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T minus 19 days 8:23 a.m.

For Nigel Frogland, the apocalypse started with a letter.

He stumbled downstairs towards kitchen and coffee percolator, pausing by the door to yawn widely and grab the daily influx of bills and overdrawn bank statements from the letter box. This was an autonomic reflex, as vital to the author as flapping its wings was to a headless chicken; he blinked sleepily at the three envelopes in his hand before staggering into the kitchen to wait for the kettle. *Two bills*, he thought, *but what's this? Looks like it's from Victoria ...* he reached for the bread-knife. Letters from Victoria Bergdorf, his editor, were always worth reading no matter which side they were buttered on.

But he was in for a surprise.

Dear Nigel,

As you are aware, we at Schnickel and Bergdorf have prided ourselves for fifty years on our commitment to fundamental literary values, providing the best service possible to the public and our authors. This is a tradition which we are -- we think justifiably -- proud of, and intend to continue for the foreseeable future.

However, given the recent changes that have taken place in the genre market, specifically the contraction of the midlist under the financial pressure of competing in a modern, thrusting business environment, we have found it necessary to enter a temporary phase of retrenchment. Specifically, the directors have approved the sale of a controlling shareholding in this company to the multinational holding corporation Spart-Dibbler PLC. Pending the resolution of this takeover, we will be unable to commission any more projects from you. This transition period should last for approximately six months; thereafter we will resume buying as usual.

Yours sincerely ...

Oh shit! pondered Dave, his stomach churning unpleasantly as he pondered the likely consequences. *What if I have to ask for my old job back ...?*

t minus 19 days 10:14 a.m.

"They're going to *what?*" demanded Victoria Bergdorf.

Jonathan Smiddler yawned widely, displaying a coffee-stained tongue. "They're going to drop half the list," he repeated tiredly. "They figure if they can put the money together and get one best-seller, it pays better than the whole lot of them. I mean, why not?" He yawned again, looking decidedly hollow-eyed; a common feature to all the survivors of the take-over.

Victoria leaned forward across her desk. "I never thought the bastards had the guts," she hissed. "Jesus Christ on a crutch -- they're going to put *all* our writers on the street! They can't be serious!"

Jonathan leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "But they *are*. Blame the accounts department -- there's more profit in one best-seller than in a dozen small titles. People don't read any more, or they read what they see advertised on television, right? Jeffrey Archer, Isaac Asimov. We're competing with other media, Victoria, that's what Spart-Dibbler's accountants are on about. And if we can't make as much profit as satellite television, we're gonna get it in the neck."

Victoria shook her head. "I've been in this trade for twenty years," she said; "and my father before me for thirty more ..." Jonathan leaned back tiredly. "So have I," he reminded her. "That's why you put me in charge of the horror list, isn't it? Look, if the cash-flow had been any better ... "

"It's no good," she said, gazing at the wall of books behind him; the wall of novels she had personally brought to market, making her personal impact on the history of English literature ... "we can't live on maybes. We've got to do something! There must be *some* way we can increase our readership to the point where we won't have to drop the small guys! Why else did we accept the buy-out offer? We needed capital to get out of the cash-flow crunch, but I'm damned if I'm going to let them throw out the baby to make room for the dirty bathwater!"

Jonathan gulped down a last mouthful of lukewarm coffee. "There might be a way," he said, "if you apply lateral thinking to the problem. I mean we're one of the foremost genre publishers left in the market, aren't we? And people *will* read our stuff -- or they would, if they weren't watching EastEnders and Dallasty instead. So we've -- " he gestured broadly, his shirt bulging -- "we've got to recapture the market. We've got capital; so why not use it? We can maximize our readership without selling out or buying cruddy hackwork. There's got to be a way to apply leverage ..."

Victoria looked back at him, her eyes narrowing. "What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"I'd have thought it's simple," he said, "once you begin to think the unthinkable. Our problem is that we've got too much competition. So ... " he shrugged, pausing for effect; it was a shame that the gesture could best be described as a cringe.

"So what?" she asked, irritated.

"We put a bomb behind the mid-list," he said, smirking at his own cleverness. "I've been talking to some of the boys, and it looks like there might be an alternate option. I mean, our SF types used to do some interesting things before they went full-time, didn't they? You remember what Dave Frogland used to do for a living before he came to us? I've got an idea for a special promotion we can sell to the accountants. And you want to know something else? It's *original*."

t minus 18 days 1:13 a.m.

For Lydia Little the apocalypse began with a phone call.

She was sitting at her desk polishing her glasses, wondering if she could afford to buy a new word processor to replace her geriatric Amstrad, when the phone rang. Cursing softly at being called back from avoiding her current master-work -- a softly chilling tale of childhood terror and adult neuroses -- she scrambled down the rickety staircase and made for the phone. "Yes?" she demanded; "who is it?"

"It's me, Lydia," said the voice at the other end. Instantly her attitude softened, for the voice belonged to none other than Sonia Black, her agent. "How are you?"

"I'm, uh, fine," said Lydia, taking stock. "Novel's coming along, uh, okay ... and you?"

"I'm -- okay, I guess." Sonia gave a short laugh and Lydia instantly tensed herself for bad news. "I'm ringing about Victoria Bergdorf, I'm afraid. You heard about the take-over?"

"Oh shit," muttered Lydia. More loudly; "yes, I have. What about it?"

"Well," Sonia said, obviously prevaricating; "it's about the input from Spart-Dibbler, the purchasers. They're re-assessing the Schnickel and Bergdorf lists for commercial prospects, and ... " her voice dropped an octave ... "frankly, they're not nice. They're vetting their authors with the aid of the Economic

League -- you know, for subversion potential and profit allergies -- and I don't know if they're still going to want your stuff afterwards. I mean, hauntingly delicate tales of fantasy or horror from a strongly feminist, left-wing American emigre writer are not quite what the best-seller list is made of, so -- "

"You mean I'm fucked," said Lydia matter-of-factly.

"Well, not *quite*. There's always the small press, and with your connections -- I mean after your time in Morocco -- you've got quite a substantial translation market among radical feminist circles in the Middle East -- "

" -- Where they aren't parties to any of the international copyright agreements," Lydia interrupted. "Look, Sonia, I know this is not going to do you a world of good either, but do you realise what this means for *me*?" She paused to shift her grip on the mouthpiece, hands shaking with pent-up tension. "This is the end! We've got to do something or it'll be the death of literature as we know it!"

There was a long silence at the other end of the line, then Sonia cleared her throat. "Uh, there is *one* thing you could do," she suggested. "Now, I've heard rumours ... and I don't want to be involved. But apparently Johnny Smiddler has got some kind of scheme he needs help with, some kind of book-promotion exercise. He's trying to get funding from the Spart-Dibbler accountants right now, and if it works, he's going to need someone to go to Morocco. Buying an unusual commodity, as it were, strictly *sub rosa*. I'm sure he'd be willing to pay your expenses, and if it works things are going to look very good for you, very good indeed." Something in her tone warned Lydia that she wasn't being entirely candid, but she realised she didn't care; it was her world that Spart-Dibbler were threatening to deconstruct, and she suddenly knew that she was willing to do anything ... even commit acts of premeditated hackwork ... in order to hold it together.

"Come on, Sonia," she said; "what is it? Why won't you tell me?"

Sonia cleared her throat again. "Uh ... I don't think it's wise to talk on the phone," she said. "You'd better have lunch with Jonathan -- I'm sure he'd be very interested if you give him a bell this morning, he'll fill you in on what it is he needs."

"Uh, okay, I'll do that," Lydia said. "Thanks for the tip."

"Oh, and one other thing, Lydia."

"Yes?"

"I'd forget that new word processor for a while. In fact, I think it would be a good idea if you bought the heaviest manual typewriter you can find. If Johnny's idea comes off, that would be a very good idea. Because there won't be any more word processors for a while ... "

t minus 17 days 1:32 a.m.

The accountants, thought Jonathan, were grey and colourless; but there was nothing mousy about them. Rather, they resembled menacing gun-metal sharks, smoothly polished engines of corporate destruction wrapped in pin-striped suits and white shirts and filofaxes, armoured in spectacles and ignorance as they prepared to dismember the mortally injured remains of the once proud heraldic beast of publishing.

"Well, mister Smiddler," the younger of the two said with an elegant smile; "and what is the goal of this proposed marketing exercise of yours?" Her pearly row of teeth would not have been out of place in a tigershark's gleaming gape; her older comrade simply sat there impassively.

"Market explo -- expansion," he replied unsteadily. "Basically, we think that our midlist authors haven't

been getting the blast they deserve in order to be as successful as they could be. But, what's worse, our market has been eroded seriously by competition from other media over the past thirty years; principally television and other forms of electronic media. This has led to a tendency to concentrate on known, safe best-sellers who will show a steady profit, at the risk of ignoring the midlist authors who might be tomorrow's giants, but who are being squeezed out of the market today."

The older accountant nodded, a glazed expression on his face. His younger colleague smiled grimly. "The profit margins are, shall we say, marginal?" she suggested. "Frankly, the idea of a five million pound promotion aimed at virtual unknowns is preposterous; we could buy two Robert Ludlum's for that! Surveys have shown that advertising doesn't work effectively on commodities with no brand-name identity, which is the main handicap of your midlist. They have a couple of thousand dedicated readers, no more . . . it's just not good enough. You'll have to do better."

Jonathan didn't let her hostility faze him. He smiled broadly. "But I am," he said. "This is no ordinary promotion! If this one works, the market for books will *explode* -- every one of those authors will be turning a hundred thousand a year in profit within three months if we go ahead!"

Suddenly the older accountant sat up stiffly, all traces of inattention fading from his face. "Did somebody mention *profits*?" he croaked.

Jonathan nodded very seriously. "You say the product lacks brand-name identity," he said, "so I've come up with a campaign that lacks brand-name identity too! An anonymous, five-million pound project to *blow up* -- er, increase -- book sales in the UK by over a thousand percent!"

The younger accountant leaned forward intently, eyes shining with something remotely approaching lust. "You'll have to be more specific, Mister Smiddler," she purred. "We obviously can't release liquidity for a high-risk, non-specific project without a better idea of what they're going to be investing in, yah?" But, Jonathan saw, she was already fiddling with the binding on her filofax, revealing naked, crisp sheets of paper within, vulnerable to the intimate scribbling of her pen; he had a captive audience.

"It's like this," he began. "Do either of you know anything about the consequences of Electro-Magnetic Pulse?"

t minus 17 days 4:10 p.m.

For Dave Greenberg, the apocalypse arrived with a ballistic missile.

It wasn't like this working for NASA, he thought angrily as the overloaded graphics workstation crashed for the third time that morning. Assorted runic sentences crept up the screen as the computer began the lengthy reboot sequence; *why can't I just jack this job in and write full-time?* he wondered. But the answer was clear. For one thing, there wasn't a big enough market for his hard-SF novels -- at least not on this side of the Atlantic -- and for another: well, Dave *enjoyed* designing rocket motors.

He looked around the dingy lab and shook his head. *but not in these conditions!* If only Imperial College could afford to equip him effectively, they'd see what a limey space program could do! But no . . . all he had was a computer simulation of the Real Thing, running on a wobbly computer that crashed regularly under the unbearable workload of tying its own cybernetic shoelaces. And, oh yes, a lab with whitewashed breeze-block walls in an annex they'd built off a Portakabin. *Gaah*, he thought disgustedly as the computer gurgled feebly to itself and reported on the status of an assortment of cryptic daemons. *Why did I ever jack in that job with Hughes Aerospace? Whatever possessed me to stop writing about space--travelling dolphins and come and work here? Why did I --*

The phone rang.

"External call," said the switchboard operator; "connecting you now -- "

"Hello?"

"Hello?" echoed Dave.

"Dave! Good to speak to you! It's Jonathan Smiddler here, from Schnickel and Bergdorf. Am I interrupting anything, or can I have a moment of your time ..?"

What the hell? thought Dave. He glanced at the screen, where the workstation had just about remembered who it was and what it was meant to be doing. "Sure," he said; "I'm not busy. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm okay," said Jonathan, with a note of almost plaintive earnestness. "I'm wonderful! In fact, everything's hunky-dory -- "

"But haven't you just been bought out by Spart-Dibbler?" asked Dave. "I mean, aren't they -- " he swallowed -- "going to axe everyone who doesn't turn over fifty thousand trade copies per novel or something?"

"Well ... " Jonathan said nervously, "I was wanting to talk to you about that. You see, we've decided we're going to *launch* a new promotion for our midlist, people like yourself, and we've got this colossal budget arranged! I mean, this has never been done before -- uh no, it *has* been done," he correct himself; "but only twice, in Japan."

"When was that?" demanded Dave. Suddenly he felt his spine go very cold and shivery. *Jesus*, he thought; *the rumours are true ...?*

"Oh, around the end of the last war. It didn't catch on, luckily, but we think we've got an application for this kind of publicity stunt: a harmless one, I hasten to add! But the thing is, we want to organise a firework display for the launch, and we were wondering if you could come up with something substantial; around the throw-weight of a V-2, for example, capable of lifting a hundred kilograms to an altitude of about eighty nautical miles ... "

Dave blanked, switching to professional mode. "Can do," he said; "as a matter of fact, I'm working on the design for something of the kind right now. It'll cost you, but if we buy the parts second hand it shouldn't be too much. I happen to know the Imperial War Museum is selling off their collection of V-2's ... "

"Great! Say, would you be able to meet me for lunch this afternoon? We could maybe discuss funding for it. Would you be able to build it part time, or ..?"

"No problem," said Dave, relaxing and suddenly realising that for the first time that week he was smiling. "I'm your man, Johnny! As we used to say at the Cape -- you just got a green bird!"

t minus 16 days 3:20 p.m.

"I'm willing to concede," said the junior accountant, "that the profit-making potential of this venture is worth looking into. But, Mister Smiddler, there a few side-issues which frankly require closer scrutiny before we clear funding for your project. Your bona-fides are adequate -- we wouldn't for a moment accuse you of being linked with any terrorist organisation, not even the New York Review of Books -- but don't you think it's just a little bit dangerous to start throwing around promotional firecrackers like that? Even if they do shut down every television station and video player in the south of England for the next three years?" Her elderly colleague nodded, then began to snore quietly.

Jonathan stared her down. "Of course," he said: "but we're not fools! The firecracker is going to go off at an altitude of about eighty nautical miles; all the fall-out drifts out across the Atlantic before it precipitates. A few cod get radiation poisoning: small fry. We do it on an overcast night so nobody is looking up, and the flash is attenuated by the clouds. Look, my team -- " he paused to look out of the window at the misty West End roadscape as the London traffic geared up for another morning of gridlock lunacy -- "my team are *professionals*. They know what's at stake, they're highly motivated, and they know what they're doing! Dave -- Dave used to built warheads for Polaris missiles, did you know that? Lydia spent a lot of time in the Middle East; she's got contacts on the buying side. We've got -- hell, we've got *Dave Greenberg*, for God's sake, the man who re-designed the Space Shuttle SRB's after the Challenger disaster and won a Nebula for the novelisation! Chris Bishop, who runs a software

company with Dave Frogland on the side, has volunteered to program the guidance computers. These people are *science fiction writers*, you know!"

"Subversives and deviants," she corrected him, smiling toothily.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "Yes, but they're useful to you!" he said. "There's a convergence of interests, don't you see? A mutual interest in relieving Joe and Jill Public of that painful bulge in their wallets. Can't you work with them in the interest of the holy dollar?"

"Humm ... " snored the senior accountant.

"But what about the possible consequences?" asked the junior. For a moment Jonathan thought she looked slightly worried, but she carried on speaking: "the potential for us to be sued is staggering! And what if we accidentally trigger off an all-out East-West thermonuclear superpower confrontation scenario? That might significantly diminish our profit--to-earnings ratio in the longer term."

Jonathan sat up and made a steeple of his fingers. "That's unlikely," he said. "Firstly it won't show up on the annual trading balance sheets, so you don't need to worry your little head about it: there's no accounting risk. Secondly, I've had a crack team of cyberpunks looking into the long-term prognosis for the past fortnight, just in case there are real world side effects. They're unanimous; the Americans won't stick their neck on the block for the British, and the Russians couldn't afford to. Anyway, the British nuclear deterrent is nothing to do with the East-West confrontation, it's to do with the French. CND found it out years ago, just before MI-5 leaked it on *Yes Minister*. We've been at war with the French for seven centuries out of the past thousand years, and they've got the Bomb too: so if Whitehall gets the idea that war's broken out they'll probably just nuke Paris."

"And what then?" she asked.

"Oh, I suppose the French will drop three megatons on Edinburgh and that will be that."

"Why Edinburgh?" asked the senior accountant, briefly waking up. "Wouldn't London be more likely?"

Jonathan sighed. "Yes, but Edinburgh is the cultural capital of the nation. The French are so much more realistic about these things than we are."

"*Right*. And this campaign is aimed at the affluent south, where there's a greater likely take-up on book sales, yah?" nodded the junior accountant. "Which wouldn't be inhibited even by a low-yield trans-Manche thermonuclear midi-power confrontation! That's wonderful!" She shut her filofax -- which bulged with the post-coital scribbles of a fiscal orgy -- and smiled sweetly. "That's wonderful thinking! So seductively profitable!"

"Are you going to clear the funds?" he asked.

She nodded. "We're going to look into it, yah. It's -- " her tongue crept out from between her teeth, pink and pointy and not, as Jonathan had half-suspected, bifurcated -- "it's *delicious*! Yah, I shall have to put it to the board myself, this afternoon!" She stood up and held out her hand; her elderly colleague slumped in the leather chair beside her, snoring softly. Jonathan found himself having his hand pumped vigorously, almost suggestively; she smiled at him alluringly. "Would you care to discuss this further over dinner at Stringfellows tomorrow night?" she asked, batting her eyelids and fingering the lapel of his tweed sports jacket suggestively. "I'd like to, you know. I'm sure further discussions would be mutually ... profitable."

t minus 10 days 11:15 a.m.

The heat in the airport arrival hall was oppressive, like stepping into a giant oven. Lydia slumped slightly, but forced herself to walk towards the doors, past the moustachio'd security guards with their fingers on the trigger. Near the exit, a short man in a cream silk suit was holding up a placard; LYDIA SHORT, it spelt. She made a bee-line for him.

"You're Abdul?" she asked. "I'm Lydia Little."

"Delighted to meet you." He smiled behind his dark glasses. "Please come this way?"

There was a Mercedes, waiting for them among the battered taxis with its engine and air--conditioning running. The driver held the door open for Abdul, who got in first. Then they moved off.

"So you are serious about wanting this commodity, Miss Little," Abdul commented. He lay back in his seat and seemed to close his eyes, but in the shadowy interior of the car Lydia couldn't be sure. She felt her pulse running fast.

"Yes," she said. "My sponsors were quite ... explicit about what they want. I have a test kit; we can arrange a mutual exchange as soon as you have the consignment."

"The money?"

"Deposited in a numbered account in Lichtenstein. We can give you a pass to verify this; the withdrawal codes follow when we've assayed the product for purity."

"Ah, Miss Little." Abdul smiled thinly. "Such suspicion!"

She shrugged, uncomfortable in her business suit. "What do you expect?" she asked. "If the Mossad were to get wind, they might sell the idea to one of our rival publishing houses ..."

Abdul shook his head. "It is a poor age," he said, "when the work of poets must be sold at the muzzle of a gun."

Lydia sighed. "Look, let's just get this over with," she said. "Show me the commodity and I'll show you the colour of our money. *Then* we'll see if we have a deal."

Abdul nodded. "We shall see ... "

t minus 9 days 11:21 p.m.

Jonathan thought that Stringfellows was overcrowded and over--rated, but that didn't stop him. Esme, as his accountant called herself when off--duty, sparkled in the company of livewire spending power; she was a creature evolved to swim in a sea of money, he concluded, a woman who in past ages would have been content to be the mistress of a *very* rich man but who now expected to earn it all by herself. She bubbled with champagne and chattered happily with him about work and other things; about cars - - hers

was a BMW -- and mortgages and music and expense accounts. "It's *criminal* what the government is doing to free enterprise, don't you think?" she asked. "Keeping control of all those nationalised industries!"

"Um, yes," said Jonathan. "But who'd buy them? I mean, who'd *want* shares in the Ministry of Ag and Fish?"

"You'd be surprised," she said with ebullient tenacity. "If you can make a profit out of Sunflowers, what about rape seed oil? All we need is a financial Van Gogh, to show the Tories the errors of their protectionist ways!"

"Let's dance," suggested Jonathan, who would rather do anything other than dance, except listen to this voodoo economics. "When it's all over I'm going to write a book about it."

"That's *lovely*," she smiled. "Do you suppose it could be a best-seller?"

Jonathan grinned. "All books will be best-sellers," he said, rising to the occasion. But later that night, lying in her bed and in her double-entry book--keeping system -- which had nothing to do with money, but everything to do with pubic scalps -- he lay awake for a long time, meditating. Money, it seemed, could be a potent aphrodisiac. And what did that suggest about the future of romance? Perhaps a new genre was in the offing, offering fulfillment to millions of underpaid women who would give anything to be in Esme's office, if not her lingerie.

Esme rolled over and fetched up against his flank. He yawned. "Mmm," she said. "Mmm ... "

"Mm?" he hummed, distracted from his meditation.

"Mm ... mmm ... *money*," she breathed.

t minus 7 days 10:04 a.m.

The manuscript-sized parcel arrived at the London offices of Schnickel and Bergdorf by registered post, landing on the slush pile with the dull thud of another leaden trilogy. The bored secretary broke off updating her desk diary to pick it up and thrust it under the makeshift scintillation counter that Nigel Frogland had set up in the office the previous afternoon: when it began to buzz her jaw dropped and she nearly spilt her coffee.

"Miss Bergdorf," she gasped into the phone; "you've got to come! It's arrived! The, the first consignment!"

"Hold on until I get there," Victoria commanded crisply, putting the phone down. She looked up and glanced round. "Where's Jonathan?" she demanded. "*Bloody* hell!" She stood up with all the weight of her forty-nine years and headed for the door. "Trouble as usual," she muttered tiredly.

She reached the reception desk just as Jonathan was arriving. She checked her watch; "where've you been?" she snapped.

"Getting into our accountants good books," he said, tiredly. "Is something the matter?"

"Yes," she said, pointing at the package. "It's arrived! Take it away! Get it out of here at once!"

"Oh," he mumbled. "Is that it?"

"It's radioactive!" gibbered the secretary, who was trying to occupy the farthest volume of the office from

the offending parcel.

"Right," he said, reaching over and taking it. "I'll get it to the team right now, hey?"

"You do that," said Victoria. "And don't come back until it's ready!"

"Roger," he said, saluting with a kilogram of plutonium. "I'll do my best ... "

t minus 5 days 6:12 p.m.

The crack accountancy team who were gathered in the conference suite to listen to the boffins had an air of quiet expectation about them. The boffins, for their part, were jittery with a mixture of anticipation and too much caffeine. It was left to Jonathan to kick off the briefing session.

"Right," he said; "you all know why we're here, you've all been told what the project consists of ... now shall we run through the specifics? Dave, if you'd like to kick off?"

"What? Oh." Dave fiddled with his hearing aid. "Yes, now as I was saying ... building a bomb is child's play; the difficult part is getting the EMP right. That's electromagnetic pulse, knocks out electronics everywhere, very messy. Hmm." He smiled vaguely.. "The higher up we detonate the device, the better. Modern consumer goods -- videos, televisions -- are bloody vulnerable. At eighty miles, the whole of Greater London and a fair chunk of the south-east is going to be reduced to thirties technology, with virtually no loss of life. Sod-all fallout too, if we do it right. That's all."

Jonathan cleared his throat. "Right. Dave?"

Dave grinned widely and sat on the edge of the table; he fiddled with a gadget and a slide projector flickered on, pasting the schematic of a rather odd-looking missile across the wall behind him. "Hi, everyone, it's really great to be here," he said. "Yes, I've got nothing but the best for you! Rocket motors from Morton-Thiokol -- left over from the Minuteman program -- nose cone stolen from the Imperial War Museum's V-2. Software programmed by our very own system's house; this bird will *fly!*" He emphasized the point with zooming motions of his hands and finished it by rubbing his bald patch and smiling. "You bet!" There was a pop as the projector bulb burned out.

"Thanks, Dave," said Jonathan. "Now the financial prognosis ... Julian?"

One of the accountants stood up and cleared his throat nervously. "Well, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we can see that this estimable scheme has considerable profit-generating potential, except in the insurance field ... for which purpose we intend to attribute it to the Butlerian Jihad Organisation." His cheek twitched. "There are unfortunate overheads -- buying of hot-lead typesetting machines, manual typewriters and plutonium -- but these are in hand and are trivial compared to the other possibilities. Do you realise that there are more than a million video recorders in the Greater London area?" His eyes glistened with enthusiasm. "We must strike while the fallout is hot -- we must launch take-overs for the Amstrad and Sony corporations at once! While there is no television we will sell books in huge numbers; then we will sell televisions and videos instead of books ... and finally we can drop another bomb and re-start the cycle!"

Dave tried to catch Dave's eye during the ensuing grumble of applause from the accountants, but Dave was nodding vigorously and contemplating the inner landscape of quasi-harmonic consumer growth patterns that he'd been designing for his next space opera. Despairing, Dave turned his attention back to the podium.

"Good," said Jonathan. "So we're agreed it's a workable idea in principle?"

"Yah," said Esme, who, sitting at the back of the room, was keeping careful note of how her new subordinates were behaving. Her smile sparkled like perrier water. "The board has given it the go-ahead and I agree. Forward to a bright new age of limited nuclear destruction and higher publishing profits!"

The accountants stood and saluted as one. Dave finally caught Jonathan's eye and shook his head; Jonathan froze, then looked faintly guilty.

"Over here," Dave hissed. Together they left the room.

"What is it?" asked the editor as they stood outside in the plush corridor of the Spart-Dibbler offices.

Dave breathed deeply. "Haven't you ever thought that there might be something faintly wrong about all this?" he asked. "I mean, zapping every television in the Thames area ... "

Jonathan shrugged. "Serves them right for not buying our books in the first place," he said. "What is it? Lost your nerve?"

Dave shrugged. "Nah, it's not that," he said. "It's *them*. The accountants. I mean, once they get the idea they can make cash from nukes, what are they going to do next? Bomb the Vatican so they can make money selling holy relics that glow in the dark? Look, books mean *nothing* to these people. They're just a route to more money. If they realise that they can do without us they'll ditch the publishing trade without a second thought and carry on regardless. So what can we do?"

Jonathan considered for a moment. "Get drunk," he suggested. "Then think about it. Maybe we should see if Dave can come up with something."

"Right, chum," said Dave. "You're on. Care for a jar?"

t minus 0.05 hours 02:00 a.m.

London at two in the morning was a strange and beautiful organism layed out at their feet; like a fractal snapshot of sodium-lit hell, an author's hallucinatory hopes for future royalty payments. Lydia shivered. "Well?" she asked.

"Soon," said Victoria Bergdorf. "Soon. Let's just wait for the accountants to arrive."

"Fine," said Dave, standing close to the edge. He peered over the parapet of the building; a gargoyle shaped like a parrot seemed to leer back at him, and wink.

The fire door opened and Dave stepped out. "Hi there," he said cheerfully. "I've just checked with the launch computer and everything's hunky--dory!"

"Uh-huh," said Victoria. She shook her head regretfully. "I wish it hadn't come to this, you know."

"It was inevitable," said Lydia. "Uh, what else could we do?"

Victoria gazed into darkness. "How long?" she asked tensely.

"Three minutes," said Dave. He sat down on the safety railing and began to whistle quietly. "Launch window in three minutes, folks. Just dig the fireworks!"

"You've secured the plute?" asked Dave, quietly.

Dave nodded. "Somewhere safe," he said. "Don't worry about it. *And* the fuel."

"Where are they gonna watch it from?" asked Lydia.

Jonathan arrived, panting breathlessly. "Hi, folks," he said. "Boy, did I have problems getting away from that meeting!"

"They wanted you to watch with them?" asked Victoria.

He nodded. "Esme was rather insistent, but I got away eventually. They'll be watching it from the S-D office block roof, as scheduled. At least that's where I left them half an hour ago."

"Two minutes," intoned Dave: "this is one giant leap for publishing-kind, one small step for offset-web lithography ... "

Victoria yawned. "Did you find a buyer?" she asked Jonathan.

He nodded. "Yeah. Those thugs we bought it from didn't have a clue how much plute is worth! I found a buyer, okay. If this works we'll be set up for life; we'll make the Great Train Robbers look like second--rate pick-pockets."

"One minute," said Dave. They fell silent, listening to the beat of some cosmic heart, waiting for the timer-driven missile launcher in a derelict warehouse to torch off, lofting three tons of solid-_fuel boosters and sinister warhead into the night--time sky over London --

"Is that it?" asked Lydia, pointing; "I hope you got the guidance parameters right!"

"No problems," said Dave, absent-mindedly tapping his hearing aid. The fiery streak rising from the far horizon seemed ominously close, almost near enough for them to reach out and touch; then the fire died as the warhead vanished into the cloud base.

"Twenty seconds," said Dave. "Who did you sell it to?"

Jonathan shrugged. "It was kind of difficult to figure out anyone I'd trust with it," he said. "Hey, look -- "

They looked.

Across the city a meteor was falling, glowing white with the friction of its passage; a futuristic bullet fired with the imagination of a group of threatened writers, falling towards an encounter with --

BANG

"Jesus Christ," said Dave. "I hope the cleaners had time to get out."

They watched in silence as, on the other bank of the Thames, the walls of the Spart-Dibbler building bulged outwards as if under the impact of some ghostly hammer; the mirrorglass flanks distorted strangely before they burst apart, showering the nearly-deserted street below with the wreckage of the accountants nuclear dream.

Victoria shook her head. "I wonder what would have happened if it had worked?" she said. "I mean, if book sales really *had* taken off ... "

"Don't," said Dave. "This way we get to keep the money with a clean conscience."

"Bravo," said Dave, clapping. Lydia turned her back on him, rudely; he could be very crass at times, applauding his own ingenuity.

"It's still not right," she said. "I mean, what now ..?"

"We go back to being poverty stricken publishing people, I hope," said Victoria. "But one thing still puzzles me," she added. "Jonathan. Just *who* did you sell the plute to after you stripped out the warhead?"

He smiled widely. "A very small record company ..."