

neoAddix

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There is not one person, indeed, not one living being that has not returned from the grave.
Tibetan Book of the Dead

'Life is very dangerous and few survive it.'
William Burroughs

Alex Doloroso

Outside the wind was mostly blue - thin strips of pale blue that twisted between the riverside buildings, one thread running into another like circuit tracery or the veins in a human arm.

The girl shuddered, sweat dripping down her face, her mouth open in a long silent scream.

Then she woke.

There was blood between her thighs. And on the sheet. And streaked across the lower back of her thin white nightdress.

If her mother - or father - had been alive. Or if the previous Pope hadn't decreed human biology to be an improper subject for a child of gentle background. In fact, if she'd been anything other than what she was, the only grandchild of a minor prince growing up alone in the imperial Paris of Napoleon V, she might have known that thirteen was really rather late for her first period.

As it was, she remained ignorant. The twenty-second century was big on ignorance.

So Maxine did what she always did when some fact puzzled her, she slid an ancient Encyclopaedia Napoleonika disc into her tatty Sony ROM-Reader, and punched in 'find/relate'. The Reader was old Thai silicon-punk retro, complete with miniature qwerty keypad, but it wasn't nearly as difficult to operate as the makers had once pretended.

The manufacturers had intended for the information to be displayed on the ROM-Readers tiny screen, but Maxine was in a hurry so she pulled the information straight into her mind, scrolling it passed the inside of her eyes. She had no idea how she performed that particular trick, but as long as it worked that didn't worry her.

Rapidly Maxine scanned diagrams of ovaries, uteri, fallopian tubes - digesting reproductive statistics, medical probabilities, a potted history of contraception. It seemed the stained nightdress wasn't the disaster she'd imagined. She wasn't bleeding to death at all...

Later, after she'd rescanned the entry under 'menarche' and carefully hidden away the tarnished silver circle of her stolen Napoleonika disc, the girl washed herself down using a cotton flannel and cold water from the jug on her marble wash stand. Then she folded up the sheet and dropped it, along with her soiled nightdress into a wicker laundry basket.

As she did so, Maxine de Pommerol Melusine wondered whether to tell Grandpa about the bleeding - and decided not.

Instead, come breakfast she'd call Razz. Which would be enough to upset Grandpa in itself. It never failed to horrify him that his quiet, studious granddaughter sought out the company of someone so obviously her inferior. What he didn't realise Maxine thought crossly, kicking her heels against the edge of her wooden bed, was that Razz and she had a lot in common - starting with their shared hatred of the man who owned Razz, Grandpa's lawyer Mr Rosary.

Luckily for Razz, Mr Rosary spent much of his time in Mexico, Japan and Megrib, too busy researching old documents to worry about what kind of trouble Razz got into back home.

Which was just as well.

Perhaps it was a by-product of her mirror-like silver skin, vat grown at an expensive clinic in Budapest and Pantone-matched to the chrome trim of her old retrofitted Kawasaki 500i; or maybe it was the angry glint in her bug-eyed silver contacts. Whatever it was, Razz had a way of attracting trouble. Exotics always did.

And with her shoulder armour of cultured lizard skin layered over genuine shark cartilage, and her virally-enhanced reflexes, Razz was as exotic as exotics got.

A rich shit's plaything, was how Razz put it.

Maxine sighed heavily. Menstrual blood, organs of reproduction - at least she now understood the theory. But what she really needed was a guide to the practicalities, and if anyone knew what to do about that sort of stuff it would be Razz...

As she drifted back into slumber, the young girl hit a familiar blizzard of white static; like a storm of electric snow or a ROM-vid run swiftly in reverse. Tumbling through it, she found herself floating down towards a city she'd never visited, but had seen night after night in her dreams.

London before the fire bombs, maybe five or six months ago. Last summer when its outer sprawl of high-rise slums was still standing, in crude concrete contrast to the sleek glass and chrome zaibatsu enclaves within its square mile. The slum towers were mostly gone now, of course, their tenants burnt out by fanatics from the Vernacular Revival Front.

Of course the metaNationals had proved tougher. Which was why they still held tight to their square mile, with its status of European financial freeport. Maxine knew all about it, she'd seen the mini-series starring Sonia Macmillan one evening in Razz's kitchen when Mr Grant was away, on CySat C3N.

If she was still falling, it was so slow now that Maxine couldn't feel the drop. As it was every night, the deserted railway station was right there below her, set slightly back from a sluggish grey river, its arched roof a mosaic of broken green glass and rusting steel girders.

Between the empty sidings of Waterloo Station and the fifty-foot wide, mile-long strip of water's edge shanty town called Thames Embankment stood a vast fenced-off builder's plot. At the western end of the plot was a man, slumped against a shed door.

There was something strange about him. And as always, at first Maxine couldn't quite work out what it was. Then she remembered.

He'd been crucified.

The New Death Waltz

But that crucifixion was already old, unused news. Digitized somewhere, gathering the binary equivalent of dust in a C3N CySat databank.

While Maxine slept, tonight's news was happening closer to home, down on the banks of the River Seine, where time froze and then stopped for Parisian tramp Louis Lepad as steel fingernails reached for his throat.

For once the dim starlight was not washed out by the glare of Coca Cola's revolving hologram, nor by the neon cross & double helix of the Church Geneticist. Communard terrorists had blown up the Rue Jacob substation, leaving darkness.

The Prince smiled, an old man's grin. He at least welcomed that night's power cut... Spearing quickly through krycoid cartilage, the Prince's fingers closed on the gnarled, stick-like column of the tramp's upper spine and snapped it like a twig.

Lepad dropped, a twitching heap of filthy rags, his opened throat bright as a scarf whose ends flowed over the cobbles, melting frost as they went. The stink of voided bowels mixing uneasily with a richer, darker scent - the salt signature of blood.

'Take this and drink,' the killer's voice was ironic, as chilly as the winter wind that fingered the bare trees lining the river bank. But that didn't matter to the kitten he called from the shadows. Skeletal, little more than a handful of bones in a purse of tattered fur, it padded past the Prince's boots towards the rapidly cooling puddle.

While the Prince smiled, and bent briefly to stroke the starving animal, the body of Corporal Louis Lepad, veteran of a hundred commando raids in Southern Megrib, and lately homeless, helpless Parisian drunk lay there like the dead meat he'd become. His pock-marked, dirt encrusted face showing no horror, not even fear. Just drunken bewilderment that death came in such a form, that it happened at all.

Almost without being aware of it, the Prince let his silver talons reconstruct atom by atom, individual nanites flowing swiftly up the back of his hand to reform as a heavy silver bracelet. It was his fifth kill in nine months. He was tempted to keep hunting but there would be time enough later, for now it would be unwise to draw undue attention to himself...

The Prince grunted in amusement, entertained that his thoughts still used the flowery phrases of polite society, even as he stood over a dead and stinking body.

All it took was practice - and would be plenty of that. No matter how often the police bussed the unSocials out beyond the peripherique, the city's six-lane ring road, the derelicts always found their way back.

Every shit-smear arch, every tattered graveyard and boarded-up parking lot had its unwelcome tribe of the filthy, the homeless, the dispossessed. And as yet none would be missed. Certainly not by the prefecture imperial who had more urgent matters to deal with than slaughtered tramps.

Keeping to the shadows, the Prince moved swiftly along a narrow river walk under the pont des Arts. M-wave surveillance cameras watched his every move, as they always watched everyone, but no record of presence would be made. All they could catch was a transparent, ghost-like blur as the atoms of his body flicked frequency, in a rapid and random succession. It was just one of the advantages he enjoyed over those who were purely human.

To his left, the beaten silver surface of the Seine, on his right a high ferro-concrete wall that rose into the darkness. Overhead a basilica of stars shone in the pitch black winter's sky, their acid brightness another bonus of that night's power cut.

An elegantly retro Mitsubishi hover skimmed silently passed him along the river's Cimmerian surface, Sanyo speakers thudding with the hypnotic beat of Tokyo rap. Rich

Japanese tourists or black-silk suits from some Zaibatsu. One of them started to wave, then paused, looking puzzled as the thin onlooker on the bank seemed suddenly to vanish.

Smiling slightly, the Prince watched the hover continue downstream, on its way to an all-night New Year's Eve party in the Bois de Bologne.

Across the wide river came howls of raucous laughter, and then a thin inhuman scream that choked into sudden, startling silence. Jeering cheers followed immediately. Students from L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, blind drunk on some lethal Drexie-box mix of ethanol and synthetic aniseed. It had the all the trademarks of another lynching.

A smoke grey helicopter hung above the quartier. CySat's stark C/S logo luminous on the side of the pilot's plexiglass bubble. Not that CySat need use a real pilot. An aerospattiale, k119 drone would have performed just as well, if not better. But the public liked knowing there was a real woman up there on their behalf, dodging bullets and coping with erratic weather conditions. And CySat couldn't risk faking the shots with some Lotusmorph talking head.

Slung underneath the 'copter, like a stunted cannon was an instant-focus Zeiss tri-D holocam, programmed to capture any movement below on infrared. It was that night's news in the making.

Three days before, shock troops from the Compagnie Imperiale de Securite had smashed the latest Sorbonne uprising in a ritual orgy of violence, to the highest ratings CySat had ever seen; and yet already Pierre Nexus, the Imperial Minister for Security had been forced to make concessions, doubling the number of state-managed, limited-function nanotech food compilers - the notorious Drexie-boxes. Within the last three hours he'd even been forced into a promise to stop tearing down the mesh of illegal CySat feeds that spread like a web between housing projects strung in a circle outside the peripherique.

If the citizen wanted to watch CySat then Pierre Nexus was going to make sure they saw what he wanted them to see. Strong, visual images were needed to disguise his climb-down. And CySat was happy to provide them - even to non-paying viewers. (Given CySat Europ's 48% stake in the current French government it was only commercial common sense.)

Down river again, just beyond the 120v electric street gates that fenced in the semi-tolerated, hereditary anarchy of the Quartier Latin, lights glittered as the city's power returned suddenly, illuminating the huge circular windows of the Muse, Napoleon, a baroque railway station turned obscenely-rich art gallery.

There was a New Year soiree in progress. Ornately-uniformed North African diplomats, silk-suited American CEOs, yakuza grandees and CySat stars, all had been politely lining up in the dark to peer at the latest mid-period Warhol in the Imperial collection.

The Prince smiled slightly. There was art and then there was Art. And his was the purest of all, and he was without doubt its oldest, greatest master.

Above him, Coca Cola's famous lasergram lit up mid sequence, beating by a split second the half-mile high, Eiffel-Tower based projection of the Geneticist's famous neon trademark. Elsewhere the Parisian night slowly turned orange until the stars faded out and the dark sky dissolved into a reflected dome of sodium streetlight.

The bitter wind was whipping at his heavy silk cloak, dragging it out behind him like a welcome shadow. He was happy to back where he belonged, killing again. It had been too long, much too long since his last round of hunting trips down here where he belonged... On the bank of the Seine at night. Here was one of the wonders of the nether world. A black, blank stretch of chipped cobbles and stunted rye-grass, haunted by weasels and feral cats. A hunting ground for owls that flitted silently in from the cemetery at Pere Lachaise, their wide eyes only slightly less well adapted to the dark than his.

This was a place that most humans had the sense to avoid.

On the wet roads that ran high above both sides of the river, a line of cars and diesel hovers raced their engines and grated gearboxes. Drunk, impatient or just oblivious, the traffic stopped and started its way through the late Saturday night drizzle. Like personal matter compilers, autodrive was illegal within the city, except for registered nobles. Another imperial edict that made no sense.

All of Paris was in a hurry to get somewhere else. Except for him, except down here where he could take his time, savouring the cold swirling water.

The Prince moved forward slowly, tucked tightly against the wall. Casually dulling his night vision, he increased the flow of blood to his olfactory epithelium. Little larger than a thumb nail and situated within his nasal cavity, over 35 different types of sensor studded its rough surface - five types more than was usual. It brought him odour molecules of something warm and earthy, a new scent and a new hunger.

Up ahead, hidden from the M-wave cameras in an alcove under the thick stone arch of the next bridge lay two people, engrossed only with each other's bodies. A flicker of amusement crossed the Prince's thin face. Centuries might pass but some things at least never changed.

The Prince could smell their need long before he could hear it.

'Marc... Oh God, please... Fuck me...'

The young American girl's voice was husky. Above her a stocky French boy, cropped hair and gang tattoo, used one hand to unbuckle himself in the dark. His other hand, fingers slick and probing, was wedged wetly between her salt thighs.

Hunger rocked through the Prince, stark as lightning. They were young, not tramps at all. Kids looking for somewhere to rut in peace.

The girl was maybe fifteen. Dark-haired, almost pretty in that wide-cheeked, dumb innocent mid-Western way... Though, right now, she looked anything but innocent, her head arched back, eyes tight shut, the boy's scuffed gang jacket thrust under her bare buttocks.

Her unbuttoned white shirt and rucked-up bra revealed plump, pubescent breasts tipped by large pale nipples. The superfine lavender cotton of an Italian-made Comme de Garcons skirt was scrunched round her naked hips.

She had those long hard-muscled legs that American girls get in adolescence. Tanned from melanin enhancers and smooth from radiowave electrolysis. Her knees were spread, her body ready. She stank gloriously of salt and blood, of low molecular-weight acids that signalled sweat and desire.

But there was something else that increased the Prince's hunger, that magnified it to a raw craving. Something the cocksure, arrogant boy waiting above her didn't yet know. Something Jennifer Mayer wanted to tell him.

Marc Levine hadn't bothered to strip. He didn't need to. It was mid-winter, almost midnight and he no longer cared about impressing the American girl. He didn't need to. He'd had her before. These days for him it was a simple swap, she opened her legs he gave her drugs. It was enough for him that he'd bothered to push his washed-out 501s down round his ankles.

Things would have been different if she were poor, or even not American. Then he could have slapped her around a bit, made her panhandle for him, hustling 'crypt chips or herself. But she wasn't poor, and when he'd suggested hustling she'd just stared at him.

Angrily Marc thrust deep into her and then pulled back, grinning as her scrabbling fingers tried to find his hips.

'God...' She pushed desperately up towards him, her words collapsing into a long pleading moan. That she liked the sex amused him.

Marc smiled. Rich kids were all the same. With a knowing grin, he grabbed Jennifer's narrow wrists and wrenched them savagely above her head, stretching her full body taut beneath him.

Then he stopped, poised above her.

'Go on,' he ordered. 'Beg for it.'

She did.

That was when Death stepped from the shadows.

The boy never saw him, never even looked round. Not that it would have made any difference. Nothing on earth could have saved Marc Levine from the fate that had come looking for him.

With one sickening blow, the killer sank razor-sharp nails into Marc's back. Blood bubbled up in red gout around the killer's wrist, as rigid fingers pushed for the boy's still beating heart, found it and ripped it clean out through a gaping hole in his back.

Dead but still mid-scream, blood exploding from mouth, Marc's body collapsed twitching onto the naked girl. All Jennifer could see were Marc's terrified eyes frozen open as they stared straight at her.

Gibbering with fright, Jenny struggled out from beneath her dead lover, his blood splattered across her stomach and breasts. Her mouth open in a silent scream that wouldn't come. Desperately she tried to back away from the advancing figure but the path behind her was blocked.

Something the killer already knew.

At her back, the curved walls of the arch ended at a huge polymer gate, time-locked each day at sunset. There should also have been an M-wave surveillance camera - in fact, there was an M-wave camera - but it was broken and for at least six months no one had bothered to have it mended.

That was why Marc always chose this bridge. Why he always proudly regarded the arch as his. With only one way in, it reduced the risk of the police coming at him from both sides, and also made it isolated enough for Marc to deal, threaten or do what he wanted with some punter.

True, other gangs occasionally roamed the river at night, but they didn't frighten Marc. Marc always carried a pearl-handled Italian shockblade and besides, it was his proud boast that nothing ever scared him.

He also carried a pirated timekey for the gate, but Jenny didn't know that, and even if she had Jenny wouldn't have stood a chance of getting it. She looked down at the mutilated body and a frightened sob escaped from between Jenny's trembling lips. Then she looked up at his killer and her jaw went slack.

Marc's bleeding heart was clenched in the figure's hand. Death had been waiting for her full attention and now he had it. The figure stepped forward and politely offered her the bloody lump of meat.

Terrified, Jennifer refused, shaking her head.

'Strange,' the figure said in a voice that was old as sin and soft as a malicious whisper. 'I thought his heart was the one thing you wanted?'

Dark eyes held hers. They seemed to be reading her frightened, muddled thoughts. 'No?' The Prince shrugged. 'Then perhaps you want me to rid you of something else?'

Jennifer backed away until the locked gate pushed cold and hard at her back.

Death was smiling. A terrible cold smile that made her soft skin crawl. His dark eyes were burning now, spinning the world around her, further muddling her already terrified mind.

Softly the Prince touched her face. One long nail running softly across her cheek in a dark caress. Jennifer screamed, as her flesh bubbled and burnt beneath his touch.

In shock, she sensed rather than felt the hand stroke her abdomen, sensed the long fingers enter her body. Something warm and liquid began to trickle down the inside of her leg.

Jennifer looked down, but the long glistening nails had already vanished. All she could see was a thin wrist disappearing inside her.

'Ask and it shall be given you,' the voice whispered softly. And then the Prince smiled.

Anguish rocked through her. She was being ripped open. Every muscle in her body locked stiff with sheer, unbelievable shock. Jennifer's scream was animal-like, as his fingers dug deeper, long flowing talons penetrating through muscle and gristle until they found their prize.

In the two or three seconds it took her to die, she saw her unformed child, small as a kitten, ripped from her uterus.

The thin figure nodded sadly, stared at the dead teenage pimp and then glanced at the young girl. He was worthless, but she was pretty. Her whole spoilt over-privileged life had been a waste, without direction - until that moment.

Carefully, very carefully, the Prince wrapped the tiny foetus in a white silk handkerchief and put the neat bundle into his coat pocket, which sealed itself shut against the air.

Encyclopaedia Napoleonika

The girl shuddered, sweat dripping down her face, her mouth open in a long silent scream.

Then she awoke.

There was blood between her thighs. And on the sheet. And streaked across the lower back of her white nightdress.

Except that when she looked again, there wasn't. There was daylight outside and she was wearing an old cotton blouse - and the soiled nightdress was where she'd discarded it, in a rolled up ball in the wicker washing basket.

It was raining outside, huge silver puddles spreading out across the cobbled courtyard of the Hotel Sabatini, her grandfather's Parisian house. On the river beyond its heavy stone gate, an early morning barge was pushing its long, rusty container load of compacted refuse down stream to the EC matter-deconstructor at Trynan. Maxine could hear the diesels cut back as the barge started to negotiate a narrow gap under Verdun Bridge. Across the Seine the south bank was quiet and for once deserted.

She hated Sundays.

Climbing from her bed, Maxine pulled her long black hair into a single thick braid, so heavy it gave her headaches, and stared at her face in an old wall mirror. After months of nightmares she should have looked thinner, surely? But she didn't. Her cheeks were still too full, with no cheekbones to speak of. Her jaw line was heavy, her chin pugnacious. And her skin was still the same drab olive which mixed Sicilian, Crusader and Arab DNA demanded.

Even her nose was too prominent for the soft, rather sulky mouth beneath it. She fantasized often about undergoing a complete rebuild, no matter how vulgar that might be. Why shouldn't she be an ebony-skinned, six-foot Masai with high forehead and perfect breasts, or else a stick thin Thai girl? But this was Imperial France where such things were technically illegal. And anyway, as Grandpa never tired of saying, people like her didn't do things like that.

Simple surgery could have helped of course, but Grandpa wouldn't hear of that either.

'You're beautiful already,' he told her almost everyday. As if his belief could change the podgy, stuttering girl she saw each morning staring back in the mirror.

Maxine sighed. She wasn't pretty, not even attractive, and she was poor. Which seemed both absurd and unfair. Her great grandmother had been a fifth generation Silicon Valley heiress, her grandmother a beautiful Californian vid star in the days when soaps still used real actresses - long before CySat Gmb perfected Lotusmorph's talking heads or Sony commercialised the SimNet.

Maxine had no idea why she couldn't remember her mother and father. Or why, if Grandma had been a Van Damme, Grandpa apparently didn't have a credit to his name - and Grandpa pretended not to remember.

'She's ill.' Razz told the Prince sarcastically, when she finally came down from Maxine's bedroom, clutching a bundle of sheets.

The old man nodded gravely.

'Sweet Fucking Nazarene,' Razz hissed at Philippe, when the old man had limped back to his study. 'Hasn't the old bastard taught her anything at all?'

The valet's moon face flicked between anxiety and outrage, and Razz grinned, her ceramic teeth unnaturally white and sharp.

'Got the place bugged, has he?' Her eyes swept over the ornate hall with its tapestries, armour and marble floors, as if looking for tell-tale signs. But for all her viral enhancements, Razz couldn't detect electronic signals - not that Philippe knew that. He had a techno-peasant's awe of modern elective surgery.

A Matsui pager inset in Philippe's wrist abruptly buzzed, causing the portly man to jump. Razz watched as he digested the scrolling message, lips moving as he carefully read out each word to himself.

'She's excused Mass.' He announced in surprise.

'Fucking hope so,' Razz said coldly, sneering as Philippe's face tipped between mixed anxiety and outrage.

Public Mass was broadcast every Sunday morning from Notre Dame, and scheduled on all terrestrial channels. Attendance was now compulsory for all nobles visiting Paris, and required twice a month from all those licensed to live there. It was, said the Prince, only the stupid or the very powerful who tried to dodge their religious obligations. And crippled with fever or not, he attended every week without fail.

Rumour said the Vatican Bank had paid the Prince Imperial lavishly for promulgating that particular law. Rumour also said it was the Vatican's last chance to break the evangelical power of the Church of Christ Geneticist.

Speaking as someone who always chose the word on the street over what was said on the News, Razz didn't expect it to work. Who wanted to join the Pope in waiting for the Second Coming, when according to Geneticists the Son of God could be mixed up in some Petri dish...?

When Philippe mentioned almost apologetically that the prince wanted Razz to shop for whatever was necessary for Maxine and charge it to his account, she just snorted.

There was no account. Even Maxine knew that. Shopping in that sense was all but obsolete. The poor dressed and ate slop from state regulated, limited-function Drexler boxes. Only the nobility could own fully-functioning matter compilers, but of course they regarded the Drexie boxes with disdain, because what they ate and wore was real - reared or grown on efficiently run, even more efficiently guarded family estates. It went without saying that the Prince didn't own a matter compiler, any more than he had an account or owned an estate. Sometimes Razz wondered how he kept going at all.

Contemptuously, she accepted a handful of crumpled, almost worthless 10,000 franc notes from Philippe, and ostentatiously checked that she had a half-full credit chip with her. She had.

A minute or so later Philippe heard the roar of her bike, and the squeal of neoprene tires as she executed a derisive skid turn on the wet cobbles of the courtyard outside. The problem with Exotics was that they were so hard to discipline. You could threaten to sell them on - though that didn't always work, and the kind of augmentations most owners invested in meant you were bound to lose money - or you could whip them hard.

From what Philippe had heard, Mr Rosary had been enjoying that privilege from the beginning...

It was Razz who left the safe, sanitised centre of Paris and roared out to flea market Malik at Porte de Clingancourt. That was where she found Maxine an old-fashioned cotton nightdress, still in its yellowed cellophane with a label that read Samaritaine. And it was Razz who sat on the edge of Maxine's bed and using embarrassed, blunt language and a lot of jivetalk Maxine hadn't heard before, explained why women bleed.

Only Razz' explanation was so jumbled that once she'd gone, Maxine powered up her Sony and accessed the Napoleonika, just to make sure she hadn't misunderstood the facts first time round. She hadn't.

It really was that unlikely.

Maxine glanced towards the mirror and sighed, glad that Razz was finally gone. Razz might be only three years older, but she was an exotic, Mr Rosary's plaything. It wasn't surprising Razz' vision of life was darker, more basic than hers...

Tearing open the cellophane, Maxine shook out the nightdress and was amazed at how thick its cloth was. It was longer than she could remember since she'd had something completely new. Something of her own.

Of course she was pleased with Razz. But all the same, Maxine thought sadly, Razz didn't really understand. And the problem wasn't something Maxine could explain. Not just, not explain it to Razz but not explain it to anyone, even if there had been someone other than Razz to explain it too.

It wasn't the bleeding that upset the younger girl, it was the black river that ran like blood through her thoughts, and worse than the river - it was what she'd seen beside it in her dream.

The torn-out guts of an unSocial, pulsing on the cobbles. A foreign girl's obscene death agony. And reflected in the terrified eyes of a dying drunkard, her own face staring harshly back at her, as it was now from the mirror...

Unchanged.

Satan's Kiss

'Merde!'

The driver swore despite himself, slammed into reverse and slid the Citroen hover out of the path of the speeding bike. The silver exotic grinned as she gunned past his bonnet, flicked him the finger and was gone. It didn't matter that on his front fender, a digital camera had automatically snapped the incident as it happened and was even now uploading data to a central traffic computer.

He'd seen the corps noblique hologram glowing six inches from the bike's front wheel, she was protected and no charges would be pressed.

'I'm sorry, Madam,' he apologised into the small sub-voc mike glued lightly to the side of his throat, but if his passenger heard him, she didn't answer.

It wasn't quite 9am when the dark blue government Citroen hover dumped a cold and irritated, but still elegant woman onto the pavement of the Voie Prince Imperial. That cracked and ageing highway built alongside the Seine to speed traffic through the heart of Paris.

But being Sunday morning and mid-winter, the road itself was deserted. Except for three arrogantly parked armoured squad cars - Renaults - sirens stilled but blue lights still flicking lazily, drawn up on a grass verge at the start of Alexandre III bridge.

If the surveillance camera covering that arch had been working properly, this entire early morning farrago would have been unnecessary. As it was, she was reduced to scrabbling for evidence on site. Someone's head was going to roll... With an irritated sigh, Clare Fabio started walking towards the squad cars, picking her way through the wet grass, her heels squelching into the rain-sodden mud.

Dark thunder-clouds had taken over where the night had left off. The sky was ugly and gusts of damp wind shook heavy droplets of rain from the trees.

Any one with any sense was safely indoors, Clare thought crossly. And the sooner she got back to her apartment the better.

The Renaults were empty. Their uniformed occupants clustered in a tight group at the top of Emperor Steps. Whatever they'd found down on the river walk, the gendarmerie weren't in a hurry to inspect it again.

Clare Fabio reached the group just in time to hear the punchline to a particularly vicious retrovirus gag. It didn't help that Clare knew the politician in question or that the joke was almost certainly true.

Their laughter cut off abruptly when they saw who'd joined them. Though Clare knew the shuffling feet and sudden tight silence had little to do with respect.

No love was lost between the Paris police and the Imperial administration. And at thirty and already a prosecutor, Clare was on her way to being everything the bulls despised.

A prize-winning graduate of the Sorbonne, she'd made her name and unnumbered enemies breaking a Masonic corruption ring within the city's Works department.

Regarded as an act of either incredible courage or crass stupidity, it nevertheless catapulted her to the Prince Imperial's attention.

Clare Fabio was efficient, analytical and arrogant. She was also largely asexual, and deeply anorexic, a flaw she kept well hidden, but which she'd lived with since the age of eleven. And apart from two miserable one-night stands with an ambitious assistant five years her junior, she'd managed to avoid sex with anyone, male or female, for the last eighteen months.

The assistant she'd had transferred to the Byzantine mercies of the new European Credit Bank in Brussels. Even now the poor little sod still couldn't work out whether it was reward or punishment. Clare wasn't sure either.

These days she kept up a liaison of convenience with a young banker who felt it expedient to keep his true nature hidden. The arrangement worked well for both of them.

'Who's in charge?' Clare demanded abruptly.

The thickset sergeant jerked his thumb towards a younger, thinner man in a navy blue trench coat. 'He is... Madame.'

Someone sniggered.

Brandy hung on the sergeant's stale breath, along with garlic sausage and too many gauloises.

Clare looked the sergeant up and down, and the man suddenly appeared less certain. Her photographic memory and lack of forgiveness were legendary. She'd recognise him again. The sergeant cursed his luck, but quietly.

'This had better be good,' Clare said coldly. And watched by the whole group, she stalked over to the top of Emperor Steps. Nodding to the thin man, who moved aside for her, she began the slippery climb down, all to aware that she should have worn flat heels.

The stench hit Clare's nostrils when she reached the first bend in the staircase. Like diarrhoea or bad meat. And it grew worse the closer she got to the river's cobbled walkway.

It was no wonder that no-one wanted a second look. The bodies waiting for her were rancid, their twisted flesh purple and swollen beneath skin stretched to splitting. Fighting back her impulse to gag, Clare pulled a small voice-operated throat mike from her pocket, licked its flat surface and stuck the mike to her neck.

'Question One. Why dump them here? When it would have been simpler just to tip them over the edge into the waiting water...'

'But they weren't dumped here,' said a wheezing voice behind Clare. 'This is where they died.'

Clare swung round to find a fat, shambling figure in a filthy brown overcoat stumbling towards her, his gaze fixed firmly on her nipples which stood out with cold beneath her blouse.

Flushing, she briskly wrapped her Dior coat tightly across her front, and knotted its belt with an angry flourish. The man just smirked, then ostentatiously returned to picking bits of dead flesh from beneath his nails with a wood-handled Opinel knife, humming all the while.

Something from Wagner.

Clare had worked with Dr Theodore Balthus before, and still found it hard to believe that this fat, childish tramp was the France's top forensic scientist. A week's worth of stubble barely hid his sagging chin. His barrel-like chest was stuffed into a too-small white shirt grimed black at the neck and cuffs. All he needed to complete the image was a flask of industrial alcohol hidden in his pocket. People probably tossed him half-empty credit chips in the street.

Balthus shuffled over. 'Figured you wouldn't mind tearing yourself away from Mass for this, dear heart. Given your Minister's somewhat dodgy brief.' He smiled sweetly.

'Impress me,' Clare said coldly.

'Oh, I will...'

Gripping her by the arm, Balthus steered her across to the first stinking corpse. 'Take a look at this!' He said as he knelt next to the body of what had once been a girl.

'Mask,' Clare demanded, staying exactly where she was. 'And surgicals...'

With an impatient sigh, Balthus pulled a couple of foil packets from his coat pocket and tossed them across to the woman.

Clare ripped open the bags, struggled into the transparent nanopore gloves and then covered her nose and mouth with a CBN surgical mask.

Less than enthusiastically, she knelt beside him.

'What were they doing down here?' Clare asked.

Balthus just looked at her.

Clare blushed. 'But the girl's rich,' she said crossly. 'Good quality clothes, Versace shoes. What was she doing with him?'

'Slumming.' Balthus said. 'Maybe he had something she wanted, maybe it was the other way round.' He shrugged, 'Drugs most probably. Let's get on with it...'

Clare took a deep breath, and lent swiftly in to take a close look at the dead girl's face. With a police lieutenant and half a dozen of Paris' finest watching her from the top of the stairs for any sign of weakness, there wasn't much else she could do.

All the same, she immediately wished she hadn't bothered. The stench was all-encompassing. Even her nanopore mask couldn't filter odour-carrying molecules out fast enough. The smell was beyond the sugar musk of recent death, beyond even that sour vinegar stench when human flesh becomes rotten meat. It was pure putrefaction, so vile that Clare's guts churned as she tried not to vomit.

'Not pleasant, is it?' Balthus remarked. Swiftly he reached into his shirt pocket and found an old-fashioned Japanese laser scalpel. With a practised movement he flicked on its micro-thin cutting beam and sliced deep into the muscle of the girl's twisted shoulder.

'See,' he said, nodding towards the cut. The flesh at the bottom was less decayed. The beam glowed again, slicing effortlessly through the underlying muscle. This time the severed fibres were salmon pink.

'Bodies rot from the inside out,' the doctor told her.

'Surprise me,' said Clare through gritted teeth. No one got to be a senior prosecutor without seeing their share of corpses.

'Internal and gut bacteria,' Balthus continued calmly. 'Spreading outwards, corrupting as they go. But not this time. Oh, she's rotting alright, liquefying practically. But from the outside in.'

'Nanite attack?'

The fat man shrugged, but didn't entirely dismiss the suggestion. 'Maybe a retrovirus, maybe not. But I've come across nothing like it before.' He wheezed heavily, the fingers of his left hand juggling absent-mindedly deep in his trouser pockets.

Pocket boule, what boys took it up as soon as they stopped sucking their thumbs, thought Clare in irritation. Catching her glance, Balthus gave a sly smile. 'Face it, dear heart, I come across most things.'

Clare nodded. Obese, neurotic, and meth-amphetamine addicted he might be, but Theodore Balthus was also a widely-published academic, a visiting professor of pathology at L'Ecole Normale, and a top-rated CySat celebrity from the forensic evidence he presented each week on My Trial.

He was also, in a less advertised capacity, the Emperor's leading expert on bio Warfare, and one of the few scientists to go on record with his belief that the retrovirus was man made, a nanite/viral hybrid escaped from a lab.

'We're going to need a Darius test. Unravel those chromosomes,' Balthus announced, standing back from the bodies. He rocked heavily on the balls of his feet, struggling for breath. Whatever calculations were going on inside his head they didn't reach his hooded grey eyes.

'I need time to run the test,' he said at last, 'it's imperative you sit on this for forty-eight hours.'

Clare met his gaze. 'Twenty-four maximum,' she said firmly. 'That's the most the Third Section can offer. The most my minister would allow.'

Which was an outright lie - and they both knew it... When it came to investigations, silver-haired Pierre Nexus was too lazy not to do whatever his thin, elegant principal prosecutor recommended. He might be Minister for Security, but she was the one who saw to

it that his department ran efficiently, effectively and without attracting too much public attention.

And as the sole representative for a Rural Christian party in a hard-pressed government of national unity, taking her advice was undoubtedly his wisest option. All the same, Clare had been intending for months to put together a file on the State Minister's duplicity. Her guarantee that the day he lost Clare's support was the day she made sure he had no option but resign.

'Okay.' Balthus allowed, 'Twenty-four hours it is.'

'And the report reaches my desk first,' Clare said in her matter of fact way, as if she'd only just thought of it.

'It could be arranged,' Balthus admitted. He paused, 'Of course, it would speed matters up if someone could run details of this through Tri-ECIS.'

The fat man was fishing... clumsily. Data-time on the new 3-core European Crime Intelligence System in Brussels was rationed and operated, in the main, on a clean-room policy whereby one person put in a request and a different person received and acted on the answer.

Even Balthus, a senior pathologist, didn't rate direct input/output. The minister did, however. And so did Clare.

'I'll arrange it,' Clare said. She saw the pathologist's eyes widen slightly, and then saw his fat face harden. What she'd gained in respect, she'd lost in giving him another reason to feel resentful.

Bending down and crouching closer to the dead girl than was strictly necessary, he signalled to Clare to join him. 'Look,' Balthus said, running his index finger down the putrefying flesh of the girl's cheek. Absent-mindedly he crumbled flaking slivers of skin between his fingers.

'At what?' Clare demanded, her expression controlled, even though every muscle in her throat was strained. She couldn't see anything out of the ordinary and didn't appreciate his blatant attempt to make her vomit.

'Here.' The pathologist said sulkily, stroking his finger softly across the dead girl's cheek. And this time Clare could see it.

'So?'

'It's a nanite burn,' Balthus said. 'Recent and at an incredible heat. It's the only reason that this flesh hasn't rotted like the rest.'

'Recent?' Despite her revulsion, Clare traced the scar. It was hard and smooth, with the swirled texture of tortoiseshell. 'What could do this?'

'Satan's Kiss...' Balthus grinned sardonically. 'How the hell would I know..? Give me a couple of days with a tunnelling-microscope and I might just tell you. That is, if we're not all dead by then.'

Clare looked up sharply. Then realised that Balthus was joking, almost.

'Look at them.' Balthus said, jerking his chin at the corpses. 'If that's the result of a virus, then we've probably all got it. If not? Well you tell me what it is...'

Clare backed away from the grinning pathologist.

'Seal off the area,' she barked over her shoulder, not waiting to see if the lieutenant would obey. 'Have the bodies sterile bagged and removed to wherever Dr Balthus wants them taken.' She glanced again at the fat pathologist who was still kneeling by the girl, running his finger again and again across the mottled scar.

The expression on Balthus' face was one of bemused fascination. The expression on the face of the murdered girl didn't bear thinking about.

'Where do you want them sent?' Clare demanded.

Balthus casually named a military complex ten clicks inland from the Brittany coast. Clare merely nodded.

'Get the bodies there,' she told the lieutenant, 'And then have your men get a thorough medical check - and have one yourself.'

Clare spun on her Gucci heels. She was already ten-minutes overdue for an informal breakfast meeting with her Minister at the Georges V. And if there was one thing that upset Clare it was the thought of Pierre Nexus getting the slightest advantage.

Besides which her Minister had a month before asked Clare to p-vet a Chinese banker living in New York - and then hadn't wanted to discuss the findings. What Clare wanted to know was why - having got the information he asked for - Pierre Nexus didn't want to talk about it, why he didn't want any record of the vetting to appear in any department records. And that was something she intended to find out...

'You know what you're looking for?' Balthus shouted after the departing woman as she carefully negotiated the still-damp stone steps back to where her Renault waited.

Clare muttered crossly to herself. Of course she knew.

Behind her, in the damp grey fog of what promised to be a lousy Sunday, white-faced police reluctantly bundled two twisted bodies into self-sealing black plastic bags, watched by a fat doctor who laboriously typed medical notes one letter at a time into an antique Matsui palmtop.

He didn't bother to tell Clare that they'd also found a most-interesting tramp with his throat ripped out. One thing at a time. And anyway who could say if it was even linked...

Hong Kong Suisse

The monkey stared at Lee Uu with watchful brown eyes and suddenly smiled, to show sharp canines the colour of old ivory. Despite the nicotine-stained hue of its cracked teeth the monkey was less than one year old, hardly even adolescent. It had been languishing in a Texas zoo until Mr Uu's men had purchased it for several times more than it was worth and had it flown up to his New York apartment.

Where the grinning monkey still was. Lee Uu who knew about simian behaviour patterns understood that monkeys grinned most when they were distressed.

Lee Uu smiled back, with the weariness of someone twice his sixty years. It was not easy being Tai Pan to a vast metaNational that operated on that delicate border between what was mere corrupt and what was so obviously illegal that IntraPol, the FBI and Europe's Third Section would feel bound to act. Though huge bribes helped remind all concerned that those borders were somewhat flexible.

Sometimes the position of Tai Pan demanded of him actions that offended human decency; at others it required that small traditions be upheld, no matter how tiresome.

Now was one of those times.

Lee Uu looked round him at his huge Fifth Avenue, Manhattan corner office. The two external walls had been ripped out to house vast shrapnel-proof, polymer windows that stretched from ceiling to floor. A private bathroom, sauna, gym and bedroom cum art gallery occupied the rest of the top floor of the black glass and chrome monstrosity which New Yorkers had been calling Hong Kong Suisse for so long that no one now remembered who had owned it before.

The tower block's design was glib capitalist retro, something knocked up from sketches by Miles van de R, and built long after the architect was safely dead. Lee Uu hated it, but the building's stark vulgarity was an asset. For all their slick cynicism, American suits were easily impressed.

Through one huge window he could see both the Chrysler building and the Empire State: while a helicopter load of rich Russian tourists buzzed the Hudson's slate grey waters through the other, so far below him that their Manhattan Air Sikorski looked like toy.

It was a spectacular view, fitting the spectacular power of its owner. But even the view, a lavish array of fresh orchids in a mutton-fat jade vase in the corner and two burning cones of incense couldn't distract his attention from the smell of simian sweat and urine that pervaded every corner of the room.

Mr Uu pulled a face and wiped perspiration from his forehead with a white cambric handkerchief. He was already half an hour late for lunch, and running out of things he wanted to do first.

'Nar-cot-ics.' He enunciated the word carefully, though these days his English was so fluent he even dreamt in it.

'Talk to a computer as if you're speaking to an idiot. Chances are, you will be,' his chief technician had once told him long ago, and Lee Uu made a point of listening to his experts. That was why he hired them.

On the far wall, a red lcd flashed briefly as Mr Uu's flat screen Toshiba whirred into action. A split second later the Toshiba began to draw a complex 3D bar chart showing global takings for the past week. Asia Group was up. The opium crop was finally in, and at that moment being processed, matched with an exact molecular synthetic and then cut with freeze-dried lactose hijacked from a UN relief ship originally bound for famine-torn Sudan.

The result would go discreetly on sale in select districts of Edo, London and Paris, in gold ziplock bags marked organic, entirely natural. Asia's revenue hike represented a Palermo cartel's likely payment to secure their share of the coming market. The profit forecast was

based on an impossibly complicated, infallible fractal equation. And Lee Uu was glad to say that the coming year looked very healthy indeed.

'Off,' Mr Uu ordered, and the screen shut down, its smoked glass surface blending in against the wall's elegant duck-egg blue, a colour chosen for Mr Uu not by a top interior designer but by a Shaolin priest.

With a dark honey-hued floor cut from strips of endangered hardwood, its scattered Bokhara rugs and elegant mid-period Warhol of a solarized Chairman Mao wearing turquoise lipstick, Mr Uu's office was the most harmoniously designed in Manhattan. A two-drawer Chippendale table, a vase of egg-shell thin Florentine marble and a small lacquer and gold leaf shrine completed its decor. As offices went, its feng shui was perfect.

Small wonder that for a while, in the month or so after Mr Uu had arrived in New York his assistant Lady Sarah had spent half her time politely turning down Vogue, Harpers, Elle and other style rags who begged to send in their own photographers.

But that didn't happen any longer, because Sarah had arranged for each picture editor to be sent a laser disc featuring 'Mr Uu's office' - stock shots, carefully mocked-up in a studio on the floor below.

Money bought Mr Uu many things, but the most useful of those was privacy. What wealth hadn't yet been able to buy him was a way out of the unpleasantness of his monthly ritual with the monkey.

Cruelty wasn't a problem for Mr Uu. In fact, sometimes he could specify torture so sophisticated and elegant that its sheer inventiveness left his business rivals breathless - and dead.

Hanging a defaulting Vatican banker from London Bridge by his own entrails was at the simpler end of Lee Uu's lethal repertoire. Besides, Mr Uu didn't believe for a minute that the monkey felt any pain. A belief he based on observation. In thirty years of the ritual he'd never once seen his lunch do anything other than look vaguely puzzled and then die.

The top of the monkey's skull had been surgically removed with a laser scalpel under anaesthetic. Mr Uu always insisted on the use of an anaesthetic. And the restraint that held the animal in place was of padded leather. Even the collar that was fitted round its neck, so that its opened skull and waiting brain protruded over the edge of Mr Uu's Chippendale table like an oversized boiled egg, even that was adjusted every time to fit each individual beast.

It wasn't the cruelty that Mr Uu hated, it was the flavour. Tradition demanded that he scoop out the living brains and eat them raw, exactly as they came from the monkey's skull - unseasoned, warm and tasting of almost nothing.

Each month for thirty years he had been faced with the ritual, and every time he wished for a dash of hot chilli sauce or some gently fried strips of fresh ginger to alleviate the bland, jelly-like flavour.

Decisively Mr Uu lifted an art-nouveau silver teaspoon from the burr walnut surface of his table and just as decisively put it back, stopping to align its ornate handle exactly parallel with the table's right edge.

The monkey could wait a few minutes, there was business to be done. An offer so bizarre, so unlikely that at first Lee Uu had taken it to be a bad joke. Except that his private e-mail was a drop within a drop, fire walled with the finest black ice, and he was not the sort of man on whom people played jokes.

The middle-aged Chinese businessman flicked up the flat screen of his leather-bound Toshiba flat box and skimmed again the letter dropped anonymously into the machine's memory. Then toggling the box into voice mode, he called down to the HKS Combs department.

'Well?'

Mr Uu cut off the anxious apology almost as it began. Nothing. Two of his best jockeys had spent a week sieving through the Web trying to backtrack the letter's journey, without success.

The letter was starkly unambiguous. If Lee Uu would donate a million credits to an obscure Latin American charity, and arrange the death by fire of a pathologist, his bodyguard and an interfering American diplomat in Paris - individuals of almost no importance - he would immediately be offered an opportunity that would even dwarf...

There then followed a list of four of Mr Uu's most complex and corrupt business deals; one of which was so secret that every record had been wiped. Until that moment, Mr Uu was under the impression he'd had murdered everybody involved except himself.

And then there was the opportunity itself. Not quite immortality, but life for as long as it was wanted. A hundred, maybe two hundred years. Subject only to a number of unspecified conditions, which would be revealed once the three murders had been carried out.

The letter was signed, 'Baldwin, count of Monte Jesu, prince of Antioch'. A quick and dirty trawl through Harvard's database threw up the bizarre fact that the only person on record with that name had gone to the stake eight-hundred years before, proclaiming that he alone held the secret of eternal life.

Who ever had chosen Lee Uu to receive the letter had known their target. A youthful sixty, still virile and a man who limited his alcohol and drug intake from health not moral considerations, he had one flaw buried so deep not even he knew it was there.

He was infertile, a fact he'd discovered in his early twenties, but that wasn't the flaw. Lee Uu's weakness was that he didn't then realise how much he would come to mind. Now, just maybe, things might change. He would be his own heir, his own descendant. Three deaths were a small stake on a major gamble. And the potential was breathtaking.

Lee Uu knew he'd never get bored with business. He was only sixty, and in those thirty years of being Tai Pan he'd taken Hong Kong Suisse from a small triad trading house to a metaNational, with branches all over the planet.

Three governments, a dozen industrialists, an entire department of the UN owed their continued existence to his whim. If he could achieve that in thirty years, what could be achieved with a hundred? A new world was opening before him.

Lee Uu looked at the monkey and frowned. A hundred years was 1200 meals of raw monkey brain. He would have to give that some thought...

A new office also. Now New York was beginning to be buried under its own waste. He'd always like the idea of Mexico city. And Mexico was rapidly replacing Brazil as South America's post-industrial power. The Warhol and the table could come with him, the rest he'd leave for which ever satrap followed after.

Staring down from his window, Mr Uu saw not the inevitable Air Manhattan Sikorski on its return trip down the Hudson, or that afternoon's first fall of snow, but a remembered world from stories of when his grandfather was a child. From the days when the Hong Kong in HKS counted for something, and Beijing's financial aspirations still revolved around that crowded, corrupt little rock off the edge of China.

In those days it was possible to see from your office window what money could and did buy. People, families, alliances. Sometimes, if necessary, rioting crowds from the city's teeming violence-ridden slums and tenements.

But never respect. That much Lee Uu knew from the records left by his ancestors. Not respect. Not from the West who prided themselves on their own sense of history and then ignored everyone else's because they didn't understand it.

Hong Kong's hi-tek poverty was exotic then, when the western nations still expected the third world to follow them into genteel hypocrisy. Not realising that an electronic

Gottterdammerung was already happening, even as the West's oil fields ran dry and their welfare states collapsed under the weight of expectation and corruption.

Without communism, why should capitalism limit itself? Because if it didn't the harsher rules of Rome, Mecca and Mein Kampf would replace the delusions of Lenin and Marx. But by the time the West woke up to that, it was all ready too late. Those who could, became aristocrats - of the church, of commerce, technology or crime. The rest were condemned to a life of state-supplied slop. Of course, the father of nanotechnology Eric Drexler had once hoped that the new science would end poverty, but like all other poverty-ending inventions before it, nanotech never did...

Lee Uu's grandfather had known what was coming though. Had seen the new order's birth mirrored in the noisy, antenna-littered sprawl of crowded streets and over-stuffed New Territory tenements. Had seen it in the faces of refugees from the countryside who lived, punch-drunk on ceaseless information, who's sanitation was a trench dug in the ground or excreta thrown off a balcony. Who were destitute but paid up extortionate rents because they were collected by thugs wielding aluminium baseball bats.

Here was where the first cheap synthetic crack was made, where credit notes or the currency of your choice could be printed to order, where state-of-the-art software was copied and improved, tamper-tear holograms printed and the lot bundled with computers that were almost Sonys or nearly Apples - where data piracy stopped being a hobby and first became a career.

Here too you could find an unlimited supply of perfectly-depilated street children to work the tourist brothels and steam baths. Life became more than just cheap, it turned into merely one more resource for the taking.

And no matter what view could be seen these days from the Tai Pan's office window, he knew this was still unchanged. Just as he knew that when men say honour they mean anger and that no one, no matter how twisted their soul, will refuse absolution if offered a safe slot in which to fit.

For Lee Uu, his father and grandfather, HKS was that slot - although it was he who had taken the company to new heights, and would take it to new heights again.

Then Lee Uu shook his head to clear it of unnecessary thoughts and took another salted plum from a bowl on his table. The shrivelled fruit's bitterness too neatly matched the sourness of his own memories.

There was nothing else for it. He'd put it off for long enough. Lee Uu picked up an art-nouveau spoon and took a deep breath. It didn't help that the monkey was watching him...

Cryonics At Marne

Theodore Balthus didn't send in a report on the dead girl on Monday afternoon, as promised. Nor on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. What was worse he refused to take any of Clare Fabio's calls.

Friday morning wasn't any better. It was raining again, there was another traffic jam. Jihad hackers had black patched the city's central computer, so that optic sensors now routed traffic on the basis of cars that weren't there, and the inner roads had been locked into a solid line since Clare's official hover had pulled out of the Isle St Louis. A fifteen minute journey had just taken over an hour. If this went on much longer she was going to demand an executive helicopter.

'Go past them, you fool.' Clare slammed her fist against the hover's expensive lizard-skin trim, shaking with irritation as her chauffeur hesitated. It was all she could do not to grind her teeth

The duty chauffeur took one look in his driver's mirror, slid the hover up onto the pavement and began slowly to overtake the queue of dark blue Peugeots waiting to get into Les Tourelles.

A bomb-proof ferro-concrete office block built many decades before to mimic a huge Foreign Legion fort, it got its ancient nickname, the Pool, from a private and long gone swimming baths nearby.

Inside the Pool's electro-sensor studded ceramic outer wall, Clare ordered the car to open its back door, not bothering to wait for her driver who was rushing round to open it manually.

'I may need you,' she told him, which meant he'd be on stand-by all day, but that was the point.

By the time she'd slammed her hand down onto a faulty Matsui reader for the third time, so some snotty, jumped-up Corsican who knew perfectly well who she was could check her palm print against the digital copy contained in her laminate, awaited a lift that stopped twice at the wrong floor, then realised she'd come out without the Bayer-Rohe derms that killed her appetite, Clare was absolutely seething.

A situation not helped by that morning's Le Matin download, which used Balthus phrase, 'Satan's Kiss' as a hyperlink headline, splashed over a short paragraph at the bottom of the third page, between a raw Foreign Legion recruit run berserk in Ajaccio and a Marseilles porn star re-elected to local government.

The details were sketchy - only one body was mentioned, a woman butchered in mysterious circumstances, her body corrupted by a new and potentially catastrophic virus. The hack had obviously had trouble filling even the brief word count allotted, since most of it was made up.

All the same, Clare would have loved to get her hands on whoever leaked the story, because the resultant outbreak of chattering comms and frantic vidphones threw Pierre Nexus into a state of blustering panic. A state all too easily induced in Clare Fabio's harsh opinion.

It didn't help her temper when he pulled his young blonde secretary off phone duty and sent her in a ministerial Citroen over to the Rue de Buci to select him a box of chocolate truffles. Chocolate overdosing was always a sign that the Minister was under stress.

Clare was rapidly reaching melt down herself. Not least because the office of the American ambassador to the Court of St Cloud kept calling to demand to know whether or not the dead girl was a US citizen.

'How the hell would I know?' Clare snarled, punching the off button on her phone.

She stared at a stick-man statue stuck in the corner of her office. Purchased by some imperial commission charged with filling public offices with art, it was priceless and impossibly ugly. Like life really. Some Italian called Giacommetti was responsible.

When the Ministry's priority link rang for the fifth time Clare lost it altogether. 'Look,' she shouted, without bothering to toggle on the vision, 'The girl was stripped, raped, gutted and then burned. She wasn't even carrying papers. How the hell should we know what nationality the little slut was?'

At the other end there was a heavy silence, broken only by jagged breathing. It might have been a classic dirty phone call, until Clare identified the sound of someone fighting for control.

And winning.

The cultured New England voice that came through was steady, with hardly a tremor.

'This is Charles Mayer... At the US Embassy.'

When Clare said nothing, he switched effortlessly to perfect French. 'I understand you might have found the body of my daughter.'

Clare flinched. And then her defence mechanisms cut in. 'Might we?' she snapped, more aggressively than she intended. 'No comment on that. In fact, there will be no official statement until the bodies have been identified.'

'Bodies?' The American said carefully. As if this possibility hadn't occurred to him. 'So there was more than one?'

Mentally Clare kicked herself. No hard details had been released by the police. And Clare's own office, not known for its close relationship with journalists, had kept facts to a bare and inaccurate minimum.

'There were two.' Clare admitted. 'But neither has yet been identified.'

'As I haven't been officially approached to make an identification, that's not surprising,' the American said harshly.

'That isn't a matter for the Third Section,' Clare said quickly, feeling control of the conversation begin to slip away from her. 'I suggest you contact the prefecture imperial.'

'The Police? They can't even tell me why Balthus has my daughter in isolation in a Matukzi cryonics tank at the Marne Complex.' The man laughed bitterly, and added, 'Suspended in liquid nitrogen at - 186 o C, apparently for safe keeping. Alone with that other body you weren't mentioning.'

A sudden silence stretched in a long line between the two voice links, then broke.

'No comment.' Clare said, her hand already reaching for an elegant Matsui portable, her own personal phone, long fingers punching buttons as she rang through to Dr Balthus' lab at Marne.

With the Marne number ringing, Clare turned her attention back to Charles Mayer. At the same time flicking a switch on the small Panasonic digital recorder tapped into her computer's voicemail. All conversations were recorded automatically. This one would be recorded twice, against a complex click track, to show that it was as heard, with no clever editing.

'Who told you about Marne?' She asked smoothly.

'We fund that complex,' said the American. 'Ask your Minister.'

'You mean,' Clare shot back, 'we let you improvise biotech that's still illegal in North America...'

The American laughed, not kindly.

'You came up with Dr Balthus,' he said. 'We just supplied the technology and cash...'

Clare cut off her portable, just as the Marne switchboard came on line. The Marne computer would automatically trace her incoming call. No matter. She'd deal with that once she'd had a full and frank, off the record swear at Balthus.

Off the record... Hell, if the slimy rat didn't come up with quick answers, there wouldn't be a record left to be off. She'd chew him up and spit him out in tiny pieces.

Threats weren't usually Clare's style. But then she didn't usually need them. The first dynamic of large organisations was that who ever wrote the budgets pulled the strings.

'What do you want from me?' She asked Mayer bluntly.

There was a second's silence. 'I want whoever killed my daughter.' Charles Mayer said softly. 'I want to know what kind of corrupting agent was used, because it wasn't one of ours. And I know one camera was non-functioning, the one in that arch, but I want to know how your killer walks unseen passed all the other M-w cameras lining that river bank. That's what I want.'

Clare couldn't recall when she'd last heard anyone sound that dangerous.

'It is Jenny you know,' he said. 'What's left of her.'

'If you know that then you know more than we do.' Clare said coolly. 'Dr Balthus promised this department a copy of his report. That was three days ago.'

'Five,' Charles Mayer said. 'That report's in your internal post. Double crypted. But it says absolutely nothing, because that's all anyone knows. Balthus will e-mail you the key once the card reaches you.'

'You tell Balthus what to do,' Clare said. It wasn't a question.

'Damn right we do. You found him. But the fat freak's one of ours. He gets round-the-clock protection and all the bodies he can cut up. We expect something in return.'

'I'm not sure I like that.'

'I'm not sure I give a damn what you like.'

Clare shifted in her burgundy-leather office chair. It wasn't a good day and it was getting worse. 'The Americans aren't popular with our people,' she said carefully. 'You know the result of the Moscow referendum, there's going to be a new Tsar. The New World Order is over. It's been over for a long, long time. Many people think your kind should have gone with it. My Minister's one of them.'

'Then I suggest you remind your Minister how many times we've pulled the Prince Imperial's arse out of the fire.' The voice was brutal, grating. 'We may not be the power we were, but study your history. And don't let anyone tell you that empires in decline aren't more lethal than those on the rise.'

Clare shivered. Politics, like food, religion and sex was one of the things she never discussed with strangers. Hell, if there had been anyone she was close to, she probably wouldn't have discussed it with them either.

As it was she spent her life avoiding those kind of complications. Yet despite her instincts, Clare could feel herself being pulled in. Not least because there were some things about this case she really didn't like. Starting with the fact that a subordinate, Balthus, had been holding out on her.

'Work against us,' said Mayer, 'And you personally could have a nasty crisis on your hands. Alternatively, you could help us and every facility the Agency has will be at your disposal. Nothing you want will be denied.'

'Isn't that corrupt?' Clare asked. It was meant to sound pious, but came out sounding more ironic than she intended.

Mayer chuckled.

'Tell me something that isn't.'

Speedwell Blues

Dr Theodore Balthus stared ravenously across the empty village street towards the green door of Madame Penn's patisserie. He was hungry - but not just for food.

True, he had an unhealthy passion for the locally-made tart d'almond, remains of which stained the front of a brown tweed jacket covering his bulging stomach. But that wasn't why his eyes were glued to the cluttered shop window and narrow door with its single frosted pane of glass.

No. That shadow behind the glass was Giselle Gabon collecting pastries for her mother.

Giselle with her long, colt-like legs covered by the ludicrous grey woollen tights of her school uniform. Small, recently formed breasts pushing out against the clone cotton of her school shirt. Dark flowing hair constrained by a black velveteen Alice band.

Giselle always collected cakes at this time. Class was finished for the afternoon and Madame Penn's shop was where Giselle stopped on her route home. When ever possible, Balthus was across the road in the Cafe Celtic watching her, hungrily.

Balthus touched nobody. Nearing thirty-five he was still a virgin. A fact that didn't bother him, and gave him no trouble with the blunt-speaking French farmers of the d'Alencine estate. Simply because such a state of affairs wouldn't have occurred to any of them, their mindset was too conservative.

Beloved uncle of the Prince Imperial, the Duc d'Alencine ran his fiefdom on traditional grounds - organic farming methods, free village schools, wind-powered electricity and no corrupting CySat. Of course, the credits that made it all possible came from the Marne nanoWarfare Complex where Balthus worked, but the Duc's tenants didn't know that. Just as they didn't know Balthus was still a virgin and were only dimly aware of his celebrity as a star on CySat.

The mayor and his brother Jacques, owner of the Cafe Celtic where Balthus sat finishing his fifth sticky cappuccino, were certain that Balthus had a mistress at the Complex. Why else would a grown American waste so many nights in that ugly concrete block nearby, behind electric razor wire.

Jacques' wife and her friend, Elspeth Gabon, mother of Giselle, privately ridiculed the idea. The fat doctor, with his piggy eyes and unnerving gaze, was not the type to have a mistress. After all, no woman in her right mind would be bedded by a such a gross object unless she was his wife, with no choice in the matter.

No. Slim teenage thugs from the nearest town, maybe. Cropped, peroxide blond, under-age unSocials from the Sim arcade. But not women.

'What do they know?' Balthus hawked heavily, spitting into his crumpled paper napkin.

'You said?' Jacques glanced up from his screen.

'Just coughing.' The doctor's shoulders hunched in irritation. He was concentrating on the street beyond the Celtic's window. Conversation could ruin everything.

In the glass behind the bar Jacques' sour reflection studied the soft top of Balthus' balding skull. Jacques knew why the doctor came there every afternoon, but as long as the fat man didn't actually touch the girl then as far as Jacques was concerned it didn't matter. When it came to human nature, Jacques was a man of few illusions.

Balthus had been keeping a hungry eye on Giselle for the last three years. Noting every change as she grew from a bright, cheeky nine-year old into a dark eyed, sullen beauty of twelve. This was her peak. Everything else would be downhill. Balthus had seen it before.

Already she was growing up. Her baggy jersey and white school shirt swapped each evening for a slinky black top that hugged tight and drew a circling swarm of farmboys and

estate-hands to her, their cheap Taiwanese gyro-balanced mopeds buzzing smokily round her like flies.

Balthus coughed again. Life. Love. It was all so much shit. Grown women appalled him with their sour smells and fleshy bodies. And whatever Giselle's mother Elspeth might whisper, he'd never been drawn to the dubious delights of young boys.

No. The doctor knew his own weakness, and kept it in check. The American gave him e-zines. Even, on occasion, the odd badly-dubbed ROM vid where every out-of-sync moan and cry came from the pain-twisted lips of some pretty young girls tied up for his gratification.

What Balthus wanted was illegal. The American had told him that. Much more than illegal, it was a sin, a moral failing. Not that Balthus believed that stuff. He'd cut open too many dead bodies and experimented on too many live ones to believe in the soul... If it existed, he would have found it long ago. Which wasn't to say he hadn't looked.

How had Mayer's original offer put it? The body was just some primitive betaTest soft machine, begging to be pushed to the limits, updated, rewired. And Balthus was its mechanic. Tuning the engine, making suggestions, dreaming of a day he'd perfect a new and better machine.

And with a body like mine, Balthus thought bitterly, was it any wonder the idea of a mechanical/human hybrid seemed such an attractive option? It seemed to him that all the human frame needed was redesigned circuits, better memory, faster recall. And why not? After all, Balthus was a skilled technician. With vision and experience...

And what experience... He'd done his first autopsy at ten, on a twelve-year old bully at the Jesuit orphanage in Nancettes; using an old steel scalpel and pliers stolen from the orphanage workshop. He'd done it alone, without books, in a dirty rubbish-filled cellar by the light of an old army-issue catalytic lamp.

When the gruesome remains were discovered, neatly labelled, in a disused Braun refrigerator that Balthus had painstakingly re-wired direct into the mains, the pudgy and tearful boy had insisted his victim was already dead. Killed in a fall down the cellar stairs. And a second, more professional autopsy, confirmed that this was indeed true. The bully had been dead - but only just.

The boy Balthus was about to be sent to a remand home in Nancettes when the sentence was commuted. If the devil couldn't find work for the young boy's idle hands then it seemed that the Third Section could.

And did.

Which was how the young, still frightened Theodore Balthus found himself at Mont Sens, a special 'clinic' funded by a Swiss-owned pharmaceutical metaNational, where his insatiable hunger to experiment was rewarded and recorded.

Pushing himself wearily to his feet, Balthus reached for a yellow plastic saucer on the zinc and deposited a handful of minor chips. Giselle wasn't coming out. Either she was still in the shop, swopping childish gossip with Madame Penn the owner, or she'd already slipped out through the back door.

The fat man had a nasty feeling in his gut that the second suggestion was right. Whatever. The American girl's enigmatic dead body was waiting for him back at Marne. The Darius Test had proved worthless. All it showed was that genetically her DNA was shot to hell, scrambled by nanites he couldn't identify, and he knew that already. Tissue samples had revealed nothing coherent. And Charles bloody Mayer was demanding results. Now. As was that stuck-up cow in Pierre Nexus' office.

Struggling to fasten his greatcoat against the coming dark and against a howling Atlantic wind which raked its way along the main street, Balthus stamped out of the Celtic towards his 4x4 Ford electric.

He didn't see Pierre Bruin, the CIA-trained operative assigned to guard him every minute of the day. But then he wasn't meant to. Bruin was good. A thin, God-fearing loner who loathed Balthus. A hatred made deep by being forced for three years to keep guard each afternoon while Balthus sat warm and refreshed in a cafe, drooling over the shadow of an pudgy local schoolgirl.

But if Balthus didn't see Bruin then Pierre Bruin, bored and irritated in the slick bucket seat of his silver-grey, all terrain Peugeot didn't see death. In the shape of a blond teenager with an angel's open face and a thug's speedwell blue eyes. The kamikaze assassin kickstarted a black Suzuki 750 rotary into life the moment Bruin fired the Peugeot's ignition.

All three had their vehicles switched to manual.

The black Suzuki bike began trail the Peugeot as Bruin pulled out of the church carpark and began to shadow Dr Balthus's tatty Brazilian-made Ford 4x4 on its way back to Marne.

As kills went it was perfect. Balthus had to slow slightly just before the crossroads that led off to the complex. Which was when the boy made his move. Closing a half click gap in a matter of seconds, the Suzuki curved inside Bruin's silver motor.

With ruthless skill, the boy ripped a cut-down Browning free from its Velcroed hiding place beneath his leather jacket and flicked the safety catch.

The first barrel took Pierre Bruin in the face. Smashing through the passenger window, diamonds of flying polymer drilling into his cranium, stripping scalp from bone. Skull splinters scythed through the bodyguard's cerabellum, pulping his brain to sticky grey jelly.

By which time the bike was already alongside Balthus' green 4x4, the fat man's shocked face staring straight into the black emptiness of the gun's smoking barrels. The shock was suddenly gone and with it the doctor's face.

Almost lazily, Balthus' 4x4 swerved towards a line of poplars edging the road, and smashed against a tree. In an instant what little was left of the dead man's head wiped itself across the inside of the windscreen.

A split second later, as the Suzuki slid safely to a halt on the grass, Bruin's Peugeot thudded into the rear of Balthus' Ford crushing it.

The boy didn't bother to look inside either car. Pulling a couple of black plastic slugs from his pocket, he bit the top off each, ripping away its airtight cover. Which gave him five seconds before the loads went critical.

Slotting both shells into the breech, the boy put one shell into each car. The impact blast blowing him back so far, he rocked for a second on the balls of his feet.

Only one thing left to do now.

The boy slid home another two magnesium-packed loads. Then paused, but only briefly. Grabbing the red-hot handle of the crashed Peugeot, the boy wrenched open the passenger door, ignoring the smell of burning flesh and the white pain that exploded in his head as his fingers seared against metal.

Flames roared around in a diabolical, inverted orange waterfall of fire.

Without stopping to think the boy climbed into the inferno, settling into the melting foam, metal and plastic of the passenger seat. Before the burning flesh of his fingers started coming away from the bone, he had time to thrust the barrel beneath his chin and pull the trigger.

The explosion removed his jaw, tongue and soft palate, spread out to curdle his brain. Speedwell blue eyes were pulped in their sockets. The deadly mix of pure magnesium and fractured boron igniting the top of his skull, ripping apart his biker's helmet and tearing out a section of Peugeot roof the size of a suitcase.

Stick Man By Giacommetti

Two hours later while Paris was preparing for the weekend - and the tragic murder of Doctor Balthus, famous pathologist, CySat star and France's leading expert in biotek was still a news story the rat pack hadn't yet broken - a bomb ripped through the usually sedate 5th Arrondissement of Paris. An area too rich, too exclusive and usually too well guarded to have grown used to violence...

But the two pounds of putty-like bioSemtex taped to the chassis of a beautifully-restored black Toyota shattered more than just the smug self-satisfaction of shuttered embassies and resting diplomats, it blew in the front wall of a small street-level office. A building so nondescript and bland that afterwards no-one could remember having noticed it was there.

One person died. The only other fatalities were a highly illegal anime-erotica Website, specialising in naked tri-D cartoon schoolgirls (who beneath their sickly sweet, implausibly pneumatic exteriors doubled as advanced semiAI Web agents) and an even more illegal 'virtual quantum' datacore, known as MAKAI - multiple alternative kernel artificial intelligence.

Still in the trial stage, MAKAI was beta-testing itself on a clean-room basis. It's advanced AI parallel-state processors could access data and assign memory but with actually knowing where they were sourced from. MAKAI could ask for and be granted access to data - but didn't itself know where it read from or wrote too...

Unfortunately, because the Website, hardware and datacore were trashed simultaneously, no one realised that the core had already been sucked dry, that in the millisecond of impact MAKAI's floating disk had been captured in one single ultra-wideband datastream.

Of course, those doing the capturing didn't realise that, also at the point of impact MAKAI had taken the unilateral decision to squirt-burst its operating system out into the Cy. MAKAI still existed, but even it realised its biggest problem was that it had just lost its memory.

By the time armed gendarmes had finished sifting through the rubble and discovered the torn and blood-soaked remains of diplomat Charles Mayer, ex-street samurai and America's unofficial fixer in Paris, the murder of Theodore Balthus, his bodyguard Philippe Bruin and an unidentified youth was splashing its way across that night's C3N Telenews, spiralling out on the Web like an unanswered question.

Computers powered up, floating disks swirled and modems gibbered. All across Europe, then the States and seconds later across global cyspace, newsjocks went to work digging out information as fast as Elysee officials scrabbled in vain to keep it hidden.

It's a basic law of heirarchies that responsibility shades into blame faster than nightfall at the equator - that much had always been obvious to Clare Fabio. And then, like a fuse lit at both ends, blame passes up and down an organization's line of command until it reaches a level senior enough to take responsibility but not so cast-iron they can take everyone else down with them.

And this time it had reached Clare Fabio. At least, that was what Clare decided as she watched her Minister stalk coldly round the edge of his plush office, Cuban heels clattering loudly on the hard marble floor.

Clare was working hard to keep him sweet - and failing miserably. It wasn't a situation she liked. And this clearly wasn't a battle she could afford to lose.

'All right,' Nexus said through gritted teeth, 'if the police can't help us... You tell me who the cunt was...'

Clare flinched at both the language and his anger. She was being asked the impossible and Pierre Nexus knew it. The body in the passenger seat of Balthus' car was charred beyond recognition. There was little to tell you it had once been animal, never mind human.

Not having an answer worried Clare. That the Minister clearly expected her to know, worried her even more. There was, without doubt, some unspoken tension hanging like static in the air between them. Some dangerous shift of power.

To her horror, Clare could feel sweat begin to bead stickily in the hollow of her lower back. Worse still, dark stains were appearing under the armpits of her expensive Italian silk suit. And an unmistakable sourness had begun to rise above the elegant lemon scent of her Chanel perfume.

Pierre Nexus noticed it all but said nothing. He didn't need to.

Beneath a shock of elegantly cut silver hair, his face wore a small and satisfied smile. Reaching into a small paper bag for another truffle, Nexus popped it into his mouth, cocoa dust spilling down his blue blazer.

For a second time froze as an expression close to ecstasy suffused his heavy face and then he licked crumbs from his immaculately-manicured forefinger and thumb and opened his eyes again.

For months this elegant, patronising woman had been running his department as if she, not he, was in charge. And now she was running scared. He could see it, smell it. Almost taste it above the bitter richness of the chocolate. And it made him happy. How happy she had no way of knowing...

Since the birth of the 3rd Napoleonic Empire, protocol had demanded that, no matter how furious the underlying disagreements, government ministers and their senior civil servants kept to certain rules of etiquette. There was a point beyond which ministers and their servants did not go. State Minister Pierre Nexus was already gleefully well over that line and savouring every minute of it..

'All I'm asking,' the Minister said with studied politeness, 'Is that you identify the third person. We've got two burnt out cars, an unregistered bike, and a anonymous corpse so fried it makes that pretty little Giacommetti over there look lifelike.'

Despite herself, Clare glanced across at the ugly black stick man. The minister was right. It did look like a burnt corpse dipped in resin.

'So, who was it?' Nexus asked. He was watching her the way a wolf watches its wounded prey. A level glare full of unvoiced contempt and barely concealed hunger.

She met and held his gaze, but it took courage, more courage than she had. 'Surely this is a police matter?'

But Nexus shook his head. 'No,' he said bluntly. 'If anyone knows what actually happened, then it is you.'

'Me, why me?' Clare asked at last. Somehow she didn't think she really wanted to know the answer.

His smile confirmed it. 'Balthus, Mayer, those bodies - what's the common link? You are,' he said, picking a smart-folder off his desk and reading the words that began instantly to scroll down its front. They both knew that was for show. All the same, Nexus pretended to scan the folder for information.

'Let's see,' he said. 'This morning you called up our fat friend on a secure line. But strangely the minute he picked up you cut the connection. This afternoon he's dead, along with his bodyguard.'

'Then of course there's also our mysterious American friend - what's left of him. This morning he talks to you, now police are scooping him up in little pieces and dropping him into a plastic bag...'

The minister flicked the switch of his desk intercom. 'Coffee,' he demanded gruffly. 'Frothy, with plenty of grated chocolate.' He didn't offer Clare any.

The pretty young girl who came in carrying a silver tray glanced curiously at Clare. Her eyes taking in the older woman's expensive dress, restrained gold and pearl Cartier brooch, her immaculate but sensible haircut.

Clare wondered briefly what had happened to Mimi, the minister's old assistant; jobbed off somewhere, probably, payment for services rendered. At any other time the new girl would have been terrified of Clare. The fact she wasn't, warned Clare that rumours of her coming downfall had already reached the outer office.

With a tightness in her gut that was entirely foreign, Clare looked carefully round the Minister's huge office as if she'd never seen it before. And in a sense she hadn't. Not from this perspective. This was what not being in control was like, not being in charge.

Everything around her was elegant. From the Minister's grand Louis XIV desk of inlaid walnut, to a tattered but priceless unicorn tapestry draped across the far wall, everything oozed power. But with a whisper, because no Minister of Security ever needed to raise his voice.

Tall sashed windows, framed by long red velvet curtains opened out into daylight along one wall. No-one would know looking at the inside Nexus' elegant office, what a sandstone-coloured monstrosity the Pool was when seen from outside.

On the far side of the shatter-proof crystal polymer window Clare could see hovers and coaches backed up on a slip road, where it joined the main highway. A slow and clumsy Seine barge could be seen beyond them in the distance, fighting its way against the river's flow.

People on the path below the window were already bustling home. It was later than she'd thought.

'You see my problem, don't you?' The minister said, making no attempt to hide his satisfaction. 'Here I am, a faithful servant of the glorious French Empire, relying on the advice of my staff. Advice you've always felt qualified to give. And suddenly I'm beginning to wonder, am I right to take that advice?'

He stared her in the eye, then let his gaze wander slowly down her body, taking in the dark sweat stains under her arms...

'You see, my dear, the question I must ask myself is can your advice be trusted?' It was a politician's question. Not meant to be answered.

The Minister put down his steaming coffee, cracked his knuckles with arrogant ease, then turned to a semi-circular Third Empire table beside his desk. A matt black pop-up screen and a half-size IBM keyboard stood on its half-circle of horse-tail marble. The Minister used old-fashioned keystrokes rather than voice commands to communicate with the S3 computer, it was one of his more annoying affectations.

Clare watched in silence as the Minister casually keyed his way passed the system-protect into the heart of the R3/8700 mainframe hidden in a vault four floors below.

'FABIO, CLARE...' the Minister typed, and stood back as the screen threw up her entire life compressed into three short screens. A fourth, more important screen, enshrined the limits to her authority as a senior civil servant.

Except that there were no limits.

The Minister stared at the last screen, and gave his most wolf-like smile.

'Quite a little law unto ourself, aren't we?' He said. 'Total security clearance. Police protection on request. Weapons authorisation. Access to off-shore funds. One could mastermind quite a little secret army, couldn't one? Without my ever knowing about it.'

His insinuations flowed around Clare, hardly touching. A numbness like sheet glass stood between her and the torrent of words. But she already understood that she was in deadly danger.

'Tell me about your friend Mayer,' the Minister said suddenly, he stressed the word friend. 'We already know he was providing Dr Balthus with kinderporn. And we have a pretty good idea he was busy cracking the ice on the computer systems of this very department. But what else was he doing, besides poking you?'

Clare took a step toward and then stopped herself. 'We weren't lovers,' she said furiously. 'He wasn't my lover, he wasn't even a friend. And I don't know the first thing about what he was doing. But her words were wasted. The Minister was too busy talking to himself.'

'You know, it's all very well the Ministry fast-tracking snobs like you. BCBGs from L'Ecole Normale. But where I grew up in the countryside, we still had to sweat for a living...'

'You know what else,' he added, folding his hands over a gut that testified that he hadn't done a second's manual labour in the last twenty years. 'Any good farmer can tell you that if you hot-house plants you're bound to get some disease.' He made no attempt to disguise his open contempt for everything she stood for.

And for a second, Clare saw herself through his eyes; someone who despised his beliefs, ridiculed his pretensions to culture. An ambitious thirties-something bitch, on her way to the top with no party loyalties to keep her in check.

'I know nothing about Mayer.' Clare said almost apologetically. 'Nothing at all. He certainly wasn't a friend.'

'You surprise me.' Absent-mindedly, the Minister picked up a letter opener cast in the shape of a cavalry sabre, and weighed it in his hands for balance. It was perfect.

'You know what,' said Nexus, 'we've had your voice line at home bugged for weeks. Not to mention a tap on your terminal and mobile. We know more about your pathetic little life than you do.'

There was nothing to say.

'Face it. You were thick as shit with Balthus. Your name comes up every other phone call Mayer made. We could put you away and chuck the key. Though it might be neater just to kill you...'

'...However,' the Minister continued smoothly, as Clare sat unasked in the nearest chair. 'Resign now and I'll see that no charges are pressed.'

The cold dark eyes that met hers were unbending. 'Believe me, this is for my convenience, not yours. You've thrown enough shit at the wall...'

'But this is my life,' Clare protested helplessly, indicating the office, the official hovers and the small park seen through the window outside.

'Was.' The Minister tapped the hilt of the paper-knife absent-mindedly against his desk top, almost as if he wasn't really concentrating any more.

Clare wasn't fooled. It might be too late, but she'd just learnt never to underestimate anyone's native intelligence. Not even when they were illiterate, thickset thugs who thought a polling booth was something that belonged in a fair ground.

'Many people would prefer to see you safely dead,' said Nexus softly, selecting another truffle. He sounded almost wistful. 'But I'm just not like that. All the same, being allowed to resign is better than you deserve. Much better.'

He popped the chocolate into his mouth. And with a couple of sticky keystrokes removed Clare's security clearance, credit limit and her authority to act for the French state in an emergency. Her file - quite literally - was closed.

'Personnel will work out what we owe you, and credit the money to your account. As of now you no longer work for the Third Section, my ministry or the government.' Nexus touched a discreet ivory buzzer hidden in the inlay on the side of his desk.

'That's not needed.' Clare said, her voice rising in undisguised dismay.

'Security will escort you from the building,' the minister said flatly, pushing the buzzer again...

'But my belongings...' Clare protested.

'Will be sent on. Right now I want you out of my office and out of this building.'

Pierre Nexus paused. 'Have I ever told you what a little cunt you are? No? Well now you know. Arrogant, spoilt, talentless - I've no idea who you had to fuck to get this job and I don't care. But if I never see you again it'll be too soon.'

He smiled after her, watching her rigid back as she made for the door. He didn't need to see her face to know she was doing her best not to cry. It wasn't often in this job that events worked out that well. But this time they had. She was gone.

State Minister Pierre Nexus knew better than anyone that Balthus, his bodyguard and Mayer had actually been killed under a contract issued by a Mr Uu from New York. Pierre Nexus knew it because he was the man who sent the original offer to Mr Uu, signed Baldwin, Count of Monte Jesu. Approaching the Triad leader had been one of the conditions in the original offer made to Pierre Nexus.

Tomorrow he'd voice mail Mr Uu - using S3's securest line - and suggest that the Chinaman track down Lord Winterbrooke, an elusive Christian survivalist apparently living alone somewhere in the Namibian desert. As a neoLuddite fundamentalist the man would have no node on the Web as a matter of principle, nor would he ever have allowed a hospital to file a record of his DNA, which made finding him damn near impossible. But then, who said immortality came cheap?

All in all, Pierre Nexus felt justifiably pleased with himself. But then as he always joked - every politician had a private agenda, it was just that his was more private than most...

He smiled, picking a cocoa-dusted truffle from his silver dish and slowly smearing its black richness across the roof of his mouth with his tongue. A shiver ran down his spine. Its taste was the closest thing on earth to raw sex, and almost as addictive.

Nexus knew without doubt that once found Winterbrooke would accept Lee Uu's offer. Who could refuse it? Only three people were ever approached at one time, and that only every two hundred years - or so he'd since been told. Human nature was something Pierre Nexus understood only too well. So he hadn't been surprised to learn that in eight hundred years the offer had never once been turned down.

The open plan Administrative section seemed the largest area Clare had ever had to cross. It was vast, desert like.

No one looked up as two guards escorted her out.

'The minister said I could collect my things.' Clare hissed, hot with embarrassment.

'Not to me he didn't,' replied the older of the two, a tall grey-haired ex-legionnaire who was gripping her right elbow in a deceptively light hold.

Clare didn't struggle. She'd already tried that in Nexus' office until the guard's tightening fingers had effortlessly found a nerve that left her crying with pain and shock.

Nobody looked up and nobody offered a word of consolation. She was marked. Condemned. The news had already gone on ahead of her.

'Let's take her out the back way.' The grey-haired guard said quietly to his partner, who grinned.

At the lower ground floor, the younger one stepped out of the elevator and reached for a nearby steel door.

'Through here,' he said, pointing to a darkened underground garage, reserved for ministers. 'And mind the steps...'

His first blow ripped into her right side, under the ribs, driving the air out of her lungs. Blinded by a spasm of pure white pain Clare buckled to her knees, hitting the ground as the steel door slammed ominously behind her.

There were grey concrete stairs encrusted with specs of silica, smeared with oil stains and dried out mud. In front of her face she suddenly noticed a stubbed out cigarette, Japanese, hardly smoked and with purple lipgloss on the butt. It looked strangely out of place.

But Clare forgot it quickly as a black-leather boot heel ground into her shoulder. Instinctively, she curled herself into a tight ball, knees tucked up to her breasts, arms clutched across her front. Just right to get kicked to death, she thought briefly, until someone kicked her down the rest of the steps, and she stopped thinking at all.

Despite herself, Clare screamed, a terrified childlike howl that echoed round the deserted garage.

'Shut the fuck up.'

She could identify the rough accent of the older security guard. He sounded bored.

Clare felt herself yanked upright and came face to face with the younger guard, the one who'd been kicking her. Ex-service, she thought vaguely. Corsican. Ex-foreign legion. And she had a sudden unpleasant memory of chewing him out for his incompetence using that Matsui palm reader.

His sly grin and the glee in his washed out blue eyes told her that he was thoroughly enjoying his revenge.

'Cunt,' he said flatly and spat at her face.

Clare never got the chance to panic about retroVirus infection or even feel disgust, because long before she had time for that a vicious back hand sent her sprawling on the concrete and snapped out the overhead lights.

Deus Ex Machina

Cold damp concrete pressed against her left temple. A vicious pain tore at the base of her bruised spine. She was shivering.

All Clare really wanted to do was sleep, or die if sleep wasn't an option. She was in shock. She even knew she was in shock, but that didn't help any.

Clare tried to open her eyes and immediately felt sick. To one side of her a naked and hideously glowing lightbulb stuck straight out from the wall. Its flex defying every law of gravity until consciousness kicked in with an unpleasant amphetamine rush, and the tiny cell-like room they'd dumped her in dropped into place around her. Newton was unchallenged. The laws of science were unchanged. It seemed the only thing that was out of its sphere was her.

And life.

There didn't seem much point scrambling upright. It was obvious she was going to be much more comfortable staying where she was in a heap on the ground. But then footsteps approached, heels clattering harshly on the concrete floor of the main garage outside and Clare almost convinced herself it would be better to make a run for it.

Except that there was nowhere to run.

So instead she shut her eyes and rested her pounding head back against the cool concrete.

'The cunt's still out for the count.' The young Corsican announced into his throat mike.

A transmitter squawked its reply and the Corsican laughed. 'I'll check them out for you...'

Clare felt rough hands grab the front of her blouse and rip. The expensive silk tore easily and then fingers scrabbled at the front of her bra yanking it up towards her shoulders.

'Nah,' he said. 'No tits.'

There was another burst of static broken only by the occasional occluded sentence. None of which made sense to Clare.

'Everyone will have fucked off in an hour, let's deal with her then,' suggested the Corsican, and then he was gone. The slam of the steel door sending shockwaves all the way up the side of her face.

She tried to drift back into sleep, as far away from white noise, fear and pain as possible, but there was a voice she didn't recognise in her head, a voice that said No. That simply refused to let her throw the switch.

Think, it said. Move, it said. This isn't the end this is just the start. Your exams, your ambition, your looks won't help you now.

They'll be back.

They won't just stop at ripping off your bra.

You're nobody, nothing.

The rules have changed. Anyone who was your friend is now your enemy.

Think, it said. Think.

Clare thought, thought hard. Though it cost more courage than she knew she had. She was out of a job, people wanted her dead - or so her Minister said. No not her Minister, not now. It might be too late to save her career, but it wasn't too late to save her life. Not everything was lost. She still had her brain, her intelligence. No friends though.

Greed disguised as ambition, cynical self-interest badged as principle would see to that. Her colleagues would close ranks like water closing over a stone, a ripple or two and then she'd be gone. And the surface would be as smooth and mirror bright as it ever was.

No friends then, no one she could call on.

Only ex-colleagues who wouldn't want to get involved.

And one soon to be ex-boyfriend. Merchant banker Claude de Crecy, co-owner of a family vineyard in Burgundy, a 12-bedroomed Sicilian villa with its own jetty on Stromboli and a condo on the Upper East Side, New York. Claude had been escorting her for two years now. And though she'd never mentioned it, and come to that nor had he, Clare had always assumed that when the time was right they'd get married. Even though Claude's relationship with his valet was closer than his family might like.

They wouldn't get married, not now.

Not ever.

Absent-mindedly Clare yanked her bra back into place, even as she tried to work out just how Pierre Nexus had set her up. But nothing made sense. So she gave up thinking about it. How it was done probably didn't matter anyway...

Oh but it does, insisted a small voice in the back of her head. I mean, you didn't come this far for nothing did you? Move, it insisted. Now. Before they come back. You really want to get raped, to take the rap for this?

Do you?

Really?

Blindly Clare felt in her coat pocket, searching for a couple of derms. Sighing with relief when her fingers closed over the familiar flattened circles.

The pain of thinking, of acting was beyond belief. For a second it felt as if someone had wired electricity straight through to her brain. Then the patches were in place on the underside of her wrists, and her neural synapses flicked and switched as a billion connections made, remade and adjusted. Reality was the same but sharper.

Clare staggered upright. Staggered again to hold her balance. Behind her eyes lights burnt, and then the pain was gone, replaced by six thousand mics of endorphin that flooded her brain.

It cut away her hurt and steadied her nerves. She was still in shock but even her subconscious no longer really knew it. With the absence of pain came confidence and a growing anger at the injustice of being what Mayer would have called the fall guy. Except that Mayer was dead. And she was alive, and intended to stay that way.

From instinct, Clare began to count up her skills. She was proficient with a Browning handgun, Thursday nights at the Elysee Gun Club had seen to that. She was fit, if some what below weight. Her muscle tone was pretty good, kept tight by regular tai chi lessons every Sunday morning on the terrace of le Jardin du Luxembourg.

She could fence. She worked out each Wednesday lunchtime at Le Gym, the most exclusive women-only health club in Paris.

And technically-speaking she was better trained at self-defence than most thugs and muggers. It was just that it had never occurred to her she might get beaten up. Or that one day she might need to hit back.

That kind of stuff just didn't happen to people like her. Except that she wasn't people like her any more. She was something else, something less. And all Clare knew was that she didn't like it.

Endorphin muffled the agony long enough for Clare to navigate her way from the empty locker up to her old office, via a service lift at the back of the building.

Every automated surveillance camera in the place would watch her as she passed. Which would only matter if the recognition software signalled her out as unauthorised. If it did she was finished; if it didn't, it could be a weeks before anyone human bothered to scan the shots.

Years of working late meant Clare knew the ins and outs of Ministry security. A rapid response team, armed with 32-round H&K 5K slug guns and protected from the elements by little huts of bullet-proof polymer, secured the huge gates.

Inside, within the huge black marble and mirrored glass foyer, deserted and with lights dimmed now that night was here, armed police guarded the massive micromesh doors to prevent unauthorised entry. There was no method of entry at the back of the building, all the doors had been bricked over following the last round of student riots.

She saw no one on her way to the Minister's office, and no alarms rang, no challenges were issued. Once in his office, heart pounding, sweat running in rivulets down the inside of her stick-like arms, Clare spent five minutes by the light of his desk lamp dividing her memos to the Minister into personal, departmental and those to be trashed.

That she was crying as she did it was absurd, Clare knew that. But knowing it didn't stop the sobs that racked through her. Rightly or wrongly, if she'd had to choose one thing that mattered to her, it would have been her career.

While the Zanussi trasher quietly pulped a dozen confidential memos into hamster litter, and then powdered it all over again, Clare slid over to the now silent IBM terminal waiting beside her old desk and toggled into in keyboard mode.

Her screen was still on line. At first Clare was surprised to find it still connected to the hiNet; the priority web which linked Section heads, Ministers and their Private Secretaries. But then it occurred to her, Why not? Monday would bring an unexpected promotion to some bright spark, who would jump a few undeserved grades and inherit all the privileges that used to be Clare's.

Clare was upset to discover just how much she minded.

login

Clare did, but not in her name.

password?

She gave that day's.

Crypt?

Her RSSA crypt log was already de-activated. But that didn't stop her. Tears still streaming down her face, Clare called up the minister's own private key from memory.

confirm identity

Clare typed in the minister's full name, date of birth and National Security number. There were some advantages to having been his section head. Not to mention some advantages to his affectation of always using a keyboard. If the system had been working on voice recognition, she'd be dead.

As it was, she was in.

Shutting down the smart interface took a couple of intricate passes with her finger over the screen, but finally she was back to a simple shell.

There was an unofficial but highly effective all-files Boolean search facility known only to top section staff and that was what Clare was after when she keyed in the words Balthus & Mayer?

But the hyper-screen she expected didn't come up to greet her. Instead the screen scribbled into page after page of machine code then dissolved to reveal a blond American with thousand mile eyes staring intently out at her.

'Good evening my dear Balthus,' the simulacrum said in an elegant Boston drawl. 'This is Charles. If this has reached you then I'm probably dead and you and Makai soon will be.'

The simulacrum of Mayer segued seamlessly into a picture of a stark white stone set over a neat grave. Behind it a field of prairie grass stretched into the distance, ruffled and rippled by an invisible wind.

The name MAYER was carved into the headstone under an intricate Star of David. Beside it, in lines that built up rapidly like a child's three-dimensional CAD drawing, a wider grave appeared, and then a rubbish bin. The bin was labelled Makai and a cross at the head of the wide grave bore the legend BALTHUS carved in gothic lettering. Above the bin and the graves a single raptor circled and slid on invisible air currents.

'Get the picture?'

Mayer reappeared, wearing Raybans.

Although Clare knew his voice came from small bioVox speakers inset on both sides of the screen, the words seemed to come at her straight from his mouth.

'Here's that present I promised you. Too late, I fear, to be of much real enjoyment.'

The screen dissolved to show a sulky young girl dressed in a too tight, black Harley Davidson teeshirt and a cheap Romanian copy of last-year's designer jeans. Her long dark hair was tied back in a rough pony-tail which swung slightly from side to side.

She was lost in thought, dancing against the blank computer screen to music that Clare couldn't hear.

Clare couldn't tell when or if video vanished and simulation took over but suddenly the jeans and teeshirt dissolved leaving the girl naked, still dancing, looking even younger than before. Too fat, Clare thought instantly, long before it occurred to her to wonder who the girl was or why Mayer should have been supplying Balthus with kinderporn. There were rolls of adolescent fat along her hips and she had those absurd conical nipples found only on the newly pubescent.

A tight knot had twisted in Clare's stomach. The girl was at least half a stone overweight, her hair badly cut, her over-lipsticked mouth twisted with that sullen arrogance young teenage girls get just before they go out and make fools of themselves. Exactly the kind of person that as a young teenager Clare would have crossed the road to avoid.

Clare glanced away just as the girl pushed her hips forward and began to massage between her legs, biting her pouting bottom lip as she did so. It occurred to a horrified Clare that this very definitely wasn't a brilliant, seamless computer simulation, this was real.

But equally it wasn't a performance. The girl didn't know she was being watched. And God only knows what kind of video kit had been used to capture and isolate the images. M-wave might be able to see through walls and strip the clothes off a suspect, obviating the need for a body search. But even M-wave couldn't capture images with anything like this clarity.

'You realise, don't you, you fat pervert,' Mayer's voice said suddenly, 'That this kid's younger than my dead daughter?'

In a flickering, sickening burst of supra-subliminal images the dancing girl merged with Jennifer Mayer's smiling face.

Cutting to Jennifer's gutted body

Marc's dead Giacommetti-like face.

Giselle Gabon's orgasm.

Charles Mayer in Raybans.

His daughter's body suspended in a cryonics tank.

The violent images meshed into a strobing, stuttering obscenity that finally exploded in a sickening flash of white.

Instinctively, Clare ducked, and straightened up, still shaking, to find herself faced with a blank computer screen. If Balthus hadn't already been dead, he would have been after that. Clare knew enough about black viruses to recognise a screen-induced fit trigger when she saw one. Luckily, they had to be hand-crafted and target specific, as that one had been for Balthus.

It was at least twenty minutes since she'd made her way up from the basement. As it was, it was only a matter of time, time that was counting itself down, until one of those two

realised she wasn't still dumped unconscious in the garage downstairs and came looking for her.

Hands shaking, Clare instinctively hit enter, and released her breath in a jagged rush as the screen kicked back into life.

Somewhere three floors below her, a command flowed into the mainframe, tripped a switch that didn't know it was there, fell through a trapdoor that remained convinced it was closed and then passed ghost-like and undetected through a double firewall and three sets of black ice. Ending up at a small black box the size of a DAT cassette. A box that had no wires, modem cables or hard links of any kind.

But all the same the command reached the box and somewhere deep inside the box a memory stirred. Its quantum processor, which worked across simultaneous parallel states, deducted state from state and arrived instantly at a single appropriate response. Under Hawkins law of quantum computing, without knowing she'd asked a question, Clare had already defined its answer.

And all Clare knew was that the screen flickered and then steadied to an archaic, plain old-fashioned DOS prompt. It was like staring at an ancient hieroglyph.

Yes?:\>

'Yes what?' Clare typed back.

Mayer?

'Yes,' typed Clare. Charles Mayer and his relationship with Theodore Balthus, that was what she wanted to know about. She was still trying to fathom her next move when the screen blanked again, only to throw up a snatched photograph of her walking down Emperor Steps on the edge of the Seine

Clare stared at herself petrified, while the screen version of herself stared briskly into the distance, a scowl on her face and hands clasped behind her back. To one side, half hidden in the shadow of a tree, was the figure of a tall man, swathed in a long coat. The man was undoubtedly Charles Mayer.

It had to be a trick, a trap. For a second Clare considered just walking away from the screen, from the Minister's office, and leaving it. But there was no point. Someone knew she was there. They must do.

'So you survived... Well that's something, though it's probably more than I can say for myself. Still that was cute, but it wasn't very clever, was it?' The words typed themselves in like subtitles along the bottom, as a crude cartoon of a young Japanese boy in mirrorshades took over the screen.

Who had survived? Who was talking?

Clare said, typed and did nothing. In the circumstances it seemed safest

'Well, was it clever? Coming in through the front door like that. And using the Minister's own password and key... Even I, fucked up as I am, know that's too dangerous a joke. Why not just trip the trapdoor?'

'What's a trapdoor?' Clare tapped back.

This time it was the screen that was silent.

'Who are you?' It asked eventually. The words were said not typed and the voice that issued from her screen sounded young and definitely foreign.

'Clare Fabio.'

The screen went dead. Nothing happened for a second or so, and then the voice was back. 'For starters,' it said, 'if you're Clare Fabio, what are you doing here. According to the report Charles filed on you, tonight's your night for squash.'

It was too. Clare realised flatly that she'd just stood up her bank manager, her boyfriend and an influential woman journalist on the Herald Tribune. All in one go. Well, no matter. Her world was rapidly separating itself from theirs.

Only then did Clare wonder how the other computer operator knew who she was, and why Charles Mayer had told him what she should be doing.

'Who are you?' Clare typed in, shaking her head to clear it. Somehow she didn't trust herself to speak. Blood was seeping from an open wound over her right temple, rolling in a warm slow trickle to the bruised corner of her mouth.

The trickle was salt as blood was meant to be, but also sweet and thick as milkshake. She'd been absent-mindedly licking it away for the last five minutes without even noticing.

'I am Makai,' said the computer. 'What are you doing here?'

Clare's fingers flicked over the keyboard.

'I needed something.'

'You think you need something!' Makai said bitterly. 'No. I mean, why you, why now?'

'I need something.'

'Let your office get it for you.'

'It isn't my office,' Clare typed. 'Not now. Not any more.' Her fingers on the keys had begun to tremble again. She didn't know whether she was speaking to another person, or to the machine. Either way it was like walking beside a ghost.

'Wait,' Makai demanded.

Again she waited.

'They threw you out, didn't they?' Makai said when he came back a second or so later. 'Your file's closed, poor lamb.' He didn't sound sympathetic at all. It was another few seconds before he came up with his offer. At least Clare assumed it was an offer.

Charles Mayer was dead. Pierre Nexus was planning to have her killed. But Makai would protect her from Nexus - at least for now - by reconstructing her security clearance and setting her up with protection so strong that not even the Minister's most dubious associates could touch her.

'Of course, in return you will help me get back my memory.'

'Where is it?' Clare asked.

There was a silence. And when the computer spoke again it sounded older, more distant. 'If I knew that I wouldn't need you, would I? What I do know is that it was taken when Charles was killed and his office blown apart. Do you understand the difference - it was taken not destroyed.'

'You help me, I help you?' Clare asked bitterly.

'I would have thought that was obvious.'

'And if I don't?'

'Then Nexus will succeed in having you killed. That is if the cross young thug with the big, big gun on the floor below doesn't get you first.'

Clare still hesitated.

'Look,' said Makai, 'do you want my help or not?'

New Gods/Old Ways

Wild hoopi trilled out an exotic dawn chorus, their notes rising and falling on a warm, whispering Meghrib wind. Somewhere behind the low rumble of street noise a small child laughed and a Rai drummer hammered out a complex North African drum rhythm.

Suppressing her grunt of irritation, Clare rolled over and shouted at the Hitachi, stopping M'Dina Dawn in its tracks.

Shouting was a bad mistake, but then so was rolling over. White pain swept her nerves as every bruised and torn muscle in her body screamed at once. Primitive agony jackknifed her into a tight foetal ball, heart pounding, tears streaming over the purple bruises on her swollen cheekbones.

Two days had passed and still the pain felt no better.

'God, God, God...' Drawing on every last grain of determination, Clare propelled herself up off the bed, across a wood floor half-heartedly patterned with weak Parisian sunlight. Heading for her bathroom.

She needed painkillers. Needed them now. It was finding them that foxed her.

With mounting desperation, Clare ransacked her drugs cupboard, then staggered to the kitchen to empty out a Chinese bowl stuffed with crumpled notes, empty credit chips, hairgrips, stuff she didn't have a proper place for. Nothing there, nothing at all.

Tipping her Gucci bag out onto the scrubbed pine surface of her antique kitchen table, Clare scabbled desperately through its contents, until her shaking fingers closed over a nearly-empty bubblepac. ParaDerm. Only two to be used in any 24 hour period.

'Sweet Jesus...'

Popping them from the pack and ripping foil from their adhesive backs, she taped a derm to each wrist, and wept with sudden relief as synthetic endorphin fed swiftly into her blood system. The hurt was still there, but with her receptors numbed, her neural network no longer registered it.

What it did still register though was her grey depression, as unwelcome as any hangover. She could take a betaB but maybe she couldn't afford to lose her anxiety. It didn't take brilliance to work out that her long-term prospects were as bleak as the winter's sky beyond that kitchen window.

Clare shivered. Half from habit she aimed her kitchen remote at the Braun cafeMaster. The machine sprang to life, quickly filling the large sparsely-decorated room with the heavy scent of pure Colombian coffee.

Not Clare's favorite smell. She could recalled a My World quiz in which some idiotic CySat anchor woman, all long blonde hair and collagen implants claimed fresh Colombian as her most ever favourite smell... Stupid bitch. First thing in the morning anyone normal would find its black aroma sickening.

Fighting down swirling nausea, Clare forced herself to toast two slices of bread. She cut the toast into quarters and ate it dry, without butter. The coffee she had black. Resisting her instinct to vomit, Clare sat at the table and forced down another cup of strong black coffee. Then with endorphin and caffeine sweeping her veins, she began to consider her options. Which were frighteningly limited.

She was home. Supposedly safe. No round-the-clock, discreet S3 bodyguard standing motionless in the street outside to be sure. But she still had two electronic Chubs securing her steel-titanium front door. Every window in the place was lined with transparent monoclonal bullet-resistant micromesh. She had a new Toshiba box with its own geosync satellite modem, a direct feed to CySat and a new Braun microwave. Not to mention enough frozen sushi, mycoprotien Tex Mex and vegetarian cous cous to keep the most pretentious gourmet happy for a month.

Damit, even the walls were triple-lined with a complex web of Russian anti M-wave ice loops, not that she put much faith in anti M-wave anything. If S3 wanted to see though your walls, that was what they did.

But what difference did it all make? She was still scared and alone, in an unpaid-for fifth floor apartment she could no longer afford, in an exclusive Isle St Louis block she was now too terrified to leave. Besides this wasn't a siege, and who was she going to vidphone anyway?

In all probability it would be lack of funds, not guns that got her out. Flats this good were rare in central Paris. Prized.

She liked the way people's eyes widened when she told them where she lived. That immediate second glance as they unconsciously reassessed her. Wondered who she knew. Losing it was going to hurt, maybe more than anything else. Okay it wasn't admirable, she knew that, but for her, where you lived was who you were. She wasn't a noble and now she never would be, but she'd come pretty close.

The near destitute had long ago been pushed out to that ring of high-rise housing projects strung out both sides of the peripherique. Moving in from this murderous, ten lane ringroad you hit the cramped apartments of shop keepers, office workers, small time salarimen, would-be suits - the streets getting less dirty, less dangerous.

And then, further in, the city changed again. From the raddled, tired, burnt out old prostitute that most Parisians knew as their city, to the slick travelog vision of Imperial Paris that the world outside mistook for the real thing.

Residence within the centre was controlled by license. Only the rich - dealers in lines of credit, software impresarios, politicians, gangsters - got to live there. Their opulence and extravagance the envy of CySat viewers everywhere to My World and Nature's Aristocrats.

But the older the money is, the harder to see it, and the gilded centre had a marble heart. On L'Isle St Louis, set quietly in the middle of the Seine, the money was so old as to be almost invisible. Narrow streets, peeling stucco, ancient wrought-iron balconies, as old as they were rusty. And it was here that Clare had elected to live.

Getting her apartment hadn't proved easy. Although, the way things were going, keeping it would be more difficult still. The acquisition had taken her two years, a certain flexibility in her approach to the law and a hefty credit line from S3's bankers at Hong Kong Suisse.

Using a supposedly restricted Administration database, Clare had fed in Quai de Bourbon, Quai d'Orleans and Rue St-Louis-en-L'Ille and matched these streets with apartments owned by people either ill or old enough to be near death. The search threw up a target of six possibles.

Two streets across from where Clare was now, on the good end of the small island was the house Clare had really wanted. A Louis XIV townhouse occupied by a ancient Sicilian prince, his elderly valet and his overweight and sulky granddaughter.

More than once Clare had seen the girl staring down at Clare's official Citroen as it slid past her gates. It was always the same. Early morning, still dark - the girl would be there, a small figure at a high window, looking out over the courtyard to the street and the river beyond. Somehow the sight of her always made Clare shiver.

But unfortunately his serene highness showed no desire to die and, through some cold-eyed American lawyer had made it very clear he had no intention of selling up. So, swallowing her irritation, she'd reluctantly accepted next best - this apartment. Not as good as the Hotel Sabatini, but still ten times better than most people would even aspire to. Better than Pierre Nexus had.

All it had taken was knowledge of the original owner's impending death for Clare to move swiftly in on the small provincial notary already appointed as executor.

Clare's offer, combined with promises of preferment and veiled threats of what happened to minor officials who ended up on the wrong side of the Third Section got Clare a flat at Quai de Bourbon before others even knew it was on the market.

But now, without the subsidised mortgage that went with being an Imperial prosecutor, Hong Kong Suisse would foreclose. The Minister would see to that.

Clare put her head in her hands and groaned. All she'd worked for, gone. And what was she without her job?

Nothing.

She'd been beaten up, struck off, sexually insulted. Her entire career ruined - and why? Because some overweight pathologist and dubious Yank spook had got themselves terminated. As if she'd had anything to do with it. She was just the fall guy, a place where the buck conveniently stopped.

And where was Makai? If he'd ever existed, and wasn't just some chimera brought on by shock... Nowhere. Nowhere at all.

Maybe it was a siege after all.

South across the wine dark river from her apartment, still floodlit and surrounded by its high security fence, stood the ugly silver walls of the Islamic Institute, patron Prince Lucian Joseph, prince imperial.

Since the days of the Egyptian campaign when Napoleon I had toyed with converting to Islam, the Bonapartes had maintained polite links with the mullahs. Useful for a family who had swept to power in 2058 on a strong North African vote.

There were those - republican troublemakers mainly - who said the family's fluency in the Koran was just real politik, pure cynicism. But however you looked at it, friendly relations made sense, given that the independent cities and protectorates of Megrib were the richest parts of what now remained of the old Third empire.

What's more, the Bonapartes and the mullahs shared a deep distrust of nanite culture. The mullahs mistrusted nanotechnology because it came from America, worked at sub-atomic levels and most important of all, because it could - and did - successfully recreate God's handiwork.

Was it not sinful merely to copy God's work in the name of art? How much worse then to duplicate it in the name of science.

The Prince Imperial's reasons had less to do with theology. He didn't like the loss of power implied by allowing his subjects to own fulling-functioning matter compilers. Which is why every matter compiler in the Empire was either a publicly-owned, limited-function slop machine, or else licensed to a member of the nobility...

To the right of the Islamic Institute, just visible in the distance beyond the tall gilt dome of the Pantheon, stood the old Monparnasse Tower, now the European headquarters of Maas-Mitsuki. The first metaNational to demand a place at the United Nations, on the simple grounds that its annual revenue was bigger than that of most Sud American republics.

The Institute, the Parthenon, Tour Monparnasse. It was a view that mere money could not buy.

By 7am, while Clare was sweating from an overdose of paraDerm and caffeine, that night's haul of vagrants had been shipped back to the peripherique and dumped by the police. By 7.30 the smell of fresh bread was drifting up from the Quai below. Another irritation. Try as she might nothing, not even her new Matsui air scrubber, could keep out the smell of fresh yeast that burst from the oven every time the baker hooked out hot loaves and piled them untidily onto ceramic racks to cool.

Now was the time that a Third Section blue Citroen should have been drawing up at Clare's courtyard entrance, its paintwork newly washed, a download of that morning's Le Matin waiting for her on its black ultrasuede back seat.

Only there was no official vehicle. And she knew with a sudden sickening certainty that there would never be one again.

In despair she went back to bed.

Four hours later when a Hertz Bykeboy pulled up onto the granite pavement outside her apartment, the paraDerm shakes were gone and Clare was dozing.

Ignoring the outside vidphone, the yellow-clad bykeboy tripped every screamer in the place by kicking his way past huge oak doors. Stamping across the glassed-in atrium of the old courtyard, he tossed a parcel at the outraged porter.

'Lady Clare,' he said. 'Urgent.'

The boy didn't stop to collect a signature.

And he wasn't really from Hertz.

The box was wrapped loosely in old-fashioned brown paper, sealed with a flamboyantly embossed blob of red sealing wax and addressed to Lady Clare Fabio, Director of the Institute Bonaparte. The only real concession to security was an undamaged strip of shimmering tamperTell lazer tape wrapped twice round the parcel, once each way.

The porter put in an immediate e-mail to the Toshiba smartbox in Clare's apartment. There was no answer but then Lamartine wasn't expecting one. The snotty bitch would be at work. All the same, to cover his back he stuck through a voice call as well.

The whisper that answered came ghost-like through the deficiencies of the internal intercom.

'Motorbike delivery, Madam,' the porter said in answer to Clare's vague question. 'Perhaps from the Ministry...'

Clare very much doubted it - unless it was a bomb. But she didn't bother to mention her doubts to Lamartine. The moment he found out about her fall, his fawning politeness would slide into open contempt. She didn't need the grief.

'I'll be down.' Clare said reluctantly, wrapping herself in a blue, gold and yellow Kenzo dressing-gown, last year's over-priced birthday gift from Claude de Crecy. There won't be many more of those, she thought. And was surprised to find she didn't care. The only reason she put up with Claude was that he made no demands, mental or physical.

Sealing the Chubs behind her with a quick swipe of her hand, Clare walked unsteadily towards the lift and stopped, in horror, at the sight of her reflection in the lift's glass door.

Yellow bruising stretched across one cheek like an unlasered birthmark. Above her blackened right eye a thick scab hid a gash that should have been zipped shut and sealed with instant skin.

But those were just on the surface. Minor surgery that could be corrected at any corner pharmacy. It was her blue eyes, which usually stared out so arrogantly which revealed the real, inner damage.

She was scared.

Clare re-read the address, as her mind stumbled with disbelief over the oddity of Lady Clare and Institute Bonaparte.

The nobility, or those fragments still left after the Second Franco-Prussian War, didn't need to work. With the re-establishment of the Third Empire, they'd been given honorary diplomatic status. Subject not to the Code Napoleon but only to the Code Imperial.

Within the Empire they paid no taxes, moved freely without police permits and could only be subject to surveillance by the Third Section with written permission of the Prince

Imperial himself. Small surprise that every American metaNational and Far Eastern zaibatsu employed at least one on its board.

Clare didn't qualify by birth. Nor did Claude, despite all his money. She'd never even met someone who did. The nobility lived behind locked doors.

As for the Institute Bonaparte, she'd never heard of it. If asked, Clare would have said it didn't exist. A bomb then? Had her first idea been right? Unlikely, Lamartine had already run the package through an explosives detector.

It occurred to Clare with a sickening jolt that it might be dog shit, dead mice, maggots. A sick joke at her expense by someone at the Ministry. Some bitter little second secretary who hadn't dared face up to her when Clare was in charge.

If so, it wasn't needed, thought Clare bitterly. She knew when she was on the losing side. Without her job she was just words on a Sorbonne certificate, 15 Versace suits waiting to be last year's fashion and an emptying account at Hong Kong Suisse.

It had never occurred to her before how hollow her life was if its props were kicked away.

The porter smiled even more humbly, and gave a gentle cough. 'A promotion, Madame?' Ever obsequious, he kept his eyes firmly away from her bruised and battered face.

Promotion? Institute Bonaparte? Clare shrugged, and retreated back to her flat to consider the parcel.

In one corner of her sitting room on a small inlaid walnut table, sat her new Toshiba, its message diode lazily flashing. Digitally encoded onto its voice box were curt messages from Claude de Crecy, from the accountant she'd stood up for tennis and from State Minister Nexus, demanding back a platinum Amex he'd forgotten to take off her.

They could wait.

Her WebReader was on the floor beside her bed, set to standby. Discarding her download of the classic Robicheaux novels of James Lee Burke, Clare keyed in her password with badly trembling fingers, and told the Reader to hyperlink all references to the Institute.

The Institute was real enough. Its name a clue to the ambiguous status it enjoyed. Founded by Napoleon III shortly after he became emperor of the French in 1853, it had been funded by Napoleon III in his capacity as a private individual. Hence its title was Institute Bonaparte, rather than Institute Napoleon or Institute Imperial.

Its job, to investigate one of the emperor's private passions - metaphysics and the occult, particularly the life of Comte de Saint-Germain, described a century earlier in a letter Voltaire wrote to Frederick the Great as, 'That man who knows everything and never dies.'

According to her Reader, all of the Institute's own records were destroyed in 1871 in the great fire that consumed the Hotel de Ville, and no further mention of the Institute had been made in any recent public records.

Playing a hunch, Clare told her WebReader to search for the Third Section. There was nothing, not even a mention of its status as part of the diplomatic corps.

If the Third section didn't exist according to the Napoleonika On Line, and Clare knew it did, then why shouldn't the Institute also exist, if Clare wasn't aware of it?

Cutting the parcel's tamperTell with a silver penknife, Clare ripped away the paper and found herself staring at a modest grey oblong about the size of a Cuban cigarbox, the small size. The box opened up to show inner surfaces so black and shiny they could have been laser cut from a single block of smoky obsidian. Everything was smooth. There were no buttons, outside or in, no lights, nothing that looked remotely like a switch.

The grey box was hauntingly beautiful. And somehow remote, as if it was an ancient art treasure. She turned it carefully, then smiled and placed the box gently on a side table. All her worries suddenly stilled, which in itself should have worried her.

When something finally hummed to life deep within it she wasn't even surprised. Though her heart beat faster when the black inner surfaces flickered and swirled though a rainbow pattern of colours, before settling for a patterned cararra marble that matched exactly the green tabletop on which it now rested.

'You look shit,' the box said in bad French.

Despite her known dislike of bad language, Clare grinned.

'I mean it,' insisted the box.

The cararra pattern faded, as a shimmering holografix head began to form in the square of air between the base and the open lid. The air stilled and the cartoon-like face of a Japanese boy stared at her, concern written all over his anime-eyed features.

'Don't get scared,' said Makai. 'cause you're going to be seeing a lot of me.'

The boy vanished and then he was standing there beside her, although not so there that she couldn't see the swirl of a Persian rug showing right through him.

He paused, as if to listen to something she couldn't hear, then grinned a little. It wasn't a pretty sight.

'Call Nexus,' Makai suggested, 'And promise his Amex back today. While you're at it, tell him you're going on holiday at the end of this week. To think things over. And that you're mortified by the trouble you caused...'

Makai held up his hand. 'Said nothing about meaning it.' The boy smiled again, his green eyes not quite meeting hers.

'What are you?' Clare asked uncertainly.

Makai shrugged. 'A friend, beyond that who knows? Get me back my memory and maybe we'll find out. One other thing, I want you to find out who destroyed Mayer's office and kill them.'

'Kill them?' Clare couldn't keep the horror out of her voice, though she tried hard enough.

'Why not? You've got nothing left to loose but your life. And you want to keep that, don't you?'

Clare nodded.

'Then Mayer made the right choice. When he realised his own bacon was grilled, he told me to attach myself to you. It was the last thing he did.'

It sounded implausible enough to be true. It just didn't explain anything. And explanations were what she wanted. 'Why Lady Clare?' Clare asked abruptly.

'Social armour. It'll worry the Third Section,' Makai said. He sighed. 'Besides the English are such snobs. 'And we must do what we can to make your job easier in London.'

It was an obvious question, but Clare asked it anyway.

Makai nodded. 'There's an Air France shuttle leaving Charles de Gaulle at 19.30 the day after tomorrow, arriving Gatwick 45 minutes later. 'Someone will meet you. Maybe even help you find this man...'

It was the sort of middle-aged face that probably once passed for handsome, in an blue-eyed and overweight, very English sort of way.

'Alex Gibson,' Makai said. 'Freelance researcher for CySat. Works on My Trial. Did work, rather,' Makai said, sounding as if he was reading straight from a screen. North London childhood. College in Birmingham. Went missing six months ago claiming his Zeiss eyecamera held vital evidence on the Juppe trial.'

'Juppe?'

It was a trial that Clare could only vaguely remember, even though it was less than five months old and she'd been the prosecutor. Something about one vagrant tearing out the throat of another. There'd been some unpleasantness or other...

She could recall it now, the murderer had killed himself before a sentence could be passed. The whole thing had been an administrative nightmare. Not to mention a complete waste of public funds.

'What kind of evidence?' Clare asked abruptly. And then remembered with a lurch that it didn't really matter - she was no longer a state prosecutor.

Makai shrugged. 'Who knows? Only, Mayer was after Alex Gibson and he wasn't the only one.' The boy stopped to consider something for a second or two, before firing a sudden question at Clare. 'Do you believe in invisibility? In honest to God, hundred percent invisibility. Not just to the human eye but to M-wave video, everything?'

Clare shook her head firmly.

'Mayer did,' said Makai. 'And Gibson claimed to have proof. Well,' Makai's smile was as chilly as any winter breeze. 'Not proof exactly, but a taped, polygraphed interview with someone who'd seen it in action.'

'The tramp?'

Makai nodded. 'You know something else,' he said. 'That other tramp, the murdered one - you never did see the morgue shots did you? His body was riddled with corruption. Now what does that remind you of?'

Clare said nothing.

'Gibson vanished without trace. Fell through the info-Net. If he's still out there he hasn't used a bank, visited a doctor or taken a plane in six months. Find Gibson, find out about invisibility. Find out about invisibility find who killed Mayer.'

'But why me?' Clare insisted, though she already knew. Jennifer Mayer's gutted corpse haunted her, corroded her mind like an unwanted answer.

'You saw the bodies, you talked to Balthus, Charles Mayer called you. Yet you're still alive. Bad mistake. Someone somewhere will be very upset.'

'Who?'

Makai shrugged. 'Not enough data on that. Not yet. Look...' he added, 'dead you're just last week's statistic. But alive. Well, whoever they are, they're not going to like it, are they?'

She could feel her feal actually feel it. Crawling across her skin, stale sweat and primitive terror oozing out through her pores like yesterday's stale garlic, making her feel unclean.

'You've got two choices.' Makai said bluntly. 'Hole up or hit the ground and roll.'

He waited. It was important that the final decision appeared to be hers.

'I'll do it,' Clare whispered at last, surprising herself.

'Of course you will,' said Makai flatly. He was suddenly less ghost-like, more real. For the first time he looked her full in the eyes. And without knowing why Clare suddenly started shivering.

M25 FreeWay

The Air France 'copter was uneventful. Touching down at Gatwick in the cold, grey drizzle. Its regular commuter crop of Zaibat-suits all busy shutting down their wafer-thin flatboxes, satellite modems squirting out arrival times for getting home.

In the rows behind, couples reluctantly unjacked and folded away 'trodes and wrap-rounds from the 'courtesy' SegaSims built into the armrests beside them.

They were drawn to England by the cheap holografix advertising that littered the streets of Europe. Find it in London - taste the passion. NafNaf-clothed teens and twenties shifting anxiously in their narrow economy seats, petrified that people would suspect what everybody already knew. Couple by couple, they were here to take advantage of England's relaxed morality laws.

The Hyatt West End, Hilton and Inter-Continental did brisk trade in long weekends for Parisian rich kids keen to prove they weren't like everyone else.

Clare knew all about it. She'd put in three long days at the Hyatt with Lucian, her first lover. A birthday surprise Lucian sprung on her, then ruined by turning nasty when she wanted to see a Klossowski de Rola exhibition at the Royal Academy rather than spend the time in bed with him..

They hadn't lasted long after that. Just time enough for Lucian to reveal a taste for anal sex, mostly of the violent kind.

But then L'amour Anglais was fashionable in France among devout, well-born unmarried couples. It avoided the papal ban on birth control and as the church hadn't thought to list it as a sexual sin, opinion said it obviously didn't count as intercourse. And as far as Clare was concerned, it didn't.

The London trip was three years after her father died from cancer. Not that she'd been there at the end.

Sitting smug on the edge of that bed in the Hyatt, still dripping with sweat from the effort of entering her, Lucian didn't know there was nothing he could do to Clare that hadn't already been done.

'Never again,' thought Clare, shaking her head angrily. Then frowned as a smart young steward came rushing across the cabin towards her, alarm written all over his handsome face.

'Is everything all right, My Lady?'

Clare nodded abruptly. Life was different now, but all the same she didn't envy the couples. Didn't envy them at all. One couple after another, Clare had seen them waiting at the check-in desk at Charles de Gaulle, staring at her as she sailed through on her way to the VIP lounge. Wonder not envy reflected in their eyes.

She could feel Makai's influence where ever she turned, like a shield around her. The special meal on the plane. The empty row behind and in front, block-booked in her name to give her breathing space.

Though on arrival at Gatwick even Clare was shocked to find herself whisked away from the milling crowds by two Heckler&Koch 5K toting security guards.

Bulky in their ceramic web flack jackets, they hurried her down deserted maintenance passages out to a waiting Honda limousine. And promptly retreated. Clare couldn't be sure whether she caused their nervousness, or whether they were scared of the tiny bejewelled Indian woman standing beside the Honda.

The woman, her sari woven from Thai silk genetically-altered to contain pure gold put her hands together in greeting, and bowed. The English wind was so cold, Clare wondered why she didn't wear something warmer.

'This is my airport, Lady Clare' she said shortly. 'Your personal secretary, Mr Makai, asked us to facilitate your arrival.'

She smiled tightly. Either her face really did reflect a timeless beauty denied to ordinary mortals, or serious credit had changed hands at some cutting-edge M'dina medical clinic.

Beside the woman, dwarfing her completely, stood Air France's UK Operations executive, a huge sweating Scot in a crumpled off-the-peg Italian suit.

They were politeness itself but so clearly wary of her that Clare wondered what Makai had said. Something double-edged. Both looked as if they wanted her off their hands as swiftly as possible.

'If you're ready, lady?

Clare turned to find a tall Dread staring down at her, his locks secured behind his head in a huge knitted cap. 'I and I Winston, your driver,' he announced, gripping her hand in a firm shake. 'We be mov'n now.' He didn't appear to notice the Indian woman or her colleague.

The luxurious Honda ate up the M23 between Gatwick and London, its optic sensors operating on infra-red autoglide. Winston allowed the limousine to steer itself. One hand on the wheel's red over-ride, the other tapping beat to a heavy dub that fed in from a microspeaker taped behind his ear.

Occasionally Winston's eyes would drift to the small screen, where MS routesoft kept track of their position as it slid the speeding limousine effortlessly between lanes.

One minute Winston was mellow, listening to dub, enjoying the absurd luxury of the huge car, and then suddenly the sinews in his neck knotted up like whipcord and Clare could feel his tension, naked as electricity.

She knew, without knowing how, that he was listening to voices from the microspeaker. His jaw moving as he answered, his words subvocal. Which meant he probably had a chipmike implant in his throat.

'Company Lady.' He said, catching her eye in the driver's mirror. 'We acquire company.'

Instinctively, Clare began to look over her shoulder, but stopped as Winston's voice cut the air.

'Look ahead Lady. Keep lookin ahead. We all ride with Jah. Nah problem.'

Winston took a deep breath, forcing himself to relax, and then punched out the over-ride, taking control of the car.

As kills went it was nearly perfect. The huge Honda had to slow slightly as Winston braked to let in a weaving container truck.

Which was when the blond boy on the red Kawasaki hit the throttle to make his move. Closing the gap in a matter of seconds, the bike curved inside the Honda, drawing alongside the backseat.

For a second Clare was staring into the speedwell blue eyes of the most beautiful boy she'd ever seen. Then as the angel-faced thug ripped a cut-down Browning free from its Velcroed hiding place beneath his leather jacket, Winston hit the brakes and swung the Honda out across three lanes, accelerating as he went.

The first barrel missed, blowing out the side of a driverless police drone that had homed in on them. It exploded, still squawking its message for them to stop.

The second barrel was never fired. In the frozen second between the first shot and the exploding drone, Winston gunned the Honda, turned it tight towards the left shoulder and ran the limousine straight over the top of the careering bike.

Clare felt the double thud as both front and back wheels passed over the would-be assassin, crushing his skull and driving splintered ribs deep into his heart and lungs. And then they were on their way again, Winston grinning and thumping his fist rhythmically against the wheel. The music inside his head flooding through him.

'Babylon burns,' he said softly, humming to the dub. When he glanced round ten minutes later, he was still smiling.

'Fuel,' he announced, hitting the over-ride. There was a touch of airbrakes, as the huge car began to slow.

'Now we do the business.' Winston's face in the driving mirror was suddenly impassive, his eyes cold as stone. He said something subvocal that Clare couldn't catch, and reached for a pair of nightsight Raybans.

While the limousine was busy refuelling itself a small man with a mean mouth clambered into the backseat. He was white, late forties. Dark hair, cut neat not short. White shirt, red tie, off-the-peg jacket a size too big, but still not big enough to hide the bulge of his shoulder holster. He didn't introduce himself.

'Well,' Clare asked in poor English, 'what happens now?' She stressed all the wrong syllables.

The man smiled sourly, showing broken teeth that could easily have been rebuilt. When he spoke it was in ostentatiously fluent French. 'We drive once round the M25 and then you go home. Fast. Word is, someone out there wants you dead. I'd watch it if I were you.'

From the front came an amused grunt as Winston jerked his thumb at the man and made an obscene up and down gesture.

The man reacted so fast his nervous system was obviously wired. But Winston was quicker. So quick that Clare couldn't have said at what point Winston moved.

One second the man's hand was diving under his coat, the next life froze as Winston's gun found a resting place under the man's narrow chin. The knuckle on his trigger finger beginning to lighten.

'Don't be ignorant. Hands in front where I see them,' he ordered. The Rasta lilt gone, replaced by tones so cold they could have been digital.

Very carefully the man put both hands on his knees, his eyes never leaving Winston's matt black two shot derringer. The Dread smiled.

'Right choice mon,' he said pleasantly, and casually angled his hand, allowing the spring-loaded gun to retreat to its wrist cradle.

'Ratso here be Babylon gate keeper,' Winston said to Clare. 'Crazy spook, but harmless.'

The small man Winston called Ratso looked bitterly at Clare. 'Ignore all that nigra dreadlocks bullshit,' he said coldly. 'This man's a Ragsta. Vandalises gigabytes of cyberdata to sell off scraps to the Nips. Clean you out soon as look at you.'

Winston eyes hardened, but the smile never left his face. 'You want war, come see me some other time mon. Not today. Today I hear the word, and the word says help this lady. You hear that word too...'

Ratso nodded, nervously. Both his hands still firmly on his knees. He caught Clare watching him and glanced away, eyelids twitching.

She could almost smell his suspicion over the scent of cheap lemon aftershave. What ever Ratso did with his life, it obviously didn't involve dealing with other people if Ratso could help it.

He was more a machine man. She'd met them before, trailing failed lives like unravelling wire behind them. Unhappy childhoods, bitter memories, neglectful parents, girlfriends who always ended up laughing at their inadequacies.

'Drive,' Ratso said to Winston through tight lips, 'Let's get this over with.' He lent gingerly back into the Honda's grey ultrasuede.

They drove, minutes ticking away in silence. Clare concentrating on the huge TransEuro containers that roared past them, a blur of spray in the wet darkness.

'So you want Alex.' Ratso said suddenly.

Clare jumped. 'Alex?'

'What Gibson's ex-wife Jenny called him. When she could still talk. If you can call the howls of a gibbering, incontinent wreck, talking.' Ratso sucked his broken teeth. 'She clammed up after her last suicide attempt. Post traumatic autism. That fat French freak tried pynozine. Even dug out an old ECT machine. Nothing.'

His thin smile was more irritated than sorry.

'Torture?' Clare was more shocked than she liked to admit.

'Persuasion,' Ratso said, sounding amused. 'Not that it was much use. Mayer got it wrong, I don't believe she knew where Alex was any more than we did. But we grabbed her anyway.'

'Who's got her now?'

For a second it looked like Ratso was going to answer Clare's question. Then he clammed up, and took to chewing the inside of his lip again. His narrow, rodent-like face unnerving in the sodium glare of on-coming headlights.

Time passed. Too much of it.

'What's your interest.' Ratso asked at last.

Clare shrugged. 'Two kids were wiped in Paris last week. We picked up a viral signature...' She kept her tone intentionally flat, almost uninterested. 'Apparently it's not unique. ECIS crime profile highlights an earlier killing. Alex Gibson might have relevant evidence. At least that's what we believe.' Clare didn't bother to specify exactly which she had in mind.

'I didn't see the profile request.' Ratso said quickly, suspicion in his voice.

Clare glanced at him.

'I get daily automatic file digests on all tri-ECIS use,' he said flatly. 'Your request wasn't in the record.'

'Unlogged.' Clare said. She didn't know that, but it seemed obvious all things considered. And she wouldn't put it passed Makai.

Ratso winced. An actual physical wince of pain. 'Shit. I thought all you Frog nobs had was diplomatic immunity. Didn't know you came with built in ice.'

Clare said nothing.

In the front, Winston was listening, half to her and half to whoever's voice cut through his heavy heartbeat thump of technodub.

'Running out of time mon,' he said. 'Lady got plane to catch, life to lead. Not safe to stay too long.'

Ratso looked at Winston and then at Clare. What ever decision he made, he hated it.

'Here,' said Ratso, thrusting a smartcard at her. 'Certified DNA profile of Alex Gibson. SIS kept them as double-encoded digitals, secretive buggers. I scanned them onto this for you. His passport pic is in there too.'

'And what do you know about the man himself?' Clare asked.

'Brilliant trial chaser, but a total mess as a human being,' Ratso said, which Clare thought was pretty ironic coming from someone like him.

'He'd dropped out of the business for a while,' Ratso added. 'But he came back in again a couple of months before he disappeared. Maybe he was just too hooked on trial chasing to stay away. Which ever way you cut it, he was completely brilliant.'

'In what way?' Clare asked.

'The best evidence sifter in the business. He got to witnesses other researchers hadn't even heard about. If he said a trial would pull in big ratings then that's what happened. He'd identify a crime, go in there and sign up both sides and as many witnesses as there were. He had a brilliant knack for knowing just what the public wanted.'

'But he was a freelancer, self-employed,' Clare protested. 'If he was that good why wasn't he on staff?'

Ratso smiled, showing his broken teeth. 'CySat UK would have put him on permanent contract years ago, but for that the man needed to pass a positive vetting and we wouldn't give him clearance... This guy was a typical do-gooder, GPeace, Pax, Amnesty2. We were about to pick him up when he disappeared.'

'Why?' Clare asked simply.

'Because this was a man in a hurry to download his Zeiss eyecam without going through the usual channels at CySat. A man who used the terms 'M-wave invisibility' and 'human stealth mode' with quite reckless abandon.'

Ratso sighed, with the weariness of a man who spends too much time round politicians. 'Just when we got a make on Alex, word came back from Westminster that we'd got it wrong. To leave Alex alone. Well, the guy covering the case wasn't having it, so he kept going.'

Ratso paused. 'I'm not saying the two things are connected, but my best operative died in a two-bit bank data heist that went wrong.'

'And Alex? What happened to Alex?'

Clare could hear the puzzlement in Ratso's voice.

'He just vanished,' the thin man said almost to himself. 'We trailed him up to Kings Cross Station, and then lost him.'

'How?' She asked.

Ratso shrugged. 'Dunno. This was six months ago. One minute he was in Tottenham Court Road, outside some dodgy Chink computer store with five of our finest hot on his arse, and then he wasn't. Fuck knows how he pulled it off. That kind of vanishing trick ain't easy.'

Waterloo Sunset

Difficult it wasn't. Snatching Alex took zero effort, even in high Summer on one of London's busiest streets. Of course, making people vanish was one of the things Mr Rosary did for a living.

The tall man with the long Astrakan coat, cropped hair and discreet adrenal wrist implants had other trades as well. All dirty.

It helped him, though, that the street vendors were out in force selling fake Rolex biographs, imitation M'Soft web-agents and dubious crypt cards supposedly able to break any version of metaPGP. Hot dog sellers blocked the pavement every hundred yards and as usual Tottenham Court Road was thick with a sweating crowd of anxious suits, all linen-look shirts and wispy ponytails, mixed in among emaciated wizz addicts and overweight, over-rich Russian tourists who were in search of deals they'd never find for state-of-the-art CySat dishes at drastic reductions.

Rosary moved effortlessly against the flow, ignoring the stink of frying onions and the heat and noise that blasted from open pub doors. His grey eyes took in everything, searching, watching, judging. The noisy crowd opened for him without knowing why, flowing around him without even noticing that they'd let him through.

Rosary liked large cities and wide open spaces, both were anonymous. Cities were better for business though. Squash enough people together in one place and they could be relied on to turn in on themselves, to retreat inside their heads.

Public blindness had become a way of life. Nothing was unexpected, so the unexpected was never seen. That wasn't just cowardice. As General Takahashi had pointed out over a thousand years before when defining the art of ambush, people simply don't notice what they don't expect.

He'd garotted an interfering priest once in a side chapel in St Peter's in Rome, during a televised High Mass. And when the Papal carabinieri turned up waiving lazer-sighted Glocks, all of the faithful swore blind - as blindly as they swore in their God - that none of them had witnessed the murder.

Which was true enough, not one of them had.

No, it was when people were alone, by themselves, that they suddenly felt the need to take responsibility for their lives.

That was usually the point when Rosary had to kill them. The tall man shivered and tugged his huge fur coat tight around his thin body. The only problem with enhanced viral metabolism was the unending, unbelievable cold. Logic said the kink should heat him up, but somehow it hadn't worked out that way.

He'd been following Alex all afternoon. Picked up his trail inside the echoing hanger-like desolation of Kings Cross, when the express finally arrived. No one travelled much by hoverRail anymore.

Not that picking out Alex had been difficult. Overweight and unfit, the fat journalist had ambled hurriedly along the filthy platform towards the unmanned barrier. What ever Alex was looking for, Rosary wasn't it. Electronic and natural, both his eyes skimmed over Rosary without stopping.

Then it was play follow the amateur, as Alex switched undergrounds, dived on and off filthy London trams, grabbed taxi drones only to discard them two hundred yards later. Getting more and more desperate all the time.

It worried Rosary that Alex knew he was being followed. Until Rosary realised that Alex didn't know whether he was or not. He was just trying to take precautions, and failing badly.

Jubilee, Circle Line, Bakerloo, Victoria. Chop and changing stations, until at last he staggered up the stairs at Warren Street, where the electro-glide escalator was broken as always. Rosary went up the stairs behind him two steps at a time, closing on his target.

Stepping over the body of a drunk curled into a foetal ball at the exit, Rosary came out onto Tottenham Court Road in time to see Alex barge his way through a crowd of Italian kids blocking the litter-strewn pavement outside MacD.

Sweating profusely, the fat journalist began to work his way down towards Centre Point, stopping at each computer boutique.

Once colonised by Asian hifi dealers, the strip had been taken over years before by refugees from Beijing's riots, and now sold every kind of mobile office, comsat-modem and IT peripheral known to civilisation.

Cluttered electronic lockups no bigger than a single bed space squeezed in next to hanger-like markets where all the internal walls had been ripped out, the roof was a single sheet of neophrene supported on cheap pneumatic scaffolding and each stall was owned by a different proprietor.

Some of the best IT deals in London were there, provided you weren't a tourist or in a hurry.

Traffic had backed up from Euston to the Dominion Theatre, but Alex ignored it, as oblivious to the stink of diesel taxi drones and the grinding of gears as he was to other pedestrians. Blinded by panic, he stumbled in and out of every shop, weaving his way south towards the high-rise slum that was Centre Point rookery.

Whatever it was he was after, he hadn't found it until now.

Now he was talking intently to a Chinese techie and a heavy-weight credit chip was changing hands. As a calmer-looking Alex squeezed out through a shop's micromesh door, Rosary brushed past him on his way into the narrow, single-storey lockup that proclaimed itself London's Teknix HyperMarket.

The elderly Chinese techie, striped cotton shirt rolled to his elbows, was prodding at the insides of an out-moded Korean satellite dish. When he raised his eyebrows at Rosary, the liver spots that were splattered like mud across his forehead vanished into sudden creases.

The bare wires of an old flex were knotted untidily round one thin wrist, the other end looped round a nearby waterpipe. As insurance against body static shorting out a chip it was pretty basic, but not so basic that it didn't work.

'What you want?' His London accent made the techie sound younger than he looked.

Rosary peeled a Beijing banker's draft off a roll of ready printed currencies, and held it loosely between gloved fingers until certain he had the owner's interest.

'That man...' He began, but the elderly techie just looked away, retreating into the scramble of ancient circuitry inside the satellite dish. Which wasn't what Rosary wanted. So he grabbed the man's twig-like wrist and twisted. Stopping just before the overstressed bones began to crack.

'Police,' Rosary snarled. 'What was he after?'

'riferrals and a black icebreaker...'

Rosary nodded, that made sense. What Alex Gibson saw he automatically recorded, but what he recorded belonged to CySat. Only they could download Gibson's eye. Now way could he get at what was in his own head, not legally.

'What 'riferrals?'

'BioSoft, Sony wraprounds or some 'trodes,' the man said sullenly, wrenching his wrist free from Rosary's loosening grip. 'Told him not possible. Told him eye has CySat seal, copyright property. CySat be very cross.'

Rosary made no effort to hide his contempt. 'That so? Sure you didn't just tell him it would take time?'

'BioSoft's illegal without a licence,' the Chinaman said softly. 'And 'trodes are dangerous.'

'But you can get them, can't you?'

Unseen by Rosary, the old man fingered a silent alarm on the underside of his wrist. Then sat back in his old chair. Sure, he could source anything anyone wanted badly enough to pay for. BioSoft. Peripherals. Why deny it?

'How long before he comes back?' Rosary asked roughly.

The man looked into Rosary's pale grey eyes. 'Two, maybe three hours,' he said, his voice suddenly strengthening, his sing-song accent falling away. Behind him, two young men had materialised through a bead curtain, graphite and steel nanchucks swinging casually in their hands.

Contemptuously, Rosary tossed him the banker's draft. And was gone before it had time to miss the small table and flutter onto the filthy floor.

With a lazy wave Jackie Tg, grand-master of the guild of five mountains and owner of London's Teknikx HyperMarket signalled one of his grandsons to fetch the note.

'Fool.' Jackie nodded towards the empty doorway.

If Rosary had offered respect, and that respect had translated into serious credit, then maybe Jackie Tg would have told him the sweating Englishman wanted more than 'riferal's, he also wanted a name. Just maybe. But it was unlikely. Mountain Guild had little time for foreigners, unless they were singularly unusual, like Razz.

The fat man wanted a face to face with someone who could crack the crypt on a Zeiss eyecamera, and for Jackie Tg that meant Razz. It meant Razz to the fat Englishman as well, because he'd mentioned her by name.

Problem was, Razz was a good customer of Mountain Guild - not to mention an even better supplier. Whatever some shady deal demanded she could get... True it came polythene wrapped with 'govt issue' laser-stamped all over it, but the kind of customers Jackie Tg had quite liked this. If anything it added to the tek's value; in fact he wouldn't put it past her to wrap and stamp the stuff herself. It would be very inconvenient for all if she were to get into trouble, but all the same if the fat man wanted to crack data belonging to someone like CySat then that data had to be worth having.

'You.' He pointed to his eldest grandson, 'follow the fat man, call me if anything happens. And you...' he waved at number two, 'follow the fur coat. If they meet up...' Jackie shrugged, 'see what you can salvage...'

It was time he told Razz about the man looking for her. The information might be important and if it was, well it wouldn't hurt for Razz to owe him one.

With his boys gone, Jackie Tg lifted the receiver of an old fashioned vidphone, slotted in a crypt card and punched in the digits for an anonymous voice re-mailer, pulling the sequence out of his memory. This call wouldn't be going by the usual routes.

Backslash Warriors

Soon done.

Time to log out.

Razz hit Alt F, chose Close, hit Yes then Enter as soon as the police computer asked Save Changes? And quickly broke the link, going back out the way she came in. Quietly, discreetly, leaving no footprints - electronic or otherwise. Primitive but effective, Razz was gone.

Hastily ripping a Velcro strap from her hip, the young black refugee dropped a small, burningly hot oblong box onto her untidy bed.

Which was where her Walkwear usually lived. One windowless room at the top of a London towerblock didn't really give her space enough put things in neat piles.

As well as the bed with its clutter of dirty clothes, tattered sheets of yesterday's fax and scattered cards of pirate software, the room had a small carbonfibre and veneer table covered with half-eaten Jamaican take-away and a plastic chair with a cracked back, which was too uncomfortable to use.

There was also a shower cubicle, tucked away in a corner, but most of the time the water didn't work. It was years since the roads outside had been repaired, and the weight of passing trucks had long since fractured the old clay pipes. These days most of North London's water seeped away into the ground.

Having dumped her over-hot datacore Razz ditched her Zeis spex, lazily undid a miniature keyboard from her left wrist, and dumped that on the bed too. Then she pulled up her teeshirt and took a look at where a raw welt ran over the dark skin of her hip.

It was no surprise the smartbox got to feel like it was practically on fire. No matter how big a chip fan or heat sink you put in, two hours remained the maximum recommended, and she'd been four, five times over the limit.

It was worth it, though.

As of now Razz and every other tenant in Upper Silcotttt had another month's supply of gas and electricity. And Haringey Utilities had on record that Silcotttt's project committee had paid up their year's taxes in advance, six months ago. For good measure, she'd finished with a quick and dirty trawl of the local police database and wiped any convictions added since she last blanket-erased records relating to her friends.

Street rules said Razz copped a tenth of what the utilities would've cost. Even allowing for exceptions and defaulters, that was good credit for fourteen hours work. It wasn't even as if the hack was technically difficult, just time-consuming and illegal. A baby could have broken their way into that mainframe.

Razz sighed, more with tiredness than anything else and took a sip of her Mighty Malt and vodka. Screen burn had dried out her retina and the fingers of her right hand RSI'd at the middle joint. At fifteen, she was beginning to feel her age.

On her bed the Sony Walkwear was flashing 'incoming message' on a tiny polymer diode set into the right inner rim of her discarded Zeiss glasses. The Zeiss' screen was old-fashioned virtual, projected to a point about thirteen inches in front of her face. She couldn't get the hang of the newer Sharp transparents supplied as standard with the Walkwear. They worked just fine, but her brain refused to believe her eyes could focus on a poly-crystalline silicon lens less than a blink away, and the resulting migraines were spectacularly unpleasant.

In a way it served her right. She should have gone straight for bioSoft implants, except that wasn't just illegal, even in anything-goes England it was seriously lock you up and throw away the key.

'Wha'?' She asked the Walkwear.

A polymer diode flashed as the machine switched over to vocal but no sound came from its voice chip. Instead another diode lit as the comms software scanned the incoming message again.

'Shielded number.' The chip announced at last.

'Them can wait.' Razz didn't like shielded numbers. Handles, monikers and AKAs were fine. Everyone had those. Some of her closest friends operated no-name out of strictly neutral data-drops, but shields were risky; it wasn't so much not knowing who was on the other end, as you didn't even know where the other end was...

Razz wasn't one to take careless risks. She'd done her share of stupids early, now she just wanted to settle, notch up some credit, do a little dealing, stay clean.

She liked North London, particularly round the Farm. Liked it when her elderly West Indian neighbours bitched loudly at Asian shopkeepers who sold only out-of-date cans of tuna. As if any food would be that cheap if it wasn't out of date or off the back of a truck.

That kind of corruption made Razz feel at home.

London was nicely slow too; lazy almost once you got outside the money mile. Not like Moscow. Thank God, nothing much was like Moscow.

Razz particularly liked the drugs, but then that much was obvious. She might be half black Sud African, but the other half was Russian. And Russians used drugs the way other people used religion. London was cool, when someone said they could deal genuine Moroccan, they wasn't shitting. It wasn't even a chemical near match, it was the real thing. Unlike home, where some Chekan spiv's shithot blow usually turned out to be composed entirely of compacted mud.

Charlene was the specialist. What Charlene couldn't source wasn't worth trying. Her man was an old time Rasta and together they dealt only high class ganja, prime Sensimilla and enhanced Dutch grass. Class product. Not like the kid copees who haunted the Farm's local stairwells and entrances, silver-foil wrapped rock tucked under their tongues or hidden in their knickers. At eleven or twelve they were just too young to be strip searched or busted; not to young to get dead though, from turf wars or from an over-hungry habit.

Charlene didn't actually do her product. But then she was practically old, with responsibilities. She was her old man's baby mother, with another on the way.

Kids, babies... That wasn't Razz scene. She'd liked her Dad though. Most of all when he grabbed her from that state hostel in Chechnya and offed with her to Moscow in someone else's battered old Volvo 4x4. England came later, after Mum's brothers nearly caught up with him.

One way and another, he'd ben pretty good, certainly when compared to other kid's dads. It was just a pity he hadn't lasted. His getting fatally sliced one night in Soho when she was thirteen hadn't helped her development any. Razz grimaced, and drained the dregs of her vodka and malt. She debated briefly dropping some billy and decided not. She had trouble enough running straight and sober when her mind started sub-setting on Dad like this.

His Dad's death had been the second worst thing in her life after that home, the third worst thing was Irish Mick, who claimed to be one of her Dad's oldest friends. Her Dad had been Xhosa, her Ma born in the CIS in the days when that was what it still was. Now her Ma's home town was the capital of some break away Islamic republic, and Razz was just another refugee lost in the chaos of North London.

Camden, Manor House, Tottenham; the Smoke got more colourful the further north you went, that and cheaper.

'Colourful. Cosmopolitan. Ideal for someone of your type. Know what I mean,' was how Irish Mick described it to Razz when he first told her about this wonderful empty 25th floor project flat out at the Farm, smart key going cheap for the right person.

They were sat in Irish Mick's over-heated first floor room, in a street off Stamford Hill full of broken down Victorian houses. Irish Mick couldn't keep his eyes off Razz' tiny breasts. It didn't seem to matter to him that his own red haired, freckle faced copee was curled up on the sofa in the same room, dressed in an overfull black lycra top and not much else.

The copee's tits were pushed out against her undersized top, and her green eyes when they swept contemptuously over Razz were heavy with too much mascara. The kid looked older than Razz, fourteen maybe, but she probably wasn't that old.

'Shame about your Dad.' Irish Mick had said.

Razz had just nodded. Razz took up Irish Mick's offer on the flat - she couldn't afford anything else. Really she couldn't even afford that, but life on the streets in Moscow had made dealing second nature. Irish Mick knew she didn't have anything to trade except herself, so he took his cut in kind.

A month later Razz hacked her way into the police database in Sen Sisters for the first time, using a cheap copy of an Apple smartbook and a kid's plastic modem. She gave Irish Mick four convictions for dealing, and two for heavyweight GBH. For luck, she added his name to a list of suspects to be pulled in for questioning over the killing of an undercover member of the nark squad.

He was still inside.

If colourful meant cheap, it didn't take the thirteen-year old Razz long to discover that by cosmopolitan Irish Mick meant black.

Which was fine with her.

There was no way an under-fed, under-sized half caste was going to blend easily into the cosy paranoia of the suburbs. Not with a shock of deep, dark red hair, mahogany skin and a heavy Chechan accent. And her only other alternative was to become transparent, live somewhere where white eyes would look right through you.

So that was what she did. Until her accent changed to the local sing-song West Indian, and her newly dyed black hair grew long enough to plait into twisting dreadlocks. By then her network of suppliers and customers was firmly in place, and everything was running smoothly.

At least it was until last month when she got a call from drug-guru Johnnie T. She'd run into Johnnie out on the Web a couple of years before and they'd stayed loosely in touch. Hell, Razz had even surfed shotgun for him one time.

Johnnie was ripe for dealing drug formulae, every damn thing from viral enhancers to tailor-made wizz guaranteed to slide up alongside the profile of your own individual DNA. In return he took anything at all on neural networks, didn't matter how high noise, low signal. Said he had a friend in Assisi who talked to the animals, Razz wasn't even sure he was joking.

Johnnie's drug formulae she swopped straight off with Charlene. The neural net stuff Razz dealt Johnnie in return, she hacked from Imperial College, through a black trap in the Magnus X database.

Everyone was happy, or so it seemed, until Johnnie data dropped Razz to warn her that some bozo freelance named Alex had just been clocked lumbering frantically round the darker edges of the Net, asking for Razz by name. Sometimes being a crypt hacker for hire wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

It didn't take Razz long to find Alex, hanging round the fringes of Berlin's Kaos Beach. And for all she knew he might be a real shit-hot trial chaser, but within seconds she knew he was a Black Net virgin, a complete amateur.

For a start he gave Razz his real name. And then he came straight out with what he wanted - help cracking open a CySat sealed eyecam. Razz considered pointing out that if it was sealed and crypted, CySat might want it to stay that way, but decided not to bother. If he didn't know the risks that was his problem.

She had no idea how big a problem.

It took her about thirty seconds to persuade Alex to tell her what he knew about the Zeiss' neural wiring - which was almost nothing - and then she was gone, knowledge taken, signed off without trace. So innocent was he, it took him another five minutes to realise she wasn't coming back.

He'd been had.

Since then Alex had been closing in on her fast, desperately even. Razz had gone on line to watch the strings being pulled, and she couldn't help but be impressed. No doubt about it, as a hacker Alex was kinderclass, as a witness chaser he was magic.

He'd gone after her like he'd go after any witness, social engineering his way through one weak link after another - closing in on her. He knew which county, he knew which city. Soon enough it would be which area, and then which project block.

With a sigh, Razz strapped on the wrist keyboard, picked up the Zeiss wrap-arounds and told her Sony Walkwear to accept the incoming call.

City Hall

Rosary caught up with Alex just as the trial chaser turned right into Oxford Street, lumbering like some drunk through a seething crowd that streamed down into the subway.

Out on the edge of that crowd were five or six men trying hard to look inconspicuous and failing badly...

Rosary swore in latin, something low and vicious.

First Alex. Now this lot ahead of him. It really was the fucking afternoon of the amateur. With their turned-up collars clumsily hiding external throat mikes, they might as well have been waving placards saying police.

Identical peroxide crops and standard-issue wrap-round Raybans identified them as undercover officers, smug as all hell that they'd lucked onto Alex. It seemed someone in England wanted to be sure CySat got their evidence back, or maybe not. Maybe they wanted it for themselves.

Rosary allowed himself the extravagance of fury, even as his brain coldly weighed the odds and began to plan a diversion.

Without breaking his stride, Rosary flicked his hand out towards the face of a beautiful Swedish girl, her arms full of carrier bags. A mono-molecular Ceramic blade cut flesh, and suddenly there was red spilling down her skirt and teeshirt. All five cops froze as the girl's mother screamed. Then they broke cover, as panicked as steers in an abattoir.

One attempted to staunch the pumping blood, screaming into his throat mike for an ambulance, while the others tried to identify witnesses from among the shaken tourists milling in panic around them.

Not that there would be any witnesses. Rosary was way too professional for that. A quick slash to the girl's jugular with his Japanese gravity knife, and he was already ten paces past her by the time she hit the sidewalk.

When Alex eventually turned back to check out what the fuss was about, everyone except Rosary was already looking the other way.

A single measured blow with the weighted hilt of Rosary's knife and Alex was reeling against a pub wall, eyes half closed. Coolly, Rosary took a half-empty glass from a deserted pavement table and tipped warm beer all over Alex' shirt. Then, hailing a black taxi drone, he told it to drop him and his drunken friend near the new City Hall complex at the front of Waterloo.

Which was where Rosary had completed his job.

It was well done.

Artistic even.

True, a cluttered parking lot stuffed with diggers and hurriedly tidied away 4x4s wasn't the most elegant of settings, but sometimes in death as in life it was important to grab the photo opportunities on offer. And what audience wouldn't love the mixture of tattered security fence, droid JCBs and recently crucified body?

Rosary opened his grey eyes wide, trying to see the scene with a fresh vision.

God, he'd even given them a background shot of the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben across the Thames. Not to mention instant news value, what with the new polymer and ferro-marble City Hall complex which loomed, in all its post-human vacant brutalism on the other side of the carpark's security fence.

His artistry was going to be tomorrow's main news attraction.

Animal rape, serial mutilation, child whores - London might be a place where pretty much anything went. But even over here crucifixions were something of a novelty. And hard or soft, novelty was the first requirement of scheduling news.

Over 7,000 pirate stations that criss-crossed the bands, burning up London's ether. Their hard edged news the antidote to CySat's castrated, anodyne vision of the world. By tonight the story of Alex' crucifixion would have been turned into dub, reggae, rai, zouk and ten other styles that hadn't been around long enough to yet be given names.

All those ghetto blasters and in-hover sound systems would belt out the details of his death for those who didn't read or couldn't afford papers, who didn't speak English or have street patois as their main language. Electronic rumours - hip and run.

In life Alex Gibson had been just another freelance trial chaser, tasting evidence to see if it was hot. But in death he would become famous. Become news himself. Just to make sure, Rosary reached under his coat for a miniature Zeiss holocam and, steadying his shaking fingers, snatched a short tri-D digital sequence.

Blood obscured most of the man's anguished face, but audiences everywhere would get the general idea. Like hunger, pain photographed well.

Up in high orbit, in a swirling belt of space detritus that included dumped US rocket tanks and a discarded, last generation Soviet satellite that could still have read the headline on a newsfax, if anyone could have been bothered to try, was Europe's new, technically much more sophisticated IntraPol Comms sat.

Keying coordinates into the Zeiss's keyboard, Rosary made a highly illegal bounce off the sat where it hung in steady geosync orbit above the city, straight back to one of CySat's dishes at Wapping.

He needed an unhealthy level of interest from both the Met and CySat, and using that particular sat should guarantee it... So he had the before shot - after would ready in a minute or less.

Rosary squinted at the squalor around him through half-slitted eyes. A scattering of black bags of rubbish, rotting crates and an ancient burnt-out Ford Jeepster littered what had once been one of London's best-loved public gardens. But for once deprivation didn't disgust Rosary. He knew how appropriate urban wasteland was, how impressive. Random this spot wasn't. He had an artist's eye for the perfect setting.

It was time to complete his work, to take back what Alex Gibson had stolen from his master - information, secrets. As sweet as chocolate and as sickly, everything good had to end, even death.

Already hunger pangs ate away at Rosary's insides, though past experience warned him that mere food wouldn't fill that void. Just as vomiting could never absolve him of the sickness that would soon begin to shake his whipcord thin body.

Once again he had tried to drag out his enjoyment, longer than his enjoyment would afford. He needed darkness, sleep and a half-willing woman. That, or a young boy, either would do equally well.

With a grunt of self-disgust, Rosary reached into his coat pocket. The inhaler helped, as it blasted cocaine and pure oxygen through to the back of his throat. Though his hands still shook violently as he slipped the inhaler back into his pocket.

Still upset, Rosary kicked Alex in the knee, shattering the man's kneecap with the weighted heel of his hand-stitched shoes. And then just as suddenly Rosary smiled again, remembering where he'd acquired those shoes.

Hand-stitched from the hide of a baby goat, they were works of art and quite impossible to replace. Not least because Rosary had slit the cobbler's throat as soon as the stitching was finished.

Of course, cutting the man's windpipe was what Rosary had gone to Istanbul to do in the first place. Postponing the murder for a week while his victim laboured unknowing over one last-ever masterpiece satisfied Rosary's sense of irony. Not that Pablo Jemel would have appreciated the joke, had he ever been given the chance...

Mr Rosary was not Rosary's real name of course, any more than Pablo Jemel's had been the real name of the retired assassin he'd been sent to kill. Though Rosary was how Mr Rosary liked to think of himself. It was his identity. A lethal persona, honed to the white dryness of bones in a desert.

It was the great sadness of Rosary's long and increasingly tiresome life that although each killing was more elaborate than the one before, he no longer enjoyed his work. Understanding that had opened him out into an emptiness that only the Prince understood.

Despite the delicacy of his touch and the richness of his imagination, outside of death Rosary had no actual artistic ability. No vocation.

Which was why, from an early age, he'd been forced to sell what few simple skills he did have. Rosary pursed his thin lips, then sucked at his teeth, white ceramic implants strengthened with an invisible crystalline matrix of white titanium.

Once, long ago in the Bahamas, he'd used them to bite out the throat of a child after the child's bodyguards had stripped Rosary naked and taken away not only his garotte but also found the ceramic shoalin spike he kept sheathed in his anus.

Of course, it wasn't the four-year old boy's fault that he'd inherited majority shares in a Swiss pharmaceutical company. It was the fault of the boy's grandfather who should have arranged adequate security for the child. Unfortunately the old man had been murdered on orders from his estranged daughter-in-law, before a security clause could be written into the inheritance.

So Rosary had been called in by the lawyers acting for the boy's father. It was one of those acts-of-attorney affairs, the father being under guard himself in a Moroccan clinic, drying out from freebase.

With the grandfather and daughter already dead, all it took was the removal of the child to ensure that the father's lawyers in Berne retained their highly lucrative account. Of course, had the child's mother not had a New York lawyer who wanted to move the account, none of it would have been necessary. But that was business.

The discovery that changed forever Rosary's life was that the super-rich would pay for vengeance, without ever needing to weigh the legal odds or count costs.

Within five mind-numbing years of that realisation, the kid from the barrio had learned to wear suits, drink white wine, tip waiters - hard wiring himself firmly into corporate culture.

Another five years was what it took to figure out how to make corporate values work for him, something he now took for granted. He also acquired a Harvard MBA, Ivy League membership, credit lines, and most importantly a list of five names - executive, politicians, CEOs so influential the law flowed round them without ever touching. They were his clients, he their sole real indulgence.

Any cheap barrio-born punk could commit murder, but Rosary offered to invest each punishment with imagination, to decorate it with a very real sense of what was fitting. And his clients loved it. They were true connoisseurs, art collectors, founders of media dynasties. Which was just as well, because what Rosary charged would buy a Rothko, a Hockney or a mid-period Warhol.

Of course, no matter how flamboyantly baroque, death was not always the best choice, sometimes a life of hopeless, helpless terror was a greater cruelty. Although it was the brief, all-to-short state in between which was Rosary's real favourite, when life slowly slid into death, like now...

Rosary knew his fat bug-eyed victim wanted to scream, why else were the veins of his thick neck standing out like that? Unfortunately, sound was impossible. The glycol-soaked rag rammed down his throat saw to that, reducing Alex' agony to a repetitive but silent gagging.

Rosary particularly liked the rag.

Improvisation with the bizarre was everything. No one could ever accuse him of being limited to a classical mindset when it came to those decorative finishes.

Were Alex in a position to plead no doubt he'd beg for the objet trouve to be removed; after all, it was choking him, blood backing up in his throat. But as Rosary had already pointed out to Alex, his master believed strongly in people minding their own business.

Invisibility was a very expensive secret and the Prince wanted it to stay that way. Alex worming his way into prison to see the French tramp hadn't been clever. But nothing like as stupid as eyecaming the tramp's 'invisible killer ghost' claim - and then doing a bunk with the evidence.

Rosary had no doubt that Alex would like to object, maybe even proclaim a public interest defence. But unfortunately he couldn't, not with both arms wrenched out at his fat sides, and eight-inch steel, enzyme-lacquered nails skewered through his hands into to a shed's heavy wooden door.

Blood dribbled sluggishly from the victim's split lips, congealing down his chin in long sticky lines like molten candle wax down a wine bottle. Imaginative, but it was about to get better.

Rosary stepped back a little, considering the job in hand. This crucifixion wasn't a commission from some client out for revenge. No money would reach Rosary's account in Zurich, no priceless information was to be added to his crypted box in some nameless Colombian datahaven.

In killing Alex, Rosary was obeying the Prince. Something that would have surprised his usual run of clients who knew nothing about Prince Sabatini, believing that when it came to pure, calculated evil, Rosary was a man who acted alone.

To them the idea that Rosary had a master was like suggesting that Satan had abdicated control of hell. And yet it was true. There was still one person in the world before whom Rosary would willingly bow. Accepting that fact had given Rosary his reason to live.

And this pitiful trial chaser had offended the Prince. No, worse than that, had actually worried him. Now it was Rosary's job to take back what Alex should never have had in the first place - the tramp's evidence.

Stepping in towards the naked body which hung fat and slack against the wooden door - head lolling, genitals shrivelled with fear - Rosary flicked open a laser scalpel and sliced swiftly around the black glass lens of Alex' left eye.

The Braun's blade of amplified photons seared through skin and a web of muscle, freeing the spherical lens and its chip from Alex' eye socket. Pocketing the eye, Rosary lent in and felt around in the bloody pulp until his fingers closed on a small black data cube, wired through to a socket on the side of Alex' head.

Alex arched forward as Rosary ripped it free. There was a putrefying stench, as the man's sphincter emptied, pumping the contents of his lower bowel out into the dirt around his crippled feet.

Time to snatch another tri-D sequence. Rosary nodded to himself. That was all it had needed, some simple old-fashioned decay to make everything complete..

On the way out Rosary had a stroke of luck, the kind of unlooked-for added extra that finally made his day. What he took for the scuttling of a rat behind a burnt-out Daihatsu turned out to be a cowering street kid, hidden among the long, rough grass that grew against the fence. Too bad for her that he'd recently had his hearing re-enhanced.

Huge black eyes stared up at Rosary, wide with shock and glazed with cheap drugs. The uncontrollable shakes racking her malnourished body said she'd seen more than was good for her, or him.

She was crouched near a squalid bash, which had been dug into the dirt and lined with fibreglass strips ripped from the fence. The whole thing was covered over with sun-mottled polythene weighted at the edges with half-bricks and stones. Broad high cheekbones, long dirty dreadlocks and deep bronze skin proclaimed her mixed blood.

She looked like a refugee.

He stared down at her, his hard grey eyes noting with sour contempt the clutter of cheap celtic crosses, Egyptian amulets and hologramatic beads on leather thongs hung round her thin neck. If she was relying on those for protection she was out of luck.

He kicked her, and then as she tried to scramble to her feet, booted her again hard, before she had time to stand upright. With a terrified whimper, the girl curled herself into a tight ball just right to get killed.

Smiling slightly, Rosary knelt above the shivering child and flicked open his pearl handled razor. The Braun's laser-bright elegance would be wasted. In fact he doubted if she'd even recognise it. Placing the shining razor softly against the side of the girl's quivering throat so that it reflected in the afternoon sunlight, he ran the blade gently across the surface of her brown skin until drops of blood strung themselves like beads around her neck.

His voice when he spoke was soft as velvet, 'Look at me.'

The girl tried to stop crying and failed.

So Rosary grabbed her, his long elegant fingers twisted tightly into her thick dark hair as he wrenched her up onto her knees. The blade going against her taut throat.

There was a long silence during which the petrified girl first stopped sobbing and then reluctantly opened her terrified eyes.

'That's better,' he said. 'I'm not going to kill you. That's a promise. Do you understand?'

The girl nodded nervously.

'Good. Now we've got that straight...!' His other hand found the thick cotton neck of her sweatshirt. It hung around her like a tent.

'What's your name?' Rosary asked.

'Me ah R... Razz.'

It probably wasn't her real name, but that didn't matter. Everyone should have at least one false name, he had dozens.

Rosary tightened his fingers at the shirt's neck and tugged. The sweat-rotted material ripped even as it yanked her towards him. Without a thought, he pushed the petrified girl away, and as she burst into tears again, he took a good look at her body.

Fifteen, maybe fourteen, he found it difficult to tell with malnutrition and mixed blood. She had hacker burn on one left hip, and the dark seam of an old knife wound ran like a zipper across her right shoulder.

'Strip,' he ordered and hooked his razor gently inside one of the girl's nostrils, leaving her in no doubt of the alternative.

She wore nothing beneath her torn Levis and no socks inside her cheap, Korean-made trainers. All it took was a few seconds for her to scrabble out from her torn jeans and crouch trembling in front of Rosary.

Even naked with her clothes in a squalid pile behind her, the sour reek of dirt rose from her body, mixing with a newer scent of rising fear.

She'd do.

He clicked his fingers and she shuffled over to stand in front of him, head downcast, arms folded protectively across her breasts.

'Wear this.' Rosary ordered, shrugging himself out of 350,000 credits worth of genuine Astrakan - its fur stripped from real goat embryos, not grown on slabs of collagen. It cost more, he decided, than she would make in a lifetime. The thought pleased him.

Rosary's Daimler hover was parked in a narrow side road, at the back of the huge derelict railway station. In all it took Rosary twenty minutes to reach, through airless underpasses and baking backstreets. But even when they strode through the makeshift, carbon-board huts littering the rubbish-strewn platforms of Waterloo East, none of the tramps gave either of them a second glance. Rosary had that effect on people.

He tossed the street urchin guarding his Daimler a packet of cheap crack and then, as an afterthought, threw him the crosses and amulets from around the young girl's neck.

She wouldn't be needing those where she was going.

Swamped by the stifling folds of Rosary's Astrakan, Razz squatted in the Daimler's leather passenger seat, thin arms wrapped tightly round her dirt-encrusted knees, a small packet of wizz clutched tightly in one hand.

Even with the hover's highly efficient German air-conditioning turned up to full, sweat kept running down into her dark eyes. It was a mystery to Razz how Rosary could bear to wear a coat like this in the middle of summer.

Still what could she do? She couldn't travel naked, and she'd been in worse situations. After all, she'd had time to wipe and dump her datacore. So at least no one could prove she wasn't there by accident. And she was alive, which was probably more than she could say for the Englishman who'd been asking for her.

When Rosary slowed his large Daimler in the run up to the Channel Tunnel roadblock, the girl just smiled at the police through huge, drug glazed eyes. Tiredness, shock and amphetamine shakes were scrambling her nervous system so effectively, it didn't even occur to Razz that perhaps she should scream for help.

An officer glanced in, noticed the young black girl and swore under his breath. But Rosary just flashed some sort of official laminate at him and hit overdrive, forcing the officer to step hurriedly back.

Inside the tunnel the M25 the Daimler automatically switched over to routesoft, driving itself, the sensors on its front bumper picking up coordinate nodes embedded in the road, instantly updating speed, position and traffic conditions in the car's rolling memory.

'So wha'ppen now?' The girl asked calmly, when the cool strip-lit dark of the tunnel gave way to a flat French countryside, baked almost brown in the evening sun

'You get a bath,' Rosary said. 'After that...' He smiled bleakly, his grey eyes as hard as diamond, 'I start teaching you your new duties.'

By the time Rosary's Daimler reached the outskirts of Paris and Rosary had clicked off routesoft and kicked the hover into manual overdrive, his plan had begun to unravel. Not that he yet knew it. One hand on the wheel, his other wedged roughly between the shaking thighs of the young girl, Rosary's mind was on other things.

It didn't occur to him that an American fixer called Mayer would make damn sure the before and after shots of Gibson never made it out of the editing room at CySat. That, in any case, Alex Gibson's crucified body wouldn't be there to be found. That he'd just made the worst mistake of his life.

The Web offer on Alex Gibson went out that evening, shortly after C3N News, 9 o'clock London time.

News which showed two thousand athletes celebrate the end of the Sydney Olympics, coverage of the reformed Duma in Moscow and an update on the three-way civil war in Sudan, but didn't once mention a body found crucified near London's new City Hall.

Sent out under the signature of Dr Makai, the Gibson Offer, as it became known, was simple and basic enough to ensure that news of its existence spread over the black web like a new virus. A contract fatwa had been declared against a badly-wounded English trial chaser calling himself Alex Gibson. Any confirmed sighting of the Englishman would be rewarded with information of equal value.

Even dead he was worth more than most jockeys could hack in a year, but prove that he was alive and he was worth ten times that. Identify where he was and you could name your price, in information or credits.

Rosary objected that he never failed, that the fatwa would come to nothing. Alex Gibson was undoubtedly already dead.

Only loyalty and the first, faint twinge of fear stopped him from showing the Prince just how much he objected to his competence being questioned. But his protestations meant nothing. Rosary had the Zeiss eyecam all right, but the crucifixion had also been a warning from the Prince about the dangers of interference, and now that warning would not be delivered.

What was worse, if Alex Gibson was still alive then any half decent neuromechanic could extract, not the actual interview, but at the very least Alex' memory of the interview. Of course, it would probably kill Alex Gibson, but that was unlikely to worry anybody.

No, Rosary had failed, somehow, and the Prince knew that.

Rosary would remain his servant; still useful, always deadly; but never again would he quite be trusted. It was Razz' ill fate that she was with Rosary when he first realised that.

Schrodiger's Kaff

The Bauhaus chair creaked slightly under Lady Clare's weight, slight though that was. The chair was an original, more for decoration than actual use.

She was watching a small black kitten called Chi pick his way fastidiously between a half-empty wine glass from Bohemia and a recently opened bottle of Mumm's Cuvee Napa. Chi paused to sniff the vat-grown garlic olives in a saucer beside the dark-green bottle, shook his narrow shoulders in disgust and sneezed, heavily.

Clare laughed.

The spurred leather boots of her guest, thrown rudely up onto the edge of the Conran table that served as her desk, blocked Chi's path, but the kitten didn't falter. It just walked in one side and out the other, straight through both boot heels.

Makai smiled, and raised his glass to the cat. He was 'drinking' from a holographix champagne flute filled from an identical but entirely illusionary bottle.

The difference was that she could see Makai, in all his glitzy New York cowboy glory. She wasn't at all sure Chi even knew Makai was there. If the kitten did know, he certainly didn't show it. Maybe his taste was too good.

Life was changing for the better - she wasn't dead for a start.

Clare still looked fearfully over her shoulder each time she went out; couldn't quite believe that the Pool hadn't sent some plastique-strapped street samurai after her. But in the last week she'd started sleeping and these days could even keep down a bowl of shiuki and noodles without throwing up immediately afterwards.

Part of Clare knew she was relying too heavily on Makai, but she'd come to need the wide-eyed, fast-talking teenager and begun to miss his company whenever Makai wasn't invisibly at her side. All the same, that didn't mean she trusted him, what ever he was...

It was two weeks since she'd left Ratso and Winston at the door of Gatwick's VIP lounge, Gibson's data tucked safely in her bag. And five days since Makai had insisted she inspected her new office, discreetly hidden in the dark twisting streets of the Marais, an old Jewish quarter just north of the Seine.

Clare knew exactly what she expected from a centuries-old Institute set up by imperial edict to study the paranormal. A couple of run-down rooms in a shabby Inns of Court, probably all cheap clone oak and rows of antique, jacketed novels disintegrating into dust. The kind decorators bought to line the dens of third generation cocaine merchants.

But what she got was something else altogether. Though to begin with Clare didn't know that, because the first time she visited her offices she was too busy being sick to get past the gates. What's more, she didn't even need to push her fingers down her throat to achieve it. The reflex was entirely automatic.

'Oh Sweet Jesus.'

Gagging, Lady Clare hugged thin arms tightly over her empty gut, and glanced again at the courtyard door. Her head shaking slowly from side to side in disbelief.

An elderly noblewoman with a dachshund, her muscle-enhanced Taiwanese bodyguard two paces behind her, frowned at the profanity then noticed what Clare had seen, swore viciously herself and stepped off the sidewalk to avoid the door. Even her bodyguard, ostentatiously stripped to the waist despite the January cold, his enzyme-tanned skin hard as leather and smooth as glass, looked suddenly sick.

'Neat huh?' Makai grinned. This time he was dressed in a studded black leather jacket, with 'we the post-humans' etched on it in a single fluorescent Japanese character. A cropped peroxide crewcut was half-hidden by a red and white lurex bandana.

The day before he'd been goth, in a burgundy trenchcoat, with long black locks that tumbled down over outsized mirrorshades. If there was a logic behind his costume changes, Clare had still to find it.

'Check it out!' Makai chirped, indicating the Institute's gate. Clare couldn't. She was too busy trying to vomit.

A squat solid-looking arch, machine cut from pale yellow concrete made up to look like carved Normandy stone, framed two heavy wooden doors.

At first glance it was just one of a hundred repaired or renovated arches scattered through the Marais, testament to an age-old Parisian obsession with privacy. Something progress, endless street cameras and a security-obsessed government had only enhanced.

Each arch was the entrance to a secluded courtyard. A few of the Marais courtyards were empty and dilapidated, their broken windows looking down onto dying plane trees or a stagnant, unused fountain. But mostly they hid state brothels, official data havens, political safe houses, even the occasional ducal home. By tradition, all the courtyard doors in the Marais sported ornate cast-iron masks that glared out at passers-by.

Pointless, expensive, available only to a few, but still somehow impressive, the huge iron knockers managed to fill all of the criteria required by a tradition. Not least that the cost of refurbishing them could have been put to a better use.

But even in an age of vidphones, retina locks and palm-operated smartdoors, the French nobility could boast that every animal ever known to Man, and several that weren't, appeared on a Parisian portal somewhere. Even if two-inch thick bomb-proof polymer micromesh and recessed titanium deadlocks lined the actual door behind the mask.

To get into the Institute, Clare first had to get past two masks set centrally into its double doors. And a voice at the back of her mind, a small child-like whisper from back when she was tiny told her to stay away, whatever Makai might say.

Nightmares started with these...

Clare found herself unable to think straight, as a tightly focused wave pattern emanating from behind the door pulled up primitive memories from her amygdala, an almond-shaped neural structure positioned just above Clare's brain stem.

But locked into panic Clare didn't realise that. All she could see were two screaming heads protruded through the Institute's double door, one on each side. Their wide eyes blank with horror, lips drawn tightly back over teeth bared in terror, their teeth clenched tight around solid iron rings. A halo of Medusa snakes made up the hair.

Instinctively Clare stepped back, shaking. Sweat breaking out down the ridge of her spine and under her arms.

She was four and the scream she could hear was her own. There was blood seeping across a pavement. A boy wrapped his arm round her thin shoulders, leading her away from an even worse sound, the whimpers of a captured mugger as nightsticks splintered his bones and the police beat him to death.

The images of attack, of childhood loneliness, anguished pain, spun together inside her head. Lady Clare couldn't bring herself to touch the slick grey surface of the door to test its texture, but she knew instinctively that it would be warm, flesh like..

Despite her self, Clare took another step back, away from the door, her gut churning. It was all human horror made real. No mythical snake-haired Medusa was that unhappy, no beautiful beast that lonely, no giant that desperate. They were haunted, the faces and feelings from every nightmare she'd ever had.

'Well?' Makai asked proudly. 'Amygdala over-ride. Neat or what?'

Clare could feel the back of her throat fill with the acid sting of bile. She swallowed frantically, again and again, trying to clear the sour taste.

'Self-referring sub psychic block.' Makai voice was matter of fact. 'It's basic really. It only works if you actually look at the masks, not if you just glance at them.' He paused, and frowned as his outline shook a little. A quick flick of his head and he was clear again. Brighter than ever. Clare doubled over and spewed again into the gutter.

She still couldn't get used to the frequency changes, or to the fact that he was transparent to her, and invisible to everyone else. Or to his terrifying bloody door...

'I'll have a surgeon fit you with a neural block,' he offered. 'If you want..? A simple synapse filter in the cortex. That way the door won't worry you ever . I can fix it now if you'd like?'

'No,' Clare said firmly, much more firmly than she felt. 'I wouldn't like at all.'

For a split second Makai's almond eyes went cold, inhuman, and then the chill was gone, and for the rest of that week he was bouncing round her, more child-like than ever.

They'd compromised on a biochip - a permanent derm - jacked into a recess on the underside of her wrist, made up to Makai's specifications by Snake, a thick set, grey bearded American data-junkie who hung out in Schrodiger's Kaff, a Sim bar on the northern, Beauborg edge of the Marais. Makai didn't tell Clare how he knew where she could find Snake, and Clare didn't ask.

Tracking down Snake and talking him into creating the chip frightened. Distaste would have been how she defined it, but it was really fear. Sure she had a title, but slumming never had been her thing. Though it half amused her to wonder what Claude would have said if he'd known she'd been inside a Sim bar. Not that she wired up, of course.

While he was it, Snake made another, more complex chip also to precise specifications that Clare relayed from Makai. When Clare offered chips in payment, Snake refused with a slow smile and lent in a little closer, draping his arm heavily over her shoulder.

It was a bad mistake.

His howl brought the cafe to a stand still, as Clare pivoted on her heel and in one easy tai-chi kata almost broke his elbow. But something made her pull the blow at the last minute, leaving Snake gasping with pain on the bar's filthy floor.

Afterwards Clare couldn't decide whether to be ashamed, or just cross with herself for not following through as her tai chi instructor had shown her. After what had happened to her in the basement at the Third Section, she should probably have kicked out the bastard's knee for good measure.

Jacked in, Clare sailed safely passed the two cast-iron masks without really noticing them, too intent on getting into the Institute.

The courtyard was slippery, deep with rotting leaves and wind-blown litter. A mud skimmed puddle in the far corner showed that one drain at least was already blocked. The whole place smelt sour, the heavy scent of wet earth overlaid with something much more unpleasant, tom cat or squatting tramp.

The yellowish stone walls of the Institute were stained and striated where damp and frost had flaked bits away like peeling skin. So the Chubb retina lock with Clare's iris pattern already programmed into its memory, and the Mazda lightpanels which busily began luminescing once the door swung back, surprised her.

But not as much as the Institute's interior. For one thing the ground floor had been gutted out and filled with wall to wall, state-of-the-art Comms. For another, there were no staff. All three floors were completely deserted, and spotlessly clean.

A couple of direct optix in, a line of linked Matsui data-cores, and bank after bank of parallel RISC processors filled the second floor. All brand new.

Piled up against a wall on the top floor, in unopened boxes, were enough dishes to build a satellite Comms sub station. And in the corner, incongruous and bubbling, was a Braun coffeemaker. Next to it was a fridge, empty.

'Well, you don't take milk, do you?' Makai said.

All the same, Clare bought some next morning, shortly after finding Chi hiding inside a wet cardboard box in the courtyard. It took Clare ten minutes to hack off his crude collar fashioned from twisted coathanger, and she ruined her Bloomingdale's nailclippers in the process.

Makai didn't seem to mind the kitten, or if he did he didn't say anything. He was too preoccupied with trying to teach her how to setup the satellite dishes and network them to the Comms equipment.

But no matter how hard she tried, and how much Makai fretted, Clare couldn't do it. She just wasn't a techie, it wasn't wired into her nature. In the end, Clare had to return to Schrodiger's Kaff and bribe Snake into coming back with her. One way and another, he wasn't too keen.

Maybe it was the thermo-plastic cast on his fractured arm that guilt tripped her, but Clare came away with a nasty feeling she'd promised him more than she intended.

'Problem with posh,' Snake told Clare crossly when they arrived at the Institutes stone arch, 'You want the world, but don't know how to put it together. Probably think tek's beneath you.' He cast a contemptuous glance at the iron faces as he passed them by, and casually adjusted a switch behind his ear.

'What is this place anyway?'

'Institute Joseph Bonaparte.' Clare's voice was carefully neutral.

Snake raised one eyebrow, but she could tell he was impressed. Anything with 'Bonaparte' in it did that to people, or else sent them reaching for their guns.

'And you're?'

'Lady Clare Fabio.'

'No shit!' He looked her up and down with new interest. 'D'you always hand round Sim bars kicking butt...'

Clare blushed.

'There's a job on offer,' she said crossly. 'Do you want it or not?'

'Oh, it's a job now, is it?' He smiled, a slow grin that wrinkled the slight lines around his grey eyes. What she'd taken for elegant aging was actually high-quality elective surgery. Which meant, she realised with a start, that he'd had serious credit at some point.

She found herself reassessing her reactions to Snake, and then was embarrassed all over again.

'Get a move on,' she snapped, stamping into the Institute without a backward glance.

Makai was waiting, sat on a pile of empty cardboard boxes, swinging his legs. 'And about time,' the hologram said petulantly. 'Tell Snake to stop gawping at you and wire up the dishes. Then download the Geneticist archive into the Matsuis, and syphon the lot through the RISCs. If that fails, start in on national medical databases, starting with Europe.'

'Alex?' Clare asked.

Makai nodded. 'I don't care if he's changed his name, sex and colour. If he's alive you're going to nail him. Even if you have to pinpoint one single bloody DNA sequence...'

'And you?' Clare asked crossly. 'What are you going to do?'

But Makai was no longer there.

SEI-IKI

Gangsters were waiting for Johnnie at the far end of the tunnel as he turned into it under the Expressway. Two of them, just standing there. Like shadow warriors.

It was no surprise.

Their smell had reached him first, a crude mix of oxidising cologne and recent sweat, carried through the tunnel on the wind.

And he'd already been warned by the gulls. Not exactly warned maybe, but he could read the birds' disquiet - darkness, big animals, not moving, more than one. And avian thought blox were so basic that Johnnie T knew what the gulls were seeing, even if the gulls themselves didn't.

Thought blox. He was proud of that rewiring. It had taken months to find a frequency in tune with the primitive cortex of an avian brain, and even longer to cannibalise psychotropic software to the point it could identify twelve images within avian thought.

Even so, his system was basic beyond belief, with only one neuroglyph for non-avian life forms. Though for all Johnnie knew, the birds themselves might not distinguish mammals from reptiles or humans from cats.

He'd discovered the wiring for non-human thought transference while cooking up a viral sex-smart in the kitchens of the neoAddix. He's been looking for something basic enough to let consenting couples share each other's orgasms. A semi-permanent, neuro-loop high. Something to sell on in the clubs.

Except that he lucked out and came away with more than that. Something that really had market value. MultiNational-forming, high-rolling, in-there-with-the-big-boys negotiating value.

At the most basic level, it seemed that some emotions were held in common. In R&D terms it was a small step from reading bird patterns to doing the same for animal, from rats right up to human. All he needed was a cutting-edge research facility and some big credits thrown at the idea. The find was a commercial and political bomb. The question was who to go to, what to do with it.

His number two, Lou, was all for offloading the idea onto the open market, to the top ranking bidder. But then Lou was slick but dumb, whereas Johnnie prided himself on being slick but smart. One thing was sure, however. The neoAddix weren't about to up-load it to anyone. Not while he was boss. He'd made it ice-bloody-clear to Lou that they'd get rolled over, ripped off and wipe clean by the first metaNational to get wind of the idea.

What he hadn't told the smooth little shit was that he'd already done a little discreet feeling around in the Net. Because this particular kink was going to be his non-returnable, non-transferable, one-way only ticket out of downtown Edo. Professor Makai had already promised him that.

Well, that had been the plan before those two blue-suited golems had turned up. Behind Johnnie, the concrete wharves of Edo's entreport were crowded with sleek, black-liveried cargo carriers, each emblazoned with Naponshi's Double N logo. Somewhere in front, the Nazomi 450 Series bullet train howled down from Hamamatsucho, off to collect another round of early-morning, long distance commuters, a noisy buffer of super-compacted air riding in front of it.

Beyond that the sheet-steel and mirrored offices of Japan Times, a place he'd always wanted to data-hit and now probably never would. Binding it all, separating port, monorail and newspaper offices from the glass skyscrapers of Edo proper was the wide sweep of Shinagawa shunting yard, multiple tracks hammered silver with the incessant wear of wheels.

Shinagawa shunting yard had been his stamping ground as a child, the place where he'd run with the Quick Deaths when he should have been at school.

Imperial Japan started the otherside of that railway track. This bit, his bit, was its shadow, where gaijin sailors, sweat rancid with the stink of butter, drank themselves ever more stupid and knifed each other in smoky bars, and the law didn't bother because foreign stiffes and home-grown punks weren't worth fussing about.

And the police wouldn't worry about his corpse wither - if it was ever found.

But hell...

Johnnie T hooked up his trade-mark grin. A trap was a trap was a trap. That was the way life went, he wasn't crying about it.

'Bykrs. Docks/deal - NeoA wz 4 s/ware.'

The offer to trade had been dumped contemptuously into an off-limits sector of the neoA's already well-iced homepage. With it was a insulting afternote that warned Johnnie to make sure the billy was fresh, not old or overcooked. As if the neoAddix ever dealt shoddy compounds...

With a thirty year pharmaceutical tradition to uphold, the NeoA ran the cleanest, tightest kitchens in Edo. Always had done. When it came to juggling molecular structures no one could touch them. Even the Yaks admitted that.

The message was a calculated insult. That was, if the Bykers really had sent it. If they hadn't, that made it more dangerous still.

The Bykers he could handle. Hardware obsessed primitives, all noise, no signal. Retro-trash for whom possession equalled status. Starting with their over-chromed, chopped out of balance Kawasakis.

The neoAs were wire merchants, augmenters, neuro warriors. For that reason alone, the two gangs didn't mix.

It wasn't that they were enemies. They weren't. They just had no reason to fight and even less to hang together. But all the same Johnnie knew the message had to be answered. So what if he was hands-on better trained in medicine than most robo-surgeon, computer-reliant doctors, it made no difference. No difference at all. Heading up a gang as vaunted as the neoAddix he couldn't afford to be faced down by a bunch of greaseballs.

Also there was that mention of software. Johnnie never had been able to pass up a deal where software was involved. It was the one commodity that traded globally, without conversions, without kickbacks to customs or the police, without even really leaving the room.

It was a trap. That much was obvious. But he'd be lying to pretend that somewhere, deep down he hadn't known that, hadn't needed it that way.

Why else had he walked into it? Taking only the most basic of precautions. Like a pair of neophrene-fibre nanchucks and micromesh-lined leather jacket. He'd gone alone, at midnight, down through the Juki underpass. Out to the stinking, stained concrete loading bays where rusting robot cranes stood silent like tall, long legged sleeping birds.

After five Lucky Strikes, one part of him was wondering where the Bykers were, even as another part knew they'd never show, that this wasn't even their party. After he'd chain smoked another ten, both parts were agreed. The Bykers weren't coming.

So he did something he hadn't done since childhood, risked the Niponshi's security cameras and dodged out onto one of the walkways to watch the sun come up in all its orange splendour over the silver sheen of Edo bay.

Doing the deal solitary was dumb, but then a lot of things he'd been doing lately hadn't been that clever. Knowing it didn't make things any better.

And now this.

Johnnie dragged on his last Lucky, pulling the nicotine laden, carcinogen free smoke deep into his lungs, then ground out its butt beneath the heel of his steel reinforced boots.

Twenty-six was too late to be doing this shit. The world was getting old around him. He wanted out. And his problem was that even though he knew he'd be dead the moment he

let down his guard, he didn't care. There was a backlog of people he'd walked over. Stacked up like the steel shipping containers behind him. Old friends who weren't any longer, people he'd turned over, all out there just waiting for their chance.

Johnnie was no fool, he could remember how he'd got to be chief. Could still recall hosing Miko's blood off his splattered combat boots.

Well, someone was going to do that to him, and sooner rather than later. He'd reached the point where he couldn't be bothered to stop them. 'Burnt out,' might as well have been tattooed across his forehead.

He was a sitting target. Common-sense said the hired guns had just arrived.

There is a concept called event horizons. Johnnie always figured that once upon a time he'd actually understood it, but lately he'd forgotten.

He had a feeling he was about to remember.

Unslinging his nanchucks from their resting place around his neck, Johnnie made a few practice passes, spinning the weighted handles from hand to hand, so that they and the chain joining them blurred into a defensive arc around him. When he figured they were impressed enough, he stopped. No point in tiring himself before the real battle began.

Drawing himself up to his complete 5'10" - he was a whole hand taller than most people, certainly taller than both of the waiting gangsters - Johnnie stalked towards them, keeping his balance well forward on the balls of his feet.

He looked hard, and ready. It was his trademark. The strangers weren't to know how thin it was wearing.

They watched him coming. Waiting for him. Broad faces impassive behind expensive tortoiseshell shades and fixed smiles. Now Johnnie was closer, he could see the irezumi dragon tattoos on their wrists twisting away under starched cuffs held together with cornelian and gold links.

They were yak. Men of rank.

Which made no sense at all. Because if they wanted Johnnie dead all they need do was instruct a junior kobun not to return until the job was done. And it would be. Yet for some reason they were going to kill him themselves.

Johnnie stopped and bowed, shamed by his childish outbreak of martial arts. Then, knowing that face was everything, he stood upright, meeting their hidden gaze.

They watched him, almost with amusement.

'Murakami, Tetsuo?'

Johnnie remembered in time that this was his name. His real, legal name He'd been Johnnie T for so long now, he'd almost forgot he ever had any other. At the age of eleven he'd stumbled over the name Johnnie T in a street market, on the back of some ancient bootleg American CD. He'd been hanging with a retroRock outfit then, briefly. Until he was thrown out for smashing up his old Les Paul copy. Minus the guitar he was nothing.

All the same, he'd kept his new moniker.

There was a noticeable bulge by the left arm of the small Yak's black silk jacket. While the taller one had his arm dropped limply to his side, hand loosely cupped with fingers bent back out of sight in a way Johnnie recognised.

If he'd been armed with a throwing knife that's how he'd have been carrying it too.

'Is me.' He agreed absently, biting at his thumb nail. The strangers might judge this too big a sign of weakness and make their move. But he had to take that risk.

The enzyme dessicate packed under his cuticle dissolved instantly on contact with saliva, feeding into his blood stream to produce a subtle but immediate restructuring of adrenalin molecules. His heartbeat steadied at 95, and the world crystalised into sharp edges around him.

Everything became suddenly hyperclear. The rough sides of the underpass fell into instant focus, the blue of the sky beyond became bluer than ever. Time slowed slightly as both his conscious and unconscious mind concentrated on to the pair in front of him.

He knew his spiky, goth-black hair was not at its best. But this wasn't the time to worry about morgue shots. His surgically-enhanced purple eyes locked onto the loosely swinging hand of the taller Yak.

Johnnie tapped his fingers lightly against the handle of his nanchuck. Waiting. With hyperfocus he should be able to see the move just before it happened.

'This is for you...!' The short Yak with the large cufflinks slipped his hand inside his jacket and Johnnie's reactions went into chemical overdrive. He'd hit the ground and was rolling to the right, nanchucks out from around his neck and swinging lightly from one hand before the man had even reached his inside pocket.

As Johnnie came up from the ground, neophrene nanchucks swinging for real this time, the Yak lent forward and used his left hand to catch the attacking handle as it blurred towards him faster than sight through the air.

Johnnie gasped.

It was impossible.

The small Yak smiled, showing expensive, ultra-white ceramic teeth. Closer to, Johnnie noticed the man's Versace shades were patched in to his elegantly-greying temples, via discreetly coloured contacts.

'You're not the only one to use enzyme enhancement,' the Yak said shortly. He pulled his right hand slowly from inside his jacket to offer Johnnie a credit-card sized, flat rectangle of sticky grey microchip.

Bioclay. Johnnie tried not to think what a lump that size must have cost.

'Like what, mine?' Johnnie asked, mouth dry.

The Yak nodded.

'Is?'

'You tell us,' said the Yak firmly.

Johnnie looked uncertainly at the wafer thin, clay-like chip in his fingers, its mud-coloured base threaded through with an intricate, crusting wormcast of living circuits. The bioclay's skin was as slippery as avidin protein, with an oily sheen that threw up rainbow shades like gasoline on the surface of a puddle.

'Honour,' Johnnie said sadly, falling into Yak street style. 'Deepest reflection needed...'

'Two days,' the Yak said.

'Five.' Johnnie demanded, shocked at his own rudeness.

For a moment, as he shook his head, the yak actually looked sad. 'Two is all,' he said quietly. 'After that we exhault you with our presence.'

Johnnie nodded in silence. It was either that or end up as fish food for fat carp in some pond in the Hama Rikyu Gardens.

Mortdieu I

'No. Don't!'

Prince Sabatini sat in his high-backed leather chair, his twig-like fingers gripping at the scuffed red hide of its arms.

Without even realising it, the old man was shaking his head from side to side. As if willing the killer not to strike. But in his dreams the hatchet-faced young man with the black frock coat wasn't listening. He was concentrating on the silver glint of a murderous blade. And on the naked form of a young girl lying asleep in front of him.

Fear ran riot through the old man's brain. Erratic neurons snapping through ancient synapses like electric cancer. He was being killed by memories and daydreams. Dangerous and uninvited. Black desires, sins and crimes - as sweet and fresh as a childhood memory.

Not that he could truly remember being young, or would want to remember it if he could.

He was near death. Not near enough to suit him, but much nearer than Mr Rosary liked. The Prince could feel the creeping corruption in his bones and nerve endings: the cell death that came as nuclei reached the end of their natural life without having replicated. He had no illusions about what was happening, and he welcomed it. There had been enough of blood transfusions, gene splices, life extending drugs and IV drips. In the end, his condition was fatal. One way or another, despite promises and lies, old age always was.

Death he could accept, but the swirling dreams. Had the prince known they were there, waiting to press in on him he would not so lightly have ordered his doctor to let him die with such patrician equanimity...

The killer in the black frock coat turned. And the prince could see that he was not as young as first appeared. Slight worry lines ran down from the corner of too thin lips, and there was a very adult hardness behind the sunken eyes

But the prince could not bring himself to watch. And when the old man looked again it was already too late.

He was in a small, damp cellar room, wrought iron bars on the windows. Despite the room's cloying scent of aromatic herbs, the pervading stink was of the open sewer outside.

Open bowls of rose leaves were placed on an oak table and a gaudy china pomander hung on sisal from a bent nail hammered roughly into yellowing plaster.

There was a human heart on the table. Floating lazily in a weak solution of salt. While what looked like an embryo floated in another, smaller glass bowl along side it.

Both from the naked girl, the prince had no doubt of that. This was the killer's hideaway. The coats and costumes hung from pegs on the wall confirmed it. Butcher's aprons, doctor's capes, even the dark blue greatcoat of a police officer. And piles of boots, and long silk scarfs for binding frightened eyes or tying some shaking victims hands behind their back...

Through the crude glass of the windows a long narrow street rose steadily towards the icing-sugar whiteness of the Basilica of Sacre Coeur. Only the French middle classes, the Prince thought in disgust, could have built such a saccharine confection to celebrate the massacre by the army of countless of their own civilians.

Between him and that icing-sugar monstrosity, stretched la Butte Montmarte, a warren of disease-ridden side streets. Where hungry, rag-clad families of fifteen lived, slept, fucked and battered each other senseless all within the confines of one damp, stinking room, and eight or so families shared one excrement-encrusted suffocating outhouse.

These were the last of the Paris slums. The only bit of Paris Baron Haussmann hadn't destroyed in his drive to move the industrial poor out of the city center. No doubt he'd have

demolished la Butte too, if he hadn't first been hung from the ornate side bar of one of his own cast-iron street lights during the Commune Riots of 1871.

It was out on these streets that the killer in the dark frock coat now hunted. Secure in his belief that whether or not heaven existed, hell was already here. For even when young the Prince had welcomed darkness, as readily as the dark welcomed him in return.

'G-Grandpa!'

The girl's voice was insistent, frightened. Fretfully the old man shook his head as he tried to dislodge the sour, distinctive taste that was spread across his tongue. Memories of blood.

'W-Wake up.' Maxine shook him roughly by one thin shoulder. Wide, familiar eyes stared down at him, dark pupils dilated with anxiety and something more worrying, knowledge....

'Leave be alone.' He began to push the girl away, but regretted it immediately as tears began to fill Maxine's eyes. She always reminded him too much of her great grandmother when she cried. 'Bad dreams,' he said as kindly as he could, reaching for her pudgy hand. 'Roquefort and burgundy always upset my system.'

He didn't want her there, not when the dark swirl of his memories were still hanging unseen in the air. If it wasn't for his bloody doctor's Hippocratic scruples he wouldn't be taking so long to die. Well, that wasn't strictly true. He couldn't die yet. There was the question of his succession.

The Prince's study was forbidden to Maxine unless he sent for her, which he didn't unless he had to, because he knew his room frightened the girl. But she just stood obstinately in front of his high-backed chair, her long black hair tied back in a thick braid, her short stubby fingers twisting anxiously at the silver Arab bracelet on her wrist. God knows, he loved her but even he couldn't pretend she'd inherited any of her mother's beauty.

'You were s-shouting,' she stated petulantly. 'Philippe heard you from the c-corridor. He's c-calling your doctor.'

'No.' The old man shook his head. 'Go stop him,' the Prince ordered, but Maxine just stayed there, staring at him. Fear in her eyes.

That night, once his doctor had left and Grandpa had retired to bed, to recite lines from *Fleur du Mal*, a book he still found touchingly childish, Maxine crept down through the deserted house and let herself out into the welcoming silence of the wind-lashed Isle St Louis courtyard. A steady drizzle of early Spring rain made the flagstones slippery and dangerous, but the night air was cool after the cloistered fug of the huge house.

High up behind her, behind those heavy velvet drapes, Pierre would be sitting with the Prince. But no drawn curtains hid the wing which housed Mr Rosary and Razz. Even this late their side of the courtyard was bathed with light.

Despite herself, Maxine glanced in and the first thing that struck her was what always struck her, just how ordered Mr Rosary's sitting room was. Unnervingly tidy.

To one side of a white marble fireplace, ROM CDs were racked in neat rows across an alcove. The fireplace itself was filled with a minimalist display of dried birch twigs. Apart from a small flat-screen Sony hung over a work desk of limed oak, the white walls themselves were totally bare.

The floor was carpeted in grey Berber which matched exactly the matt coating on the half-open door and a washed-silk sofa that sported a single white cushion. There were no books, no ornaments and no music system of any sort.

Maxine shivered. The place felt empty, but she already knew it wasn't. From beyond the half-open door came the unmistakable thud of flesh on flesh, and below that subdued sobs from Razz.

Grandpa had warned her more than once that whatever went on between Mr Rosary and Razz was the business of Razz and Mr Rosary. But Maxine wasn't so stupid as to imagine that Razz was ever given much choice.

Just what she'd do, Maxine didn't know, but when the time was right she was going to do something to change things. Something terrible to pay Mr Rosary back for all the horrible things he did to Razz. What it was Maxine didn't know, but she'd definitely think of something.

Beyond the courtyard of the Hotel Sabatini, the Quai de Bethune was deserted and windy, and slick with drizzle. To Maxine's right, silhouetted against the night sky stood the black outline of the south side of Notre Dame, its elegant flying buttresses as thin and sinister as the legs of a giant stone spider.

Perhaps the Commune's propaganda had been right, Maxine thought suddenly, perhaps the Catholic Church really did squat over Paris like a deadly spider. If so, she was not afraid.

The dark was her element, her comfort.

This was where she hid. Where lack of beauty, money and even sanity didn't matter, perhaps never had. So what if she saw cats in the shadows before they had a chance to see her, or heard the mice and rats long before they were aware of her passing?

This was her empire. Some nights down here where darkness and the river met, her vision became so keen she could even see the wind as it whistled across the water.

kinkenseiji (money-power-politics)

Sleep was a luxury Johnnie often did without. Just as well. What with heavyweight Yak shit about to hit the spinning proverbial.

Serious viral rewiring meant his metabolism could go 48 hours before his liver clogged up with toxins. If pushed, he could stay up for five days straight. Pretty fucking good, given that sensory deprivation studies showed paranoia or hallucinations usually cut in after three days.

Except he didn't even have five days, didn't even have three. And the two he'd once had were almost up.

But then the way he felt about life now, what time he had left looked like burning up in one sick speed dream anyway.

Lou'd given a queer, twisted smile when Johnnie first mentioned the two yaks. Then promptly pulled down polymesh shutters, put electronic screamers on all doors into the safe house and hustled his boss underground to a deserted subway tunnel. One the metro authority had given up as beyond repair sixty years before.

Burnt-out fuck or not. If the Yak wanted Johnnie then the neoAddix needed him more. A screw up by one neoA would be treated as failure by all. At nineteen, Lou'd been round long enough to know that if Johnnie blew out, the others could kiss goodbye as well.

Watched by Lou and half a dozen other punks who made up the neoA's hard core, Johnnie refound the skills that had made him head honcho in the first place.

He began slowly at first, fumbling his passes over the bioChip, dripping sweat from the unfamiliar demands that concentrating for more than ten minutes made on his amphetamine-burned synapses. But then the patterns began to weave together, as they always had, and the others were forgotten.

The bioChip was like nothing he'd seen before. An archology of intricate gold tracery, with gleaming gem-like flashes of diamond and ruby buried in a wafer-thin base as dank and slippery as compacted mud.

The whole thing could have been some asshole artist's idea of a joke, the ultimate in post-human jewellery.

It took him one whole day to identify a frequency that matched the bioclay, and most of another to wire the chip to a 'trode deck and delicately slide his way in though black ice that someone had layered in deadly rings around its centre. Whoever worked the thing up had tried pretty bloody hard to keep it private.

'Way to go!'

Johnnie grinned skull like as the anti-virus program finally parted to let him through. Burnt-out nothing! He was alive and hacking with the best of them...

When a stretch limousine finally slid to a halt in the narrow street outside the neoA's safe house, and Lou went topside to get them, Johnnie was humming with a rush that for once owed zip, zilch, nada to a chemical high.

Oblivious to the two Yaks clambering slowly down a rusting ladder, he crouched over his favourite deck, 'trodes jacked crudely into a socket in his skull. An affectation Lou openly despised - but still one that pleased Johnnie.

Zen awareness wasn't his hot suit, never had been. So wouldn't have occurred to Johnnie to wonder what the Yaks saw when they looked him over. Which was just as well. His best silk shirt, the black one with filigree Mexican collar-points, was salt stained under the arms with stale sweat. More sweat ran in rivers down his thin face, streaking his cheeks with three-day old mascara and black hair-dye.

Oblivious to Lou's sarcastic quips, Lou's 12 year old brother Ryuci, long goth hair razored on top in imitation of Johnnie's, was busy sponging witchhasel onto his hero's glazed

face. Drops of which were trickling steadily onto the front of Johnnie's Mex shirt, making it even more of a mess.

An IV glucose drip fed a steady stream of meth-amphetamine into a ceramic socket in Johnnie's thin wrist while a clear plastic catheter ran out through a slit in the top of one trouser leg. His shaking, nail-bitten fingers were flicking at terrifying speed across a grey Mitsuki keyboard, while at his side was a floating trackball.

Between the 'trodes and the deck, he was in, and searching. Except that in wasn't the right word, not really. Because when it came down to it, it wasn't possible to be in the Cy, what you saw was an approximation, a convention.

Just as letters grouped into words, that strung out in a line allowed people to read, and just as the word-pictures of ancient Egypt, China and Japan had been minced up and spat out thousands of years later to form comic, strips so the Cy had its own conventions.

But knowing that what you saw was just that, a convention, and accepting this as stone cold fact was a very different thing.

And at that moment he was the Cy. Way down below was a golden lacework globe. Somewhere behind his back, invisible but inevitable, had to be a restraining wall. The boundary. Not that he'd ever found it - not that anyone had.

There were guys who said riding Cy was like floating inside one vast balloon looking down at a smaller one. But that was so much crap.

It was silver surfing for technoheads.

That golden beachball was what you got if you plotted the simultaneous movement of all global and satellite information, and then removed the globe.

Glance at the ball and it looked solid, get in close and you could see that it was woven from a flickering flow of data that pulsed its way around the Cy like blood through capillaries.

Johnnie clicked in closer. Once, then again, passing between lines of light, down inside the twisting Gordian knot. If he looked up, as if at the sky, he could count off the familiar zodiac of info constellations he knew from old. Tangled and complex, brightest along the edges of the triangle that linked Edo to London, via the Boston/Atlanta sprawl.

It looked the same as it ever was. Yet it felt different. Heightened. More frightening. More alive.

Johnnie jacked out, and registered the Yaks watching him in silence. He smiled vaguely and jacked rapidly back in on a deck that wasn't wired into the bioClay, going for the comparison. And yet, same as it ever was...

He jacked straight out and then back in on the first deck. Looked identikit, felt fucking bizarre. The change wasn't visual, wasn't even informational. It was emotional.

Johnnie could feel the matrix as a vast translucent shell overhead, enclosing some inner emptiness where he hung, its streams of data forming some deadly solar wind that circled around the inner void.

And there was another space, far out. Cold and distant, beyond the edges of the luminescent mandala that was global information. Never before, Johnnie realised, had he felt the sheer size of information space, its unfillable and incomprehensible vastness.

On impulse, he powered himself upwards, homing in on the Ninjuku district of Edo Central, fingers flicking instinctively across unseen keys.

A wall of light fell towards him, like a dislodged shard of sky, and then he was up above the lines, looking down once more onto the mimetic cityscape that was information flow made solid.

From habit, Johnnie glanced across to the port district to check his own position. And realised with a shock that things weren't as they ever were. Although the tiny steel-grey pyramid that stood as icon for the neoA headquarters was where it should be, no umbilical cord of light flowed out from it into the matrix.

He was invisible!

Everything else was right.

But he wasn't there...

'Eat your fucking heart out!'

Johnnie's hoarse croak filled the cold tunnel, turning heads as even the short Yak looked startled. But Johnnie couldn't see him, and in any case Johnnie didn't care.

Yak headquarters was right there below him, just waiting, he couldn't resist it. High on derms and punch-drunk with excitement, he dived straight for a wall of lethal black ice.

Logic said it would fry him, reaching back through the 'trodes to burn out the synapses of his cerebral cortex. So? He wouldn't be the first jock to become on the Cy. There were worse ways to go than being offed instantly at your deck.

A manic grin fixed rictus-like across his features as he plummeted towards the ice. He felt it burn, and then he didn't. A cold solar wind had wrapped itself around him as the ice opened like petals and then folded behind him.

He was through.

Except for that first nanosecond of contact, grade A, black ice had ignored him. What's more, it was obvious from the smooth unbroken sheen of the black wall behind him that it had forgotten even that first brief connection.

Johnnie grinned. Instant invisibility within the Cy. This was hotter than drugs, faster than life. He couldn't really claim it was sharper than sex, he hadn't managed carnal for a while, wizz did that to you.

But this topped wizz anyway. He was right inside Yak Cy while back in the meat world, two Yaks stood at his shoulder, watching his fingers dance across the keys without having the faintest idea where he was or what he was doing there.

He jacked out and grinned at them. Both nodded gravely and the shorter one started to speak. Johnnie jacked back in again... They weren't going to like that. But tough shit.

He powered in close to the Yaks information flow, watching the lines of light connect and disconnect, the light threads were always there but visibility was limited to when lines were active.

Something major was going down between Yak headquarters in Edo and a Chinese holding bank in the New York/Atlanta sprawl. Johnnie patched himself in and then straight out again, sweat breaking out all over.

He didn't need to know that stuff, he liked living.

Information in, information out. That was a simplification since both took place simultaneously, but data flow had always impressed the hell out of him, ever since he got his first broken down, third hand Zanussi cyfi deck, all chrome and matt black plastic. The bizarro kick was that hot black was coming back in to style. Sort of retro-retro-Retro.

Johnnie was all set to jack back out, through the ice to somewhere less lethal when he noticed a snake-like line of neon at the edge of his vision. When he looked at it full on, it was gone.

He tried looking at it by not looking at it, until his head pounded. All the same, it was there. Someone had a line into Yak headquarters. And they'd gone to serious trouble to render it transparent.

The big question was could the tap be spliced in turn and, suppose it could, was it worth the risk? The Yaks were dangerous, every street kid knew that, but they also honoured their debts as scrupulously as they extracted payment. Hack this and he could score a big one in his favour. Maybe even get a life.

Unbreakable didn't exist, not where code was concerned. Some crypt was just more difficult than others, which meant that given time he could splice the wire, maybe even track it back to its origins.

If the ice didn't kill him first.

Johnnie began to consider his options, hanging there in innerspace like a baby in the womb. If things worked out, he'd be off the treadmill. With enough credits to go legal. If it failed he was snuffed, but then any street gang leader who passed 25 might as well be offed anyway.

Only thing was he'd never tried anything like it. Hell, Johnnie doubted if anyone had. What he really needed was some solid advice...

'Hey Johnnie, my man.'

Johnnie spun round, to find himself staring at a grin he'd first seen, aged eleven, on the back of an import CD.

Black shades pushed up over long black hair, black leather jacket, black jeans, red stratocaster slung across his back like some deadly katana. The figure grinned, a slow easy grin that didn't quite reach his dark green eyes.

'Need any help, my man?'

Johnnie flatlined for 28 seconds before Ryuichi managed to rip the smoking 'trodes out of his skull and slapped a pocket oxygen mask over his mouth and nose.

As Ryu did so, ignoring the burns that blistered across his palms, Lou scrambled to run a jack plug into a surgically-implanted socket in Johnnie's chest, then coaxed enough power out of the old Matsui cardiox to blast the electrodes already in place on both sides of Johnnie's heart. No one could guarantee against flatlining, but anyone with enough money and foresight could take sensible precautions.

Three blasts later the fist-sized lump of muscle that was Johnnie's heart shuddered and then, basic as it was, reluctantly began to pump blood. Ryuichi did a complete transfusion on the spot, using plasma and a sterilised, freeze-dried blood mix Johnnie had donated to himself for just such an emergency.

The two Yaks look decidedly unhappy with Johnnie when he finally staggered upright from the slab. That was a bad sign in itself. Shows of emotion counted as loss of standing.

Johnnie wiped the stupid grin from his face and faced them both, his blue eyes slightly lowered as he attempted to bow. They bowed back, limiting themselves to only the briefest nod of the head.

Their eyes widened as Johnnie staggered over to his deck and jacked straight back in before anyone could stop him...

The underground tunnel was silent, except for the steady click of an in-coming fax and the gecko-like chatter of a Dell modem. Striplights flickered overhead. The supply of electricity was spliced straight out of Niponshi's own private line, but the fittings were primitive, scavenged from skips and ripped from deserted factories. The neoA had refined bricolage to a high art.

Leather Jacket was waiting.

'I'm Johnnie' said Johnnie, hoping he didn't sound too stupid.

The transparent figure with the shades and the leather jacket cocked his head. 'That so?' he said. 'Well, I'm Makai... You watch for that small yak. He's one mean mother.'

'Makai, Professor Makai?'

As in avian thought blox, his way out of Edo... Johnnie undoubtedly looked as shocked as he felt. Apart from anything else, it didn't seem possible that this figure could know what was going on outside.

'Small yak's the High Oyabun,' explained Leather Jacket. 'President of the Winter Cherry Society. Only extreme need could force him into the open.'

Johnnie didn't need telling. Until that moment he'd thought the man existed only in street legend. Word said the rank was power made flesh. Yak oyabun had only to issue an order and his kobun would die without murmur.

'He hasn't been seen outside his compound for fifteen years,' Leather Jacket warned. 'But five days ago he consulted an oracle, and the oracle told him to visit you in person.'

'Why?'

Leather Jacket grinned. 'Maybe talking to seagulls is about to be the next big thing!'

The gap between the neoA and the Yakuza was much more than geographical. Several layers of society and infinite shades of respect separated them.

The only time a yak grandee might notice a neoA was if one got in his way and had to be removed. In fact it was unlikely that any yak above the most basic street soldier could even tell one gang from another.

Leather Jacket gazed pointedly at the neon bright skyscrapers of information and the thick pulsing data links that still tied Edo to the Taiwanese holding bank in the New York/Atlanta sprawl. Unimaginably huge quantities of credit was busy changing hands.

'If this was your deal, you'd fucking ride shotgun too. Even if the price was to meet some half-arsed street punk whose idea of a neat hiding place was stuck down in the sewer...'

'But how did they find me?' Johnnie asked, just before pulling off his 'trodes. Leather Jacket didn't answer. It occurred to Johnnie that Makai didn't need to. Anyone with half a functioning cerebellum could work out that Makai himself was the answer.

'Respect,' Johnnie mumbled, concentrating all his attention on the small yak. It was hard not to shake. Only the fact that the oyabun didn't know that Johnnie did know, gave Johnnie any comfort.

Nagging at the back of his mind was the fact he'd tried to bash out the small yak's brains with a pair of nanchucks. He hoped real sincerely that the oyabun wasn't going to hold that against him.

Lou was standing in the background, watching what was going down between Johnnie and the yaks with unhealthy interest. Johnnie had no doubt he was busy trying to find a way to turn things to his own advantage. It was so blatant, the sick fuck might as well have spray canned his offer on the wall, or taken out a display ad in the Japan Times.

Well, whatever was going to go down, it wasn't over yet. Taking a deep breath Johnnie steadied his nerves and stared the small yak straight in the face. One chance to get it right was all he had. But that was going to be enough, he just knew it. Someone was bleeding them dry and he - the one, the only, the best of the neoA - was their best answer.

'Vampire program.' Johnnie sounded apologetic. 'Your enemies are draining you. Siphoning away credit as it moves between Edo and the Sprawl. This you know, undoubtedly.'

Neither yak said anything. But the oyabun's eyes narrowed to a slit, without him even realising it, and his hands were suddenly hung loose at his side. He must have begun as a street samurai, Johnnie realised. Which was more than pretty good, it was fuck near impossible to have made it that far up the ranks and still be alive.

The thought impressed him. Almost as much as the single finger cut off at the knuckle on his left hand, an act of yubitsume. To have made only one mistake that demanded such an act of contrition on the way from street samurai to oyabun, that took serious class.

'Who?' The short yak demanded, his voice hoarse with emotion. On his temple a vein stood out, like an implant beneath the skin, pulsing in time to his heart.

'Know not,' Johnnie said.

'Then find out,' the short yak snapped.

'Can do.' Johnnie reply was glib, way too glib. Abruptly he dropped his street gang drawl. Everyone's eyes were on him. Lou's in particular. Tough titty. Johnnie was about to get himself a real life, and there was nothing Lou could do to stop him walking away with the goods. Maybe even taking Ryu with him.

'I could poison the blood, upset the vampire,' Johnnie suggested carefully, keeping all emotion out of his voice.

Steel grey eyes locked with his, and a single eyebrow was raised, very slightly.

'Virus.' Johnnie suggested flatly.

'Fatal?'

Johnnie nodded.

The oyabun's lips twitched, and he gestured impatiently with his pudgy gold-ringed hand, ordering the gang leader to continue.

Despite his blinding headache and a racking attack of come-down shakes, Johnnie let out a sigh of relief. Leather Jacket had been right. The yaks could be hooked.

Keeping his face deadpan, and his excitement to himself, Johnnie ran his plan past them. Making it simple. The yaks had little time for jockeys.

When they wanted know-how they bought it - with billy-wizz or absolution. Jockeys and gangs were tolerated as a necessary nuisance, but that was as far as it went.

All the same, it was obvious the oyabun liked the sting. As the plan unravelled before the yaks, Johnnie struggled not to show his tiredness. Non-jockeys had no idea how exhausting the Cy could be.

There was a silence. Johnnie had a sense of the yaks silently weighing up his suggestion. The faintest glance passed between them, and then the short one spoke.

'How do we know who has been bleeding us?' He demanded.

Johnnie smiled. 'You look for the fallen body.'

It worked. It did better than that, it blew a hole in the Cy, wiping an entire virtual archology off the matrix in one spectacular explosion of wasted data.

Johnnie had wired up a flat wall monitor, so everyone could see the show. He'd gone inside to make the connections and then come out to push the switch.

He'd wired his tap straight into the Berlin Fusion Authority's most lethal ice. Held back the surge and then unleashed it when enough pressure had built up behind the block. The surge powered its way down the tap, a flash of light moving at information speed across the Cy until it hit a Chinatown datahaven in San Francisco.

It was all over in a second. Billions of credits wiped from the Net, a Megabite-gigabite of information, connections and storage flash cleaned with one single pulse of energy.

Anyone trying to work out what happened would have been left with the unlikely conclusion that Berlin had just trashed a triad holding.

Nothing at all tied it into the Yaks.

'Respect.' Johnnie said. He was working hard to keep the grin off his face.

The oyabun smiled gravely, his hand reaching towards the wallet pocket of his elegant grey suit. Lou had his eyes fixed on the scene. Johnnie could have sworn the little shit was holding his breath.

Still smiling, the oyabun withdrew his hand and thumbed back the safety on a small, elegant grey revolver. Its stub barrel was pointed straight at Johnnie's head.

'Things date,' Lou said softly from the sidelines. 'Styles change. You were waiting for this anyway.'

The gang leader stared in disbelief, first at Lou and then at the Yak with the gun. Johnnie's turquoise eyes met the cold grey pupils of the elderly oyabun, and Johnnie shivered. Suddenly all he could see was the beckoning black circle of the Colt's muzzle.

The bastard didn't just intend to have him killed, he planned to carry out the drop himself. It was too late, nothing Johnnie could offer would stop the clock.

A split second before the hammer fell, the oyabun shifted his aim slightly and grunted with satisfaction as the .22 bullet took Johnnie cleanly through the heart.

Mortdieu II

Maxine watched the screen, she couldn't help herself. Though what she was watching was not what she wanted to see. Not at all. The tears that rolled silently from her puffy eyes were not for her, Maxine told herself crossly, they were for Razz.

The closest thing to a friend that Maxine had and now that Mr Rosary was away, Razz was too busy making a fool of herself even to visit Maxine. And God was Razz making an idiot of herself.

Razz was smiling. Not kindly. And speaking something Maxine recognises as a kind of patois.

'So boy,' she asked the boy watching her, 'How your baby?'

'Wha?'

'Babe,' grinned Razz and spread her hands, indicating smallness. Sharpened red nails glistened with the sheen of metallic enamel.

'You know wha' a babe is?' Razz asked archly.

The boy sucked his teeth in irritation. In his late teens, he'd had tooth-bud surgery and each tut revealed the sharp upper canines of a Drakul. Star was scripted right through him, from his single ruby ear-stud to the shaved mandala razored into his cropped black hair. He was a runner for Mr Rosary, and Maxine had noticed him before, but Razz interest in him was new.

'I got nah baby.' His cross dark eyes were warning her not to disagree.

'Nah?' Said Razz. 'Nah baby mother either?'

As Razz shook her head mockingly, her short oiled dreadlocks bobbed slowly like the spines on a porcupine. She was dressed for battle, or else to impress. The silver skin of her arms and face shone bright with body slick, the kind used by bodyguards to improve muscle definition and reduce the chance of someone getting a grip.

Her top was nanite, woven from sheer spider's web gene spliced to included boron fibre. As a blade deflector it was excellent, where modesty was concerned Razz might as well not have bothered. If anything, Maxine thought, it just served to enhance the other girl's curves and muscle definition.

Not that Razz needed much help. She already had cheekbones to kill for and the languid, carefully cultivated movements of an expensive predator.

'Nah babe?' She stretched out the question as if tasting it. And watched with studied calm as the boy took an angry step towards her.

The fighter's stance wasn't lost on Razz. 'So,' she said, spreading her hands wide, 'Babe, how doing?'

'That nah baby,' the boy announced suddenly, admitting defeat, proud despite himself. Holding a hand level with his knees, he smiled. 'Him this high now.'

'Exit.' Maxine ordered from her and watched as the old wall-mounted Toshiba screen broke its video link, automatically reverting to an ancient afterdark of waves crashing against a Brittany beach.

At only 64 bit the breakers were more stylized than realistic, but Maxine didn't watch for the waves, she wanted the loop of haunting harp music that went with them, Marv Pontkalleg. Celtic harp always helped Maxine calm the unruly visions in her head. It was just a pity it could do nothing to quiet the longing in her stomach...

Before the nightmares had come she'd always been able to retreat, into music or dreams. To call up a place inside her head more real, colder, cleaner than anything the world could offer or CySat would ever dare to put on the wire.

But without the simplicity of her dreams how could she survive the strictures and boredom of living as an only child in the Hotel Sabatini. If being trapped behind shatter-

proofed plexiglass in an over-ornate gilded Louis XIV prison with Grandpa and Philippe counted as being alone.

That sounded ungrateful. It probably was, but she couldn't help it. Maxine tossed her hair and immediately felt ridiculous, even though no one was no one there to see her sadness and anger. No one in her part of the house at all.

Crossly she ordered the Toshiba to re-establish a visual link. She was peeping disgracefully. Spying on Razz, which should have made her blush red with shame but didn't. She's been doing it for so long it felt like second nature.

As far as Grandpa, Mr Rosary, Philippe or Razz were concerned the original house cameras were as dead as the ancient pneumatic message tubes or the somewhat more modern e-mail system. Maybe the systems were dead to them, but not to Maxine. When ever she talked to the house, it always talked back.

Maxine bit her lower lip. There were a lot of places in the house where she went searching when she wasn't meant to, some of them stranger than others. Some rooms she just scanned using the internal cameras, other more interesting ones she visited in person. But by far the most serious was Grandpa's study on the third floor, with its high window looking out over the courtyard and the jumbled streets of the Latin Quarter on the river bank beyond.

Grandpa was too-old fashioned to use smart locks. And she knew a set of spare keys to the study were hidden in the small first-floor drawing room, hidden away inside the hollow lid of an enormous blue and cream Chinese vase that once belonged to Louis XIV. She'd found the keys one lonely afternoon when she was ten.

'Vision,' Maxine ordered, and watched the grey screen kick back on line. It was a mistake. The thin black boy had his hand thrust down the front of Razz' Levi ultrasuades and from the intense, earnest expression on her face it didn't look like Razz objected.

Maxine knew all about foreplay from her stolen CD of the Napoleonika. She knew just what function it fulfilled - lubrication. And why it happened - instinct. She just couldn't imagine what it felt like and was too embarrassed to touch herself to find out.

Ragged gasps from Razz issued from the wall screen's soundcard in all-too-perfect stereo. Getting louder and more ragged by the minute. Crossly Maxine ordered the Toshiba screen to cut out the sound. And watched wide-eyed as a now silent Razz frantically clawed at a huge silver buckle on the boy's leather belt.

The gap between Maxine's life and that of Razz was more than a simple few years, even Maxine realised that. On her side there was class and education. On the side of Razz, the augmentations of an exotic, and experience. Maxine wasn't stupid enough to think that all - or even most - of that experience was good.

She sat on her bed, arms clasped round her knees as she rocked back and forward, her brown eyes never leaving the silent screen. Razz filled Maxine's world, like it or not. And Maxine wasn't sure she did. Like it, that was. But then there were a lot of things that Maxine didn't like, such as hearing that the Paris Ripper had killed again.

It had been the lead story on that morning's download of Le Monde, which she'd found on Grandpa's desk in the study. The killer had left the freshly-slaughtered, already rotting corpse of a prostitute on the steps of Notre Dame. The stink had alerted the police to the latest murder.

On the full-colour poly-crystalline Toshiba screen, Razz was silently writhing on the edge of a bare kitchen table. The spiders web top was pulled high, over her breasts. With her knees and mouth wide open and her head thrown right back, she looked like a devotional statue of St Teresa.

The now-naked boy was between her legs, his back shiny with sweat, his head twisted sideways as his mouth hungrily sought her small silver nipples. The coupling was less graphic than the nightly diet of children and dogs beamed in from Holland. And far less

vicious than the bondage rituals on offer at speakeasy holo-porn booths on the rue St Denis. But Maxine didn't know that.

Furiously Maxine shouted at the screen, suspending the system. Enough already, as Razz would have said.

Maxine didn't need it.

Except she did. Razz's open mouth. Her silver muscled body hard as steel. Maxine couldn't let the memory alone. Birth and knowledge meant nothing. Even her powers, which Maxine hardly ever stopped to consider, counted for little. It was Razz who mattered. Razz who was all the things she wasn't - alive, dangerous, seriously street smart.

Alive. Confident.

Worse than Maxine's bubbling self-anger or the sudden cold contempt she felt for her own self pity was a new, undeniable feeling between her legs. She didn't need to touch herself to identify that hunger, it seemed that the hunger had finally found her.

The Napoleonika's section on pre-adult psychology, with its carefully homogenised blend of expert opinion and exhortation, would have told her that children live by harsher moral laws than adults. But Maxine didn't know that either.

From nowhere, uncontrolled sobs spread through her body in a wild release as Maxine clutched harder at her knees, pulling herself into a tight, rocking little ball. Life was all too complicated, and even Razz was too busy being grown up to help.

Maxine thought of Razz without intending to, of her pierced silver nipples, those small hard breasts and that tightly muscled waist which was fit rather than thin. And then Maxine remembered her own heavy hips and the ugly soft curve of her own stomach, and began to cry all over again.

Dawn At M'dina

Alex Gibson came to on the streets of M'dina, mind-wiped and naked - one eye, one kidney and half his liver missing, his clothes beside him in a filthy bundle. The first thing he felt were spikes driven into his hands and feet, except that there were no spikes. Though puncture wounds were there, all right. Open and bloody, thick with a shimmering, swaying circle of feeding flies.

Sitting on the worn stone steps of St Michael's basilica in what was North Africa's richest city, he flapped his wounded hands, but the flies stayed put, hooked legs clinging tight to his filthy skin.

'Sod off,' he shouted. But they stayed put.

Shifting slightly on a knee that had been savagely broken and even more badly mended, he swore again in crude street Arabic and without thought slapped his hands together hard. The flies were successfully displaced, for the briefest moment until instant, blinding pain knocked him unconscious.

Around his slumped body M'dina's ancient taxi drones hooted and jostled for position, but still only made their way up Ifrigiyah Hill at a crawl passed the marble fronted, air-conditioned offices of Time Warner towards the hotter, cheaper grey concrete archology that housed the area's collection of lesser web production companies.

Smart young Arabs in loose linen suits, drop-pearl earrings and ponytails, who weren't so smart or so young when you got up close, strode swiftly to their work, stopping off in Idrisid Alley to pick up an obligatory cappuccino and fresh croissant from some 'Parisian' street stall.

Sharing the pavement with these media junkies there were the kinder-whores. Amphetamine-thin, underage strippers from Southern Spain casually obscene in gold leggings so tight you could lip read, and sullen Portuguese rent boys driven South by the depression; pimped by elderly Campanian thugs who crouched jealously over flasks of methedone. Their Camorra tattoos fading under the blotches of sarcoma-scarred arms.

If M'dina freeport was the honeypot of Megrib, then the squalor of the bottom end of Idrisid Hill, nearest the docks was M'dina's cesspit, and these pimps and thugs were the flies that swarmed at its edge not caring if the street's stench was really that of honey or a carcass.

Alex Gibson couldn't remember where he was. Not even when he woke for the second time. But it looked dizzyingly fresh to him, despite its heat and dust. Behind him was a basilica, its shape reassuringly familiar, except its walls were of sun-bleached North African stucco, not the red London brick he expected. The sky above shone bright azure, not a cloud in sight. No birds either, only impossibly-small silver planes, shock-wave riders that criss crossed the high blue in a web of vapour trails as thin as white cotton thread.

A faint shimmer of heat rose from the dirty pavement. By mid-summer its asphalt would be hot enough to burn flesh, but as yet it was merely warm, even at midday. Late Spring in M'dina was kind to everyone, beggars included.

If Alex heard the simple, amplified cry that rose and fell like an old man's wail from a minaret in the distance it didn't register on his thin and badly scarred face. And it didn't appear to register with anyone else either. But then this was M'dina - the faithful were already at prayer. Everybody else was too busy to bother.

An settler woman was moving towards him, the skin of her pinched face tanned mahogany by years of direct sun. Mumbling to herself as she walked, the old woman stepped carefully round a black plastic rubbish bag and found her path into the church blocked by the huddled form of a naked tramp. Without thinking Alex thrust out his hand, palm up.

Crossly, Sister Maria Begley fumbled clumsily at her purse, looking for a credit chip but nothing too big. All these beggars were more than she could afford. Still, charity was God's work, even if all her mite afforded was slop-produced, industrial-strength alcohol to pour straight down their gullets.

With a shrug of annoyance, Sister Begley made to drop a nearly-empty chip into the filthy, outstretched hand. But then saw the marks of Our Lord. Clear as day and with her own tired eyes.

A young Arab man swore angrily as Sister Begley stepped hurriedly back, accidentally jostling him. Then took one look at her habit and spat too. Still she was used to that. Nuns weren't popular in M'dina, but at least they were tolerated. Elsewhere, fundamentalists and unsympathetic police had driven them out of most of the city states of the North African litoral.

For a second Sister Maria Begley looked straight into the scarred face and single tortured blue eye of the naked, wounded beggar. It was a mistake. Before she could stop herself, the old woman was on her knees vomiting all over the church steps.

She wanted to be embarrassed, but the shock was too strong - and so was the relief. All her life she'd been a true believer, first in the Pope's church, later with the Church of Christ Geneticist. Finally her faith was repaid. She'd been given what she'd always wanted most; a sign, a real indisputable sign.

Crying, Maria Begley backed away, taking with her not Alex Gibson's nakedness, his stink or his startled face, tangled hair and beard matted with food scraps, but a memory of his heaving, fly-encrusted stigmata and of his eyes. One a black weeping pit dug into his skeletal face, the other clear, blue and puzzled. An eye that looked up at Maria Begley, as if she was the first human the beggar had ever seen.

'Sweet Nazarine.' Half-asleep, the Taurag priest checked the digital readout on his bedside clock and swore again. Lunch time - and he'd instructed his housekeeper not to let anyone wake him before supper, which was when the Reverend Dr Volubilis usually began his working day. Either someone was dying or Sappho was in trouble with the police again.

Undoubtedly there was a limit to the number of times he could get his housekeeper's delinquent daughter out on bail, and pretty soon he'd be butting up against it. If it wasn't for the fact he was a Geneticist, that limit would have been reached a long time back. But luckily for Sappho the Mufti of M'dina liked the Church Geneticist. As well he should do. Christ knows, they paid him enough for his protection.

Volubilis swore again, and then hit the view button on his vidphone.

'Here,' he announced crossly.

It wasn't Sappho, her mother Etta or the Mufti's religious police at all. Standing in front of the lens was that mad old Irish nun, Sister Maria Begley. He could see her mouthing at him excitedly. The sound button produced her voice, squawking at him through the Panasonic's well-worn voicecard.

'Father. Is that you? Are you asleep?'

'I was,' Volubilis muttered crossly, searching for an old cotton robe. Giving up he pulled on some fresh 501s and slipped a huge 'God Will Live' teeshirt over his head. Then he slammed his palm onto a brand new Matsui reader, and ordered the surgery's smartbox to unbolted his courtyard door.

Straight away the old woman came clattering across the scrubbed cobbles of the courtyard, heading for the air-conditioned coolness of his kitchen. She was ready waiting for him, sat at the table by the time he arrived: her frown was so disapproving that Volubilis almost stopped in his tracks. It was his new Levis, he realised with annoyance. She expected

a dark suit at least from her priest, or preferably a heavy felt soutane. While they were at it, she probably wanted him to address her as Sister...

The Reverend Dr Volubilis wasn't everyone's idea of an ideal priest. But he was, he told himself crossly, what the auditor-general had sent them, and that would have to do. It wasn't Volubilis fault he was also a Taureg warrior in a city full of olive-skinned Arabs, blue-eyed Berbers from the Riff mountains, and fussy, impoverished French colons.

He sighed pointedly and when Sister Maria wasn't looking surreptitiously palmed a couple of betaBs from a saucer on the table. These he knocked back with a glass of chilled Evian from the kitchen's Braun dispenser. It took a minute or two for the world to steady, but once the blockers kicked in he was fine.

'Now then,' he said firmly, 'what's the trouble?'

By the time Sister Maria had finished, Volubilis was wishing he hadn't asked. He'd have to go of course, to search for her miraculous bloody beggar. Not because the man carried the stigmata of Our Lord, but because he was injured and the Geneticists were a medical order.

Volubilis was a practical, pragmatic man. The best surgeon of his year at the Sorbonne's l'Ecole de Medecin. Superstition annoyed him, as it annoyed most priests there days. Yet what if the old Irish woman's story was true, he wondered. What if the man's stigmata were more than just a ploy to fleece the gullible? The Church of Christ Geneticist was nothing if not interested in absolute, objective scientific truth.

Dismissing Sister Maria with a sigh and a mumbled blessing, Volubilis stamped back up to his room to change. He Velcroed a dog-collar and bib round his neck, then half-covered it with an old loose djbella that almost reached the ground.

The djbella was lined with a nano-engineered silk that wrapped itself around any bullet as it entered the body, slowing the ballistic spin but also making it easy to extract the bullet by pulling gently on the threads. It wasn't a new idea, the Mongols had used something similar against arrows in the thirteenth century.

His simple, buckle-up sandals were of neophrene. But it was impossible to discover that their soles were studded with dark brass rivets without getting up close; and if you were that close it was already too late. The skills Volubilis had learnt at the Sorbonne in Paris weren't restricted to medicine. The dirty end of kickboxing he'd picked up at a Thai gym in St Denis.

The Church of Christ Geneticist had no quarrel with the Mufti of M'dina - far from it. But the Jihad Front had been infiltrating the state of M'dina for decades, and Christian priests - even rich Geneticist ones - had a way of ending up with their throats cut. Not that throat cutting was limited to priests or even Christians; intellectuals of all persuasions had long been legitimate targets.

For added reassurance, Volubilis tucked a small Colt floating-breech pistol under his robe and dropped eight extra alloy flechettes and a crucifix into a pocket for luck. Then he got on line to Zurich and took out a day's extra AR insurance cover in case he had to wander off the main streets.

Alex Gibson didn't even notice the priest approaching. His senses were on overload, reeling under the thick stink of the harbour's mud at low tide, the heavy wind-borne smell of frying feta breiks and the brightness of the sun overhead.

All around him electronic noise was pressing in, as rai beat out from bar doorways, and loud quarrels in Arabic, French, Spanish and Japanese carried forward the plot lines of a dozen different afternoon soaps. Marriage, divorce, infidelity, birth - even without knowing the languages, he didn't need to plug into CySat to know what was going on.

And above it all was the sonic thud of reconditioned MIG wave riders flying south to defend the border and the growl of taxis drones that still plodded their way slowly up Ifrigiyah Hill.

Alex was dimly aware that something had changed in his life, something important. But the splitting ache in his head was preventing Alex from grasping what it was.

Being drunk didn't help much either. At least, the bit of his brain that was functioning assumed he was drunk, he certainly felt odd enough. It took Alex another few seconds to work out what had changed: and by then the tall man with the dog-collar and the loose djbella was almost on him.

Like a sheet of glass imploding behind his eye or a wall coming down inside his cerebellum, Alex suddenly realised that what he didn't know was more important than what he did - which was nothing. For the first time in six months he was aware that his mind was a blank, and being aware made it not so.

It didn't matter that he had no idea where he was, that today's date was a mystery. It didn't even matter at that moment that he didn't know his name. It was the knowing that he didn't know that counted...

Frantically Alex levered himself up off the church steps with one hand, and grabbed at the priest's stripped djbella with his other hand, smearing its cloth with crushed flies and clots of blood.

It was a test of Volubilis' Christian charity that he didn't break the man's neck on the spot; an even greater test that he offered Alex a small room off the courtyard, when he could have packed Alex safely off to the Christian hospice at St Cross.

True the room he offered Alex smelt damp and its one window to the outside world had long since been bricked off and crudely plastered over, but it was space and in M'dina space was valuable. Come to that, these days space was valuable where ever you went.

The blood samples Volubilis took tested negative for retroVirus, and showed much less cell wear than expected. Without insurance, it was obviously impossible to do much about the broken knee.

There was a Dutch datacore slot in his wrist, purpose unknown, almost entirely grown over. But way more interesting, the root of his top-left back tooth had been drilled out and replaced with a second miniature datacore. Presumably wired through to some kind of cam originally housed in the now empty eye socket. Whatever the eye had recorded had been downloaded by a sub routine to the second datacore.

A journalist then of some thought - and one who sure as hell didn't trust his employer. Keeping back a datacopy was against most news contracts, but went a long way towards guaranteeing you got paid if it came to lawyers about who actually provided the screen shots.

Volubilis was beginning to get interested so he logged a DNA imprint onto the Geneticist computer, and told the hospital to give the man a new eye, not to mention a cheap synthetic kidney to replace the one he'd obviously sold or had stolen at some time or other.

He charged it to his own account.

It was a good thought and a bad mistake, at least where Alex Gibson's long term prospects were concerned. The DNA profile was pulled immediately off the geneticist database by a high-illegal S3 smart agent. Once informed, Minister of State Pierre Nexus put through a voice mail call direct to Rosary.

Of course, by then Lady Clare's serried bank of RISCs had also pulled up the profile. Alex Gibson might not know who he was, but by now at least three other people did. And unfortunately for Alex, two of them would be more than delighted to see him dead, while the third didn't want him killed, but was quite happy to go that route if necessary.

The report Volubilis downloaded on Alex Gibson's stigmata was short and somewhat evasive. Though when he called up the elderly Ethiopian surgeon who'd run the pathology tests, the man insisted all known facts were there, he'd left nothing out.

Some unidentified inhibitor was preventing the surrounding muscle from rebuilding or binding. The cells didn't die or rot, but neither did they repair. The wounds had all the

hallmarks of an uncompleted experiment or an elaborate medical joke. Either way, that was as far as it went.

Which was fine with Volubilis. He wasn't looking for miracles and he didn't want one to come searching for him. He couldn't spare the time.

Every priest in the Church was committed to the biggest scientific project ever mounted, mapping and replicating the human genome, empty data sequences and all: only then could the fragments of DNA taken from the Turin Shroud, the Sacred Thorns and the one remaining splinter of the True Cross be scanned for signs of divinity. Even with the whole Church behind the project and funding from Kodansha-Edo, Harvard Philips and Cambridge-La Rochelle, it would take another six years to sequence, replicate then re-sequence all 23 chromosomes.

That was where traditional research pulled out. The Church Geneticist would go on in its mission to recreate the DNA of Our Lord.

First sequencing the echo chromosomes, that bundle of mirror-image, ghost DNA that half the world's scientists refused to admit could exist.

The Buddhists, of course, had their own infinity programme, with a huge Cray mainframe in Lhasa electronically chanting all possible permutations on the known names of God. The Dali Lhama confidently expected the stars to snap out, one by one like lights, when the programme had finally run.

It was no more or less unlikely than Christ's second coming being the product of a genetic miracle...

For three days Volubilis managed to work in his labs as usual, ignoring the questioning calls of his patron at Cambridge-La Rochelle and scowls from the friends of Sappho's mother Etta. A small group of devout, sun-dried widows who thought Etta so daring to look after her cross black pastor's every need.

Not that his needs were great, Volubilis acknowledged wryly. BetaBs might neatly stabilised his world on its axis, but they also killed any physical desires.

On that third evening, Volubilis was sat grumpily in his white-washed study, a tall glass of Saporro and a half-played game of chess set out on a wicker table in front of him. The can was real enough, and so were the ancient ivory figures, but the game itself was a sham.

He'd grown to accept Etta fussing around him, scolding and complaining mercilessly; but had built in a defence mechanism, insisting that she leave him in peace each evening to enjoy his chess.

As the day cooled and Etta bustled at her ceramic hob, steaming fresh vegetables or braising organic meat, luxuries made possible only by the lavishness of the grant from Cambridge-La Rochelle, Volubilis sat staring at his dust-covered chess board.

The computer had made the last move, putting him in check, and three months later it was still waiting patiently for him to respond. Playing against a computer always bored him, but Volubilis he found it impossible to play himself without cheating.

Instead he listened to old-fashioned evening radio. Operas by Britten and Glass, Goreki's ninth. Something ambient by Eno. Not that pirate radio was as good as it used to be. Still he disliked CySat and despite his youth was old-fashioned enough to distrust Sims.

As indulgences went, an evening doing nothing in front of a chess board was a small one, but still important to him. So when the knock at his door came just before supper, the priest didn't even try to sound polite.

'No. Go away.'

The knock was repeated, as was his order, and then the study door swung slowly open. And the beggar staggered in, dragging his bad leg behind him. His hair was still matted and unwashed, but he was dressed and he no longer stank of Drexie-box alcohol. Instead he just stank.

'I'm busy,' Volubilis stated, 'Come back tomorrow.'

Alex Gibson didn't move, though a flicker of interest crossed his face when he noticed the chess board.

'Go away,' insisted Volubilis, sounding irritated. 'You can't just limp in here when you feel like it.'

Alex nodded at the chess computer.

'Move your Queen to F5,' he suggested.

Volubilis stopped being board.

Sappho

She knew from years of biology that house dust was just flakes of human skin, splintered hair and the desiccated bodies of dead mites, but Sappho still couldn't help admiring it as it spun lazily, floating in the evening sunlight that filtered through her slatted shutters.

Her Ma's sandals could be heard slapping loosely across the courtyard below. Another tureen of harira for the beggar, most probably, fresh soup to help him get better.

Yesterday morning the priest had done something clever with the man's wounded hands. Ma'd tried to explain it to Sappho, but Sappho hadn't really been interested, though it sounded like coring an apple, slapping a new core in place and then putting back the peel. All the same, Sappho knew the priest was pleased with himself from the way he'd been wandering around the house all day, humming snatches of the Missa Luba.

Ma liked things medical. What with all the nano-this, onco-that stuff she picked up from Dr Volubilis. She always dropped tek-terms into her talk like she knew what it all meant, but that science just made Sappho shiver. Given the choice, she'd rather Ma didn't look after Volubilis at all.

It wasn't his colour, she didn't even mind that he was a priest. Not much. It was his obsession with tek, with genetics. Like it was going to supply answers, after all this time. The young woman sucked at her teeth in the universal expression of disgust, imitating street smart from half a world away without even knowing it.

The Sisters of Gaia might be unloved and unfunded, not to mention unfashionable among anyone who mattered, but she still resolutely supported them.

There was one other thing that Sappho disliked about Volubilis, that he mocked the way she spoke. His pure unaccented French in stark contrast to her ugly, pied noir twang. But Sappho wasn't stupid, she knew that getting a job as the priest's housekeeper was better luck than her Ma had a right to expect. Ma was just another hard-up colon widow, more pretensions than credit, and a job was a job. Anyway the Geneticists had class, and the ear of the Mufti too, if talk in the bazaar was to be believed.

Without bothering to plug in, Sappho flicked channels to no good effect, one eye on her small tri-D screen. Nothing. Either the Atlas transmitters were down or the fundamentalists were jamming foreign stations again.

All day the air had been thick with static as the wind stilled and pressure built up behind the eyes of M'dina's inhabitants. Later afternoon was fading unhappily into evening, and already a red storm had nearly brewed itself to boiling point far out over the Mediterranean.

It would be an ugly night. The first red wind of Spring always unleashed the worst in everyone. Tensions and prejudices usually smoothed away under the city's air of lazy comfort would erupt violently, as friendships cracked and neighbours fought. How bad things got depended on the weather.

A pink storm produced broken limbs, rapes and a spate of divorces; but dead bodies, open revolt and blood feuds came out of a full-scale, no-holes-barred barbarossa.

No one really understood why it happened. The old blamed Western scientists, the young just took the storms for granted and blamed nobody. Some years before, a group from M'dina University had suggested the storms resulted from the city's microclimate between the sea and the mountains. A rival group of academics claimed this was complete rubbish. Both put in for extra grants to prove their point.

The answer was no one really knew why. Though no one doubted that a barbarossa was coming.

The highway police had already slung Toyota Seraphims sideways across all roads out of the city, hazard lights flashing, on-board computers snarling out aggressive warnings in three languages.

Unknown to Sappho, who instinctively blamed everything on the fundamentalists, it was the Mufti's own police who were busy jamming incoming satellite signals. Soon a digitally-generated Lotumoph of the Mufti would come on air on every terrestrial channel with a reassuring message of unity and tolerance.

Not that his plea would make any difference. When a barbarossa struck words never did. Steel grills were going up across the city on lock-ups and cafes, stalls in the glass-roofed Souk were hastily being dismantled; while up on M'dina heights, consulates and embassies were drafting in extra gate staff and double-checking that their perimeter fences had working back-up generators.

On the other side of the city, a tall thin man slid his hired silver-grey Skoda to a halt and checked himself in the mirror. Rosary's hair was neatly cropped, his suit expensive but understated. The ceramic-mesh flack jacket was so discreet most people mistook it for a waistcoat.

A small enamel badge on his lapel supported an exclusive, politically innocuous charity dedicated to good works in the non-aligned nations. Joining cost more than most poor-belt Stateside families got a year in food stamps from security.

In his jacket pocket was an all-areas police pass from the Mufti's local Section and a broad Chinese lock-knife with ceramic blade.

Behind Cirrus fooler loops designed to convince airport M-wave computers that they saw clothes, memory cards and a portable smartbox, his Samsonite case was packed with enough weapons and bioTex to start a small civil war.

He was here and he was ready. The glass doors of the Christ Geneticist complex slid open as the evening shift signed off, and lab workers tumbled out of the air-conditioned comfort straight into the hot, dark claustrophobia of the approaching storm.

He picked his target from instinct.

Young, serious looking, spectacles rather than contacts, hair loosely tied back under a cheap imitation of a Versace scarf. Not too senior, but with access to information. An office worker not a technician. Engaged probably, now on her way home...

Ordering the car to alarm itself, he slid out of his seat and began to cross the road, wrapping his heavy Astrakan coat tightly around him.

He caught up with the girl as she was hunching her upper body, ready to fight her way home against the rising wind.

'Ms...' He held out his hand.

She looked startled, then suspicious. He caught precisely the point at which her eyes flicked passed his shoulder to check who else from Geneticist was still on the street.

'Miles Fasbinder.' The hand was still offered. His voice loud to carry over the wind but now sounding a little hurt. 'From Cambridge-La Rochelle.' He smiled sadly. 'We met when I toured the lab last year. Ms...'

'Palmer, Leila Palmer.'

'Yes, of course. I meet so many people, it gets hard to remember all the names.' His voice was genuinely apologetic.

Leila smiled in understanding.

'I'm looking for our good friend Dr Volubilis. I went up to the hospital but they said he was probably down here.'

The girl shook her scarf-covered head, the ends of her hair lashed by the oncoming barbarossa. 'He's been home this week treating some beggar Sister Maria discovered.'

She looked suddenly embarrassed. 'Well, that's what I heard...'
'A bit odd, this tramp?' Rosary said smoothly, his voice friendly, unthreatening.
Leila nodded. 'Holes in his hands. Stigma...stigmata,' she stumbled over the word.
'The doc cured it. Seems Sister Maria's furious.'
She smiled to herself and the tall man smiled back.
'I'd better go.' Leila said.
The tall man nodded, and waited until she'd turned away.
'Oh, my dear...' He said suddenly.
Leila twisted round to face him, still smiling, even as the mono-molecular edge of the ceramic blade cut her throat from ear to ear. By the time the thin man reached his rented Skoda, the sand and swirling dust had already begun to cover her body.

Sappho couldn't remember what had sent her down to Alex' room in the first place. The barbarossa and boredom probably.

Anyway you looked at it, the move was dumb. But then common sense wasn't something she majored in, as Sappho's ma never tired of telling her. And now Sappho was here, the beggar didn't seem to object after he got over his shock.

Alex Gibson had been asleep at one end of his courtyard room, sprawled on a grimy slab of shape-hugging polyfoam, when his door had blown open with a crash and a red-haired chubby girl in a long Sisters of Gaia teeshirt stuck her head round the door frame.

Eyes black with khol stared down at him from a chalk white face, circled by a shock of wind-blown hair that looked as if it hadn't seen a comb in months.

Her loose shirt couldn't hide the ripeness of her breasts, and when she turned Alex saw them swing slightly, nipples brushing against the material inside her shirt. If she noticed that he noticed, she didn't let it show.

She was obviously European. The heavy use of traditional Megrib cosmetics couldn't hide her race. Changing that would take cosmetic surgery and a course of melanin boosters.

'Thought you'd be older,' Sappho said as she stalked over to the polyfoam and dumped herself next to him. With exaggerated cool, she lent sideways against one white-washed wall.
'Door.' Alex suggested, flicking one finger towards the storm outside.

Sappho got up with a sigh. For good measure she rammed home two primitive steel bolts. One was at eye level, the other wasn't. And when she bent to ram home the one riveted onto the steel door just above the ground, Alex got the distinct feeling she wasn't wearing anything much under her tee shirt.

'Thought you'd be dirtier too...' She added, squatting down beside him again. As before, her breasts swung softly under the cloth of her shirt. '

Alex glanced at his grimed nails. And then stared thoughtfully at his filthy 501s with their split knee. The food-encrusted, once black teeshirt was wearing wasn't much better. Maybe he should have taken the cotton djbella offered him by the hospital at St Cross, but he'd refused it.

These were the clothes he woke in. That could be significant. But maybe not. Alex hadn't the faintest idea where the jeans and shirt came from. The bin by the look of it.

The beggar shrugged unhappily when Sappho asked his name, and the girl smiled.

'I'm Sappho,' said Sappho. 'Who are you?'

Alex shrugged unhappily.

'So Ma's right,' Sappho stated, sounding pleased.

'Ma?'

'The priest's housekeeper.' Sappho's lips twisted, wryly. 'It was the Bishop-auditor who suggested she housekeep. Ma didn't know she would get that one, did she?'

But Alex was only half listening. The storm almost covered the whole city now, and yet the rain still hadn't come. Only dry thunder and the rattle of the steel door as it shook in its great iron hinges.

The walls of his room were ancient. Concrete rendered breezeblock, thick and solid, but still the wind hit the walls like a fist onto a table. And sand had begun to creep in under the lintel.

'Happen often, does it?' Alex asked Sappho, indicating the thunder overhead.

She glanced at him quickly, checking that he wasn't making fun of her. But he wasn't. It obviously hadn't occurred to him that his question might seem odd.

'Every year,' she said, as uncertainty replaced her suspicion. 'Don't you remember?'

Alex didn't.

Not remembering the storm didn't necessarily mean he hadn't lived through on before. Maybe it was just that he couldn't remember. Not wanting to push the thought further, not yet anyway. Alex turned his attention back to Sappho.

Not pretty, but attractive in an over-made-up, sullen sort of way. Hard to put an age on all the same. With her short, stocky body, ethnic lapis & silver earrings and heavy Megrib makeup Sappho could have been twelve going on fifteen, or nearly twenty desperately hanging onto her teens. Alex had a feeling it was the latter.

He didn't know how you'd tell, short of asking. And what with one thing and another, he wasn't really that bothered. Alex tuned back in to what she was saying, and realised with a start that Sappho was waiting an answer. To what he didn't know, but it didn't matter. When she didn't get a reply, she asked again.

'Let me see.'

'See what..?'

'Your hands. Go on!' Sappho moved closer. 'I'll swap,' she offered, holding out a small fold of oiled paper.

Alex took the fold of paper and unwrapped, looking blankly at the yellowy crystals within.

'Wizz,' said Sappho. She crushed one of the crystals between first finger and thumb, put the powder to her nose and inhaled deeply.

Alex tried to copy her but choked as the coarse powder hit the back of his throat.

'Sniff harder,' Sappho suggested, crushing another crystal for herself, 'otherwise you'll end up with throat ulcers. And they're a dead giveaway. Now,' she said firmly, 'let me see your hands before it's too late.'

'Late?' Alex was slipping away again, his newly amphetamine-wired mind trying to remember something, anything at all. If he couldn't have who he was, then how he got there would be better than nothing.

'I'd say before the scars heal over, but that wouldn't be fair to you,' Sappho said seriously. 'Ma says you'll be gone long before then. Dead probably.'

Alex stared at her. It occurred to him that he should say something, but nothing seemed appropriate.

'People are after you,' said Sappho. 'Dangerous people, Ma says. Apparently Volubilis put the Geneticists at risk, taking you in like that. It's all in this afternoon's web-mail from the Bishop-Auditor.'

Alex wondered briefly how Sappho's mother knew, and then stopped wondering. She probably just accessed the file. 'I'd better go,' he said, standing up.

Sappho pulled him straight back down again, with a quick yank on his tee shirt. 'That's a barbarossa going down out there,' she said harshly. 'If the curfew cops don't nail you, the storm will. Anyway, you can't go, not till I see your hands. I've never met a real saint.'

Alex was tired. There were things he wanted to forget, important things, only he couldn't remember what they were. And he wasn't a saint.

Not if she was naked under that teeshirt.

He peeled the black micropore dressing back from his wounds and offered her his hands, palms upward.

They could have been relics or votive offerings, carved from white candle wax. Wax that someone had driven nails through and then held near a flame, melting the edges, so that the holes looked half filled.

What he'd expected from her, he didn't know, what he got was religious ecstasy. Her eyes widened, her pupils exploding as if someone had thrown a switch on the focus. It didn't matter that he saw ugly half-healed scars, when Sappho looked at his hands she saw something different.

The girl was coasting he realised with a shock, not just on wizz but kite-high on something heavyweight. The insides of her wrists were clean, no derms. But it was there all right. Watching her ride it was like seeing someone try to contain a great, unstoppable emotion.

'I'm joining the Sisters for real.' Sappho announced loudly.

When Alex didn't answer, she hugged her knees tightly and twisted her head, eyes fixed on the bare wall. What she saw he didn't know. But he didn't need to look to know she was crying.

Outside the rains had come, chilling the air. Drops ricocheting from the roof like buckshot from the muzzle of a riot gun.

They sat listening to the rain and to machine-gun fire in the distance.

'Curfew breakers,' said Sappho, a catch in her voice. 'You know,' she added, 'Round here it's bad news to look like Christ, that is if you ain't.'

Alex felt she had a point...

The Braun clippers made a low buzz as they ran along the side of his head, long lanks of curling hair spilling down off his shoulders into a old cracked basin.

He was stood in Sappho's room, opposite a crumbling Third Empire mirror, actually inside the five storey town house where Volubilis lived. He was under its flat roof, listening to rain hammer down as if it would never stop.

In a matter of seconds his skull was close cropped. And then, without warning, Sappho started on his beard.

'Wait!' Alex grabbed her wrist. Its bones fragile under his grip, thinner than he would have thought possible, if he'd been thinking about it. Between them, the Braun continued its buzz, as angry as an injured wasp.

'It's okay,' Sappho promised. 'It's okay.'

Swiftly she trimmed back his beard and then used her razor, a pink ceramic disposable to scrape clean his face, coarse grey-flecked bristles clogging its twin blades.

He stared at himself, while Sappho retrieved her razor and with a grunt of disgust, tossed it down a recycling chute.

The face that stared back at him was older than he'd expected. Somehow he felt ten years younger than that face looked. His eyes didn't match. The new one was too dark a blue. And a brutal scar around his left eyesocket froze his face on that side, until it looked like he'd had a stroke.

Feeling vulnerable is always a dangerous emotion, and Alex felt critically vulnerable then, as he stood in her room and stared at his white, ghost-like reflection in her huge gold-framed mirror.

It wasn't a feeling he liked.

'Well?' Sappho demanded. 'Who are you?' For the first time since they met her voice lacked its usual edge of smart mockery.

He couldn't answer of course. Not even when she ran one finger sadly across the newly cropped stubble of his hair. He had a name now - or so the priest told him. But who he was Alex still didn't know.

In the corner of her room inside the open door of a frosted plexiglass cubicle was a small shower driven by an ancient electric pump. But the electricity was off and the nozzle just dripped rust-stained drops onto the Triton's cracked polymer floor.

'You could try the roof.' Sappho suggested, catching his gaze.

He could too.

The city of M'dina was hidden beneath a downpour of rain that tried to beat him flat onto the slippery clay roof tiles

At the front of the house the narrow street was as bare as the courtyard behind. Rain had cleared the city of people. Alex could stand naked at the edge of the roof and peer down at the completely deserted road, and know that no one could see him.

Those of the local police who weren't drinking for nothing in illegal bars, were sheltering in doorways, cursing the electrical storm that had reduced their throat mikes to useless chunks of circuit and plastic.

High above Alex the night sky was a chaotic swirl of black clouds pulsing fractal-like against an even blacker sky. It was, he thought, as if he was the only one alive, the only one who welcomed the rain.

Face upturned to receive the drops, torrents of water washing down his naked body, Alex knew that it was his lightening, his storm. Its purpose was to wash him clean, to free him.

And yet, though drunk with improbability, wired on wizz and battered by the barbarossa, Alex still knew the real question, the one to which he needed an answer was - free him from what...?

Still life With Ice

Ignoring the wind that battered at the shutters of his surgery, Volubilis glanced again at the wreck of a body on the Samsung cryonics slab before him. The cause of death was obvious enough. A small-calibre bullet through the heart. Caseless ceramic probably. Mexican or Japanese - he couldn't tell without the slug, and that had been removed. By a professional and seconds after the man was shot if the mediSoft scan reading of the wound was to be believed.

The cause of death was body shock, not blood loss or irreparable organ damage. True the blood was missing but only because someone had taken the Kobe Option and replaced it with a propylene glycol and DSO formamide mixture. Then the young Japanese male had been flash frozen to shock the soft tissue into self-suspended animation before individual cell structures had time to decay.

It was well over a century since three Japanese academics from Kobe in Japan had proved that mammalian brains could be drained of blood, filled with glycerol and frozen for up to 6 months without significant damage.

That had really been the beginning of Japan's lead in cryonics. Besides this feat, and pioneering American work on Miles, a frozen beagle who got up and walked away on being returned to room temperature, even the experiments of Dr Theodore Balthus were just so much technical tinkering.

Dr Volubilis smiled bitterly as he struggled to pull on a pair of Bayer surgical gloves. He hadn't liked Balthus, hadn't trusted Balthus when the fat man was his tutor at the Sorbonne, but all the same he'd been unusually surprised and upset when reports of the man's death were released by CySat. Psychologically, the Frenchman scientist was an emotional anorexic, technically he had been a genius. And brilliance counted for more than morality, or at least it did to Volubilis, though the priest accepted that maybe this was not a position with which the Church would agree.

Turning his attention to Johnnie's corpse, Volubilis studied the screen of the table's Samsung monitor. According to the readouts, resuscitation was technically possible. Although looking at the muscle-wasted, amphetamine-addicted body in front of him it was hard to see why anyone would want to bother...

But somebody did.

A Samsung cryonic tank and back-up technician didn't come cheap - and that was without adding flights from where ever it was the corpse originated.

Added to which, Volubilis knew the cryonic tank had by-passed even the Freeport's minimal customs. That much was obvious, given its delivery after the beginning of that night's curfew, by two heavily-armed Korean bodyguards, wrapped head to foot in pacific Rim copies of a M'dinan djibella.

Volubilis knew about the arms, because the main door of his surgery was programmed to scan the bodies and clothes of anyone it didn't recognise.

Once again he checked the flimsy web-mail print out in his djibella pocket. There was no mistaking its authenticity. It was short, to the point and contained both an S3 official recognition code and a red alert password known only to senior members of the Church of Christ Geneticist.

It was signed Lady Clare Fabio, on behalf of Cardinal Makai.

Delivered minutes after the web-mail had come a small pouch of maroon leather, an imperial eagle stamped into its lead seal. The pouch was marked, 'Alex Gibson - confidential.' Since logic dictated that the Cardinal knew who was present at Volubilis' house and that a name this Western was unlikely to belong to a Japanese gangster, Volubilis had reluctantly given it to the beggar.

Deathbird

The first thing Alex Gibson thought when he saw the spinning saucer was gunship, the second was what's that? It revolved like an oversized child's top, hovering in the air on the other side of the street, ten, fifteen feet above the opposite rooftop.

It was unmarked. An aero-spattiale, k119. But not military - otherwise he'd already be dead.

The plexiglass pod slung below its rotating disk protected a camera not a floating-breech Desert Eagle machine gun.

Riot control maybe, or CySat freelancers.

Though that might be pushing it a bit. According to Volubilis, the Mufti had a monopoly on official news gathering. Supplying stock shots of battle or horror-pix from the war in the south provided a sizeable slice of his income. Even C3N had been forced to buy into the service he offered.

The tramp stared vaguely at the spinning, toy-like object, wondering how much of his rain-soaked naked body the cameras could pick up through the torrential downpour. As much as they wanted probably, if they had the lens frequency tuned to infrared. Of course, if they wanted something slightly more intimate, like a close-up of the twisting guts inside him, they could just re-tune to M-wave.

Sappho fucked like she kissed, clumsily. But then it wasn't reasonable to expect sophistication from someone who was so obviously an amateur. Alex had forgotten to mention the aero-spattiale, k119 when he came down off the roof, wrapped in her black Kenzo towel, his cleansed body slick with rain. Forgot to mention it because when he got back, Sappho pulled two glass straws out of her drawer, broke one under his nose and the other under her own and then immediately kissed him, hard, while he was still staggering under the blast of metaNitrate.

This isn't about me at all. It's the drugs, Alex decided hazily. Either that, or barbarossa fever, but whichever ever is was Alex wasn't bothered. He was too busy sliding his hands up under the front of Sappho's teeshirt to worry about her reasons.

Cheap tri-D holos were tacked to Sappho's walls, mostly of naked stars from MTV CySat - Kali, Sonya, Razz-jazz... their names meant nothing to him.

tacked up next to her window was one of a whip-cord thin black woman, Sonya Serene, blowing sax in some smoky bar, white cotton shirt open to her diamond-studded navel, bottle of Jap whisky stuck on a piano next door. The fluorescent red slogan promised that life was smoother in Edo.

Over the bed, towards which Sappho was now gently manoeuvring him was another holoposter. A teenage girl with bug-eye lenses, silver skin oiled and sleek, her whole body muscled and lean, dark lenses fixed on the camera. If scowls could have killed, the photographer would have rotted to dust long before.

Sexy, dangerous, ultimately untouchable because ultimately unreal. It was impossible to tell her original nationality, because the all-over silver of her skin was so striking that it over-rode all other impressions.

With her hard, shaven body, lens implants and three gold labia rings the effect was fabulous - for the moment. If she reached sixty it would be obscene. But somehow Alex doubted if life would allow a girl like that ever to get that old.

'Everything I'm not,' said Sappho sadly, following his gaze. It was a statement not a question. Though it took Alex a second or so to understand what she said.

'Then why have it?' His French was cut-throat, with the accent of a beggar or street thief.

'Ain't she who you'd be,' Sappho asked. 'Given the choice..?'

'I'm not silver...'

'Not a woman either.' Sappho pushed him away, until he could feel the edge of her bed hard and cool against the back of his knees. Her smile when she stared at him was sad.

'Oh shit,' she said. And knelt in front of him, resting her head face-down in his bare lap, her tangled red hair spilling across the skin of his legs. Her open mouth found him and closed over his entire penis, sucking gently until it was so hard, so deep Alex thought she would choke on him.

But at the last minute, Sappho moved her head upwards, her teeth dragging gently. Then, when it was almost too painful, she released her teeth from around the head of his shaft and ducked down, swallowing him in again.

This time when she raised herself, she knelt upright and pushed her cheek flat against his thin ribs, one arm flung tightly around his middle. Her lips against his nipples were gentler now, a caress.

'I can hear your heart.' Her voice was muffled.

'Is that good?'

'Least you have one...'

She tightened her grip. 'Ma says most men don't, you know.'

Outside the barbarossa had choked off to a sullen mutter, leaving the air still sour with static. The rain's overflow gurgled and splashed as it churned along blocked storm drains before spilling over onto the road and evaporating into the clammy heat of the night.

Wrapping his fingers in the girl's hennaed hair, Alex pulled Sappho upright and slowly bent back her head, to look deep into her eyes. He was right, Sappho couldn't really see him at all. Her pupils were expanded way beyond any ability to focus.

It was like staring into a blank screen.

A screen on which Alex could write anything he liked. Unfortunately for both of them, it was then that the metaNitrate finally hit Alex synapses, re-routing neural pathways from cortex to amglada in one simple neural switch, allowing EQ to blow out IQ in a straight cerebral overwrite.

Her Sisters of Gaia teeshirt tore easily, ripped in half before it hit the tiles, revealing full, ripe breasts. Inexperience were exposed in her shocked, over-made up face as she stared up at him, eyes blinking nervously against the hissing glare of a hurricane lamp.

Keeping one hand twisted into Sappho's hair, he looked down at her. Wide hips saddled with late adolescent fat, a soft stomach curving down to an untidy bush of waiting fur.

Without thought, Alex bent to fasten his mouth on one pink nipple, tugging at it with his lips and teeth, even as he dropped one hand between her legs, pressing his fingers hard up against the lips of her sex. She was damp, her edges swollen slightly open.

Sappho shuddered - and reached down to grip the newly shaven sides of his head, yanking him up until his mouth met hers, her kiss bruising his lips.

Her eyes filled his vision, so close they were out of focus, reduced to a dark blur in the haze of lamplight. Close up, her cheek was smooth and supple, though her questing lips were rough and salt like blood or the sea.

Sappho's nipples darkened beneath his twisting fingers, as their delicate tissue engorged until the circle around each was puckered and swollen. Drops of sweat had begun to bead in the gap between her breasts.

That sweat too tasted of salt.

From somewhere came the memory that both blood and the sea contained exactly the same percentage of salt. Maybe that was also true for sweat.

Painfully Alex slid to his knees, his broken leg stuck at an ungainly angle behind him. For an second he hovered off balance, like a falling gymnast snapped by an unkind camera.

Then his hand caught the naked girl impatiently behind her knee and yanked. Dropping Sappho to her haunches in front of him.

They kissed savagely, crouched in front of each other. And then she bit hard into his bottom lip, drawing blood.

Alex grunted, saw her sly grin and flipped her over, face down on the low bed. Gripping Sappho's wide buttocks he pulled them apart until her sex and anus were fully exposed - the one a glistening pink slash, the other a circle of darker pigment like a puckered rose.

'No!'

Sappho bucked as he tried to force his tongue into her, chasing a taste as dark as bitter chocolate. And when Alex ignored her frantic shudders, she tried to clamp tight with the muscles of her buttocks and thighs. For a moment Alex thought he would suffocate, but as his tongue kept probing deeper she began to buck again, this time in arousal, her cries coming in a run of jagged gasps.

'Bastard,' said Sappho, when it was all over.

Alex just grinned and moved his head down from her anus, wiping his battered mouth on the inside of her thigh, before fastening his lips hard on her open sex. He pushed her legs wider, to allow him to push his tongue further into her cleft.

Sappho began bucking again, and kept on bucking until she came for a second time. Then she sprawled forward on her bed, eyes closed, breathing deeply.

Defenceless.

She wailed as he thrust between her buttocks. Not a cry or a scream. Something much more primitive, more primeval than that. A child lost in the night, an injured adult left behind by its tribe.

He paused, to see if Sappho would beg him to stop. But when she refused to do so, Alex continued. Both of his hands tight around her wide hips.

The girl was swearing now, in a low animalistic moan, a string of invective repeated over and over.

'You bastard, you fucking fucking bastard.'

True enough. Alex nodded agreement and gripped her hips tighter as he pulled slowly back and then thrust forward plunging into her, hard.

Everything around him was irrelevant, forgotten. His broken, ungainly knee. Sappho's upper room with its red tiles and white-washed walls. Her trite tri-D posters. The burnt-out barbarossa. Even the fact that finally knowing his name still didn't mean he actually knew who Alex Gibson was, or what he was doing in M'dina...

Everything, all of it, was wiped from his mind as he held and rode the girl. Her stink was like rich earth and her insides felt like liquid. Behind his eyes, the whole world was building up just waiting to burst out in a spew of memory.

Then it was over, and Alex was sprawled across her back, gasps racking his body as he fought for breath, sweat running down the inside of his arms. The thud of blood pounded in his ears as the girl's litany of swear words subsided into silence.

It was done, over. But the memory he'd been chasing wasn't there.

With a groan, Sappho struggled out from under him and crawled across the tiles towards a box of antiseptic wipes. Squatting, she pushed a handful tight between her legs, holding them there until her sobs subsided. They came away spotted with red.

'Blood,' she said in disgust. 'Not quite what I had in mind.'

Alex said nothing, just remained fetally curled on Sappho's bare mattress, staring blankly at the Togo logo etched endlessly across its polyfoam surface. Above the girl's bare shoulder, through an ordinary glass window, he could see a synapse of lightning flick through

the cluttered cloud-laden sky. It might have been imagination only, but for a nanosecond he thought he saw the spinning top-like silhouette of an aero-spatialle, k119.

'Look at me,' she ordered crossly, to no effect. When Alex wouldn't, her hands caught and twisted his head, giving him no alternative but to meet her scornful, drug-powered gaze.

He knew then why adults feared adolescents. Because where Sappho was provided the only point in life when you could see in both directions - back to the distant hurt of childhood and forward to the pain of being properly grown up.

Except that wasn't how it was going to be for Sappho. She'd already had her childhood, and was finally finished with being an adolescent, but becoming an adult wasn't going to happen.

Life was going to get in the way of that.

It was Lady Clare's small pouch of burgundy leather that sent Alex back to his own room in the courtyard: which meant she was the one who died, not him. And it began with an innocent enough question from Sappho. Innocent but unanswerable. As loaded as a cheap Colt look-alike in the hands of a Saturday night drunk.

'No idea?' Sappho asked suddenly, mood-changing so fast that at first Alex couldn't suss out what she meant. 'I mean, no thoughts 'bout who you are?' She took her hands from his face, and sat gingerly beside him.

'No clue at all?'

Well, that wasn't quite true. He had a clue, but he was afraid to use it.

Excusing himself, Alex crawled up off the polyfoam and went to get Sappho the one clue he did have - a red leather pouch, broken lead seal and wafer-thin square of bioChip, its slippery surface all threaded through with gold wires and studded with small beads like coloured glass.

It was time he used it.

Inside his room, Alex removed the card from its pouch, took a deep breath and pushed the card hard into the half-overgrown slot of his empty, unused ceramic wrist implant. Skin broke, blood flowed but the card connected.

New, thread-like axons branched out from the edges of the slot in an explosion of fresh nerve cells. The tips of each axon threading its way into the porous, mud-like surface of the bioClay, locking itself in place. It was because of the chip that Alex was able to feel Sappho die.

He didn't hear it, he felt it. A low crack, almost subsonic, then a sudden wrenching burst of pressure as a chopped off scream ricocheted against the edges of his mind, immediately followed by the real explosion.

For a sickening moment, inhuman tentacles of thought probed at Alex' mind, then withdrew to leave a sepulchral emptiness all too quickly filled with Sappho's splintered, fractured dying memories.

Alex was running for her room, pounding up the old wooden stairs, his shouts breaking the stunned silence of the house before he was even aware that the horror in his head had gone.

He flung open her bedroom door and froze on the step. Already flames were licking up walls plastered with bubbling smears of sickly red enamel. Billowing black smoke hid carmine splashes of blood that spattered the cracked ceiling.

The stench of burning magnesium couldn't hide the overpowering smell of roasted flesh. Alex looked helplessly at the splatters of dripping meat stuck putty-like to Sappho's burning bedside cupboard and hit the floor, on his knees, vomiting.

What else was left of the girl was glued in a burning black mess to the lacerated, flaming surface of her Togo polyfoam futon.

'Don't fucking move.' Volubilis' Colt jabbed hard into the pressure point below his ear, and then its handle crashed down on the back of Alex Gibson's skull, dropping him to the floor.

'You're dead,' the Taureg priest promised hoarsely, staring at the magnesium-fired inferno in front of him. He wore black surgical gloves and a pale blue, nanopore scrub suit so stained with chemicals that it looked like an early Jackson Pollock.

'You animal.' Volubilis' kick caught Alex a sickening blow under the ribs, but the man had nothing left to spew.

Around them both fell chunks of burning plaster as the ceiling's beaten-earth brick began to crack apart in the heat; already Sappho's futon had turned to a spluttering polyfoam puddle of blue flame. What was left of her body no longer even looked animal, let alone human.

In the distance sirens wailed as M'dina's fire brigade went into action, and Alex and the priest could suddenly hear the muffled thud of an approaching police 'copter.

'No they don't,' Volubilis said quietly. 'Not until I've fucking finished with you... Get up!' He rammed the barrel of his Colt back against Alex Gibson's jaw, but Alex didn't even flinch.

He was knelt, his face to the inferno, his flowing tears heat dried by the flames almost before he had time to cry them. His scarred hands half raised to ward off a fading memory that resonated off the burning walls, fragmenting in his mind in the way a satellite picture breaks up as its signal goes out of frequency.

A tall man in a long fur coat stood at the foot of Sappho's mattress, staring contemptuously at her naked body as Sappho tried desperately to struggle against slithering, eel-like restraints that bound her wrists together. The more she fought them the tighter they bit, until blood welled out as they began to vanish beneath her bruised skin.

'Help me.' She begged. 'Please. Help me.'

'When you've helped me.' The man thrust a small Kodak tri-D at Sappho, holding it close to her stricken face. The tri-D showed an overweight, hair-haired Englishman in darkglasses, wearing a collar and tie.

'Where is he?'

'I don't know. Really I don't.'

'But you have seen him?'

'No. Never.' Desperately, Sappho shook her head.

'You know, I don't believe you' The tall man's smile was grim.

In his right hand he held the stubby handle of a floating breech pumpgun with eight inches of neatly sawn-off ceramic barrel protruding from its stock. The man didn't bother to look at Sappho again.

Pulling a black plastic slug from his coat pocket, he bit the top off, ripping away its airtight cover. Which gave five seconds before the load went critical.

Slotting the shell into the Browning, he walked round to the foot of the futon and yanked her knees apart.

Still life after death

Johnnie was ice cold - with shock, he imagined - his blue and frozen fingers twisting against each other. However often he checked above his heart for a bullet hole, it still weren't there. Though the skin was pinker than he recalled.

He couldn't hear the comforting night-time rattle of the downtown monorail or the familiar roar of the Edo-Osaka Nozomi 450 Series bullet train either. Which meant that where ever he was, it wasn't Edo. But he knew that anyway.

The nocturnal roar of the Nozomi Series was one thing; a low scarifying thud of circling helicopters and the night-worrying noise of distant machine gun fire was quite another. Japan was just too ordered for shit like that.

From the room overhead came the crash of heavy feet, while from outside came the sonic redshift of police sirens mixed in with the metallic rasp of loud hailer.

There were three other people in the long thin cellar when Johnnie walked in, and for all the attention they paid the newcomer he might as well have been invisible, a ghost.

The cellar had a death-like quality anyway.

In the far corner, lit by a single chemical strip, a tall priest in a filthy scrub suit was towering aggressively over a neatly-dressed, sour faced woman. If their difference in height intimidated the woman, she sure as hell didn't let it show.

What ever the priest was saying she wasn't having any of it. Answering each of his points slowly but insistently, as if talking to an argumentative child. Maybe she hadn't noticed that a vein in the tall man's forehead throbbled fit to burst and that his hands were bunched into fists.

Or maybe she had.

Johnnie didn't know what language the two were using, but it sounded sort of European, like Italian or French. The other person in the room hung naked in chains against a whitewashed wall. If both the man's legs hadn't been smashed to pulp at the knees he might have been able to stand; as it was he hung unconscious by his wrists.

The chained man's thin face was turned in Johnnie's direction. And from where he stood Johnnie could see that one eye was swollen shut, while the other just wasn't there...

In its place was an empty, bleeding hole with something like raw egg streaked below it. Johnnie didn't need to look at the blood-stained scalpel near the victim's feet to know what had happened. He'd heard the man's animal screams on his way down to the cellar. As had the woman who'd pushed passed him, also on her way down stairs.

By the time Johnnie made it to the bottom, she was already inside, busy trying to lay down the law. Only the tall priest had serious objections.

'Non. Absolument, non. Merde...'

The more he argued the tighter her face set, until her unblinking determined eyes looked as they were carved from marble.

'Enough,' she said finally in a cool aristocratic French Johnnie had no hope of understanding. 'I outrank you. I want him. And that punk Nip.'

'Too bad,' Volubilis said through gritted teeth. 'By now the fire's probably destroyed my fucking surgery and your precious corpse has gone straight from deep frozen to overcooked.'

The woman glanced at where Johnnie stood unsteadily in the doorway, and when she turned back to Volubilis her smile was triumphant. 'Perhaps you'd better check your thermostat,' she suggested.

There was a moment of absolute silence that bloomed swift as cherry blossom in the Imperial East Garden and withered just as fast.

'Where am I?' Johnnie asked her in Japanese.

It looked for it second as if was going to drop kick Johnnie back into unconscious, but instead the priest contented himself with swearing, then kicked a door shut behind him as he went deeper into the cellar.

'Well?' Johnnie asked, stood right in front of the woman, so she couldn't get by.

Lady Clare stared at Johnnie, then at the naked man hanging unconscious from the wall. There was a worrying tightness around her eyes and the otherwise perfect pale skin of her face was pulled white over her cheek bones and temples.

Johnnie wasn't feeling so laid back himself. His headache was getting steadily worse, and when his teeth began to chatter uncontrollably he suddenly realised that the terrible emptiness inside him wasn't just cold. It was withdrawal. Some bastard had emptied his wrist implants, or spliced in a by-pass when he wasn't looking; without wizz his body was having trouble ticking over at all.

'Don't worry. Give you some in a minute.' The woman's Japanese was crude, but Johnnie understood the sense of it.

'Okay.' He said gratefully. Briefly he wondered how she knew what was going on in his head. After all, he was the one working on thought blox. But maybe it just looked like he was doing turkey.

'But first we need to decide what to do about Alex...' Clare strode over to where the tortured man hung in chains and slapped him hard. Pulling a face, she hurriedly wiped blood-stained jelly from the palm of her hand.

'Can you hear me?' She asked.

The man nodded.

'Good.' Clare grabbed his chin, turning his head to face her. 'Now look at me. I'm Lady Clare Fabio... Do you remember who you are?'

With difficulty, the man shook his head.

'No? Doesn't matter. You'll be someone else when you wake up anyway. Sleep now.' Rapidly she jabbed rigid fingers into a pressure point where neck met jaw. Then stepped back to let the tramp's now unconscious body flop forward on its chains.

'That just leaves you,' Clare said to Johnnie. 'And the problem is you're still meant to be frozen. We're not really ready for you just yet. In fact, I'm not sure now that I'm going to need you at all.'

Johnnie looked at the neat, tightly-controlled French woman in front of him and somewhere in the amphetamine-starved fog of his mind things began reluctantly to fall into place.

The last thing he could remember was being dead, the next was waking up alone on a Samsung cryonics slab two floors up from where ever he now was, electrodes sprouting from his temples, IV drips and transfusion tubes sprouting from each wrist. All round him doors were slamming and in the distance a fire siren was getting decidedly less distant. Given the flames licking up the surgery walls, getting immediate emergency help seemed pretty logical.

In the thirty seconds it took him to play Houdini with his drips, trodes and anal waste tube, the courtyard outside had filled to bursting with fire fighters, each one clutching a Chubb high-compression monoxide extinguisher.

Johnnie knew that, because he'd had time to watched it happen before the surgery's wall-mounted flat screen Toshiba exploded in the heat, showing him with shards of crystal polycarbon.

Once free of the slab, he'd grabbed a blue scrub suit to cover his frozen body and decided to get out of there, fast. The fire fighters weren't a problem, they parted respectfully enough when they spotted the cross and double helix on his borrowed scrub suit, hustling him out to the safety of the open courtyard. Johnnie was actually safely out through the main

gate into the teeming crowd outside when the first police hover screamed towards him along Rashid Street, loudspeaker blaring.

As the crowd around him thinned like wind-blown smoke, Johnnie found himself briefly outlined in the halogen beam of a police searchlight and tumbled sideways on instinct, rolling safely back inside the courtyard as a slug of recycled rubber whistled over his head.

There was a furious shout. Johnnie didn't speak Arabic but if that wasn't a call to halt then he'd never heard one. As if to confirm it, two more slugs from a Browning stun gun came screaming after him, hitting the courtyard wall in a crackle of electricity.

Back inside the burning house, a frantic Johnnie grabbed a door looking for another way out, and found himself at the top of a twisting flight of stairs. Stairs that fulfilled three main functions: they led away from the flames, they led underground, and the air that blew up them was cold and moist. Old habits died hard, particularly for the neoA.

Clare nodded when Johnnie finished explaining.

'So why am I here?' He asked at last.

Clare smiled. 'The Yak sent you here. That was my payoff for supplying the bioClay and having you fix their data leak. Lou was going to kill you anyway. You know that don't you?'

Johnnie nodded. 'The others would've let him,' he said regretfully. It wasn't a question.

'Don't doubt it,' said Lady Clare firmly. 'Like Alex here, you're better off if people continue to believe that you're dead. Of course, the little trip with the cryonics tank suggests you weren't intended to stay that way. But,' Clare shrugged. 'This is a bad fire. Who knows how many lives it will claim?'

She stopped, and looked hard at Johnnie, as if considering something. Whatever it was Lady Clare seemed to decide in his favour, because when she smiled at him it was almost sympathetic.

'You can't go back, you know. Lou's got them all dressed in grey Muji suits selling 5-HT neuro-filters out of fashionable clubs in East Sinjuku. You're history. If you're wise you'll keep it that way.'

'So what do you want from me?' Johnnie asked. In his head he was already beginning to weigh up what he would need against what he could offer. He wanted Ryu for a start - out of Edo and away from his elder brother. Lou would hate that. And then he wanted credits, lab facilities, access to the best computers...

Clare pointed to where the tortured man hung in chains. 'Makai's deal was we swap him with Section 3 in Paris, so they can rip out his thoughts. Kind of a memory for a memory. But I'm going to change that. Or rather,' Lady Clare put her arm round Johnnie's thin shoulders, 'We're going to change that, you and me. Because I'm not yet finished with Pierre Nexus and his precious Section.'

Johnnie nodded. It felt like the sensible thing to do.

'And you know what?' Lady Clare added, reaching into her pocket. 'Makai's not even going to know about the new deal. Not for a while anyway. And if he does...'

She peered down at what looked like a tooth, resting in the palm of her hand. 'We can always negotiate.'

Desert Roads

Alex howled in agony the whole way out to the desert complex. But then there was no where to strap him down on the shuddering metal floor of Clare's newly purchased Toyota Atlas 4-track; and renting a Red Cross hover would attract too much attention, or so Volubilis insisted.

'At least slap on a packet of paraDerm!' Johnnie suggested crossly.

'No way,' Volubilis said, shooting the neoA a glance that would vaporise titanium. He muttered something nasty about drug addicts and not inflicting unnecessary chemicals on Alex's metabolism.

Johnnie didn't buy it and nor did Lady Clare, who had the ancient 4-track on manual over-ride and was far too busy wrestling with its highly erratic power steering to argue. RouteSoft didn't exist for most of the Megrib desert, and she was the only one with a full manual license.

Johnnie'd never learnt to drive, no need. And as for Volubilis, if the trip was longer than was comfortable in a taxi drone he usually caught a plane. Only planes meant computerised central booking and this time round Lady Clare didn't want to leave a trail. There was nothing she could do about spy satellites, except maybe travel in the heat of the day - such as it was in Spring - and trust that the heat of the sand would be enough to blur any infra-red recordings. As chances went, it wasn't good.

But then, however many street cameras, satellite eyes and M-wave spy planes there were, the authorities couldn't watch everyone all the time, or so Lady Clare told Johnnie.

It had taken all her ingenuity to stop Volubilis turning the half-dead body of Alex straight over to the Mufti's police, so they could finish the job. But she'd talked hard and fast, sketching out a possible deal of benefit to the Church Geneticist, and in the end the priest-surgeon had been persuaded to guide her out to San Lorenzo, the Geneticists' desert retreat.

To Johnnie it didn't look that special. A big grey farmhouse with a red-tiled roof, overlooked on one corner by a tall square tower topped by uneven crenellations. The farmhouse was three storeys high, set on the edge of a small oasis. All around the bottom storey of the farmhouse ran a dark shadowed cloister whose thick walls and narrow arches kept out direct sunlight.

The narrow windows of the two floors above had slatted wooden shutters already closed tight against the midday glare.

'Most of it's underground.' Volubilis explained. 'The top bit's been kept as it was when Dr Dutch lived here.'

Lady Clare took one looked at Johnnie and before he had time to ask his question answered it with a sigh. The amphetamines she'd given him had already worn off. He looked a wreck and also badly needed a bath but then, God knows thought Clare, so did she.

'Dr Dutch founded the Geneticists,' she explained patiently. 'Sold his initial research to bioTekz in return for a percentage of the profits. Used the profits to fund research stations at Cambridge, MIT and Cal Tek. That was before he decided it would be simpler to take all the work in house and bought majority shares in the Sorbonne...'

'Right so far?' She asked Volubilis.

He nodded, his dark eyes impassive. Caught Clare's smug look and stared straight back, his eyes narrowed behind his half-tint Raybans.

'I don't like you,' he said flatly. 'I don't like your pet Nip junkie, your psycho tramp or that little black box you talk to each night but only tell half the truth. And I don't believe for a minute that you're not still in bed with the Third Section... But if you can deliver a patent on Invisibility to the Church Geneticist, then I'll follow you to hell if instructed. The Bishop-Auditor gave you Seraphim level clearance and it's not my place to challenge that, for which

count yourself lucky. But all the fucking same, day and night, I'm keeping an eye on all of you... Now let's get on with this farce.'

Volubilis swung open the Toyota's door and stamped his way across gravel and through an arch into the dark interior of the farm house, leaving Clare and Johnnie to bring Alex between them.

Deep underground, in a huge operating theatre tiled floor to head-height with pale pink, light emitting ceramic tiles, while Volubilis watched tight-lipped from the sidelines, Johnnie allowed two male nurses to tie him into a blue scrub suit and fix a Sanyo sub-voc mike to his throat, and matching bead-sized receiver in his right ear.

This was class kit. It made the stuff the neoA usually used look like cheap toys from the state nursery where Johnnie grew up. The nanopore mask came next and last of all came the gloves and a pair of Zeiss, floating screen glasses that let him see readouts for all of Alex's body functions merely by focussing his eyes on a point half an arm's length in front of him.

Everything from heartbeat and haemoglobin/oxygen ratios to endorphin levels in the brain were presented as an series of self-referring tri-D bar charts. Class kit or not, Johnnie wasn't too sure he liked the information overload. Back in Edo the really tricky medical shit was usually performed on a mixture of drugs, adrenaline and instinct. Johnnie's main worry was that when the time came to get rolling, he'd be so busy looking at all the pretty readouts he'd lose his flow.

'I'll do the legs first,' Johnnie said almost to himself, and immediately a bank of lights above his head lit the area even as an overhead camera began to record the operation. Everything he said would be picked up by the throat mike and laid down as a digital soundtrack alongside the visual recording.

Volubilis had vanished but Lady Clare was looking down onto the sterile op room from a darkened, glassed off mezzanine built into one wall of the theatre. She could watch Johnnie, but he couldn't see her. Not that he wanted to. It was bad enough that Clare had insisted on her own link to his throat mike and receiver.

Johnnie examined the naked body in front of him and wondered if Clare had any idea what she was asking for. Maybe she did and just didn't care... But Johnnie cared. He'd been dead himself, he had no wish to put somebody else there.

That said, Alex would die soon if Johnnie didn't begin working a miracle. Gangrene had already set in badly on both legs, rotting the flesh where ever splinters of bone had broken through the skin.

Volubilis had already told Johnnie, firmly, that in his opinion the heat and humidity of the previous night's barbarossa had somehow caused Alex's flesh to corrupt faster than usual. Johnnie knew this was so much crap. That when Volubilis rubbed enzymes into the wounds of the beggar's broken knees, he hadn't expected someone to be asked to undo the damage.

In the Toyota Atlas that morning Lady Clare had downloaded a basic French grammar and vocab program direct into his front brain, via 'trodes attached to a small grey box she'd been carrying in a bag over her shoulder. It was like being coshed inside your head. Until Clare casually suggested downloading the program direct, it hadn't even occurred to Johnnie that such a thing was possible.

His wrist implants were back too, their thin ceramic barrels vanishing like ivory or bone beneath his skin. Volubilis hadn't been too happy about replacing those, but Johnnie had a thing about not operating on himself and when Clare had insisted Volubilis just shrugged and produced a Braun laser scalpel from the pocket of his djbella..

'Let the little shit kill himself, why should I care?'

It wasn't easy making neat incisions while the old Toyota 4-track growled and slid its way over dry desert gravel, but Volubilis managed it, more or less. Johnnie was sure the re-connection hurt more than necessary, but the pain was worth it to be back on line.

It was only after they'd arrived that Lady Clare told Johnnie what was required of him. 'I've got a job for you,' Clare said, eyes fixed firmly on the naked figure of Alex wired into the table. Briefly she outlined to Johnnie what she wanted, and cut him off before he began to protest.

'Do it and you can name your price.' She promised. 'Get it wrong and I'll give you back to the Yaks. Understand me?'

Johnnie nodded.

'Good. You'll find the theatre on floor minus4. You've already got clearance.' With a smile Clare flipped across a precious bottle of high-grade, medical quality MDM-amphetamine.

'Here. You'll be needing this.'

Kafka Flats

He hates New York on sight, and it isn't just that he doesn't belong. Or that the his flop house hotel, the Grande Agora is as full of cockroaches as the small park opposite with its smashed statue of Lincoln is of freebase addicts and child whores each night after dark.

It isn't even that Broadway north of 46th is wall to wall with pushy, grey-suited Jappies too arrogant or afraid to look where they were going. That the entire stinking lower West Side is filthy, bankrupt and runs at the speed of a bad adrenalin high.

The real problem is that his ex-wife Jenny loves the place. Worse than that, his own kid loves it too. Five year old Riki who's already begun to forget he has a real father.

Jenny just ups and goes, without even leaving a note on the kitchen table. It takes him three weeks of questioning her ever-more hostile friends, before he even discovers where she's gone - back home to the States, looking for a job

He learns later that she's flown into JFK with Riki on tickets bought on his Amex chip, booking into the Hyatt, also on his chip. Within two weeks she's met and is in the employ of bio-patent expert Lenard Bohn, a high powered copyright lawyer. The kind who charges more per day than normal people earn in a month, travels only by chaffered Rolls Royce and squares his conscience with a year's membership some kid's charity.

Two months later she's making plans to marry Lenny; retaking her American citizenship and lashing out liberal Lenny's money on an orthodontal operation for Riki. And she won't even take his calls.

She's already moved into Lenny's five-room, tenth floor apartment overlooking the most fashionable bit of the 'newly-reclaimed' upper East Side. Moved in, and taken Riki with her.

Across Central Park, over on the Upper West Side stands the world's largest cathedral, St John the Divine, built to the glory of God by rich white Americans and abandoned by them almost as quickly when the Puerto Ricans moved into the surrounding streets.

'It'll do Riki good,' Jenny tells him when she finally agrees to take one of his calls. 'The boy needs security. At least Lenny can give it him.'

The reproach is there. What is worse is that he knows it's justified. Lenny has money and a big apartment. Lenny is American, a lawyer and Jewish, like Jennifer. He is the odd one out, Jennifer's big mistake.

'Riki's my kid,' he tells her angrily. 'I'm the boy's father.'

Jenny doesn't even bother to reply to that one.

They are on a tri-D vidphone, their wide-waveband words bouncing coldly off a satellite that's set in geosynchronous orbit miles above the mid-Atlantic. It's his call. The silence stretching out between them. He doesn't want to worry about the price, but he does. Transatlantic tri-Ds still cost money, and he doesn't have any. Not any more.

Not unless he hocks his Zeiss eyecam, and there's no way he's ready to do that. Which means there's only one thing left he can do. Go back to doing what he does best. Chasing down trials, sifting evidence, looking for some crime big enough or defence plea bizarre enough to grab audience. What he needs is something kooky enough to be a 'must buy' for CySat. That's where the real money is, pinning down the trinity - method, motive, twist.

Sure you can pick up a finders fee just for identifying an interesting case, but the real money is made sifting medical records, witness statements, arcane precedents - basically in coming up with anything which will deliver an eleventh hour, audience grabbing twist. Which side gets it isn't an issue, not for the chasers. CySat have audience analysts to decide that sort of thing.

What is he to do? If he wants to raise enough credit to fly to New York then there's only one thing he can do. Swallow his pride, his scruples, his tiredness, his disgust at the eye camera which dominates one side of his face, and go back to what he does best. Chasing down the unusual, chasing trials.

And the lame shall walk

Both knee were smashed beyond repair, fragments of splintered patella driven into their cartilage. The synovial liquid that oiled the joint had long since ruptured, and Alex's ligaments were ripped beyond repair.

'Easier to renew each joint.' Johnnie announced casually, using a scalpel to slice free the end of a muscle that ran from hip to shattered knee. The beam cauterised as it cut, leaving surprisingly little mess.

'If you really want to change Alex' appearance, now's your chance to add or subtract height,' Johnnie said flatly, staring up at the darkened glass of the mezzanine window.

'What are my options?' Clare asked.

Johnnie held up his hand, thumb and first finger two inches or so apart. 'This much either way. Provided the Geneticists have got the right bones in stock, of course. Any more and you'll traumatise his muscles.'

'Make him taller,' Clare said firmly, 'as much as you can manage.'

Johnnie sucked at his front teeth, and spoke into his throat mike, ordering the parts.

Deep in the sterile, temperature-controlled basement of San Lorenzo, a medical orderly at a computer screen pulled up a specification list of spare femurs, tibias and fibias and quickly matched a left and right of each.

The bones were already removed from their cryo-preservative and had undergone rapid electromagnetic warming by the time an orderly arrived to transport them up to the theatre.

Wheeling in what looked like a stainless-steel food trolley but was actually a container designed to keep antiseptic saline solutions at exactly blood heat, the orderly parked the trolley next to Johnnie and stepped back.

'And some bloody synovials.' Johnnie demanded, waiting impatiently while two ceramic and polymer knee joints were quickly found to match the new leg bones.

Computer-controlled hoists attached to the table had already turned Alex Gibson face down, so his naked back, buttocks and legs were exposed the glare of the operating lights. Only his right leg ruined the neatness of the layout, bent crooked where Rosary had snapped it last summer. And at Johnnie's suggestion, a nurse quickly Velcroed that ankle to the table, to stop it flopping over the edge.

When he was finally satisfied, Johnnie jacked up the MDMA3 dose on his wrist implants, took a deep breath and began to cut, his fingers moving so fast that by the time Clare had worked out what he was doing it was done and he'd moved up to another area. She knew he could see both the actual operation as he performed it and a VR template of what should happen relayed from his Zeiss floating focus glasses, but it was still impressive.

And a little scary to someone who knew nothing about the frontiers of medicine. In one clean sweep, Johnnie sliced a cut up the back of Gibson's right leg from his knee to buttock and then ran the cut round under the buttock's curve, out towards the hip.

Putting both hands firmly into the open cut, he ripped, peeling the whole dermal layer of Gibson's upper leg and buttock away from its underlying muscle.

The flayed skin was sewed swiftly to the edge of a cloth covering the operating table, using a hand-held Singer portable, and kept moist with a automatic spray.

Now came the difficult bit. Cutting swiftly, Johnnie sliced into the side of Alex Gibson's flayed leg, taking care to do as little damage as possible to both the muscle that kept Alex' leg pulled in towards the centre of his body, and the vastus lateralis which bent and stabilised the knee. The ligaments would need to be rejoined once the new thigh bone was in place, and the less damage now the better.

When he'd cut down to the edge of the old femur, Johnnie stepped back to make way for two of his nurses.

'Binning the original,' he said for the record, even though every move he made was being recorded, so that it could be added to the Geneticist's VR template and increase the amount of actual hands-on experience logged in their mediSoft's memory bank. Logging this had been one of their conditions for letting Johnnie loose in the operating theater.

With the old bone gone, his upper leg looked as flabby and lifeless as a slab of boiled, synthetic meat. The next bit was at Clare's request. As a surgeon Volubilis had a good idea what the modification was for and he didn't approve. Johnnie however couldn't care less.

'Inserting medullary screw into femur,' Johnnie said, happily, holding the new thigh bone in one hand, and a small electric drill in his other. Quickly he drilled into the femur until the motor's sudden drop in pitch warned him that he'd reached bone marrow.

An electric screwdriver drove a hollow ceramic screw into the waiting hole, leaving its stub protruding from the bone's surface. There was now an open channel from the screw's sterile, self-sealing top down into the marrow.

'Putting the new femur in place.'

Johnnie fitted the head of the new thigh bone into the socket of Alex Gibson's hip and swiftly reattached the complex web of cartilage that kept the hip joint tight.

'Cartilage okay,' Johnnie reported, liberally using molecular glue to seal the severed edges. He sprayed the final result with a protein solution to strengthen the natural collagen and elastin matrix of the damaged cartilage.

Within two days the ligaments would have bound themselves tightly in place. The same went for the muscles that Johnnie reattached as he moved down the thigh bone towards the knee, allowing always some extra slack for the leg's overall increase in length.

Unconscious, badly damaged, Alex' body still knew something was happening. A floating focus read-out on the edge of Johnnie's vision kept him informed of a rising level of trauma. All he could do, was rely on the mediSoft to keep the alphas, betas, heartbeat, bloodcount and respiration as stable as possible.

'Upper leg finished, readout reports damage levels acceptable,' he stated with more confidence than he felt. 'Beginning on the knee.'

Drip lines into Alex Gibson's wrists slowly released a mixture of plasma, paravene and a biochem specifically designed to fool the body's defence mechanism. Without this, Alex' body would instinctively start rejecting his new transplants and implants.

Alex Gibson's basic DNA profile would also be slightly changed, but that was inevitable. There'd been a lot of fuss at the start of biotek about whether something simple like a blood transfusion could alter a DNA profile. But it wasn't long before most people understood that the very nature of blood production meant transfused blood lacked almost all of its red-cell DNA anyway, and what there was fragmented once it was in the new body.

No DNA change would, or could ever happen without a significant transfer of bone marrow, which was where the essential stem cells originated.

Transplanted organs were different, however. The biochems needed to force the body not to reject the new organs also allowed the DNA blood profile to change. And when major bones were transplanted, with their ability to create new blood cells in the medulary cavity, then the picture was complicated still further. But not so much that a good police lab couldn't identify what was original and what was not.

'Replacing the knee.'

The new synthetic joint looked exactly like a dead octopus, a gristly yellow sac of synovial fluid that fitted in behind the thigh bone, bound in place by a web of ligaments that Johnnie swiftly glued into place using molecular epoxy.

'Making good.' Johnnie told his throat mike, as he busily wrapped fatty tissue around the upper half of the knee joint and then folded the muscles along Gibson's outer leg back into place, juggling those at the back of the leg so that the ceramic screw could show through.

'Sew it up,' said Johnnie and stepped back from the table to let a young Arab nurse take his place. The boy ran a long line of molecular glue up the sides of the scalpel cut, and held the muscle edges neatly together as he swiftly fired three or four soluble staples into place. That done, he slapped on a wafer thin, nearly invisible strip of sub-dermal sealant from a sterile roll and stood back.

Then he picked free the stitches holding Gibson's skin to the edge of the cloth and, having first sprayed the inner surface with a sterile antiseptic solution, skilfully smoothed the skin back into place, remove air bubbles with a single sweep of his hand.

Using molecular epoxy, he joined together the long loose edge and the dermal edge that had remained fixed, and sprayed the now-almost-invisible incision with instant skin.

From a distance of more than eighteen inches or so the join was invisible; closer to it looked like the seam of a stocking running up from the back of Gibson's knee. Someone was going to have to get in pretty close to see the scar, although the neat melanin cross the nurse was busy tattooing to mark the position of the ceramic screw beneath might take some explaining.

'Well, so far so good,' Johnnie said with a grin. 'Looks like you're going to owe me after all.' His eyes flicked up towards the blank black glass of the mezzanine deck. 'Maybe we'd better talking about a price.'

Which wasn't what lady Clare wanted to hear.

Unseen by Johnnie, she spun on her heels and made for the mezzanine door. An armed guard swung it open for her before she'd even reached for the handle, his eyes raking hungrily down her body. It was pretty clear that San Lorenzo hadn't seen a woman for some time.

'Take me to the labs.' Clare ordered.

He turned to look at her again, his eyes hidden behind combat-issue neophrene Raybans.

'The laboratories are off limits to civilians,' he announced sternly, then ruined the effect by letting his gaze slide down to the small flash of skin showing at her shirt collar.

'Civilian!' Clare slapped the young recruit hard, rocking him back on his feet. Before he had time to react, she pulled a red leather pass from her trouser pocket and snapped it open, pushing the holographic image close to his shocked face.

'Colonel,' she barked. 'Third Atlas Mechanised Hussars. Take me to those labs. Now!'

The shaken recruit did as he was told, and Clare followed behind. When she caught her reflection in the smoked glass of an internal window, Clare was surprised to find that she was smiling.

Hard technology could take care of the basic mechanical changes Alex Gibson required, but there was a whole subset of viral enhancements that only biotek could supply. What Johnnie was now doing was just like the work of a proficient jobbing builder, to rewire Alex she needed to draw on the neoA's skills as a specialist drug designer.

From habit Clare popped a couple of Accutrim from a bubblepac in her pocket and swallowed them without water. It was time to check on what facilities would be available for Tetsuo Murakami, or what ever it was the little Jap punk was calling himself now.

Johnnie extended Alex Gibson's lower leg by the simple expedient of breaking it, inserting an extra inch of bone between the severed ends and pinning the bone back together again. Except it was nothing like that simple.

Using a small electric saw, Johnnie sliced through the thick weight-bearing shin bone a hand's breadth below the knee, the saw's built-in vacuum pump swallowing splinters of bone and gristle as it went.

Then, six inches below the level of the first cut, Johnnie severed the fibula, a thin bone that ran parallel to Alex' shin bone; so that the two breaks were spaced wide enough apart to take the strain.

Using a hollow ceramic tube to extend the bones was relatively easy. Made from a blend of silica, aluminium fibre and borosilicate glass, the tubes were fired at a high enough temperature to allow coarse pores to develop. Once the extensions were in place, osteocyte cells from the original bone would burrow into these pores, binding the hollow tube to the bone.

The problem came in trying to persuade the muscles of the lower leg not to spasm at the unexpected extra strain, and so pull the bone out of line before the cells had time to bond into place.

But if it worked - and it did, more often than not - then the bond would end up stronger than the original bone. The tube for the thicker bone was hollow, with a large central cavity already packed with DNA-compatible bone marrow, and smaller haversian canals filled with biochems to encourage blood vessels and nerves to grow back and rejoin. The smaller tube lacked the cavity but had haversian canals.

It didn't occur to Johnnie to wonder where the bone marrow came from, but Lady Clare knew - from the same place as Alex Gibson's new face. From the late, unlamented, freshly murdered Lord Winterbrooke. Who somehow never did receive the invitation Nexus sent him, although Makai had happily received it on his behalf.

When the extensions were safely pinned and each muscle had been hand-stretched after being injected with relaxant, Johnnie stood back to let a nurse take over. He'd done all he was doing for the moment. The left leg would have to wait until tomorrow.

Tossing down his Zeiss floating focus glasses, Johnnie remembered just in time to tell the computer he was finished for the day, then pulled the wireless bead from his ear and ripped the sub-vocal mike from his neck. As always it left a round circle of irritated skin the size of a small coin to one side of his Adam's apple.

Just as he was about to leave the theatre for the welcome respite of a new fix, a wank and a long, hot shower, something made Johnnie glance back at the bank of Matsui monitors busy logging Alex Gibson's brain patterns.

The alpha waves weren't dangerously high, but the peaks were, well... more peaky than he'd have expected, and the level of brain activity that unusual for such a heavily sedated subject.

Idly, Johnnie wondered what the poor bastard was thinking.

Roses round the door

The girl has brown eyes and long dark hair pinned back with red plastic grips on both sides of her head. She wears Reebok smarts, old Levis cut off above her knee and a green clone-cotton sweatshirt emblazoned with the name of a French university she's never been too.

Alex loves her on sight. Not fancies her or wants to fuck her - although he eventually does both - but loves her with a fierceness that feels foreign, even to him.

She's so obviously out of place in that drab, heads-down get-me-home London crowd, she might as well be wearing a holobadge saying 'exotic American tourist - please fleece'. She isn't a tourist though, she's on an exchange visit to LSE and she's a student, which is worse as far as Alex is concerned.

There's a recession on, there's been one on for as long as Alex can remember. Britain is taking another government-inspired dive down the tube, and Scotland is again in the middle of voting on whether to go independent. The elderly Princess Regent is talking about retiring from public life, also again.

And Alex is working his balls off, precedent shuffling, combing old-fashioned, paper-based legal digests in Westminster Library, looking to put together a prior-precedent twist for a case involving a father-of-four police sergeant who's run amok with a ceramic machete in Soho.

The police, foreigners and particularly students come a long way down his list of desirables. So it's just as well that Alex thinks she's just another pretty but dumb American kid needing directions. He moves out of flowing crowd and takes her elbow. Not knowing that his life will change, that she will eventually persuade him to drop trail surfing altogether.

'Can I help?' he asks.

Later, much later, she takes Riki with her and leaves for New York so he goes back to trail chasing. Like a professional he pulls in a few favors, has a few lucky breaks. There's a crime case in Paris that looks interesting. One tramp accused of ripping out the throat of another: and the murderer's only defence is that it wasn't him, it was someone invisible. Alex is pretty sure CySat would put out a decent contract for that one.

Later still, Alex needs to sleep but doesn't dare. He also wants to take a shower and shave, but is too tired to do either.

Coming to New York is the worst decision of his life. Jenny takes one look at the stinking, unshaven wreck who was once her husband, and promptly calls up Lenny's attorney. Within 24 hours Alex receives the attorney's ultimatum. No access at all to Riki until he cleans up his act.

Alex takes a swig at a bottle of Japanese bourbon and chokes. Nothing wrong with the rye, he just isn't the type to swig Wild Bird straight from its flask.

'Shit.'

Springs squeak rustily as Alex levers his bulk up off the bed to fetch a chipped glass tooth mug from a small bathroom where cockroaches sit in the bowl of a broken bidet. He catches sight of his reflection and for a moment thinks he's wearing dark glasses, but it's just the rings round his eye and his Zeisscam. The bourbon tastes no better or worse out of a tooth mug, but somehow he feels less of a slob.

Jenny isn't coming home, he knows that already but still wants to know why... Unfortunately there's no one there to answer his question, so he stares instead at the brown-stained, peeling wallpaper of his hotel room wall, wondering when the place was last decorated. Not in his lifetime.

Didn't he do what she wanted? Stop chasing trails, stay at home and teach journalistic ethics over the Web? He doesn't know when it all went wrong, when he actually lost her; and Jenny doesn't care enough these days to tell him.

'It's gone,' she says, over her expensive, state-of-the-art tri-D vidphone. And looks at him with a sad smile that's meant to say, I did my best, but really says leave me alone, and stay away from my son.

Alex shakes his head angrily. The gulp he takes of Wild Bird scalds his throat, not that he notices. He knows they were happy, knows it... Images of tanned bare arms, her discarded Gap teeshirt on the floor, long naked legs twisting together. And the low buzz of Honda and Suzuki hovers on a distant motorway, as their hotel sound system churns out some golden oldie concert in the background.

Sentimental crap and he knows it, but Riki is born nine months later, and that brings another, more grown-up kind of happiness.

But then the cracks appear.

Alex finishes one tumbler of rye and reaches for another. The cockroaches are getting bolder now that darkness has fallen, or maybe it's that Alex doesn't seem to move except to pour his drink.

In the room next door a woman is crying, not softly to herself but in great racking sobs that vibrate through the cardboard thin walls. With a shudder of disgust, Alex picks up the bottle of Wild Bird and brings it down hard on the back of a cockroach the size of a discarded cigar but, crushing its carapace.

Next door the woman stops crying briefly, as the sound of the crashing bottle echoes along the corridor, but then starts up again.

Televising Armageddon

The air-conditioned, below-ground complex at San Lorenzo worked a 24 hour day, in three 8-hour shifts. In labs situated deep under ground, chromosomal micro-dissection machines worked round the clock to snip out targeted areas of cloned human chromosome for sequencing.

It was long known that humans operate the cellular equivalent of a spell-checking function which kicks in a repair process whenever DNA base pairs slip out of alignment during replication. And Geneticist research had not only produced a gene spellchecker that could be rewritten to order, but also put together and copyrighted the definitive list of correlations between individual base sequences and inherited illness. It had taken them from fringe religion to major multinational overnight.

Most of the research now carried out by the Church Geneticist was automated, with Dell semi-AIs busy juggling the code for each of over 3 billion base pairs. It didn't help that well over 80% of any gene string appeared to hold no workable codes at all, just junk DNA. Not that genome data was necessarily corrupted. But most of it was heavily overwritten from earlier species and had no discernible relevance to known human characteristics.

An air-conditioned, humidity-controlled library on Floor minus3, the level above the labs, contained the world's largest collection of books relating to miraculous appearances by the Messiah. A Marian subset on a mezzanine at minus 2a held volumes pertaining to visions of the Blessed Virgin.

It went almost without saying that reported sightings of the Virgin vastly outnumbered those of the Messiah. But then, irrespective of whether the Mother of God appeared 3000 meters up on an Andian plateau, beside a village well in southern France or in the deserted loft of a barn in Kansas, most sightings were by pubescent girls with a mother fixation.

Information from all the books was already logged in a databank, but as most of the volumes were rare antiques given by rich donors around the world, they performed a second function as part of the Geneticists' financial power base.

Volubilis smiled and padded across to his shower cubicle, catching sight of himself naked in the mirror. He was as slim as he'd been in his teens, his skin still soft like velvet and remarkably unscarred for one who lived so dangerously. He was already a priest-surgeon. Not bad for someone still in his late twenties.

But his prospects had just got better. The Bishop-Auditor had finally agreed the small print on the deal Volubilis had suggested on behalf of Lady Clare. Alex Gibson was dead - that was now the official story. And Lady Clare and her pet junkie were to be given whatever facilities they required - theater or laboratory - to make over Alex Gibson in any form whatsoever that Lady Clare chose.

In return, Lady Clare would deliver to the Church the ultimate patent, invisibility, which the Bishop-Auditor was already referring to as 'human stealth mode'. That it would be delivered was not open to question, according to lady Clare. It was only the when and how that were still open to negotiation.

The wall screen in the shower was still giving its simplified This-is-the-Geneticists speech for visitors. Volubilis knew it by heart, he'd even written some of it, but the breezy optimism and sly skating over of awkward truths still amused him.

Geneticist investigators combed the world - so it told him - delving into new sightings with Inquisitorial ruthlessness and tracking down holy relics not already in the San Lorenzo collection.

Some of the funding came from international copyrights for revised genome sequences, particularly those related to Alzheimer's, Huntingdon's and cancer. But many came direct from the public through donations.

True enough, Volubilis thought. But he also knew what the screen wasn't saying. That most of the credit came not from rich industrial or political donors of the kind likely to be offered a stay at San Lorenzo, but from Salvation Numbers, a rolling electronic lottery run simultaneously in the bottom of the 'screen' on all three of the Geneticists' CySat channels.

Number of the Beast alone required fifteen hundred open lines to handle donations from the American West. And the Moscow lottery regularly took a seventh of the city's weekly GNP.

It was serious credit. And the Geneticists habit of tithing a tenth of the takings direct to the government of the country where the credit was taken had smoothed over more problems than anyone could count.

Even more useful was that fact that while the metaNationals had at least to go through the motions of paying tax, even if profits really went straight into Barhaman credit-havens and only losses got declared, the Geneticists had tax-free status in most Western states.

And those rigorously secular states on the Pacific Rim who didn't acknowledge religion as a reason for tax exemption were usually happy enough to register the Church as a bonefide medical charity.

To the best of Volubilis knowledge, the only time the Auditor-General had been in real trouble was a couple of years ago when he tried - and failed - to buy outright the huge Mormon genealogical database in Salt Lake City.

Turned down by the Elders, he'd hired a jockey out of New York to crack open Salt Lake City and managed to download virtually the entire base, before the boy was caught.

It took a huge and very fast exchange of credit to dig the Geneticists out of that one. But even that hadn't ended badly. Once the money was paid, the Auditor-General decided he now had a moral right to the Salt Lake database and hired himself another jockey to finish the job. Discreetly this time.

Showed, dressed and ready for his day, Volubilis looked up at the towering bronze statue of Dr Abdullah Dutch on his way through the deserted foyer. The first Auditor-General had either been a genius or a dangerous lunatic, maybe both. Whatever, he'd found the credits to fund long term research when everyone else was busy chasing short term profit. No wonder he'd cornered the market in top scientists.

Volubilis had no trouble including himself in that category.

The nurses were already with Johnnie in the theatre, woken automatically when he'd keyed in his intention to operate. Unlike Volubilis who'd come by to watch, they hadn't had time for a shower.

Johnnie completed Gibson's other leg in under two hours, at six in the morning, while Lady Clare was still safely asleep in her bed, in an air-conditioned guest room on Floor minus2.

Songs for Drella

Passion kills her gin in one shot and gives a baroque shrug, her long red wig spilling out from the Warhol-print scarf that's meant to keep it out off her pale, freckled face. Alex doesn't remember this at all, but he's not complaining, it sure as hell beats the roach hotel.

Dark green eyes stare intently at Alex.

'Opening your legs. That's a hell of lot easier on a poor girl than risking her heart. Don't you agree?'

Alex says nothing. He's too busy wondering why and how France's Section Three have got to his tramp. He's worrying about what CySat will do now the murderer has not just denied ever mentioning invisibility, but also committed suicide.

Come to that, what will Section Three do to him now that the tramp is dead and Alex is still on the loose with the dead man's original plea of innocence locked safely in his eyecam. Not to mention, that somewhat vivid description of the real murder's invisibility.

Section Three will know about it of course. Alex knew that when he bribed the guard into letting him get in to see the prisoner. But back then, before the defendant changed his plea it didn't seem to matter.

Now it does.

There's dust floating in the late afternoon sunlight; an aimless swell of golden motes dancing in rays that slot down from a huge skylight overhead. The walls are stripped brick, broken up with angles of gleaming sand-blasted steel girder.

A bitter sweet smile flicks across Passion's thin face, without really reaching her eyes.

'Look at me', she demands. 'Famous, rich and as miserable as cold sin.' She shrugs once more. 'Tough titty, no? At least it's better than being unknown, poor and miserable, like you.'

There's no answer to that.

'You want to know what real misery looks like?' Passion asks, and flings a silver-ringed hand towards a mound of canvases stacked up against a far wall.

'Pick your way through the trash and take a look at those.

Alex glances around him, at the squalor of her priceless Tribeca apartment, and suddenly remembers why he still doesn't like foreigners, artists or students. The huge studio has the wasted feeling of a squat after a drunken, dusted-out five-day party.

'What happened?' He asked.

'Happened?' Passion pouts childishly. 'Nothing ever happens. Believe me this is tidy...'

Her own paintings are stacked in a huge pile. Two hundred, three hundred, maybe more all jumbled together. He can't even begin to imagine how much they're worth on the open market. Millions. Billions. Retro-expressionism is big business.

Alex begins to look through them, quickly at first but then more slowly.

She has ability and not just as America's most senior CySat executive. More than ability, she has genius. Alex begins to see why Passion is famous. Why she has her own news show. It isn't who she fucks or how much enhancer she blows up her nose. It isn't even that she throws parties which feature on CySat. It's because she has talent, a manic black talent in terrify amounts.

In a few crude brush strokes, she has put onto canvas something he can almost feel - even though he doesn't remotely understand what any of it is meant to signify.

What he does understand, only too well, is the sheer horror contained in the sequence of paintings. Howling face after howling face stares out at him. Each one ever more twisted in abject terror. Each face easily, instantly recognisable as her own.

He's there to see if Passion will buy the contents of his eyecam anyway, even without a trial to go with it, but he's not doing very well.

'Have a gin,' Passion suggested. 'It's what I always do.'

He takes the blue recycled Mexican glass without comment and downs the Bombay Sapphire in one, then downs the next glass and the one after that. She's made them three each; his with tonic, limeslice and ice, her own neat and double strength.

They say nothing, but sit in silence and watch the Boston Symphony' perform Songs for Drella. Sad songs about the weird life and death of everybody's art-hero, Andy Warhol.

It's nearly morning before either Alex or Passion think of bed, and then it occurs to both of them at once.

'Through here,' she says, weaving only slightly as she makes her way across the huge studio towards a orange and red Amerindian wall hanging. Sweeping the cloth to one side, she yanks open an old fashioned wooden door.

'Here we go again,' she says tiredly.

Alex can't tell if she's joking.

Skull beneath the skin

Alex Gibson's throat was cut in one easy slash of a lipid-coated scalpel. Its blade slicing cleanly through the skin beneath his jaw, neatly missing a web of superficial muscles in his neck.

If Alex was the kind of man to have a neat beard, that's where its line would have been.

Johnnie stopped his cut just before it reached where the lingual vein branched off from the jugular, and curved the cut swiftly round the outside of a muscle designed to close the jaw.

With another two quick, neat slices of the scalpel Johnnie cut up behind each ear, following exactly the crease where the back of the outer ear met the scalp.

The advantage of using a PC-lipid coating was that it briefly fooled the body into thinking the scalpel's action was natural, which helped prevent the blood cells from clotting.

A brief slash of scalpel split open Alex' chin, from his Adam's apple up to just below his bottom lip. From there on in things got difficult. But Johnnie could handle it. Sure he was showing off for Lady Clare up in the mezzanine, but it was difficult not to.

Johnnie grinned, not minding the salt smell of blood or the faint but distinct scent of mint seeping from the air-conditioning. Trace scents were known to keep the mind alert, and the theater's computer had been programmed years before to release random bursts of peppermint into the air recycling system.

Working smoothly, Johnnie slid what looked like the handle of a plastic spoon under the skin of Alex Gibson's jaw and began to loosen the dermal layer. The skin made a soft, sucking noise as the surgical spatula freed it from the muscle beneath.

Because the operation was secret, no actual copies of the mediSoft recording would be released in which Alex was recognisable, and any voice-over visuals that were issued would be code protected, with highly limited access.

Lady Clare wasn't too happy about there being any access. But there were some battles that even she couldn't win, not if she wanted total access to the labs as well.

'Lower jaw finished,' Johnnie said calmly, 'Switching over to the lower right cheek.'

No one had ever managed a successful face transplant, and should Johnnie succeed, his every action would be computer analysed and refined to produce a master VR template to ease the way of those who came after him.

Tough shit, if you were the first.

Johnnie smiled wryly, and began to hum something suitably punky under his breath. It took great skill not to wreck the underlying network of facial nerves, but eventually Alex' skin was teased away until the lower part of his face flapped free - as loose, slack and twisted as damp leather.

Mind you that was just the start.

Damage any of the facial nerves and you'd automatically cause problems. A minor slip might lose Alex his ability to smile or frown; major damage could mean he lost the ability to turn his head at all.

Disconnecting Alex' bottom lip from the muscles that gave him movement, Johnnie sliced away the muscles which worked the sides of Gibson's mouth. Then began separating the underlying muscles of the upper lip, trying all the while not to damage two tendons that ran in parallel from mouth to cheekbone. Alex would need the smaller, upper tendon - it was used to pull back the mouth into a sneer.

'Ditching the jaw skin,' announced Johnnie crossly. He'd hoped to perform the actual transplant in a single, camera-grabbing move that allowed him to peel back the whole face, but that wasn't going to be possible.

Apart from anything else, he was two hours into the job and he hadn't reached Alex' procerus, the muscle which furrowed his brow and wrinkled the top of his nose. And unless

the muscles used to express emotion were protected, then Alex Gibson's new face would be worse than useless. After that, Johnnie still had new eyes to insert, and he couldn't start on those until he'd repaired the muscles damaged when Gibson's right eye was torn out.

'We're going to skip the next rest break,' Johnnie told the nurse who'd moved alongside him, holding a sterile bowl ready to catch the waste skin he'd just stripped from Alex' chin and jaw. 'I'll need enhancer. You got any?'

The nurse nodded impassively and reached deep into his own scrub-suit pocket to find a small glass tube which he offered to Johnnie.

'Just do it, man.'

Obediently the young Arab peeled back the neoA's nanopore face mask and held the tube under Johnnie's nose.

'Ready Sir?'

Johnnie nodded. And the nurse neatly snapped the tube in two, letting liquid cholene enhancer evaporate into gas just in time for Johnnie to inhale the lot.

The young jap drug designer rocked on his feet slightly, and when his eyes opened again his pupils were as tiny as small black beads. But the world around him had fallen into focus, and there was now a sharp, slightly luminous edge even to ordinary objects like the operating table.

Up in the walled-off mezzanine, Clare wondered what the auditors would make of Johnnie's drug intake when they eventually got round to scanning the tape, and decided it didn't matter. Things were already so odd that a supposedly teetotal organisation suddenly turned its facilities over to Johnnie wouldn't make much difference.

'You all right?' She asked, and saw Johnnie's eyes flick up to the silvered window of her gallery. He'd forgotten about her.

And just as quickly he forgot about her again, turning his attention back to the sticky, semi-flayed face on the bed.

The eyelids were going to be his worst problem. One was already wrecked anyway. The other was just difficult. Problem was, eye lids were soft, flexible covers lined with rows of tarsal glands and connected to the tear ducts. Nearly impossible to replace convincingly and too thin and fragile to let even a decent surgeon peel away a top layer with anything like success.

He was going to have to cheat.

Having worked the skin at the sides of Alex Gibson's face free from the underlying muscle, Johnnie sliced from the top of Alex' left ear straight across to the same point on the other side of his head. Johnnie took care to cut neatly round each eye, slicing through the paper-thin skin that lined each eye socket without touching the one actual eyelid which remained. The other would have to be plastic, something simple and animatronic.

The next strip of waste skin he discarded into a sterile bowl was once Alex' upper lip, cheeks and nose, now it looked like a tattered pink flannel. Tissue was usually saved automatically for research purposes but not this time. Lady Clare had been insistent that every scrap taken from Alex be destroyed immediately in the San Lorenzo incinerator.

'Eye colour?' Johnnie asked, seemingly of no one in particular.

'What are they now?' Clare said.

Johnnie lifted the lid on the eye remaining to take a look. But the mediSoft computer beat him to it.

'Pale blue.'

'Make them brown,' ordered Clare.

'Perfect vision,' Johnnie added, 'As young as can be. But make them fully grown,' he insisted as an after thought. 'No more than seventeen.'

Once again, deep in the sterile, temperature-controlled basement of the San Lorenzo complex, a medical orderly pulled up a specification list of spare cornea, retina and whole optics onto a computer screen and quickly matched a brown left to a brown right, and checked that the vision was true 20/20.

'Not bad,' said Johnnie holding one wet eye in the middle of his gloved hand. It seemed perfect, not that he was relying on his own eyesight to make the judgement. The mediSoft had already scanned the organ to check it was undamaged.

Advanced eye surgery was common enough, but whole eye transplants with added optic splice were still rare enough to be an event. And Johnnie was going to add a third lens, part infrared/part polarizing, in front of the iris and just behind the cornea.

Lady Clare had agreed that once Alex Gibson's face was flayed beyond recognition, she'd have no objection to vids of this part of the operation being circulated. At least not within Geneticist circles.

For the eyes, Johnnie chose to use a pair of virally-mutated optic nerves; passing each one, left and right, through the eye sockets of Alex Gibson's skull, splicing each to the relevant optic node on the under side of his Alex' brain, right in the middle of a ready-made arterial bypass called the Willis Circle.

Not for nothing did the brain weigh only one fiftieth of the body's weight but receive one fifth of its blood.

With the complex manipulations now done, Johnnie handed the next part of the operation over to the nurses. Using lipid-coated spatulas, they would continue to skin Alex Gibson's head.

A relatively easy task.

'Cut round the ears and leave them in place. Then take it down to here.' Johnnie indicated an area along the back of his own head, fractionally below the hair line. 'Follow the edge of the follicle growth, so the whole scalp comes away like a wig. Then treat the tissue for shock and open the top of the skull. Wake me when it's done.'

'Oh, and sterilise this,' he flattened a clay-like lump between his fingers, until a web of gold wire and tiny coloured beads showed through. 'All we have to do is put it in place. Apparently it attaches itself.'

He nodded politely at the mirrored window of the mezzanine, pulled the wireless bead from his ear and went to take another shower.

Shaker Nights

Over Passion's stark Shaker-designed oak bed there's a very large, very ugly Warhol, and another smaller Warhol next to the door they've just come through.

'Bribes from producers who know my weakness for the poor little sod,' says Passion dismissively. Alex knows he's meant to be impressed - and he is.

One entire wall is constructed completely of crystal polycarbon, a huge window that stretches from floor to ceiling and looks out over the sharp, twinkling lights of down-town Manhattan.

'I had to fuck some slimy little real-estate agent to get this view,' she says. 'But it's worth it. Don't you agree?'

Later, when it's too late to matter, Alex asks himself why she wants him. Loneliness maybe, or the need for company. Boredom even. He doesn't think it's because she wants his story of the tramp, the confession and the invisible murderer.

And if it is a business transaction then he isn't too sure who's doing the selling or who the buying.

Right now he couldn't care less.

She has the sort of body that most people buy from plastic surgeons, but her neck lacks the fine tell-tale trace of scars and so far her body seems the real thing.

He runs his fingers gently across her face, and down the freckled line of her throat. Watching as her head arches back and her green eyes close as his fingers keep going, undoing mother-of-peals buttons at the front of her antique silk blouse.

She is naked beneath the silk, her long dark nipples pierced with platinum rings. The nipples are already taut as his hand caresses small, beautifully upturned breasts.

How old is she? He doesn't know and doesn't care. She looks somewhere around thirty and moves with the impatient hunger of a teenager. But he knows she's had her own show on CySat for as long as he can remember, and that goes back thirty years at least.

She shifts restlessly, and Alex returns his attention to her small breast; pushing his tongue ever harder into the middle of the ring, feeling the pierced nipple swell and swell as she holds his head, her whole body shaking.

With a smile, Alex slides his tongue down the smooth, absolutely flat muscles of her stomach, over a small tri-D tattoo of a bluebird in flight; until kneeling on the stripped pine floor in front of her, his mouth reaches the first carved jet button at the front of her long Japanese skirt.

He can smell her now. A thick unforgettable musk. The second button comes undone and then a third, letting her skirt slide down her slim hips, revealing a triangle of thick red hair and two gold labia rings.

Time vanishes.

When he looks again there's a young Japanese boy with long bleached-blond dreadlocks and a red leather jacket leaning casually against the door post.

'Enough,' the boy says firmly, though the voice is kind, understanding even.

Alex scrambles off the bed and grabs his jeans. He risks a quick glance at Passion to find out if she knows what's going on, but she's silent. Green eyes glazed. Unmoving.

'They told me you were dead,' the boy says. 'Killed in a fire and all that precious information in your head gone with you.' The boy rests his head to one side, and smiles. 'It seems Lady Clare has been lying.'

If the boy is upset about this, it doesn't show. 'I was going to swop you,' he tells Alex calmly. 'A memory for a memory, but it seems Lady Clare has other ideas. Revenge, I suppose.'

The boy's green eyes meet the eyes of Alex and hold his gaze. 'I imagine,' the boy says, 'that Lady Clare believes her plan is now too far advanced for me to object. All the same...'

Alex waits, but the boy seems to have forgotten him. On the bed Passion is spread eagled, still naked - and Alex is having trouble concentrating all his attention on the green-eyed boy.

'You're through with all this,' the boy tells Alex finally indicating the naked woman, Passion's bedroom, her window and beyond it the whole cluttered Manhattan sky line.

'It's all over. Memories. You can't change it. Your wife got remarried months ago. These days your kid doesn't even remember you.'

Makai walks across to the oak bed where Passion is frozen, apparently asleep. Her face looks older in the cruel refractions of daylight.

'The last of your old memories,' Makai tells Alex. 'Not that you'll need them. You're someone else now. With a new face and a new part to your brain. A little amendment of lady Clare's, that I can use as a door way to visit you. And it was all her own idea.'

The boy looks impressed, but Alex can't shake off the thought that impressed or not, Makai doesn't sound pleased.

Dosi Pares

Maxim knew who the Paris Ripper was - had known since the night before her fourteenth birthday, when she'd watched her grandfather rip apart a tramp for sport. The agony of keeping her secret was eating the girl up inside. But there was nothing she could do with the dreadful knowledge. Nothing at all.

And that was what frightened her.

Obviously she couldn't let Grandpa know she knew. And Philippe would have done something stupid, like absolutely insist she either tell Grandpa what she knew or maybe go to the police. That was, if he didn't already know himself.

She hadn't even told Razz. In fact she hadn't had much to do with Razz, not since she'd wired into the house camera in Mr Rosary's kitchen and seen Razz naked with that thin black guy wearing the dreadlocks. Maxine didn't need shit like that.

The marble staircase of the Hotel Sabatini was wide enough to let ten men walk down stairs together, but all the same Maxine stepped politely to one side to let the small Chinese man go by. But instead of appreciating her gesture, Lee Uu paused, his clear brown eyes noticing her discomfort.

Close up, Maxine could count the pale liverspots splashed like brown spray across his forehead. If she didn't know better, she'd have sworn he was wearing face powder.

'Had breakfast already?'

Maxine nodded politely, wishing the old man would leave her alone. She hadn't had breakfast at all. The sound of male voices had reached her through the shut door of the small dining-room, warning her that others were already in place and she was too late to eat in peace. So she'd turned round to go straight back upstairs, telling herself that she wasn't hungry anyway. These days it was more than she could manage to eat anything in public.

'Thirteen's a difficult age, my dear. Don't worry,' his hand briefly touched her arm, so lightly she might have imagined it if she hadn't seen his fingers brush the thin sleeve of her dress.

'Anyway,' he continued. 'We'll all be gone soon.'

'And my G-Grandpa with it!' Maxine blurted out, before she could stop herself.

'Your Grandfather gone?' The man's voice was gentle, unruffled.

When she dared glance up again, the small Chinaman was staring at her with something that could have been puzzlement.

'He's d-dying, isn't he?' Maxine said crossly. 'I know what's going on up there. All those d-doctors with their refrigerated bags, oxygen cylinders and p-portable mediSoft operating kits. And then there's Mr R-Rosary inviting all of you to stay...'

Mr Lee Uu nodded his understanding. 'Everybody dies eventually,' he said sounding almost sympathetic. 'Even great men like your grandfather.' Without waiting for her answer, he walked on down to breakfast, vanishing through the door of the small dining room. For a second Maxine could hear the raised chatter of male greetings and then the heavy oak door swung shut.

They'd been arriving for a week now. Earnest, black-suited lawyers and doctors who turned up in chauffer-driven Hondas clutching briefcases and vanished up to her Grandfather's room. Most of them disappeared as swiftly as they arrived, some stopping on the way out to have low, muttered conversations with Mr Rosary or Philippe. All of them ignored Maxine. And it didn't take the girl long to work out that they were embarrassed by her. As far as they were concerned Maxine shouldn't have been there.

One or two of the visitors stayed and were moved into suites on the west side of the courtyard. Into a wing that had been kept locked up, its slatted shutters bolted shut and its old-

fashioned furniture hidden away under great dust sheets for as long as Maxine could remember.

The west wing was huge, decorated in a style that was hopelessly out of date, with stripped silver and green wall hangings and blue velvet curtains. Most of the windows were single glazed.

Three entire floors were filled with broken terminals, outdated satellite dishes, torn paintings and mildewed books. Maxine had loved the west wing ever since she'd dropped down into it from the attic, through an unlocked trap door, finding herself in a child's paradise. That was the afternoon of her ninth birthday, and in her mind the wing had been hers ever since. Maxine wasn't happy to have it opened up for visitors.

Mr Uu was one who stayed. Another was a big-bellied Cabinet Minister with silver hair and a thug's jaw. A barrel-like man who moved in a cloud of expensive aftershave that didn't quite disguise the ever-present stink of sweat.

A third guest was expected after breakfast this morning. Preparations for his arrival had begun last night. Or so Maxine assumed, for that was when she caught Philippe lugging real coal across the courtyard to where Razz was busy airing another bedroom.

'Coal?' Maxine said in disbelief.

'The Prince's orders,' he said, as if that answered everything. 'Lord Winterbrooke's been living in Africa. Perhaps that's what they use there.'

He'd staggered off, bowed under the weight of his scuttle, an old man past the age of retirement, sweating in the unnatural evening heat.

Maxine had let him go. Her mind already on other problems. Razz was watching her from the shadow of a West Wing window, she could feel the older girl's gaze. And Maxine didn't understand enough about biotek to know what Razz could actually see with those bug-eye lenses of hers. But just in case it was everything, Maxine smiled in Razz' direction and waved.

If Razz saw her, she didn't respond at all. Fighting back tears, Maxine turned on her heels, chin kept high in the air until she made the safely of the front door.

'Maxine de Pommerol Melusine?' The man's voice had an arrogant confidence that she instinctively hated. Without meaning to, Maxine turned on the stairs and glared down at the man standing in her hall, on her floor, in her house...

He was tall, with a pale face and long black hair tied back into an unfashionable pony tail. He wore a flowing white djibella, with a curved knife tucked into his belt.

'W-What do you want?' Maxine demanded. It was meant to sound grown-up but just came out spoilt and petulant.

'Lord Winterbrooke,' Alex said by way of introduction and smiled. For a second Maxine felt something brush the inside of her mind like wind against cobweb. Instinctively, Maxine pushed it away and saw the man stagger. In reply he nodded once hard, and the stairs spun as Maxine tumbled. The last thing she noticed, just before darkness fell, was how old and tatty the Persian rug at the bottom of the stairs had become.

When she reopened her eyes a crowd was gathered around her, staring anxiously down. Philippe was white with anxiety, Mr Uu and Pierre Nexus were talking quietly, both flanked by impassive bodyguards.

Razz was there also, dropped into a fighter's crouch, her eyes never leaving the face of the strange Englishman. In front of the Englishman stood a wild-eyed Jap in a black Mexican shirt with silver collar points. It was obvious even to Maxine that if Razz wanted to take the tall Englishman she was going to have to go through the Jap first.

'S-Stop it, all of you.' Maxine demanded, clambering to her feet. But no one paid any attention. Everybody was watching Razz and Johnnie circle round each other, in a ballet that

was as beautiful as it was deadly. It was obviously only a matter of time before one of them made a move.

'Enough!' The command was ice-cold and brooked no refusal.

So absolute was the authority in the Prince's voice issuing from the top of the stairs that it stopped Johnnie and Razz in their tracks.

'Gentleman,' the Prince said, glancing at Lee Uu and Nexus, please go back to breakfast. Razz will get on with her work and you...' He waited for Alex to meet his gaze. 'If you must bring your bodyguard into my house, kindly make sure he knows how to behave.'

Leant heavily on his silver-topped cane, the Prince came slowly down the marble steps, his eyes holding them all in a steely gaze.

'Breakfast! Gentlemen.'

Without a murmur, Mr Uu and Pierre Nexus returned to the small dining room.

'Maxine?'

She looked up at her Grandfather, and saw immediately that will-power alone had forced him up off his sick bed.

'G-Grandpa...'

'Are you all right?' His voice was a low, hesitant croak.

'I'm f-fine, I promise.' She kissed him quietly on the cheek. Maxine knew her grandfather didn't believe her, but he let it go.

At a glance from Prince Sabatini, Philippe hustled Johnnie away to the kitchens leaving Razz to wrap her arm round Maxine's shoulders and steer the young girl up towards the stairs.

'Wait please.' The Englishman was behind them now.

Maxine just had time to notice that Alex was wearing nanopore gloves and that his eyes didn't quite match, and then the feeling was there again in her mind again, but gently - the faintest whisper of a touch.

'S-Stop it.' Maxine shouted, and saw the man's mismatched eyes widen in shock.

'Stop what?' Razz asked, stepping back. Instinctively she'd dropped into a fighter's crouch. She couldn't help it.

'He knows.' Maxine nodded at Alex - then turned her back on him and let Razz lead her upstairs. Maxine didn't notice the Prince's gaze suddenly sharpen but Alex did. The old man was worried, worried because when he looked at Alex he saw nothing - no colours, no emanating feelings, no aura. Which was just as well, Alex decided. Because if he was to pass as Winterbrooke, then his own mental defences were all that stood between him and exposure.

'There's something weird about that new guy,' Razz said, leading Maxine up another flight of stairs. 'Like, he's unreal. You know...'

Despite her headache, Maxine couldn't help smiling as she glanced over at the chrome gloss to Razz' skin.

'Tell me about it.' Razz muttered bitterly. 'But I didn't choose to look like the Silver Surfer's fucking sister, and anyway this crap is all on the outside... Window dressing. That guy's different. It like I know him from somewhere, and I don't want to remember...'

Her Zeiss implants reflected back the young girl's gaze, but for the first time Maxine saw the tiredness and hurt behind the stunning chromed skin and the mirrored contact lenses.

It was all too easy to notice only the striking features, the bizarre surgery and to pass up the person inside.

'Who d-did it to you?' Maxine asked, ashamed to realise that she didn't know. And suddenly wondering why it had never occurred to her before to inquire.

'Rosary. It cost major credit at a black clinic in Budapest. But hell, it was still cheaper than what he was putting out to pimps for a constant supply of exotics. Plus, of course...' Razz held up a hand to stall Maxine's question. It seems he wasn't too hot at handing the

merchandise back in a usable condition.' 'Still isn't, but I'll be getting my own back.' Razz glanced over her shoulder, but no one else was around. The long upstairs landing was empty. Not that it made any difference. The whole Hotel Sabatini was probably bugged.

'Do you know w-what's h-happening?' Maxine asked, not sure she actually wanted an answer to that question.

Razz nodded. 'Your Grandfather's dying,' she said flatly. 'But he won't make a will or to let the doctors treat him.'

'That bit about the d-doctors I know.' There was a dangerous glitter to Maxine's eyes, and when Razz hugged her, Maxine couldn't stop her tears from falling.

'There's nothing to inherit anyway,' Maxine said forlornly.

'That's what I thought,' Razz muttered, 'until I started logging Rosary's calls...'

Morning sun streamed in through Maxine's open window, heightening the shabbiness of the worn floor boards and the tattered state of the faded, washed-silk curtains.

In a wide-necked Victorian jug on her dresser, dust had settled into a thin skin across the surface of the stagnant water. And a thin crust of grime had dried to powder on the bottom of a nearby bowl. Even with the window open the room smelt stale. And it wasn't hard to see why.

Unwashed dresses and underclothes were tossed into a pile in one corner, the bed was unmade and its thin cotton sheets were grey with dirt.

'Sweet fucking Nazarine,' Razz said, gripping the young girl by her shoulders. 'What happened? Why hasn't Philippe cleaned your room?'

'I told him to stop c-coming.' Maxine looked slowly around her. But it was obvious that whatever her blue eyes were seeing, it wasn't the chaotic squalor of that room.

'Then why not ask me?'

'You?' Maxine said, sounding surprised.

'I'm a servant,' Razz said quietly. 'You only had to ask.'

The younger girl blushed. A memory of Razz sprawled naked on the kitchen table coming unbidden into her head.

'It didn't s-seem appropriate.'

'Maxine,' Razz's voice was casual, but neither was fooled. 'Maxine, what the fuck's going on...?'

By the time the bedroom door was half open, Alex was across the other side of the room, away from the bed, his fingers silently unfolding the blade of a brass beinte-neube butterfly knife. But he'd left it too late.

'Freeze shithead!'

If the woman's voice didn't convince him, the tiny red button of her laser sight did as it flickered briefly into his eye and then settled on his forehead, just above the bridge of his nose.

'Room lights,' she ordered.

Automatically the room's smartbox turned on a marble table lamp. And seconds later an old fluorescent tube recessed into the ceiling stuttered unhappily to life, with a sour smell of burning dust. Despite his fear, Alex' eyesflicked to his alarm clock. It was 1.30 in the morning.

'So, who are you really?' Razz asked. 'Because Maxie says you're sure as fuck not who you say you are.' An S&W LadySmith Mk4 was rock steady in her hand, its short but deadly barrel pointed straight at a spot between his eyes. Her naked body was hard and lean.

There was a Sony Walkwear Velcroed to a belt slung round her bare hips, and a small keypad was strapped to her left wrist.

Her dark Zeiss lenses were fixed on him, and he suddenly remembered thinking once before that if looks alone could kill he'd have been rotting. That it was impossible to tell her original nationality because every inch of her shaven body was tattooed silver.

'Jesus,' Alex swore darkly, and for a moment his head was full of roaring flames, the smell of burning flesh and the low thud of helicopters. And then it was gone, snapped off like a switch thrown in his mind.

'I know you,' he said mostly to himself.

'Yeah?' Razz kept the gun trained firmly on him. 'Is that so? Because I don't know you. But then that's no surprise 'cos I checked you out, you don't really exist, do you..?'

Alex smiled. 'Oh, but I do,' he promised. 'You've just been looking in the wrong place. The title may be English but my mother was French. I've got S3 status and an Imperial passport. You check me out with the Third Section?'

Razz shook her head. 'But I can,' she said confidently, and still holding the Mk 4 Smith & Weston, jabbed her first finger rapidly across the keyboard. A tiny polymer diode set into the side of the Walkwear flickered as a floating disk was scanned and an internal infra-red modem spat into life.

'You must be pretty good if you can hack the Third Section,' said Alex, but Razz just shook her head impatiently and then stiffened, her eyes scanning data as it fed in on the floating focus screen of her Zeiss lenses.

'Holy shit,' she whispered. 'This isn't just S3 status. Where do you get this kind of clearance?'

'You trade it.'

'Then you must have had something someone else wanted badly.' Razz said in admiration, and missed the thoughtful look that flickered across Alex' face.

They talked.

And then they sat in silence.

And then they talked.

Later, after Razz had removed the three gold rings from her labia and they'd fucked enough times to be drunk on the heavy smell of sex, she rolled in close to him and let him wrap one whipcord-muscle arm round her lizardskin shoulder.

'You ever traded under another name?' Razz asked him.

'Now and then. You?'

'It's been known. I didn't always look like this, you know.'

Alex glanced over at her and smiled, despite the shadow of flames in his head.

'I saw you once, long ago,' he said in a slow voice. 'In North Africa. Someone got killed. You were there.'

'Not me.' Razz said sleepily. 'I never been out of Europe. And the only person I saw killed, he got it nailed to a door.'

Darkness Falls

Not much seemed to happen the next day, or if it did Maxine didn't know about it. So she spent her time curled up in front of her wall screen. Not watching soaps but channel flicking through the rooms of the house, trying to work out exactly what was going on.

Maxine knew there was going to be some sort of party because she overheard Philippe telling Mr Rosary to have everyone assembled by the end of the following day. about the need for everything to be in place by the end of the day after.

But when she left her newly-tidied room and went down downstairs intending to talk casually, Philippe found a reason why he was wanted elsewhere and Mr Rosary left abruptly, saying he needed to talk to the Prince.

Without meaning to, Maxine sighed heavily. She was trying to pull herself together, but no one was making it easy. As she nibbled fitfully on a bar of Suchard chocolate, a present from Razz (Maxine had cried over that too), she watched Pierre Nexus get on the vidphone to commandeer a Third Section driver and a Government Peugeot to show Mr Uu round Paris.

In another room Alex was telling Razz that he had business at the Institute Bonaparte and would be taking Johnnie with him. From the way Razz and Johnnie kept glaring at each other it was pretty obvious that Johnnie didn't like the idea of Alex and Razz and more than Maxine did.

In fact, Razz walked round all day with a strange expression on her face. And whenever she thought she was alone, Razz would stop and strap a miniature keyboard to her wrist, then make swift passes over the keys, all the while staring into space as if day dreaming.

Maxine spent the whole day knowing that something big would soon happen without not knowing what. She was still trying to work it out when night began to fall and Philippe knocked politely on her door, to tell her that Grandpa said it was time for bed.

Which meant she missed the one thing of interest that did happen. The arrival of a young, impossibly beautiful Japanese boy, who announced in impeccable French that he was Johnnie's bodyguard and that his name was Ryu. When Philippe tried to point out that Johnnie was actually bodyguard to Lord Winterbrooke, and that bodyguards don't usually have bodyguards of their own, Ryu just smiled.

Since there was already a houseful, Philippe decided that one more didn't matter and packed Ryu off to the servant's quarters.

'Won't they miss us?'

Razz shook her head. And let Alex press in close behind her, his breath warm on the back of her neck. They were both hidden in the black shadows inside the great stone gateway. Behind them, a few lights showed in the upper windows of the Hotel Sabatini, but it was long past midnight and most people were already safely asleep.

'Where are we going?'

Razz held a finger to her lips, hit a complex sequence of numbers on a small wall-mounted pad, and pulled Winterbrooke after her as she slipped out through the small pedestrian gate onto the night-time cobbles of the Quay.

'Take this, and don't use it unless you have to,' she said, handing him a small floating breech Colt. 'It's Rosary's. Or at least it was until he lost it.' She smiled bitterly. 'I don't know how much your Lady Clare told you, but there's something you should see.'

It wasn't until they crossed over the river to the south bank and slipped through a low gap already sliced in the mesh that encircled the Latin Quarter, that Alex realised they were following someone.

Briefly it occurred to Alex to wonder how their quarry had by-passed the power supply to the wire, and then the barrier was behind them and they were pushing their way through the bedraggled crowd that filled the Rue Des Beaux Arts... If a tall man with shades and a pony tail wearing a North African djibella, or a silver girl wearing an open silver jacket and not much else at all looked odd or out of place no one showed it.

'Come on.' Razz hissed and surged forward. Sliding quickly between two topless jugglers and a bald man playing electric sitar. Without warning she suddenly turned right down a side street, cut left through what looked like a private entrance and came out in a narrow alley.

The far end was open to the river, but the nearer one was blocked off with rubble where a tenement block had collapsed into the street. In its dark shadow a thick-set thug lent against on alley wall, his trousers open, a bottle of flavored alcohol dangling loosely from one of his hands. On her knees in front of him was a sobbing girl.

Razz shot the man through his forehead without breaking step, the silenced flechette splintering along engineered fault lines as it hit frontal bone. By the time the flechette exited in a muffled explosion from the back, having reduced the man's cerebral cortex to frothing jelly, it looked like a slowly spinning black spider. In all it took less than a second.

Razz shrugged, and slid the gun back into her pocket. The young girl stared up at Razz then at the body, and her eyes rolled back into her head with fright. Her small mouth was opening and closing silently. She looked about nine.

'Get lost.' Razz told her, and the kid was gone, her thin shoulders still shaking with sobs as she ran.

'Nice toy,' said Alex, sounding nervous.

Razz caught his sideways glance and smiled, grimly.

'I'd been wanting to try it out,' was all she said.

A warm wind was blowing down river onto their backs as they left the latin Quarter through a second slit in the electric fence and turned left onto the Quay. Ancient Citroens and Fords were parked solid on the near side of the road as Razz and Alex swiftly over to the far side, blinded by headlights and dodging between small electric Hondas, old-fashioned diesel taxis and a few black Mitsubishi hovers, sporting CD plates and pounding sound systems.

Above them the night sky was lit orange by Coca Cola's vast hologram and the tall, revolving neon cross & helix that signalled the European headquarters of the Church Geneticist.

'What are we after?' Alex asked, glancing at the river below..

'Quiet,' Razz took a long silent drop over the edge of a low restraining wall and landed not in the river but neatly in a crouch on the narrow river walk twenty feet below. Alex followed, twisting his leg slightly as he hit the ground. A big part of him wanted to go back to the Hotel Sabatini, but he knew that Razz was taking a major risk being out without papers on the wrong side of the Seine. And he believed her when she said there was something he needed to see. He just wished to hell she'd say what it was...

'Shit,' said Razz, coming to a sudden stop. 'I can hear him on his way up.'

Alex just looked at her.

'That means he's killed once already,' Razz announced, sounding upset. Underground's where he goes afterwards,' she explained. 'There's a fucking warren of tunnels under this city.' She pulled Alex into a narrow alcove. Squeezing herself tight against him. It would have been pleasant, except that the alcove stank of urine and there was a broken Coors bottle, piles of human shit and scraps of discarded news fax at his feet. If the prefecture thought their campaign to keep tramps out of the centre was succeeding, they had it badly wrong.

Backing away from the dirt at his feet, Alex hit the back of his skull and he turned to find a huge metal grill set into the stone wall behind him. What it was there for he had no idea.

'Which way he's coming?' Alex whispered.

'Up over the edge,' said Razz, pointing to the river. 'There's a slot down there that leads into the storm drains. He uses it as a bolt hole. No one's even come close to stopping him.'

'Well, this should do it.' Alex produced the Colt Hi-Hi from his djbella pocket and slid back the safety.

'No!' Razz hissed, 'you won't even touch him.' She caught sight of Alex' disbelieving expression and grabbed his wrist, roughly. 'You have no idea what you're dealing with,' she said angrily, 'just hope he doesn't smell us, or we'll be dead anyway.'

'What?'

'Pray,' said Razz quietly. 'And if you don't believe start now.' There was a moment's silence broken only by the noise of traffic from the road twenty feet above them, and then she grinned as a gust of warm air burst from the metal grill behind their heads.

'Who says miracles don't fucking happen?' She said shakily.

Alex glanced up at the heavy metal grill covered with wire mesh, and heard behind it the rising Doppler roar of a hovertrain rushing along a metro tunnel. Seconds later a louder roar could be heard coming in the opposite direction as a huge empty RER people carrier rattled through the tunnel on its way out to the suburbs.

Along with the burning dust that issued from the grill came the sour tang of static wafted out from the electric line.

As the roar of the second train began to rise, Alex saw a spider-like outline appear, as a tall thin figure dragged himself painfully into view. Head down and shoulders hunched, the crouched figure passed by without noticing the alcove and began to hobble rapidly up river.

'Quiet and quick.' Razz ordered starting after the figure.

Alex nodded.

'At least the wind's in our fucking favour,' she added over her shoulder, 'Just as well, he picks up scent like a hunting dog.'

They entered the Louis Napoleon memorial gardens and almost reached the floodlit silver walls of the Islamic Institute, its aricular prow rising sharp and tall like the Flat Iron building in New York but three times higher, when the figure stopped suddenly and sniffed hungrily at the night wind. Alex sniffed too, but all he could smell was diesel and heavy scent from the garden's flowers.

There was light enough, against the floodlit backdrop of the Institute, to see their quarry wore a long cloak which flapped lazily in the summer breeze, and had a wide-brimmed black hat pulled down hard over his head. One hand held a long cane, the other appeared to be growing a long metal claw.

'What the...'

Alex got no further. Razz's hand snaked up over his mouth to silence him. The figure glanced swiftly back, his whole body suddenly still. But the wind was in the wrong direction and either he decided he'd heard nothing, or else he was too far gone with greed to bother about it.

Ahead of them, a Czech girl was sleeping rough in the park under a spreading horse chestnut tree. She heard nothing of Death's approach and never even had time to wake properly. Which was perhaps a mercy.

Because nothing on earth could have saved her from the hunger that had come looking for her. With one sickening blow, the Prince sank razor-sharp nails into the girl's abdominal wall and reached through her rectus abdominis muscles, driving in under the twisted purple

loops of her small intestine, his twisting silver talons slicing open her bladder, severing her femoral artery and veins on their way.

Blood spurted out in harsh red gouts around the killer's wrist, as rigid fingers felt for the girl's warm left ovary, found it and ripped it clean out through the gaping hole in her abdomen.

Dead from shock before she even had time to scream, the girl's body twitched and shuddered, her blue nylon sleeping bag stained dark in the middle as blood seeped out onto the dry earth beneath.

Alex rolled silently out from his hiding place behind a birch and levelled the Colt, squeezing its butt to activate the laser sight. He saw its red button of light miss the crouching figure and touch briefly on a distant tree, like the beam of a child's pencil torch or the glow of a far off firefly. He was readying to re-aim when Razz appeared beside him, her fingers biting swiftly and painfully into the wrist of his shooting arm.

He looked at the silver girl in disbelief, but she just shook her head. 'No! Not yet.' Her voice was urgent. 'Believe me, everything has to wait until tomorrow.'

Alex watched as the killer produced a silk handkerchief from the pocket of his coat, dipped it in blood and then used it to carefully wrap up the warm ovary.

It wasn't until the thin figure bent painfully to close the dead girl's eyes that Alex realised who the killer was. The lined, tired but smiling face was Prince Sabatini's, lit unmistakably by the bright overhead glow of Coca Cola's night-time hologram.

What Alex and Razz didn't see as they hurried from Louis Napoleon Park, what they should have seen was Maxine slip past them both, only to stop at the edge of the clearing and buckle to her knees.

Vomit rose in her mouth, sour and acid at the back of her throat, and then she spewed up onto the grass, tears of helplessness pouring down her wide cheeks.

The Skull

The next morning began badly for Razz - and then got worse. By lunch time it was practically killing her. But by then the part of her mind that was still functioning reckoned it would welcome the release.

'Tell me, you little bitch,' Rosary hissed. The tight smile that narrowed his lips into an ugly sneer didn't make it as far as his eyes, which had grown colder with every moment of the passing morning.

Razz said nothing.

She'd seen this mood on him before. But not so bad and never so merciless. The politeness, charm and old-fashioned Southern courtesy Rosary affected in polite society had dropped from him the moment he walked her through his own front door, his fingers gripping her arm tight just above the elbow.

He'd steered Razz out of the main part of the house and across the courtyard in full view of the Prince's startled guests. A polite smile on his long face, his head bent sideways as if listening to something she was saying. His iron grip never leaving her arm.

What Razz was expecting, she didn't know. A quick, vicious punch for some imagined misdemeanour or maybe a hurried and brutal fuck designed to put her back in her place. It depended on what Rosary thought she'd done.

But what she got was different.

Terrifying.

He dragged her straight through his apartment, and threw her down the stone steps into the wine cellar. Then he pushed and kicked her across the cellar's cold flagstones to a low doorway blocked by a heavy wrought-iron gate.

With casual brutality, he handcuffed her right wrist to the door while he reached up for a key hanging from a peg above her head. Red and slippery, the handcuffs were like nothing she'd seen before. They twisted under her grip and bit tightly into her wrist when she struggled.

'Pretty, aren't they?' Rosary said with a cold chuckle. 'And they'll have your hand off if you don't stop fussing.' Flicking free the blade of his German gravity knife, Rosary swivelled it so the blade faced downwards, hooked the blade into the collar of her silver jacket and sliced the jacket open from collar to waist. Two slashes and the arms were free as well. Then swivelling the knife again, Rosary hooked its blade between her buttocks and slashed down, cutting loose her silver leggings.

Frantically, Razz kicked herself free of the leggings, before he had time to turn the knife to its legs.

When the iron gate was open, he released the cuffs with a single pass of his hands and pushed her through. She found herself at the top of another long flight of stone steps that lead down into darkness. The air was cold and musty, with a sour smell like newly turned earth.

'Go down,' Rosary ordered.

Razz hesitated for a second too long and felt his hand rest lightly in the small of her back. 'Walk,' he said softly. 'Or I'll throw you down anyway, and risk breaking your neck.' Rosary smiled in the half light of the wine cellar, and ran his hand gently up her spine, stopping his fingers when they touched the tendons at the back of her head.

'And we wouldn't want that now, would we?'

As his fingers closed on her neck, Razz twisted round to face him and what she saw in his eyes was pure, driven madness. Behind the repressed anger and cold bitterness, behind his sinister politeness, there was a silent insanity that burnt with a yellow glow at the back of his eyes.

He'd trained her, hard and fast. Paid for the body augmentations and her lessons in unarmed combat. But most of all, she realised, he'd taught her to be afraid of him. Made her believe that before Rosary she was powerless.

Razz looked into the quiet insanity of Rosary's eyes and tried to concentrate on his weaknesses. On the way he was shivering with cold. On the way he didn't know it all. He didn't know, for example, that she kept a file on him deposited in a Baharman databank - as an insurance policy in case everything became too messy.

Which is what it had just done.

He didn't know she still walked the Cy. That early on, after he'd dragged her out of her hiding place at the back of County Hall in London, she'd lied, traded and sold herself to buy the kit needed to put her back on line.

She'd done that in her first week at the Hotel Sabatini. Before the clinic in Budapest but after those three weeks he'd made her do at a Triad brothel in Kwaloon. At the time she thought she was in the Far East to learn those pillow skills every man demands in his mistress. And also wants in his wife too, but without wanting to know where from they came.

Now she knew Kwaloon wasn't about pillow skills at all; it was to put her down so low she'd never really get back up again.

'Crying?' Rosary said. 'You?' His hand brushed her cheek, and Razz could feel how the cellar's chill had bitten into his fingers, until they were as blue and puckered as the fingers of a drowned man.

Despite herself, she shivered at his caress.

It was a mistake. Ice cold, his fingers reached casually for her throat and squeezed. Just before Razz fell into darkness, her own hands scrabbling uselessly at his icy grip, Rosary lifted her off her feet and tossed her down the flight of stairs.

Only the limpness of her barely-conscious body saved her from breaking her leg or her ribs as she tumbled down fifteen or twenty steps and landed with a thud.

He was after her before she had time to scrape her self up off the narrow stone landing, his armadillo-skin boot catching her a vicious kick under the ribs.

'Tell me.' He said, with a mildness that belied the insanity in his eyes. 'Where did Maxine go last night?'

Razz really wasn't holding out on him. It wasn't a question she could answer, no matter how many times he asked it. And he'd been asking it continuously since breakfast. Razz couldn't tell him because she didn't know. Any more than she could say why Maxine hadn't come back, or where she was.

Philippe had realised Maxine was missing when he took a pot of Colombian coffee and a basket of fresh croissants up to the Prince's suite that morning, expecting to find the girl with her Grandpa. But Maxine wasn't there, she hadn't been to breakfast and she wasn't in her room either.

Which worried Philippe who liked Maxine enough to worry about her. And in any case, he found it hard not to be anxious about what would happen to her once the Prince died. As die he would, and soon...

Well-born orphans were the responsibility of the Prince Imperial. Like everything else they tended to go to the highest bidder. In Philippe's opinion the very best she could expect was a quick marriage to some rich old man who wanted her because of her name.

Without thinking, Philippe put out a call to the bleeper function of Razz' wrist implant, and then hastily asked the Prince for permission to wait in the kitchen for Razz to answer.

When she finally turned up, her face tired and her head bare except for a dusting of dark stubble, Razz was quietly simmering. Not least because Philippe couldn't stop gaping at her. He hadn't realised before that she usually wore a wig.

'What the f--- are you looking at?' Razz'd asked crossly. 'I was in the shower.'

Philippe tried briefly to imagine the silver girl's pert naked body, and found he couldn't be bothered. Razz, Maxine, even the Prince assumed he was asexual, but that wasn't true. He just didn't parade his preferences. The passion he felt for his master was cooler now than it once was, because even unrequited love affairs dull down - but it was still there.

The elderly valet sighed. And when he looked at the sullen silver figure before him, for the first time he felt something more like pity than annoyance.

'The Prince wants to know if you've seen Maxine...' Philippe knew from bitter experience that Razz only paid attention if she thought the question came from on high, and even then not always. But making clear the question came from the Prince was usually a good first move.

'The Prince.' Razz said stupidly. 'Is he back here?'

'Where would you expect him to be?' Philippe asked with a frown. 'He's in his room. Having breakfast.' A sudden hopelessness pulled at Philippe's mouth, and when Philippe spoke again it was obvious he expected Razz to share the gravity of his news. 'I'm afraid he had another bad night.'

'I'll bet,' Razz muttered under her breath. She glanced at Philippe's soft brown eyes and wondered exactly what he knew. In the year she'd been at Hotel Sabatini she'd learnt more than she wanted to and, God knows, the Prince's valet had been around a lot longer than her. When it finally came to choosing allies or enemies, she had no way of knowing which side he'd be on. The Prince's most probably. It was better to be cautious.

'Don't know where Maxine is,' Razz said apologetically, 'But I'm sure she hasn't left the house.'

'Oh, but you do know,' said an mild voice behind her.

Razz spun round to see the Prince, leant on a silvertop cane, his legs trembling under the slight weight of his frail body. Quietly, inexorably his eyes locked onto hers. And Razz had a nasty feeling he was trying to read her mind. Without success...

The old man frowned and shook his head, trying to clear it of swirling thoughts and memories. Finally, when the voices in his head has cleared, he settled his attention on a note clutched in his shaking fingers.

'She left you this note,' he said softly. 'I thought you might like to tell me about it.' He handed Razz a scrap of paper filled with Maxine's spidery handwriting.

Razz snorted in disgust. Only Maxine would still use a pen to write something down. The words were crabbed and difficult to decipher for someone more used taking her information off a screen. But eventually Razz made sense of Maxine's note - and promptly wished she hadn't.

Darling Razz... I saw you leave and who you went with. I guess I already know what you're doing, so I'm coming too. If we don't meet up or I don't come back then please, please look after yourself.

Thank you for everything. Most of all, for listening to me.

I'm sorry I watched you on the screen.

Love maxine

It was the kind of rubbish only a thirteen-year old girl could write, but that didn't make it any less dangerous. Inside Razz' guts a knot tightened until she felt her bladder was about to open. It probably would have done, except her brain was too busy trying to get her shocked lungs to breathe.

Finally she managed it.

Taking a deep breath, Maxine turned to face the Prince. With his lined, sad face and thin worn-out body he didn't look like the killer she knew him to be.

'I'm sorry,' she said politely, not lifting her eyes from the floor. 'I've no idea what Maxine's talking about. Didn't even get her note.'

'Which in itself is strange,' the Prince said heavily, 'Since she left it where she thought you would be bound to find it.' His words were beginning to slur as if his vocal cords had finally worn out. 'It was pinned under your pillow. But then, if you slept at all last night, it wasn't in your own bed was it?'

Razz looked up at him and immediately wished she hadn't. His voice was weak, but his eyes were as cold and unblinking as they ever were.

Razz said nothing. She had a feeling he wasn't yet finished. He wasn't.

'You amuse Mr Rosary,' said the Prince. 'And your master is a man I occasionally find useful. That's the sole reason I put up with your presence in my house or your friendship with my granddaughter. But that can be changed.' The Prince nodded, almost decisively to his valet. 'Philippe call Rosary.'

For a second Razz considered knocking the silver cane out of his wizened hand and then drop kicking his stick-like legs out from under him. But somehow the frail old man she could see in front of her didn't mesh with the previous night's memory - of a girl bleeding her life onto the dried-out grass of the Park Louis Napoleon. And something deep in his eyes warned Razz that he knew what she was thinking.

'Whatever you or that fool Lee Uu thinks of me,' said the Prince. 'I care for Maxine, and I have made a suitable provision for her future comfort. She is my responsibility.' The Prince held up Maxine's scrap of paper.

'No doubt Rosary will discover what you know and where she is. After that we can review what happens to you. Whether you stay here, or whether you go,' the Prince paused, 'elsewhere.'

Only Rosary still didn't have the information the Prince wanted. And not having it was beginning to make Rosary badly upset. He'd been kicking her down stairs for so long they must almost be at the bottom...

In the dim light still coming from the top of the stairs, Razz could make out a vaulted roof of red brick, supported by sandstone arches, and hanging from the roof the inverted branch of a simple wrought-iron chandelier that some artisan had converted to electricity over a hundred years before. Old-fashioned bulbs were in there, pointed like flame, their clear glass thick with dust. She doubted hazily that anyone now actually knew where the right light switch was.

'You listening to me?' Rosary asked, rolling her hunched body down another few steps with the tip of his boot. They'd finally reached a turn in the stairs, leaving even the dim light from the top of the stairs behind.

It seemed best to say nothing at all and let him get on with it. Which he did, steadily tipping her down a few steps at a time. Razz had worked out that he wouldn't do anything fatal to her, not while the Prince needed information and he was the one responsible for providing it. Razz rolled up tighter and vainly tried to call up a plan from deep inside herself, without success, she was running on empty and no ideas would come.

Razz didn't even realise she'd hit the bottom until a sharp kick caught her in the small of her back and suddenly Razz knew she had to move or get her spine kicked to pulp. So she did what she was trained to do.

Steady her nerves, breath out not in, and then click into action.

When she rolled it was so fast Razz surprised herself, and it also caught Rosary off-guard. She heard him swear as she rolled out of his range. Heard him come after her, kicking wildly, but she kept changing direction, flipping right and left, losing herself in the absolute blackness.

'Get me a lightstick,' Rosary said in barely concealed fury, and Razz realised he was talking into the vidwatch he'd bought in Osaka. She'd always hated the bloody thing.

Crouched behind a pillar, trying desperately not to make the slightest noise, not even breath, Razz was wondering how long she had before she needed to make a run for it. Whether to get her breath back or go now before the lightstick arrived, when she heard Rosary's grunt of shock and a thud as his body suddenly hit the cold earth.

'Who there?' She called out, despite herself. There was no answer, and then she felt a hand slide softly over her lips.

She slammed her elbow back instinctively, but the man behind her flipped sideways to let the blow pass by.

'Hey, keep it quiet.' Alex hissed in her ear. 'We don't know what kind of listening equipment they've got down here.' He took his hand away from Razz' mouth. 'Follow me,' he said.

'I can't see you!' Razz protested, and felt his hand slide into hers and begin to pull her through the darkness.

'What about Rosary?' She hissed. A face came close to her face, and she could feel warm breath on the side of her face.

'If that blow didn't finish him, the damp and the cold probably will,' Alex said quietly. 'The viral mutation he uses is very basic, something East European out of Mexico or Brazil. He was always going to freeze to death one day anyway.'

Beneath The Skin

'Dumb fuck.' Razz snarled, tripping clumsily over a brick that had worked itself loose from the tunnel roof and become half-buried in the sodden floor. She was almost in tears. 'How come you get to see in the dark?'

'Optic nerve splice,' said Alex, as he helped her up out of the mud.

Razz brushed herself off, and then swore again as the earth stuck to her hands. 'Didn't know that was possible.'

'Neither did I.'

They'd given up not talking when they were over an hour into the darkness and the tunnel had suddenly branched off in two directions. There'd been other tunnels before that, including one near the start that led under the Seine and came out at a storm drain on the Quai de Montebello. But they were all minor paths leading off the main tunnel and Alex ignored them. As for Razz, he doubted if she even knew they were there.

But then they'd to chose a direction, and suddenly not talking didn't seem so important. The tunnel they were following had steadily become more derelict and dangerous. Its walls switching between old brick and sodden, striated blocks of sandstone with occasional low stretches roughly hewn through deeply fissured rock.

Alex insisted they took the right turn, more as a default than anything else; and they'd been bickering ever since. Neither had the slightest idea how much time had passed.

'Don't those bug eyes give you night vision?' Alex asked over his shoulder.

'No such fucking luck,' said Razz, ducking to crawl under a slab of limestone that had tumbled in across their tunnel. The gap got tighter, forcing her first to her knees and then onto her stomach as she inched her way after Alex. His boots were almost in her face and she kept having to duck back to avoid him kicking her.

'Get stuck in there,' she said viciously, 'and you're dead. I ain't going to pull you out.' Razz grunted as he paused, and then almost felt the effort as he forced himself to wriggle forward another inch.

'It's a dead end,' insisted Razz. 'We should've taken the other turn.' Which was the way she'd wanted.

'No,' said Alex. 'There's a bend up ahead and then a gap on the other side. I can feel a breeze.' He paused as he realised he couldn't really feel a breeze at all... somehow he just knew by instinct that the tunnel opened out. It was like he could sense the approaching space.

It took twenty wet, gruelling minutes for them to crawl their way face down through a passage no more than ten paces long. And then Alex was up on his haunches, crouched in a small vault, its sides lined with dressed mortar and its ceiling rising up to a row of ancient stone hammerbeams.

Every bone in his body hurt and each labored breath he took hit him in the ribs like a punch. But he was through. On the opposite wall, a faded fresco of a Byzantine-looking Christ stared out at him, watching as he tried to over-ride the dizziness in his head. The Messiah's eyes were almond in shape, and his mouth had that lose-lipped petulance that a later generation of artists would call pre-Raphaelite.

'Come on,' said Razz angrily behind him. 'Pull me out.' Her wrists were slick with sweat where he grabbed it, and beneath her skin he could feel the labored thud of her pulse.

'You okay?' He asked.

Razz pushed her way past him, staggering into the middle of the room. 'I got more bruises than a stale peach, I just had the shit fucking kicked out of me. What you think?' She was shaking badly, her eyes staring helplessly round in the darkness.

'What place is this anyway?' She asked him.

'The vault of a chapel.'

'You see a way out?'

Alex shook his head.

'I said can you see a way out?'

'Not so far.'

'Great.' Razz sat down in the middle of the floor with a thud, and pulled her knees up under her chin. Tears began to trickle slowly down her silver cheeks.

He liked Razz, more than he thought he would, and he'd enjoyed fucking her but looking at where she sat in a huddle, Alex couldn't help wondering if Razz was going to prove a liability.

She hadn't even asked how he got to the bottom of those stairs before Rosary did. Not that it was a secret. The moment he saw Rosary drag Razz across the courtyard, he slipped out of the main gate, across the Quai and down some stone steps to the edge of the Seine.

Ryu, the pretty Jap boy Lady Clare had kidnapped at Johnnie's request had come with him. Which was just as well. Alex would never have known how to pilot a stolen hover across the river, never mind hot-wire it in the first place. Alex had jumped hover at the storm drain by the Quai de Montebello. From there he'd run the tunnel between the Quai and the base of the stairs. Ryu he'd told to return the hover, contact Lady Clare and then try to find Maxine - in that order.

'Razz,' said Alex softly, but she didn't even stir. Dropping onto the floor beside her, he felt Razz stiffen as he put his hand on her shoulders.

There was just enough space between her neck and the edge of her implanted shoulder armour for his fingers to find the knotted muscles of her upper back. He broke down the tension with smooth passes of his fingers, wondering all the while where the knowledge came from. That gateway Makai put in his brain, most probably. Just thinking about it made Alex shiver.

'That feels good,' Razz admitted at last. 'Like some of the pain's gone.'

Alex kissed her hair, what little there was of it and felt her shift with embarrassment.

'We've got to get you safely into hiding,' he said.

'That's not so easy,' said Razz sadly. 'I don't exactly blend into the background, do I? No.' She shook her head, 'I think this is where it stops. You reckon you killed Rosary?'

'Could be.' Alex knew he hadn't, the blow hadn't been hard enough. That was the trouble with scruples.

'If you did, then the Prince will send someone else to kill me. If you didn't, then it will be Rosary.' Unconsciously, she rubbed her eyes.

'Those mirrored contacts, do they do anything for you at all?' Alex asked, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Razz shook her head. 'The Zeiss floating focus is under my right cornea. The tacs just look good. Zero prescription. My eyesight always was perfect.'

'Then take them out,' Alex suggested.

'No point, no one gets to see them down here.'

'I do.'

Razz lifted the lid on one and then her other eye and flipped the lenses into her left palm. Her hand closed round the two examples of precision glass engineering and then casually crushed them to fragments beneath her clenched fingers. It was too dark to see what colour her eyes really were.

'Oh,' Razz turned to Alex a little too casually, like she'd just remembered something. 'On my way to the kitchens, some rich bitch was looking for you at the gate. Urgent she saw you, she said. Told her you weren't around.'

'Who was it?'

'Didn't leave her name,' Razz's smile was so quick he almost missed it. 'But her car had CN plates so I ran a quick make on its registration number.'

'And...?' Alex prompted.

'It was licensed to the Institute Bonaparte. 'Would that be your friend, Lady Clare? Smart, CN plates. Didn't want to leave her name?'

Alex laughed softly. 'Sounds like her to me,' he said.

'You lovers?' Razz asked Alex sharply. A strange expression flicking across her face. 'Not that I give a fuck,' she added, fast.

'No.' Alex stretched his neck, feeling the bruising to the muscles of his face and the sharp ache that ran through the bones and ligaments of his knees. 'Not lovers. But she certainly saved my life. One way and another I owe her. You could say she made me everything I am today.'

'Don't get it,' said Razz.

'Nor me, not really. Not yet.' Alex glanced round and caught the Christ gazing at him with a catamite's knowing eyes. There was something about that stare that made him squirm.

'Too real,' he said. 'Let's get out of here.'

'Back down that tunnel?' Razz demanded, not moving. Alex could see that she was chewing at the edge of lip. Which ever way you cut it, she looked a mess. Blood seeped from a cut above her eye where she'd split her head tumbling down the stairs, and individual stud marks stood out from a heel-shaped bruise on her jaw.

'Razz, I'm sorry,' Alex said. 'I shouldn't have got you into this.'

He couldn't have said anything better. Not that Razz took it the way he intended. Alex felt rather than heard her roll away from him, and when she came to a stop she was on her feet, dropped into a crouch he was beginning to recognise.

'You, get me into this?' She hissed through tight lips. 'You didn't get me into this. I was born in this shit, I grew up in this shit, this is where I live. And I don't need some shit-for-brains English lord wasting his pity of me. You ever worry about what you had to do to qualify for this little party?'

Alex shook his head, remembered that she couldn't see and told her that he had no idea. Even to him his voice sounded more than a little lame.

'Maybe you don't like to remember,' said Razz. She'd already checked it out and had the figures at her fingertips. 'You ordered the destruction of a Triad database. 119 people were killed in the gang war that followed. You had some Jap street punk killed and handed over his narcotics franchise to one of the slimiest Versace wanabees in Edo. Prices went up 38% overnight and quality's through the floor. Oh yeah, and your 10% commission gets paid straight into a closed account at Hong Kong Suisse.'

The street punk had to be Johnnie. But the Triad database didn't ring any bells. Mind you, Alex knew he wasn't really Winterbrooke, which Razz didn't. So chances were he didn't really do any of this stuff either. In fact it seemed possible that Lady Clare had organised it all. He was going to need a serious word with Johnnie about what was going on, once this was all over.

If it ever was.

'Only thing is,' Razz said sounding puzzled, 'Last night you were all prepared to blow away the one man who could offer you eternal life. Now what's the sense of that?'

'Eternal life?' Alex's voice sounded as hollow as the chapel vault around him, and just as cold.

'Isn't that what this is about?' Razz asked. 'You, that Chink banker and our fat French politician? One of you gets to be the new Prince of Antioch. The other two make do as Counts Palatine. What you do with the power after that's up to you. But, believe me, the Imperial Order of Antiochys makes the Freemasons look like some hick town rotary club.'

Alex grunted.

'If you don't buy it,' Razz said crossly, 'Check it out in the Third Section database.

It wasn't a question he wanted to ask, but he asked it anyway. 'You mean, Sabatini is immortal?' Alex said, feeling stupid.

'Immortal but dying.' Razz agreed. Her laugh was bitter.

Alex hunkered down beside her, holding his head between shaking hands. He wasn't at all sure what Lady Clare had landed him in, but he already knew he didn't like it.

'This power,' Alex said, thinking of the twisted, spider-like creature that had crawled up over the edge of the river wall. 'What did he do with it?'

'You mean besides raping his first granddaughter and slaughtering Maxine's father. His son or great grandson, depending on how you look at it?' Razz asked. She smiled bitterly, and rubbed at her eyes when she thought Alex wasn't looking.

'He killed, he robbed, and then he got bored. You'd be surprised how much the Third Section have on him,' Razz continued. 'And how little they can do about it. Or come to that,' she added, 'how little they want to do. The Prince didn't select Pierre Nexus for his beauty, you know.'

Alex was about to ask a question, but Razz beat him to it.

'Nexus runs S3,' she said.

'And the Prince...? What do you know about the Prince?'

'That he sold slaves to the Confederate South, made a gold fortune in West Africa, and lost most of that putting Maximillian on the throne of Mexico. He lost interest after Max was executed. He's done fuck all of interest for the last hundred and fifty years, except for a brief reprise as the Paris Ripper. And now he's dying.'

'But before he dies, he has to transfer his power?'

Razz nodded.

'So if he were killed before any transference took place, the sequence could be broken?'

'I suppose so,' admitted Razz. 'But you're probably too late to do any good anyway.'

'Why?' Alex asked.

'Because the ceremony's already started,' said Razz. 'Just listen.'

Gekokujo

Someone had strapped a naked child to the marble altar, the boy's tiny genitals small as fallen acorns, the soft olive skin of his small body grey with cold and fright.

From their hiding place behind the balustrade of a small balcony, Maxine and Ryu could see that he'd wet himself. Neither knew then that the sobbing toddler was there as diversion, to impress the chanting white-robed audience, nothing more.

Not that the Order would let him live.

In eight hundred years of history, countless victims had died that the Order might remain as its title suggested, Most Secret.

The small underground chapel was thick with dark smoke rising from a hundred ivory beeswax candles impaled into rows on the black metal spikes of an offertory tray. There was a thick scent of burning incense, and below that the pungent smell of narcotic herbs. But despite the candles, incense and wrought-iron braziers, the chapel walls were so cold that Maxine's teeth were chattering. Ryu's too probably, but she couldn't tell for certain. One of Ryu's hands was clamped over his mouth. Still, he'd been doing a pretty good job at pretending not to be terrified, ever since he caught Maxine trying to sneak back in through the courtyard gate and gave her the message and box from Lady Clare.

The message, of course, was simplicity itself. 'Find Razz, Save Alex.' Or it might have been the other way round, Maxine couldn't remember.

As the last notes of a chorister's Angelica Belta fell away into an echoing silence, the small crowd briefly shuffled in their oak pews then stilled in expectation. A young boy in a white robe stepped into the narrow space at the front of the crowd, bowed to the Prince and his two guests where they sat on raised thrones to the left of the altar and began a soaring, sad Lamento.

Even the sobbing toddler stopped his crying as the boy rolled notes rapidly into each other, harmonies as pure as snow and cold as ice echoing off the low vaulted ceiling of the underground chapel. If the voice was artificially amplified or computer enhanced, it wasn't possible to tell.

'Time to move,' Maxine told Ryu.

The young Japanese boy shook his head. 'Wait,' he said, 'it's not over yet.'

When Maxine looked doubtful, Ryu hesitantly touched her arm. 'Trust me,' he said. 'I know when shit's about to happen, and this isn't it. Not yet.'

For two hours there had been Gregorian chant from the choristers, hymns from the small congregation, and muttered responses. The mood wasn't yet restless, but there was a definite air of expectation.

Crouched on the balcony, looking down over the heads of the congregation towards the naked boy on the altar, with one of Razz's padded kevlar coats wrapped tightly around her against the cold, Maxine crossed herself. Secretly she hoped the ceremony would just finish, with a simple blessing. But even as Maxine wished it, she knew with terrible certainty that wasn't going to happen. Everything had been leading up towards some peak, some high point which would stun the gathered people.

What ever the crowd-pleaser was, she knew it was going to be nasty, in keeping with the palpable hunger of the congregation.

There were at most fifty people in that small candle-lit chapel, though the huge cavern outside would happily have stood a thousand. Either there were fewer members to the Order than in past years, or the pillared cavern had once been used by someone else. Maybe by the Winter King or for a Court of Thieves.

Though, at that point in the proceedings Maxine couldn't care less which it was.

All she wanted was for her and Ryu to get out alive. And at least Ryu was a boy. It hadn't taken Maxine long to realise the crowd below was exclusively male. Prince's granddaughter or not, she had a sick feeling in her gut about what they'd do to her if they found a female intruding into their precious ceremony.

'It's okay, I'll protect you,' Ryu whispered, crouching close to her side. It was the first time anyone other than her grandfather had called her by the familiar tu; and the boy watched in bewilderment as Maxine blushed.

Not sure what he'd done to offend her, Ryu blushed furiously in return, running one hand through his long curly hair. His warm eyes were brown and anxious, and with his nervous smile and neat, if odd clothes he looked like a younger, cleaner, politer version of Johnnie.

'W-What are you?' Maxine asked. 'I mean for r-real?'

Ryu smiled. 'Johnnie's bodyguard. Yours now,' he said proudly.

'W-Who hired you?'

'No one. I offered,' said Ryu. 'Lady Clare is worried... This is a very bad business,' he told her seriously.

'Lady Clare?'

'Lord Winterbrooke's master, I think.' Ryu sighed. 'It's complicated,' he said sadly. 'My apologies, but your grandfather is not a good man. And those men down there are not much better.' He pointed to Nexus and Lee Uu.

'There's an empty chair.' Maxine said. She looked thoughtful.

'That's where Lord Winterbrooke should be sitting,' whispered Ryu, sounding embarrassed. 'But something went wrong, he and Razz...' Ryu's voice trailed away. He was blushing again.

'Did Lady C-Clare tell you what this service was for?' Maxine asked hesitantly.

Ryu swept back a curl that had flicked down over his eyes. 'A DNA data swop,' he whispered, his brown eyes doing a rapid scan across the crowd. 'Lady Clare says it's been so long since anybody tried it, the information was almost buried. Most of it had been reclassified as myth. Your grandfather's going to die and be resurrected, either as Mr Uu or Pierre Nexus. The choice isn't yet made.'

'My Grandpa? R-Reborn?' Maxine's face lit suddenly, then crumbled as she remembered the trail of carnage she'd watched her grandfather leave behind him, the dead Czech girl, the tramp in the doorway of Notre Dame, the teenagers dead by Emperor Steps.

She was crying before she realised it.

'You know then?' Ryu said. One of his hands hesitantly reaching for her's. She didn't return his quick grip, but she didn't pull her hand away either.

That she didn't need to ask 'know what' was answer in itself.

'Killing is in his blood, Lady Clare says,' Makai said sadly. 'No matter how much he loved you, in the end he'd have killed you too. Except death caught up with him first. So now he must to transfer his memories while he still can.'

Ryu looked at Maxine. A thirteen-year old Cy-samurai wanabe, self-charged with protecting an unworldly, possibly schizophrenic fourteen-year old French princess, who'd been gene spliced before birth. He knew what came next. He just didn't know how to say it. So it just said it anyway.

'We have to stop him.'

'Stop him?'

'He must be killed,' Ryu said seriously.

'How can we?' Maxine asked, as tears began again to stream unchecked down her childish face.

Ryu's answer was gentle, his tone embarrassed, apologetic. 'If you don't,' he whispered, 'this will go on forever. We have to go down there, we have to do it. How else are you going to stop your nightmares?'

Crouched beside Ryu, looking down to where her Grandfather sat stiff-backed and very still on a simple gold and ivory throne, Maxine realised he told the truth - and knew what she had to do. The only problem was that Maxine wasn't sure she could do it. Come to that, she wasn't sure it wasn't too late.

Up at the altar, a man approached the shivering body of the young child. Although the man was wrapped in a black cloak and his face was badly bruised, the young princess could tell it was Rosary, and anyone who looked closely would have noticed that his legs were unsteady and one shoulder twitched. But the crowd was too busy watching the knife in his other hand, and anyway his pupils were blank with pain-killing opiates.

The child on the altar stopped wailing and smiled nervously as Rosary let one of his hands briefly brush the boy's tear-swollen cheek.

'Take this and drink.' Rosary held a small cup of beaten silver to the child's mouth as trembling lips sipped at a sticky mixture of honey, cloves and opium. As the child's eyes quivered like the wings of a butterfly and then began to close, Rosary quickly yanked back his victim's head and neatly slit his throat.

Blood spilled over the cold stone of the altar and a dark, bitter smell filled the small chapel as more herbs were thrown onto a charcoal brazier, smoke billowing up in thick clouds towards the low ceiling.

When the smoke cleared the Prince was gone and with him Mr Lee. The choice had been made. Only Pierre Nexus, silver haired and loose lipped, now sat alone in a row of three gilded chairs set below the throne. The State Minister's jaw was clenched and his eyes were fixed straight ahead. Only the pulse of a vein in his temple gave any clue to how violently he objected to being passed over for an elderly Chinese banker.

At the altar, Rosary gutted the dead child with three easy strokes, ripping out lungs and gullet. He tipped the discarded rope of purple entrails straight into a convenient bucket but left the heart, liver and kidneys packed into the empty body space. Cooks would use them later to prepare a bitter sauce to accompany the sweeter, baked flesh of the body.

Job done, Rosary stepped back and stood impassively beside the altar. Any last chance he might once have had of occupying one of those three chairs had been lost when the supposedly crucified Alex Gibson reappeared in M'dina. For that failure he had been reduced to one of those who merely stand and wait.

As the steady rhythm of a sistrum and the soaring notes of a chorister's Sanctus began to fill the chapel, Rosary shut his eyes and threw powdered magnesium onto a brazier. There was a brilliant flash that burnt white hot into the retinas of all watching, and then darkness.

When sight returned, the smoke had parted to reveal two figures standing in front of the altar, swathed in heavy cloaks of purple, their faces hidden by silver masks that looked down on the crowd with the smooth, noble faces of Byzantine gods. Hair of yellow beaten gold curled above straight silver noses and high, burnished cheekbones.

'Hail Strategoi!' The small crowd's roar was so enthusiastic that for a moment the chorister almost wavered, but then his chant rose flawless above the rustle of the restless congregation as both masked figures held high their right hands. Palm out in a salute that could have come straight from a Roman statue of Hadrian or the Emperor Justinian.

As the last notes of the Sanctus died away into silence, the masked figures spoke together.

'Hail cataphracti!'

Turning towards each other, they gripped hands and stood silent while Rosary lifted a jewelled chalice from the altar, balanced his blood-stained dagger across its top and walked out to the edge of the dais.

'Behold the life.' He held up the chalice before the congregation. Then he offered it to the masked figures.

'Give that you might receive.'

First one and then the other took Rosary's dagger and cut deep into their palms, allowing blood to mix together in the waiting cup.

'Here is the blood of eternal life,' intoned Rosary, swirling the chalice, 'which shall be given to you, drink this in remembrance.'

As the blood of Mr Uu reacted with that of the Princes, virally-mutated over generations, it reacted also with the chalice's complex mixture of embryo tissue, renal adrenalin, amino acid and fresh bone marrow.

Not just eternal life but eternal memories, as swimmingly incoherent as a living nightmare were held in the warm sticky mixture that Lee Uu drank down in a single gulp, thinking as he did so that at least the taste was less offensive than the brains of a living monkey.

Almost instantly, as the new Prince of Antioch began to recall signs, formulae and powers almost the whole world had otherwise forgotten, the old Prince began to give up his immortality. Slowly, cell by cell, with a sense of indescribable relief.

But Rosary knew none of this, as he slowly put down the chalice, his job almost done. And neither did Maxine, crouched as she now was in the shadows at the back of the chapel, Ryu's instructions wiped clean by terror.

'We die that we are born,' Rosary intoned, his voice hoarse with smoke from the braziers and tremulous with a cold so absolute that it bit into his flesh. His hands shook and the blood in his head pounded.

Without even knowing it, he was feeling his master die.

The Interface of God

Alex streaked passed Maxine before the girl had time to get a glimpse of his face. A single dive took him out of the darkness and onto the raised candle-lit area around the altar.

He came up out of his roll at the feet of the two Byzantine figures and then for the first time, for the merest nano-second he hesitated.

Time froze.

As the congregation rose to its feet in panic, time restarted and Alex made his choice. Driving the blade of his beinte-neube sharply up under the rib cage of the first figure, he sliced through liver and diaphragm on his way in to the heart.

The 29cm blade of Alex' butterfly knife split the muscle-fibre of the right ventricle, sliced through the tough septum that divided the heart in two, and came to rest below the left atrium.

As purple goutts of blood erupted over Alex' head, coating his face and chest in a hot, sticky baptism; the figure above him crumpled forward, bounced clumsily off his left shoulder and hit the ground, the silver mask rolling away into the dirt.

'Shit.'

Alex stared in shock at the startled, unfocussed eyes of Prince Sabatini and began to tug at frantically at the knife embedded in the old man's chest. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the second masked figure begin to back away, the impossibly beautiful silver mask looking from side to side in alarm.

He'd stabbed the wrong man, killed someone who was already almost dead. Ripping free his butterfly knife, Alex flipped sideways onto his feet, every nerve in his newly-enhanced system wired and working. In two paces he would reach the retreating figure of Lee Uu and then the job would be done.

Charles Mayer would be avenged. Lady Clare would take back her job. The bitter life and near death of Alex Gibson would be forgotten. Maxine could sleep.

Alex made to step forward, saw the burly frame of Pierre Nexus suddenly launch itself at him from the side and instinctively dropped onto one knee, simultaneously swinging his razor-sharp beinte-neube in a vicious arc.

The fat State Minister's guts spilt out onto the floor from a bloody two-foot grin cut into his abdomen, but Alex didn't stop to watch. He was coming up out of a roll, his whole attention already focused on that point behind Mr Uu's back where his blade would be aimed.

But Alex never got to make the strike.

Rosary came at him from behind the altar, clearing the stone table and the gutted body of the dead child in one fluid roll. Dropping to a crouch, Rosary smiled confidently, the sacrificial dagger held loosely between fingers and thumb in the professional grip of a knife fighter.

Without even knowing it, Alex automatically adjusted his own position and saw Rosary's eyes narrow.

'So, play actor,' Rosary said softly, slowly circling his opponent, 'who are you really?'

Alex smiled, turning just as slowly, his every move matching that of the man opposite. So that together they looked like mirror figures or partners dancing.

'Don't you know?' Alex asked.

Rosary didn't bother to reply, but Alex saw his mouth tighten.

'Strange,' said Alex. 'I thought you'd remember me.' He held out one ungloved hand, to let Rosary see the scar.

It was a bad mistake.

Rosary's blow came so fast that it almost finished Alex before Alex even realised the other man was moving.

Time slowed as Rosary spun on his heel, his dagger blade driving forward and then, at the last minute Alex moved, flipping himself sideways onto the outside of the circle that Rosary had been turning. As he flicked through the air over the hired assassin, Alex struck. His blade opening a livid slash on Rosary's cheek.

Rosary's eyes widened. And Alex could see the other man make a swift mental adjustment.

'Enhanced, eh?' Rosary said. He smiled grimly. 'Don't you think that's cheating?' His voice was a mocking imitation of Alex' own.

'No.' Alex said softly, enjoying the flickers of doubt in the other man's eyes. 'I think it's necessary. How else do I get to kill you?'

He flipped sideways fast as an angry Rosary slashed at throat height. Rolling in close, Alex ducked in under the other man's extended knife arm. The way was open.

He was steadying his knife for a swift upward strike to the heart, when in the flash of an eye the man standing above him slickly swivelled his own dagger, until its blade faced the floor.

'Time.' Rosary whispered as he plunged his blade hard into Alex' back. Only sheer luck and animal instinct saved Alex from immediate death. That and extensive neural rewiring. As swift as the dagger came down, Alex dropped quicker, hitting the ground flat, belly down. Simultaneously his beinte-neube flicked round so its blade protruded sideways.

As Rosary's dagger sliced deep into Alex' right shoulder, shredding the fibres of his muscle, Alex' butterfly knife caught Rosary behind the right ankle, severing the man's Achilles tendon with an audible snap.

Both men went down in a raging, bloody heap. The noise of their ragged breathing harsh enough to override the hushed whispers of the crowd.

Desperately, Alex levered himself round to face upwards. So his wounded shoulder was against the earth, and the ground pressing up against his back slowed the loss of blood.

But it wasn't enough. Rosary was already above him, knelt on his chest, the dagger forcing down towards his throat. And Alex' butterfly knife was lying in the dirt, almost within reach but still too far away to be of any use.

Alex could feel his own muscles strung into whipcord as he pushed up against Rosary's wrist. But the other man had both body weight and gravity on his side.

Even so, Alex managed to hold Rosary's knife away from his own throat. Only too aware that his first falter meant immediate death.

The determination in Rosary's eyes turned to anger and then doubt as his victim continued to hold out against the pressing blade. The crowd had crept closer still, and now were standing pressed tightly together in a hushed circle.

Only in one place was the circle broken. Around the upright but silent figure of Mr Uu there an invisible boundary, as if everyone was afraid to get too close.

'Finish him,' the new Prince ordered Rosary, in a voice that was cold, irritated and distant. The retroVirus was unzipping his DNA faster than even cancer could rip apart growing cells, and he was trembling with fever and the weight of new memories.

'Do it now.'

That was when Razz walked into the chapel, stark naked, her body completely hairless, the light of a hundred candles reflecting off her silver skin as she moved smoothly out of the darkness towards the watching circle.

The crowd parted in silence, stunned by her nakedness, the alien quality of her features and the palpable sense of danger that radiated from her tensed body.

'Too bad,' she said, glancing briefly at Prince Sabatini's dead body. She looked at the masked, cloaked figure of the new Prince and smiled coldly. 'How's the headache, or didn't anyone warn you about that?'

Lee Uu said nothing. He was fighting the rising chant of unseen voices that quarrelled for recognition in his brain.

'Razz,'

'Razz,'

Both Rosary and Alex said it together. And the strange silver figure laughed. 'What it is to be wanted,' she said, her voice bleak with bitterness. Rosary flicked his glance towards the girl, and for a moment it looked as if her answering gaze might falter. As Alex watched, Razz forced herself to meet Rosary's eyes.

'Pick that up,' Rosary ordered her, nodding towards Alex' dropped butterfly knife.

Without a word Razz did as she was told.

'Now cut his throat,' Rosary ordered, increasing his pressure on Alex, until all of his enemy's effort was concentrated just on keeping Rosary's blade from travelling the last few inches.

Rosary smiled as Razz slave neatly spun the brass butterfly knife in her hands and knelt casually at Alex Gibson's head.

Rosary was still smiling when she swiftly flicked the knife from right hand to left, jabbed two rigid fingers through the jelly of his eyes and hooked her fingers down into his ruptured eye sockets. Before anyone had time to move, she'd forced back his head and slit open his throat, turning Rosary's anguished scream into a bubbling gurgle.

Going Underground

As Razz and Alex sprinted towards the back of the chapel, leaving the shocked congregation behind them, Maxine came to with a start. In the flick of a second she watched the new Prince pulled himself together. Or at least pulled together the different threads of thought, clamouring voices and conflicting memories that howled for attention inside his head.

Still within the same second, she understood that it would be a small matter after that for him to impose his will on the small congregation, that the hunt for Razz and Alex would soon begin in earnest.

True, two high officials had been murdered - but the situation was more serious than that. Virus like, the Order's hermetic, sealed borders had been breached. Already its ancient carefully-balanced ritual of transference was corrupted, incomplete.

Killing Alex and the silver girl as they fled might limit the damage, but the damage could not be undone. Lee Uu did not yet know that - but Maxine did. As surely as she knew her way around the catacombs and caverns. Not through knowledge or even experience, but from within where it was written like code in her blood.

'R-Razz.' She yanked at the silver girl's arm as Razz sprinted by, and had to duck fast as Razz pivoted on her toes and drop kicked at where Maxine's head had just been.

'It's m-me!' Maxine hissed. She saw Alex slide to a halt and gape with shock as he recognised Maxine and Ryu.

'Q-Quick. We'd better loose them,' Maxine said, as Ryu began desperately to ladle bundles of narcotic herbs onto a brazier, aiming to blind the still static congregation with thick smoke.

'Come on,' insisted Maxine. 'F-follow me.' She ducked into a tiny side chapel, scrambled over its alter and dropped through a hole in the floor. First Ryu and then Alex followed. Razz came last but whether she was standing guard or just deep in shock Alex couldn't say.

The brick-lined tunnel they all tumbled into looked oddly welcoming in the low orange burn of Alex infrared vision. His back wasn't hurting as much as it should have done either, for nanites in his blood were already clotting protectively round the edges of the wound.

The tunnel was entirely circular, no more than two hundred years old. Its air good enough to breath, if you could stand the clammy dampness and its sour mortuary smell.

'They b-built it without even knowing about the l-level above,' Maxine told Ryu. To Alex' surprise she didn't seem to have any trouble seeing what was going on around her.

'Come on,' Maxine said, 'we need to g-get down to another level.'

'Down?' Alex asked. All he wanted to do just then was get safely up to ground level as swiftly as possible.

'Down first,' insisted Maxine. 'Up later. There's at least five levels, even if you leave out the modern sewers and the Metro. That still leaves the catacombs and Roman quarries. As well as ossuaries and private vaults. You know how many dead there are down here? Over six million.'

One person at least was impressed. 'How do you know?' Ryu asked. Like Razz he was night blind, slipping and slithering on the thin trickle of sludge running stream-like in the middle of the tunnel. Behind him, he could hear the silver girl swearing quietly to herself, as she too splashed and stumbled in the pitch darkness.

'How do I k-know?' Maxine said. They were coming up to a turn and she suddenly began to listen with sudden intensity to the echo of her voice off the brick of the tunnel wall. 'I suppose I must have looked it up. Anyway,' she said, 'w-we should change tunnels now.'

'Here?' Alex asked, sounding bemused. The brick extended without break in both directions, and as far as Alex could see, the roof above was rock solid as well.

'There's another tunnel behind here... Razz?'

Razz didn't answer even when Maxine walked back to where Razz was standing, sweat beading her face, her recently exposed eyes blank in the darkness.

It was obvious from the way the silver girl's shoulders immediately tensed that Razz could hear Maxine's approach, even if she couldn't see it.

'It's m-me.' said Maxine, reaching out to take the other girl's hand. Angrily Razz jerked her own hand away.

'Get off my fucking back,' she hissed. .

'R-Razz.' Maxine whispered softly, her fingers reaching again for the other girl's tensed shoulder. 'It's okay, it's okay...' Rapidly Maxine started to pull up images of open sky and cypress groves from the depths of Razz' brain. She found streams that rustled silver in the hot sun, white-painted houses built of breeze block and mud brick, and a laughing black man with huge handlebar moustache and crinkled eyes narrowed against the bright daylight. Swiftly, Maxine concentrated on strengthening the images, the feelings - then cut them off cleanly. Sending them back to where they came from.

'Childhood's gone.' Maxine suddenly announced, her voice sympathetic but firm. 'Your father's dead. And so is Rosary.'

Maxine's hand dropped briefly down to brush across three labia rings, touch Razz shoulder implants at the point where lizard and chitin slid beneath skin and stop at Razz's eyes, where the silver contacts used to be. 'R-Rosary deserved everything he got,' said Maxine fiercely. 'You d-didn't. That's the d-difference...' Her fingers swiftly brushed the other girl's temples and without Razz realising it, the pain began to drain out of her.

Maxine shrugged herself out of the multi-pocketed, black kevlar jacket she was wearing. 'Here, use this. It's y-yours anyway.'

She wrapped the padded jacket round Razz's naked shoulders and led Razz passed Alex and Ryu to stand near the tunnel wall. 'There's another tunnel just behind h-here. Can you hear it?'

Razz tapped the brick and listened intently, while the others tried to hold their breath. Eventually, Razz pushed once or twice against the brick and slowly nodded. 'Through here,' she agreed, 'the wall's not that thick.'

'Then you can g-get us through?'

Razz smiled. Stood back to measure her distance and then kicked, splintering the wall in a crash of crumbling brick.

'They'll hear that.' Alex hissed in alarm.

'D-Doubt it,' said Maxine, scrambling through the hole. 'But it doesn't m-matter if they do. We have to fight Lee Uu on our g-ground, not his.'

'Our ground?' Ryu asked, still sounding puzzled.

Maxine nodded - which being night blind Ryu couldn't see - and Alex realised with shock that Maxine had begun to enjoy herself.

'C-Come on,' she insisted, 'we need to m-move.'

The new tunnel was also brick at first. But as it narrowed and started to slope down, the crumbling brick gave way to rock; deep chisel scars on the tunnel sides showing where blocks of stone had been split away.

Along its damp floor ran parallel tracks, worn deep into the rock by the passage of heavily loaded sleds carrying cut stone for transport to the surface.

Every fifty paces of so, the narrow tunnel widened out into a rubble-strewn room where the blocks of rock had been cut away to twice human height. Long shafts vanished up towards the surface.

'M-Medieval quarries,' said Maxine, 'It gets more interesting in a m-moment.'

'Tell me about it,' Razz felt her way gingerly along a damp, roughly hewn wall. 'And find me a fucking torch while you're at it. I can't see in the dark like you.' She paused. 'How come you got night vision anyway, eh?'

'I was b-born with it,' said Maxine. 'That and eight c-colours to the rainbow.'

'What?' Ryu and Alex asked together.

'Most p-people see seven, I see eight.'

'Something to do with the frequency of light,' Alex said, flicking his own vision through normal, infrared and M-wave, checking the difference.

'What about the w-wind?' Maxine asked.

Alex looked blank.

'I see that t-too,' she said. 'There's a b-breeze blowing towards us. That's what we've been f-following for the last hour.'

There wasn't much the others could say.

'Where are you taking us?' Razz asked eventually.

'To link up with Makai.' Ryu answered for her. 'We got a box and some trodes. He's sort of here now, with Alex, but he isn't properly turned on. We need power.'

'Electric?' That was Alex. From his face it was obvious he wasn't too happy with Ryu's talk of Makai being there already.

'Mainline fibre optics, mains electricity, the works,' said Ryu. 'Anything to throw up a pattern of interference. But there's more to it than that.' Ryu put his hand hesitantly on the shoulder of the young princess. 'There are other kinds of power, you know. I think we should keep following Maxine.'

She led them out of the last underground quarry and into a brick-dressed tunnel so narrow they had to move single file. Walking through the pitch darkness, Razz got the feeling they'd stopped dropping down and were beginning to climb back towards the surface again.

Eventually they were brought to a halt by a small gate fashioned from crumbling wrought iron.

'R-Razz,' Maxine said, standing the other girl in front of the gate, so that Razz could use her hands to work out what she was facing..

Its rusted lock snapped with a single kick and they found themselves in an ossuary; surrounded by dried-out bones, hollow-eyed and grinning skulls and the occasional desiccated corpse. All of it, every grisly relic neatly piled onto shelves cut in the wall.

Room after charnel room followed.

And with each lock that Razz kicked in, the corpses became less dried out, less neatly stacked and more obviously rancid. The cold air grew thicker, with a heavy, sour stink that pulled at the back of the throat.

And as the dead began to look less like clean skeletons and more like rotted bodies, their grave clothes grew more modern. Winding sheets and tattered shrouds gave way to trousers, linen smocks and dresses. One entire room was give up to rows of over-dressed small boys with frock coats and stove pipe top hats fashioned from black cardboard.

'How much more?' Alex said, gasping for air.

'Remember Maxine's six million?' Razz answered. 'It could be miles.'

In the event, the end appeared within minutes, as they ran into a modern steel door, with a square glass window. On the other side, brightly lit and painted in an institutional green, was what looked like a souvenir shop.

Skull

They went through the door, the electronic tumblers clicking shut behind them. Ryu looking touchingly pleased with himself as he stuffed 'trodes and a small neoA-designed smartbox into his Levi pockets.

'Sunday,' Alex said, glancing at a ceramic sign treated to look like old-fashioned enamel. 'Closed for the afternoon.'

Around them other signs in German, English and Japanese begged customers not to smoke, and reminded visitors that the catacombs were not suitable for very young children, asthma sufferers or those who believed in the absoluteness of the final resurrection.

A bank of video screens wired into simple headsets offered the true story of the catacombs. Further along a credit chip reader and row of VR helmets offered a slicker, paid-for version of the same thing.

Trays of toys were laid out at a height chosen to attract bored and irritated children.

'Jez-zus,' Razz exclaimed, holding up a plastic skull with Paris stamped in gothic lettering across its forehead. 'Who buys this stuff?'

'About two million t-tourists each year,' Maxine answered without thinking, and blushed. 'I p-probably looked it up for an essay,' she added hastily, glancing at Ryu.

The metal door they'd just come through had large no entry, staff only and protective clothing must be worn stickers attached to the shop side. There were three other doors, two of which were an entrance and exit to the catacombs for tourists, the other had the same collection of peeling stickers as the one they'd come through in the first place.

'I guess it's this one then,' said Razz, standing back to let Ryu do his thing. The serious-faced Japanese boy licked the 'trodes, attached them to forehead and began to flick his fingers over the surface of the box. There was a whirr from within the door and then a series of clicks as deadbolts drew back.

'Gotta buy me one of these,' Razz said with a grin. 'Banks, shops, pharmacies. I could do some serious damage...'

They were back in a tunnel, only this time Ryu and Razz were both wearing cheap plastic specs, their lenses treated with a thin coating of infra-red filter. On the outside, one lens said Paris, the other had a small hologram of a grinning skull. Above the nose piece was a small battery that trickle fed the circuits around the edge of the specs.

They didn't reveal that much, but somehow just having them made Razz and Ryu feel happier. As she walked, Razz chewed on one of the chocolate bars she'd looted from the shop, Ryu chewed on another and so did Maxine. Alex wasn't hungry.

The stone roof was now so low everyone had to crouch as they walked, but the air was cleaner and without the sickly, corrupt smell of the earlier tunnels. And welcome draughts of fresh air occasionally swept out from cracks deep in the wall.

Ahead was a vast low room easily the size of a warehouse, piled floor to ceiling with bones stripped completely clean of any flesh.

Someone had carefully sorted out the broken skeletons, putting a thousand femurs and tibias neatly into one pile; stacking ulna, radius and humerous tidily into another.

Whole breastbones were piled together like bird cages in a market. There were also stacks of minor, more anonymous bones crammed densely together into tall white pillars. Alex could easily believe that only the bone pillars kept the ceiling from falling in.

'The m-main ossuary,' Maxine said in a low voice. 'We must be g-getting close.' She led them down the maze-like aisles between the bone piles, oblivious to the icons of mortality around her.

At the far end of the room was a small tunnel with a niche over its entrance. Inside the niche someone had sat the skeleton of a still-born baby between two tallow candles. A pewter

mug was by its tiny right hand and the bone fingers of its left rested protectively on the horn handle of an artisan's knife. Above the niche were words carved in latin, but they were filled in with dark lichen and lost under cobwebs and dirt.

'Wonder what it means.' Ryu said, pointing at the writing.

Maxine looked suddenly serious. 'You d-don't want to know.' She paused, pushing damp strands of her long black hair out of her eyes, her fingers ridged with cold. It was taking every ounce of her will power not to shiver. The bitter cold had been leaching heat from her body for the last two hours, but she was determined not to ask Razz for the coat back.

Moving towards a narrow side tunnel, Maxine said, 'This is where it s-starts to get d-difficult.'

'Starts!' Razz's harsh laughter exploded off the walls, echoing round the low room.

Maxine ducked down into the tunnel entrance. 'Two things to r-remember,' she said over her shoulder. The place of Skulls was the only part of the catacombs that m-made my grandfather afraid, and according to Lady Clare there's a fibre-optic c-cable in here somewhere. Which we need to f-find before the others arrive.'

'How the hell will they know where to come?' Alex asked angrily.

'Oh, they'll k-know all right.' Maxine kept her voice studiously casual. 'Mr Uu's been tracking you - I can feel his thoughts. We need to find that c-cable, and we don't have much time. Ten minutes maybe, fifteen if we're lucky.'

'And then what?' Razz asked.

'Then we w-win, and if we're lucky we get out alive. Or we d-don't win, in which case we're dead, if we're lucky...'

Maybe it was what Maxine had said, but as soon as they came out in the Place of Skulls Alex was aware of a prickling at the back of his neck. The air in the chamber even seemed colder and the darkness somehow darker. Even the orange glow of his night vision had dulled to a hellish, deep blood red. There were skulls all around him, grinning and hollow eyed, piled into huge pyramids or laid out in complex cabalistic patterns on the cold stone floor.

The whole room echoed with malicious whispers that mumbled and muttered just below the threshold of his hearing. Within seconds his teeth were shivering with alternate bouts of extreme cold and burning fever, as Alex convinced himself he was dying, poisoned by Rosary's blade or by the mutated blood that had gushed from the Prince out into his face.

'S-Stop it.' Maxine insisted, grabbing his face between her hands. For a second Alex fought the calming waves that rolled over him, then he let them come as images of a young boy followed a rainbow arched over rolling, green English countryside. But neither memory lasted, blasted aside by the approaching siren of an ambulance, the dark, lethal silhouette of a spinning aerospatialle 119, and finally flames.

Maxine dropped her hands from his face as if burnt.

'We need to find that c-cable,' she said hastily, and started towards a distant corner of the room without looking back.

It was Razz who found it, slung untidily along the low ceiling, coming in through one hole and going out twenty paces later through another.

'Guess it belongs to the tourist company who rents the catacombs,' she said flatly.

'Looks modern enough.'

'Can you splice into it?' Ryu asked.

Razz looked at Alex and then back at Ryu. 'Can birds fly, does his holiness wear a big hat?' Without bothering to ask, she flipped Alex' butterfly knife from the sheath on his belt, folded open its handle and absent-mindedly wiped it clean on the bottom of her kevlar jacket, as she began to search through its compartments with her other hand.

'Got any wire?' Razz asked Ryu, pulling Lady Clare's grey box out of an inside poacher pocket.

Lady Clare's grey box rested on the stone floor, a thin strand of commercial quality optix leading out and back to the thicker loop dangling overhead. A set of 'trodes were coiled up to one side of the box. There'd been a small Walkwear keyboard hidden in its base, but Razz now had that Velcroed to her wrist.

Razz, Alex and Maxine were sitting cross-legged in a circle, Razz's wrap-round infrareds making it look like she was sunbathing in the dark. If she felt exposed or embarrassed to be naked from the waist down she didn't let it show. And if Alex was unusually aware of her nakedness, he was too polite to let on. Whereas Ryu, who was only too aware of the silver girl's state, was far too embarrassed even to look at her. Razz thought that was rather sweet.

'So,' Alex said to Maxine. 'Ryu rides the Cy, you talk to some ghost I can't see, and Razz and I just sit here waiting. For some horde of screaming maniacs to turn up.'

Crossly, Maxine shook her head. 'Razz goes into the Cy and r-rides tail-gunner with Johnnie.'

'Johnnie?' Alex interrupted.

'He's already d-decked up and waiting, over at Lady Clare's.' With an effort Maxine fought down her rising frustration. 'I only know what Lady Clare told Ryu. That you're to r-ride the Cy without any 't-trodes.' She stuttered over the slang, her voice uneasy.

'That's impossible,' said Razz.

Maxine shrugged crossly. 'I hope not. Because if Alex c-can't do it, we're d-dead. Razz,' Maxine's hand briefly brushed the other girl's bare knee. 'It's t-time... get going...'

The elder girl absent-mindedly licked both 'trodes and casually stuck one each side on her temples. There was a slight shift, as swift as a snake's flick of nictous membrane and then she was gone. Somewhere else. Her body was still there, but heavy REM behind her specs and a swift, almost reptilian nodding of her head showed she was already in there and riding.

The fingers of her right hand tapped rapidly over the keyboard strapped to her left wrist, then paused. For a second she tilted her head slightly to one side.

'That's probably Johnnie,' Ryu said proudly. 'Introducing himself.' 'The world isn't simple,' Razz broke in, then paused, listening. 'Different people call the same thing by different names... Those are Makai's words,' she added carefully, 'This is what he wants to tell Alex.'

Huddled in the darkness, his back to an elaborately arranged pile of skulls, Alex nodded.

'What you call tek,' Razz said carefully, 'Maxine still calls magic. What Austrians call the subconscious, Navajos call the ghost world. What difference is there really between dreamtime, ghost dancing, astral travel and the Cy? Perspective only. I see this, you do not.'

Razz' eyes were glazed, her whole mind taken up with listening to the voice the others couldn't hear.

'Consider your brain. Has it evolved dramatically in the last 500, 5000, 10,000 years? No. All that's changed is access to information. 87% of your mind still isn't used, it's just waits there. As empty, as pointless as the million futile databits of junk DNA.'

'Through Lady Clare I have rewired the axons, the dendrites, the synaptic links of your brain, to let you access that other 87%. Of course, I intended a plain swop with S3 - you for my memory. Your memory for mine. But, it seems, Lady Clare will give me much more than that, once I have given her Section Three. So now I offer you back your memories. But first you must take the locks off my mind.'

'Who are you?' Alex asked.

'How can I be sure?' Charles Mayer was the only person who knew for certain, and the Prince had him killed. What's left of my logic says I'm a conscious, quantum processor - a multiple, alternative-kernal artificial intelligence. In all probability, I'm the world's only quantum driven AI.'

'Why only?' Ryu asked. 'I mean, how do you know?'

'Because I don't sense any others.'

'Perhaps they were shut down.'

There was a stillness, as Razz' head slumped forward slightly. When she glanced up Razz seemed almost shocked to find Alex staring at her. They both blushed. Then her eyes flickered and she was listening again.

'No others.' She said firmly. 'They'd have left clues and there aren't any.' 'So what do you want from me?' Alex asked seriously.

'That you find what the Order took from Charles Mayer without knowing what they had. The neural code that joins together my memories. By nature I work across parallel states. Whether binary code is 0 or 1 depends not on an absolute but on who's asking, even on why they're asking. All possible answers, at all possible times, in infinite parallel.'

'I want you to find me again. Ride the shockwaves, be invisible, pass through ice like a ghost, just find the missing bits of me. In return I'll give you a permanent mental interface, your own internal digital god. You will be the Cy.'

'And should I refuse?'

'Then I let you die - and the world loses its next renaissance. Of course,' Makai added, speaking through Razz, 'If you don't agree, then Razz, Maxine and Ryu will die also...'

Alex saw the silver girl's eyes widen as she relayed the last part of that message.

'And after all,' said Makai, tripping the trapdoor in Alex' mind, 'Don't you owe the world a life?'

Flames roared up the inside of Alex' eyes and then he felt it. A low crack, almost subsonic, and a sudden indescribable burst of pressure as a chopped off scream ricocheted off the edges of his mind.

Fire was already licking up white walls streaked with sickly red enamel. Black smoke from a burning bed rolled up towards a splattered, cracked ceiling. Alex was on his knees, beating at the air, choking on his tears. 'Bastard,' Alex snarled, fighting to stop his hands from shaking, 'that wasn't my fault.'

'Maybe not,' Makai said through Razz, 'but don't you need to wipe it clean?'

Vampire in the hall of mirrors

With the sudden tripping by Makai of a single neuron, synapse after synapse inside Alex' brain began to fire in sequence, as axons and dendritic nerves around the bioClay implant carried and caught new signals - flooding both cortex and cerebellum. One minute Alex was crawling blindly across the floor, one arm wrapped tight round his face, protection against flames which no one else could see. And then the gates of perception flipped and he was in free fall.

Far, far below was a small sphere spun from a complex tracery of moving light. Beyond that a blue emptiness with no wall or boundary that Alex could see. As Alex' eyes locked onto the spun gold globe, his mind began to judge distances, launching fresh waves of nausea to sweep through him.

Each time his gaze fixed on the distant globe, the whole sky went into a spin, until the globe flicked times and again across his sight like an amphetamine moon speeding endlessly across the face of heaven.

'Shut your eyes,' someone shouted in his ear.

Alex jumped.

'Shut them,' insisted the voice. And this time Alex did, feeling some kind of sanity slowly began to creep back into his frightened mind.

'Razz?' Alex said hopefully, risking one peep through half closed eyelids.

The universe rocked.

'No way man, it's Johnnie. Ain't you ever jockeyed before?'

There was a silence.

'Fuckin' hell,' said Johnnie crossly. 'No one said anything about you being a bloody virgin. I suppose that's why you can't hold still.'

'Where am I?' Alex asked. Even he could hear the crackle of fear distorting his voice.

'Where? You're in space, Man. Inside the Cy,' said Johnnie. 'Machining the matrix? Hanging in the well?.' Johnnie sighed, heavily. And when he spoke again his voice had assumed the irritating singsong of an Ad jingle. 'Things to remember,' he said. 'Part 1, it don't exist; part 2, you're in here anyway so you might as well get used to it.'

Johnnie paused, 'What kind of deck you using?'

'Deck?' Alex asked.

'He ain't using no deck,' Razz said so close to Alex' ear that he jumped. 'Yeah, I know that's impossible. But it's true. No wires, no deck. Just a neat neural match. Gather you might have had something to do with that?'

From then on in things got simpler, though that was probably an illusion. It had recently occurred to Alex that most things were.

Listening to Johnnie, Alex steadied his breathing and very slowly opened his eyes. He was floating inside the Cy again, with Johnnie beside him, wearing a completely unnecessary pair of mirror shades and a long, Isadora Duncan red silk scarf. Only, this time the matrix didn't immediately start spinning around him.

'Where's Razz?' Alex asked.

Immediately a shadow, thin as silk and dark as night spun into a solid figure next to him. Razz hanging naked in space. As Alex looked her she began to fade away.

'You can tune us in or out,' Johnnie said helpfully. He glanced hungrily at Razz's disappearing nakedness, shot a sideways glance at Alex, and shrugged. 'Here or not, what the hell, it's your call. But either way, get going. You're running out of time.'

Alex couldn't remember asking him to vanish, but when he looked again Johnnie was gone.

All Alex could see around him was an infinite blue that stretched away like a pale summer sky. Somehow, from what he'd read, he'd been expecting the Cy to be darker and colder. Even as he thought it, the restful blue deepened down to a jumpy, electric neon.

'Lighter.' The brightness came up a bit like tapping the slider on a screen. The Cy could be made to run from a pitch black night around a white hot central sphere, to a muted orb of smoky orange surrounded by a sphere of palest duck egg blue.

He wasn't adjusting the hue at all, he realised. It was his perceptions of them that changed. In the real world, colour was the reflection of certain frequencies of light. Here it was a concept. Things that had been hidden came into focus once he adjusted his cerebral frequency.

In the centre was where the spun web was most complex, and where a single white-hot dot turned out, on closer inspection, to be composed of a whole financial district of pulsing data, but the complexity simplified and dimmed down in the valleys where residence was cheaper, or up in the anonymity of one of a dozen or so orbiting moons.

Because exploring the matrix was new to him, Alex wasn't sure how much of what he ascertained was true discovery and how much was merely old hat. There were white hot datacores that turned out on inspection to be illusory, information ghost towns, as if every scrap of data had been sucked out but somebody had forgotten to click out the lights.

At city level, over Edo, M'dina, independent California and the East Coast sprawl were elaborate logo constructs; a vast Mickey Mouse for Disney, a fluted Coca Cola bottle, the familiar double V of Volkswagon, all seen only by those who actually used the Cy, all the product of thousands of hours of company time.

There were other, huge constructs that were already crumbling, their edges blurred or broken away. Zaibatus that had been asset-stripped or left bankrupt in one of the recent corporate wars.

At the next level down, somewhere between micro and close up, there hung walls of black ice, huge cold invisible nets that would have tangled into knots around him except he passed ghost-like through them.

There was vanity ice too, completely pointless but very beautiful, reflecting back an endless fractal of what it saw. That was Alex most interesting discovery. Where ice was concerned, he had no reflection. It didn't matter how many times he slid up alongside it. Like a vampire in a hall of mirrors, he saw only that he wasn't really there.

And when he stumbled over what he was in there to find, almost without realising that he had, it was by accident. Hanging with his back to the electronic brightness of the globe, staring out towards the distant sky he realised there were dozens of distinct, disparate areas of the Cy that his eyes simply slid over without stopping.

They were hanging out there, transparent, taking their hue from whatever was around them, and his eyes just refused to admit it.

'Out there,' he said excitedly. And Johnnie appeared as if by magic at his elbow.

'Where?' Johnnie asked, forcing Alex to point again, but without success.

'Out there in the sky...'

'That's not the sky,' said Razz, without bothering to materialise. 'That's the Edge.'

But no matter how hard Johnnie screwed up his eyes and peered into the distance he could see nothing but blue emptiness.

'Your time's running out,' Razz warned Alex, 'So if there is something out there, hurry the fuck up with those co-ordinates.'

Unbidden, numbers began to appear behind Alex's eyes and he read them off slowly as they scrolled down his vision.

'Nothing,' said Johnnie finally.

'Razz?' Alex asked.

'Not that I can see.' She sounded apologetic.

But the areas were there. Alex just knew it.

Alex attempted to move in on the transparent matter and found he couldn't. And yet the only thing to prevent him was himself. Instinctively he tried aiming for a point beyond its edge and flowed effortlessly passed it, the Cy unfolding in fractal patterns around him as he slid through information space.

When Alex looked back he could see the central matrix hanging where it should have done. All the same, he knew with a burning certainty that one part of what he looked for was there between him and the filigreed patterns of the central core.

He had no sense of having passed anything unusual. And got no feeling that anything had sensed him. Maybe that was Razz and Johnnie's doing, Alex wasn't too sure what riding shotgun in the Cy actually meant.

He hung there longer than he should. Razz Makai's increasingly urgent pleas to begin searching again. Hung there, unattached, motionless and unseen. Streams of data scrolling through his head, logic paths forming, fracturing and forming again.

Idly, Alex wondered what would happen if the invisible ever reacted with the invisible, and then it came to him. Not in a flash of light or a roaring wind but as a small, central certainty. He hadn't found what he was searching for, but what he was searching for had found him.

'Makai?' He demanded, and next to him a waiting shadow flicked instantly from transparent gauze to almost solid flesh. The pretty boy of his earlier dreams was gone, along with the flowing curls, now the face was older, harder.

'Time's nearly up for you,' Makai warned bleakly. 'Mr Uu's got a fix on Maxine. The Order are closing off the tunnels. You need to make your move...'

Alex shrugged, and wondered if his casualness was really fooling Makai. Somehow he doubted it.

'Those things out there,' Alex said, the sweep of his arm indicating half a dozen transparent areas strung out along the outer edge of the Cy. 'You don't see them do you?'

Makai shook his head.

'Sure?'

Alex saw Makai squint out into the distance.

'Unformatted space,' Makai said heavily. He sounded appalled at the prospect.

'Fair enough,' said Alex. Inside his brain random hunches were knitting together into a certainty. 'Where are you in the Cy?'

'Here, right next to you.'

'No. I mean point yourself out to me, show me your physical point of presence.' Alex gazed down to at the matrix, and felt it shift as he automatically closed in on a curved horizon luminous with data highways and bright digital cities. They were over Manhattan.

'I'm not there,' said Makai.

'You never looked?' Alex asked, already knowing the answer.

'But I'm already here.' Makai said petulantly.

'Find me Razz.' Alex demanded.

Makai nodded, and everything blurred. When the Cy refocused, they were hanging above a digital simulacrum of Paris, and far below them wired into the insignificant data-path of a minor tourist facility was a extra node.

'Mayer lied,' Alex said with certainty. 'You aren't the computer at all, you're its start-up program. That box of Lady Clare's is the quantum equivalent of a highly-sophisticated BIOS, if that isn't too big a contradiction in terms. The real MAKAI is out there, broken up and buried under enough high-grade reflective to sink the Titanic. And you know what else..?'

Makai stayed silent, but Alex could see from the way his outline firmed that he was busy listening, assimilating and taking new data on board.

'That ice isn't there to keep away people like me, though that's a neat added extra. It's intended to keep bits of you from tripping over each other.'

Alex smiled grimly. 'Charles Mayer must have figured he'd found a direct line to God. Alex paused, ordering his thoughts. 'You can stay safe in that grey box you know, and still out think any commercially available semi-AI. Or I can reload you, maybe recreate the whole. Either way, you recreate my memories and help me keep Razz and the others safe. Otherwise,' Alex indicated the matrix, 'I'll go in there and pull the plug on you myself.'

They worked out the strategy between them, in a matter of seconds, debating briefly where the actual hardware sites might be. In the end they decided it didn't really matter. By the time anyone in authority realised that MAKAI had been recommissioned, the fragments that sat parasite-like on other systems would be data-linked and the AI would be up and running. Without doubt, it would be more than able to protect itself.

The move was almost zen in its simplicity. Alex withdrew out to the Edge, so high above the matrix that he could swear invisible, impossible electronic winds blew data-fragments into his pale blue eyes and made rats' tails of his long ponytail. And then, with Razz, Johnnie and Makai riding at his shoulder, he aimed himself at a point in the far distance and with stunning, balletic fluidity dived through first one, then another and another area of absolute nothing.

In the process he passed ghost-like through the entire matrix, moving so swiftly that not one ice station, star surfer or black jockey even registered his presence.

But the explosion that followed was recorded around the world. A sheet of lightening flared across the matrix, from edge to edge. The very sky solarised as it lit white and then faded.

For a nano-second a golden data highway ran, constellation like around the edge of the sphere, as if the matrix had suddenly acquired a mantle. And then just as suddenly everything settled back to normal. No one saw the opaque, reflective emptiness stretch out until it melded with the Cy's outer Edge, or noted that a small data node in an insignificant Parisian submatrix flared briefly and died.

'Jez-zus,' Razz said, ripping smoking 'trodes from her temples. 'How the fuck did he do that?' She was rocking to and fro, clutching at her bare knees. A sour, animal stink had filled her nostrils and with a shudder she realised it was her own. Her whole upper body was slick with sweat under her coat.

Opposite her Alex slept, his head fallen forward on his chest, his face impassive and drained of any emotion. His chest had that slow, steady rise and fall usually found in resting children.

'Hey!' Razz prodded Alex's shoulder hard but he didn't even stir. 'Shit,' she swung round to Maxine, wondering if she was asleep too. But she was sat on the floor, wide eyed but silent. At her shoulder stood Ryu, dropped into a fighter's crouch, facing into the darkness. His face set, his breathing steady. But nothing could disguise the nervous shake in his hands.

'What is it honey?' Razz asked Maxine.

The young girl struggled to speak, nervously licking at her lips and struggling to break through her stutter.

'Take you time,' suggested Razz, but that just made the girl more frightened than ever.

'No t-time left,' she whispered finally, 'h-he's already out there, I can f-feel him.' A lone tear trickling down her cheek. 'While you were all d-dreaming, Mr Uu blocked off the t-tunnels.'

'He knows we're in here?' Razz asked.

'Not yet. I've screened us from him, but I'm g-getting so t-tired.' Maxine's lips were grey-blue with cold and her jaw chattered uncontrollably.

'If he don't know we're in here. We still got surprise. We can take him,' Razz insisted. Her lean arms snaked round the girl's shoulders and gave her a quick hug. 'Honey,' she said, clambering to her feet, 'you ain't ever seen me fight. Not for real.' She flicked open Alex's butterfly knife and grinned.

Try as she might, Maxine couldn't stop her answering smile from slipping away. 'You don't understand,' she told Razz sadly. 'He c-could snuff out your mind like a c-candle before you get close enough to use that knife.'

'That so? Razz said. 'Then how we kill this man?'

Maxine thought about it.

Routines

'That's it then,' Makai said, his voice distant, almost an echo. 'You want me, I'm here. Though...' he sounded almost apologetic, 'the bit of me you know as me is now just the sub-routine of a sub-routine.'

'And the Cy?' Alex asked.

'Waiting for you when you want it. But now,' said Makai, 'you should prepare yourself.'

'Prepare myself?' Alex knew it sounded stupid. But he repeated it anyway. Makai was withdrawing from his mind, and Alex wasn't ready for that.

'I never was human,' Makai said gently, speaking from a great distance. 'You were, but not for much longer. Your brain's got more hardware than a stealth shockwave rider. Your nervous system's been rewired, and your DNA's re-replicating to a template imposed by proteins in the Prince's blood.' Alex didn't even know which statement to question first. Once again, there didn't seem much to say.

'Power is not about capacity but about use.' Makai said, and then he was gone, tendrils of retreating thought wisping through Alex's mind like smoke in the wind, leaving the faintest flash of light.

Mental fireflies.

Shuddering, Alex watched the spark reborn further away, and suddenly realised that what he saw as a firefly was just one node in a vast, ultra-fast passage of thought across the circuits of his mind.

He watched the spark again and this time held it until it stretched out in the darkness like a twisting neon tube. He tried again, and the twist of neon extended as Alex realised that either he was slowing down the pattern or else his own observations were speeding up.

Soon his head was filled with an endless tube of neon that knitted together and separated, in a seemingly limitless permutation of sets and subsets. Stunned, Alex stepped back to watch synapses open and shut, the passage of thought as clear as rushing headlights on thousands of otherwise-deserted twisting roads.

It was a small mental shift from individual roads to a whole traffic system. And as space shifted around him, Alex realised that he was overseeing a fragment of the hideously complex three dimensional interchange of information that was his own brain.

And beyond the edges of the interchange were larger areas of darkness where the traffic seemed just to stop. Except that thought couldn't simply dissolve, any more than could other forms of data.

Jumping a spark, he rode it on a roller-coaster ride through the twisting neon, but always spark and neon vanished together - even though Alex knew with burning certainty that both must keep going beyond that cerebral frontier.

'Why?' He muttered angrily.

Behind him someone laughed, unkindly. Alex spun round, seeing nothing except the flash and flare of his own jumpy thoughts

'Please allow me to introduce myself,' said a low voice. 'Maurice de Pommerol Melusine, Prince Sabatini, duca di Gatapardo, marchese Severino, conte Cortnai, barone Corvo...' the ironic, whispered litany of titles rolled on. Dry as wind through parched grass.

'What are you doing here?' Alex asked, even as he realised the answer. *The Prince was there, as he was in Lee Uu; split incarnations, as alike as any program and its copy.*

'We're all here,' the Prince said flatly. 'Every single Grand Master since the Order began.' He paused, momentarily puzzled. 'Aren't you the man who killed me?'

Alex didn't really know how to answer.

'I was dying already,' said the voice, 'but I'd still like to thank you.'

'Wake up!' Razz hissed, digging her knuckles hard into a nerve point in Alex's jaw. Used properly, the move could reduce even trained street samurai to screaming tears. Alex didn't even move. So in desperation Razz reached between his legs, felt through the blood splattered cloth of his trousers until she found his testicles, and twisted.

When that didn't work, she grabbed his left hand, found the little finger and viciously snapped it.

'It's no good,' said Maxine, 'I think he's dying.'

Alex knew where he was now, what he should do. Medical information he didn't even know he had came rushing to his aid. Graphix of the brain, CT scans, MRIs megabytes of bioTek data flowed through him, pin-pointing his position until he staggered under the weight of incoming information.

He was at the base of the brain - while the analytical part of his mind, his cortex, was at the brain's crumpled outer edge, and between the two was a dark wasteland Alex couldn't consciously cross.

It didn't matter that he now knew bundles of axons connected the two areas, that in the grey outer edge were millions beyond millions of nerve cells, each octopus-like with dendritic legs waited to receive any neuro impulses he might send them, should his influence ever reach that far.

Time and again the barrier held him in. And Alex was all but ready to give up when an idea came to him... Approaching the dark wall by himself, not riding a nerve signal but slowly, softly as fog passes through a shutter, he slid unhindered between one state and the next, passing from sanity into hell.

'Jez-zus!' Hatred he didn't know he had, slights and shames he assumed long forgotten all crowded in on snatches of his fall into the gutters of M'dina. Tracer trails of thought fired up into the darkness that was the white central matter of his cerebral cortex, like the tail of a child's rocket that vanished out of sight instead of falling back to the earth.

Unknown to Alex, his brain started to synthesize gamma-NFG, a nerve growth drug, even as minute doses of SRS automatically inhibited his adult brain's inbuilt reluctance to connect with new nerve tissue.

In the twisted grey, flannel-like folds at his brain's outside edge axons burnt white hot, in a stutter of synaptic fire, as neurotransmitters linked first the horizontal then the pyramidal cells, axon to dendrite in a spreading neural net.

Webs began to grow within webs. When the whole of the grey matter was linked, the new matrix began to replicate, virus like, with the inner edge of his grey matter recreating itself as it ate down the simplistic neural paths of the brain's central white matter, moving down towards his brain stem, burning in newer, more complex connections.

Alex was instantly shaken by the space that exploded around him. Vast, apparently empty areas ripped open, revealing areas already littered with technological debris. Wafer thin plates of bioClay nestled between his frontal lobes, looking as if they'd been shaped by some thermographic process to ensure perfect fit. A complex optic link on a three-way splice in his Pons allowed almost-instant transfer rates between cortex, cerebellum and spinal cord.

Alex didn't want to admit it, but he actually terrified himself with the speed of his thoughts and sheer quantify of data he could now draw upon. But beyond the San Lorenzo tampering, there were bigger changes of which the colonising of white matter by grey was just the first.

In his bone marrow, DNA was being unravelled and restrung. The c/d3 suicide gene responsible for cell death had already been reprogrammed, while a p53 protein set itself to slow down his body's ageing process.

And all this not the product of advanced Geneticist research, but the result of a hermetic, cabalistic 800 year old recipe for eternal life. What Alex wanted to do next was think it all over.

Into the mirror

'Honey, just what do I have to do to wake this poor fucker?' Razz asked, snapping a third finger at its knuckle. Alex shifted uneasily, but still didn't wake.

Ryu said nothing. He still didn't trust the silver girl, and anyway he was far too busy watching the door as Maxine had told him.

As for Maxine, she couldn't answer because she was beyond talk. Her wide-open eyes were stark with terror, and a nervous tic pulled repeatedly at one corner of her mouth.

Razz didn't need telling that Maxine's girl's fear made more sense than her own irritation with the comatose man in front of her.

'Oh shit,' said Razz crossly and dislocated Alex's thumb with a vicious jerk. He shuddered and snapped open his eyes. 'Always works,' she muttered darkly.

'About time. There's a fucking army out there,' Razz told him, casually wrenching his thumb back into place.

'I know,' said Alex, immediately sensing a crowd enter the catacomb beyond the chamber's narrow entrance. 'Lee Uu knows he's close, but not exactly where we are. Maxine's holding him at bay.'

'Really?' Razz shot a puzzled glance at the young princess. 'I thought all that magic stuff was so much bullshit.'

'Bullshit?' said Ryu crossly, one of his hands rested on the silent girl's rigid shoulder but his eyes never left the door. 'Look at her,' he said, 'can't you see it's killing her?'

Leaning across, Alex touched Maxine gently on the wrist and felt her tension melt away at his touch. Ryu caught her as she slumped forward, letting her down gently, until she lay rolled into a fetal ball on her side.

'He'll s-see us,' Maxine whispered, between gasps.

'Without doubt,' replied Alex. 'But we need to fight, and what else can we do?' Alex was horrified to realise he was actually looking forward to the coming battle.

'Right,' said Razz, climbing to her feet at the word fight and pulling an indignant Ryu up after her. 'Perhaps you'd like to tell Ryu and me what the fuck you expect us to do?'

But there wasn't time for strategy, as it turned out. When Lee Uu attacked, he attacked hard - no subtle feints or sophisticated manoeuvres. With only one narrow tunnel into the chamber, Lee Uu wasn't worried about containing his prey. Now he knew where they were, all he needed was to kill them quickly, then stamp his authority on the restless, pitiful collection of diplomats, politicians and salarimen milling blindly around him.

The Order's elegant, mysterious ceremony had turned sour. Its members were trapped in the damp, foul-smelling gloom of an out-of-the-way ossuary. And though their minds were still dulled by incense, opium smoke and the narcotics of chant and ritual, Lee Uu could sense that already they were showing a dangerous discontent.

Lee Uu moved quietly between them, picked two almost at random and shone a light stick briefly at the narrow doorway that led into the Chamber of Skulls. Both recoiled at their fleeting sight of the tiny skeleton enthroned over its door, but they went anyway, creeping silently into the darkness.

Lee Uu didn't hear them die but he felt it, a quick flare of fear and then nothing. Whatever had happened, it was too fast to be the plunge of a knife or the thud of a blow.

'You and you,' he said, shining a light at two others. 'Go and help them.' He watched the next pair duck down under the entrance lintel, then closed his eyes in concentration, as they moved nervously down the narrow tunnel. Again he felt the flare and the silence, but this time he recognised it for what it was.

Another adept.

Which meant the Englishman had successfully mutated. Lee Uu felt further and met the edges of another mind. It felt amused and barely human.

'Welcome,' it said darkly. And then the other mind and its sense of amusement vanished - leaving a cold echo darkness.

Inside the chamber, Alex shivered. Bluff was dangerous, but it might turn out to be all he'd got. When he looked up Razz was watching him, a hungry expression on her face.

'You killed them, didn't you?' Razz said. Alex could feel her wanting him to say yes.

He nodded and Razz's lips twisted into a smile. 'No weapons, no contact, no noise. You gotta teach me that someday, when we got more time.' She pushed the kid's infrareds back on her nose, and wrapped her padded kevlar coat more tightly round her. 'By the way,' she said casually. 'How much time we actually got?'

'Minute, m-maybe less,' Maxine's voice beat Alex to an answer. 'Lee Uu's regrouping. The Order w-works on a hive mentality. But Mr Uu hasn't had time to master group will. Not like Grandpa...'

Ryu heard the sadness in her voice and reached for her hands, then wished he hadn't when Maxine collapsed into sobs. He was still trying to comfort the girl when Lee Uu launched his main attack. Not with a rush through the narrow doorway, but through the wall with a fireball of pure energy that almost blacked Alex out where he sat.

'Data-strike,' Makai's hollow voice warned from far back inside his head, just as Prince Sabatini's lined face materialised behind his eyes, pushing to use Alex' vision. Anxious voices clamoured at him in a dozen dead languages.

'Leave me alone,' Alex Gibson's scream echoed off the chamber walls, and he realised he'd shouted aloud. 'Guard the door,' he told Razz.

The silver girl flipped easily to her feet, then cartwheeled away across the earthen floor, casually dodging between the wall and a pile of skulls. She was grinning. 'Covered,' she told him, slipping out of the heavy jacket and tossing it away from her.

'Try to guard my back,' Alex ordered Ryu, 'give me warning if Lee Uu gets behind me.'

He felt rather than heard the young Japanese boy's agreement. And then Alex was too busy drawing on his own mental powers to bother about anyone else.

The sparks in his head fanned slowly to a single flame that burned white hot in the centre of his mind. He tried to project the flame and felt Mr Uu's amused contempt.

Anger helped him, stoking the fire.

Next time round, the flames materialised where Alex wanted them, on the other side of the cavern wall, right in the middle of the restless, discontented crowd. Someone screamed and then Alex felt the fireball suddenly extinguished - though the pitiful wail went on.

It stopped seconds later, leaving silence.

'Lee Uu k-killed his own m-man,' Maxine announced, but Alex didn't hear. Every mutated cell in his cortex, every re-wired bioClay enhanced node in his cerebellum was drawing desperately on its potential as Alec concentrated on defeating Lee Uu's next attack. Fire threatened to envelop the whole chamber and reduce them to dust, but Alex was taking the flames whole into his mind, downloading as much of Lee Uu's power as he could reach.

And then Alex launched his own offensive. When it came, it came swiftly while Lee Uu was distracted by his own next assault. Three of Lee Uu's men rushed the chamber only to be chopped down by Razz in one fluid, deadly kata that snapped the spine of one, splintered another's nasal bone up into his own brain and drove a newly-cracked rib through the stunned heart of a third.

As Maxine deflected a blow of energy that threw her backwards against the wall, Alex' launched his final attack, throwing everything into one burst of pure cerebral energy.

Lee Uu exploded - skin blistered away, flames cauterising the ruptured veins in his face, clotting his blood. His eyelids seared back, the surface of his cornea cooking to an opaline milky white. But the man's charred lips moved in an endless incantation, and Alex could feel Lee Uu's energy begin to grow.

Desperately, Alex kept up the attack, pulling flames from his mind. Pale blue fire licked up the walls of the cavern outside, spreading across its roof to meet in an unholy, twisting knot in the middle.

Maxine was hunched up on the ground, with Ryu stood guard over her twisting body, the butterfly knife held tightly in one hand. In the distance, on the edge of his consciousness, Alex heard Razz swearing in stunned disbelief, using Azerbaijani insults she hadn't used since childhood.

Disbelief too was what Lee Uu felt, as he felt the hot dance of flames that charred his flesh. Most of the Order were already dead, scattered on the floor of the cavern. Their features lost under the tortoise-shell patina of desiccated skin. The few remaining were too crippled to fight back, too shocked to escape.

Lee Uu burnt like a candle, flames running up his body as muscle fried and the fat of his hypodermis began to melt away, running like tallow down his legs.

His face was almost featureless, picked flat by the fire. White teeth snarled in parody of anger, bare of any covering lips, silent words still falling from his blackened tongue. Glassy fluid from his eyes bubbled down his cheek and where the man's nose had been, a gaping nasal cavity drew flames straight down into lungs that bubbled and popped with exploding alveoli.

But still he wouldn't die.

Flames radiated from Lee Uu as he stalked into the chamber entrance, the heat pushing Razz back from the door. Maxine was in one corner crying, but for all her terror her mental barriers were still up, she was still watching out for Alex as surely as Ryu was watching out for her.

'Almost over,' Alex promised Maxine.

Lee Uu laughed, his whole body a pillar of fire, held alive, upright and present by will power alone.

As Lee Uu advanced into the chamber, fire from his body spread out across the floor, clutching at the pyramids of bone, licking snake-like in and out of empty eye sockets and open mouths.

Alex tried - and failed - to hold back the flames. Failed because where before Lee Uu had been fighting against the rapacious blaze now he was working with it. Increasing its heat, forcing its conflagration ever closer to where Alex stood.

Razz, Ryu and Maxine had retreated into a corner behind him. And Ryu was desperately trying to dig Maxine a tunnel using the blade of the butterfly knife but the expression on his face revealed he already knew it was hopeless. Maxine was praying, simple childhood prayers that tumbled from her lips.

'Way too late,' snarled the figure in the doorway as Alex reached deeper inside himself.

And in one way the figure was right. As Alex called on and accepted the help of the Prince, and every other grand master who howled and gibbered in the wasteland of his brain, Alex was aware he was no longer remotely human - that the battle was now happening on levels everyday life could never access.

And as Lee Uu's mind finally exploded in a blaze of white thought, an inferno of burning memories showered Alex. Skin and cloth ignited together in a blue flame. Thick, greasy smoke rose from his body, smelling of charred meat.

Unbidden, unwanted, the image of Sappho came into his mind.

AFTERMATH

Amphetamine and Chocolate

When they let Alex out of the sanatorium at Mont Sens in Switzerland, he left behind walls scrawled with flames. Drawn in blood, coffee dregs, even his own excrement. But the sanatorium had no complaints. It was noted for its careful, considerate medical care, and the size of its fees.

Fees which, in the case of the Englishman, were paid promptly through a numbered account at Hong Kong Suisse. And if the Englishman's friends wanted him left to his own strange devices then so be it.

He was sound in body, if not in mind - for no one else could see the hideous burns that Alex insisted blistered his hands, his chest and his face. And even detailed tri-D close ups of his perfect skin failed to convince Alex that the scars he saw weren't there.

It was true two specially-hired young Latvian nurses were on duty twenty-four hours a day to see he didn't set fire to himself, but other than that what he did with his time was his own concern. Even if what he did was draw flames.

Besides the Herr Doktor had reasons unknown to the rest of the staff for allowing this particular patient a wider than usual margin of tolerance.

The Englishman had been referred to Mount Sens by a Dr Makai, and to ensure that everything went smoothly Dr Makai's own practice in Budapest had discreetly bought a 51% stake in the Swiss operation.

San Lorenzo Blues

The anchorite of San Lorenzo saw no one. To many he was a myth, like the yeti or the bigfoot. And though unconfirmed press reports claimed he could produce fire from his fingertips and recite all the names of God, no one ever saw him do either.

Unlike the yeti and bigfoot he had a home, a sparsely furnished hut built from mud bricks. There was no electricity inside the hut, but then he didn't need it. The days were hot and he had a thick blanket for when the nights were cold.

Food was not a problem. Each evening an acolyte from the mission came out with a tray. On it was a round loaf of ksra bread and a saucer of pure olive oil. More often than not, the acolyte was an enthusiastic college kid from France or America, sometimes even from Japan. All wanted the chance to see the anchorite. None of them ever managed it.

Most times too, the semolina bread was untouched and the oil ruined by the moths that drowned in it during the night.

No one at the mission knew how long the anchorite had actually lived there - though it was for less time than most people assumed. And only two people ever dared claim familiarity with him.

One was an ambitious young surgeon-auditor, who wore his taureg heritage proudly like the Colt tucked to his djbella belt. The other was a thin, nervous-looking French aristocrat who spent part of each winter behind closed doors in M'dina. Her constant companions, a cat named Chi and a young princess of mixed Arab and Sicilian blood claimed nothing, for the cat was hardly ever seen and the young woman rarely spoke, except to her bodyguard.

It was reputed that Ryu Makimura, bodyguard to Princess Maxine de Melusine Pommerol was as deadly as he was beautiful. But then it was reputed that the French noblewoman was not only a friend of the Prince Imperial but when not in M'dina, she ran France's Third Section from a palatial house on the Isle St Louis. So who knew what was true?

Well, a slick Yakuza grandee called Johnnie Murakami did. But what Johnnie knew he kept to himself. One half of it would not have been believed, the other half was too useful to share.

There was, however, one other person who not only knew the anchorite, but was actually allowed inside his hut. Though in other company she never even mentioned his name, or his part in the unsolved, unresolved Parisian kidnapping that a few years before had apparently stripped the diplomatic and political world of so many of its prime movers and shakers.

But sometimes, when there was a rare lull in the business of political assassination and abduction, a heavily veiled woman would fly into the airport at M'dina and hire a Toyota Atlas 4-track, to head out into the Megribian desert.

Razz was going to see her lover.

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