

There was a banging, some way off in the building. Oleg ignored it, watching instead the big wall screen that painted the beam path across a polar map of the Union. The highlighted strip jumped, suddenly, pointing inwards and upwards; a searchlight beacon of microwaves pouring energy out towards the stars. 'That's good,' he said, encouragingly.

The young officer grinned back. 'We can point it anywhere,' he said, 'even down here, if we wanted to fry our brains out. Hey—' He made as if to stand up, but Oleg caught his hand and held it.

'Sit down,' he said softly. 'Let the Colonel deal with it.' Behind him, Andrei was moving towards the door. 'You don't actually think this is a good thing to do?' he asked the captain, suddenly curious to hear this young man pronounce upon his own species' demise.

For a moment doubt flickered across the young man's features. 'What makes you ask that, comrade? Is this some kind of political thing?'

A shadow of exasperation crossed Oleg's features. 'They don't tell you anything out here, do they? About the coup? It'll collapse, you know, but the Union will go on in one form or another. No, not politics. Just ... think what might lie out there! What hideous evil we might be summoning down when you transmit that call sign ...'

But the captain shook his head and grinned. 'But you must be wrong, comrade! Look—' before Oleg could stop him he punched keys. 'I send it now! And you know, of course if they can understand

what they are reading in decades' time from now, they must be *more* intelligent than us, more civilized! Mustn't they?'

Oleg stared at the anonymous soldier, utterly aghast. There was a staccato banging noise in the distance. For a moment ice water coursed through his veins instead of blood. *What have you done* ... 'Of course, if you are wrong, you might have killed the human race.' He felt a giant laugh, two-thirds relief and one-third terror, rumble through the back of his head like an echo of thunder, the humour of a mad god. Acutely aware of the guards, the guns pointing ever inwards, his guts melted to jelly. You *fool! The most important event in the history of your* species and you *do it because of* a *discredited political theory!* It's humans Jike you *who screwed* us over so *badly that this is the only way out*—a grand, manic hilarity bubbled up inside him, thirty years of terror set free in a single moment.

The captain, oblivious, shook his head and smiled. 'Rubbish, comrade! Any aliens sophisticated enough to read your message, of course they'll be good communists, won't they? I mean, it stands to reason that all intelligent life must be evolving towards—'

Oleg felt a sudden gust of cold air on his neck. The captain stood up, mouth hanging open, as Oleg spun round in his chair to face his sister, her frozen vengeful face, the ridiculously small pistol she clutched in her hands—'You can't be serious,' he tried to say, smiling with embarrassment and fear—'I didn't do it. They did it to themselves! After all these years I never even had to raise a finger!' Staring down the barrel of a loaded gun, he wondered as if for the first time if he might be held accountable: 'Won't you be reasonable? Talk to me!'

His sister took a step forward; and for a moment Oleg thought he saw her smile. 'What's there to talk about?' she asked.

'Everything—' he began.

But he was much too late.

Epilogue: Raised Voices In A Reading Room: II

Roz Kaveney

'I did not call you as a witness,' the scaly Lord of Stasis said in puzzlement as Valentina finished her story. 'I shall kill you, I think, in an exemplary manner, for this interruption of your elders and betters.'

'I am not interested in your prerogatives,' Valentina said. 'And I can face your threats with calm. Sometimes it is more important that the facts be known. It is not fear of your punishments that makes my voice tremble. You have got to understand, all of you. The Dark is coming.'

The scaly one towered over her, its great claws unsheathed for bloodshed.

'I have invoked,' Chepstow said, 'the Truce of knowledge. I believe that it holds for anything said or done in this council, though I am prepared to stand corrected.'

'You are, of course, correct,' the gracile Lord of Chaos said.

It turned to Chepstow's Ancient.

'I did not know you were part of the Shanghai business,' it said.

'Sins of my youth,' Chepstow's Ancient—who must, he realized, be the Saunders of Charlotte Matthews's stories—rumbled apologetically. Typical of humans to rake up old scandals.'

'Chaoticists and Progressives,' the scaly one bellowed.

'Revealer scum. I call on you to witness that there has to be an accounting ...'

'Do shut up, my good man,' Chepstow said, 'you are not helping your case even slightly.'

The squat Ancient pulled at the scaly one's arm, and whispered into its ear. It subsided, muttering.

'Gentlepersons of the jury,' Chepstow continued, 'no case against humanity has been proved. More importantly, there is real danger now both to you and us. I suggest that this hearing be adjourned to consider the real crisis. The Dark is coming. You are concerned, all of you, with how your actions will look in the Fifty Lives, in the Songs of the Lines. And you cannot leave humanity defenceless before the Dark without risking condemnation and namelessness.'

The two small Ancients had moved to the front of the crowd.

‘This is exciting,’ one said. ‘I could never vote for the extermination of humans. They are too much fun.’

‘I still say we should kill them all,’ the squat one said, but fell silent when it realized that none were offering him support.

‘Remember,’ Chepstow said, as if he had not been interrupted, ‘the Dark is coming. If it arrives, and we apes are not here, can you rely on its slinking back into its intergalactic thicket unfed? The Dark is coming. Dare you face it alone, and risk the end of the Lives, the *end* of the Song? The Dark is coming. This, above all, is the time in history when Weerde and human must stand, or fall, together. The Dark is coming.’

He slumped exhausted. Around him, the Ancients murmured their way through a vote that was irrelevant, whatever its result. There was no pleasure in this victory. There would be no victories ever again, and, he feared, only the very grimmest of defeats. *The Dark is coming.*

About the Editors

Neil Gaiman is co-author of the bestselling apocalyptic fantasy *Good Omens*, with Terry Pratchett, but is better known for his work in the comics medium, particularly for his ongoing dark fantasy *Sandman*, which has won lots of awards. He comes up with quite a few of the ideas for *Midnight Rose*, while other people do the real work: Alex Stewart did all the heavy lifting on *Temps* (also published in ROC), and Mary Gentle and Roz Kaveney had to get their hands dirty with *The Weerde* and the ROC anthology *Villains!*

Mary Gentle is known for her science-fiction novels *Golden Witchbreed* and *Ancient Light,* and most recently for the Renaissance technoBaroque fantasies *Rats and Gargoyles* and *The Architecture of Desire.* She edits for Midnight Rose Ltd, and reviews for Interzone. She has an MA in seventeenth-century studies and continues with unrelated research. In her spare time she runs around a lot, swordfighting, and shooting people in laser-gaming events. She is a born-again redhead.

Roz Kaveney is probably best known as a journalist and reviewer writing on science fiction, comics and other topics for the *New Statesman, Foundation, City Limits* and The *Sunday Times.* At one time or another she has read for most of the SF lists in London, and edited the two *Tales from the Forbidden Planet* anthologies. In what would otherwise be her spare time, she is an anti-censorship and civil-liberties activist.