

Softlight Sinsa short story by Peter F Hamilton

Ghosts drifted through Douglas McEwan's mind as he drove down the long road towards the execution. There were four spectres, the family of Adrian Reynolds, his mother, his abominable father, and his two lovely young sisters. The forensic team's in situ video had shown them in their beds, captured in a frozen pose that feigned sleep: eyes closed, lips relaxed, fingers splayed like albino starfish. In each case their throats had been slit open, black yawning gashes that had sprayed thick jets of blood across the sheets

The phosphene mirage was broken when Douglas's police escort switched on their lights and sirens. The five-car convoy was motoring along a thin ribbon of road that cut through the heavily wooded Ling common to the north of King's Lynn. Tall pines and slim silver birch trees stood sentinel duty on either side, their small yellowed leaves swirling through the air like a rusty snowstorm, settling on the grass verges where they formed a soggy mantle. Twin lines of parked press vehicles were backed up a hundred metres from the entrance of the Clinical Rehabilitation Institute

A dense knot of people was blocking the road ahead. The media circus. And to Douglas's eyes they did look like clowns, dressed in their bulky garishly coloured parkas, noses and cheeks raw from the chill morning air

A double rank of police in blue-grey riot tunics had linked arms, creating a barrier to hold them back from the road

A hundred shouted questions merged into a single unintelligible bawl as Douglas drove past. Cameras zoomed in

Protesters had taken up the prime sites on either side of the Institute's gate, their stamping feet pounding the mown grass strips into rucked quagmires. The police were three deep here, forming a funnel down to the gate, both lines visibly wavering from the pressure of the protesters' bodies

On Douglas's right was the LIFE! group, opposing any form of capital punishment. From what he could see a majority of them were women. They held hundreds of white candles aloft, ranging from small nightlights to elaborately carved half-metre columns of wax. A ragged chorus of defiant voices sang Abide With Me

Gobs of mud pelted the car. Douglas switched his wipers on, smearing the windshield with brown streaks. It was the TRUE JUSTICE group on the other side launching the deluge. Trim young men in the main; hair cut close to the skull, wearing olive-green military-style sweaters, a red crucifix stitched on the breast. And so much hatred leaking from their hard young faces. They were carrying a forest of placards; obscene demands for Adrian Reynolds to be hung, fried, shot, gassed, guillotined, poisoned... The gallows erected next to the Institute fence had a straw-stuffed effigy of Adrian dangling in a noose. As soon as Douglas's car swept through the gates someone put a torch to the wooden structure. A well planned optical bite for the cameras

Then he was through, the gate closing behind him. Something about the savagery of the protesters bolstered his own determination

And what an irony that is. Me, the man who prides himself on his liberalism, having to find refuge in the stiff upper lip tradition the minute adversity strikes

The Institute building was only three years old, paid for by the European Federal Criminal Psychology Bureau. A four storey cube, with green-tinted mirror glass that bounced the forest trees back at him, their bare autumn-ravaged trunks long and wavery

It was part secure hospital, part research facility. The Bureau had originally hoped the doctors could use laser imprinted subliminal commands to insert new behaviour patterns into the more stubborn social recidivists. A technique that would produce, if not model citizens, at least reasonably honest ones. That research was still continuing, but for the last year the Institute had concentrated on developing Softlight

It had been the idea of Doctor Michael Elliot, a neurologist who had been studying memory retention to see how long the rectification commands would last

What his research uncovered was the amnesia mechanism, the method by which grey cells discard the unwanted memories of each day's events, preventing the brain from being cluttered up with a billion irrelevant details

Elliot isolated the governing neurological code and managed to adapt the laser imprint technique to transmit the sequence throughout the brain

Softlight: the total erasure of memory and behaviour patterns. Personality death

Anyone committing a capital crime could be mentally executed, leaving behind a perfectly viable body; an adult infant ready to be named, educated, and returned to the world as fully functional members of society. Capital punishment without death. For the PC politicians of the Brussels Federal Assembly it was a dream solution

Adrian Reynolds was about to become the first subject

Barbara Johnson was standing in the Institute's reception area, her long face taut with agitation. Douglas had met her on several occasions; she was Dr Elliot's deputy

She led him to an interview room on the third floor where Adrian Reynolds was waiting. A couple of muscular-looking male orderlies stood patiently outside

"Ten minutes, Douglas, please," she said, apparently embarrassed at rushing him. "No more than fifteen. The judge is already here." "Sure," he said, and walked into the interview room

Most Court Defence Officers tended to develop a sense of responsibility for their clients. But Douglas had taken it to an extreme, always refusing prosecution cases. The price he paid for his quirk came in the form of people like Adrian Reynolds. Twenty years old, with a father who had abused him from the age of eight - sexually, physically, and mentally

Abused him right up until the day he finally snapped, taking a kitchen knife upstairs while the family slept

The Reynolds trial hadn't dealt with guilt, that was beyond question

Instead Douglas had fought to establish the level of culpability; arguing that a degree of blame must lie with the social services, to let it go undetected for so long; with the teachers for not spotting the boy's moodiness; with knowing relatives who had turned a blind eye

Douglas fully expected to lose the case. The people of Europe were achingly tired of psychopaths and terrorists and ideology warriors and street gangs. The death penalty had been reintroduced six years previously, the Federal Assembly finally bowing to enormous pressure from the electorate. The jury found Adrian guilty on three charges of murder

He should have been given a painless lethal injection. But with providential coincidence Dr Elliot announced Softlight was ready, and Douglas had asked judge Hayward to consider Adrian as an appropriate subject for the treatment. Judge Hayward agreed

Adrian Reynolds was standing by the window wall, a tall skinny young man, with a weak chin, puffy cheeks, his dark mousy hair lying lank over his ears. One of the Institute's baggy green overalls hung loosely from his body

He turned when Douglas came in, then dropped his eyes. "They want me dead, don't they?" Douglas realised the gate and the mob were just visible from the room

"They don't know what they want." It was true enough. TRUE JUSTICE thought Softlight was a liberal/scientific cop out, allowing criminals to escape punishment once again. LIFE! denounced it as a living death, court-sanctioned zombiism. The only thing they had in common was their opposition to it

"Is my will sorted out?" Adrian asked

"Yes, half to Barnardo's, half to the RSPCC." "There's not very much." "Every little helps." Douglas was having trouble keeping his voice level

If people could just see him like this, see that he cares. He doesn't deserve Softlight. Maybe I should be on the other side of the gate, join in the chanting. If only it wasn't so utterly futile

"They asked me if I wanted a priest," Adrian said. "Last rites and all that crap. I said no. I said if there was a God then he wouldn't have made my father." Douglas half-smiled. "You said that to the Institute chaplain?" Adrian gave a fast wild grin. "No." The humour faded. "Shall we go now? I don't think there's much point in dragging it out any longer." Officially it was laboratory complex seven. But Douglas knew the Institute staff had taken to calling it the Light Chamber; and the press had somehow got hold of that title. It resembled a dental surgery, with a bulky hydraulic chair in the middle of the floor, a glass-topped desk, several cabinets of electronic equipment, and two voice-activated computer terminals. The Softlight

imprinter was a triple-segment metal arm standing next to the chair; it ended in a bulbous plastic strip moulded to fit over the eyes like an optician's mask

Judge Theresa Hayward was sitting behind the desk when Douglas walked in

She was sixty years old, her oval sun-browned face heavily wrinkled, exacerbated by her frown. During the trial Douglas had found her to have an astute mind, in court she was scrupulously impartial, and very aware of the political undertones of the case

Harvey Boden, the Court Prosecution Officer, was studying a plasma screen on one of the computer terminals. He greeted Douglas with a thin nod

The third person in the laboratory was Dr Michael Elliot. He shared Barbara Johnson's air of sheepish eagerness, desperately trying to camouflage his feelings below a crust of professional detachment

Adrian walked straight over to the chair, not looking round. The orderlies who were escorting him slipped the restraint straps around his wrists and legs

The knot of tension in Douglas's stomach twisted sharply when Dr Elliot swung the Softlight imprinter up, manoeuvring the black mask over Adrian's eyes

"Will I see anything?" Adrian asked suddenly

"The laser operates predominantly in the green section of the spectrum," Dr Elliot explained. "It will be quite bright, but not painfully so." "No lasting damage, eh?" there was a quaver in Adrian's voice

Dr Elliot managed a sickly smile

Barbara Johnson was voicing one of the terminals, reeling off a string of security codes to access the data core which stored the Softlight sequence. Dr Elliot joined her, and added his authorisation code, then he glanced at Judge Hayward. Her face showed nothing but regret. She jerked her head down

Douglas closed his eyes, secretly terrified that a flash of green light would spill out from around the black strip, boring its way down his own optical nerves, exploding in his brain. Somewhere in the distance he heard Dr Elliot's voice: "Expedite." The imprinter arm retracted automatically. Adrian's face wore the look of docile imbecility, eyes unfocused, every muscle relaxed

Barbara Johnson walked forward carrying a white plastic sensor crown which she settled around Adrian's head. "No brainwave activity above the autonomic level," she reported, oh-so careful not to display any satisfaction

Douglas watched a bead of saliva leak from the corner of Adrian's mouth, and turned away

It worked, punishment and redemption wrapped in one neat package. Taking away the threat and salvaging our conscience. I ought to be grateful. If only Adrian didn't look so pitiful, so... wasted. But at least I cannot be faulted for that, I did my best for him

"Abschaum!" The vehement shout electrified Douglas. He jerked round to see Barbara Johnson stumbling back from Adrian in panic

Adrian stared at them with a covetous birdlike expression, his nostrils flaring as he sucked down deep breaths. He shouted at them again, the words making no sense as he snarled and spat

Douglas heard Harvey Boden saying, "That's German." "What's happening?" Judge Hayward demanded

Dr Elliot shook his head, staring at Adrian in numbed consternation

"It didn't work," Douglas blurted

"It did work," Barbara Johnson insisted. "The brainwave function was zero." "Does this sound like he's empty headed?" Douglas waved his hand angrily at Adrian

She appealed to Dr Elliot. "Some kind of residual activity?" "I don't know," he said in a shaken tone

"What's Adrian saying?" Judge Hayward asked

"I've no idea, I don't speak German," Douglas said. "My God, neither does Adrian." Judge Hayward gave him a sharp look, then turned to Dr Elliot. "Find someone who does, and fast." "Not necessary," Barbara Johnson told her. She took some headsets from the desk and handed them round. Douglas slipped his on as she voiced the computer terminal for a translation program. The earplugs muted another of Adrian's invectives, then the translator cut in

"...bastard Yankees. No better than fucking Jews. Queers and women, nothing more, we'll shit on you yet. Your President Roosevelt is dead, from shame, from the pox- " Douglas voiced the headset to stand-by mode, an unnerving chill blossoming inside his head

"All right," Judge Hayward said. "I want best guesses, and I want them now." "It's quite obvious Softlight doesn't work," Harvey Boden said. "It doesn't wipe memories, it simply jumbles them up." "There was no primary brainwave activity for two minutes," Barbara Johnson said stubbornly

Harvey Boden shrugged. "People recover from comas. Weeks and months spent like a vegetable, then they're up and talking as if nothing had happened." Douglas knew what Boden was doing. The Prosecution Officer wanted Adrian dead. For real

It's obviously not just my skull those two girls are haunting

"I can't even pretend to understand what's happened," Douglas said as Barbara Johnson and Dr Elliot started whispering together. "And you're certainly not in a position to give qualified neurological opinions, Harvey. We'll need a complete assessment made before any decisions are taken. And we certainly shouldn't decide anything in haste." Dr Elliot nodded in agreement with something Barbara Johnson said, and faced the judge. "I believe we should consider regression as a logical explanation for this situation." "Regression?" Douglas asked in confusion

Harvey Boden gave him a contemptuous look. "Past lives, Douglas. People thinking they used to be Napoleon or George Washington, that kind of thing." "There have been documented cases," Dr Elliot said.

"Under hypnosis, subjects have related a wealth of details concerning their previous existence, details they couldn't possibly have known without extensive research." "Rubbish," Harvey Boden said

Douglas was inclined to agree, but that would be offering Adrian up to TRUE JUSTICE. "Are you saying this German personality popped up out of nowhere to fill Adrian's empty brain?" he asked Dr Elliot

"Yes. A German from the Second World War, judging by the reference to Roosevelt." Adrian had fallen silent, glaring round at them, teeth bared

Judge Hayward voiced the terminal for a two way translation. "What is your name?" she asked Adrian

The terminal repeated the question in German

"Mentally defective bitch," he shouted

She backed away, badly disturbed. "Whoever Adrian believes he is, he remains our problem. The three of us - " her red fingernail lined up first on Douglas then Harvey Boden, " - have to decide what to do next." "Is this an official session?" Douglas asked

"We'll call it an In Chambers consultation, if you and the Prosecution have no objection." "After this failure of Softlight, Prosecution has no alternative but to apply for the death penalty," Harvey Boden said quickly

"On who?" Douglas snapped back. "On Adrian Reynolds, or this German?" "There is no German, Douglas, only a mind screwed about by a subliminal laser code. Face facts." "You don't know that. At the very least I would appeal for an identity check first." "Oh yes?" Harvey Boden was scathing. "What kind of check, genetic fingerprinting?" "My client, Adrian Reynolds, was sentenced to personality erasure. That has been enacted; successfully, as far as we can tell. The emergence of this second personality is outside the court's jurisdiction." They glared at each other

"We could try a hypnogenic," Barbara Johnson suggested

"Fair enough," Judge Hayward said. "Any objections? No. Good." Adrian spat on Dr Elliot as he approached with the spray ampoule. Phlegm dripped down the doctor's collar as he applied the nozzle to Adrian's neck

Dr Elliot waited until the young man dropped into a waking trance, eyelids heavy, head drooping. "Can you hear me?" he asked

Adrian mumbled something. "Yes," the translator program said

"What is your name?" "Erich Breuer." "What is your job, Erich?" "I am a member of the garrison troop." "Where?" "Dachau." Douglas heard a quick hiss of indrawn breath from Barbara Johnson. Harvey Boden's face turned blank, unreadable

"What is the last thing you remember before you woke up in this room?" The man's hands started to tremble slightly. "The Yankees have arrived, their tanks halting by the guard post. There were shots, our officers were killed. The Yankees, they cried and they vomited when they saw their mates, the unburied corpses. I am lined up against a wall with my colleagues, some are bleeding from the beatings. I hear the machine gun firing. Louder. Louder." His eyes widened with shock, mouth hanging open

Douglas turned away, unable to look at the shell of flesh which had once been Adrian Reynolds

"That's enough," Judge Hayward said as Dr Elliot began another question

Douglas walked over to the chair, and studied the now quiescent figure

If Elliot is right about regression, if you are who you now seem to be, then that would prove the existence of men's souls. That would be so hard for me to really believe in. It would mean there is a God, that Jesus was born and died for us. A long agonising death nailed to a cross of wood

And how could we ever be forgiven that? Better we believe in some shared consciousness theory; that will be the scientists' answer. The other is too much to bear. An afterlife. That you have been sent back

from Heaven

Or Hell. That life on Earth is nothing more than a penitence to serve before we can enter God's Kingdom for all time

"Now what?" Harvey Boden asked, Douglas left Erich Breuer, wearied by the Prosecution Officer's unceasing assault. "I maintain the case is closed. We have now proved beyond reasonable doubt that this is no longer Adrian Reynolds. The Institute should help Erich Breuer adapt to modern life, and let him go." "I can't agree with that," Judge Hayward said. "Douglas, you haven't thought this through. Suppose this really is Erich Breuer?" She held up a hand to forestall Harvey Boden's protest. "The body contains Erich Breuer's memories, camp guard at Dachau. Then what?" "Oh," Douglas saw what she was driving at, his mind racing after the implications. "War Crimes." "Exactly. If you bring an appeal over the question of this body's identity, and prove your case that this is Erich Breuer, then he will have to face the consequences of his actions in World War Two. Do you want that to happen, Douglas? Do you want the public spectacle of a trial? Because that's what you'll get. The Israelis were chasing the original concentration camp guards up until the middle of the nineties; old men whose identities were extremely uncertain. Erich Breuer, who by his own admission was part of the holocaust, would never be allowed to walk out of the Institute a free man. That's what your appeal would bring." "Oh God, she's telling me it's my decision. Me! Forced into the role of judge, and probably executioner by default

"I don't know," he said miserably

"Let me see if I can clarify the situation," Judge Hayward said. "I sentenced all the memories to be wiped from Adrian Reynolds's brain. Now we find a deeper, hidden set of memories." She narrowed her eyes, and fixed Dr Elliot with a lance-like stare. "Can these Erich Breuer memories be wiped by Softlight?" He looked startled. "Well, yes. I would suppose so. But I don't think it's advisable." "Why not?" "We don't understand how they originated. It opens up an entire new area of neurology to study. It is quite possible that each of us possesses a similar mental heritage, a window into the past. Think of the data that could be uncovered, the true history we could learn." That was when Douglas witnessed the showing of the Judge's claws for the first time. "Dr Elliot," she said coolly. "Adrian Reynolds is not an experimental subject, he is a multiple murderer sentenced to personality erasure. A sentence which this Institute is legally obliged to enact. You will either fulfil this function, or tell me you are unable to. Do I make myself clear?" Dr Elliot considered his options, and settled for a reluctant submission

"Very well, I accept that a penal institution is not the place for an academic study of this nature." Judge Hayward glanced at Douglas then Harvey Boden. "Any objections to a further Softlight administration?" "No," Douglas said, partly ashamed. It was the easy way out

The one I always take

This time he left his eyes open for the whole procedure. Erich Breuer stared placidly ahead as the softlight imprinter's moulded strip went over his eyes

"That's it," Dr Elliot announced

The arm retracted, folding back onto its pedestal

Barbara Johnson moved in with the white plastic sensor crown again. She settled it on the head. "No primary brainwave activity registering," she reported

"We'll wait for a little while," Judge Hayward said. "See if there's any change." "It's happening," Barbara Johnson called. She was hovering around the computer terminal which was displaying the sensor crown readings. "His brainwave activity is picking up." When Douglas checked his watch he saw that barely four minutes had elapsed

Adrian's head had been bowed limply ever since the arm had retracted. Now Douglas watched him lift his chin, his expression perfectly calm. Then he began to hunch in on himself, bending his shoulders round as far as the straps allowed

"Why doesn't he say anything?" Douglas whispered to Barbara Johnson

"Because we haven't told him to," she whispered back. "The hypnogenic lasts for about three hours, he's still well under." "Can you hear me?" Judge Hayward asked. "What is your name?" He blinked slowly. "I hear you, miss. Please, they call me Deaf Willy, miss." It was an American accent, a slow rich twang, setting off an unwelcome train of thought in Douglas's mind. It was the servile manner which he couldn't ignore

"Why Deaf Willy?" Barbara Johnson asked impulsively

"Cos I ran when the sheriff shouted me to stop, miss. I didn't hear him, I swear. Boxed my ears when he

caught me. Said I must've been born deaf." "Are you black?" Douglas asked. He ignored the looks the others gave him

Deaf Willy's mouth split into a wide grin. "Yes sir. I surely am." "How old are you, Deaf Willy?" "Sir, maybe sixteen, seventeen. Don't rightly know for sure." "Do you know what year it is?" "Year, sir? No sir, I don't know that, sir." "Who is the president?" Harvey Boden asked

"Why, it's Mr Harrison, sir. Mr Benjamin Harrison." Barbara Johnson started to voiceline the terminal, calling up a list of American Presidents

"Where do you live?" Judge Hayward asked

"Mississippi state, miss." "Benjamin Harrison served one term," Barbara Johnson said

"Eighteen-eighty-nine to ninety-three." "What is the last thing you remember before you woke up here?" Dr Elliot asked

"Sir, it's the horses, sir. They's riding all around the house, sir. Must be twenty or thirty of them. They's got torches, razing everything as they go. Flames is rising halfway to heaven." Beads of sweat began to prick his forehead. "Little Jose, she's inside. I can hear her. Lord, I can't see her. Oh Jesus almighty, I'm on fire. Jose's still screaming. I'll get her, I will." Thick chords of muscle rose on his throat. He began to gurgle, a thick liquid sound as if he was choking

Dr Elliot rushed forward. "Forget! Forget that, go back, right back. When you were a little boy. Think of that. When you were little. What do you remember when you were little?" Judge Hayward pumped her cheeks out as Dr Elliot soothed Deaf Willy down with calming words, encouraging murmurs. "At least we haven't got a zealot this time," she said

"No," Harvey Boden said carefully. "But you did rule that Softlight should be used until it was successful." Douglas couldn't believe what the Prosecution Officer had said. "Are you telling me you want this Deaf Willy personality wiped?" "Prosecution does have a valid point," Judge Hayward said. She looked unhappy at what she was having to say. "If I order a halt now, then that judgement will have to be reviewed by an appeal court. And it wouldn't hold up, it's abysmally arbitrary; we didn't like Erich Breuer so he was wiped, but we felt sorry for a downtrodden cotton picker boy so he was allowed to stay. What kind of legal basis is that? No Douglas, we committed ourselves when we wiped Erich Breuer. Either this

body is wiped clean of all its memories, or it is physically executed." "But we have neither the moral nor legal authority to order the death of an innocent like Deaf Willy," Douglas insisted. "And that is what we are discussing here; Softlight is a death penalty for Deaf Willy. He is nothing like Erich Breuer, he doesn't deserve to be erased. I contend that what we've found in this instance is an eminently suitable replacement personality for Adrian Reynolds's body. As you originally ruled, Judge." "Not quite," Barbara Johnson said. "Examine that idea from a practical standpoint, Douglas. You will have one hell of a problem trying to integrate an illiterate nineteenth century black boy into modern European society, not to mention acclimatising him to a white body. Without such conditioning he would be totally adrift in time, no family to love him, nothing he can understand, let alone relate to. In order to survive, his antique behaviour patterns would all have to be suppressed. The memories too, I imagine. Could you stay sane with the memory of your own death in your mind? In fact you would probably wind up having to junk about ninety per cent of his memories. Only the name would be left. You wouldn't be saving him at all." She appeared saddened by the prospect. "Our era would be as cruel to Deaf Willy as his own." Douglas thought about it, and couldn't see an out. "Very well," he said

"I have no objection to clearing Adrian's brain entirely." "You want me to wipe every past life?" Dr Elliot asked in astonishment

"But that will probably mean going back down to pre-sentience, Neanderthal man, that's the Palaeolithic age. And from what we've seen so far there are about two or three lives per century. If that holds constant, you are talking about four-hundred-plus incarnations. It'll take a week." "Did you have anything else planned?" Judge Hayward asked icily

The third personality was called Rosin, another slave from Mississippi. He died from a whipping while James Monroe was President. He was still uttering little dog-like whines when Dr Elliot lowered the Softlight imprinter over his eyes

Number four was French, a peasant killed at the start of the revolution

They had some trouble coaxing number five to speak, there was no response to any European language. Barbara Johnson solved it by accessing Cambridge University's linguistics department computer, and requesting a list of greetings in all the languages known to be in use around seventeen hundred

"If we have to do this each time, the whole process is going to take a month," Dr Elliot said as the terminal droned through the catalogue. "And I doubt that the university's memory cores will be able to help us when we enter pre-Roman history." The man sitting in the chair mumbled something in response to the terminal

"African," Barbara Johnson said triumphantly

His name was Ingombe, a member of the Fon tribe; they were migrants based in Abomey, prey to the coastal slavers. He remembered the Ardra war canoes coming upstream to attack his village, a fight. Listening to him, and the ones that followed, it seemed to Douglas as though Adrian had turned the tables on them, condemning them to witness a seemingly endless litany of misery, a refined torment for the empathic

They had lunch delivered to the laboratory, compartmentalised airline-style trays from the canteen. Douglas just ate the cheese and biscuits, staring out through the window. The mist which swirled through the woodland outside was thickening, it already obscured the yellow-brown carpet of dead bracken

Incarnations ten to twenty were mainly European -Portuguese, English, Dutch, German. Two of them awoke screaming and pleading in Spanish, their anguish so deep set it was beyond even the hypnogenic's ability to quell

Harvey Boden grimaced while Dr Elliot hurriedly manoeuvred the Softlight imprinter over the first. "Spanish Inquisition," he said softly. "The time fits." "And LIFE! thinks Softlight is medieval," Barbara Johnson said grimly

Douglas abandoned his cheese and biscuits. He walked over to the window wall, only half listening to a man called John Diker give an account of Cambridge in the thirteen-forties; his job as a freemason, how he lost his mother, wife, and five children to the Black Death before succumbing himself. The autumn frost seemed to reach in through the thick glass to frost Douglas's body to the core

Why are there no memories of what happens between his lives? God's censorship? Or is it simply that the afterlife cannot be interpreted through human senses, the brain cannot hold it? Maybe Dr Elliot will choose that as his next area of study. If he does, I'd like him to fail utterly

Even before this we regarded life too cheaply. Now Softlight will reduce its value still further. In that respect it has already been a tragic failure. Perhaps that is our punishment for meddling with the substance of our own souls. But what kind of God would that give us? One who shows little compassion, one who will hold us to account for each of our actions on this Earth, one who is prepared to turn us away from the gates of the Holy City. An Old Testament God. He cannot be like that. He cannot

The evening wore on without respite, one tale of woe following another as the incarnations came and went

When Douglas stood beside the window wall he could see the tiny yellow flames of the candles the LIFE! women were using for their vigil, a small dim galaxy lost at the end of time. Their flames held an unknowing poignancy; if they had lit one for every mortal death Adrian's soul had undergone they would have the number about right

Douglas strode over to the chair as Dr Elliot was lowering the soft light imprinter over Decius Tactus, a Roman centurion, and Christian, condemned to death by a local magistrate. His family had been butchered by soldiers, blaming the bad harvest on their alien God

The man's eyes gazed back at him through a hazy chemical veil

"What did he do?" Douglas whispered hoarsely. He met the blank faces of the others

"Christians were blamed for everything," Barbara Johnson said. "It was convenient." "No, not Tactus. Originally. What sin could possibly be so bad, so brutal, to deserve this?" "What do you mean 'originally' Douglas?" Judge Hayward asked, there was a degree of petulance in the question. It was midnight, they had been in the laboratory for a straight fourteen hours

"This man's soul has been sent back from the afterlife forty times in two thousand years. And each time he has suffered the most appalling degradations, known nothing but war, pestilence, and slavery; seen his families murdered, his homes razed, whole cultures wiped out. Torment without end. This is Hell for him, not Dante's Inferno, Hell on Earth

Every single time. Why? What did he do that God would subject him to this?" He saw Judge Hayward and Harvey Boden exchange a heavy glance

"Look, Douglas- " Harvey Boden began

"Don't," he said angrily. "Don't you tell me it's been a long day, don't tell me I need to go home and get some sleep." "Probability," said Dr Elliot. "That's all it is, Douglas. So far we've seen less than ten per cent of his incarnations. Apart from the last couple of centuries the vast majority of the human race has lived short miserable lives in unhygienic squalor. In any given historical era the number of aristocrats is a minute fraction. It always has been." "No. He did something. Something terrible." Douglas could sense the conviction growing inside him. It was one of the most frightening experiences he had ever known. A precognition that could look into the past

"Genghis Khan?" Barbara Johnson suggested

"He was late tenth century," Judge Hayward said thoughtfully. "We've regressed well past that now." "We have another half hour before this hypnogenic wears off," Dr Elliot said. "Do you want me to go on?" "Yes," Judge Hayward said before Douglas could voice a protest

Should I object? I want to know who he was, what he did. And I don't want to know. That is the way my life goes, always unable to decide. Well it ends now. Taken out of my hands. I could have stopped it, right at the start, I could have said no, stood firm. But I did what appeared best at the time. I cannot be blamed for that. It is not I who is stained by guilt

They waited in restless silence while the forty-first incarnation flooded into the body of Adrian Reynolds. His eyes narrowed, the irises appearing to blacken, receding to some indefinable depth. For one supremely disconcerting moment Douglas thought he was looking directly into a distance beyond that of galactic night

I know that man, that look; he holds a terror from which even insanity is no refuge. I have seen it once before, so long ago. But where? Douglas heard the terminal start with a Hebrew greeting; the man answered straight away

"What is your name?" Dr Elliot asked

The man blinked, his lips quivering as he fought against the words the hypnogenic was tearing from his mind. "I am named Judas Iscariot." His wounded gaze swept round the five of them in a voiceless plea. Then he saw Douglas, and a confounded light of recognition flared. "Pilate," he cried

"Pontius Pilate." Douglas stared back at him in mute horror while time quietly dissolved inside his brain

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