

Shamanspace

by Steve Aylett

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*Caught by the mortals in old age,
an angel scattered itself like leaves*

SIG

To those who know that the inhabitants of heaven and hell are political prisoners, that the law is as preventative as next year's weather, that the post-human's too predictable, South London has always been a playground.

'Don't think so hard - he'll hear you, if he's bothered.'

The younger, the boy, tipped his head back in a bone-flavour rain, seeing air rich in nocturnal swirls.

'What about you?'

'He won't know I'm here,' the French girl told him. 'He never knows.'

'You must be good,' said the boy - good, if she could screen from Alix. They said Alix could enter the face of a guitar without making a sound. Melody had once seen his body splitting open as he bleached out behind geysers of infra-red, lightning in the blot of his mouth and angel blowback gusting stuff off the breakfast table. And as he reversed out of the human bandwidth he pulled depths into the house, furniture exploding into blurdust and splinters. He could lose it across to otherspace as soon as think about it. He stared and it was hell that blinked. Back at the Keep, Alix featured in heavy books, his icon head in colours kitsch as Indian firework art.

She said they were near but the boy couldn't feel anything strange in the traffic-jam of structures. He ran his hand along a pedestrian subway's paracetamol walls as they ascended into an angled wasteland where a traffic-light hung like an earring. Melody was now a more stripped-down version of herself, invisible to anyone but the best edgemen - Sig saw a flicker of her wrapped in protein mapping. They said he had the gift but no brains. Bad steering.

Mood rang across the slamming street, abandoned. They stopped at a metal door covered in rust like coffee grains. Alix's door and still no energy signature. They valved through, and the boy found himself clattering up the dodgy stairs alone. Glancing back, he saw the girl had sat down sadly to wait.

Sig pushed carefully into the dim room. It was as cold as stone and slowly became a distinct space of calloused books and abraxia. Everywhere, softening, withered and dead flowers were arrayed in the gloom. Seated near the hollow fire of this dry worry shrine was Alix in clowntorn rags faded to a pupal grey. How old was he meant to be? Twenty-seven? But his hair was white, his face empty. Not cloaked - just not producing any energy. Was it a new, deeper sort of disguise? Living right down in the detail?

His eyes were turns of liquid gold, glistening and unseeing.

'What's this,' said the living legend without looking up, his voice that of an old man. 'A little novice godstopper, ripped to the tits on righteous fury.'

'I like to think so, sir.'

The eye-gold shifted, meaningless. 'Well answered. I had a dream just now. Bomb season rushed in, flinging back loose particles of the house, blew bodies into me like leaves. Then you swanned in. You and your neurotrash friends getting on alright? Teaching you to fieldstrip and reassemble yourself like a gun? Watch yourself. You think being permitted is the same as being free? You're allowed to siddown.'

Sig pulled a wooden chair over and sat down, staring in silence past Alix at a bug which jotted across the wall.

'D'you like stories? They say our enemy likes stories and that's why we're here. Well, we haven't provided it with anything interesting lately, have we.'

'I've heard a lot of stories about you, Alix.'

'So you drop by to sip my ghost. Like I've plenty to spare, the hero. Expected a couple hundredweight of angels entertaining me? Established to heroic glory in a Sistine scene, right?'

'I don't know what I expected.'

'You're lying. Or the next thing over. Lying still reveals stuff because it's directly connected, they haven't taught you that? I used to be that way - all of six years ago. Thought truth was the stone in the snowball. Truth was really the whole shebang.'

'Tell me.'

'It's a secret no matter how much it's told. Our enemy hides in plain sight. I believe you already know that.'

'But you found its heart.'

'I got the coordinates, in the shabbiest way. And I went there. Jabbing a dagger at the sky. You think it's cool, making me remember? Good for your rep out there? We're white minutes, disposable ghosts, many per hand. We're nothing.'

Sudden pockets of failure went geomantic, flashed into expression, twisting the moment through the room. He had abruptly opened his pain. Sig saw Alix journeying in the big huge, an electron speck on electric white.

'Yeah, it's a little bit triggery,' Alix said. 'I mean it. Into every word I weave thorns.'

1

CHAOS PAD

Darkness turns on a dime

The girl was surgeon and singing bird, deadly queen of sharps. Resentments at the ready, we met in a nerve storm club. I went in as an untextured nobody, walls showing through me. Scar incarnate, third generation cool and moral omitted, washing one drug down with another as the world toxified around us. Sad shadows in her hair, a slow ballet of cigarette smoke, cold bottle touch going warm as outcome diagrams watched our way. The streets, treasure lights bobbing underneath the real. Her rough ferrous oxide tongue as we went up in a cage elevator somewhere. Her hair hides the phone.

After that I lost track of time for a while. Someone's flat. I was looking at a strange box of bone parts, all hoaxed up with operation wire - an October switch, it was called. I had one of those, it was an activan machine. A what? My head frazzled through a series of pulls, releases and dissolves. The body is king on Earth, I remembered, a vital lie.

A lightbulb was swinging like a hanged ghost as I drew a thin blade through the smudged centre of the entry stamp on my wrist. The wound pulled open, stretching gluey blood. It looked like a main line station in there, parallel tracks converging and splitting in a soak of red light. Who was I?

The elemental flutter of etheric draw flickered in the soda blackness to my right, barely visible through brain spuff. Outside influence, drawing like silver stage ropes.

I was in such a bad way. Deep cover - I'd lost myself in it again. I was Alix the ultra-vivid hero, or something like it. I stood up, pushing through thick space, and pull patterns shrivelled like cobwebs around me. The girl was a loft baby, rigged up in a back room, the leather cocoon of her flightbag the centre of a massive kirlian web. Transformation adjustments mashed in the dark, heroine wear backing up, discovered and obliged to die. I had to do a techie before the end. Etheric strands were still trailing into me - all the better.

I used the blade to split the suspension bag - lengths of gelatinous activan stretched from her pale face - she didn't stir. Laying on hands.

An armchair was already dwindling into the corner as electrovistas opened up in front, the stream of cells blowing past. Bloodshot intervals of subterranean transport and the racket of magic.

Her head was a lovely little number. Creation-fresh, her spirit entered a litter of fallen winter, momentary people reproached her angrily for delicious visions and she died a notch or two. Together the years conspired, denying each other. Fame admiration trapped the family, their lives in dry dock. Children were plucked like pillows and shoved into formation. Surgeons hand over a mistake, culture paints leaves green which were green, complete and repeated, sickening, and mother birds drop coins into the waiting mouths of chicks. She learnt to keep her eyes closed when crying, tears flowing under the skin and over the skull. Early dreams collapsed like empires. At least there was little chance of her rage dying among the lies. Truthful and ousted, she saw structures in events, sat in crowds watching the armatures of human need and fantasy anglepoising between the people, linking them in a jagged scaffold, and later learnt that others couldn't see this. Bloodshot canyons of wounds, ward screeches, remote money, a cell padded with snow, a white girl curled round a white soul.

And the Prevail picked her out of the chorus. New fathers taught her to use a sigil gun and walk with street-sensitive claws. Something of herself was left, a miniscule mischief which rifled a secret and took it away. Sacred telemetry. And this rushed into me the instant before her head jumped apart like a balloon filled with water.

The left side of my body was on fire and I was shaking with sobs, several layers of skin gone. She'd been achingly, corrosively beautiful under the make-up. People who've had a lot of good luck deny that luck exists - those who've had a lot of bad know it does.

2

THE SWEET HALFWAY

Inconsistencies are shown to be limbs on the same creature

The Internecine pulled me in immediately, my headshout summoning a unit before the Prevail swung by in response to the girl's phone call. I was ghostburnt, in mourning and voiding lumps of the cover personality. After a few days in my cell at the Keep, I went to see Lockhart in his study, a room tumoured with statuary and patched with a lot of detail. Chairs of red leather polished like cherry skin, floors of heart pine, fruit hugged in a bowl and a fire the colour of drugs. Here we sat and talked in the utter sadness and treasuring of golden mischief which came of knowing it was all for nothing. The Keepworks rendered everything ironic instantly; and all the while we meant it.

'You know this bit of barefaced enlightenment could have smashed the neighbourhood?' Lockhart said, his face full of the vitality of old wisdom. Misery glows better with fibres of experience.

'I got sloppy, then lucked out - that's all.' I was healthier. Matter felt right. 'Where's Melody?'

'Paris, sidebanding the Prevail mother-house. She sends her congratulations. She was interested to hear the Prevail have located the heart of god and this assassin girl of theirs happened to know about it. So you're to do the job.'

'Looks that way, doesn't it? Slingshot into the monster's eye. Why shouldn't it be me? A crack in the furnace may be fiercer than the mouth.'

'Quite. But I've been wondering, if the Prevail have the location, why haven't they carried out the hit?'

'They're limousine rebels. Riddles retreat if they're weak. This one keeps staring until they look away.'

'We don't. You don't. You're getting faster. If anything you're over-confident. We bleed outside the history books, Alix. However tempting to scorn through victory and leave it wrapped in whispers. Don't become so attached to your rep that you delay the final act forever. Allow for etheric wind-sheer - and that of cowardice.'

'What the hell does that mean?'

Lockhart's face congested with concern. 'People, unlike our target, can give way to pity. I believe the Prevail feel something like that. Individual versus society, or versus god. Either way it's the resistance to absorption. Independence of spirit. Pause any country and you'll spot subliminal torture in the frame. The sky of culture looks downward, obstructive and unambitious. The edgemen are a circus of parallel citizenry. So we sometimes forget the pain that drove us here in the first place.'

'God, camouflaged by sheer familiarity, different to nothing, essence of agony.' This was re-examined rote, out of an old but good edgemen book called *The Ultimate Midnight*.

The debate is: destroy the universe entire? Or cut god out like a cancer? We in the Internecine believe that in destroying god, we'll bring everything to an end - that it runs through all matter. Because the Prevail believe the universe will continue after god's destruction, their considerations are entirely different from ours. When men assume they'll continue, responsibility is postponed.'

'Listen, what if it made no difference, neither ended it all nor made it better - why do the hit?'

'At the simplest level? Revenge. And honour satisfied.'

'Then death wouldn't be punishment enough, would it?'

Lockhart twitched a small smile. 'You and old Quinas have a lot to talk about.'

I didn't like the sound of this - Quinas was a charred moon dropped from the sky, yesterday's hero gone to margin remnants and remains. 'I've met shamanic burnouts. Some shivering leftover with weird eyes? I haven't got the patience to hear about some gold-rimmed yesterday.'

'He's rather younger than I am,' Lockhart muttered tersely, and I felt like the idiot I was. I loved this kindly gentleman who had been born in the days before our enemy's existence had even been verified. 'In any case, it's important you meet him before the big push. And be surprised by nothing you see or hear. He's... on the night side of right.'

I decided I needed a little more recovery time. I'd stripped my gears being something deliberately counterclockwise with my idea of myself - someone out of control. Hip discord wasted my time. But I was the great age for edgework - faced with truth, the young merely *fizzed* with its acid clarity. They weren't crippled - they were connoisseurs of the delicate tension between alive and nonalive, the sweet halfway.

In my cell, I watched the alkaloidal motion in the wall, and asked for stories. I knew books could see people

around them, they ground their tiny teeth, tried to rattle like windows, stories to tell. Here were stored Arabian secrets uncynical and sensate, books tattooed in pain-ink, buds turning open, suburb flagstones, broken-down gardens, a tin barrow red hot in the sun, insects in the dusk-fluctuating wind flying against shallow water, a mind where river floor scenes flutter unseen, all in the worming walls of the Keep. I treasured the safety here. Dead entrances withstood storms and there were aimless stains of music on the air. Outer platitude galaxies tapped ineffectual at the door. Kneeling to see along two thousand miles of architectonics, I found the accumulated density of civilisation, the food chain binding scraps of posterity. Society flowed along the vibration, unchallenged and unchallenging. What kind of world was that for a growing lad?

3

PAINLESS BLOOD, A SECRET

Originality irritates so obscurely that people may have to evolve to scratch it

I went through the ivied gate to the locked quarters, a guard allowing entry. Quinas was meant to be batshit crazy and acquitted himself well. He sat at the centre of his cell like an albino frog, working at some obscure cabbalistic grid, probably a malice puzzle. Proceeding around him was a polychrome exchange, the walls trancing with sickly refractions. His head was sprouted with white death-hairs, and when he turned my way I saw his eyes were liquid mercury, the surfaces flowing like oily water.

'My,' he said, 'people come and go so quickly here. Alix - I've heard of you. Dark harlequin, toxic clown or something, yes? Ridiculous that even among our kind we need our little superstars. Sit down. I wonder what they expect me to tell you? Maybe I'm just a warning of what can go wrong, like a mad uncle, eh? Last little initiation.'

'Whatever you like.'

'An open mind? I feel privileged.' He seemed to consider, his seemingly sightless eyes blank. 'Perhaps you need to know what's gone before. The winning side writes the history books, the losers adjust in translation, thus all is homogenised. The Sequel Coming, one messiah eaten by the next. The Internecine Order began with Tagore Ros, who over there in the asphalt world is mainly known for the saying, "Say which exists and which doesn't - the gallows, harmony, yourself." He knew that genuine power doesn't have to enforce itself by example. Assumed power, on the other hand, requires folks' belief - it depends upon the victim's industry. Without that, it... just sits in a room, referring to itself as authority.'

'I know all that,' I told him. A lot of edgemen contract that turn of the head that gets them talking weird - past and future helixed together.

'But do you see that even genuine power may have something to hide? Too inquisitive and it pulls rank. Always that in the end. It seems that whenever god has a fight with us, it's never over what he's really angry about.'

'He?'

'You're right, that's more of a girl thing. But we're living amid its moulted material, including the hothouse cultivated hell some call civilisation. Democracy, for want of a better word, denies the song every day with a din of affairs, our opinions yelled above the sound of hope scratching in the dust, all in faith eyes and alarm. Though hysterical, folk are proud - and it's hard for people to stampede when they're strutting. Genocide, a million jet-trail outcries, easily ignored. Unconcerned, we are not awakened - are we perfect, or imperfect? Public fountains haven't answered us in years. And all the while a thin film of identity separates you and oblivion.'

By now bored and languid, I hadn't the patience for this crumb-cupboard past. The twists of tacking convention are pretty to some, not me. 'This is a lot of damp news.'

'Yes - I apologise. You need to know about the Internecine's failed attempts, these things our own people bet their shirts on. Let's see then. Did you know they tried a sort of MK Ultra programmed agent scheme? But of course it could sense something - everything, in fact. They decided the only hope was to operate in a way about which it didn't care. We knew there was a vast percentage of events about which it didn't especially care, and those involving human suffering seemed a safe bet - so we raised an agent from scratch. Lived in a monastery and so on, and died unaware he was a virus - to sneak him into heaven. He'd then be activated and do the hit. But they found the heart of the creature wasn't there - this "heaven" was just a place to get people squared away, one of countless infinite bandwidths for etheric soul material.'

This story was brand new to me. I couldn't quite believe it, but Quinas was transparent. I should have known a blaze of honesty is a fine decoy.

'I used to be the bigshot like yourself, but I believed a quick hit wasn't enough, I thought the creator should be tortured beforehand. I loaded our pain - guided crawling to the only choice, deference to the lucky, extorted worship, full-body entropy, incinerative powerlessness, the medicinal smell of lies -in to a million etheric traps throughout subspace. If one was tripped they'd all tip at once into god's mind. But like a clumsy poacher, I managed to trip it myself.'

'If you survived, god certainly would have.'

'But it would have suffered more - with it being the source, the experience would have been a feedback loop. Torture was the point. Anyway, I realised it had delayed me from the inside. The sheer bravura of that, the regard the project would get me. Yes, I should have just gone for the hit. You see, we're part of our enemy. It hides by walking in its own footprints. It's everything. Luckily this means anywhere's an entrance to it, in fact we're already there. The question is, how to reach a vital organ.'

'Well I've found that, and you're wasting my time. All I want to do is say goodbye to a few people, let them know it's about to end, and do the job.'

'The stars of reason corrupt your sky, Alix. You're too coolheaded. You'll need anger that would turn sand to glass. God depends on our becoming distracted - as you have, with your style, as the Prevail have, with their politics. It knows you're coming.'

'We take precautions - we're hidden here.'

'The Keep's made of anglematter -antimatter reversed through its own dimensions to make a near-neutral greyspace. Tied off sidelong to society with false entrances of whole years. Normally the body eats space equal to its size. Not here. The Keep's not camouflaged. In fact it stands out like a scar that won't tan.'

'If it knows, why doesn't it stop us?'

Quinas smiled wintery. Geometries whirled through the albescent walls. He was a fine one to accuse me of a lack of passion. The man had been ghostburnt to ice.

'Without consciousness there's no cruelty - only objects without pain. God made us conscious for a reason. It knew that when its cells became self-aware, they'd experience a pitch of pain that'd send them for revenge. We're nano-assassins. It just takes one of us little viruses to get to the right place. In our capacity as god's suicidal impulse the idea's always been to work covert, like a drink habit - god's cowardly, it doesn't want to know or take responsibility for what it's doing. That's why it delegated in the first place, yes? A part of it knows what we're doing, because we are that part of it. Just don't make too much noise. It'll let us sneak up. A telescope is god looking at itself. We are god cursing at itself. When we kill it, we'll be god killing itself.'

Behind him was the image of a nerve in earth growing grassblade-thin and already dying.

'Well,' I said, 'it's been good, Mr Quinas.' I stood, feeling headachy. Not good.

'You like books - let me give you a going-away gift,' he said, standing as an opalescent shelf extruded from the wall. Amid the junk, I noticed curse needles and a very rare spinelight camera. He took down a book of mirrors, flipping through it in an absorbed sort of way - I thought he'd forgotten me. Then he handed it over, his dead silver eyes knowing exactly where I stood. 'Acqueville's *Flightless Land Without Clouds*. It's said this book learned the ultimate secret, lain in sun on the tiles for a million years - the pages extracting a store of the mystery, closing. Truth revealed, the sky one big X-ray.'

'Thank you, Mr Quinas. Goodbye.'

I passed through the security sweetwall and glanced back. Quinas was flickering, his body fading to a tintype image. His voice rasped right against my ear. 'Maybe you didn't hear me. You expect the stars to know you? We're nothing, snuff-zeroes in a vacuum.'

I knew it - he was creating a diversion. An etheric exertion was throbbing in the air. 'What's this,' I said, stupid. Quinas was a red electric outline scrambling from the mirror book. I dropped it as he formed up with a sort of dazed laugh and sprang toward a fast clearing in the outer sweetwall. He hung aside from the crackling gap, behind him a city glittering distant as beads. Phenomenal effects banged past him - he winked his eye and let go, vanishing. The wall closed.

So it was to be human drama and delay after all.

4

ETHERIC SPEEDWAY

The threat of ending has been taken as a promise

Quinas valved down in Paris and this suggested he had some business with the Prevail. I should have known when he referred to the world as god's 'moulted material' - Prevail philosophy. Lockhart was saying I should regenerate and keep my powder dry, whatever the hell that meant. But there was a chance I could

stop Quinas from blowing the surprise. I joined Melody in a safe house in the Rue Fromentin, loving her but weirding on the city - my nerves sang sickly with the left-handed landscapes and cathedrals brittle as candy. The style layer was so thick it put a two minute delay on the registration of actual flesh. Melody tried to distract me in a skirt made of brain skin. 'What's this?' she asked, holding the mirror book.

'Quinas gave it me.'

The only words were an inscription etched on the cover. *Mirrors are roots - buried here with us. What they feed is elsewhere. We are a mirror to show god its cruelty.* Did Quinas give me this thing to root me deeper into the world? If so, it wouldn't make it.

I asked Melody for directions to the Prevail motherhouse and she pointed in the ninth direction. I took that very deliberate half-turning step which tilted an edge in the air, showing me a dense cross-section of several etheric miles. A bright band of rich rubine red was immediately noticeable, not far away. I raised an arm toward it, the funhouse-mirror limb stretching to infinity, and let it draw the rest of me into subspace like an elastic band. The room started to funnel and I gained a sense or two, then blurred through a wedding-arch of cobalt flame. Vision wedges cut in, passing. Ahead was an audio hole surrounded by warp, liquid voices stretching. Subfrequencies coalesced and sharpened.

'...A society will manufacture an image of progress and locate it in the direction it wishes to take us.'

'Enough small-talk.'

It was a typical motherhouse, all mystery windows and trees in the attic. And here was an arcane basement - broad steps and a massive wall into which was set an impressive geomantic gateway. Moving through solid air, my angle cut the visible bodies into edges - aligning a little, they swelled from blood buttons to focused form. Drifting unseen and insulated, outside the colour, I peered in.

Here was Casolaro, head of the Prevail, gravitational decades telling on his body and no humour to shore him up. 'You're here under heavy manners, Quinas.'

'It's a fragile conquest that bad manners can undo.'

'Amusing, such language.'

Quinas, his head like a birdcage and one song, made a fluttering gesture of dismissal. 'I'm a sixty-two year old edgeman, Casolaro. I've spent life watching the truth going in and out of focus. I'm no longer holding out for happiness, just a better turn of phrase.'

This continued a negotiation in the spirit of sinking hoods and strange smiles, all that elite malarkey. Everyone here was shielded, all but Moon, a blond kid about my age. I could see sideways in him like a sandwich man. He pretended he was already what he planned to be, a display as fragile as a scale model. Casolaro's partner, Wireless hung back. He wore a uniform that looked like a done puzzle, joints worming in the surface. The pattern continued in tattoo across his sleek bald head.

'I'm aware you're a burnout - I see it in your eyes. As it were. You've run with the ashers a long time - why trap you behind the planets if you weren't dangerous?'

'They think I'm insane.'

'What does that mean, in this context? Your bargaining position consists precisely and entirely of your being insane and capable of anything.'

'Very flattering, I'm sure.'

'Your bullethead - Alix - he's not a mere technical instrument, no? Individuality's not the problem?'

'No, to go all out for differences, that's us. He's the etheric surfer boy in the summer of his stardom. Playing a swiss army harp. Getting high on what's meant to kill him. A certain style, that's all - the bud's brittle and dry, it'll never open.'

'The funeral's still young. And the Bluetooth's in ready dock. You're right that a valve journey's too great an escape risk. What's your strategy up front?'

'Forgetting, with all the comforts and drawbacks of addiction.'

'The girl we sent, he got what was in her head?'

'I told you he was a brain bandit, Casolaro. Of course, he's curious as to why you haven't initiated the hit.'

'And Lockhart?'

The young guy Moon stepped toward my view with a jugular gun, his face curious. He was better than I thought - he was sensing me. And the other two stopped, darkness between them. A secret had been taught.

Moon started crossing over, leaving his outline. I recoiled through the etheric, allowed him to dwindle in the middle distance, a nearly-nothing pinned on the air. He was tracing me even as I entered my body in the safe house, a sticky settling of form. 'Get a hotel,' I told Melody, 'we're rumbled.'

We made the street and split up, falling in with shadows. Streets and acres of slick rain, the night black with astral smoke. A six-gun-signature body fell in behind me, Moon treading the length of silence. You can tell an edgeman - his shadow's strongest furthest away from him. He was smiling already, ahead of himself.

Passing the mouth of an alley, I folded down to a single element and streamed sideways into the architecture - what a clever evening this was turning out to be. Moon sifted in also and we were fleshtones flushing through the walls on either side of the alley - branching up into roofs and undoing bundles of air

before dipping into masonry again. I was rushing through a distinct room of carpet and woodwork, then skeins of bloodlace and a realm of flurrying protoplasmic urgency. I'd merged with a stranger, a librarian unkissed and professional, her accomplishments trim in misery, prayer-pecking and mean. Feathery snowbursts took me out and an armchair went on forever. Before realising, I left the end of the block and slid through a parked car, which baulked sideways into the road in an explosion of glass. Moon was right behind me as I blurred through a car park, a whole row of vehicles shattering with etheric drag. I slammed to a stop inside a car, slipped upward through the roof and apported, jumping down to the tarmac. Moon materialised too fast, merging with a Volvo - the windows were instantly painted red from the inside and shattered as metal warped out. Elbowed armatures punched out of the chassis and gut lava tumbled from the headlamps. The scene settled down.

I was stood in an alarm-hooting supermarket car park like a failed angel, wearing a simplistic memory approximation of my clothes. I don't know anything about fashion.

5

VAMPIRES OF PARIS

The world began as an insurrection - but later joined the vacuum

It's said that all societies contain only a finite number of persona - those left over merely have fun and good ideas. But our little heads suck in questions like air. I lay in Melody's hotel room, half my insides phantomburnt by the scrap with Moon. I'd been stupid caning it at a time like this - I should hibernate, heal, say goodbye, do it, whether god knew I was coming or not. A pretty poor virus. The running dematerialisation and rebuild had healed my arm, at least. What a strange and total vocation, blotting the sky. Distance in the windows. 'Don't turn a corner in the air and go all angel on me, Alix.' The way she said it, with honey somewhere behind the word.

'Just outside. Books.'

She made a face.

The delicate old city was beyond price - birds immediately felt faster, fish like flitting gems, waters opened the flowers, students my age and older, platinum skies, the stale subway sound of ghosts coming on like cigarette fog. This was the tying of emotional loose ends, saying goodbye before the push - if the Internecine were right, everything and everyone would vapourise moments after the hit.

I took the mirror book into an antique bookshop on the Rue de la Bûcherie, a place to all appearances the victory of habit and knee-jerk illumination. Yet here and there were books produced by cabinet-makers, passwords under the blurb. Lies flowed into their diaries and they died pure, leaving behind cure documents white as cream. Spreading the mirror pages to those of the old books, reflections showed the snail trail left by the author's bile, invisible behind print. 'Our secret broken law,' a law so irretrievably broken its existence had to be retroactively denied. *Medicine is the Slightest Species of Magic*, the true title of a treatise on the Napoleonic wars. *The Dictionary of Endless Independence*. 'Perhaps theology is dwelling in hell,' began another. Tasting hidden chapter names behind the visible.

I felt like I was returning to my own vomit. This was all old, frustrating stuff. God, I was itching to go on.

It was like a dream, that day. I was picking up history like coloured flavours. Railway furnaces, chestnut ancience, pistol cloaks, hooded horses in a dark tunnel, a symphony of something through long corridors of wide avenues, a slow viscous sky. A white drunkenness in tails and waving coats, galleries murmur and sermonise in a scene ceremonious and moving, infinite standing landscapes waltzing under olive trees, open-air festivity walking away. A seat by the shore of these things, chairflap beaches of afternoons. Pierview figures stroll at the rail, children at a distance change, yellowing, momentariness. The streets speeding over land. My eyes felt innocent.

The hotel was a practical hard station. I needed it.

Melody, her coal eyes far away, told me about a boy using some kind of reverse philtre. 'When more of his body was drug than human, the drug became hungry for humanity and went out night after night, addicted. This is how vampires are born, when a drug ventures out in the shell of a man or woman, trying to re-establish the biological balance. But he fed on a girl who was like him, a drug, and left all humanity behind. The girl lay in piss and blood staring up at the night against which he was shrinking like breath on a mirror. It was the first time she'd met one like herself, and in seconds he was nothing more than a ghost fading from her eye.'

Melody drew tears into a syringe. Pure among edgemen, it was an intimate act to taste one another's protest. Minutes cancered, infrared lightning running up our arms. Pinlights were scrambling over the furniture. Space rushed like the scorched air of a man's damnation gathering speed, and then the neon dust thrown

slowed and stopped. Grief had ploughed us into a seventh heaven where penny wishes rusted. Bloodtime passed in satellite colours and secret deeps, seeing radio species like grain electrons. Little burdens like kisses. Marble holes in the clouds, the journey finishing in other colours, blurring and clamorous, a waterfall of tears.

A hate girl, sunken pain, a climb through the thirst world, every compromise. A blood father in work glasses. A million miserable mirrors and all was worn. Scarred sighs. Gathering a hole among sheets, dying in a hug. She was so beautiful.

By windowlight snowstyle bodies entangled... hissgravel cars... boiling parks... big flapping days of lawns... slow shifts... breasts flatten to a young stretch... yawns falling among moments... brushing all things an hour away...

'Alix.'

'Yes.'

'Wait till I'm asleep. Do it when I'm asleep.'

'Yes.'

Soon she was sleeping, her jet black hair fallen over her face, and I went quietly onto the balcony to drink tea, say goodbye to the sky and obliterate the creator. There were coppery clouds out there, a sunset the colour of ale. I apologised to my victims, expecting no forgiveness. Moon, the hot wind bending his scream. The Prevail's London assassin. *And we won't be long in getting to heaven from here*, whispered the girl with the white skin and thin blade. Two signposts had led through the girl's head. Anything in life can serve as a doorway to understanding. Dimensionally, a sure way of being everywhere is to exist in time.

I finish my tea. The view is done. Like hell I'm not alone.

The buildings drained out as I braced for take-off, the horizon flashing into negative. Pain rained through my head and new silence poured over me.

6

STITCH THIS

Gold can't answer, it wonders why the fuss

An edit can contain infinities. I was aware of a sleek void. I could sense little more than gravity hurtling the world, and a smaller nausea of motion. I was in an enclosed space about the size of a coffin and restrained by an etheric body buckle. I'd been knocked out from behind at the hotel, the Prevail's unsubtle handiwork.

They wouldn't kill me - that would be like driving me to the launchpad with songs and champagne. But the ghost belt and shielded casket limited me to re-runs, math and anger - the pulpy gut in the head. They'd locked the door to the etheric.

Edgemen recover by accepting our cages over and over. Muscles shut. In blackness, I observed the faint geometrical directions of my own thoughts - all I was allowed. Back at the Prevail motherhouse, Casolaro had mentioned their sub, the Bluetooth. I laid bets I was aboard. Serves me right for getting ambitious.

I used the time to sort the sawdust from the glass. Why do this if they believed they were right? Were they doubting now that the time was nigh, was that why they hadn't used the information themselves? We were gunning for the same enemy - a creature which did nothing but explode continually in every direction. Hell, I could do that. In an infinite universe, virtue was bound to happen -accidentally unearthed and resembling intestines and veins. And so we became inevitably better than our creator - or a better limb of it than had existed before.

I didn't think it was possible for burnouts to recover. They were terminal, chained to the centreweight which draws down, taking walls chairs books people like a hole in the floor under sagging carpet - step on the sag and disappear, sucking everything with you. It was the exhaustion of pretending we weren't in a universe which had curdled immediately. Quinas was too well shielded to tell. He seemed involved in the mere spectacle of darkness, but burnouts haven't even the energy for that. And he'd sided with Casolaro, a bloated aesthete with as much sense of humour as a cat. Lockhart, at least, was like a father - one who was good but not weak, wise but alive.

Retinal darkshapes blooming into absence, I passed days or hours watching scenes from this one-horse planet and listening to head music. Chewing the trance slow. Peekaboos of clarity like mint. I passed through the sea watching mental recordings of black lava beds, forests which lapped and rushed in gales, close-ups of aged, scarred wood. Willing castles into urgent detail. Symphonies from start to finish. Walking through cities. And I began drowsing, losing my conclusions. That all of us are the subconscious thought impulses of a shabby god. That many of us want to die. These were the truth-halves of one picture. I was dreaming of

purple pastures and captivity kept me warm. I'd diminished to a mere mood.

I could hear techies talking outside -clamour sounds like a factory. The vessel had docked. I rushed to get alert. Etheric fuses were banging open, arm restraints slapping automatically aside, but I was still locked down at the chest and legs. The sarcophagus lid cracked and opened - I thumped up with both arms, connecting with Wireless's puzzle-suited chest, and valved into him. His body flew to pieces around me, leaving me stood in blood on the jetty. England, it had to be.

Techies were staring like cod on the slab. The sub was nestled into a roofed dock, a giant gasometer in a dirty swimming pool. I ran down a disused abduction tunnel, new pants winding up my legs like a graphics restart. The exit lintel still bore the dialist inscription, *Euphoric corpses look to no saviour.*

The clamber tunnel opened onto a sinkland paved with grey hardpan. Song in the wind hit me like a bottle. Right in front of my face a blown candy wrapper rattled against a vent. Half a ferris wheel was buried in the horizon. Hydraulic London was occupied.

The stars hurt like needles as I walked to the Internecine motherhouse. Rains varnished the street and raised dirt in acid walls. Resurrection is an encore uncalled-for, and as mortifying. To be young and full of poison in streets raining strychnine, moving through tilted shadows past all-night chemists and locked launderettes. Even the creator could do nothing more than adequate with this red liquid. Here a small dark door from the street, fizzing with rain. Valving through, a short walk up a path and into a grey textureless house like a church.

Lockhart wasn't in his study but I could feel a token energy signature through my exhaustion. I had a look at the stuff on the shelves - a tobacco-coloured photo of a young Lockhart at the base of a jungle temple; a small icon of St Isidore hunched under popular forgiveness, wanting out; a Turkish shrike lamp as dusty as a railroad radio; sigil ammunition. I trusted Lockhart more than anyone. Certainly, since he'd learnt to manage his mysteries some action had dimmed in him, died. But as mentors went he was impeccable.

I threw myself into a leather swivel chair and half-dozed. The downpour was like heavy static on the window. I opened my eyes as Lockhart sauntered into the room and halted. He was clearly less than impressed with my dulled condition, and seemed strangely uncomfortable. I began spilling my Prevail theory before I forgot it or fell asleep again.

'They think we're out to stage-manage the death of the universe whether it ensues naturally from god's death or not. Why they call us ashers, isn't it? Flattering that they think we're capable of it. But you see what the effect is? Even though both groups are out to assassinate the same target, it still has us arguing and delaying each other. The last little uncertainty's manifesting - does the creator want to obliterate completely, or does it want to leave its works and deeds intact, in testament?'

A cold twist of air came in as the other door opened behind me. I read the vibe before turning - an almost-flatness swerved out of true. It was Casolaro.

And looking to Lockhart in simple surprise, I saw something in his eyes. An impossible flicker of retreat.

7

SUICIDE CELLS

Let my heart loose on the authorities - distant laughter

Suppressed practicality will out. 'Careful, gentlemen. I've watched him play hopscotch on the ceiling.' I was a bit punchy but I could still talk bollocks as they forced me down the short flight of steps to the basement. 'Your etheric stylings are not welcome here, Casolaro.'

If I'd been healthy I'd branch into a wall, ghost up a structure and exit via the guttering, merge with a stranger and split out later without making a huge fuss about it. We've all done that, watched a room thrown into bright constellations as the washing machine changed cycles. But then it was too late - they were fastening me to an upright aura-rack at the far end of the chamber. The motherhouse basement was an etheric runway. The old ascension containment cross had been dragged out of storage and stood on the cocoon platform between amplifier housings. The cross was an ancient but effective trip preventer which worked in part by keeping the subject spread and unable to focus inward - like trying to sing low with your head high. An electrostatic discharge closed the etheric airlocks and threw me back against the main spar. It was Saturday morning.

I was looking at a large room coated in dust, rust and groundwater. Three figures stood against the darkness of the generator -Lockhart, Casolaro and Dreva, a young Prevail techy and strongarm. I was about to say something clever when Quinas ducked under an oppressive stone lintel, stepping into the light. He looked smart and healthy in a white leather coat, his death-hair slicked back to the skull.

It seemed they'd agreed it would be braver to sacrifice their principles than their present circumstances. I was positively relieved I was alone - that I wasn't quitting anything of value after all. I was sneering with bitter mirth. 'So the gang's all here. You're all cowards after all? Even you, Lockhart. I admired you like a boy should love a father. Is this it?'

Lockhart was staring at the floor. People forget how powerful he was, the grand old man. He seemed as harmlessly proud as a library lion but he could pour iceflame from his mind and freeze a moment for inspection, the air ghostly as cathode light. He'd been the first to give me a demonstration of etheric cocooning, enamel shine flowing over him in ectoplasmic encapsulation. Freaking me into hope. He looked terribly abashed now.

'You know what he thinks, your iron-haired mentor?' Quinas asked. Of course, the albino could read me. 'He thinks of great years, dust justice in oxblood rooms. Ageing and drumming the clock like he's okay with it. Night growing in his mouth.'

Lockhart glanced up and muttered gruffly, 'Sorry if they hurt you.'

'They can't hurt me.'

'Fetters are not toys,' said Quinas, and the boy Dreva smiled behind him. 'Your St Sebastian fantasy's getting real and Casolaro's getting a hard-on.'

'Let's get on with this,' rumbled Casolaro, not one for wit or theatrics.

'I was careless enough to be born in England,' I said. 'I'm not about to compound the error by dying here at your hands.' And I began wondering why they hadn't just plastered me with sigils; why they hadn't killed me by remote inside the containment coffin, dropped it in a sinkhole.

Casolaro stepped forward, looking grim. Never having had an original idea, he'd never gotten a taste for them. 'You killed three of my people without a second thought.'

'Oh yes, as slaughter goes I'm the blue ribbon winner round here. For the sheer eloquence of the thing. And I don't need a trip cocoon like your little girl assassin, Casolaro. Flightbags are for fucking amateurs who can't believe anything's an entry point.' I was letting them know I could take off from anywhere without preparation, boasting, as if things weren't bad enough. 'First thing I learnt. Honesty is the voice that is acceptable in every matter.'

Quinas sniggered. 'The universal assassin quoting edgeman writ from the cross - this is priceless.'

What they had duct-taped to this cross was a body bleached with ghostburns and dissolve scars. It was my ghost which pulled to lose it across to a hyperdimensional location triangulated upon by the input of hundreds of edgemen. To face an enemy covering so much ground the beginning of its definition differed from the end. We'd been hung out to dry by our leaders.

'He misses nothing, this one,' chuckled Quinas, picking up my thoughts easier than dropped change. 'You think it's coincidental that at precisely the time that the greatest number of people feel indignant at god's works, the fewest ever people believe in it? It's ducking for cover, denying its own existence. If its works are separate from it -if it is not everywhere and everything - then our desire for its death is not its desire.'

'So you're bone scared, plain and simple. Afraid you'll make the big enemy mad. You want it to like you?'

Quinas quoted sarcastically. " 'Hate adds only to hate. Cross through the angel of death and you give it extra wings.'"

I was catching featherweight visions, apple green skies, a pink and black chessboard. Yes, I could remain here a mummified potential. That tranced laziness was in me. So the plan would be buried and they'd all begin to live happily ever after?

'I expect status will go with everything else, eh? You're terrified of our little one-step peace process aren't you?'

Casolaro was indignant. 'You've an eye to status yourself, ultimately - won't your memory be regarded with awe by everyone?'

'Only if you're right.'

But this was all ridiculous.

'We're talking here like a fucking debating school. Denounce the sky like it gives a fuck. D'you realise this isn't theory?' My mind twisted useless at the restraint - I saw myself kicking my legs to crash it off. 'You realise you take these ghost locks off me, I go and do it? For real? You're late for this? We're cornered, bracketed in comparisons. Let's cut the crap, shall we? The Prevail are withered, diminished, and you took the Internecine with you. We're reduced to stupid intrigues, hitting each other round the head in hotel rooms - the First Mystic Renegades would be ashamed.'

The edgemen were mystic rebels from worm one, building observatory cathedrals and arcana grenades covered in spines like the black hands of a clock. All that righteous dying, for what - sacrifice swings the spotlight onto absence.

'Diminished,' said Casolaro sourly. The man was little more than a sack stuffed with chains. 'No, reconciled to our level. And you? Resigned to your mind, stuck to a face, and called finally to the solo, there you hang. Your vanilla calculations, these naiveties - they can't serve you. What you do in your head, you do in your

head. You're weak.'

'Yeah, as water.'

'And the Prevail didn't hit you in the hotel - it was your girl, Melody.'

Melody appeared at that moment, framed in the door like a thought of escape. She'd trailed in with one of my old books and seen me, nailed to their cross-purposes. And I'd thought I'd been alone before. I thought of the hotel: Melody whumps her hot face into the pillow and grinces her expression. People think there are limits to betrayal because they see it all black and white, onion layers - the skin, the skull, the brain, the thought. Cliches. Quinas was delighted. 'Agonising isn't it, the terror of the expected?'

8

SMILE

When do you know finally that a secret's successful?

She stood frozen, eyes ticking across the scene. And I thought, I'm a better man than her by far. 'You all report to the specimen above as surely as churchmen.'

Casolaro looked grim. 'You're alone, Alix. Nobody knows you're here.'

Then I can do whatever I want to you.' Quinas gave a contemptuous snort and shook his big, crafty head. 'Always the next trip, eh? Which of us here withholds the most power through prevarication? Louder concerns are not necessarily deeper. You're still part of a population that's been craving more vacuum and less content every hour - sanity its madness, song its science, fashion some right-hand nothing. Tedious repetition is exalted and boredom is a sign of sweetness. For brains I fear this is more than an interlude.' How could eyes of dead silver be so full of humour?

Within this device, I couldn't project an etheric image of my view and so had to use the arcane code of words. What was I doing here anyway? Tuning up for silence?

'I feel awkward watching while you sort the pottery shards of your justification. If you're the spokesmen for god's niggling doubts, I think I can deduce that it's ready and waiting.'

'It probably is. If it created our nature to rebel against force, our nature not to submit, will it be surprised? Can it be, on any score? Heaven and hell - both offer immortality, which ultimately doesn't get us very far. All is one, as they say. So why not be at peace, Alix, with what you have. It won't go unrecognised.'

'What, smart job on the train? Neon headstone? The only real peace is a defeat you cowards intend never to concede - an admission of reality. The refusal to help it pretend we've every reason to be grateful. Through inventing justice we've earned the knowledge that we hate the constancy of our suffering. Crimes against humanity.' Yes, the revenge was self-destructive, nuclear. The only act of dignity left to us. All great events close as many doors as they open. Open as many doors as they close. Fear the less-than-great. Does spring smash winter? 'I can't help you feel anything better. Fuck you old men, it's the golden mischief - this if nothing else. I complied with myself. Do better, if you can.'

I even suspected it was a dare, a set-up. Sainthood, you could feel it coming up like dust. Escape.

Casolaro stepped up with a hypodermic.

'Death in etheric containment,' he said coldly. 'Very nasty.'

'Sometimes the needle hurts most when they pull it out,' Quinas called, enjoying himself.

Casolaro looked me in the face. 'It's not personal.'

'Everything's personal.'

Technology masked the old blade.

Melody had handed Quinas the bound book. 'I found this in his hotel room.'

Quinas looked at it vaguely, lump-fanned it open. Melody had put the mirror book into an old cover. A scream tore in half as Quinas was drawn eyes-first into the object, a cloud of blood sizzling across the floor and ceiling, drenching the onlookers. Casolaro looked back as Melody whacked down the generator switch, breaking the current to the rack.

Ah! Melody.

'I've lost all feeling in my gob, gentlemen. Time to go.' A shiver of static trailed away from me and everyone stepped back in panic - like they'd no idea I could be this far into the countdown. My teeth powdered in my mouth as I slipped the lifeline. Sparks of the nervous system rushed shooting past my release.

I felt like a white maggot as I pulled out of my skin. Neat as the meat from a lobster.

IT'S PRETTY BUT IT'S VERY VERY HEAVY

Chains live without air

I left the body on the ground like an old cracked shoe. The onlookers' faces were turning to porcelain, then to thin paper masks on the surface of flowing film - still shielded, then irrelevant as I swept behind the pasteboard stage of architecture and on into the airwaves. The end - every tiny hero, remember their story. The end - every history. The end - every youth in the adventure street. The end - every lover. If you won't do it, then I will.

Men's fields were old rags of land, the setting sun was enraptured, a huge edge and wheel, fire descending a sky covered in bruises. Intersecting dimensional sightlines tangled the continents, a mountain was a green city of things, stone depths.

A little air high in the sky singing as the universe flew into my eyes. I was a single monochrome cell accelerating through kidstuff and clashing superstorms. A squall of ultraviolet geometries and other junk intended to distract. Red gold elements and shifting clarity.

Another forgotten firmament rolled into view, dark pulses teeming with stings of light, waves of a billion perishing cells. Gigantic flavour tides in high definition, space overdoing it and washed by fizzing toxicity.

The sawtooth strobing of side-viewed dimensional edits ended in the seething, chaotic mass of quantum foam. Hypergrey depths rumbling with the accumulating density of what was ahead. It was letting me approach. It hadn't flattened the steps yet. Bringing its own poison to its lips.

But when the thing drew near, it precipitated from all directions in a vastness of intricate, nonrepeating evil. A slow spectacle of dark vanes and complex underside, a titanic black insect floundered on its back at the centre of an infinite nerve net, fiddling a million legs amid the ferocious stench of vomit and scorching wires.

Its mouth rimmed with lashes like an eye, biting in space at an end, it was eternally frantic in its convulsions, evils tangling and stretching about its mindless ratcheting. Shackled by its own influence. Seeping cold corrosion in a night of oceanic tragedy. No cure ever, a constantly breaking heart.

And before this thing I felt the blossoming of total exposure. All resolve atomised by horror. One particle of poison in a sea of poison. No guts in a zero. No hero.

On the cross, my eyes turned gold.

SIG

Daylight air gnawed off the curtains. Each molten tear frazzled down Alix's face like a fuse. 'Truth crosses the blood/brain barrier intact, boy.'

The boy leaned forward. 'But you are sort of a hero. You found the heart despite everything, everyone. They all talk about you back there, the ashers.'

Alix rasped, old and faded as a photograph. 'You don't get it. Quinas's escape, the abduction, the final act in the basement, it was stage-managed. The whole deal had been to send me off with passion. My friends. To save me from being a mere dry ironaut, easily turned. Quinas knew he'd get it in the neck - he welcomed it as a burnout. But he had more mischief in him at the end than a lot of us start out with. He parleyed the coalition. I thought I'd seen everything. I was surprised, just as you'd be.'

'They talk about the forgiveness of god - I could never forgive it before, maybe now.'

'You've missed the point - Lockhart urged me not to feel pity because Quinas had got a sense of what the enemy was, during his failed try. It's the reason I failed too. Remember the cause of it all, and what is the enemy. There's a furrow through fortune - it's not irrigated with mercy. You know the one thing I can say that'll help you live a life? We're shit, but we're better than *it*.'

'And part of it?'

'The better part maybe - by a small margin. Now get out of here. You're too young.'

The boy stood as tiny pin-minutes sprang over silence. The room was aching. The living legend had gone dismal in the skull, lording it over dead flowers and dead books. Inside the ink, night alone was prophesied like black confetti.

Alix's metallic eyes seemed to move. 'Someone else is here. I can hear her smile.'

Melody was in the doorway. 'I'm not smiling.'

He didn't turn. 'Nor am I. Heaven sickness. Too many exits drown the soul. I've talked to your rookie -

honour's satisfied.'

'Thank you, Alix.'

'I really got a big rep out there? I remember me - stars in my pocket. Young rebel gun. Remember? I can see you and me in the street, believing it. I don't even scare myself now. I'm dust.'

'You're a star.'

'I know it's you brings the flowers.'

'Yeah.'

Melody and the boy left him in the small room, victory ghosts in his hung head.

They reached the street through a fence, stepping over broken tarmac pieces with the scent of oil.

'That was intense, Miss Melody. I didn't know he'd be like that.'

She stepped in front of the streets, stood watching rain on asphalt, tears hidden in the downpour. 'Let him alone. Let him figure in a cloud, not in history.'

'So why bring me here? I've read the books. What do I do now?'

She looked back at him. 'You could wait for a surprise, that the fruit won't always correspond with its seed. That's evolution, after all.'

'You think I'll back down because of this? You think I'm a re-run head just because I'm not so bright?'

She didn't answer. Maybe he'd think she hadn't heard him above the rain.

'Wait a minute - this is a set-up, right? Like what you did to him. And he's in on it, yeah? I knew he couldn't be a burnout. You want me to fight forward, push against you. I'll do that. I'll go for the big trip. The enemy's up on blocks? So bring it on. I'm ready.'

She watched the rain susurrating in the street, clouds fighting over the sky, and the bandaged windows of the edgeman's house behind them, in which there was no living human energy whatsoever.

'He was right,' she said. 'You're young.'

She saw Alix and herself in the streets he had described, the psycho heroes, coats full of death-welcome and belief. Nothing can be reclaimed.

She began striding back across town, the boy hurrying after her. And turning corners only they could see, they lost themselves between the rainfall.

APPENDIX

An etheric history extracted from the Internecine resource site www.shamanspace.com

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTERNECINE

"Any triumph is merely initial," stated Isabelle Feedi, and so through its history the Internecine has hoped that its single success would take place in the very last instant of the universe.

In the four thousand year old Yezidi belief system, there is no false introduction of another force that can exist against God - no Satan. Slavers cross-fertilized Yezidism with toxic wicca during the Roman conquests, resulting in angry faces all round. Of the fifty or so gospels excised from the trad Bible, the most influential on early Internecine activity were *Thunder*, *Perfect Mind* and the *Complete Archontics*, which now reside only in the Keep's etheric library. Peter the Assassin's insistence that authorities on Earth exist merely to confuse the aim of those who would "loose an arrow at the true sacred heart," was recorded in the true *Archontics* by the man himself: "Impertinence merely confirms authority's greatest fear." *The Reality of the Rulers* also touches upon this, using higher dimensional symbolism (in the dimensional one-jump manner of *Flatland* - the gods higher than god and shielded by god, as a symbol to portray the god higher than Earth authority and shielded by Earth authority). This truth was interesting enough for the priesthood of the time to frantically parse his statements into Christian quibbling (soft gnosticism) - recording him as Peter the Gnostic in the physical fragment which now poses as a piece of the Archontic Gospel (but which was written by St Epiphanius of Salamis, the same overweight gentleman who claimed there was a holy statuette gestating in his belly).

The third early text was *The Distractions (According to the Persian Prince)* which related the travels of an invisible Prince who slips through the rooms and palaces of this world and those adjacent, "making of deception a continuous window," to conclude that: "The world went from vast to artistic, a bad choice." The text was used by Hasan Sabbah and the 'hashishins', an early manifestation of the assassinator Internecine, used to discipline its soldiers in the matter of focus, intent and the irrelevance of surviving the task. Their initiation ritual (trancing with hashish potion, after which the initiate would awake into a beautiful garden and a servicing by a dozen teenage girls) has continued to this day in the Cryers' Climax and the occasional orgy at

the Portugal house.

One of the guises under which the so-called edgemen operated was that of the alchemical brotherhood, whose 'transmutations' often masked the construction of massive 'sky guns' whose medieval payloads of propellant explosives were ahead of their time. The age of sky guns gave way to more sensible initiatives. (For an idea of the levels of sophistication reached, see Basil Valentine's ironically codified text *The Triumphal Chariot*, in which cypher generates the request 'Just kill me' more often than the number of words in the manuscript.) It is recorded in *Disciples of the Discarded* that Elizabethan alchemist Doctor John Dee witnessed the scarab star of god blooming with a creak from the surface of the wooden table at Clerkenwell - a vision immediately waylaid by the arrival of unwitting holy agent Edward Kelley, who wasted years of Dee's time with useless signs and wonders. At the instant of death, Dee tried to remember the shape of god, while to onlookers it spread across his chest like a set of dark alien ribs and only black blood poured from the mystic's mouth. Yet even upon recognition of the universal facts within such visions, we remain utterly powerless - the number of false walls for us to pierce are truly infinite.

In the mid 17th century, the salvaged table itself was to be double-apported to its supposed former shape by our very own Sebastian Cockayne (entailing the destruction of parts of London) and the inaccurate depiction obtained was used for a symbolic target in an etheric misfire which resulted merely in Cockayne being reversed into himself in the most messy way. Similar 'dartboard' projects were carried out by the late hashishin splinter group known as the Unforgiving, a group more about cloak-and-dagger glamour than effectiveness. But it was from this group that Ralph/Chaim Foxcroft emerged, bringing to the Greek pre-Internecine the craft of the geomantic portal and the notion of projecting a missile into etheric sidespace (at a time when the mundane was still perceived as being separate from the all, and god a separate creature - the term Internecine was not yet used). These creations of Persian and Dialist architectonics can still be found embedded in several pieces of Internecine real estate. Finally the notion of a physical weapon was abandoned for good, but not before the geomantics were sealed against the espionage of the emerging Prevail.

For some time the Internecine initiative was codexed through history by those known to us as the Whispers of the Road (such as Villon) and the later Strychnine Scholars (such as Voltaire, Trepannier and the over-casual Bierce), as well as by what some have called 'Akashic Resentment', a wish for revenge passed down through generations at the atomic level. It was this consideration that led the late-Victorian fourth-dimensioner CH Hinton (who by the use of 'casting out' was teaching edgemen to see four-dimensionally with a visionary result similar to sonar) to consider that we are the self-destructive impulse of god. In presenting this and other information to the main council, he led Tagore Ros to reconfigure the assassin programme to that of pure etheric manoeuvres, with the conclusion that the assassination of god would lead to the certain obliteration of everything - a small price to pay. The first purely etheric hit attempt was performed in 1903 by Ros, who was an instant burnout, fin amplifier accident in Siberia in 1908 set back the technical side for some time and lost a talented man in the Russian Persikov. The use of Saunière etheric amplifiers, finally put edgemen into what was termed the 'body of god', but none were ever so foolish as to claim to have reached the heart - though many returned as babbling madmen or the walking dead. The splinter group known as the Prevail - formed by those who considered that god was a thing separate from its works, and that the universe would persist after god's assassination - began a series of spoiler skirmishes against the Internecine (or, as they began to call us, the 'ashers') which soon became a full cult war or, as the Invisible Prince might have put it, 'an Almighty delaying tactic'. The Prevail have speculated: "The space where god was, it will perhaps seem bigger than it is - like the feel of a missing tooth."

In 1942, Kosmon Levant, on the rim of death, placed himself within a circle of twelve amplifiers and, witnessed by edgemen of all ranks, died, leaving his nerve rig to run for a full hour on automatic. Cleared of philosophical interpretation, the shell ran through a well-practised etheric journey, according to all coordinates gathered thus far. The unfiltered vision accomplished is recorded in the locked section of the Keep files, but proof of the enemy's existence had finally been obtained.

In the second half of the last century, Internecine affairs have been complicated by intrigue - the matters of the Paris '68 Decoy, the googleplex-agent Alfred M Hubbard, and the so-called Russian 'scanner battles'. Yet there have been concerted pushes - that of Salii, a burnout, Quinas, a brilliant burnout, and the recent push by Alix, which has spawned the so-called 'Cult of Alix' about which we have such debate -another inventive distraction from our purpose (spawning the first open tell-all to be published by the straight press). The edgemen coalition broke down almost as soon as it began. A thousand times more powerful than 'the man on the street', we are universally ineffectual. Did we expect anything else? As Trepannier stated, "Emptiness tilted is yet emptiness."