

Ancient of Days

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There were less than two weeks to go until Christmas, and flakes of snow were settling silently on the window-sill. Sue leaned against the wall next to the casement so that her breath formed patterns of condensation on the glass. The red glow of the newly-lit street lights turned the falling snow to blood, drifting down across the deserted alleyway behind the lab. She blinked slowly. Was it her imagination or was there a new shadow behind the dumpsters? Holding her breath so that it would not fog the glass, she stared out of the window. The shadow disappeared and she breathed out. Then she undid the catch and swung the window open in invitation. "You're late," she said.

The shadow re-appeared in front of her, resolved into the shape of a man shrouded in a donkey-jacket against the cold. "Rush-hour traffic," he said, his voice somehow deadened by the softness that settled on every surface. "Help me in?"

Sue extended a hand. He took it and levered himself up and over the sill. He swung himself into the room and dropped to the floor, looking around as he did so. "You're wet," said Sue. "Did you bring any equipment?"

He nodded and held up a small brief case. She looked at his face. Something wasn't quite right. "You look strained," she said as she shut the window.

He nodded tiredly. "I am not as young as I used to be, Sally. If you knew what I had to do to get here –"

"I can guess, and as for the name I'm called Sue," she said, a trifle too sharply. He stared at her for a moment then nodded and forced a smile. The shape of his cheekbones turned it into something hollow and unconvincing.

"Please accept my apologies then – Sue. It's late and I've got a job to do and we've all been under considerable stress recently –"

"Accepted. Just remember who it was who laid their neck on the line to get a job here ..."

"It is noted," he said curtly.

"No it's not!" she flashed. "This unit is licensed to work with pathogenic organisms. They wanted a blood sample and insisted upon giving me a series of vaccinations –"

"Ah, I'm sure it hurt." He shook his head, oblivious to the finer points of immunological stress. "But in view of what you found that's immaterial now, isn't it?"

She turned away angrily and busied herself with an untidy pile of papers that sat on the desk in the corner by the centrifuge.

"Believe me when I say that this could be the greatest threat we have ever encountered," he said softly. "Greater than any ancient encounter with half-glimpsed horrors ..."

She nodded slowly, wondering if she had it in herself to forgive him the slight. "You might have a point," she said. "But only time will tell." She rummaged through a drawer in search of a paper-clip, bound the documents together, and slid them out of the way. Then she walked to the battered metal locker and removed a creased lab coat. "Let's make a start on it, shall we?"

Kristoph grinned and removed his donkey-jacket. "Let's," he said. He opened his brief case and pulled out a pair of disposable plastic gloves. "Now who shall we apportion the blame to? How about some animal rights activists? Or shall we make it look like an industrial job this time, do you think?"

Kristoph was not his real name. He had no real birth certificate, although he had carried several. He was much older than Sue, and he had lived through interesting times. He had lost a large part of his heart on the Eastern front, so that fifty years later he still wondered if he could ever be whole again: he had survived the decades since the war by auctioning his soul at Checkpoint Charlie, running jobs for Stasi and the CIA and another, less familiar Organisation. With the collapse of the Wall he had been set free to wander, and finally to turn his hand to Family business. As he prepared for the job in hand he whistled a half-forgotten marching song to himself.

"Will you stop doing that?" asked Sue.

He glanced up from his kit and caught her eye. "Why?"

"Anyone would think you were an old Nazi," she said.

"Oh." He glanced down again so that she wouldn't see his smile. *Now he*

remembered what the tune was. "Time flies," he said, clipping the camera shut. Then he stood up. "How long have you been here then?" he asked.

Sue walked to the window and stared out of it again. "Two years," she said, "but that's only in this job. I had to go to one of their Universities to qualify for it. My family –"

"Demonstrated a laudable degree of fore-sight," opined Kristoph.

"In this day and age anything else condemns you to life as a menial. Times have changed. If you want to get ahead you've got to play by their rules. The net's too tight."

Kristoph, who knew better than she, held his silence.

"I've heard all the old tales," Sue continued. "My parents are really keen on them. But things aren't the same, are they? It's hard to maintain a sense of ... community ... while all around us ..."

Kris stood up. "I think you'd better show me to the offices. We don't want to start too late; this could take all night."

Sue turned slowly, looking around as if she had forgotten where the door was. When she opened it she glanced swiftly down the corridor outside. "Clear," she called over her shoulder as she slipped out of the basement laboratory. Kristoph looked around curiously as he followed her through the deserted passages of the department.

The concrete floor was scuffed and dirty and the whitewashed walls had seen better days. Fluorescent lights flickered overhead, casting what Kristoph saw as a gangrenous blue-green glare across the crowded bulletin boards. An ancient ultra-centrifuge keened to itself in a shadowy niche as they hurried past. Sue pushed through two pairs of fire doors and turned a corner on a concealed staircase. "Meet me in room D-11 if we become separated," she said. "It's two flights up. There's a walkway from the corridor opposite it to the Geophysics block if you need a quick getaway."

"I don't think that will be necessary," he said quietly.

"You know there are security guards?" she asked, pausing on a landing half-way between floors.

"Whatever makes you think we'll encounter any trouble?" he replied, looking her straight in the eyes.

She appeared to be slightly flustered. "Nothing," she said. "I just thought you spook types always liked to know a way out of a tight corner –"

Kris held her gaze for a moment then nodded. "The ones you read about are the ones who get caught," he said. "Don't worry about me, Sue. I can take care of myself." He waved a hand in an abrupt cutting motion. "Carry on. We haven't got all night."

Presently they arrived outside a locked door. "This is it," she said.

Kristoph bent over the lock for a couple of minutes, fiddling with a set of fine-tipped pliers. "You've got to be careful to leave all the right signs," he murmured. "Otherwise the Polizei get suspicious. Is there a vending machine anywhere near here?"

"Sure," said Sue. "Why?"

"Get me a cup of coffee, please," he said. "White, no sugar. We're going to be here a while."

The lock snicked open and he turned the door handle as she walked away. The room within was darkened. He pushed the door open and reached around it for the light switch, every nerve straining for signs of potential trouble. But there was nothing amiss: it was just another night-time office, plastic covers drooping over the copier and word processors. He breathed out slowly, willing the muscles in his arms to relax as he looked around. There were papers in every in-tray, filing cabinets full of pre-publication data: he rubbed the skeleton keys in his pocket. The soul of a research group lay exposed to his midnight fingers, so prosaic an institution that it seemed ridiculous to connect it to some hideous, numinous threat to the survival of the race. But that was what Ancient of Days had said – and Kris knew full-well, with the bitterness of experience, that when Ancient of Days spoke, everyone listened.

Kris went to work with a precision that was born of long experience. First he closed the venetian blinds; then he switched on the photocopier and went to work on the first of the filing cabinets as it warmed up. His brief-case he placed upon a nearby desk, opening it to reveal two reams of lightweight copier paper: *why bother with toys like Minox spy-cams*, his trainers had once explained, *when any well-run office provides all the tools you need?* He whistled as he worked, in an effort to forget the snow on the window ledge. If it wasn't for that damned snow, with its burden of remembered horrors preying on his mind, he might even admit that he was happy.

There was a knock on the door. Kristoph spun round then relaxed, recognizing that it was Sue: a slight catch in her breath and the way she shifted her balance on the floor outside gave her away. "Come in," he said, turning back to examine the suspension files in the top

drawer of the first cabinet.

She opened the door. "Your coffee," she said, placing the cup next to his case. "Any idea how long you'll be?"

He yawned, baring teeth as white as those of an actor in a toothpaste commercial. "You tell me. If there's not much to lift from the project files, then ..."

"You're in the wrong cabinet for the research data," she observed, looking over his shoulder. "That's all departmental admin. The interesting stuff is filed in the drawers marked Homoeobox Research Group. Funded by the Human Genome Project, natch."

"It's all greek to me," said Kris, turning to the indicated cabinet. *Greece, yes ... and the partisans in the hill country ...* he stamped on the memory. *Maybe I've been around too long*, he thought bleakly. *The generation gap is widening all the time.*

"I shouldn't worry about it," she replied, sitting down in a chair in front of one of the word processors. "Change overtakes us all. This shit is so new it's all developed since I left school."

"How long ago was that?" Kristoph asked, picking out the first file and carrying it across to the copier.

"Ten years since I took 'A' levels," she said, "then a bachelor's degree, Masters, Phd and research for the past two years. I'm in a different field, though. She rolled her chair round, craning her head back to stare at the ceiling. "Polysaccharide chemistry, not ontological genetics. They've made huge breakthroughs in the past ten years, you know. How long is it since you were at school?"

Kris laughed. "I was never at school," he said, stacking papers face-down in the feeder tray. "At least not as you know it. I learned to read and write in primary school with the other children, but then the dictator's men came. Ideology was in the driver's seat, and there were secret police – night and mist – and identity papers to contend with. We couldn't move as freely as we did before all this modern nonsense. I went into the army at sixteen because I was a young fool and thought it was a good way to get away from home, to lose myself among millions of other young men; I didn't understand about humans then."

He fell silent for a while, watching the sharp-edged shadows moving on the wall behind the photocopier. *I don't think I should have told her that.* "We suffered in that war," he said quietly. "I don't know how many died; there's no way of telling. But all through that area – the pain –"

"Then you must be, what? Sixty years old?" Sue asked. She wasn't spinning the chair any more: she was staring at him, her face a sharply pointed question, hungry for answers. "And still, you –"

"Still," he said. "I'm not even settled down with a family. If I was human I would be an old man, now. Retired to tend my bed of roses." Abruptly, he leaned forward and grabbed the stack of ejected documents, stuffed them back into their file and returned them to their drawer in exchange for another bundle. "They created the roses, you know? The humans. They bred them, from earlier plants."

"I know," she said. "Just as now they're trying to redesign themselves to fit their own desires. It's an interesting preoccupation ..."

Kris shuddered at the sight of her expression. "Pass the next file. What's your real name?" he asked without looking up.

She told him.

"Well," he said, running his long, thin tongue along his lips as he stared at the control panel: "you would do well to remember who you are, *Sue*, and think carefully about where your loyalties lie. We're letting them play with fire, and you are sitting very close to the hearth. There are those who would say that if you were to be burned it would be only your own fault."

She walked away from him, towards the window. "I say that as a friend," he added. "There are other groups at work as well ..."

She turned round then, and Kris felt himself frozen by the black spike of her gaze. He stared back at her unwaveringly. Something very ancient and very chilly passed between them and he made a small gesture with his right hand, a relic of an upbringing in backwoods Silesia. Behind them the photocopier whined on, unattended in its shadowy corner. "You don't know what you're talking about," she said, her face relaxing into a shape that was both alien and intimately familiar to Kristoph. "Believe me, genetic manipulation is perfectly safe," she added, baring inhumanly sharp teeth at him. "You can tell that to Ancient of Days. It's safe as stones as long as we're in control. Safe as stones ..."

Later, as soon as it could be arranged, five strangers gathered in impromptu committee. There were no validated safe houses available in the city at present, and Ancient of Days had insisted upon full security precautions being observed: therefore they met in the a place normally maintained for serious emergencies, where interruption was unlikely.

The city sewer systems were more than a century old, and a lengthy program of refurbishment had been under way for ten years now. Old brick-lined tunnels crumbled gently beneath the pounding wheels of trucks and cars, and the new prefabricated concrete sewers by-passed them completely. The original maps were in poor condition, many of them lost during the war, and the old lore of the tunnel-walkers had dwindled as a result of modern career mobility, but there were still some who knew where the ancient tunnels ran. One of those summoned hence conference had spent years in similar tunnels under Bucharest; and another had been around when they were built. And tonight, two nights after Kristoph's twilight raid on the research group's offices, they were about to meet.

Slime wreathed the sewer, forming a tide-mark three-quarters of the way up the rotting brick walls. Five metres below the streets of the city it was completely dark, and Kristoph was forced to stoop over his lantern in order to keep his head from brushing the ceiling. Jagged black shadows danced along the tunnel behind him like a retinue of silently mocking mimics. Once a pair of close-set red eyes gleamed at him from an outflow: Kris nodded at them as he shuffled towards the meeting place. There was no telling where Ancient of Days might cast her eyes and ears. He pushed onwards, ever deeper into the maze of fetid burrows beneath the city, wading knee-deep in ancient effluent. His thoughts were grim.

He arrived at a dead end. A pile of rocks and mud had collapsed through a hole in the ceiling, blocking off the tunnel ahead. Cracked and rotted timbers poked out of the heap, and a pool of black mud had gathered at its foot. Kris paused, then reached out and pushed down hard on one of the exposed timbers. With a gurgling sigh the water around his feet drained away; whirlpools swirled briefly about his ankles as he braced himself against the powerful current leading to the concealed grate. Presently the floor was dry – dry enough. Bending down he felt through the mud for a projecting iron ring and pulled up on it. The trapdoor was ancient but well-maintained, and he let it swing shut above him as he descended the steps below. Now there was no need for a torch. Ancient of Days had passed here before him, and where she walked darkness was not permitted. Kristoph shivered, not from cold but from awe and a slight, small dread. He had met generals of State Security and deputy directors of Central Intelligence and he had worked with assassins and spies and defectors and the other shadowy predators of the cold war jungle; but none of them possessed even a fragment of the legendary power which Ancient of Days controlled. And never before had she taken a direct interest in his affairs, to the point of requesting his attendance ...

He looked around. He stood on dry stone flooring at the bottom of a high, narrow room similar in shape to an oubliette in a mediaeval castle, except that it was considerably larger and there was a door set in one wall. It was a modern door, plywood and aluminium, and it was as jarringly out of place here as a plastic denture in the jaw of an Egyptian mummy. He shook his head disapprovingly then reached into a pocket for the key which he had been given. Then he unlocked the door and went through.

"You can leave it open," she said. Kris's head snapped round and he froze, staring at the woman who stood in the corner of the room behind him. "We're expecting three more guests," she added.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Call me Helena." She came forward, out of the shadow cast by the weak light bulb that hung from one corner of the ceiling, and Kristoph realised that she couldn't possibly be Ancient of Days; for one thing she was far too young, even though she bore the marks of encroaching middle age. Her left cheek was scarred by a patch of psoriasis, an angry red margin around a silvery, scaly patch, and with a sudden jolt Kris realised that she might actually be *human*. "Don't worry: I'm not as – human – as I look." She rubbed the back of one gloved hand against her cheek. "There are two others coming, then Ancient of Days herself. You brought the documents, I take it?"

Kris glanced round, taking in the rest of the room. It was furnished, albeit sparsely, with camping seats and an upturned tea-chest as a table. It was also very cold. "I'd prefer to leave that until the others arrive."

"Very well then," she said, thrusting her hands into the pockets of her coat: "it can wait. I hope you appreciate the gravity of the situation –"

"Lady, I'm the one who turned over the office," he said with heavy irony. "I was on the

Kennedy assassination committee; I set up spy swaps during the fifties. Before that, I was site officer on Operation Silver. *Trust* me, I'm a professional."

She laughed, which was not unexpected, then abruptly looked away, which was. "Bullshit. Spy stuff. Fun and games." She turned back to him. "This is the real thing," she said intensely: "you'd better believe it! This is so important that –"

He held up a hand and she stopped. The noise of hands and feet descending a ladder was clearly audible. "We have company."

The new arrivals didn't wait around. Both of them came through the door, then stopped and stared at Kris and – whatever her name was – Helena. "Ivan Salazar and David Jakes?" asked Helena.

"Yeah," said the shorter one, removing a yellow construction-site helmet and running a pudgy hand through his thinning hair. "I'm Dave. That'n's Ivan." The taller one stood with his hands thrust deep in the outer pockets of his trench coat. Kris stiffened, automatically focusing on the bulge in Salazar's right pocket. "Sorry we're late."

"Any trouble?" asked Helena.

Ivan slowly pulled out his right hand. It was empty, and Kristoph relaxed slightly. "Not much," Ivan said in heavily-accented English. "Not much *now*." He grinned sharkishly and Kristoph looked back at his pocket. *Must be a .22*, he thought. *Anything bigger would show. Now where have I seen him before?*

Kristoph looked back at the tubby American and unexpectedly realised that he was being stared at. The man had exceedingly cold eyes. "No offense," he said, "but we ran into some identity verification problems a while back. Ivan hasn't had time to change yet."

"Did you deal with the problem?" asked Kris.

Ivan nodded. "He terminated it," said Jakes. "He terminated it so efficiently that half the police department are after him."

Kris looked round and caught Helena's eye.

She shook her head very slightly and shivered. "The person you've all come here to meet should be arriving any time now. I hope you don't mind waiting; she's a bit slow on her feet these days and likes to take time to look her visitors over in advance."

"Huh." Ivan stared at the plywood door, irritated by his treatment but trying not to let his resentment show. "Now you've introduced us, how about telling us why we're here? I mean, this four-star accomodation is all very flattering, but –"

Salazar chuckled to himself, a warm, throaty sound. "Guess, man," he said. "Just guess."

"Are you corporate?" Kris asked, raising an eyebrow. "If so, from which entity?"

"Ah." Jakes shook his head. "We're not here to talk about peripheral business. It's bad practice. Observe compartmentalisation at all times. We are all family, it's true, but we might be on different sides –"

Kris spat on the floor. "*Human* sides. Always building walls between each other. Huh." He turned to Helena. "How long until She arrives?"

"Not long now," she said. "In fact –"

The door opened. Ancient of Days stood waiting. Nobody moved: the sight of her condition was too shocking.

"Holy shit," whispered the one called Dave. "I had no idea –" He took a step forward.

Ancient of Days raised a warning arm and spoke. "*Wait. Come no closer. My condition is of unknown aetiology and may prove to be infectious to your kind. Please make yourselves comfortable –*" one obsidian pupil swept the room; a scale-encrusted nostril flared in remote amusement – "*insofar as that may be possible. We have much to discuss.*"

Kris could hold his peace no longer. "What's going on?" he demanded angrily, meeting her huge eyes full on. "Why weren't we told things had gone this far? The situation may be irrecoverable!" Then he stopped, shuddering in his boots as he realised what he had just done. Ancient of Days looked down upon him and for an endless instant of terror he could hear his heart stand silent, the blood in his veins freezing as he waited for her response to his presumption.

"That is not yet the case. But, be that as it may, you are now needed here urgently. Please listen carefully; you will have your turn to reply. What I called you here to tell you about is a matter long overdue, and one that should have been dealt with years ago, before the humans reached their current dangerous state of power."

She looked round at those who were gathered to her, then re-focussed on Kristoph. "*I must start by asking you a leading question, in order to judge how much you need to know at this stage. Tell me, how much do you know about genetics? And what – in particular – do you know about the so-called 'Human Genome Project'?*"

A welcoming house: a hot bath: a lover's arms. After the raid Sue went home and tried to lose herself in the eternal present, far away from the grim shadows that Kristoph had raised by his passage. But there were a number of obstacles; Eric, for one thing, couldn't let things be, and for another thing she couldn't help wondering just what it was that Kristoph had been sent to look for.

Eric entered the bathroom as she was rinsing conditioner out of her hair. He sat down on the closed lid of the lavatory and carefully shut his book before he turned to face her. "What is it?" asked Sue, switching off the shower attachment. Unlike Eric, she didn't read many books when she was home; only people.

He looked at her and smiled. "Just wondering what it was all about this evening. Was it really Family business?"

It was characteristic of Eric, an ill-timed curiosity that pried into hidden corners just when she most wanted to leave them alone. She'd become used to it in the eight months they'd lived together, and expected it to drive them apart over the next few years. This relationship was an anomaly, after all; neither of them were mature by the standards of their people, who were traditionally promiscuous, and their intimacy was more a consequence of their isolation than of any convergence between them. "No," she said, and then, on second thoughts: "I'm not sure. The man they sent – he said he was called Kristoph, but I don't believe him. He's some kind of spook, can pick locks and knows how to burgle an office and make it look like someone else's fault. He was hunting for something in the HGP contract notes but I think he didn't know quite what he'd been sent to get." She sank back in the bath and shivered, then reached out to run some more hot water into the tub. "He was really creepy, you know? And the stuff he was spouting –"

Eric put his book down on the window ledge, carefully avoiding the patch of condensation that trickled down one corner. He always seemed to be carrying a book around the house with him, but never seemed to read from it; she had speculated whimsically that he made himself invisible when he was reading, as a defence against being disturbed. "Where was this Kristoph from? Who sent him?" He leaned forward and picked up the conditioner bottle and began turning it in his hands, inspecting it as if he expected to discover a hidden message embedded in its soft pink plastic.

"I don't know who sent him, but I expect it was some hard-line oldster shit. He kept referring to the *dark*: you should have heard him going on! 'Take care, sorceress, lest they send for the witch-finder general and burn thee at the stake!'" Her voice deepened an octave and her cheeks sagged into nascent jowls as she delivered the injunction to a wisp of steam that hovered over the shower fitting. "They're still living in the prehistoric past, Eric, not the new age crap the humans keep spouting on a bout but the real thing –" she yanked the plug out angrily.

Eric watched in silence as she sat up and let the water drain around her. She saw him eyeing her breasts as they sagged slightly, no longer buoyed up by the fluid around her. "Any thoughts on the matter?" she asked, trying to conceal her anxiety. "Come on, don't just sit there!"

Eric passed her a towel. "Thanks," she said, standing up and wrapping it around herself. The air on her skin felt cold even though the room was half-filled with steam.

"I think we ought to investigate this carefully," he said. There were times when she hated his imperturbability; just this once it was a shred of comfort. "It sounds like the kind of intrigue that could affect us if we ignore it – the dinosaurs still have fangs."

"Huh." She shook her head and stepped out of the tub. "Will you stop speaking in tongues and give me a straight answer for once?" She reached out and gently cupped his cheek in her hand. "What's worrying you, love? All the old stories coming back to haunt you?"

"No, it's not that." He stood up, accidentally dislodging her hand in the process. "It's just a nagging feeling I've got." His face hardened slightly, so that the soft, pampered look of the mathematics professor was eclipsed for an instant by some harsher, more primal expression of his identity. "Maybe we should look into precisely what the HGP group are working on for their industrial grant. I doubt that the Ancients would be interested if it was harmless to us. But there might be something we can spot which your spook wasn't educated to identify. Something that will put the program in an entirely different perspective."

Helena, assistant to Ancient of Days, nevertheless didn't live in the tunnels alongside with her mistress; she had a daylight identity and a job that payed the bills the night-blind humans levied in return for warmth and peace among them. After the meeting broke up she found herself inviting Kristoph back to her house: she deliberately refrained from exploring her motives. Kristoph, for reasons of his own, accepted the invitation.

Perhaps it was the remembered chill of the news that Ancient of Days had borne, or perhaps the central heating was malfunctioning; in either case, the hall was cold as she took off her coat and hung it behind the door. "Something to drink, perhaps?" she asked as he patiently scraped his boots on the doormat. "Or some coffee?"

"A drink would be great." Kristoph unbuttoned his coat and hesitated a moment before hanging it on the door. She heard him test the Yale lock before he turned and followed her into the living room. "You live here alone?"

She shrugged and bent down over the sideboard. The stereo was still switched on and the room filled with the faint strains of Vivaldi. Two tumblers of scotch appeared, followed by ice from a small refrigerator. "I like to keep the world at a distance," she said, turning to pass him one of the glasses. "I'm no lonelier than I want to be."

"And how lonely is that?"

"You're here. There've been others, but none of them cared to compete for my attention with Her."

"Ah." Kristoph sat down at one side of the sofa, then glanced at her enquiringly. She took a mouthful of burning spirit in order to cover her indecision, then quickly sat down next to him.

Presently Kristoph asked, "Did you choose to serve Her, or did she choose you?" He stared into his glass and swirled the thin layer of liquid around until the bottom was exposed. "I mean, I wasn't aware that She has any tradition of priestly attendance ..."

"She doesn't. And to answer your question, I didn't choose to serve her, and she didn't choose me. It just happened." Helena stared at his glass for a moment in fascination. "Are you going to drink that?" she asked.

"Eventually. I'm sorry, it's just a bad habit of mine. One of my acquaintances said I was like a cat; I play with my food. I can't remember when that was, but it was some years ago." He glanced up and stared moodily at the window-sill. "I try to cultivate my private eccentricities. They're a kind of defense, if you will, against this modern habit of living in crowds. It strikes me that the bigger the city you live in, the more anonymous you become. It's as if it's an infectious disease, and the most common side-effect is loneliness."

"Perhaps you're right." She rubbed her cheek reflectively. "I certainly don't know of many other – people – living in this man-swarm. Perhaps that's why She asked me to help her. She needs eyes and ears among the humans, you know. They used to be easy to deceive, but now their intelligence is as good as or better than anything we have –"

"No it isn't," he said. "Please believe me, their intelligence people know *nothing*." He said it with a degree of venom that made her tense instinctively before she realised that it was not directed at her. "I'm sorry, Helena. I've been alone among them for a long time – perhaps too long. The time when it was possible to live exclusively among Family folk is long past."

"It lends a certain tension to life, doesn't it. There have been times when I've gone months without seeing another *weerde* face. I felt like I was going crazy: you know, like that patient of Freud's ..." she turned and stared at him intently.

"Steppenwolf. Yes, I knew him well." Kristoph tossed back what was left of his glass and stared back at her. "It's late, Helena. Would you mind if I stayed the night?"

"That's why I invited you here," she said, her face tingling with anticipation. "It's very cold outside, even though the war's over. Can you think of anywhere you'd rather be?"

Kristoph was of a certain age, as was she, and if he didn't understand what it was like to be single and unmated at fifty years of age, there was time for plenty more opportunities ahead.

"I can't," he said, a strange roughness edging into his voice. "I've been searching for a long time now –" He glanced away, suddenly shy. "I don't know you, but I feel as if I've known you for years," he tried to explain.

"In the morning you must tell me where you've spent your life," she said. "Then maybe we can think about the future." They stood up simultaneously and came together in an endless, clinging embrace. "But first –" she kissed him. Gradually, her face relaxed into its primal form, her cheeks flowing and her teeth expanding to grate against his lengthening jaw as she felt something vital return to her. A flame of desire that had been bottled up behind an alien mask for too long had finally discovered its own identity: and by the time the two lovers raked the clothes from each other's backs, an onlooker would have seen nothing human about them. But that was as it should be, for neither Helena nor Kristoph were – or ever had

been – human.

Two days after the raid: and, astonishingly, nobody had noticed Kristoph's carefully laid trail of clumsy clues. In fact, none of the staff so much as noticed the unlocked file cabinet or the opened door. It might as well have been a non-event. Sue, who had been steeling herself for vans with swirling blue lights in the rainy night and a plastic tape cordon around the premises, didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Instead, she took the first afternoon off with a well-rehearsed migraine and followed it up the next morning with a headache. Nothing too serious, though. Working in a lab with biohazard stickers on the door meant that any serious symptoms could land her in an isolation ward, exposed to risks of examination that she was not prepared to run.

Eric worked on the other side of the campus, in a cramped office in the department of Mathematics and Computer Science. How he'd ever got into academia still mystified her; a knack for passing exams, he used to say, smiling faintly when she probed for an explanation. Nobody took any notice when she stopped by his office on her way in to work that afternoon, looking pale and a trifle nauseated. A lecturer carrying on with a post-grad was nobody's business but their own, after all, and stranger things had been known to go on in university staff rooms.

"Up to a rummage tonight?" Sue asked, sitting in his favourite visitor's chair and idly stirring the papers on his desk. "We could go on to a restaurant afterwards –"

Eric pulled open a desk drawer and withdrew a black plastic case. "No trouble at all," he said. "You think it'll be safe?"

"Sure," she said. "I swallowed enough of the buzz-words to ask the right questions. We'll say it's about a grant extension to your department and we've got to dig the right names out to put on the letter. How's that?"

"I've been doing a bit of reading around the subject," he said, gesturing at a fat book balanced on one end of the desk. "Developmental genetics?"

"Figure a mathematical slant on it," she said, shrugging. "Otherwise, be yourself."

"Hah. Okay. We'll leave the copying for some other time. But for now, are you sure you can remember just which drawer it was that your visitor took a particular interest in?"

"Pretty much so, yes. He was after HGP-funded stuff, specifically anything to do with Geiger-DESY Research and a doctor MacLuhan. He didn't seem to know what, but he photocopied everything in sight and shoved it in a briefcase. I couldn't tell you what the notorious doctor was up to, though; I've never heard of him, he seems to be some kind of industrial connection ..."

"Hah. Thicker and thicker, my dear Watson." He sat up and spun his chair round to face away from the desk. "How are Geiger-DESY connected with the Department?"

Sue thought for a moment. "If it's anything like the way industrial funding goes elsewhere in the field, it's a simple directed research project. In return for a first shot at information from the Homoeobox Research Team Geiger-DESY pays a huge whack and provides equipment. The University pays for the staff and gets the kudos while the company get the patent rights. How's that sound?"

"And what line are Geiger-DESY in?" asked Eric, thoughtfully. "I thought they were into drugs –"

"There's not much difference these days, I mean, the times when they used to go out in pith helmets and poke around the jungle in search of some new wonder plant are all but dead, aren't they? It's all molecular modelling and receptor-affinity analysis. As often as not they start out with a complete biochemical description of a problem and work backwards towards isolating a genetic –" she stopped, realising that she'd lost Eric a while back. "Well," she concluded, "it's no surprise that Geiger-DESY are into the human genome project. That's where everyone's expecting the next big therapeutic breakthroughs to come from."

"Like a cure for AIDS?" asked Eric.

"That, and other things," she acknowledged. "When the Human Genome Project is complete, they'll have a total map of the human genetic structure. They'll be able to play with it, working out what causes what and how it acts as a, not a blueprint so much as a, *program* for generating human beings. If you insert a bug in the software you get a malfunction – AIDS is a bug in the immune system, spliced into the program by viral reverse transcriptase – but, equally, if you've got a faulty computer program you tackle the problem by trying to debug it, not by hitting it over the head with a blunt instrument like a drug."

"I think I see," said Eric. "One other question, though. What's a Homoeobox when it's

at home, and why's everybody so interested in it?"

"Ah, well, you do pick the easy ones, don't you?" Abruptly, Sue stood up and looked out the window. There was nobody outside. She flicked the lock on the door then turned and faced him. "Watch."

Slowly, her face began to flow. At first it simply looked as if she was relaxing, all her muscles slowly slackening: but gradually the process accelerated, until it was as if all the underlying tissue was falling away from the bones of her skull. Cheeks sagged then began to stretch as cartilaginous flaps brought her jawbone forwards. Eric watched, petrified, as her lips pulled away from her gums – "*Stop it!*" he hissed at her, glancing hastily at the door. "What do you think you're –"

Sue raised her hands to cover her face. "Don't worry," she said, "there's nobody about. I checked first, I swear it. Look, you asked me a question. *That's* your answer."

"Pardon?" Eric stood up and checked to make sure that there was nobody outside the window.

"It's a little-known fact that humans, ants – even us – share most of the same genes. What differentiates us is the homoeobox: a complex of genes which are, I guess, *meta*-genes. They control how, why, and when other genes are switched on or off; the flow of control in the genetic program, so to speak. What's the difference between a blood cell such as a lymphocyte, and a muscle cell? Or a neuron?"

She lowered her hands and Eric saw that her face was back to normal again. He smiled with embarrassed relief. "Please don't do that again in public. Someone, a student, could call at any time ..."

Sue shrugged. "They didn't. Look, what I'm getting at is this. The stuff Kristoph was looking at, it was all to do with research on mapping the homoeobox. Got that? The one section that tells a human foetus that it's to grow up into a human being and not a gorilla or a flatworm. We're not the only people working on it, but –"

Eric turned round. "I think I've heard enough. Will there be anyone in the office if we go there now? I mean, right now?"

"It's anyone's guess. Hey, what's the sudden hurry?"

Eric shook his head. "I've got a feeling that this could be bad. I think I know why Kristoph was sent to look through those files, and if I'm right it could be very serious indeed. In fact if they're doing what I think they're doing and we don't stop them right away those clowns could land us all in a real mess."

The department office was open but nobody was in when Sue and Eric arrived there. One of the word processors was switched on, and it looked as if whoever was using it could return at any moment. "Act as if this is something you do all the time," murmured Sue as she opened the unlocked filing cabinet drawer.

"Is there any particular reason why you think I wouldn't do that without being told?" asked Eric, standing behind her with a conspiratorial air.

"Not really," she remarked, slightly nettled; "you're blocking my light. Here, I think this is what we want." She opened the folder and turned over the contents. "Doctor MacLuhan, Suite Four, Geiger-DESY research foundation laboratories. What he's asking for – looks like a breakdown of one particular sequence, doesn't it?" She flicked more pages. "No, that was last month. This month ... applications with respect to polymorphism, phocomelia, regeneration –"

"That's it," said Eric. "Phocomelia, isn't that when, you know, like thalidomide –"

"Failure to develop limbs, yeah." Sue made a quick note of MacLuhan's address then slid the folder back in the cabinet. "I'll bet you anything you care to mention that this is what caught Her attention –"

She turned round. One of the departmental secretaries, a woman Sue recognised but couldn't put a name to, was standing in the doorway staring at her. "Hello," said the woman, "I thought you were off sick?"

Sue slid the drawer shut and smiled at her, then carefully turned the smile into a wince. "I was," she said: "I had a migraine." She rubbed her forehead. "You know. But professor Sampson wanted an address out of files so I figured –" she shrugged.

"Oh, that's quite all right," said the secretary, sitting down. She looked up at Eric, who was standing beside her desk with one hand behind his back. "Can I help you?" she asked brightly.

"It's okay," said Eric, "I'm with her." The woman nodded then turned back to her screen.

Sue beckoned surreptitiously, and Eric followed her out of the room. "What's that you've got in your hand?" she whispered once they were outside the door. Eric slowly brought

it into view, then uncurled his fingers so that she could glimpse what he was holding. Then he dropped the lock-knife back into one of his jacket pockets and set off down the corridor at a brisk walk. Sue hurried to catch up. *Eric*, she thought grimly, *you and I have got a lot of talking to do*; but she also had a feeling that his caution might be justified. This was not a time for half-measures.

The orange glare of street lights filtered through the windows, casting a rippling shadow on the wallpaper above the bedstead as it passed through the cloud of cigarette smoke that hung motionless in the air. The bed was occupied: Kristoph lay on it, chain-smoking Benson and Hedges and staring at the ceiling. He was naked, and the sheets lay in tatters beneath him.

He sensed a presence nearby and tensed, then turned one eye towards the door. Helena was standing there, a bottle in one hand and two glasses in the other. She, too, was naked, and smiling.

"*What's so amusing?*" asked Kris, in a language that he had used so little of late that it came haltingly to his tongue.

"*It's nothing*," she said, putting the glasses down beside the bed. "*It just looked – I don't know. It was the cigarette that did it. I'm too used to looking at people through human eyes; seeing you as you are is – strange.*"

She climbed onto the bed and squatted, adopting a pose that would have been very uncomfortable if her joints had been of human articulation. Her long tongue lolled from one side of her mouth as she regarded him.

"*I find it that way too.*" Kristoph couldn't pull his eyes away from her nakedness. "*I had nearly forgotten what my own kind looked like, other than in a mirror.*"

"*It's over now. You've found me.*" She reached out with uncanny agility and snagged a glass, then filled it from the bottle. It was a whisky glass and the bottle was red wine, but somehow such considerations seemed petty to Kristoph. The sensations, the tingling beneath his skin and the heat of his ardour, had taken him by surprise. Not an unpleasant surprise, but a surprise nonetheless. It had been a long time since he had mated with another of his species, and he was astonished to discover that it was far more pleasant than he recalled. But then, he was of an age to be bonding, and such changes should be expected. Helena extended the glass to him and he took it: their hands stayed in contact for longer than was necessary simply to pass the wine.

"*The waiting is over. I had almost given up hope of meeting one of my own age and predicament. That there could be others –*" he shrugged. It was considered desirable among the weerde to form group relationships.

"*At least we can continue the search together,*" she said, nestling up against him. "*If in your wanderings you should meet anyone –*"

"*Hah.*" A short, barking cough that was the same in any language. "*A sad fantasy. I thought my solitude was the product of my travels, and now that I've met you you think your loneliness the consequence of your stability! Is there no happy medium?*"

Helena considered this for a while, then gulped back her entire glass in a single mouthful and said: "*No.*" She extended a hand and Kristoph passed her a lit cigarette. "*What do you suppose we should do? Settle here among the humans, or travel at large within their world in hope of finding partners before we fully come of age?*"

"*Neither seems very hopeful,*" Kristoph remarked. He sat up and leaned close to her, then fell silent. She nipped gently at his ear to get his attention.

"*What of the woman who showed you into the office?*" she asked. "*The one who works for the University?*"

"*She's too young,*" said Kris. "*And she is already living with another of us. It's strange how the young behave, isn't it?*"

"*They're closer to the humans than to us,*" Helena suggested. "*Imagine if you were one of them, born in the past forty years. The Ancients go on about the dark history of our people, how we were foredoomed to live amongst those we mirror in the flesh and how dangerous it would be to invoke any kind of solution to our problems from outside – the universe is a dark and fearful mystery, shrouded in ancient death – yet the young, the young live with television and credit cards and research.*" With each of these words she lapsed back into english, for her primal tongue held no equivalents to them. "*Everything they are raised with tells them that the Ancients speak nothing but senile nonsense. It is not merely that they have no respect for the Ancients, but that they speak a different tongue altogether. It is no*

longer possible for them to separate themselves from the humans –" she broke off.

Kristoph stubbed his cigarette out on the ash-tray beside the bed. "What did you just think of?" he asked.

Helena stared at him. Her eyes were huge and dark, with no visible whites around them. "I think that it would be a good idea to pay these two youngsters a visit," she said thoughtfully. "I would like to meet them. And besides, I have a certain sense that if we don't they might become embroiled in something that will not be good for them. What do you think?"

Kristoph threw his head back and poured a glass of wine between his sharp white teeth. "If you like," he said. "When shall we go?"

Helena twisted and rolled off the bed, then rose to a crouch. Her spine slowly began to straighten. "As soon as possible," she said, slurring as she fought to control her shifting vocal chords. "My sense of urgency is great ..."

As soon as the door swung open, Sue realised there was something wrong: *it smells strange*. "That was a lovely meal," said Eric, behind her. She held out a warning hand and entered the hallway, switching on the light as she did so.

"You can come on in," she said; "I just thought I smelled something ..."

"Gas?" he asked.

"You can't be too careful. But no, it wasn't gas."

She hung her coat up as he closed the front door, then she switched on the living room lights and walked straight in. "Hello," said the balding man with the gun, "did you enjoy your meal?"

"Oh shit," she said, starting to back away. "Hey, Eric –"

"Don't move," said the other one, the tall thin man standing behind the door. "You move, you get hurt."

"Ah." Her stomach felt like lead and her knees were about to give way.

"Hey, what's going –" Eric, standing behind her: he looked over her shoulder and saw the man with the gun. "Shit," he whispered.

"That makes it unanimous," said the bald one. "Won't you come on in? I'd like it if you'd sit in the sofa – there – where I can keep an eye on you."

Slowly, with exaggerated care, Sue sidled over to the sofa and sat down. Eric followed her. She could see him out of the corner of her eye. *I hope he doesn't do anything stupid*, she thought. Then, *how do I stop this happening?*

"That's good," said the bald one. "That's real cool. Now maybe we should have a chat, you know, loosen things up?"

"Who are you?" asked Eric in a low voice. "What do you want?"

The tall one strolled over from the doorway to stand behind the seated man. "You know who we are," he said, in a language which sent shivers of recognition down Sue's neck. "We come to talk sense."

The man in the chair shrugged. "You'll have to excuse my partner," he said: "he can be a bit blunt. Someone you might have heard of – one of your neighbours in this city – called us in to do a service. Ancient of Days. Perhaps you've met her?" He cocked his head, looked slightly disappointed when neither Sue nor Eric responded. "A shame. She's very – impressive. Anyway ..."

The tall one pulled his right hand out of his coat pocket. There was a small black pistol in it. He pulled his left hand out of the other pocket: he was holding a cylindrical object in that one. He began to screw the cylinder onto the muzzle of the pistol. "You'll have to excuse him," said the seated one: "he's a bit nervous." He blinked at them: "the police don't like him very much. Anyway. Where was I?"

"Ah yes. We owe you for showing the point man in, where the files were held. However, you don't seem to have gotten the message: this is *not* a matter you want to get involved in. Oh no. In fact, you should do your best to forget about it, unless and until Ancient of Days sends for you. Is that understood?"

"I understand," said Sue. Suddenly her mouth was dry, but it was a dryness born of anger: she found that she very much wanted to spit. "I understand that what I see is a bunch of superstitious fools chasing around in the dark preparing to kill – yes, that's it, isn't it? That's what you do for a living – to kill a harmless scientist because some clapped-out fruitcake thinks human genetics research is going to conjure up the devil –"

"Wrong," said the seated assassin. "You understand nothing. You cannot possibly

remember what it is we face; you will be nameless to history if you insist on giving aid to the *humans* in pulling down everything we have tried so hard to preserve!"

He raised the pistol and Sue unconsciously stopped breathing and steeled herself to jump; but before she could move there was a flash of light reflected from the gunman's face and a voice screamed "DOWN!" in her ear.

She rolled forwards and tried to hug the carpet: she heard three muffled spitting sounds overhead, and then a crashing of glass and heavy objects as the tall assassin fell, knocking the television set off its stand.

"Idiot," snarled Kristoph. "Were you *trying* to get yourself killed? Why didn't you duck?" Then, gently but urgently, "oh, see what he's done. Quickly, fetch a towel. Now!" Sue heard footsteps hurrying, doors banging, then a low moan behind her. She rolled over and sat up and saw Kristoph bent over the back of the sofa, gripping Eric – collapsed across it, his eyes closed – by one shoulder with both hands, both hands wrapped around an upper arm from which a huge, dark stain was slowly seeping. "A towel will do but a compression bandage or a tourniquet would be a lot better and I need one or the other of them in a hurry," Kris muttered. "Otherwise he may bleed to death all over me."

She remembered standing in the bathroom, watching blood trickle and swirl down the white porcelain sink as the rushing water numbed her hands. She remembered ransacking the cupboard for bandages and finding nothing but a small tin of elastoplast, suitable only for grazes. And the towels were all pink, the same colour as her vomit when she heaved her entire meal up into the toilet. Then a strange woman was holding her by the shoulders and saying "it's alright, the bleeding's stopped and it's a clean puncture" as she slowly led Sue through into the living room. Eric wasn't in the sofa, but his blood was. Unaccountably, she began to cry. After all, it wasn't she who'd been shot, was it?

After a while she realised that she couldn't see the bodies. "Wh-what happened?" she asked, trying to dry her eyes and realising as she did so that her blouse was ruined, spots of blood everywhere on her right sleeve.

"Don't you worry about it," said the woman, "everything's going to be alright. Your friend is in bed, Kris is stitching his arm up – he's done it before, he says – he's going to be okay. A flesh wound."

"We've got to get him to hospital –" Sue began, before she comprehended how foolish her words must sound.

"Don't you worry about it," said the woman. "I'm Helena, by the way. I came here with Kris. Is there –" she stared at the bloodstained sofa – "anywhere else in this flat where we can go? Apart from the bedroom or the kitchen?"

Sue didn't think to ask what was wrong with the kitchen. "The back bedroom," she said automatically. "We can, I need to, sit down ..."

"I'll say you do." Helena took her by the arm as she stood up again and stumbled through the hall to the spare room. When she got there she collapsed on the bed and curled up and began to Change, so that Helena was hard-put to get her clothes off her. But that was okay. It was only a little more than she'd bargained for, after all.

Shock and exhaustion forced Sue into a deep sleep. Helena sat beside the bed, watching the shifting form that lay there, its flesh slowly crawling in an unconscious attempt to shut out the outside world. *I can't even look at my own kind without seeing them through the eyes of a human*, she realised. *How much worse must it be for one of these, raised in a modern city and exposed to their education, their entertainment, their friendship all their life? Our ancestors would barely recognise them. Worse, they would barely recognise the ancestors ...*

She shook her head in sympathy and stood up. Then she left the room, closing the door behind her as she tracked through the hall and into the main bedroom. Kristoph glanced up as she entered, then continued to wrap his makeshift bandage around Eric's shoulder.

"She's taken it rather hard," Helena commented.

"I'm not surprised," said Kristoph. His voice was rough, as if he was fighting an inner battle and did not wish to be disturbed.

Eric rolled his eyes. "Ah – it's not easy," he whispered. "This mess ... we were going to come looking for you ..."

"Lie still. How is he?" she asked Kristoph.

"I've seen worse. Small calibre bullet, went clean through the quadriceps. I think he froze when the flash went off, otherwise he'd have been down on the floor with her and this wouldn't have happened. Nicked a vein, but no arterial bleeding. Knowing how we heal, you should be fine in a few days," he said for Eric's benefit. "The real question is what happens in the mean-time," he continued under his breath. "Depending whether those bastards were

here of their own accord or at someone's command."

"We can fetch two tea-chests for the bodies," said Helena. "Then we ditch the sofa. Nobody's called the police so we may be able to conceal it –"

Kris looked at her coolly. "That's not what I meant."

Helena sat down on a low stool in front of the dresser, then turned to face Kristoph and the bed. "You know I've served Ancient of Days for twenty or more years. It wasn't necessarily through choice." She paused and looked at him, but he made no response. Eventually she continued.

"I was twenty-two when the call came. My family told me what to do, and in those days one obeyed. Reluctantly, but – I grew up on a farm. I was told to go to the city and present myself to Her. I didn't want to: I was afraid, and perhaps a little rebellious, but not too much so. I did as I was told, in the end. When I met her, She told me what I was to do. It seemed she had a servant before me, her eyes and ears among the humans, who had gone insane or died. I was to take their place. She hasn't been able to walk among them for a very long time – over a century, I think – and so she needs a set of proxy senses, preferably young, which can be exposed to the swirl and rush of the human civilisation above her head."

At the other end of the bed, Eric yawned and shut his eyes. Kristoph glanced up. "I'm listening."

"I gathered news," she continued. "I read all the literature and newspapers. I arranged for Ancient of Days to have a colour television, supplied by cable – not that she watched it. I dare say the images it brought to her were simply incomprehensible. Her curiosity is vast, but she needs me for the *feel*, the idea of what it's like to live among the humans. She hasn't ever seen an aeroplane except in pictures, has never ridden in a car. This new degenerative condition of hers is quite recent, but she refuses to summon anyone who might be able to treat it. I think she wants –"

"She wants what?" asked Kris.

"I don't know. It's just that I thought ... she wanted me not as a pair of eyes but as a mind, to understand what was going on in the world. *You* understand that; you've lived among Them, haven't you? But last time she was on the surface she rode in a horse-drawn carriage and there were new gas-lights along the high streets. And I don't think she quite understands how far things have changed, or how fast."

"Hence the pet thugs," Kris speculated. "Yes, that would explain a lot. In which case, these two –" his gestured encompassed Eric, and the wall behind which Sue lay sleeping – "have a more valid perspective on the world than she does, at least with respect to the humans. Doesn't that follow?"

"I don't like that line of reasoning," Helena said uneasily. "It's what it leads to ..." *My destination barely five minutes ago*, she chided herself. How long had these flowers of doubt been germinating? The dusty towers of the city had never struck her as a fertile soil for new ideas of any kind, much less for thoughts of treachery. *She needs me, but how can I possibly serve her? If my loyalties belong with anyone, they should lie with the young. It's not for me to decide. Maybe –*

"I think we should take these two to visit Ancient of Days," she said slowly. "They might be able to resolve this situation where I could only fail. In any case, it was her servants who died here tonight. She should be informed; at least, if you mean to involve your friends that you told me about."

Kris stared at her. "Do you really think so?"

She met his gaze. "Yes. Otherwise she will assume the worst, and act accordingly."

"And you think it isn't already too late for that?" he asked. "That her thrashing around doesn't offer a threat to the continuity of the race? Come on. If that's what you believe, I want to know –"

But to her shame she had to glance away; and when she looked back at him the time for second thoughts had long since passed.

Time changed, Kris thought as he waited for the phone to ring, but people never did. That was the root of the problem. A glass of whisky sat among the shadows by an overflowing ash tray, the last cigarette in the pack balanced burning on its rim. The faint howl of a descending jet cut through the night and the rattled the windows in their frame as he stared out across the city.

A ringing tone cut the air: he forced himself not to pick up the receiver. It gave out a second ring before the answering machine cut in. The voice at the other end of the line was

faint, as if its owner was shouting down a buried pipe.

"Hello, is this –"

"This is Susan speaking. I'm sorry I can't come to the phone right now, but if you'd like to leave a message, please speak after the tone."

"– Oskar speaking. Call me back." *Click*.

Kris picked up his cigarette. He felt a little ill at the prospect of what he was about to do, but he couldn't see what alternative there was. For Helena, sure: for these two kids who'd gotten themselves into a whole lot more trouble than they'd dreamed of, too. For the pair of hitters Ancient of Days had sent round – but they were beyond sympathy, beyond regrets. No, it was the fact that what he was about to do was irrevocable that made him sick with worry; him, who'd seen men eating each other on the Eastern Front and other things too terrible to talk about.

He picked up the phone and began to dial, careful not to enter any wrong digits.

Oskar picked up the phone on the fourth ring. It was three in the morning in Berlin and Kris could imagine the crumpled beer cans on the floor, smoke curling beneath the ceiling and the oil from the black metal-machined parts scattered across the newspaper pages on the sofa. "Hello?"

"Oskar, this is Kris. I have a candidate." His mouth was dry and his throat burned from the cigarettes, but that wasn't why his heart was pounding.

Oskar grunted. "After all this time? Are you sure?"

"You better believe it. The location is –" he gave directions. "You'll need to bring tools. And watch out, you'd better be clean. It's already gone critical; we had a *securitate* airhead trying to scare the canaries earlier this evening."

"A *what*? They must be crazy!"

"No way. He was travelling under falsies, ID of Ivan Salazar from the Langley entity, but that wasn't his real name at all. I fingered him on a liaison job oh, years ago. He was one of us, but shit sticks if you roll in it for long enough. I figure he's one of the ones who skipped out after they fragged the Ceaucescus during the coup, maybe figured he could cut it as a wet operative for the Families. Anyway, it's really hit the fan this time. We're talking a Hummingbird situation; got that?"

There was silence from the other end of the line as Oskar absorbed this information. "Yes, but which side are we on?" he finally asked.

Kris froze. "The winners," he said slowly and deliberately. "Spread the word. We've got a Hummingbird situation, here and now. Get the wagon rolling then hop the next flight out of Tempelhof. We need you on the job."

"Check," replied Oskar. "The fuses have been lit. Good luck and goodbye."

The phone went dead, but Kris didn't put it down. The sound from the buzzing receiver was unlocking memories from his childhood, stories he'd been told by his mother about what happened to his uncle Hans in the terrible night of the first Operation Hummingbird, uncle Hans with his proud brown uniform and Stormtrooper strut who had vanished in the night of the Long Knives, never to be seen again. *Is this how it happens?* he wondered; *must the young always eat the old?* His palm sweated as he squeezed the smooth plastic of the receiver. *It wasn't always like this among our people. There was a time when the gap wasn't so wide. It didn't have to grow this way, did it?* But he'd set the wheels in motion and now there was only one way out: and death was an integral part of the process.

Helena was clearing up in the kitchen when she sensed somebody standing behind her. She straightened up and thrust a blood-stained wedge of kitchen roll into the waste disposer then rolled off her soiled rubber gloves before turning round. It was Sue, looking pale but collected and wearing a thick dressing gown that was too big for her. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Not bad, considering." Sue breathed deeply. "Mind if I ask your name again? I didn't catch it before." She looked around distractedly, but not down, never down. She looked as if she was trying to walk on air. Helena was still a long way from finishing.

"That's all right; my name's Helena," she replied. "And you're Sue. Look, are you sure you ought to be up? That was –"

Sue waved a hand. "I'm tougher than I look. And so is Eric, I think. He'll be fine and so will I. But he –" she looked at the body lying on the mat of newspapers Helena had spread on the floor – "he's not going anywhere. I think we deserve an explanation."

Helena sighed. "You're not getting one here. I'm in this over my head, I just tagged along for the ride." She laughed self-consciously. How could she possibly justify what she was doing on the kitchen floor? Then she frowned. "Look, I'm not explaining this very well, am I? Kris and I thought you could, could do with some help. We weren't expecting things to have

gone this far, not yet."

"Uh huh." Sue nodded, glanced down queasily, then turned round and fumbled in one of the cupboards above the work surface. "I need a drink. How about you?"

"That's –" Helena paused – "a kind offer." She rummaged in the cupboards for a minute then found two tall glasses and filled them half-full with rum. It wasn't Helena's favourite spirit, but she took it all the same. "You've been very lucky so far. Ancient of Days probably doesn't realise how isolated she is. The oldest ones –" she took a sip of rum – "seldom do."

"Who is this Ancient of Days?" Sue asked. Helena looked at her sharply.

"Exactly what her name implies. The one I – help me – am sworn to serve." She took another sip, then a mouthful of the neat spirits. It burned in her stomach, like the dull fire of revenge. "One of Us, left over from a former age. She serves the Families by searching out threats to our collective survival. But in latter days she's become ... unreliable."

"Hence ... this?" Sue asked. "You mean she thought she could simply order us to kill all the scientists working on homoeobox structure and the rest would lose interest or be too frightened to continue working in the field?" She finished on a note of disbelief.

"That's about the size of it," Helena admitted.

"What does she think we are? A bunch of medieval alchemists?" Sue downed her glass in one gulp and slammed it on the work top. "Jesus Christ!"

Helena didn't say anything.

"It's a complete sack of shit!" Sue exclaimed. "Scientists don't work like that, hiding dingy secrets from each other and bolting at shadows! All it would take would be two, maybe three suspicious incidents and we'd have every police agency in Europe breathing down our necks. What does she think she's *doing*?"

"Protecting us," Helena said drily.

Sue glared at her. "And what are *you* doing?"

Helena sighed. "Protecting you, I think. Times change, and the Ancients can't adapt. For most of our history responses which worked a century ago have been valid today. But not any longer. You – your generation – are our future. You don't need to exist on the edge of human society, you can slot right in with them! But in the process –" she shrugged.

"But what's in it for you?" Sue looked agitated, uncertain whether to be grateful or suspicious or angry. "Why are you helping us? You said you were sworn to serve her! What are you doing here?" She sounded deceptively close to hysteria.

"Cleaning up after the party," Helena said calmly as she bent down and picked up the electric carving knife again. It was strange how little blood there was, she noted. As if weerde tissue fluid clotted far faster than human; and the bullets had been low-calibre. "For what I'm doing now, the punishment would have been forgetfulness," she added. "To have one's very name expunged from the memories of all who one held dear, to be cast out into the wilderness on pain of death, there to wander through the empty forests until even the memory of speech faded and one was nothing more than a beast." She glanced up. "But that doesn't mean very much to your generation, does it? You've grown up among the urban sapiens, after all, and they do things differently." She shook her head. "I wish I knew where it was all going."

Sue didn't reply, but a moment later Helena felt her crouch down beside her, and there was another pair of hands to help expunge the evidence of the crime.

Oskar caught the red-eye shuttle out of Tempelhof. It was delayed three hours by snow, and when it lumbered into the cold dawn sky the outline of the redundant Wall was clearly visible on the ground below. Less than two hours later he was landing in the City. Somebody was waiting for him.

Howard was already in the country, running a high-value high-risk shipping agency from a motel bedroom near Milton Keynes. When his brokers discovered he was gone they were furious: but not as furious as they were three minutes later when the Special Branch broke down their door. But Howard wasn't around to care. Now he was a truck driver called Mark, and within a day even his fingerprints wouldn't match on Interpol's files.

Fiona got the call when she returned to her lodge in the Pyrenees after a good day's skiing. She fobbed off her current boyfriend with a tale of an elderly aunt and a stroke, made an air connection out of Toulouse, and caught the Chunnel link from Paris.

Frederico didn't head for the City. But then, that wasn't his target. His target was in the Vatican. There were a hundred others in the Organisation who, like him, weren't heading

for the City; but all of them had targets. And when they reached them, the targets would be dead.

It was agreed within the Organisation that a purge was long overdue. It would have been sensible to have held one during the turbulence of the second world war, when it was already becoming obvious who was unreliable and who was trustworthy, but back then the Organisation had still been weak, a compact of like-minded *weerde* who understood the ways of the modern human world less imperfectly than their forebears. Therefore the Organisation lay low, recruited individuals disaffected with the way of the Families, and waited.

Times changed. The war ended, and with the falling of the iron curtain came opportunities for expansion and re-entrenchment. The Organisation made very good use of them. The Ancients, however, were oblivious to the fundamental changes in the world at large; their response to the Cold War was identical to their response to the British and Spanish empires, the Romans, Alexander the Great ... it was a practised response, and it had worked before. But unfortunately, some times changed faster than others.

Eric opened his eyes and blinked until the ceiling swam into focus. *Bullet wound. I never thought it would hurt like this. More like ...* he tried to clear bloodstained drill-bits from his mind's eye. He felt weak, *drained*, but fine, except for the bruising ache in his left arm. He tried to sit up and the arm almost exploded; he gasped and forced himself to hold still until the pain passed. Then, very carefully, he propped himself up against the headboard and began to explore the damage inside.

Torn muscles grated against one another, sending surges of pain up those nerve trunks that had not been severed by the bullet. A fibrous matrix of clotted blood had spread through the tissue around the ruptured vein, holding cells in stasis while the complex machineries of his immune system went to work. Already the first new cells were infiltrating the mass, spreading along the boundary of ripped flesh and commencing the job of reconstruction. Eric concentrated; without guidance the wound would heal badly. There might even be a scar. He was still tired, and his head ached, but it was essential that he –

"Aha, he's awake. Aren't you?"

Eric opened his eyes again. "Very probably," he said, speaking so quietly that it was almost a whisper. "Who is it?" *As if I couldn't guess.*

"I'm Kris." He sat down at the foot of the bed, stretching the quilt. "If it wasn't for me you'd be dead."

Eric tried to sit up properly. "I suppose I should be grateful, but it would help if I knew what was going on."

Kris nodded understandingly. Eric looked at him and wondered what it was he didn't like about this man. *This – weerde*, he corrected himself. *One of my own kind. But he looks more like a wolf!* The thought was distinctly uncomfortable. There was a hot tingling in his arm as the muscles began the slow process of knitting together again.

"What is it you want to know?" asked Kris.

"Well –" Eric struggled, at a loss for words. "What all the fuss is about," he said finally. "I can understand an Ancient becoming interested in the Homoeobox data, but her response seems rather excessive, wouldn't you agree? It's not as if it can achieve anything, after all."

"I don't know," Kris said. "It *used* to work ... three hundred years ago, against alchemists and would-be magicians."

Eric snorted disbelievingly. "Come *on*. What does she think this is? The middle ages?"

Kristoph didn't say anything; he didn't need to.

"All right then, be the smart guy! See if I care. Thanks for saving my life, by the way." Kris raised an eyebrow as Eric rolled his feet over the side of the bed and sat up experimentally. "There's more to this than one out-of-control Ancient and a couple of former secret policemen," Eric added as he waited for the dancing black spots to clear from in front of his eyes.

"True," Kris stood up. "Here, let me help you. I think you lost a fair bit of blood."

"Yes, I can't say I'm looking forward to cleaning the sofa –" Eric stopped talking as he stood up, taken aback by his own astonishing irrelevance. He wobbled a bit, but the black spots didn't come back and he was able to shuffle around after a fashion. *I must be crazy*, he thought, floating. *This isn't me here, is it?* His arm burned like a torch. "Tell me about everything in particular."

"There's an Organisation," began Kristoph. "It's been around since the twenties, waiting for something like this. It's probably happened before, but each era creates its own orthodoxy, doesn't it? Maybe some such group is where Ancient of Days came from originally. Some bunch of plotters who were afraid that their elders were going to give them away to the Roman secret police."

Eric shuffled over to the chest of drawers and fumbled one-handedly over the chair in front of it. "Dressing gown," he muttered. It seemed a much more concrete concern than any ancient tale of police and thieves. He berated himself. *Your future depends on this!* But somehow it didn't seem like an immediate problem; more like a light farce, seen through a few too many layers of cotton gauze. *I must have lost a fair bit of blood.*

"Here. Like I said, we've been waiting. The signs have been around for a long time. Crocodiles seen in the sewers under New York, Yeti sightings in Tibet; the breakdown in human family structures in the developed world –"

"You make this Organisation sound like a bunch of shamen steaming over the entrails of the Sunday Times crossword," Eric winced as he tried to ease his damaged arm into a baggy sleeve. In the end he gave up and wore the robe over it, tucking the cuff of the empty sleeve into the belt. "I mean, are you trying to tell me they deduced from all those signs that some of the Ancients were liable to go loopy within the next few years?"

"Something along those lines," Kris assured him. "There were no overt signs of loss of control – not until recently – but little things were slipping everywhere. All those signs were warnings of a certain ... malaise. Now it's unmistakable. Their responses have become so inappropriate that I'm afraid there's no alternative to action."

"What are you going to do to them?" Eric asked with false levity, pausing in the doorway. *I feel drunk*, he realised. *The truth will set you free! And isn't that better than wine?* He glanced over his shoulder at Kristoph, who stood behind him holding an unlit cigarette in one hand.

"What can we do?" Kris replied. There were quiet voices coming from the kitchen. "There's one thing you can be certain of," he said, striking a match. The shadows it cast across his face gave him a calculating, lupine expression: "we're not going to do anything to them that they wouldn't do to us first if we gave them the chance."

Eric felt himself go cold, everywhere except his arm, which was feverishly hot. Suddenly, despite his injury and blood-loss and the intoxicating sense of own survival, he felt entirely sober. An atavistic urge, from god-knew-what recess of his hindbrain, made him want to bare his teeth and snarl. Instead, forcing himself to do the right thing – *come on, mister cool!* a part of him sneered contemptuously – he went into the living room. It was unlit, but the street lights were bright enough to let him see that there was a dust-sheet flung over the sofa and a rug on the carpet, and the vase of flowers was gone from on top of the television. He walked over to the windows and looked out across the street, then fumbled with the latch and pushed one of them open. A chill breeze cut through his dressing gown, swirled past him and numbed the stench of blood and gunpowder.

"What do you think?" asked the quiet voice behind him. He didn't turn round.

"I think –" he paused, seeking the words with which to express his anger, his *rage* at this violation of his carefully-maintained humanity – "there is no precedent for the current situation." He stared down at the streets, watching the traffic scurry and hum along in illuminated columns far below. "We're a conservative people, aren't we?" The word he hung strange and heavy on his tongue. "But the world we live in is undergoing eruptions and upheavals. And when conservative peoples are placed under such a stress they tend to ... well, look at the Russian revolution."

The breeze was beginning to work through to him. He was still weak, and his arm ached; he couldn't summon the resources to keep himself warm. He reached out and pulled the window to until only a slit was left open. "Is this happening everywhere?"

"It is," said Kris. "Maybe you're right, maybe there hasn't been an upheaval like this since the – since the ancient times, the days of legend and darkness. The old race. But *someone* –" the voice faltered, and in a flash of astonishment Eric realised that he was pleading with him, pleading for his approval, his understanding – "someone has to look to the future! And *you* are the future, more surely than any conclave of ancients."

Eric turned his back on the window. Kristoph had lit his cigarette, and in the darkness the glowing coal resembled an ancient saurian eye. "But where does that leave you?" asked Eric. "If your organisation takes credit for this killing, where can you go from here? Where are your thoughts for your own future?"

Kris blew a thin plume of smoke from his nostrils. It swirled lazily about his head then drifted towards the door. "I suppose we'll have to be the scapegoats, the nameless ones who

will be driven from the present to atone for the sins of the past. Doesn't that sound about right to you? Something's got to go, after all."

"Not if you succeed. But the whole thing sounds so extreme –"

"You're uncomfortable with the idea of killing, aren't you?" said Kris. He began to button up his coat, preparing for the cold of the streets outside. "Listen, I've got to go out now, to arrange for some waste disposal. But there's something you should remember, professor, when you go in to work in your warm office next week and sit in your comfortable chair behind your tidy desk." His face began to slide into another, ancient shape: or else the shadows cast by the city lights were shifting across his cheeks. "Remember you're a predator, professor, one of a long line of free-ranging killers. And remember that one's natural instincts can sometimes be very hard to ignore ..."

Presently, Eric struggled to his feet and walked into the kitchen to see what was going on. Sue and Helena were just finishing with the knives and moving onto the bin liners. They both looked up, then Sue had her arms round his neck and was kissing him, tracking bloody stains across the front of his garment. "You're doing well," she whispered in his ear. Louder: "has Kris gone for some boxes then?"

"That's quite likely, I think." Helena rose and peeled off her gloves again, shaking them out carefully. "Ah, I don't think we've been introduced. Have we?"

"Eric, Helena," said Sue. "Helena stayed to help clear up," she added, letting go of him as he glanced around. But Eric wasn't dwelling on the mass that occupied the centre of the floor. "I can see we've got some socialising to do," he said. "It's a long time since either of us have met anyone who wasn't – entirely – human. Still," his expression became unreadable, "do you suppose Kristoph will be long?"

"No, I don't think he will," said Helena. She smiled sharply. "He said he had one more job to do, then it's all over and we can just lie low, 'go to the mattresses' as the mafia call it, until everything dies down." She put the knife and the gloves in the sink and turned the tap on them.

"Then it'll all be over," said Sue, an expression of relief dawning on her face. She turned back to Eric and hugged him, burying her face in his shoulder, all his petty irritations forgotten for the moment. "I'm so glad it's finished."

But she was wrong. In fact, it was only just beginning.

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