

Eat Reecebread

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Burroughs was munching on a reeceburger, a disallowed act in the Charles Street ops centre. Too much highly-prized Command and Coordination computer hardware lined up on our desks. Amazing what a stray crumb could engender in the network terminals, still electronic, unlike the crystal processing core in the police station custom-built basement—a top-of-the-range Packard-Bell Optronics model. Leicestershire's regional taxpayers are still whining about the finance.

I should have growled at him, but I'd never been good at pulling rank. Besides, Burroughs-watching had become a macabre fascination for me over the last few weeks. His appearance was ordinary enough: a 28-year old with a rounded, pink and permanently sweaty face. His thick, pointed ginger beard was a carefully cultivated emblem of masculinity - a lot of men sported beards nowadays. There was an irritating certainty in his carriage, in the way he liked to swing his arms and trumpet his androcentric prejudices. Just to let you know whose side he was on. That confidence had been crumbling before my eyes recently. Burroughs had been accosted by a sudden insecurity that even led to physical tremblings. I knew disguised panic when I saw it. Today his odd malaise was bad. His worst yet.

He was sweating profusely when I stopped behind him, his shirt collar undone, tie hanging loose, skin blotched and red. His appearance wasn't enhanced by the cold blue neon flashing from across the street, exhorting us to EAT REECEBREAD. I had little sympathy. Despite his discomfort he was excited by the morning's gossip which flashed through the building faster than optical fibre could carry it.

"Hear the news, Mark?" he asked, an indecent thrill raising his voice an octave. That "Mark" was new. It should have been "sir" but I let it go.

"What news?"

"There was one of them working here. A shagging Hermie on the force! Fifteen years operating in the same building as the rest of us. Just shows you don't know who you're working with half the time." His undercooked reeceburger dripped white juice into his beard.

"That's right, Burroughs. You never know."

"Did you know who it was?"

"Nope."

"Come on, you must have! Time you've been here? You know everyone!"

Of course I knew the poor creature, but I wasn't going to give Burroughs the satisfaction of probing me

with more stupid questions. I stared at the amber script on his monitor as if I was actually doing my job and searching for errors.

Burroughs continued to speak with his mouth full. "It lived in one of the Nu-Cell adapted flat complexes. Sod was intercepted while it waited for the bus into work this morning. Usual thing. Clothes torn off by the mob and ten bells kicked out of it before the panda car arrived. Uniform boys said it looked like a monkey's miscarriage in a reeceblender. Yuk! Hoo hoo hoo!"

That was indeed the usual pattern. An anonymous call informs the Charles Street duty officers, who duly load the information into the nearest panda car's situation bulletin display. In theory the constables should be at the location within two minutes to pick up the offender. But somehow there is nearly always a delay, combined with a tip-off to some thug well placed to lead a lynch gang. Well, it saves the expense and the mess of hauling them before the judiciary. The moral mess, that is.

What really galled me was that the problem obviously originated in the police ops room. It was one of my people, corrupting my routines and my communication networks.

The reason I went in for technical specialization after coming off the beat was to be above all the grey behaviour endemic to the side of the force interfacing with the public. Reality, I suppose, that's what I couldn't handle. The sheer emotional clutter of dealing with people: - turning a blind eye to this, giving that the nod. Computers and programs don't have fuzzy edges. They're also a valuable new tool in fighting modern crime since the Federal Parliament in Brussels passed the Civil Authority Unlimited Data Access act. I thought I'd found myself a comfortable little niche. Ironic it should turn out to be the heart from which the new global war of persecution was waged.

A scarlet priority symbol started flashing on Bur-roughs's monitor. He sat up with a lurch, the reece-burger dumped into his bin with an accurate, lazy lob. Script rolled down the monitor as he muttered into his throat-mike.

"Christ look at that. We've got another fish. Two in one morning."

The priority request came from another duty officer taking a phone call. Somewhere out on Leicester's streets a good citizen was informing on a Hermie. The duty officer would be tracking down the call, though most people were smart enough to use a coin box to avoid detection. Brussels are already phasing 'em out: soon it will be credit cards for everything, traceable, incriminating.

"This time I don't want any mistakes," I told Burroughs sharply. "Make damn sure a panda car gets there within the allocated response period. Alert two or three if you have to. But get the uniform boys there in time!"

He wiped the back of his hand across his feverish brow, giving me a sullen glance. "Why bother?" he murmured.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Burroughs."

I walked away before he had the chance to show how little respect he had for my authority. Safe back in my glass-walled supervisor's office at the rear of the ops room, I sat at my own desk and hurriedly asked my terminal to display the data on the Hermie.

Morton Leverett, the monitor printed, a middle manager working in an insurance company office. Personal details followed as I accessed his citizen's file. No family, thankfully. That could have been tricky.

I summoned up my private alert program and fed in Leverett's number. His netcom unit would be bleeping, displaying the simple warning message. With luck, he would get clear in time.

There would be no record of the call - one of the benefits of being the city's chief data control officer. My program would wipe all memory of it from British Telecom's processor core.

I was still working on improving the program in the evenings. When it was complete it would snatch the data on Hermies as soon as it was entered into the station's network, warning the impending victim even as they were being informed on, increasing their odds for getting away.

I wrote that program with pain-soaked memory driving me. You see, I knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of an informer. I'd turned a Hermie in myself once. It's not something I can ever forget, let alone forgive. But I do what I can to work off my penance. And I wait for the world to stabilize.

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Her name was Laura, and she was quite beautiful. I say "her" and "she" because when I first met her, I didn't realize what she was. You might laugh and call me a slow starter, but it was three months before I found out. The year we spent together was a hiatus of halcyon bliss until she demanded too much of me, and that's when I tried to turn her over to the police. How do I sleep at night? You may well ask. Yes, Laura was a Hermie, as different and as ordinary as all the others. At that time the Hermies had enjoyed nearly 40 years of tolerance and acceptance. When I met her, everything was just starting to go crazy. There was no single trigger, no one fateful incident which turns rational people into a screaming mob. It was more of a growing fear of them, their potential, that ultimately spilled over into hysteria. In part that fear was due to the first wave of Hermies who had now matured, and who were beginning to exert a slightly disproportionate influence in their respective fields.

The first Hermies had appeared in what used to be called Third World countries. A blizzard of theories blew up to explain the phenomenon. One suggested they were the product of genetic mutation after careless biological weapons-testing in Africa. It seemed plausible at the time, and most people went for it. This theory fell apart faster than the second Iraqi spaceplane flight, when numerous cases came to light in the West. Scandalized Western parents were just more inclined to make a dark secret out of the thing than their African counterparts; especially since the obvious physical signs hadn't fully developed until a child was in its seventh year.

Because of superstitious fears and the dread of stigma, it was at first impossible to collect reliable statistics. Eventually it became plain to everyone that the spread of hermaphrodite births was evenly distributed around the globe.

"Hi!" Laura had said when I first met her, two years ago now. God, the ordinariness of it! It was in a bookshop.

I wasn't actually looking for something to read. Leicester in those days was a spectacular place to live, an exciting city on the cutting edge; I enjoyed wandering round watching the changes Nu-Cell was making to arguably one of the most mundane urban sprawls in England. The company was an adjunct of the university, formed to produce and market the products of Dr Desmond Reece's biotechnology research. As far as the public was concerned he would forever be known as the genetic-engineering pioneer who'd solved the immediate world food crisis with his vat-grown reecebread. It was a protein-rich algal which came in several varieties; textures and taste varying from meat to vegetables to fruit. Even the most

undeveloped countries could build the kind of fermentation vat needed to breed it in. Nu-Cell licenced the process to anyone who wanted it, charging a pittance of a royalty. Reece wasn't really interested in the money; he was a genuine philanthrope, happy to see the spectre of famine ending.

But his other projects at the university were equally important in metamorphosizing our world. Land-coral revolutionized buildings; the way we designed them, the way we thought of them. Not just new constructions, but the old, tired, ugly structures which blighted our cities too.

Property owners bought the seeds and planted them eagerly. It was like watching broad slabs of marble growing up out of the ground, enveloping the existing brickwork and concrete. A marble that was coloured like a solidified rainbow, dappled with gold, black and silver.

I walked down Rutland Street, where the topaz and turquoise encrustations had already reached the ledges of the second-floor windows of the dreary brick buildings. The landcoral had been pruned from doors and first-floor windows, a process that had to be carried out continually until the building was completely covered, then the polyp could be stabilized by an enzyme Nu-Cell sold along with the seeds. After that it would simply renew itself, maintaining its shape for centuries. The new resplendent growths made such a wonderful change from the grime-coated streets I grew up in. How could you not have hope in your heart, Living in an environment so vividly alive? It lifted the human spirit.

So maybe I was a little giddy with optimism when I saw her through the bookshop window. That first sight of her cut me like a laser. A 25-year-old in a university sweatshirt and indecently tight jeans. I was nearly 15 years her senior, but she was so magnetic I just had to go and stand next to her. I hadn't got a clever line, I'd no plan of how to talk to her, but I had to approach her. At least I wasn't in uniform. I can imagine the effect that would have had.

"I'm looking for The Last Written Word," she said. "Have you seen it anywhere?"

It was by Franz Gluck, perhaps the second most famous "public" Hermie in the world at that time after Desmond Reece himself. Everybody was reading it. Very intellectual stuff, which was why I'd given it a wide berth. I remember going puce in the face. "They must have sold out again. I'll lend you mine if you want. If you promise to let me have it back." I hadn't got a copy, but I knew some theoretically intelligent people who had.

That was it. We started meeting regularly, even though I was a bag of nerves whenever I sat next to her. I might have been older, but I'd generally avoided sexual experience. Something about Laura made all the muscles in my body lock, and my mouth would go dry. She had a searching way of looking at you when you spoke, as if everything you said counted.

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It was a wonderful summer, one of those long, dry, wearily hot periods which always turns conversations to the greenhouse effect. We alternated our time between my three-room flat overlooking Victoria Park and her landcoral dome on a new estate in Humberstone. That place really opened my eyes to the promise of the future. Laura worked for Nu-Cell in their gene-therapy lab; as an employee she got the dome for a peppercorn rent because it was experimental: lit by bioluminescent cells; its water syphoned up by a giant tap root; power supplied by an external layer of jet black electrophotonic cells. I hadn't realized how advanced Nu-Cell's technology was before then.

"Every city is going to change the way we're changing Leicester," she said. "Think how much of our materialistic attitude will be eradicated when you can just plant a landcoral seed and grow your own home. Ninety percent of your working life is spent paying off your mortgage, what a difference it'll make freeing yourself from that burden!"

Her optimism had a ferocity far exceeding mine. She believed in Desmond Reece and Nu-Cell with an almost religious fervour. The newest of the new world orders to be promulgated since the end of last century's Cold War. Most of the hours we had together would be spent with her talking, explaining her visions of tomorrow. I just listened for the sheer joy of having her invest her time in me.

Her impassioned arguments and stubborn convictions might have frightened away some males. Fiery intellectual women are still frightening things, especially to a simple cop. But Laura was also intoxicatingly feminine. I can still see her that first night we spent together: wearing a sea-green cotton dress with slender straps and a ruff-edged skirt. Gold-tinted hair brushing her bare shoulders, eyes sparkling and teasing from the wine we'd drunk.

It was her dome, her bedroom, with its wan blue light and sunken sponge-mattress bed. I simply wanted to kiss her. And she smiled and beckoned me, because she knew me so well although I always said so little. It was a surprise for me when I finally found what she'd got under her clothes.

Summer faded into autumn, even though the strange symmetrical trees Nu-Cell had planted in Victoria Park kept their scarlet dinner-plate-sized flowers long after the first morning frosts turned the grass to a hoary silver plain. I walked down the avenues they formed on my way to work; Laura wrapped up snug and warm in her coat and ridiculously long scarf, hanging on to my arm until we reached the pavilion and parted, me to the station, her to the university. With the cold came the grey stabbing rains. But something more sinister began to stir right across the continent.

The boys in the tabloid press had stayed sober for long enough to make a few simple demographic calculations based on the most recent, and more comprehensive, surveys of hermaphrodites. Once the stories started they developed a momentum of their own; "interest items" became centre-page features. From there they progressed to front-page articles and finally graduated to concerned editorials.

Since hermaphrodites all came perfectly equipped with both a vagina and a penis, they could of course enjoy the usual sexual relationships with either sex. Whether they grew up appearing - on the face of it at least - male or female was more or less accidental and irrelevant; the only major give-away was the difficulty male-aligned Hermies had in growing beards. Once the superficial gender-stamp had stabilized (again at about the age of seven) it usually stayed that way as a matter of social convention. That wasn't what bothered people—after they had recovered from the initial shock, you understand. The problem was this: hermaphrodites, in contrast to mythology, were very fertile. If an hermaphrodite bred with a non-hermaphrodite, the possibility of them producing an hermaphrodite child stood in a positive ratio of seven-to-ten. If an hermaphrodite bred with another hermaphrodite, the result was always an hermaphrodite.

The future of the human race was certain.

Those boys in the tabloid press may be slow, but when this statistic finally penetrated the alcohol fog of the long lunchbreak, they sharpened their knives. They were vicious. Before long, stories began to appear in the papers about "the hermaphrodite conspiracy." Unsubstantiated allegations were reported as hard facts. Hermaphrodites everywhere stood accused of crimes ranging from deliberately littering the pavements to global sabotage.

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I raged impotently while Laura looked on in sad silence. "Conspiracy, God! Hermies can't even spot each other in the street, never mind get together to organize megalomaniac plots. You should answer back! Demand airtime!" I waved at the inarticulate Euro MP smirking on the TV news as he hedged his bets for the interviewer.

"Who should answer back, Mark? Hermies don't have an organization to speak for them. That's what makes this all so stupid."

"God!" I stood at the window, kneading my hands. Out in the park the trees had finally shed their leaves; the bark had turned chrome blue. "Take a news crew to film round your department. Show how you're helping ordinary humans, that you've dedicated your life to it. It sounds brutal, but sick kids always get to people. Maybe the public will realize Hermies aren't ogres like the press makes out."

Laura massaged her temple. "A lone documentary isn't going to change public opinion, especially not the kind of public that's turning against us. In any case, we still haven't made enough progress on viral vectoring or transcription factors to cure children who suffer from the really severe genetic disorders."

She had explained viral vectors to me: organisms which integrate plasmids (small loops of DNA) into a cell's DNA so that defective chromosome sequences can be corrected. It's how cystic fibrosis and haemophilia were eradicated early in the new century, literally replacing the old genes which caused the illness for new ones.

It was also the same basic method which Reece had used to convert useless pond scum into reecebread, and aquatic coral into landcoral; inserting modifications and improvements, distorting the original DNA out of all recognition. But constructing transgenic plants was an order of magnitude easier than human gene therapy.

Laura and her team had been working on the more difficult hereditary cancers. They didn't have organisms which could be junked and burnt when a modification failed or mutated into teratoid abominations. Reaching perfection was a long laborious business.

But it was good work. Important, caring work. People should be made to see that.

"There must be something you can show them," I said in desperation. "What about the university hospital clinic? Nu-Cell funds have been going there for years."

"Not everyone that works for Nu-Cell is a Hermie, you know. We're not even a majority in the company, nowhere near. Besides, showing Hermies conducting experiments on bedridden children? Not a good idea, Mark. Nu-Cell has already given the world reecebread and landcoral and petrocellum beet. What more can we give?"

I put my arms round her, trying to stroke away the tensions I found knotting up her muscles. "I don't know. I really don't."

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The comments and conspiracy accusations continued to fly unabated as Christmas drew near. It took on an almost ritual quality. The tabloids had found another scare image to rank alongside illegal African migration into Mediterranean Europe, Russian nuclear power-station meltdowns, Japan's re-emergence as a military superpower, and the Islamic Bomb. But even they couldn't have predicted the full horror, the tidal wave of violence and hysteria which swept the planet.

The physical attacks started in public places as the New Year broke. It only seemed to make things worse that a disproportionate number of hermaphrodites had made a significant contribution to the world of arts, medicine, science and engineering. So much for my idea of a Public Relations coup.

It was the week before Easter when the first trouble hit Leicester. We were out shopping in the city centre, buying chocolate eggs for nephews and nieces. It was a fine spring day, we strolled idly. The

clock tower pedestrian precinct had been completely converted by landcoral, with only the old white stone tower itself left free as a centrepiece. It looked handsome; the unprepossessing clash of concrete and brick, architecture from the mid-1950s to the early 2010s, all eclipsed by seamless sheets of iridescent sapphire, emerald and amber marble; buttressed by colonnades of braided gold and bronze cords. Speckled rooftop domes reflected a harlequin gleam under the cold bright sun.

We heard the noise as we walked out of the Shires mall. The crowds were growing denser up ahead, people flocking to the edges like iron filings caught in a magnetic field.

"What is it?" Laura asked.

A column of blue smoke rose in the distance. Cheers rang above the background babble. We steered our way through knots of people, anxious and curious at the same time. I wondered where my colleagues were.

Someone had broken the windows of W.H. Smith's. Books were being flung out onto the pavement through the gaping holes. People scooped them up and slung them onto a flattish bonfire blazing on top of one of the flower troughs.

"What the hell's going on?" I tried to sound authoritative.

"Hermie books," a woman crowed. She grinned wildly. "Clearing 'em off the shelves. Not before time."

Laura's hand covered her mouth, eyes staring helplessly at the blackening pages. I grabbed her arm and began to tug her away. She was in tears when we finally left the crowd behind.

"How can they do that?" she wailed. "What does it matter who wrote them? It's the words themselves which count."

I pulled out my netcom unit and called Charles Street to report the event. It took another 20 minutes for the first panda car to arrive. By then all was ash.

Some days after the bookburnings, Doctor Desmond Reece made a powerful public plea for the attacks on hermaphrodites to stop. The morning after his speech he was kicked to death on the steps of Nu-Cell's botanical research laboratory.

I spent the next three days helping to orchestrate the police reinforcements brought in to protect Nu-Cell's buildings and the University campus. The county commissioner was badly worried the mobs would wipe out the region's premier economic asset. Reece's murderers were never caught. The commissioner didn't consider the matter a priority.

Right across Europe, the Americas, and the far East citizens were burning Hermie books and cutting up Hermie doctors with scalpels; but their mouths were still red from munching on their reeceburgers. The hypocrisy of it all was driving me insane.

Nobody was really safe walking the streets. There were plenty of cases of non-hermaphrodites caught in the hysterical onslaught. Laura said very little, but she would lie awake at nights wondering when they would find out. In the dead of night she would just look at me with her moist, frightened eyes, but say nothing. She never dreamed I'd be her Judas.

The Brussels parliament was under pressure to act to halt the slaughter. But with Federal elections looming, you knew the mob was going to win either way. Under The (Hermaphrodites) Public Order and Dis-enfranchisement Enactment of that year, the following restrictions were ordered:

1. All hermaphrodites are required to register with their regional authority.
2. All hermaphrodites shall resign from holding public or civil office.
3. Hermaphrodites will be disenfranchised forthwith from all municipal, regional, state and federal elections.
4. An enquiry to be launched into the origins of her-maphrodism and into allegations of hermaphrodite conspiracy.

There were a lot of other clauses in the statutes, about publishing and other things with which I won't bore you. The point was that it didn't satisfy anyone. No-one gave two hoots whether a Hermie was allowed to put a cross on a ballot paper once every five years. What they wanted, as the tabloids pointed out on a daily basis, was to stop the filthy Hermies from breeding.

I got home late from work one evening towards the end of spring.

"I'm pregnant," said Laura.

"Jesus!" I said.

"Hermes," she said. "Aphrodite." It was sort of a joke. We went and lay down and, I'll admit it, I cried like a baby.

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The wave of attacks subsided for a while. Burroughs and a few other people at work were visibly disappointed, but I began to feel less anxious about Laura's safety. Meanwhile the official enquiry went into labour. A surprising number of prominent people spoke up for the Hermies, risking careers and tabloid derision, not to mention public assault. But a lot of people had been sickened by the street attacks.

Meanwhile the tabloids characterized the debate as two basically opposed theories. One they called Millennium Fever. The other was known as Martian Theory.

It seems that at the turn of every century a number of people get taken with Millennium Fever. The symptoms of Millennium Fever are a certain itchy credulity in the belief system and a nervous suggestibility, all brought on by the conviction that the turn of the century will signal some major development in the course of human history. The Next Big Step. The Giant Leap. The MF people argued that the arrival of the hermaphrodites semaphored that this had already happened. They pointed out that the first birth cluster of hermaphrodites, born around the end of the 20th century, were already making disproportionate contributions to the culture and progress of the species. Hermaphrodites, it was true, were characterized by their resourcefulness, their meekness and their fertility. It was the assertion of old gods, the MF people argued. Hermes the messenger. Aphrodite the goddess of love. The presence of the hermaphrodites was Messianic. To a planet in dire need, it was a message of love.

The tabloid louts just adored that. They staggered back from their reeceburger-and-beer lunchbreaks and wrote up the Martian Theory. Which gives you an idea of the kind of level this was pitched at.

The Martian Theory assumed some cosmic plot on the part of another species somewhere in the galaxy.

This alien species had littered the planet with spores - and how they loved that word spores - to reproduce their race. At the same time the overthrow and extinction of the human race was guaranteed. Message of love? No, trumpeted the Martian Theorists, it was a message of war.

To me, both arguments sounded about as rational as a jar of ether at a teenage psych-out party. But given the choice, and the intelligent level of debate conducted through the media, most people plumped for the Martian Theory.

So did the board of enquiry. Under their proposed (Hermaphrodites) Public Order and Disenfranchise-ment Enactment Amendment, several new clauses were to be added. It was never going to be anything else than major trouble.

Predicting the results of the enquiry, most hermaphrodites had failed to register as previously directed. Chief among the Amendment clauses was one which made it law that anyone knowing of an unregistered hermaphrodite should report their presence to the authorities.

Laura was well into her pregnancy when the findings were published. "This is it. We've got to take some kind of a stand." Suddenly that soulful, searching look of hers had taken on a blade edge. "No bloody way am I registering."

I could hardly argue. You see, there was another, rather more sinister clause included: a blanket prohibition on any hermaphrodite breeding, either with another hermaphrodite or with a non-hermaphrodite. Enforced contraception was the solution offered. But contraception has never been one hundred per cent successful. It would take only a few accidental pregnancies and sterility would become the only publicly acceptable answer.

The enquiry board made no mention of what was to happen to unborn children.

Unfortunately, the new law not only directed people to inform on their neighbours and colleagues. It also introduced retrospective interpretation of the law. Anyone who had previously consorted with an hermaphrodite was obliged to inform. Failure to do so was a Category A offence. If Laura and I were ever to part company and her secret was to be discovered at some future date, I too would face certain prosecution.

As a further complication, that week had seen the delivery of a set of highly classified Recordable CDs to Charles Street. They contained a program written by the experts of the Federal Detective Agency in Paris. It was a specialist monitor which would track an individual's movements on a 24-hour basis. Not physically, not optically; we're not that close to Orwell's nightmare, not yet. But the trail any one person leaves through the civil datanets is comprehensive enough to build up an accurate identikit of their movements—traffic control routing your car guidance processor, timed purchases through credit card, phone calls from home, netcom units, or office, mail, faxes. From that can be worked out who was in the pub with you, who shared your bus, your taxi, whose home you visited. And how often, that was the key. It looked for patterns. Patterns betrayed friendships and interests, contacts with criminals, even drug habits and bizarre sexual preferences.

It couldn't be done for the entire population; not enough processing power available. But the Packard-Bell sitting so princely in the Charles Street basement could quite easily track a troublesome minority clean across Leicestershire.

I had already been instructed to load the program. The county commissioner was simply waiting for the Amendment to be passed by Brussels before entering the names of all known hermaphrodites in the county.

No question, Laura would be found. She had a lot of hermaphrodite friends, some registered, others not. They would meet, talk on the phone, have meals together. Her name would be slotted into a pattern of seemingly random binary digits that flowed and swirled along the city's streets in the wake of its human occupants. And my name was linked with hers, irrevocably.

I didn't know what to do.

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I watched the duty officers at their terminals, busy keen-eyed youngsters, analysing requests and assigning priorities. Oblivious to each other and to their immediate environment. Three rows of desks, with a big situation screen on the far wall. All of it geared up to maintain the rule of law. It was all so bleakly efficient.

My own heart was slowing to its normal rate. The ops room, focused on the gritty problems that the streets dumped on our overstretched uniform boys and girls, wasn't my main concern. No, it was the detectives upstairs who worried me. We had a new division at Charles Street, the Registration and Identification Bureau, formed six months ago, with the sole task of spotting Hermies. They might begin to wonder why so few Hermies were being brought in after tip-offs, or even why the precious monitor program was producing so few names. And I wasn't the only computer expert in the building.

But it looked as if Morton Leverett was going to get clean away. I asked the terminal for a display of panda-car routings. When the street map with its flashing symbols flipped up I saw Burroughs had assigned Leverett only a blue coding, about level with shoplifting.

It would mean he had more than enough time to get away. Delight warred with anger inside my skull. I'd given Burroughs a deliberate and very pointed order to get officers there fast.

I looked up to see Burroughs talking into his throat-mike. His agitation had reached new heights. His blotchy skin betrayed him.

I used my supervisor's authority code to check his desk's communications network. He was using an outside line. Mistake, Burroughs, big mistake.

I patched the call into my own headset.

"...about twelve minutes," Burroughs's whined. "That sector's panda car is dealing with a mugging right now. I'll see if I can find another amber call to hold 'em up when they're finished. But I can't promise."

"We'll be there," a low voice replied.

The next minute was a blank. I sat there staring at nothing.

Burroughs! Burroughs was the one feeding the Her-mies to the organized lynch gangs! He was responsible for men women and children being torn to pieces, several hundred of them over the last 18 months.

But then, I think I was always ready for that. My dislike for Burroughs went deeper than his slob personality and vile bigotry. A lot deeper. Perhaps it was a psychic thing, some basic animal instinct.

On the other side of the glass he was standing up, clutching his arms to his chest. His shoulders were quaking inside his baggy shirt. Face wearing the desperately grim expression of someone holding back vomit.

I stuck my head round the door. "Burroughs, where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Toilet," he gasped.

"You're off shift in half an hour. Can't it wait?"

He stopped halfway to the door. "No it can't wait!" he screamed. "I want to go! And I'm shagging well going! All shagging right?" A bead of spittle dribbled from anaemic lips.

The entire ops room had come to a halt at the outburst.

"All right?" he yelled shrilly.

"Why, Burroughs, something's put you in a terrible mood today..."

He snarled something incoherent, then turned and ran for the gents.

I smiled evilly at his sweat-soaked back.

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For the start of summer it had been a chill night. I'd walked along paths lined by surreal purple and black ferns, taller than myself, which made up the garden hedges in the Nu-Cell housing estate. Out in the city I imagined the pubs hosting raging debates on the approaching ice age.

Laura had sounded odd when she phoned, timorous but insistent. Policeman's instinct, maybe, but I wasn't looking forward to the meeting. I thought I could guess the reason.

The mobs had started attacking Hermies again. Encouraged by the findings of the enquiry they'd returned with a vengeance. I'd never seen such naked hysteria before. When they got hold of someone, it was like watching a storm.

When I arrived at the dome there were five other people with her. All Hermies, and all working at the University or Nu-Cell. It confirmed my worst fears. The police had suspected the existence of Hermie cabals for some time. But the fact that Laura was a member was horrifying.

"We can't just sit by and do nothing," she said. "Not any more. It's gone too far now. They're killing us! We have to resist."

"And do what?" I asked.

"Stop the police collusion with the lynch gangs for a start."

"What the hell can I do? You don't seem to realize the position I'm in."

"You've got the power! You're there! You've got access to information. You know when the calls come in from informers. You can warn people. If you can't help us, who can?"

"And put my head on the block?"

One of the others cleared his throat, a male-aligned 30-year-old. Gerald, or at least that was the name he gave when introduced. Laura said he worked at Nu-Cell.

"Assisting our fellow Hermies here in Leicester would only be a very small part of our overall stratagem," he said.

"Stratagem?" I exclaimed. "Keep on using that kind of language, and people really will begin to believe in the Hermie conspiracy."

"When events force a minority into collusion to survive, then the term conspiracy is wholly appropriate."

"Jesus!"

"Will you listen," Laura hissed.

"We have to buy ourselves time," Gerald said. "That's all. After that the inevitable sweep of history will protect us. But the intervening years will be extraordinarily difficult for us as a race."

"What?"

He gave me a small contrite smile and held up a thin sheet of some transparent plastic. It was printed with rows of black lines, like a bar code. "I've been mapping the genome of various hermaphrodites working at Nu-Cell," he said. "I've identified the genes which produce both our dual sexual characteristics and enhanced neuron structure as well as other physiological improvements. Do you remember the so-called Martian Theory?"

"Yes," I said wearily.

"It is completely inaccurate."

"Astonishing," I said dryly.

Laura shot me a vicious glare.

"We have not resulted from artificial interference," he continued. "And that means that even if every hermaphrodite alive were to be sterilized, ordinary humans would still continue to give birth to more hermaphrodites. Within five generations every human born will be a hermaphrodite. So what we need is an interval in which people are forced to face reality and come to terms with our racial future."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"Over 95 per cent of human DNA is inactive spacing, literally garbage. The active genes, those which make us what we are, account for a tiny three or four percent. Until now geneticists have considered those inactive genes to be part of our heritage; primitive genes that have been switched off as we evolved out of our remote ancestry through simian stages until we arrived at what we are today. That theory is incorrect. Once I identified the hermaphrodite genes, I went back and examined the genomes of ordinary humans. They too contained the hermaphrodite genes. But they were inactive; for the moment, part of the spacing. Hermaphroditism is part of humanity's ongoing evolution."

"What switches the genes on?"

He shrugged lamely. "It is their time to be switched on. Our time. God, if you prefer, Mr Anderson, God has decided to bring us forth. Just think, in a hundred generations another sequence of genes will activate themselves. Who knows what our descendants will look like."

"And in the meantime, we get slaughtered," Laura said.

"Registration dodging isn't the answer," I said. "It criminalizes Hermies in everyone's eyes."

"Neither is registration," Philippa said. She was about the same age as Laura, with auburn hair and a small compact body. Aggression simmered, barely contained, below her calm surface persona. "Not when all that does is bring the lynch gangs down on you."

"It's not our fault," I shouted. "When the police arrive it's always too late."

"That's because someone inside your precious ops room is tipping off the lynch gangs," Laura said. "And you're just standing by and letting it happen."

I knew she was right. At the time I just didn't know who was doing it. I sank down into one of her scoop chairs. "I don't know where the leak is coming from," I said. "Believe me, I've looked."

"This may help," Philippa said with deceptive calm. She was holding out an RCD.

"What's this?"

"See for yourself." She indicated Laura's desktop terminal.

I slotted the silver disc. The program it contained was simple enough, designed for the Packard-Bell core, a number of subroutines that would work inside the original operator shell. Once loaded, any file that was started on a Hermie would be switched with another citizen file selected at random. That meant a duty officer sending a panda car to pick up a suspected Hermie would target the wrong person. Some innocent non-hermaphrodite would be cut up on the streets instead.

"No chance," I said.

"It would not have to be in effect for very long," Gerald said. "I intend to confront my non-hermaphrodite colleagues with my discovery. They are rational people, they will accept it. Then the intellectuals and leaders of the world will be made to understand what is really occurring. Hermaphroditism is inevitable."

Philippa snorted. She didn't believe in Gerald's wishful-thinking solution any more than I did. She didn't like the idea of being civil to a policeman, either. I could virtually see her mind working out ways to blackmail me into loading her program.

"Please, Mark," Laura said. "What kind of world will the baby come into if we don't try to bridge the gulf? This gives us the time to do it."

"I'll think about it," I lied.

She sat beside me and twined her arms round my neck. "Thank you."

* * * * *

I knew it was disastrous for Laura to get involved with these people. It was only a matter of time before they were rounded up; if they weren't informed on, the monitor program would track them down anyway. I loved Laura, and I would have done anything to protect her and our baby. She had taught me so many incredible things, things I would never have understood on my own. But I also believed in the system, believed that the system would protect us. I decided to take action before we were both up on a charge of insurrection.

The simplest thing to do was have her picked up. Crazy? Not really: once registered, her name would be entered in the monitor program. If she contacted her cabal members the monitor would spot them. She would never knowingly betray them, so she would steer clear of them.

And me? Well, I was prepared to face the consequences. As I said, I ultimately believed in the protection of the system. Remember, this was before I'd found out about Burroughs. What's more, I would be there to prevent anything from happening.

The day after the meeting I told Laura to meet me at Guys & Dolls restaurant for lunch. Then I bypassed the normal log-in procedure and loaded an informer's report of a Hermie into the ops room network, giving Laura's name and profile, telling them where she would be. One of the duty officers would pick it up, and assign a panda car to collect us both from Guys & Dolls.

I hurried towards the restaurant hoping Laura wouldn't be late. When the uniform boys picking her up found they had a senior officer as a witness they would have to act strictly according to the book. She would be perfectly safe in my presence. After that I would inform the Chief Constable of my relationship with her, but only after she'd been correctly processed.

On the way over to Guys & Dolls I got caught up in the lunchtime traffic snarl. I sat under my perspex bubble sweating for half an hour. In the end I jumped out and walked.

I turned the corner of the street and made for the restaurant with a growing sense of anxiety. When I saw the crowd outside the restaurant I felt a strange taste in my mouth. Fingering the buttons on my uniform, I had to fight down a rising panic. Then I found myself sprinting towards the crowd.

The lynch gang had already done its work. Their victim lay naked and bloody in the gutter. One of them turned the lifeless body over with the toe of his boot. They had hacked off the penis. And as I looked, I saw that their victim had been expecting a child, and that they had sliced open her belly. The bloody foetus was almost indistinguishable from the rest of the carcass. I looked around for Laura, as if somehow just by looking I could make that figure on the ground not be her. A neon sign flashing above the crowd exhorted us all to EAT REECEBREAD.

Philippa found me, hours later. I was sitting on the New Walk bridge over the carriageway running through the heart of the city. Down below, the fuel-cell driven cars formed a silent steady stream of colourful metallic beetles, scurrying home from work. Rushing towards their loved ones.

"What good will that do?" Philippa asked gently.

I didn't even look up. "It will stop the pain."

"Only for you. There are soon going to be others in your position. Millions of us. Do you want them to endure it as well?"

"I don't care."

"Yes you do. Laura taught you to care." I started sobbing. Philippa led me away from the parapet.

* * * * *

Behind me the ops room was abuzz with duty officers gossiping over Burroughs's hyper-tantrum; calls for assistance and reports of crime were going unanswered. It was my job to marshal them back to work. Not today. I pushed the door of the gents open, and walked in.

There were five stalls along one wall, stainless steel urinals at the far end. White tiles gleamed soullessly under harsh tubelight. The stall at the end of the line was occupied.

Gerald, quiet intellectual Gerald, had been quite right; oppress a minority enough and no matter how meek, how mild, eventually they begin to fight back. He even led the fight.

The whole world would be Hermies in time, he said. But time was the one thing the first generation didn't have. Our father Hermes and our mother Aphrodite might be bringing hermaphrodites into the world, but they were doing it too slowly. Even gods need a helping hand occasionally.

I tested the stall door with my hand. Burroughs had slipped the tiny bolt. A fragile whimpering sound was coming from inside. I was going to have to break down the door. I was already four months pregnant with Philippa's child, and exertion like that wouldn't be good for the baby, but I kicked at the lock anyway. The bolt flew off and I was able to push open the door.

After identifying the Hermie genes, Gerald had fed the sequence into a DNA synthesizer. Plasmids came out of the other end, the essence of Hermaphroditism, all that we are. Philippa and her more militant colleagues incorporated them into the new improved varieties of reecebread that Nu-Cell was giving to the world. And the people of the world ate. Both the meek and the greedy, eating their reeceburgers. The plas-mid-carrying viruses slithered into their digestive tract, into their bloodstream, into their cells, into their nuclei. And, finally, began raping their DNA.

But we're not heartless. Manipulating human genes is a tricky business. So much can go wrong. The plasmids needed to be tested first. I once said you can't experiment with gene therapy on living humans. I was wrong. There are certain individuals who can be exempt from such moral posturing.

Our test subject, myself, showed no ill-effects after a solid month of eating the modified reecebread. It was enough for us to release it for general consumption. That was six months ago.

Burroughs was sitting crammed into a corner of the stall, his trousers and pants crumpled round his knees. His wretched face jerked up as I looked in, his mouth open in a silent plea.

No wonder he'd been in such a rotten temper all week.

The chicken-flesh at the base of his scrotum had split open. A mucus plug had voided from the raw open slit, followed by a dribble of blood.

Burroughs was having his first period.