

CASTLES MADE OF SAND

Gwyneth Jones

Here begin the terrors Here begin the marvels

Lyrics from 'Scarlet Begonias' by Robert Hunter

Ice Nine Publishing Company

Used with permission.

PROLOGUE

About four a.m. Fiorinda and Sage decided they'd better leave the Disabled Toilet, fond as they had become of the place. They woke Ax and persuaded him that this was a good idea. Cleaners, Ax. Folks with brooms and buckets; you don't want to meet them. The Rivermead Centre seemed deserted, blank corridors echoing with departed revelry. In the car park (ominous clanging noises from somewhere, no other signs of life) Sage hugged them and set off into the dark. Almost immediately he came loping back, hands in his pockets, shoulders forward, a dearly familiar tall silhouette, to where they were standing bereft, not knowing what to do with themselves. No, no no, he said. This is wrong. We stick together. C'mon, come back to the van.

They crossed the ghostly arena, with its shadow-buried rainbow of towered stages and marquees, and headed into the campground, still smashed enough that even Sage found his own back yard a puzzling wonderland. They could have gone on forever, they probably did go round in circles once or twice: on access lanes, or threading their way by paths only staybehinds used, between rows of tents that lay like sleeping animals: hand in hand, or in Indian file, brushing past spider-pearled thickets of Old Man's Beard and Michaelmas daisies; discussing their route in rapt whispers. It would have been paradise to go on forever, through the chill, river-misted night . . . no need for a house or a home, sleep under a hedge somewhere with the stars rustling overhead. Instead they reached the van, which was full of people, mostly unknown to the proprietor (as far as he could tell). They tiptoed past a couple of staybehind women having a hushed, early-hours conversation, stepped over the bodies on the floor in Sage's room (the boss's actual bed had remained sacred), and slept in the midst of the crowd. Many hours later Ax and Fiorinda woke alone, fully dressed, surrounded by digital hardware, and followed the scent of frying bacon to the kitchen – where Sage and his brother Heads, George and Bill and Peter, (all four skullmasked as usual), George Merrick's wife Laurel, Bill Trevor's posh girlfriend Minty LaTour, plus a grab-bag of Heads crewpersons, were cooking and eating a huge fried breakfast.

Sage was cheerful and sweet, but a distance had been re-established.

From there it was straight back to business as usual. The newly inaugurated Dictator and his girlfriend had to get to London, and establish a *modus vivendi* with the suits. The Heads zoomed off to Truro, where they'd promised a free gig for the Cornish (most of whom had no tv reception at present, so they'd missed the big concert). The show must go on, while none of the ongoing emergencies let up. The three leaders of the Rock and Roll Reich didn't have another chance to examine their private life, all through the winter. But at last there came a pause, an equilibrium. At last a chance to take stock, count the bruises, relax a little. A dangerous time.

1: Sweetness And Light

'What's that?'

'Haydn. Okay?'

'Yeah, fine. Cruise, Sage.'

'Tisn't working.'

'I wonder... ', muttered Ax. The Heads reckoned their boss was only safe to drive unaided when he was so wrecked he *knew* he was in trouble, which was not the case this morning. Still, there was a lot more room per vehicle on the roads these days, despite bomb-crater-sized potholes and long stretches where the surface had been hacked off by the righteous and never replaced. Th

CASTLES MADE OF SAND

Gwyneth Jones

Here begin the terrors Here begin the marvels

Lyrics from 'Scarlet Begonias' by Robert Hunter

Ice Nine Publishing Company

Used with permission.

PROLOGUE

About four a.m. Fiorinda and Sage decided they'd better leave the Disabled Toilet, fond as they had become of the place. They woke Ax and persuaded him that this was a good idea. Cleaners, Ax. Folks with brooms and buckets; you don't want to meet them. The Rivermead Centre seemed deserted, blank corridors echoing with departed revelry. In the car park (ominous clanging noises from somewhere, no other signs of life) Sage hugged them and set off into the dark. Almost immediately he came loping back, hands in his pockets, shoulders forward, a dearly familiar tall silhouette, to where they were standing bereft, not knowing what to do with themselves. No, no no, he said. This is wrong. We stick together. C'mon, come back to the van.

They crossed the ghostly arena, with its shadow-buried rainbow of towered stages and marquees, and headed into the campground, still smashed enough that even Sage found his own back yard a puzzling wonderland. They could have gone on forever, they probably did go round in circles once or twice: on access lanes, or threading their way by paths only staybehinds used, between rows of tents that lay like sleeping animals: hand in hand, or in Indian file, brushing past spider-pearled thickets of Old Man's Beard and Michaelmas daisies; discussing their route in rapt whispers. It would have been paradise to go on forever, through the chill, river-misted night . . . no need for a house or a home, sleep under a hedge somewhere with the stars rustling overhead. Instead they reached the van, which was full of people, mostly unknown to the proprietor (as far as he could tell). They tiptoed past a couple of staybehind women having a hushed, early-hours conversation, stepped over the bodies on the floor in Sage's room (the boss's actual bed had remained sacred), and slept in the midst of the crowd. Many hours later Ax and Fiorinda woke alone, fully dressed, surrounded by digital hardware, and followed the scent of frying bacon to the kitchen – where Sage and his brother Heads, George and Bill and Peter, (all four skullmasked as usual), George Merrick's wife Laurel, Bill Trevor's posh girlfriend Minty LaTour, plus a grab-bag of Heads crewpersons, were cooking

and eating a huge fried breakfast.

Sage was cheerful and sweet, but a distance had been re-established.

From there it was straight back to business as usual. The newly inaugurated Dictator and his girlfriend had to get to London, and establish a *modus vivendi* with the suits. The Heads zoomed off to Truro, where they'd promised a free gig for the Cornish (most of whom had no tv reception at present, so they'd missed the big concert). The show must go on, while none of the ongoing emergencies let up. The three leaders of the Rock and Roll Reich didn't have another chance to examine their private life, all through the winter. But at last there came a pause, an equilibrium. At last a chance to take stock, count the bruises, relax a little. A dangerous time.

1: Sweetness And Light

'What's that?'

'Haydn. Okay?'

'Yeah, fine. Cruise, Sage.'

'Tisn't working.'

'I wonder... ', muttered Ax. The Heads reckoned their boss was only safe to drive unaided when he was so wrecked he *knew* he was in trouble, which was not the case this morning. Still, there was a lot more room per vehicle on the roads these days, despite bomb-crater-sized potholes and long stretches where the surface had been hacked off by the righteous and never replaced. The van's erratic glide wasn't going to meet much opposition. Let him do without the autopilot, if it makes him happy. This is a holiday.

'I think I fell in love with you,' he said, 'the night we did the concert at the end of the Islamic Campaign. You remember?'

'Nah.'

'Sage, you are having me on. Cast your mind back. Bradford Civic Centre, end of January last year. Arabian Nights décor, inadequate stage crew. We'd been running around the Yorkshire Dales with a bunch of hippy guerrillas for three months, playing live-ammunition wargames with the Islamic Separatists. I sell my soul to make peace, we agree to do an armistice gig for both the armies. No bands, just you and me: Aoxomoxoa on noise, stunt-dives and horrible special effects, Ax Preston on guitar. Worked out pretty well, considering.' 'Yeah, yeah, yeah. I didn't mean, *I don't remember*. I meant, what, only then,

Ax? Now you have hurt my feelings.' The living skull turned to him, grinning in blithe affection. If truth be known, he'd rather have had the guy's natural face today but—

'*Shit!* Watch the road—!'

Unfortunate that they should have hit a patch of traffic at that moment. Horns blared. A woman with a horse and cart was left yelling furiously . . . Well, strictly speaking, horse and cart rigs should keep to the left hand lane but—

'Sage, I think I'll drive.'

'No, no, no. *My* van. *I* drive.'

'Fuck. How old are you? Three and a half? Listen, if we were in a sports car I think I might let you kill me, but you could take out twenty innocent bystanders with this thing. I'm going to drive. Stop the van! NO! (he corrected himself, urgently), PULL OVER! Get off the roadway, *then* stop the van. DO IT, Sage—'

But when the great grey space capsule was parked on the hard shoulder (Sage having accomplished this feat without incident), Ax stayed where he was. The cab filled and brimmed with stately, joyful music, they smiled at each other: time was away and somewhere else.

'Nah,' said Sage at last, 'can't be true. You can't have fallen for me only that night. I have never felt more *understood* in my life than I did then, first time on stage with you. You must've been practising.'

'Maybe it was love at first sight.' 'Hahaha. I *don't* think so!'

In the lost past they had not been friends. They'd had one of those personality clash feuds beloved of the music biz media: Aoxomoxoa, of Aoxomoxoa and the Heads, shameless commercial techno-wizard (aka Sage Pender), always picking a fight with Ax Preston, the modest, critically acclaimed guitar-man.

'Okay, not love,' Ax conceded (though from this vantage point, all of it looked like loving). '*Intrigued* at first sight. Or from an early date. Remember when I took you out drinking after you'd been slagging off my band on the tv?

Complacent nostalgia wank-aid for dreary little left wing acne-suckers—
'It all comes back to you.'

'Oh, I remember every word. That was when I first really looked at this—' He reached over and traced the eyesockets and cheekbones of the skull. 'There's a lot of digital masks around. This is something else. It's a serious piece of coding, and an amazing work of art.'

Sage keeping very still, very happy to be touched. The avatar mask, that phenomenally expressive veil of coherent light, grinning between sheepish and self-mocking—

'I didn't believe you bought it off someone you met in a bar, either. Not one of your more convincing yarns. So then I started noticing how much got done, behind the drunken oaf cover. The bit-by-bit slog that goes into those immersions of yours. You and the Heads touring like maniacs, and a stage act you couldn't *survive* if you weren't in constant training. It nagged at me. If he made that mask, and if he's secretly so focused and organised, he's not stuck for inner resources.

Why is the stupid bugger impelled to spend half his life *so fucking hammered* that just walking across the room is a great big adventure?'

'Bored, bored, bored.'

'Not so bored now? Not so smashed so often, anyway.'

'Carn't fit it into my Ministerial diary, Sah. I never have the time to get decently trolleyed, too busy being a workaholic bureaucrat. It's a disgrace.'

They collapsed into giggles. The situation they were in was so *ridiculous*.

'You ever going to tell me why you used to pick on me like that?' said Ax. 'Mr billionaire-as-fuck megastar? It was a mystery to me why you bothered.'

'Oh . . . Yeah, okay. I'll tell you. We were a pair, equal and opposite. Ax Preston gets the critical acclaim and the cred, Sage gets the filthy money, and everyone's convinced that's just the way it ought to be. I was jealous. Envious. Resented it.'

Ax was amazed (he'd been imagining some slightly more grown-up grievance, all this time). 'Is that what it was? *Really?*'

'Really.'

'Well,' said Ax, after a moment, 'now I know your stuff better, I don't blame you. But it wasn't my fault. You should've *behaved* more like Leonardo da Vinci.'

'Ax, I'll never beat you at this game.'

'What game?'

'Forgiving, understanding. Maybe the game is being good.'

'Oh, I'm not good,' said Ax. 'I think *you* are good.' They listened to the music for a while.

'We don't need the van,' said Sage at last.

'Nah.'

'Don't know why I brought it out.' He tapped the phone implant on his wrist.

'George . . . Hi, George, when you get to this, I've left the van by the road—'

George Merrick was the second-in-command of Sage's band. Pause, while Sage looks out of the cab, peers around and finds nothing in the shattered vistas of Reading's urban freeway system to fix in his mind. 'Well, it's somewhere. Not far. Take it back to the Meadow, will you? Thanks.'

The van belonged in the Travellers' Meadow on Rivermead Festival Site, where thousands of staybehinds had been living like Bangladeshi slumdweller since Dissolution Summer, three and a half years ago. It wasn't as bad as it sounded. In ways, the campers, in their lo-impact, alt.tech hippy squalor, were better off than the bricks and mortar people, now that the Crash had really begun to bite. They got down and stood checking each other over: tall Sage with a living skull for a head, skeleton-masked hands to match. Ax Preston, Dictator of England, in his old leather coat, milky-brown skin and smooth dark hair of non-specific non-white origins; looking a little lost without a guitar attached.

Maybe the absence of guitar's the cause of the uncertainty crisis he's suffering, worried frown in his pretty brown eyes—

'Are you still up for this, Sage? No second thoughts?'

The skull grinned. 'Not much option now, is there? Eh, Teflon-head?' 'Oh. Oh yeah, right.' 'Hahaha.'

They began to walk.

'You know, Ax, I can always tell when you are completely out of your tree.'

'Oh really, how is that?'

'You become convinced you're sober, an' you start ordering me around.'

'Do I? I'm sorry—'

'Nah, it's okay. I like it.'

Ax had driven down from London very early and left his car by Caversham Bridge, to avoid getting hassled by Staybehind Gate Police, over private transport hypocrisy. As they walked into the town centre—empty plate glass gleaming (where plate glass had survived); burned-out shells of fast-food outlets and car salesrooms—they discussed going to look for it. But they reached the station first so they settled for the train, and the quiet intensity of sitting side by side among strangers: touching hands, brushing shoulders, traversing the crowds at Clapham Junction with that magic thrill in the blood; barely speaking, occasionally sharing a smile of delight.

'For once we can just enjoy this,' Ax said.

'Yeah. But it was there all the time.'

'I know.'

By mid-afternoon they were in Brighton. Neither of them knew the town, but the gazetteer on Ax's warehouse implant (though out of date) helped them to fool around. It was so rare, such a treat to be idle together, the strains of their own music not infrequently washing over them, as they prowled the fashion shoplets: two stunningly recognisable faces (one face, one mask) so studiously unrecognised it was like a cloak of invisibility. The Dictator and his friends never had to worry about invasion of privacy: Stone Age Fame, Fiorinda called it. So this was Ax's England. In Reading the violence was more obvious. Here, in a town which had always been Countercultural heartland, change looked more permanent. The music and video effects that acted as urban décor were cutting edge, but the Shopping Mall Generics had vanished. Private cars had gone, or turned up ingeniously recycled. Asphalt, brick and concrete had been torn up to let the weeds and wilderness in. There were marks of privation, obviously. The 'see a queue, join a queue' mentality prevailed. But the crowds were peaceful, there were buskers but no beggars; and not a weapon in sight. Considering the

events of recent years, that last was a major triumph.

At sunset the only street lighting was by ATP patches: cell metabolism energy, bio-activated by the fingertips of passers-by who had taken the treatment, Sage among them. They ate (Ax ate. Sage, typically, ignored some food), and went down to the beach. Evening crowds flowed on the promenade behind them, but they were alone on the shingle.

It was cold, the air was still, the sea murmured in a tawny dusk.

Sage folded himself, cross-legged, in one of his giant pixie poses. Ax sat wrapped in his leather coat, trusty old friend, examining an antique ring on his right hand. It was a birthday present from Fiorinda, he wasn't used to wearing it.

The carnelian bevel had an inscription in Arabic: *this too will pass*. She gives me Solomon's ring . . . and is that a threat or a promise, my Fiorinda? I think it's a promise. Everything will pass, but not your love for me, my love for you.

It was the twenty-first of February, he was just twenty-nine years old. He'd been Ceremonial Head of State for six months; the official leader of the mighty CCM, the English Countercultural Movement for a little longer.

Ax was not now, nor had he ever been, a Green Nazi, a hippie, or even an Eco Warrior. He'd once been a pretty-good guitarist, with the delusion that he could do something to save his country from the dark. He'd become the leader of the CCM through nightmare circumstances —after the Dissolution of the United Kingdom, and the collapse of the first, bloody and terrible Green Revolution regime. When the suits offered him the Head of State job he'd accepted: but he'd refused to be called President. He preferred a title that reflected the real situation. 'Times and times,' he said, turning the ring. 'I prayed to God we'd make it this far, and I didn't see how we could. Now I know that everything since Dissolution was the easy part. Now we have to keep it all going. Fuck.'

'No need to think about it tonight. Take the evening off.'

'What did we do with the shopping?'

'Can't remember. Something. Does it matter?'

'Not at all.' He didn't eat, thought Ax. He never eats enough. Not a gram more than he must, to keep that fabulous body in shape. But I am not going to nag. He took Sage's left hand, missing the fourth and fifth fingers, and measured it against his own. The right was worse off, having lost index and second finger and half a thumb. Skeletal ghosts that masked the gaps. . . Meningitis and septicaemia had done the damage. He thought of a ten month old baby, can't even talk, sick unto death. They put him to sleep, he wakes up and *what's happened to his hands?* The little boy who refuses to eat, because he can't stand the clumsiness of his maimed paws. Ah, God. Unbearable pity.

'How d' you decide how long to make the missing fingers?'

'These are my real hands.'

'What?'

'The masks are copies of my bones the way they would have grown. It's not hard to work out. Now ask me why I don't wear fake normal hands.'

'You can't fake anything. Remind me not to try and turn you into a diplomat.'

'Hahaha. I can lie. I do it all the time.'

'You can talk bullshit; there's a subtle difference. I wish I'd known you before.'

'You did. You didn't like me much.'

'I *mean* long ago. My life has had its ups and downs, but tonight it strikes me forcibly that you have been horribly unhappy, for *years at a time*. I never put it together before. I wish I'd been there, to stop things from hurting you.' 'I deserved most of it,' said Sage. 'Not the meningitis, obviously, but the rest. If

you'd known me when I was a teenage junkie you would not have liked me, Ax. But I know what you mean. Me, I have a desperate need to time travel and punch out the playground racists —that you've never told me about, but I know the fucking South-West of this fucking country.'

Ax was from Taunton, Sage was Cornish. 'I'd have liked you,' said Ax, 'if I'd known you. We should have been together; total waste of time that we weren't.' 'Never leave me, Ax.'

'I won't.'

They laughed, dropped the handclasp and looked away from each other, smiling. 'The racism didn't bother me,' said Ax. 'Much. I was okay with it by the time I was ten. I resign myself to work around stuff like that. *You* write horrors like the *Arbeit Macht Frei* immersions, as you told me once, because you want *to see the world as hideous, miserable and terrible as it really is, and still find it loveable—*'

'Did I say that? I must have been pissed.'

'Pissed enough to trust me, briefly, on that anomalous night out. Then you were straight back to giving me unmitigated shit, any chance you got. But you'd changed, next time our paths really crossed, in Dissolution Summer. Still winding me up the whole time, and habitually plastered, but not finding the world such a difficult place to love. If you don't mind me saying so.'

'Yeah, well, that was Fiorinda. I'd met Fiorinda, year before all of this shit started. In March, in Amsterdam. She turned everything around.' When the three of them joined Paul Javert's Countercultural Think Tank (not

even Ax having any idea what the doomed Home Secretary was planning), Fiorinda had been sixteen. Sage'd been playing the big brother, waiting for her to grow up, and it'd been Ax who'd made the crucial move. It had only gradually dawned on him, through the terrifying cascade of disaster that followed, that he'd cut Sage out . . . That Aoxomoxoa the sex-machine, the laddish fool you'd think couldn't deceive a fly, was secretly, passionately, permanently in love. The problem was on the agenda, the unspoken agenda of the drug they'd taken, and both of them knew it: but the words wouldn't come. They faced each other in silence, the skull's frontal bones glimmering with a faint silver light. The look moved into a kiss, hard to say who initiated that, and then, irresistibly, into plenty more than a single kiss. Ax wanted it all, then he wanted out, and caught an alarming glimpse of what it might be like if he *ever really* had to fight this supple giant. They flung apart from each other, breathing hard—

'*Don't ever do that to me*', snarled Ax.

'Do what?' demanded Sage, on his back with an arm flung across his face.

'Who? Did what to whom? You absolutely sure that wasn't your idea?'

Ax chucked pebbles at the sea. 'Okay,' he said, 'sorry. Two sides to it.'

He heaved a sigh, moved over and shifted his friend's arm. The mask looked up, doing a heartrending line in *alone, conflicted and confused*. 'Hey, stop that. Not the whipped puppy dog. Knock it off, you're scaring me.'

'How do I know what's the right face to make? Me, oversized blundering oaf.' Ax lay down, settling his head on Sage's shoulder. 'If you are so lost in the complex world of grown-up human emotions, maestro, who made the mask?'

'Doesn't mean anything. A lot of that emotional mapping is join the dots, mechanical. Wood ants could build an avatar mask.'

'*Wood ants*. Tuh.'

The sea swooshed in and out. They stayed like that for a while, very happy.

Ax sat up and fetched out his smokes tin.

The Brighton Pier was dark. The cocktail party on the restored West Pier, the

gig they were meant to attend, was in full swing, all that lacy, artfully restored old ironwork lit like the Titanic on ghost-crab legs; like a beached starship.

Tinsel-faint wafts of music escaped from the sound-proofing. 'Now listen,' said Ax, lighting the spliff and handing it, 'we're going to Allie's party, and I put it to you that we walk in there tonight, the two coolest dudes in the *known universe*.' 'I thought you didn't like being famous.'

'Usually I don't. But this isn't celebrity culture, this is undeniable fact. Far as our island nation goes, right now, we fucking *are* the two coolest dudes in the known universe. Just for once, why don't we get some fun out of it?'

'An' no sarcastic rock and roll brat around, to make her deflating little remarks. Yeah, let's go for it. Fuck, what is in this? It's blowing my head off.'

'That's because you've hardly eaten a thing all day. I've been watching you. It's only Bristol skunk, and you couldn't leave the street lighting alone, could you?'

You *cannot* drain your cell metabolism like that, and then not eat—' 'What would you know, *fogey*? I like draining my cell metabolism, it gives the world a nice edge, also like getting my head blown off—'

'Sage, pull yourself together. Coolest dudes. Can you do it? No falling over things?'

'Coolest dudes. I will not to fall over anything. But now I need a shit.'

'Trust you. Well, you can't do it here. You can't shit on a public beach.'

'Why not? This would be a Rivermead GM turd, with unzip bugs. Be gone in an hour. Okay, okay, if it worries you. Ax, how you got to be the leader of the outlaw unwashed I will never know. I'll be dead suburban, I'll go and shit in the water. I hope a terrible wave doesn't come and drown me.'

'Then I'd be sorry—' Ax stopped laughing. He could see this wave. 'Hey, be careful.'

'Calm down, there is no terrible wave. Maybe you better come and hold my hand.'

The party was being thrown by Allie Marlowe, the Dictator's Queenpin administrator; a Brighton native. There was quite a crowd: core members of the Rock and Roll Reich mingling graciously with South Coast Countercultural luminaries, favoured media-folk, non-Few rockstars; other useful people. Ax and Sage caused a satisfying stir. They presented themselves to their hostess (an ill woman to cross, Allie: better make sure and be polite), who congratulated them for turning up. They then forgot about being the coolest dudes and stood at the bar, forgetting to drink and ignoring everyone, talking about Fiorinda.

In Dissolution Summer she'd been the Indie babystar with a past: recruited off the streets by DARK, infamous Teesside dike-rockers: outed by the music press as the daughter of Rufus O'Niall, veteran Irish megastar. Ax had known the ugly story about Fiorinda and her father, and admired the kid's courage: but he'd never been inspired to check out the music, until she was his girlfriend.

'I knew what DARK were like, and I knew *you'd* taken her under your wing, which I'm afraid did not give me confidence. I had to get hold of *No Reason* and listen to it when she wasn't around, to find out whether she was total crap—'

'?Hahaha. Then you got a surprise.'

'?Yeah.' Ax shook his head fondly. '?Blew me away. Fantastic. But you knew.' *No Reason*, the debut album DARK had made with Fiorinda, had transformed the band's fortunes. Without her they'd been a disaster with flashes of genius. With her, they became extraordinary: though still fully as volatile.

'I knew,' agreed Sage, the skull grinning sweet and rueful. '?Oh yes, I knew the first time I saw her on stage. Fourteen years old, screaming like a banshee,

having severe difficulty singing and playing a guitar at the same time—'

Ax grinned. 'Well, it's a situation I try to avoid, myself.'

'But she was *the business*—'

'Dunno why I bothered, looking back. It was about a year before she

condescended to turn up at a Chosen Few gig.' The Chosen Few, now generally known as the Chosen, because *the Few* meant

something else, was Ax's band: comprising two of his brothers, and his ex girlfriend Milly Kettle on drums. They didn't play a big part in the Reich.

Fiorinda stories from long ago, some of them new to Ax even now. Her epic fights with Charm Dudley, DARK's rabid-tempered front woman. Her cut crystal management style with the government suits. Her secrets. (Have you ever caught her writing a song? Nah. Nor me. Always happens when I'm off the premises.) The shock of her intelligence. How much they missed the arrogant, oblivious, cruelly damaged teenager they had known. How much they loved the person she had become. The party chattered on. Across the room, above a frieze of heads, a big screen displayed the Armada concert, finalé of the Boat People tour last summer. They watched Fiorinda and DARK, with Ax Preston as emergency stand-in guitarist: quite a change in demeanour for the Chosen's sober, reserved virtuoso.

'Did you plan to carry on like that?' asked Sage, who'd been elsewhere that night.

'No! I planned to blend in with the wallpaper, so that Charm would not hate me—'

'Nyah. Not worth worrying about. Charm hates everyone, regardless.'

'But with DARK, blending-in means—'

'Go for it 'til you fall down bleeding at the nose and ears.'

'Yeah. So it just happened.' Their girl simply standing there, in the tight-waisted red and gold *Elizabeth* dress, red curls falling around her face. No can-can kicks, no cartwheels. This they didn't like so much, as they knew what a feat of alcohol and raw courage was keeping her upright. But how the cameras loved her—

The scene changed, Fiorinda no more in sight, and they turned away at once.

'You know,' remarked Sage, 'I *really* don't like Charm Dudley, but it must have been a hell of a thing. I kept thinking, back then, *Fiorinda forever*, but I'm fucking glad that firestorm of a superstar brat didn't happen to my band.'

They laughed, and talked of other things, only for the pleasure of coming back to her. Nice little country we've got hold of here, a little battered but still afloat.

What are we going to do with it? Leave governing to the government, our job is the hearts and minds. . . The next big problem, as Ax saw it, was the Ancient British tendency, except they didn't call themselves that now. Called themselves the Celtics, in alignment with a Pan-European movement of the same name.

Anti-science, ultra-Green, covertly racist and dangerously attractive. The Celtics didn't *want* economic recovery for the masses, mediated by futuristic-utopian sustainable tech: as all that sort of thing was against the will of Gaia—

It was a hijack. You didn't hear Ireland, Scotland and Wales calling themselves the 'Celtic nations' any more. They didn't wish to be associated. But needless to say, the sinister romantics had their fans at Westminster, and Ax's own so-called subjects were deeply divided. So how to combat the Neo-Feudalist creep?

Without starting a civil war in the Counterculture? Ax had come up with the idea of an education scheme.

Futuristic-Utopian arts

and crafts. Masterclasses; training in music tech from superstars. Pop-cultural history in hedgeschool kindergartens. Bring in the rest of the Arts. Outreach to

the general public, get some irresistible albums out. Rock and Roll meant something different now, for everyone trapped in Gulag Europe by the data quarantine. Not crowd control (disguised as the hedonistic soundtrack of the revolution), but a connection with the lost world. Psychological landscape, belief in the return of modern civilisation—

'D'you think an education scheme is going to *work*?'

'Truthfully, no,' said Ax. 'I always think my ideas for social engineering are ridiculously stupid and childish. But then I look at *real* government initiatives, supposedly designed by the grown-ups, you know? And fuck, I'm no worse.'

Sage laughed. 'Well, okay, I'm in. You got us this far.'

'I wish you'd *sing* more,' sighed Ax. 'You have such a great voice. There are songs I'd love to hear you do, and so would the punters. But no, you prefer to hide behind those fucking circus stunts that scare me to death, and I'm sure you're going to kill yourself—'

'I am not going to kill myself. Look, if I sing, I have to take care of the voice, they don't take care of themselves, an' *the body* (yeah, laugh, my stock-in-trade) is already a time-consuming hobby. Why don't *you* sing more?'

'Because I can't.'

'Now that is nonsense—' The pauses became longer. Sentences fell into pools of engrossing silence. They left the spot where they'd taken root, went out on deck and stood leaning against the rail, backs to the water, elbows touching, breathing slow, sinking deeper and deeper into the feeling—

'Sage?'

'Ax.'

'Let's go home.'

Fiorinda had had the flu for Christmas, gone back to work too soon and succumbed to an attack of bronchitis. The after-effects were enough to keep her at home on a chilly, damp February night. Well, she wouldn't have known where to put herself at Allie's gig, in the circumstances.

So this is what happens. You are poorly, so your boyfriend abandons you to spend the day with his best mate, and they're going to your best girlfriend's party out of their heads on *hideous mind-destroying drugs*—

She'd meant to go to bed early. At midnight she was sitting up reading, drinking red wine and trying not to worry. When friends take oxytocin, the intimacy drug, things have been known to go horribly wrong. Especially when the friends are the same sex, and heterosexual (or more or less heterosexual, darling Ax . . .) Fiorinda hated modern drugs anyway. Taking massive doses of enhanced human biochemicals for fun sounded to her like —feeding cows on dead cows. You don't need the scientific details, if you have any sense you just *know* it's a terrible idea.

They'll be okay. Sage will be in charge, because it is drugs. Or Ax will be in charge, because Sage loves that. Anyway one of them will be in charge. They always do that, very clever; or maybe it's genetic, a male thing, to avoid—

The entryphone chimed: she had to go down and let them in.

'Sorry,' said Ax, on the doorstep, 'couldn't find my key.'

'You don't have a key, idiot. You look at the ID thing with your eyes. What are you doing back here, futile creatures? You can't have a pair bond with three in it.'

'We're not interested in any other kind,' Sage kissed the tip of her nose.

'DON'T kiss my nose! I HATE it when you do that!'

But he had followed Ax upstairs, laughing.

In the big living-room they were walking around, beaming weirdly. Ax had

taken off his coat and Sage his outer scummy sweater. Fiorinda returned to her book. She'd been asleep when Ax left for Reading (pretending to be asleep, to signal her disapproval). 'Is that what you were wearing at Allie's party? She *will* have been impressed.' There was nothing wrong with Ax's dark red suit except that it was a little shabby, which should be a virtue these days. Sage wore his beloved slick, Imipolex, one-shouldered black dungarees (easy for hosing down), over a dreadful Hard Fun Tour hoodie, itinerary dates illegible with age. It might once have been grey. Or maybe mud-brown.

'Uh, yeah?' 'Are we not modish enough? Maybe that's what was up with her.' 'She didn't *say* anything—'

'I don't remember whether she said anything. But I received tetchy vibes.'

'Oh, surely not,' said Fiorinda. 'She wouldn't have wasted her fire.'

Fiorinda was occupying one couch, along with Ax's cat, who was fast asleep on a cushion. They took the other: Sage stretched out, Ax propped against it on the hearth rug, in front of the old flame-effect gas stove. 'Is this room warm enough?' asked Sage. 'Can we turn that up? You have to keep warm, Fee.'

'I am very cosy. Leave the stove alone, both of you. The state you are in, you'll set the place on fire. Is it turning out the way you expected?'

Sage looks at Ax, Ax looks at Sage. They have a little staring match: breathing in synchrony. She's not going to get an answer. They've forgotten the question, or neither of them is going to be the first to back down and say yes; or no.

'What's it *feel* like,' she asked (her attitude softened by the fact that nothing seemed to have gone horribly wrong), 'doing oxytocin?'

'Depends who you are and who you're taking it with,' said Sage, disengaging from the stare to grin at the ceiling: a skull in a soppy dream. 'If you're me, and taking it with Ax, it feels not unlike being three years old and spending a happy day pottering around, doing nothing much, with your mother.'

'I'd go with that,' said Ax, smiling at his huge infant. 'Only different.'

'I may throw up.' She wondered about Allie's party. '*Could* you behave normally if you wanted to?' 'Oh yeah,' said Ax. 'It's very mild, really.'

'Are we not behaving normally?' asked Sage. They started laughing like fools: then stopped, gazing at each other with such grave happiness—

'I should go to bed and leave you to it.'

She did not throw up; or go to bed. She stayed, pretending to read, unable to tear herself away, and they didn't seem to mind. Ax fetched an acoustic guitar, and made sure it was in tune. He started to play, looking at Sage expectantly. She was so flustered by the situation it wasn't until Sage began to sing that she recognised 'Stonecold', Fiorinda's own paradoxical, teenage-vagrant anthem, her first big hit, her first *big* song. What on earth's going on?

She hid behind her book, wishing she hadn't tied up her hair, depriving herself of her usual retreat.. They played the song through, then they stopped and discussed the chords, the key-changes, the melody: bitching gently about the time last year, when 'Stonecold', along with Fiorinda's solo album, *Friction*, had wiped the floor with the opposition, Ax and Sage included.

Weird how people keep buying music, in the midst of catastrophes.

Fucking babystars, they said, grinning sweetly. Makes yer sick. Thank God she never did that aerobics video. Then the song again, word perfect, note perfect, and 'Stonecold' is a *good* song, not a forced rhyme or an off syllable: her own music that still gave her goosebumps, the shivering feeling of power running through her—

'Is this okay?' said Sage, as if suddenly realising they had an audience. Fiorinda nodded, keeping her

nose in her book.

When they'd finished with 'Stonecold', they did 'Rest Harrow'. Fiorinda gets ecological (and she'd never realised how much of Sage there was in that song, hayseed, plough boy, until she heard him sing it). Then another, less familiar track from *Friction*, and another, each song getting the same loving attention. Ax adding to the guitar part, how could he not, but never taking over, always staying close to what she'd written. The oxy must be good stuff. They didn't steal her wine, or light a spliff, they just went on playing and singing Fiorinda's music. She'd had *no idea* they could do this. She forgot to be embarrassed and simply listened; and watched. So beautiful together, locked into each other, her tiger and her wolf. A longer pause. What next?

It was 'Pain', the original Fiorinda-song, with the stupid monochrome tune and the ridiculous teen-angst words; that she had never released, and never would, though fans yelled for it at gigs and sometimes got it. That she had scribbled in the middle of the night, under a 40-watt bulb in a hostel dormitory, when she was a lost, desperate, bitter little kid: wanting to tell the world what it's like when pain is all there is (as if the world didn't know). That she'd screeched out like a crazy prayer from the stage, all through Dissolution Summer. And put behind her, and been ashamed of—and here it was restored to her, by their art, the way it had felt when she wrote it, but different; but made beautiful.

Live in the pain, deep inside the pain . . . Live for this moment . . .

Tears stung her eyes. She turned a page with shaking fingers: invaded, heartwring, staring at the print and seeing nothing, until the music ended. Ax put his guitar aside. Sage said he thought he'd go to bed. He'd sleep in the music room, as usual when he stayed. They had a spare bedroom, but it was unfurnished (they'd only moved into this place last May) and full of junk.

'You want me to sort you out a duvet and stuff?' said Ax.

'S'okay. I know where to find things.'

Sage prowled halfway to the door, big and graceful but undecided, as if he'd forgotten something but couldn't remember what it was: not an unusual state for the perfect master of short-term memory loss. He came back, dropped on one knee beside the couch and kissed Ax gently on the lips. 'G'night . . .' He started to get up again, then changed his mind. The mask vanished. Sage's natural face appeared, blue eyes wide and dreamy, that big soft beautiful mouth between solemn and smiling—

'Thanks,' said Ax. 'I needed that.'

'Yeah,' said Sage, and kissed him again, a deep kiss, a soul kiss, both of them getting into it, Ax's fingers locked in Sage's close-cropped yellow curls.

Sage stood up.

'G'night Fee,' he said, and left them.

'God,' said Fiorinda, fascinated. 'Why don't you go after him?'

Ax laughed, leaned back on the couch and stretched his arms.

'Because, little cat, in the morning I'll be sober, and so will he.' 'Perhaps more to the point,' suggested Fiorinda. Ax could be a bit of a

chameleon. Aoxomoxoa, despite the wishful dreams of the nation's gay community, was definitely one way only: in normal life. She peeped at her boyfriend over the top of that useful book. 'If we go to bed and fuck now I'm going to feel extremely weird, knowing I'm supposed to be six foot six with a curly blond brush-cut.'

'Hahaha. Lay off. Have respect for a man's drug experience.' Ax sighed, and smiled. 'What happened with Sage's mother? If I ever knew, I've forgotten.'

'She left when he was ten or so. Got sick of the hippies-in-a-cottage drop-out dream, I think. He didn't see her for years. He sees her now, sometimes. He says it's like another incarnation. She's not much interested and neither is he. He says.'

'Oh. Sad . . . Still, it's something to have had a happy childhood. Which I think he did, 'spite of his hands and all that. It grounds him, rock steady. Makes him someone . . . very secure, very safe to be with. Don't you think?'

'Hm. A lot of people wouldn't instantly recognise Aoxomoxoa from that description.'

'Oh.'

'But I do. Yes.'

About noon the next day Ax came into the kitchen of the Brixton flat and found Sage, masked, eating toast and reading the newspapers that Ax (such a fogey!) had delivered to the door. Elsie the cat was on the top of the fridge, disgruntled.

She didn't like Sage. The feeling was mutual: Sage didn't approve of pet animals.

'Hi,' said Ax, looking at the door of the fridge.

'Mm,' said Sage, concentrating on his paper.

'Sleep okay?'

'Yeah . . . She's well again, isn't she?'

'Oh yeah, she's fine. All better.'

Bronchitis doesn't sound like much, but it had dragged on and they'd been anxious. Some fantastic futuristic medicine survived in Crisis England, but simple things like routine antibiotics were gone. But Fiorinda's a lot tougher than she looks, thank God. The fridge made no sudden moves. It was old-fashioned whiteware, though green enough in its habits. Unlike the fridge in Sage's van, a futuristic womb-like thing with a superb energy audit. Ax picked off a magnet and placed it carefully in line with the chrome door handle.

'Want to take back anything you said yesterday?'

'?Nothing I said, and nothing I did.'

He risked a glance around. The living skull was giving him a look he'd never seen before, kind of a tender, outgoing mix of *enigmatic smile*. Sweet trick.

'We have to talk,' said Ax.

'Yeah. But not this morning. Got to get to work. Later.'

And off he went. Fiorinda returned to her desk in the Office at the Insanitude, the Rock and Roll Reich's London headquarters, on a freezing cold day at the end of the month.

The San's righteous building management were refusing to turn the heating up, and advising everyone to wear more clothes: Fiorinda wore two cardigans, the top one fluffy and orange, which clashed splendidly with her hair, over a calf length fifties antique in indigo moire satin: and was pleased with the look, like the dawn of a stormy day. She had an office of her own in Whitehall, as the Ceremonial Head of State's first lady, but she never went near it from choice. She preferred the buzz of this gaudy, shabby room: with the makeshift clutter, the view over the Victoria Monument, Allie's staff wandering to and fro, irritating shifts of taste on the sound system. Felt safer, too.

So the queen was in her counting house, checking on various situations in her special areas of responsibility—the Volunteer Initiative, and the care of the Drop Out Hordes: the clueless thousands who had vanished from all record and taken to the roads, in the economic collapse. Counterculturals looked after themselves, and accepted their alleged rockstar government as a useful fiction. The barmy army, Ax's military, had their own organisation. The lost souls had nobody, and must be kept fed, sheltered and peacefully occupied. It was a challenge.

Fuck, more agricultural labour camps in prospect: an ominous trend but hard

to resist, the country must eat. Gone were the days when Fiorinda had to beg big employers to find pseudo-Keynsian make-work for her drop-outs. She cursed under her breath as she ran into the Ivan/Lara bulkheads. The Internet Commissioners, US-based firemen, had cut Europe off from the rest of the world,

to stop the spread of a deadly virus. Maybe that was justified, and maybe they had to serve their time and prove they were clean. But did it have to mean Fiorinda couldn't send an email to Westminster from the former Buckingham Palace? But on the whole, she was pleased to see, she had not been missed. On either side of the Balcony doors stood pasteboard blow-ups of two of the pictures for a new series of postal stamps. Ax on stage with DARK and Fiorinda, at the Armada concert, Sage spinning Fiorinda above his head, in the Battle of the Sexes Masque at Ax's Inauguration last September. She stared at the images in absent wonder, caught by the strangeness of this predicament, this fate.

The oxytocin serenade was still running through her head.

Abruptly, she hit the keys that took her, anonymously, to the Magic Scrapbook, where Reich staff posted *occult phenomena* stories: and scanned the new material for something she hoped and believed she would never find. No cause for concern. She got out fast, before anyone passing happened to glance at her screen: peeled off her throat mic, tipped her earbead into a paperclip tray and closed her machine down.

Anne-Marie Wing, the Few's token hippy earth-mother, said the psychic powers of the New Age were being blocked by an unknown force. If that was true, it was nothing to do with Fiorinda. Not as far as she knew. She retrieved her saltbox – the polished birchwood apple that her gran had given her, long ago: never out of her sight, never far from her hand. Dropped the talisman into her bag, and went to join the others.

The Few, Dictator Ax's inner circle, survivors of the Countercultural Think Tank sat around the circle of battered schoolroom tables where they traditionally held conclave. The atmosphere was informal. Wine was being drunk, spliff passed, sodium chloride-free snackfood from the works canteen disparaged. Roxane Smith, ex-man and veteran music critic, wrapped in his customary Dantesque velvet robes, was resting his eyes with his feet up. Kevin Verlaine, Rox's young boyfriend, and Chip Desmond, Ver's partner in an esoteric techno duo called The Adjuvants, were trying to get the Great Dictator to divulge his pulling moves. Rumour had it Ax Preston had been a *smoooooth* operator, before he settled down and became a Politicised Rock God. Felice Hall, Cherry Dawkins and Dora Devine —aka the Powerbabes, horn section divas of the Snake Eyes Big Band – offered helpful jeers.

'Sorry,' sez Ax, grinning, 'it's been a long time. I can't remember.'

'Go after Sage, kiddie' advised Felice, senior Babe. '*He's* the sex machine.'

'According to *who*—?' Her fellow Powerbabes snickered.

'Nah, Sage is useless.' Verlaine removed a dashing Jimi Hendrix hat, and twisted up his silky brown ringlets, in approximation of Sage's cropped head.

'This is Sage, flirting. ?Hey, Babe. I'm Aoxomoxoa, wanna fuck??'

'If it ever stops working,' sez the king of the one night stand, unmoved. 'I'll let you know.' Rob Nelson, Snake Eyes front man and boyfriend to the Babes, raised the topic of a scurrilous sketch in the venerable Staybehinds vid-zine, *Weal*. Rob had been a music-biz activist, long before the shit hit the fan. He didn't like being called a member of a fascist junta. Not even in jest.

'Rob, dear boy,' said Rox, opening half an eye, 'if you must read your reviews, try to see the good in them. *Weal* is very flattering about the Few's actual music.'

'You think I care if they *insult* us? It's not that: we're successful, they have a right. I just don't want to be taken out and shot in the next blood-fest, because some crypto-Celtic hippy freelance gave us a reputation we don't deserve.'

'I would *hate* that,' agreed Sage.

'You have to admit,' said Fiorinda, taking her usual place between Ax and Sage. 'If our beloved leader insists on calling himself *Dictator*—'

'What can I say?' Ax shrugged. 'It seemed like a good idea at the time. Relax, Rob. We're getting into Education: they'll see that and leave us alone out of pity.'

'Hey,' announced Chip, style-victim in retro-punk-chic, his hair a tiny rug of green and blue spikes on the top of his head. 'Fiorinda's back! Cool!'

The rock and roll brat was invited to take a bow, which she wouldn't. Her saltbox was passed around, to enliven the pondweed crackers.

'Fiorinda,' said Chip, gallantly, 'you're our survival tool.'

'Thank you so much. Give me my box back.'

'I worry about the A-list,' said Dilip Krishnachandran, the slender, doe-eyed Mixmaster General: pushing fifty and still beautiful. 'The great and the good, the shiny people, leaders of fashion. We were never in the rockstar chapter of that

club, except Aoxomoxoa, sorry Sage. Now they want to join our gang and we should not refuse them, because *our enemies won't*, and to the A-listers it's all the same, Celtic ritual, whatever's cool. But most unfortunately what we offer is not glamorous, and socially speaking they detect a lack of enthusiasm—'

They'd spent the transition, which had begun for them in blood-daubed terror, slogging their guts out beside the army and the police: struggling to keep the peace. It was bizarre to come down from that long, strange trip and find fashionable society eager to fête them —

'The Few only want to be with the Few, that's what people say, and they are right. But how can we help it?'

'We could try to make it less fucking obvious,' muttered Allie Marlowe, who was sitting beside Dilip, ostentatiously catching up on some paperwork on her palmtop. The tetchy vibes were not in doubt.

'Genuinely sorry about that, Allie,' said Ax.

'Don't worry, Ax,' said Allie darkly. 'I know *whose fault it was*.'

'Remind me,' sighed Roxane, opening half an eye again, 'what outrageous crime has Sage committed this time? The casualties? The damage to property?'

Chip rolled his eyes. 'You were there, Rox. You *saw* him. He failed to mingle!'

'Unforgiveable,' sighed Dilip, taking the spliff Chip passed to him.

'Dunno why you're blaming Sage,' remarked Fiorinda. 'The oxy was Ax's idea.' 'This is true,' confessed Ax. 'I led him astray.'

'Nah. I claim equal responsibility,' declared Sage. 'And I too am truly sorry. Turning up drugged to a cocktail party, my, my. What was I thinking of—?'

'You can all fuck off,' growled Allie. 'That party was *important*.'

Yeah, yeah. We know.

Fiorinda heard relief in her friends' laughter: and knew the real topic of concern. *Sigh*. Who needs the paps with this lot breathing down your neck? And when did I acquire a family? I *hate* families. Relax, sisters and brothers, Ax'n' Sage's adventure with the love drug had Fiorinda's seal of approval.

But maybe the Few had a right, considering how bad things had been, how bad things could easily become. The Triumvirate, England's sacred icons, *must be united*. What a position to be in, and it can't be helped, and where will it end?

The oxytocin serenade—

Shortly, Sage's brother Heads turned up, along with a couple of illustrious non

Few musicians. The mediafolk arrived, the press conference began. Rock and Roll Reich education: the new idea. Chip and Verlaine played merrily with the concept of Rock Cultural History. For we have our rabid rulers and our huddled masses. Our scientists and our artists, our dynasties and our battlefields: our bourgeoisie, our suffragettes. Peter Grant for Bismark, Jimmy Page for zee Kaiser! The Beatles were our Mozart, Jimi Hendrix our Beethoven*

Everyone knows Dylan is Shakespeare, but here in England we could have, Thom Yorke for Thomas Hardy, Polly Harvey for Virginia Woolf!

Madonna is the Margaret Thatcher of Rock!

Then Ax came in with the statesman message. If someone doesn't teach the children of the drop-out hordes *something*, there's an appalling problem in ten, fifteen years' time. We can reach them, same means as the Crisis Management Gigs: teach 'em basic life skills, give them a worldview, through the music. The history of this music, the human rights protests and the Utopian movements that have always been entangled with it. And before you tell me, yes, of course we're handing this down from on high, not waiting for the lost souls to invent their own culture. It's the way things work.

'Will the Counterculture buy it, Ax?' asked a Radio Three journalist, seriously. 'Aren't they going to say Rock isn't British music? It isn't natural, it isn't folk, it's from the heart of the evil empire?'

'For the record, I don't see the US as an 'evil empire'. I hate that line. But no nation has a monopoly, and no mode either. There are folk roots in Rock. The music goes around and around, like all art: high culture into pop culture and back again.'

'We're *English*,' said Felice. 'Our ancestors are everywhere.'

This insight from Karl Lutchmayer, visiting professor at Trinity Music College, via Gabriel Jones 'The Utopian thinking too,' added Roxane Smith. 'You know, Anil, the original arts colony at Woodstock, where tradition says the 'Woodstock' concert was held (of course, that's not quite the case) was founded by followers of John Ruskin, in imitation of the English Arts and Crafts movement.'

'A movement which was itself *entangled* with nineteenth century Utopians of India and Pakistan—' agreed the radio man, helpfully.

The Few had made more friends in radio than in the other broadcast media: not only because of the music, but because radio tends to survive in a meltdown.

'But won't people be saying, 'how can rockstars, with their culture of excess, *teach the children well*''? And wasn't all that sixties idealism naïve and corrupt?'

'For sure,' agreed Sage, solemnly. 'Being naïve and corrupt is a vibrant part of our cultural heritage, which we fully acknowledge.'

'You guys were *always* into ancient history, weren't you?' put in Dian Buckley, tv presenter superstar: making eyes at Aoxomoxoa. 'Snake Eyes and their 'post Motown' sound. Sage and his Grateful Dead fixation—'

'A grounding in the classics develops the mind,' said George Merrick.

'You *learn* things,' explained Peter Stannen, 'that you didn't know before.'

'Paul Javert had his own reasons,' announced Chip, invoking the dead to signal that he'd stopped fooling around, 'when he picked rock musicians for his Think Tank. But it works. Rock is the art form of our times. It's folk *and* futuristic.

It's using cutting-edge technology, without harm to the environment, to express universal human emotions. It's about becoming *more ourselves*—' The term Celtic wasn't mentioned.

No need to spell it out. These were tame

mediafolk, they knew what was going on. The discussion continued, lively and argumentative, while London grew dark outside; and the session ended in

music, as Ax's addresses to the nation generally did.

The Triumvirate lingered until they were alone in the room.

'Did you talk to Jordan?' asked Fiorinda. Ax's band didn't often come to London, and communication could be difficult. 'Has the baby got a name yet?' Milly Kettle, the Chosen's drummer and Ax's ex-girlfriend, had been Jordan Preston's girlfriend since a short while before Ax and Fiorinda met. Her baby had been born in November, but remained nameless.

'Yeah, I got through eventually. No name. My Dad is still fucking with their heads, and I have once more vetoed Slash. I hope my voice will be heard.'

'But Ax, you should be pleased, a mighty canonised saint of our religion of excess. What could be better?'

Ax looked a little hunted. 'Don't start. The media have left the building.'

'I'm not going to start. I think the education scheme is a wonderful idea. Kids will ponder on the chord structure of *All Along The Watchtower* the way children of yesteryear studied Ox Bow Lakes, and who is to say which knowledge is more useless? Not me . . . Why is Marlon called Marlon, Sage?'

Marlon was Sage's twelve-year-old son. He lived in Wales with his mother:

Sage didn't often see him. Mary Williams had been Sage's girlfriend when he

was a teenage junkie with a taste for domestic violence. She was sparing with visiting rights. 'No idea, I was not consulted. Could be a Welsh god. Or it might

be something to do with the kindness of strangers, I never asked.'

Smalltalk failed. Fiorinda studied the mackerel patterns on her storm-cloud skirts, chills going up her spine. She looked up and they were staring at her, with solemn intensity. Sage had taken off the mask.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing,' said Ax hurriedly. 'Nothing at all. We were wondering if you'd like to get down to Cornwall for a few days, for a break.'

Cornwall meant Tyller Pystri, Sage's cottage on the North Cornish coast.

'We can take the time off,' said Sage. 'And you need some fresh air.'

'Okay,' said Fiorinda slowly. 'Good idea. Count me in.'

The Heads had been in Cornwall doing some filming (for a secret project); and had stayed at the cottage. Everything was clean and tidy, but there was a faint spoor of alien presence: in the stone-flagged kitchen, in the dusky living room where Sage's big bed stood, in the freezing bathroom with the ancient pebble patterned linoleum; in the bedroom that Fiorinda and Ax used. Fiorinda walked around, discovering things out of place and setting them back where they should be. On the upstairs landing, with the windowseat overlooking the garden and the bookcase full of childrens' classics, icy rain spattered the windowpanes, dousing the last of the light. The little river Chy roared in its miniature gorge. Stupid, like a cat sniffing strangers. Tyller Pystri isn't home. You've only been here twice. She leaned her forehead against the dark glass, almost frightened. What am I doing here?

In the kitchen Ax was frying eggs, while Sage put together a plate of chicken salad for himself, from the cold food Mrs Maynor, his housekeeper, had left ready. They stopped talking when she came in. 'Hi Fee,' said Sage, with false bonhomie. 'Lemme give you some wine. What d'you want to eat?' He poured the wine, precariously, with his awkward right hand; she knew better than to take the job away from him.

'I'm not hungry.'

She lifted a small piece of chicken from his plate, and nibbled it.

'Hey. Do you have to do that?'

'She does it to me too,' said Ax. 'I'm not hungry, then nibble, nibble. Drives me nuts. Say the word, I'll make you a fried egg sandwich, Fio. All of your own.'

'Okay, fuck it,' said Fiorinda. 'I said I'm not hungry. Keep your sandwich.'

They looked at each other, two men and a girl, an abyss suddenly opening.

Are we far too old? Is she far too young? Do we even *like* each other?

Fiorinda went to tend the living-room fire. Sage and Ax followed her, and ate their food, making stilted conversation, while she stared at the flames and drank her wine: wondering what the fuck had gone wrong.

'Shall I put on some music?' 'I'll do it,' cried Ax, rushing to the dead media wall, which was stacked with a

collection handed down by Sage's parents. 'You don't know what you're doing with this catalogue, it's before your time and you'll scratch the vinyl.'

'Thanks for reminding me how old you both are. Practically thirty, how weird that must feel. Jimi Hendrix was long dead before he got to your age.'

'I didn't mean—'

'Wasn't he? Not that I'd know, being a girl, a juvenile and totally ignorant.'

Ax spent ten minutes dithering over the antiques, and was impelled by a death wish to put on Ry Cooder, which he knew Fiorinda hated. Sage fetched a jigsaw from the games cupboard. They sat on the floor, sorting straight edges for what seemed like hours, in a painful attempt to recapture the mood. Last year, when Tyller Pystri had been their haven, when this firelit room had been a bittersweet paradise . . . Fiorinda fetched her book and another glass of wine, and settled on the edge of the fender: ignoring them, which she hoped would improve their tempers.

'Do you have to sit right there, little cat?'

'Yeah, brat, do you mind? Could we see some fire?'

'Ah, let her alone,' said Ax, 'she can't help it. She's an obligate fire-hogger.'

'She's finished the wine too.'

'She always does that. Let's make her get another bottle.'

They laughed, exchanging very weird looks of guilty complicity. Fiorinda stood up. 'Okay. *Enough*. I don't know know what the fuck's got into

you two. I don't know why you're being so horrible, but I'm going to bed.'

The men jumped to their feet in panic and rushed to block her way.

'Oh no, Fiorinda! Don't leave us! Stay just a moment!'

'Fee, please, please don't go—'

They led her, unresisting, to the battered sofa. She must sit down, while they knelt, on either side of her, holding her hands.

'Fiorinda,' said Ax, 'please don't be pissed off. We're clumsy but we mean well. W-we want to ask you something.' His voice was shaking.

'Yeah,' said Sage: and what's this? Sage, her best mate, her dearest friend, doubly unmasked, looking at her the way he's *never* looked at her. She stared back at him, and then at Ax. Ax smiled, and kissed her cheek: and then they were both kissing her —chaste, delicate, thrilling kisses, showering on her eyelids and her brows, her ears, her fingers, the blue veins in her wrists. Her sleeve pushed back so Ax could kiss the inner skin of her elbow. Sage's soft mouth tracing the neckline of her dress, brushing the hollow at the base of her throat—

She said nothing, and didn't respond; she remained passive, pliant, staring at them wide-eyed.

'Fiorinda,' said Ax, drawing back. 'We want to ask you if all three of us can be lovers. We wouldn't ask except we think you want it too.'

'In spite of us being so old,' added Sage (that one obviously still smarting).

Silence from Fiorinda. 'Well, um, what do you say?' asked her boyfriend at last, looking very worried. Sage's blue eyes telling her, everything's going to be all right.

She kept them waiting for so long they'd have been terrified – except that she was still holding their hands, and the charge of their kisses was glowing in her cheeks, in her eyes.

'Dearest Ax,' said Fiorinda. She leant and kissed him on the angle of his jaw.

'Darling Sage.' She kissed him too, at the corner of his mouth.

She removed her hands from their grasp and folded her arms.

'Alphabetical order. Well, this is very formal. So this was your big plan, was it? You decide you want some group sex, so you cunningly kidnap me and lock me up, miles from anywhere: sneer at me, ignore me and be totally horrible to me. And then when you think you've done a fine job of softening me up—'

'Sheer nerves,' said Ax hurriedly.

'Frightened stupid,' explained Sage. 'It just came out that way.'

'Tell me, does this approach often *succeed*? Is this how you romanced all those sheep?'

'I knew we'd get the sheep. I'll be hearing about those sheep to my dying day.'

'*Sheep*? Huh? What sheep?'

'All those sheep we met in Yorkshire, Sage. Surely you remember.'

'Oh.' Sage's turn to look worried. 'Er . . . well, in that case. Maybe this is the moment when I ask for, um, a few other sheep to be taken into consideration.' 'I don't think you'd better tell me how many,' said Fiorinda. '*Not that I care*. My

God. If either of you really thought this would work, then I am sorry for you.'

She took Sage by the shoulders, tugged him close and kissed him on the mouth, long and strong, tongue in it, first time ever. Then the same to Ax.

'That's reverse alphabetical order. And I'm still going to bed.'

Left alone, they sat on the sofa with their ears ringing, silent for a decent interval to allow tumescence to subside.

'So much for that,' said Sage. 'Shall we go after her?'

'I don't think we should, not tonight. But I don't think it went too badly—'

'No. Not considering what a fucking mess we made of the intro.'

Sage got up and started to prowl around: so wired, so electric Ax expected sparks to rise from anything he touched. Finally he went and softly closed the door to the stairs, which Fiorinda had left open.

'Why d'you do that?'

'Because I'm going to kiss you. I want to find out how it feels without the drug, and I don't want Fiorinda by any chance walking in on us. Could be misunderstood.'

'Kiss, not fuck.'

'Absolutely.'

Ax sat waiting for the threat to be made good, thinking he wished to God the three of them had fallen into this arrangement through an act of casual lust, years ago, and had the difficult emotional dynamics sorted by now. But things happen as they must. Sage came and sat down again beside him.

'Ax—'

They kissed, for a long time: finally tore themselves away from each other.

Sage leaned back, staring at the ceiling, making up his mind. 'Oooh. I think I could live with that.'

'Good. I suppose we might as well go to bed.'

'You going to stay down here with me?'

'If you don't mind. It seems like the right thing.'

They made the room ready for night: the rituals of Tyller Pystri, where ancient electric lamps must be switched off one by one, black vinyl put away in cardboard sleeves, the fire made up. They stripped, got into Sage's nice big bed, and lay listening to Fiorinda stomping about overhead. It sounded as if she was moving furniture.

'Maybe one of us should stay awake.'

'What for? You think she'll come down and take an axe to us?'

They nearly choked themselves smothering hysterical giggles, which would not sound good at all upstairs.

'You can stay awake,' said Sage. 'Since you're going to anyway.'

The room was cold, despite the fire. The rain had stopped. There was a black frost out there beyond the thick walls, the deep-set mullioned windows where the night looked in, the icy dark stretching out forever. About an hour later the stairs creaked. Ax felt a surge of movement rousing from

beside him, like something much bigger than Sage. *My God*, he thought, *what have I unleashed?* The door opened. Fiorinda came into the room, her fiery hair tumbled on the shoulders of a brown and gold shawl, a candle in a china holder in her hand. She sat on the edge of the bed and stared at them, pale as the candleflame. The shawl fell back. She was wearing a nightdress, a long slip of cream satin with narrow shoulder straps.

'Our friends are convinced you two are having a secret affair. Are you?'

'No!'

'We were waiting for you,' said Ax.

She nodded. 'Well, okay . . . Okay, I knew this was coming. Of course I did. I've known for a long time. Fact is, from the night you did the oxytocin, I knew it had gone too far. No more pissing around, I just had to have you both.' She saw them startle. Ha! Nice to give them a different view of the situation. But she wished she could stop shivering, all gooseflesh; she felt such a kid. 'Only . . . I don't know how it works. I w-want to, but I don't know how? Who do I turn to? W-which of you two am I with? Which of you—?'

Ax got out from under the covers and put himself behind her, a wall at her back, hugging her close.

Sage took her hands. 'Don't worry about it. Anything you do is right.' 'If *anything* feels wrong,' said Ax, kissing her hair, 'at *any point*, you say the word, and you and me go back upstairs.'

'Everything will be like before,' said Sage. 'No damage. We promise.'

'And *don't*, fuck's sake, worry about the secret affair. It won't happen, ever.

Will it, Sage?'

'Of course not.'

Fiorinda shrugged. 'Fine. W-why all the fuss, anyway? It's just sex. It's not a big deal.'

'Yes it is,' said Sage.

'Yes it is,' said Ax.

She sat for a moment, her heart beating hard against Ax's arm. Then she freed herself, picked up the skirts of the satin slip, tugged it over her head and tossed it. Instantly Sage pushed back the quilt, so they were naked together. All three of them sighed then, involuntarily: a sigh of profound relief, we're over the edge, we've done it. Fiorinda leaned back against Ax, how warm he feels, and held Sage's maimed hand to her breast, ah, what a rush. 'This'll never work,' she said, her whole body sweetly burning. 'We'll fall out, and it will be awful.'

'It's worth a try,' said Sage, trying to sound level-headed.

'It'll work,' said Ax. 'As long as we're careful, at the start, and make an effort.'
She moved her head gently from side to side, so her hair caressed Ax's throat,
the way he loved. 'Uh-uh. Nothing's supposed to be an effort in the Good State.
Or it won't last.' 'But we're allowed to concentrate on one another,' said Sage. 'I remember that.'
They were quoting from Ax's manifesto, the one he'd pitched at his friends
three years ago: a plan worth living for, on the other side of the end of the world.
In the Good State we will only take time off from having fun, from making art,
from *being ourselves*, to concentrate on each other, like the social animals—
She's flying, into Sage's arms, Ax falling after her—
Well.

That was very good. What a rush, how overwhelming, how frightening, tell
the truth, to lie naked between them, these two big fierce male animals. But from
the moment they both had their arms around her, kissing her, nuzzling,
whispering, *sweetheart, is this really okay? Are you okay Fee?* it had been nothing
but good and wonderful. Oh, there are problems, I know there are problems. But
we truly love each other, and the sex is brilliant. Surely we can sort out the rest.
Someone was walking around: Sage. She opened her eyes to the icy grey
morning and saw him dressed in biker leathers, sitting down to pull on his boots.
There wasn't anyone in the bed with her.

'Where's Ax?'

'Gone for a walk. He'll be back soon.' Second boot on. Snap the closures.

'Where are you going?'

He came and sat on the bed. 'Back to Reading.'

'Why? What's wrong?' 'Because I can't do this threesome thing. I'm sorry, baby. I can't.'

She sat up, pulling the covers around her, suddenly very young, suddenly a
shamed and frightened child. 'W-was I no good?'

'Oh God. Fee, it will be all right. I'm still your Sage. I *love* you. I will be your
best friend, forever and ever. But I can't do this.' He didn't touch her. She didn't
dare reach out to him. 'So I'm going. The keys are on the kitchen table. Leave
them at Ruthie Maynor's. You can push them through the letterbox.'

Ax had walked towards the sea, on the unfenced track that crossed the cliff-top
grassland above Sage's house, and then taken a turn along a field line, beside a
hedge. Before the Crash he'd had a data chip implanted in his brain, holding a
huge stack of information about this country: he'd thought it would come in
useful. He could review Sage's estate in several scales of detail, twelve acres of
dry granite pasture, a portion of the Chy. Not much cover except for the gorge,
which would be a trap. . . A standing stone. A patch of crooked dwarf oak trees.
Odd set-up for megastar seclusion, but there you go, that's Sage. He was now
outside the domain, on National Trust land from here to the South-West Path;
the cliff's edge, the Atlantic.

God, it was cold. He took shelter under the thorn hedge, the wind fingering
his spine. He was thinking of the strained conversation he and Sage had had, the
day after they took the oxytocin, in the Fire Room at the Insanitude – an old retreat of theirs in the North
Wing; an island of Few territory now, in the wastes
of Boat People accommodation.

What they were asking of Fiorinda wasn't easy.

When she was twelve, this amazing girl had been pregnant in horrible
circumstances. When she was thirteen years and three months old, she saw her
baby die. She was only eighteen now, still a damaged child. How could they risk
hurting her? Risk adding to that damage in any way? They'd agreed that they
were sure enough of their love to ask the question. If she said yes then they'd

take it carefully, be ready to back off at any moment. They'd agreed that the three of them must be lovers together, equals, not two rockstars sharing the girl. Fuck that! On the oxytocin showing, Ax and Sage should have no problem getting physical. To some extent, see how it goes.

Are you *really* okay for that? Ax had asked.

Oh yeah, he says, the mask almost as blank as Hallowe'en. I took the drug with you, didn't I? And then he stalks off without once touching me. Weird. So far so good on that aspect. *Sage!* What a storm of soft ferocity. Like being assaulted by a giant albino tiger cub. A giant tiger cub that loves you very much, but still—

Sage's size and strength must never become an issue, have to watch that.

His brave girl, leaping into Sage's arms as if into deep water.

But why was it with Sage, that conversation? He saw himself walking with her: a beach, a street, doesn't matter, holding her hand, shall we do it? We love him so much, we must make Sage our lover. They would have been very happy and very sad, saying goodbye to what they'd had: *why didn't I do that?*

He hadn't had the courage to face what he might see in her eyes—

The sky was ironbound. The branches of the thorn were covered in half-furled fists of green, ice crystals hanging from them, sometimes a bud encased in a complete crystal sphere. Every time he took his hands out of his pockets to wipe his eyes and mop his nose, the wind burned them. He had to stop crying so he could go back to Tyller Pystri before they started to worry, but the tears kept coming. She'd never leave me, but she loved him first, only she was a kid and she didn't realise . . . I've known it for I don't know how long, and *this is the solution*. She loves me. But she won't be my little cat anymore. She'll be Sage's baby now. He knew he had found the only way to save himself from unimaginable pain, but he just *couldn't stand it*.

He heard the bike and thought nothing of it, not attuned to the rarity of such a sound out in the Cornwall countryside, three years after the end of the world. At last Ax realised he'd have to go back anyway. He let himself in, went to the bathroom and splashed his face. It was the wind. It made my eyes water, fucking cold out there . . .

Very quiet in here. Fiorinda was sitting on the bed, wearing her orange cardie over the red and blue chiffon dress and skinny faded denims, same as she'd been wearing last night. Her hair was a mess. She looked half-asleep, almost dazed.

'Where's Sage?'

'He's gone. Back to Reading.'

'What? Did something happen? Did Allie call?'

'No. He's just gone.'

'But how?' said Ax, fixing on the practical impossibility. 'The car's still here.'

'He took his bike.'

'Oh, God.' He looked at the windows, as if he might catch a glimpse of Sage's Triumph careering away down narrow, ill-kept lanes. 'I hate that fucking bike. There's black ice everywhere—'

He came and sat beside her. 'Fiorinda. What went wrong?'

She shook her head.

'Okay,' said Ax, with reserve, 'if there's stuff you don't want to tell me, I understand.'

'*No!*' wailed Fiorinda. 'He said, ?I'm going back to Reading because I can't do the threesome thing?, and then he left, and now you know as much as I do.'

'Shit. . . Do you think that was really the first time he ever got sexual with

another guy?'

'Yes. But.'

There wasn't a single thing she could say that would be true to both of them. He put his arms round her and they clung to each other, heartbroken. 'Sssh, ssh. Don't cry. It'll be nothing. I'll talk to him.'

'You can try,' said Fiorinda. 'It won't do any good.'

They drove to Reading. Sage wasn't there. He'd been and gone.

'Sage?'

'Hi Ax.'

'Sage, can we talk?'

'We're talking.'

'Fuck. Sage, *please*. This is horrible.'

'It's not horrible. I tried your idea, I can't do it, that's all. Everything's fine, everything goes back to normal. Now leave me alone, I'm working.'

Silence. The big, impressively messy studio at the top of the converted warehouse, the Heads' London stronghold, filling up with this pitiful silence—

'Okay,' said Ax's voice at last, 'I'll call you later. Sage, I love you.'

Gone.

'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' said Sage. 'I love you too.'

He genuinely had been working. He pulled off the eyewrap and spun his chair away from the boards so he could stare out of the window that overlooked Battersea Reach. I was *all right*, Ax, I was good. I was living with my situation. I was even *happy*. Until you came along with your damned very generous offer, Sah, and now every thought of her is poisoned.

I don't think you'd better tell me how many . . . Her grey eyes flashing on him that glance of hurt reproach. Totally outrageous, totally unjust reproach, what was I supposed to do, brat? But oh how sweet. But he must not think of her, because he could still taste the scent of her skin, he could feel her teeth and tongue, the small, warm weight of her little breasts. Thinking of her, of the *details* of Fiorinda, which had been his consolation, would bring on the maddening, humiliating, adolescent problem of an erection he could not will down.

Damn you, Ax.

Testosterone's a good drug if you have something hard and positive to do with it. If not, well, a no-brainer, blocked power surge, foul irritability. He could dose himself out of this state, easily, but he would not. Masking the symptoms is a fool's game. It'll pass.

He thought of putting his fist through the window.

But he'd only feel like an idiot, and then have to get it fixed.

What a crappy, adult way to think. Shame on you, Aoxomoxoa. Probably couldn't break the glass, anyway. It was supposed to be bulletproof.

2: Unmasked

This was the year that the fuel crisis hit rock bottom. European fossil reserves were in dire straits: foreign supplies, already beyond the country's means, had been put utterly out of reach by the complications of data quarantine, and Renewables were not bridging the gap. Travel was a nightmare, powercuts lasted weeks. The proverbial Major Credit Cards had vanished along with foreign oil; ATMs, back online at last after Ivan/Lara, doled out new currency notes in huge denominations, with ever less spending power. Malaria, TB and other long-vanquished diseases, plus the frightening new bugs, defied public health measures. The British Resistance Movement pursued a nagging

terrorist campaign in the rural hinterland; and there was a serious campaign to make witchcraft once more a criminal offence.

Yet Ax Preston's Dictatorship still counted as a miraculous success.

Violence and civil unrest burned throughout Continental Europe: the English, who had suffered the first, worst revolutionary violence, lived at peace with their Rock and Roll Reich. The party atmosphere, the glamour and the optimism maintained by Ax and his partners, and the Few, prevailed over hardship. The Counterculture happy, extremism defanged, the masses (the vast majority of whom were living like puritan Greens because they had no option) shared the buoyant mood. It was just as well the public didn't know their sacred icons were in trouble.

The Few themselves knew only that a trip to Cornwall had been cut short, and that suddenly there was something badly wrong. The three were professional about it, no open rift, but everyone was scared. If the Triumvirate collapsed, how long could anything in this fragile house of cards survive?

The anniversary of Dissolution came and went, with bio-degradable bunting in the streets, cheering crowds and all the trimmings; Fiorinda's nineteenth birthday slipped by. The Triumvirate attended their monthly meeting Benny Preminder, Parliamentary Secretary for CounterCultural Liaison. Arguably, this post was obsolete now that the official Leader of the Counterculture was Head of State: but Benny was the type that hangs on. He'd been implicated up to his neck in Paul Javert's bloody coup—but unlike his boss he'd survived the faked 'terrorist attack' that changed the world. Benny had managed to be somewhere else when the gunmen opened fire at a government reception in Hyde Park, one December evening. The so-called investigation hadn't touched him, either: and here he still was.

Ax said it was just too bad. Until he knew exactly what made the slimeball so bulletproof, he wasn't going to mess with him. Plus, whatever his motives, Benny the Liaison was a prime source of insider information. Given that Ax was determined to keep the Westminster Government at arm's length, they needed all the dirt they could get on that nest of vipers—

So here they sat in Benny's nicely-appointed, over-warm office, discussing public surveillance. Most of the old England's staggering CCTV network had been wrecked in the Deconstruction Tour—the countrywide rampage of Green Violence that Ax had managed (to an extent); though none of it had been his idea. . . Control of what remained was an asset, however: and Benny knew some people who'd like to take it on. If Benny could broker a deal? Such spyware as the Tour had spared was run by the police, in righteous partnership with ranking barmy army officers: militarised hippy heroes of the Islamic Campaign. Ax said Benny should be talking to the Home Office.

'I wouldn't try it, if I were you,' drawled Sage, the skull doing between scary great oaf and bored stupid. 'Wenever argue with the barmy army, tha's not how it works. They get on okay with the police, seems like. Better leave it.' Benny dimpled. He was very sleek, these days. Not a trace of the style-free Government puppy, so annoying and clueless in the Think Tank days.

'Come on, you guys. This is Benny you're talking to. The barmy army is your obedient servant, you can do what you like with those mad dogs. You and I both know that you could take over the bureaucracy any time.'

'I don't want to,' said Ax. 'I like legitimate government.' Luckily I hate birthdays, thought Fiorinda, bare feet tucked up in one of

Benny's armchairs, staring out of the window. She rarely spoke in these

sessions, and got away with it because Benny was convinced her function was purely decorative. She could not stand the bastard: he choked her breath, she saw him through a mist of other people's blood. The sky over Whitehall was sullen and low, weighed down by the fumes of wood and coal fires. Benny's eyes slid over her: recalling hideous meetings when Benny Prem had been right-hand slime to Pigsty Liver, Paul Javert's monster protégé, the first Green President. And now it's Ax. Is this an *improvement*? Blitz spirit in the streets, on Dissolution Day. Celebrating what? God, what a waste of time. Civilisation is over. Why can't we just let go?

Benny had accepted his rebuff calmly, evidently he was paid to ask the questions: not on results. Now he was marvelling over the latest Drop-Out figures, the prediction that the plague of nomadism was likely to affect thirty per cent of the population of Western Europe. That's bigger than the Black Death! I mean, wow, fucking weird!

He gazed at the three with his wistful, uneasy smile.

'But who's counting?' said Sage, studying the ceiling.

'Not weird at all,' said Fiorinda, still looking out of the window. 'It's the climax vegetation of global capitalism. The peat bog of economic growth.

People think of forests as climax vegetation, because the trees look big and successful. But the final result of all the explosive boom and bust has to be a flatline. Stands to thermodynamics, really.'

'Thermodynamics? Peat bogs? I'm afraid I don't follow.'

'It doesn't matter. Just nonsense'

Benny attempts at being matey fell very flat with Sage and Fiorinda, and he always seemed genuinely bewildered. You'd swear he *didn't remember* that he'd helped to organise that killing spree in which several of their friends had perished. And Benny was right, it really didn't matter anymore. New world, new rules . . . At last the allotted twenty minutes were up. Fiorinda, who had been watching the clock when she wasn't staring out of the window, put her boots on. Benny made his usual attempt to prolong the chat, gave up in the face of more than usual resistance: buzzed his secretary and stood to usher them out.

'I'll see you all at Beltane, then.'

They stared at him.

'Beltane?' repeated Benny, carefully, as if wondering if he'd pronounced it right. 'At Reading? You famous rockstars will be on stage, but I'll be there!'

'Oh,' said Ax, 'you mean the Mayday Concert. Sorry, Benny. I don't do the Ancient British calendar. It's not my style.'

'Shit, Ax,' said Fiorinda, out in the corridor (and oblivious of bugs, because she didn't care). 'How could you turn him down? I bet there was a timeshare in a villa in Tuscany in that CCTV thing.'

'I read the small print.' '*Beltane*,' said Sage. 'I don't like the sound of that.' Trust Benny to have caught the Celtic bug.

'That's exactly why it's good to have him around. Benny tells us more than he ever realises about what's going on around here. I'll explain to him about avoiding neo-primitive buzzwords. He'll understand. He's committed to our solution, in his weird way—'

Fiorinda sighed in exasperation. 'Benny Prem is committed to the main chance. Someday soon he won't be subtly letting us know about the latest plot against the Reich, he'll be telling the coup-merchants how to get rid of *us*.'

'Well,' said Sage, 'I got code to write. Talk to you later.'

Lengthening that deliberate stride he zoomed away, leaving them standing.

This was Sage's idea of 'back to normal'. He did what had to be done, he turned up for all his gigs: and never came near them otherwise.

Someone peeked out of an office door, and quickly closed it again. There was a hiss of whispering, suddenly cut off. His neighbours measured the time the Triumvirate spent in Benny's office by the second: they were madly envious. The dim-lit Whitehall corridor was a wild wood, alive with feral eyes and stealthy movement. Ax and Fiorinda looked at each other, personal heartbreak and appalling responsibility merging.

Without Sage, the burden of what they had become was impossible. In reality, the Education Scheme was nothing new or startling. The Few had been giving masterclasses, and the Volunteer Initiative had been running hedgeschool kindergartens since before the Inauguration. But it was colourful, it was inclusive, and at least it gave the media something else to talk about, besides shocking 'Celtic' animal sacrifice at Stonehenge, and the spirituality of head-to-toe tattooing.

Rob and Ax attended a musicology seminar at Goldsmiths and returned, by the vagaries of Crisis Conditions public transport, to the Snake Eyes urban commune on Lambeth Road—hotbed of music radicalism since Dissolution Summer. It was a noisy place, usually, but the basement was quiet that evening. They settled with beers and spliff and reminiscence, and spent awhile chewing over the absurdities of Rock and Roll academia.

'Snake Eyes means losers,' grumbled Rob. 'We were the beautiful losers, that was our thing. Righteous, non-star, never-going-to-sell-out Black music. And now look. You've made us into the establishment, Ax.'

'Sorry,' said Mr Preston, gloomily. 'It just happened.'

Inspired by beer and nostalgia, feeling close to the days when it was Ax and Rob who'd been best mates, Rob felt inspired to take a hand. Ax bottles things up, that's his problem. When he found out about Milly and Jordan he never confided in anyone, never lost his temper. He just carried on, because the band must come first. But the Chosen Few were never the same after that.

'You know, Ax, Sage is a great guy, and I love him—' 'Oh yeah?'

'But he's *white*. There's nothing wrong with being white, but there's a cultural difference, a different attitude to life, and, er, relationships. You can't handle him the way you would a brother—'

'Milly's white,' said Ax, narrow-eyed. *Sage is a great guy and I love him* was not Rob's normal conversational style. 'So is Verlaine, so's Rox. Fiorinda *looks* white, as long as you keep her out of the sun. Where's this going?'

'Huh? No offence—'

'I'm sure you'd prefer it if I didn't do guys at all. That would be more politically correct, wouldn't it? For a *brother*.'

Rob was staggered. He'd *never* worried about Ax's occasional prelection.

Why the hell would he, given his own home life? He was about to protest he'd rather be called a fascist than homophobic, when he realised what he'd just been told. Oh, fuck—

'Hey, I'm sorry. Uh, I didn't know it was like that. Shit, the Babes *told* me, but I didn't believe it, I mean, uh, not that we've been *talking behind your*—'

Ax was thinking of the nights he'd slept in this basement in Dissolution Summer his first nights with Fiorinda, and now he couldn't even treasure the memories. Rob, chunky and dark and earnest in his sharp green suit, sat there all gob-smacked concern, and Ax, who hated violence, had difficulty refraining from punching the bastard out—

'Rob, fuck's sake, take foot out of mouth.' 'Sorry.'

'I never thought I'd have to say this to you.'

Rob braced himself. He was in deep shit. 'Yeah?'

'Mind your own business.'

Olwen Devi, the Rock and Roll Reich's chief scientist, was ready to white-label her latest invention. Ax went down to Reading to talk about it, on an April day when he knew that Sage would be on the Rivermead site. If he could catch his friend alone, off guard (and, let it be said, without Fiorinda), he knew he'd be able to turn this hateful situation around.

The Zen Self tent, eau-de-Nil geodesic dome that seemed curiously larger on the inside than on the outside, had its usual crowd of staybehinds and day trippers, trying out the neuroscience rides. Zen Selfers in Welsh red and green moved among them, offering help and advice. He passed through and found Olwen Devi in one of the inner labs: immaculate lab coat over a festive sari of gleaming emerald silk, a scarlet tilka mark on her smooth, ageless brow, and flowers in her hair. She looked as if she'd been called from a wedding to attend some kind of medical emergency: she was probably getting ready for a workshop. Olwen was a performer, in her way. She knew the value of looking the part, and Ax liked that. No use having the big idea if you're not prepared to go out and sell it. She had been running her experiments in human consciousness in Reading arena since Dissolution summer, and lately providing Ax Preston with alt.tech spin-offs from the Zen Self quest, in return for his protection from the anti science mob. He did not fully understand why she had decided to work for him, or why she had left Wales, where her parent company was still based. But she had believed in his vision of the future, when his career was at a very low ebb, and he counted her among his most trusted allies.

They discussed the ATP situation. Cell-metabolism energy sourcing was a success. The punters, Countercultural and otherwise, were lining up to find out if they had the right genes for the treatment. (For a percentage of the population the gene-manipulation didn't work in its present form.) But they must not move too fast. The aim was to get these new and strange developments *out into the world*, but do it quietly. Take no risks. They agreed they would pull back. No more new treatment centres, no more high-profile projects like the Brighton street lighting: not right now.

Moving on to Olwen's new baby, the bi-location phone, which thankfully involved no transgenic tissue infusions. Ax – who had never taken the ATP treatment and never would – had his demo, and enjoyed the bizarre experience of being in two places at once: slightly like looking into a mirror, and also being the person looking out . . . In the long term, he was dreaming of industrial-scale applications for this one. Your muscle power and part of your conscious attention can be in one place, doing some kind of necessary work, while you are somewhere else, having fun. (His imagination balked at the idea of more than one doppelgänger, though Olwen said there was theoretically no limit.) But that was far in the future. In the meantime they had a medical application, and an intriguing novelty mobile phone.

Olwen had a handful of severely disabled people (whose health otherwise checked out A1, a rare breed) signed up for the trials. Other white labels would go to influential hippies, mainstream opinion-formers with the right sympathies, and trusted media folk. She advised against the term 'living ghost'. No 'clones' either. Definitely not!

'Okay, so what are we calling it? Bi-location presence is a mouthful.'

She showed him her right hand, and the ring with a large milky-golden stone that she wore on the middle finger. It looked like a jewel; in fact it was the Zen Self mainframe computer. 'Serendip can make copies of herself – apparently physically separate copies – that remain entangled with her so there is still just one Serendip. We call that a facet. Something logically similar is happening in the bi-location phenomenon. It's a possibility that's long been implied in the theory of memory transcription, where we know that in effect a different virtual self is created for every moment—'

'Right,' said Ax, cutting it short before she lost him completely. 'Facets it is. Nice and neutral.' He looked around the green-tinged, light-filled cell, vaguely recognising brain science equipment. What goes on in the Zen Self experiments? Sage and the Heads were deeply involved, along with Chip and Verlaine and Dilip: Olwen's rockstar labrats. Ax had never been interested. Know your limits. Seeking for some kind of technologically mediated Nirvana was not for him. But Sage was a fool for all that. He wanted to use the bi-location trick for cheap space travel. Send your little receiver off to the moons of Jupiter, and bi-locate to it, why not? A facet doesn't need life support—

He'd been silent too long. He thought he could read, in Olwen's kindly eyes, that she knew all about the bust-up. The Zen Self guru and her A student had had a brief fling at one time, and they'd stayed very close. Olwen probably knew more than Ax did, about what had gone wrong at Tyller Pystri . . .

He'd been planning to linger, in the hope that Sage would turn up. Instead, he left quickly. In the outer tent he spotted Kevin Verlaine, parting company from a couple of Selfers, and on an impulse followed him into the arena.

'Hi.'

'Oh, hi Ax.'

'What're you up to?'

'Buying illicit drugs,' said Verlaine proudly. 'Well, not exactly *buying*—' Neurologically active experimental compounds sometimes exited the Zen Self tent without Olwen Devi's cognizance, and Olwen wouldn't strictly approve. Verlaine left the sentence hanging and discreetly showed Ax his loot: half a dozen translucent golden capsules in a twist of green paper.

'What's that?'

'Snapshot. It's something we use in the experiments. It aligns your firing patterns so that the scanner can take a snapshot of the global state of your brain. But when it does that, for an instant your mind gets freed from the middle dimensions, you flash on the sum of all possible states—'

'Right, I see,' said Ax, grinning. 'So what's in it?'

'—and you get these amazing visions. What's in it? Well, acetylcholine, I know *that*.' The labrat looked a little crestfallen. 'Er, a lot of things. Cadherins. I don't really know.' He brightened. 'You want some? It doesn't take any time, not normal time. You're *Whoosh! Pssht!* You're there, then you're back.'

Ax was not a hardened NDogs (endogenous psychotropics) abuser. He preferred classic drugs: but he hesitated only briefly. Talking to Olwen had left him feeling embittered, sidelined and reckless, and anyway acetylcholine sounded okay. Sage used that stuff all the time.

'Go on then.'

It was mid-afternoon. The towered stages were bare, the marquees empty or playing host to staybehind concerns. They had stopped under one of the camp council's THIS IS A SPACESHIP banners, behind the main sound stage. LITTER LOUTS WILL BE KILLED. Ax saw the young man's face, its frame of light brown ringlets, wisp of

brown moustache, the kid's last-moment uneasiness. He was suddenly sharply aware that he didn't have a guitar case over his shoulder. See Ax Preston, see guitar, Fiorinda used to say. He'd given up the habit, afraid it was getting to be an affectation, but he missed that weight—
'Are you feeling calm? You're supposed to be calm.'

'Hit me.'

Two young hands, bitten nails and puzzle rings, snapping the capsule under his nose . . . and he was waking from sleep, with Fiorinda beside him. But what's this? Fiorinda is sixtyish, the dark red curls all silvered. Feeling very peaceful and blissfully happy, he propped himself on one elbow to look at her. She's still too thin, his little cat still not wasting her time on stupid body-fuel, but God, how *beautiful* she has become. He realised that the change was in himself, not in his girl. For Sage, Fiorinda had always been beautiful (they'd never talked about this, but Ax knew). For Ax, dearly, dearly as he loved her, she had stayed the skinny white girl, not his physical type, that he'd first taken to his bed. Occasionally he'd catch a glimpse of what other people were seeing: but now he could see it clear. Her soul, her courage, her steadfast heart, all the perfection of his darling, in the curve of her mouth, the level brows, the strong bones. *Well*, he thought, with great joy, *I will get there*. I will have it all. But how pale she is. She's white as paper, and what's this sticky wetness seeping from her place in the bed? Has she pissed herself? Can't be. Fiorinda never sleeps that deeply, no matter how smashed she gets. He moved, and felt a strange reluctance in his joints (but that makes sense because if Fiorinda is sixtyish Ax is over seventy). Not really frightened yet, but . . . Hey, Fiorinda? Oh God, she's not breathing. OH GOD. OH GOD. NO!

—and he was staggering on the green grass, under the THIS IS A SPACESHIP banner, his body thundering, a steel claw clutching his chest, the arena exactly as before, the whole vision having taken less time than it takes to say *cardiac arrhythmia*—

'Ax! Oh, shit. Ax, are you okay?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'Fine.' The world was dark and shaking, he could hardly focus on the kid's scared face. 'I know what I meant to ask you. D'you know where Sage is?'

'Yeah,' said Verlaine, eyes big as saucers. 'Sage. I better get Sage, I'll get him. He's teaching. You stay—'

'No thanks. I'll find him myself.'

Aoxomoxoa, in sharp black and white as if for a stage performance, the skull at high contrast, was holding his class in a quiet spot by the Blue Lagoon marquee, a slve of wireless hardware spread around him. He had the kids looking at animation on their cellulose-based-plastic slates, while he talked to them about how their brains worked.

What a privilege to minister to the awakening of these young minds. 'You see, whatever you 'see?', whatever you 'hear?', whatever you 'touch?', et

cetera, what your brain experiences is a pattern of fire. See that? How it washes over the whole brain, like, mm, a cloud of sparks? When I write my immersions I copy those patterns, and make your brains believe they've had the experience. I do it visually, and I'll explain why that works best in a moment. I write the code, and I deliver it on a carrier wave of visible light. I don't even have to fake the patterns very *well*, because brains love being fooled, yeah, what?'

'Did you always want to be a rockstar?'

'No. I wanted to be a dancer, or a gymnast. But I'm too tall, and I have weird

hands, so I had to give up the idea.'

So much for delusions of grandeur. This was not an Aoxomoxoa masterclass. He gave those as well and they were hard work, but this here was just a celebrity warm-up. No one expected him to teach the kids anything. He only had to turn up, looking like Aoxomoxoa, move the mouth, do some tricks: make the children (and the hedgeschool teachers) feel included in the new idea. And he was doing it. He wasn't going to let Ax down, just because they'd broken up. He'd carry on with everything that was asked of him, though it was cinders and ashes.

Ah, well. Back to the Sanskrit.

'Okay, now all the visual information that registers in your eyes, mostly at this little spot called the fovea, goes to the back of yer head and then ends up here, in the middle temporal cortex, which is right in the middle, conveniently, of where the rest of your senses are handled. When I send the fake information on my carrier wave, the MT starts thinking it's having an experience. It goes through its cache, looking for a real experience it might be having. This alerts the hippocampus (little thing allegedly shaped like a seahorse, down in here), and triggers the whole brain to get involved, *whoosh*, with emotions, sensations, the whole thing. *That's* when the punters at my gigs get convinced that what's happening is totally real, because insofar as a brain knows reality, it *is* real. Sharks biting them, clouds of butterflies, flocks of seagulls, ravening werevoles, whatever. It isn't incredibly hard, if you use the right hooks—'

The children gazed at him like sponges. 'Oh,' said a girl in the front row, about ten years' old, a toddler dozing on her knees, 'MT. That says Em Tee! Is that why the other track on *Morpho*, besides 'Morpho', is called 'The Empty Zone'?'

Morpho was the Heads' first album, the first immersion record in the world. They'd lost the rights when they broke up with their record company, which had for years been a very sore point. But eventually you see reason. *Morpho* had been written and released before this child was born.

'Yeah,' he said, 'you got it—' suddenly feeling that this was indeed a privilege, and also feeling like a, a talking trilobite. I am *ancient*. They know nothing before: I am the first page of their history books. Or would be, except most of them can't read. . . Over the kids' heads he saw Ax coming towards him. No way to escape so he waited in silence: while Mr Dictator came ambling around the children.

'Scuse me,' said Ax, 'I need your teacher. Sage, do you mind?' Not ambling, stumbling. As was grey in the face, hands visibly shaking.

'Okay, class dismissed.'

The children scattered, Ax sat down. 'Sage. Do you think you'll live to be old?'

'Oh yeah,' said Sage, judging that *live fast die young* was not what Ax was looking for. 'Very old.' He spoke slowly, gently taking Ax's wrist in his left hand. 'I reckon I'll quit giggling when I'm a hundred, before it gets undignified, an' I'll take up gardening. Or I'll keep koi. I like fish. Ax, what the fuck have you been doing to yourself?'

The pulse was not good.

'I met Verlaine. He gave me a, stuff called snapshot. Oh God, *Sage*—'

'Sssh. Let's see.' Sage touched his righthand fingertips to the sweat on Ax's upper lip and put the taste in his mouth. He had enough of the drug in his system that he might get some idea of what had happened—

'Oh,' he said, sombrely, a moment later. 'Unlucky, Ax. You have to be careful with Snap. It goes for the jugular, if you give it a chance. Well, it seems I can tell you two things. What you saw is further off than you think. And I will be there.'

Ax's heart gave another terrible leap. He was in a garden, and this old man was crying in this other old man's arms. *Oh God*, those arms, still hard and taut, carrying with them such a freight of memory, of decades, of conviction, of *reality*, oh God, *unbearable*—

Wrong thing to say. . . Sage saw Ax's eyes burst wide in horror and had to catch the falling body. 'Ah, *no*. Ax, babe, I didn't mean to sound like that, I'm a bastard, you caught me off guard. Hey, *it doesn't last*, it's a bad dream, it'll be gone, few seconds, hang on—'

But Ax was out. Sage laid him down, slapping his phone implant—
'George! *George*, get over here. *Now*. Bring the First Aid . . . *Shit*. Where is that little fucker? I will *kill* him.'

Ax came to lying in an outdoor passageway backstage of the Blue Lagoon. George Merrick was beside him, the white picnic hamper that was the Heads' First Aid kit open on the grass. Bill Trevor was sitting in a plastic chair, between the two of them and the world, casually on guard. There was no one else around. He took a deep breath and sat up. Had he walked here or been carried here? Some fleeting memory of a dream, gone the instant he tried to focus on it, and *what happened?* I took some brain candy from Verlaine, that nearly gave me a heart attack.

'Hi, George,' he said. 'What's the screen say?'

George took a pull on a fat joint, and handed it. 'Sez you'll do.' He peeled a telltale from the back of Ax's hand, stowed it and shut the box. 'Looks like snapshot's not your drug.'

'I would agree,' said Ax, with feeling. 'Ah, shit, my head. Got any painkillers?'

'You're not supposed to take that stuff except in lab conditions. You c'n have a half an aspirin. Pain is a warning, Ax. It's there 'cos you need it. You driving?' Head Ideology occasionally bears a suspicious resemblance to Primitive Methodism at its most hardnosed. If you're meant to suffer *you suffer*, fuck it. But George and Ax had had that conversation. Never argue with a Cornishman about his religion.

'No, I'm not driving. Think I'll pass on the aspirin. Where's Sage?'

George and Bill exchanged a glance. George decided Ax didn't need to know what was probably happening to Kevin Verlaine right at this moment.

'I think 'e went back to his class.'

'Right,' said Ax, who had clocked the glance. He leaned over to give the joint to Bill: and decided he would make no more pathetic attempts at reconciliation. Enough is enough. In future he would play this exactly the way Sage wanted it. Life goes on. Fiorinda recorded her vocals for the Heads' new album (still under tight wraps) at the Battersea studio, and though she didn't pretend she was having fun you'd never have known it from her singing. Sage and Ax went to Yorkshire with the Chosen for a one-off gig at Bradford Civic Centre, where they debuted the immersions (diluted to visuals for the concert hall) that Sage had written for 'Blues In C#'; and for the Ax and Jordan Preston classic 'Dark They Were And Golden Eyed'. Sayyid Mohammad Zayid, premier leader of English Islam was there—the man who'd received Ax into the Faith, the conversion that had ended the Islamic Separatist War. The Dictator and his Minister also met with the Islamic leaders, reinforcing the peace; as if nothing was wrong. Sage also went on working with Ax on a secret and delicate investigation of the strength of the quarantin

But the rift showed no sign of healing. At the Reading Mayday concert the crowds went crazy for the Heads' dance mix of 'Little Wing', featuring Ax

Preston on guitar. Silver and Pearl Wing, Anne-Marie's nine-year-old and seven year-old little girls, whirled around on stage, dressed as butterflies, each convinced that Ax Preston had written this song, and Aoxomoxoa had mixed it, just for them. Celtic bonfires were discouraged. Techno-Green Utopia was talked-up. At the end of Sage's masque (Sage's masques were Reading tradition) the Dictator and his Minister did Hendrix's 'Third Stone From The Sun', with the spaceship dialogue and some truly amazing immersion effects . . . and then walked off stage in opposite directions, without having exchanged a word that wasn't scripted.

Fiorinda was having nothing to do with either of them. If rumour could be trusted, she spent the night in a hospitality benders, with Cafren Free of DARK and/or three or four husky and thrilled male crewpersons.

It could only be a matter of time before things went horribly public.

The last Saturday of May was invite-only Dance Night at the Blue Lagoon. Snake Eyes were playing, the Few were to be there in force. It would be a private gala, and everyone was hoping it would be more fun than Mayday. In the afternoon Ax called Fiorinda to say he couldn't make it. She decided to go by herself, took the train and flagged a taxi at Reading station, dressed in her best and feeling defiant.

'I had that boyfriend of yours in the back of my cab the other day—'

Oh yeah, thought Fiorinda. Which one? The one who dumped me, or the one who's too busy saving the world? The people of Reading were privileged: they didn't have to pretend the Few were invisible. Equally, the Few didn't have to be polite. The driver met a stony, glacial stare in his rear mirror and shut up until they hit Richfield Avenue.

'Blue Gate, Fiorinda?'

'No,' she said. 'No. Drop me here.'

The taste-free Leisure Centre buildings were being demolished, to make way for something . . . not yet fully worked out. The tented township stretched into the distance, drainage ditches twinkling, nylon hummocks and teepees, turf-roofed shanties and lake-village platforms; the firetowers with their banners standing out like marker bouys on a rainbow sea. She took off her shoes and walked barefoot through the site gates, where chickens scratched, every conceivable support was festooned with tomato vines.

What a *hideous mess* we made here, in Dissolution Summer. Dear Lord, we reached new depths. My God, the mud, my God, the cans, the trashed cars, the plastic fires, the streaming middens of human excrement. What a way to start an eco-friendly revolution. Yet there was logic in it. The kids came to the rock festivals, trusting little lambs, and had their own souls sold back to them, bubble

packed; and I remember what a feeling it was to break out of that damned trap.

No sense, *no reason*, no ideology. Just NO, actually. No, I won't shuffle obediently into the slaughterhouse, not today, thank you. There's this plate-glass window saying *throw a chair at me*. It was mad and stupid, filthy and infantile, nothing built on it can possibly last, and I'm still glad I was there.

In the arena she stopped to put her shoes on and stood for a moment gazing: the Counterculture's rockstar Titania in a froth of cream tulle over gilded net petticoats, peacock feather mandalas scattered over her bodice and skirts. Her subjects parted around her, smiling and respectful. She didn't notice. She was trying to see this place as it had been one evening in July, years ago. A sunset, red and gold. A road-worn, angry little girl, too scared to use her backstage pass, lost in the crowd, looking for a friend.

The sky over the Thames valley was pale and mild, with rafts of lemony cloud. Another rockstar party had arrived and was moving through the staybehinds. In the midst, like a prince among his courtiers, strolled a very tall blue-eyed blond, magnificently built yet slender, hands in his pockets, moving like a dancer, and wearing an extremely beautiful suit, sand-coloured, with a glitter of gold in it.

The Heads saw Fiorinda and came straight over. They lined up: Sage in the sand-colour, George Merrick big and broad and ruggedly goodlooking in slate blue, Bill aquiline and sardonic in rose velvet, Peter in crumpled dark brown linen: an owlish post-modern gangster. They gave her a twirl and a bow, and

launched into a short burst of the synchronised dancing. The onlookers clapped and cheered. Sage faced her with a smile that was like a plea for mercy. Under the suit jacket he wore a white teeshirt, a little too small, bearing the timeless message: *I'm naturally blond, please speak slowly*—

Fiorinda made a swift, pragmatic decision to accept the peace offer, even if it was only for tonight. It would be a fucking pleasant change to be with him in public, and not have it be a hateful, publicly awful experience.

'You finished it,' she said, smiling back.

She knew about the secret album called *Unmasked*.

'Yeah. Finished the master, about four o'clock this afternoon.'

'Are you pleased?'

He shrugged. 'As I ever am. God knows what the punters will think.'

It was a shame things had to turn out this way. *Unmasked* had been planned as a surprise present for Ax. Something that would make him laugh, but he would also love it. It featured the masters of techno-weird not only unmasked, but singing classic covers, and dancing like an apotheosis of Take That.

'He's pleased,' said George. 'It's fucking good. You wait.'

Sage glanced around. 'Where's Ax?'

'He isn't coming.'

'Huh? Where is he?' 'I don't know. Oh, don't panic—' (Sage had looked alarmed.) 'I don't know where he is, because I didn't show enough interest, but he's with some barny army netheads. He hasn't been kidnapped by terrorists, not yet, he just isn't going to get here, okay?'

'Okay.'

They looked at each other for a long moment, then turned together and headed for the marquee, Bill and George and Peter forming up around them.

Sage suddenly realised it was much easier than usual to look Fiorinda in the eye. 'Hey.' He grinned at her, sidelong. 'Nice!'

'Enjoy it while you can,' said Fiorinda cheerfully. 'Until I break my ankle.'

'There's a way to walk in spike heels, but I can't never get my head around it.'

'Ah, you can lean on me.' He slipped his arm around her shoulders. She hesitated for a split second, then leaned close; and they walked into the Blue Lagoon like that.

This was the third version of Reading arena's major covered venue. It had been destroyed twice in the Reich's history, once by arson and once by storm damage. It had a sprung floor of fireproofed reclaimed timber and a classic rock fest décor of marquee membrane, naked scaffold and coloured lights. Tonight it was laid out cabaret-style: dancing in front of the stage, tables, a bar. 'Cigarette?' girls and boys in fancy dress were sashaying about, proffering trays of spliff and Meanies (the lethal Reading Site dance pills). The floor was hopping with campers, dancing to their resident DJs, the rockstars and friends were busy socialising. Fiorinda, Sage

and the Heads were instantly surrounded. Fiorinda had to repeat countless times that Ax was tied up and wasn't going to make it. A stream of people wanted to congratulate Sage and the band on their new baby. Everyone was fascinated by the suits, the naked faces, the whole concept. 'Is this the way it's going to be?' Dian Buckley, the media-babe, wanted to know. 'Have the demons of techno morphed into an elderly Boyband?' The Heads declined to commit themselves. 'We're takin' it a day at a time,' explained George. Sage admitted he had a copy of the master in his pocket, but no, it wasn't going to get played.

Even Allie admired the suits, though she deplored Sage's stupid teeshirt. 'Yeah,' said Bill, maliciously. 'Shame 'e couldn't get it in his right size, either.' Friends, acquaintances, schmoozing strangers came and went. Fiorinda and Sage stayed put, maybe both of them afraid to move, afraid to break this bubble. It could have been a night of long ago: Aoxomoxoa and his brat, with the Heads as a protective guard, drinking hard, talking nonsense, entertaining everyone with firework towers of repartee. And if Fiorinda's sallies were a little barbed tonight nobody blamed her, least of all the boss: who took his licks like a gentleman, grinning sweetly, and not making the slightest attempt to retaliate.

The Snake Eyes band went off to get on stage. The group diminished, and still all was well: until Laurel Merrick and Minty LaTour, Bill's posh girlfriend, came back from a table-cruise and took George and Bill away with them. Fiorinda suddenly realised that Peter had slipped away too. The cabaret was still crowded, a sea of chatter and colour, but somehow she and Sage had been left alone. The merry banter had died, she wasn't sure just when. Probably the moment

they'd realised they had no audience. She stared at the tabletop, almost wishing he would jump up and flee. How terrible to be with Sage, and struggling to think of something anodyne to say. She had lost him. Such a pain in her heart— She looked up to find a pair of blue eyes watching her, so contrite and so tender she forgot everything she'd been trying to script and just said, 'You look amazing.'

'So do you.' He reached over to brush the froth of tulle at her shoulder with the tips of his crooked righthand fingers. 'I love the dress. Wanna dance?' 'Yes.'

She followed him to the floor. At first they danced the way they'd often danced together: not touching, just loving the rhythm, loving their own skill. But maybe everything had been decided in that moment outside the marquee. Their eyes met in the music, question and consent. They moved together and danced like lovers, first time ever.

. . . and this was so intoxicating that they couldn't stop, except for pauses to refuel the blaze with alcohol and Meanies, until eventually, some glorious while later, Sage had the idea of bounding up on stage and romancing Felice (Snake Eyes' bravura Trumpet Strumpet had a soft spot a mile wide for Aoxomoxoa) to lead the band into Swing. Rob attempted to remonstrate, *Hey, you get off of my stage*, but he had to give it up. He didn't want to cause a scene, and frankly, the situation, the fabulous pair they made, those two, was hard to resist, even for Ax's staunchest defender. .

. Sage leapt down, caught Fiorinda by the waist and then it was no holds barred. They were lindyhopping all over the shop, a few couples crazy enough to keep up, the crowd clearing out of the way with yells of admiration, the rock and roll brat, red curls and gilded petticoats awhirl, feather light, almost as acrobatic as her partner— They had to take several bows, laughing (saved by the habit of performance), before they could escape. Fiorinda found a scaffold pillar unoccupied and propped herself against it. Sage was beside her, looking down, not touching,

very close. Two minds with but a single thought, and the thought goes something like this:

Don't fucking care. Devil take tomorrow. I am NOT going to pass this up.

?You're not even breathing hard.'

?Yes I am. That's a beautiful shade of lipstick you're wearing.'

?Isn't it? Best colour I ever found. It's called Pomegranate Flower.'

?It's very—'

?Let's get another drink.'

The backstage bar called Bartoli's Hideout was deserted, everyone was in the tent. Fiorinda sat on a stool, a pint of lager in front of her, Sage's arm around her. She played with his right hand, biting gently at the web between the surviving joint of his thumb and his palm, folding the two crooked fingers and rubbing them against her cheek. From the mirror below the optics his natural face looked on (the blunt nose, wide high cheekbones and big mouth: a blue-eyed faun, an elemental, definitely odd) with a tender, possessive, *fuck tomorrow* smile. She wondered if it was late or early. She'd lost track.

?You coming back to the van?'

?Yes.'

?How about now?'

?Sounds good to me.'

?Okay . . . Okay, stay there. *Don't move*. Got to talk to George.'

And he's gone.

?Aw, Sage,' wailed Fiorinda, banging her head on the counter, ?how can you do this to me?' But he was back almost at once. She jumped down from her stool, bristling. ?*What the fuck* did you have to go and talk to George for?'

?I had to tell him,' Sage explained, distinctly, as they left the bar, ?that if anyone asks, he doesn't know where I went, and no one is to come near the van tonight. That's *no one*,' he repeated, stopping to look into her face. Sage being gallant, making sure she's not too smashed to know what they are doing.

Fiorinda nodded, and laid a finger across his lips. No more of that.

The night was dark, overcast and warm. He noticed, as they began to walk, that the top of her head had reverted to its normal position, about level with his breastbone. Wonder when that happened? Hours ago. Sometimes she has delusions of being a supermodel, but this brat can't hardly walk across a room in high heels.

?Fiorinda, where are your shoes?' ?I don't know. Somewhere. I'll find them in the morning.'

?I'm gonna have to carry you.'

?No you are not.'

?Fee, you cannot cross Reading arena barefoot, at this time of night. Think what you'll be treading in. Broken glass, bloody sharps, knocked-out teeth, pools of piss, vomit, turds, steaming diarrhoea, dead rats, dead cats, discarded body parts, oozing viscera—'

?Nonsense. That was years ago.'

?But this *is* years ago. Didn't you realise? It's Dissolution Summer. We went dancing, my brat, I'm takin' you home: an' look there's a fucking *lake* of vomit, right now—'

?Carry me.'

He carried her, at first trying to kiss her as he walked, but that didn't work, too much, he couldn't do both. Out into the township, and why stop here, why not keep hold of this sweet burden, she isn't complaining, all the way to Travellers' Meadow? There was no one about when they reached the gate in the

trees, not a sign of the hippy watchmen. Fiorinda, stirring out of a tranced stillness, reached down and lifted the latch. Sage carried her through, set her on her feet, and shut the gate.

‘Kissable,’ he whispered, stooping, mouth against hers, as she stood on tiptoe— They slipped down, kissing, into the scent of honeysuckle and heavy elderflowers, into the cool embrace of the meadow grass. He meant to take her there, Fiorinda very much consenting: but just when he couldn’t hold back any longer, when he *must have her*, she pulled away, jumped to her feet and ran— He had to give chase, cursing and laughing. She was waiting at the door of the van. She slapped the lock, they fell into the kitchen and she leapt into his arms, legs around his waist, all he could do to get his cock free and safe inside. Instantly they were fucking like hammer and tongs, her skirts crushed between them, her heels in his back, gasping, babbling, stumbling all over the place, seemed to go on forever, sorely unromantic (you horrible brat—) but wonderful, flat out, total discharge—

Finished?

Yeah, she’s nodding her head, teeth and claws relaxing; the vixen is finished for a while. He slid to the floor, back against a cupboard door, hugging her on top of him. ‘Fiorinda,’ he said, ‘Sweetheart—’ the words coming out slow and spent, his left hand gently massaging her spine, ‘what was wrong with the meadow, hmm? Why did I have to get up and run, an’ be in real danger of putting some stains on my beautiful new trousers, prob’ly ruining them forever?’

‘I hate al fresco sex.’

‘C’mon. You weren’t going to be the one getting rocks in your back. You know that.’ ‘All right. I wanted it to be in here, because I love this place.’

‘Ah, she likes my van! . . . Don’t you like my cottage?’

‘The cottage was different. Anyway, what are you whining about? You’re happy now, aren’t you?’

‘Oh yeah. I’m happy now.’ He sighed. ‘I’m happy, but . . . I’m not comfortable. How about you let me get up, hm? Lemme get out of these clothes, let’s get to bed.’ He stripped off. Fiorinda, a warm, shadow-girl in the darkness, was having trouble locating her side zip. ‘Oh no. We keep the dress. I love it, it’s like fucking a Barbie doll—’

‘Oooh, you shouldn’t have said that! Off with the dress—’

‘Ah, Fiorinda, please. Let me have you in the frilly dress, please please, please—’

‘Fucking pervert. Oh, all right. You can have Barbie in her underwear. It’s a very pretty outfit, except, I don’t know what happened to the knickers—’

‘They’re in my pocket. Okay, let’s see this.’

He touched the wall. ATP light rose, pearly-white, and there was Fiorinda, sweat-blackened curls plastered to her brow, smiling up at him, her eyes like stars. He forgot to clock the lingerie because he just had to hold her; it felt as if he was folding something bigger than the whole world into himself, this fragile girl, wriggling like a fish now to get her arms free and fling them round his neck—

‘Let’s get to bed. I want you in my bed, where you belong.’

‘Yes.’ But when they lay together under Sage’s silver-grey quilt, in the room with the walls of hardware, their mood had changed. He’d been showering her face with such kisses as they stumbled through the van, she’d wanted to tell him, I’m *not* a doll, Sage. I can kiss back. I have as much loving as you to fit into this one night. She hadn’t had the heart, because he was crying: tears on thick golden lashes, salt

tears on her mouth when she managed to get a kiss in edgeways.

?Sage,‘ she whispered, ?I want to tell you something.‘

He smiled, wiping his eyes. ?Shoot.‘

?This goes back a long way,‘ she said, wiping her own tears with her fingers.

?Back to the day you and Ax came home from the war in Yorkshire. Do you remember? I met you on the platform at St Pancras, and told you about Pigsty getting arrested.‘

?Yeah. I remember.‘

The first Countercultural President had turned out to be a child killer: a revelation that had ended his brutal hippy régime.

?I was telling that story. You were both terribly shocked that I‘d been involved, and I was thinking, you are so wrong, because I‘m not the delicate flower you two think I am. I‘m just what people say Fiorinda is. I‘m hard as nails, and my world is very small. As long as I had you two back safe nothing could hurt me, not poor Pigsty or anyone. But my best mate Sage was looking at me . . .

You were looking at me, I don‘t know, in a different way. My eyes were opened. I knew that you were in love with me, and I was in love with you too, and I had

been for a long time, only I hadn‘t known it. But it was too late. It‘s too late, Sage.

It didn‘t happen. It can‘t happen, because I love Ax now. I love him with all my heart, and I could never, ever hurt him.‘

?I think I loved you the first night I met you,‘ said Sage. ?I know I‘ve loved you more every night and day since. And I love Ax – oh, differently – as much as I love you. But I can‘t do the threesome thing. I need you to be only mine. Nothing else will do.‘

She stroked his hair, combing her fingers through the lamb‘ s fleece. ?I know, my sweetheart. I understand.‘

?Oh Fiorinda, how can you forgive me?‘

?What‘ s to forgive? I‘m the one who fucked up. I‘m the one who ruined—‘

?Ah, *no*—‘

He kissed her to silence her and they lay quiet, looking into each other‘ s eyes, for so long that Fiorinda felt herself slipping into the place or state that she had discovered in the terrible year – when she‘d got pregnant, and her baby had been born, and he had died. She had that Escher feeling, the impossible perspective, the world and Fiorinda moving into phase, becoming one. Aeons passed. Then she was back, and nothing had changed, except for a faint, extraordinary smile at the corner of his beautiful mouth. But wherever she had been, and for what immeasurable time, she knew that Sage had been with her there.

Nothing was spoken. There was nothing to be said. Such a moment just is. He moved closer.

?Hey. Want some more?‘

Shortly before dawn three Heads came in quietly, deposited Fiorinda‘ s shoes and her bag, and stood looking at their boss and the babe. ?If the length of courtship is related to the length of his sexual relationships,‘ remarked Bill, ?they should be together for about a thousand years.‘

?I told him to do that *five years ago*,‘ sighed George. ?The kid‘ s wearing the yellow ribbon, so she‘ s not interested in sex, which does not stop other blokes doing her. He says he can wait, she‘ s too young and too hurt. I say don‘ t be a fuckin‘ idiot. Be nice to her, romance her a bit and take ‘er down. Do it now or you‘ ll miss your chance. You‘ ll be forgiven, any fool can see. But would he lissen? He never lissens.‘

?Hell to pay when Ax finds out,‘ said Bill.

?Yeah. Well, at least they had their big night out. Can‘ t honestly grudge ‘im

that.'

'Sometimes the cards aren't worth a dime,' said Peter, 'If you don't lay them down—'

The other Heads groaned softly and hauled him away.

Fiorinda didn't mind them coming in. If things had turned out the way maybe they should have turned out, no doubt she'd often have opened her eyes in this bed, in these arms, to find three brother Heads looking kindly down. She pressed herself closer against Sage's side: so happy in this moment, so completely, hopelessly without any solution for the morning, that really, now would be a good time to go to sleep and never wake up.

But if you have to wake up, in a disaster movie on the wrong side of the end of the world, and with a bone-crushing hangover, it helps, *it certainly helps* if you can arrange to do so with the Minister for Gigs wrapped around your back, his lovely mouth nuzzling your spine. Eyes closed, without leaving the soft chemistry of sleep, she turned in his arms, skin warm against skin (she'd been allowed to take off her underwear eventually), and slid her knees up his ribs, so she could take his cock inside in one smooth rush—

The spurt of a struck match.

Ax was sitting on the end of the bed.

'How did you get in here?' gasped Sage.

'Talked to George. He wasn't happy about it, but I persuaded him.'

'Oh bugger,' said Fiorinda. 'We forgot you would be able to do that.'

She had grasped in one icy, drowning instant that the only possible way to handle this was to see the funny side. But no. Not a chance. The two men stared at each other, sheer murder on the one side, sheer horror on the other.

'I suppose I have only myself to blame,' said Ax. He stubbed out his newly lit cigarette, in the ashtray he had carefully provided for himself, jumped off the bed and slammed out of the room. Sage was dressed in twenty seconds, and about to fly out of the door before he

spun around. Fiorinda was hunting for her clothes, set mouth and averted eyes saying she'd always known it would be like this. Always known it, and now she's finally been added to Aoxomoxoa's *mille e tre* of course he's going to leap up and run. No big deal.

'Ah, *shit*.' He flew back, grabbed her, hugged her tight, 'God. Fee, darling, it'll be all right. Stay here. *Don't* be frightened. I'll talk to him, I will sort it. I *will*.'

It was raining. When Sage caught up, Ax was storming along a staybehinds' footpath through the fields that bordered Travellers' Meadow, head down, hair flying in dark wings around his jaw. He gave Sage one savage, naked glance and kept going.

'Ax, hey Ax, listen to me. Look, we were drunk, these things happen—'

'Fuck off.'

'Please, Ax. It was a drunken night, nothing serious. *Talk* to me—'

'*Talk to you?* Where the fuck have you been since March, you bastard?'

The path led through pasture where cows were grazing, indifferent to the weather, among the unburied corpses of cars that had been trashed in Dissolution Summer, awash now in grass and flowers, and then swerved into the back of a scrapyard on Richfield Avenue, where indigestible lumps of the old Leisure Centre were lying about waiting to be reused. Nowhere further to go except onto the road. Betrayed, Ax turned in fury and sat on a chunk of concrete, staring ahead of him.

'I couldn't help that.'

?Oh, fuck. Not the fucking giant toddler line. You knew what you were doing. You had it all calculated. You let me give you the spiel, you pretend to go along, because you'll get to sleep with her, and then you're off. King of the one night stand, and I don't care about me, but *how could you do that to her—*

?I did not! That's not! That is NOT what happened!'

?If you didn't plan to leave the next morning, what was your bike doing there?'

?What? Ax, that is fucking *paranoid*. Look, the bike was there because I rode it down when we did the Unmasked filming, and I came back in George's car.

Fuck's sake—

Ax refused to look at him. The rain fell fine and straight. Sage walked around in a caged circle, wanting to leave, unable to leave: finally sat on another chunk of concrete.

?Oh God. Ax, listen. When I said yes to you, I meant it. I desperately wanted that to work, but I . . . I love her too much. I couldn't stand it. I DID NOT plan to leave like that. I didn't plan to behave the way I've been behaving. I thought I'd be okay. But it was so fucking . . . painful. I've been *trying* to get back to being normal . . . Fuck, last night I—' He didn't know why he'd come chasing after the guy. This wasn't going to

help Fiorinda. The only way he could truly help Fiorinda was by bowing out, leaving them both the fuck alone. Unfortunately that's impossible, *we're the Triumvirate*.

?Shit. I don't feel like getting into this discussion; you don't want to know, it's useless, it leads nowhere.' He doubled over, head propped on his hands to hide the tears. ?I can't talk to you. I don't know why the fuck I'm trying.'

Ax had come to Reading, straight from a very tough night, to find the whole site buzzing with the exploits of the nation's wild-cat glamour puss and the amazingly transformed Aoxomoxoa. With Ax cast, in their flashy piece of MTV, as the dull, controlling, workaholic cat who has to be away so these fabulous creatures can play. He was cruelly wounded, mortified, furious, and in no mood to be merciful.

?I suppose I should be grateful the show you put on last night wasn't being *televised*. At least I was only publicly humiliated in front of every single person I know.'

Sage's head came up, indignant. ?Publicly humiliated? You what? By me dancing with Fiorinda? Oh, fuck that—!'

?Yeah. When you've hardly spoken to me for six weeks. You can say what you like. Nobody who was there last night was in any doubts about what was going on.' Sage glared at him. ?Ax, if you were even wondering, let me assure you it was a one-off. She made that very clear. The way you found out was rough, and I'm sorry for that. We were pissed, we didn't think. But don't talk to me about . . .

Oh, *I know she's your property*. I've had that well shoved in my face. You tell me I can play with her sometimes, you let me get into bed with you, but I have to kiss her, this girl I love more than my life, *for the first time*, under your supervision. I can't say a word to her of my own. I have to, to m-make love to her, for the first time, *with you looking on*. What was that about humiliation? Tell me again?'

?One off?' Ax curled his lip. ?Oh give it up. I know how she feels about you. Of course I know, you stupid fuck. That's not an issue. What d'you take me for?'

D'you think I'd have ever *suggested* the fucking threesome if I hadn't known she loves you? And don't tell me that night was no good, you destructive shit. *I was there*.'

'It felt like playing golf with the boss.'

These words sank into Ax like poison darts. He tried to tell himself Sage would say *any nasty thing* right at this moment, as long as it would hurt Ax. But all he could hear was the awful pain in Sage's voice, and all he could see was himself on that morning after, crouched under the frozen thorn hedge crying his eyes out, because he knew he had to share his darling and he couldn't bear it—

'Anyway,' said Sage, viciously pursuing the advantage, 'I don't know why

this is all about me. What about the way *your property* was behaving? The Dictator's girlfriend, wife of the Muslim prince, surely must not act like that.

Why aren't you blaming Fiorinda?'

'Because *Fiorinda is never to blame*,' said Ax, in a terrible voice.

Sage's turn to back down, defeated by the self-evident truth. 'Ah, fuck it. Last night was nothing. It's you she loves, first and last. I'm just a bit of rough trade.'

'Don't whine, Sage. It doesn't suit you.'

They fell silent. Fiorinda, in her peacock mandala frock, was coming across the field, barefoot through the rain, looking like a somewhat bedraggled fairy of the Christmas Decorations Plant. She came up, and saw the tears on both their faces.

'Well,' she said. 'At least you're not fighting.'

'That'd be a short contest,' said Ax bitterly.

She sat down on the wet grass. 'Listen. You two said let's be a threesome, and I agreed. I remember that. I don't remember where I signed anything saying, if I fuck Sage Ax has to be in the room, or vice versa. Correct me if I'm wrong. You both love me, I love both of you. Any fool can see you're madly in love with each other, or you wouldn't be sitting out here sobbing like broken-hearted fools.

When we all had sex together it seemed to work. One of you tell me, *what is the fucking problem?*'

'There's a problem,' said Ax. 'There's a problem with this manipulative bastard, rewriting history.'

'*Me? Manipulative?* How the fuck do you make that out?' 'Oh God. Well, I don't care. I've got a *pitiful* hangover, I feel sick and I can't

keep my head up. I'm going to lie down here for a while in this puddle. Wake me up when you've finished yelling at each other.'

Fiorinda suited her action to her words. The rain started getting heavier. The Dictator and his Minister sat on their lumps of concrete.

'Good sex?' said Ax at last.

'Brilliant.'

'She's amazing, isn't she?' said Ax, deliberately.

Their eyes met. There's nothing either one of them can claim for himself alone. No secret thing she does, that she might not do with the other. It's horrible. Sage nodded. Yeah, brother. Got the message. They stared at each other, for once contemplating this disaster, this terrible thing that has happened to them, in the centre of their lives: without any colouration, in its naked truth. There is no way out. It can't be fixed. There is *no solution*. Unsmiling, but with a strange lessening of tension, they looked away.

Several minutes passed.

Sage wiped his nose with the back of his hand. 'God, Ax. I've *missed* you.'

'Wasn't my idea.'

Silence.

'Okay,' said Ax. 'I accept that I fucked up. To some extent.'

'I shouldn't have run out. But there was provocation.' 'So what now? Are we going to try and force her to choose between us?' *And*

break her heart, he added, by means of a glare she couldn't see.

'I don't think we can,' Sage answered, looking down at Fiorinda. Her eyes were closed, but of course she was listening to every word. 'I think she'd quit us both. I'd have tried to take her off you years ago if I hadn't spotted that.'

'Well, thanks.'

'No problem.' He wanted to draw Ax's attention to the shadow under her lashes, the lovely angle of her cheekbones, to the reckless curve of her sweet mouth, the natural rose-madder still traced in clean scarlet, pomegranate flower.

'Why stop at two?' he said fiercely. 'Every man and woman in the world should worship her. She's a *miracle*.'

'Hm. Maybe we should remember this is purely a diplomatic coma.'

'Don't care.' He poked the rock and roll brat with his foot. 'Hey. You are amazing and wonderful and wise, and the best fuck in the universe.'

'Yeah,' said Ax. 'All true. Fiorinda? You can wake up now.'

But Fiorinda had grown attached to her coma, and refused to stir. They headed back to Travellers' Meadow, Sage carrying the babe.

'So where were you last night, anyway? I brought a copy of *Unmasked* to the party for you, er, kind of a peace offering—'

'But then, ironically, decided to screw my girlfriend instead. Makes perfect sense. I was in Hiroshima.'

'*What?* Oh God, you did it!' 'Yeah.' Ax grinned wearily. 'Yeah, we hacked the quarantine. Using my chip,

and your code, and I don't know what the difference was but this time it worked.

It was fucking draining, and *could we talk about it later?* After I've had about thirty-six hours' sleep?'

'You're mad,' said Fiorinda, opening her eyes. 'You're both insane. You'll get nicked, and then things will be a million times worse. Put me down, Sage.'

They'd reached the van. She stood looking from one to the other. 'Well, what's the verdict? Have you two decided you can handle sharing *the meat*?'

'Ouch,' said Ax. 'I deserve that. I'm sorry, little cat. I'm just a jealous guy.'

Most unexpectedly, Fiorinda burst into tears and flung herself into her boyfriend's arms crying, '*Oh, Ax. I'm sorry too.*'

At four in the afternoon Sage and Fiorinda were sitting outside the Continental Breakfast Bar in the arena. They'd just struggled through brunch at the hospitality benders with Dian Buckley —an informal get-together they'd apparently agreed upon at some point during the previous evening. Needless to say, they'd had no idea until Ax told them. In normal circumstances they'd have stood Dian up, without a qualm. She ought to know better than to prey on helpless drunks. After the way they'd behaved, they'd felt they had to go along and mend some fences.

Before brunch they'd organised the getaway, Ax having tearfully refused to organise anything, as he was so crap at it and had fucked up so badly last time. They'd left him sleeping in the van, while they arranged for Allie to look after

their diaries, fixed for someone to go to the Brixton flat and pack bags, fixed for someone to drive the Volvo down (Ax had arrived by train this morning). As soon as the car arrived they were going back to Cornwall, to try again.

They'd ordered coffee, bread and jam (neither of them had touched the brunch), but they couldn't eat. Sage kept catching startled glances from passers by, amazed that he was still unmasked. Fiorinda sat in a foul miasma of patchouli. She'd had to borrow clothes from Anne-Marie, who lived in the hospitality area with her brood; or she'd have been chatting to Dian in the

mandala frock. Her head felt broken and empty, a tub full of chemical fragments that didn't know what the hell to do with each other. She wrapped her hands around her coffee bowl, trying to get them warm. The coffee was Crisis Blend, mainly ground roasted dandelion roots. It didn't taste too bad, but it smelled like nothing.

'Sage.'

'Hn?'

'Last night when we were alone, you told me you couldn't do the threesome, no chance, never. You talked to Ax and it's happening. Could you explain that?'

'Don't you trust me?'

'No. I think you and your boyfriend will surely run off and leave me.'

If he'd been wearing the skull she'd have called the look she got *weary forbearance*, with a mix of *bleak resignation*. 'You can trust me. I finally realised, you and your boyfriend are making me the best offer I'll ever get in my life. I'm sorry it took me so long to grasp the concept.'

'Hey.' She grabbed his hand (Sage so lost to vanity he was out here in public not even hiding them: he *must* be feeling rough). 'Knock that off. I love you both the same. Don't you ever believe you come second. Don't you *ever believe that*.'

Sage thought of the vision that Ax had forgotten. He had forgotten it himself: snapshot glimpses don't last, they *vanish*. Yet he knew where they had been, though he remembered nothing. . . What will happen to Olwen Devi's quest? Is the goal impossible to reach? Is it even desirable? The Zen Self had seemed so important, when he had nothing else. Now the reversal of his fortunes overwhelmed him: the straits he'd been in, even last night when he held her in his arms. The *terrible* look of that long lonely road ahead. He wanted to kneel at her feet.

'Fiorinda.'

'Now what?'

'About those other sheep . . . I will be true to you.'

She stared at him, amazed. Then she laughed. 'Funny Sage.'

'I mean it.'

'Give me a break. Aoxomoxoa monogamous? Don't be silly.'

'Fuckit, Fiorinda. Why will you never, *ever* take me seriously—?'

'Oh! Shit! Did we arrange for someone to feed Elsie?'

'Yeah, we did. The cat will be fed, don't change the subject—' The people of Reading arena passed by.

She kept on holding his hand, feeling like driftwood, floating, her heart filled with golden light.

George and Dilip had been visiting the Leisure Centre deconstruction, which had become a Reading sideshow: recycling robotics, seething tanks of plastic disassembling slime moulds, all kinds of interesting stuff. They came out in time to see the black Volvo handed over, in the alt.tech builders' yard that used to be a car park. Ax had just arrived. Fiorinda hugs her boyfriend, Sage hugs him too. Ax chivvies them into the car, refusing to be distracted by some last-minute tale they want to tell—

'Sweet,' said Dilip.

'You shoulda been at the van this morning,' said George grimly. 'Fuck. I thought there'd be murder done.'

Dilip stared at him. 'I don't believe it. Sage would never lift his hand to Ax.'

'Maybe not. That's not the way round it was going to be.'

For a moment they faced each other – big George and the fragile mixmaster, no taller than Fiorinda – like duellists' seconds, but with loyalties the opposite

from what you'd expect. Then they shrugged and resumed watching the departure. Fiorinda in the back, Ax and Sage in the front. Off they go.

'It'll end in tears,' sighed George.

'Because it always does,' agreed Dilip.

But secretly they were hopeful. This isn't your average no-brain rockstar menage à trois. This is *the Triumvirate*. Nothing is beyond their powers. When they reached Tyller Pystri, long after midnight, it transpired that Sage had forgotten to call Ruthie Maynor. The house was dank and cold. There was no electricity, and no water coming out of the taps. They made up Sage's bed, crawled between the sheets and slept, clinging to each other like refugees in a burned-out cellar.

The next day Fiorinda woke in sunlight. For a while she watched them, asleep in each other's arms: Sage unmasked, Ax's hair a dark, gleaming fan across the pillow. And how often do you see that? How often is Ax Preston relaxed enough to sleep in *Fiorinda's* arms? Huh.

Well, she thought. That's the size of it.

She got up and went out (remembering to leave them a note). In the garden she found a bed of wild strawberries, picked the ripe ones and carried them off, down the footpath that led to the stepping-stones across the Chy; and the short cut to the village. Red berries, blue sky, yellow sun, the little river rushing and shining beside her, the larches and the hazels and the oak trees every shade of new tender green.

Later they joined her at the pub called the Powdermill. There wasn't going to be electricity for at least a week: North Cornwall Renewables was having trouble with the wrong kind of waves. The spring-fed water supply, however, could be fixed. Ax arranged to borrow some tools – but not today. They stayed at the pub until evening, drinking beer and eating bread and cheese (the only food on offer, alas, no crisps, no Bombay Mix), and then headed back by road: Sage and Ax trying to convince Fiorinda that Ax's visit to Japan had not strictly broken the quarantine. Ax had just harmlessly proved that the quarantine *could be* broken. She was not impressed.

'Just don't do it again,' she said. 'Or if you do, I don't want to know.'

Could they stay? Why not? They had bottled water, firewood, rapeseed oil for the lamps. The water in the Chy wasn't safe to drink (*giardia*): but they could boil it if they were stuck. . . A little shy with each other: Fiorinda lit a fire, because the house was still cold. Ax and Sage recommenced work on the abandoned jigsaw. Fiorinda fetched a book from the landing and curled in an armchair. The room grew warm and dusky. The two men sat back, leaning against the sofa.

'Fiorinda,' said Sage, 'Did you eat my strawberries?'

'Yes.'

'Told you,' said Ax.

'What's wrong with me eating the strawberries? If you didn't happen to be here, the slugs would have had them.'

'Not so. Ruthie packs them up and sends them to me.'

'God, that's pathetic. You're such a *baby*.'

She ditched her book and jumped on him. Ax watched them giggling and tussling and felt a momentary pang, *hey, unhand my girlfriend* . . . Then he remembered all the times the three of them had been together, and Sage and

Fiorinda not allowed to touch each other. Sage's pain; Fiorinda's pain, that he couldn't even bear to think of. *This is how it has to be*. There's no other option.

He leaned over and cut in. 'God, that feels weird,' he complained. He was

snogging a freshly stripped skull: Sage had put on the mask to go down the pub and forgotten to take it off. Fiorinda couldn't care less, but Ax is such a fogey—
?'Sorry. Is that better, Sah?'

'Yeah,' said Ax. 'Much better.'

How strange that three should be so different from two. The difference between a line from A to B and the whole world.

The sex was as good as last time, in fact, mysteriously, it made last time better, reaching back to undo the knots of tension in that remembered night. They kept going for a long time: practical, greedy, instinctive, mostly silent, only laughing and talking in the pauses between takes. At last there was a longer pause, the three of them tumbled on the bed in a lax, sweat-greased tangle of limbs.

They moved into an easier configuration. 'Was there some wine?' mumbled Sage.

'I'll get it,' said Fiorinda.

They turned instantly to watch. Fiorinda walking away from you, naked in the firelight, there can't be enough chances in a lifetime. Shoulder to shoulder, they glanced at each other, sharing the delight: and how appalling now to think how differently this could have ended: Ax not here in this room tonight, Sage with some other woman—

'Oh. I'm afraid it's a touch more than chambréed. Anyone for claret soup?'

'Never mind, bring it here.'

She brought warm wine. Ax went and found some glasses. They toasted each other and settled again, Fiorinda curled up between them, her head on Ax's ribs.

'Anyone hungry?' said Ax after a while.

Fiorinda giggled. 'Ax is hungry.'

'Okay, guilty. Ax is hungry. Sage, is there anything in that kitchen of yours that can be eaten, like, easily? Without any soaking of lentils or scraping of roots?'

'There's what we bought in the garage shop last night. Bread, butter, bacon. Can't remember. Tomatoes? There are tins. I don't feel like doing anything.'

'I fetched the wine,' said Fiorinda.

In the end they all got dressed, or half-dressed, and made the expedition together: Sage carrying the babe, because the stone flags were cold for her little feet, or some such excuse. He set her on the counter by the fridge and tracked down the groceries, which they'd secured by knocking up the garage shop people in the middle of the night. Bread, butter, a pan for the bacon, check the gas cylinder, light the gas, slice some tomatoes, the tomatoes are a little frisky, but it's not beyond him . . . He looked over his shoulder. Ax and Fiorinda were kissing, Fiorinda still on the counter, her slender ankles and rosy heels locked in the small of Mr Dictator's beautiful, copper-coloured naked back.

'Hey. Why am I doing this?'

'We don't know,' said Fiorinda, winding a strand of Ax's hair around her fingers, giving herself a silky dark moustache. 'Why are you?'

'Carry on,' said Ax. 'You're doing fine.'

'Tuh.' He carried on, but he couldn't stop looking at them, kept casting envious glances: finally he deserted the frying pan and came raiding.

'Let *me* have him. *I* want him—'

Sage takes possession, but these two can't snog quietly like normal human beings. They have to start racketing around Tyller Pystri's old-fashioned, perilously cluttered kitchen, laughing, falling against the dresser, the table, the chairs, the things hanging on the walls, both of them delighting in Sage's size

and strength, as if it's the greatest glory of the universe—

'Out!' yelled Fiorinda. 'Get out of here! You're going to BREAK things!'

She finished cooking the bacon, made the sandwiches, put them on a tray and brought them back to the living room. Sage and Ax were on the bed, naked, still grappling. Are they fucking or fighting? Looks like a bit of both. 'Idiots,' murmured Fiorinda. She knelt beside the fire and took a bite of sandwich. God. *Delicious*. The best bacon sandwich *in the world, ever*.

Better give them space. Hopefully they're not going to hurt each other, the tiger and the wolf, but they're not holding back. Fiorinda put down the sandwich, pulled her dress over her head, tossed it and got up on the bed. What

she meant to do was quietly masturbate, in the penumbra of their sweat, heat and movement. Instead she was captured, a hand gently covering her eyelids: ooh, I'm not supposed to know who? Come on. You are not exactly identical twins . . . It didn't matter. They were all three lost in a blind world, reaching a new, incredible peak of three-in-oneness, for ever and ever and ever, feels like as far as anyone can go, without never coming back at all—

When she opened her eyes they were looking at her anxiously.

'Are you okay Fee—?'

'Maybe that was too much, maybe we won't do that again—'

'I loved it. What do you want me to do, turn cartwheels?' Then she decided

she *did* feel like a fragile, broken flower: deliciously broken, but absolutely

finished. She burrowed under the duvet. 'I'm fine and now I'm going to sleep.'

'Hey, Fiorinda,' crooned Sage, 'don't you want to smoke a cigarette with us?'

'I keep telling you, little cat. It's guys who are supposed to do that.'

'leavemealoneI'masleep.'

'Spliff?' said Ax.

'Yeah.'

They pulled trousers on again before they moved to the hearth: not so much to mark a line between sex and friendship, as from a futile sense that they ought to be prepared. Nakedness feels so vulnerable. 'I have post-traumatic stress,' confessed Ax. 'Always, everywhere, at the back of my mind, I'm waiting for a

bunch of gunmen to burst into the room, and start blazing away.'

'And not a thing we can do about it,' agreed Sage. 'Yeah. Me too.'

This is the enduring legacy of Massacre Night, the night the world ended and this bizarre afterlife began. They'd seen worse since, and higher body counts: been to war and become soldiers, dealing out death themselves. But nothing compares with the memory of the first sight of violent death; the first horror of their helplessness.

'Nah,' Sage decided, after a moment. 'We're safe. If they were going to burst in tonight, they'd have been here 'bout half an hour ago.'

'And that would have been a real shame.'

They grinned at each other. 'Wrong on both sides?' offered Sage.

'Wrong on both sides.'

A hand clasp on it.

They shared the spliff in peaceful silence. Sage went out to take a piss. Ax moved around the room, mending the fire, tidying things, putting out the lamps (fucking lucky we didn't smash one). Sage came back and stood gazing down at the hearth, enraptured. What's he looking at? A mouse-nibbled bacon sandwich.

'You're soft in the head about that girl, Sage.'

'I certainly am.' And about you too, babe, he thought, but I plan to try and

keep the extent of that to myself. You push me around quite enough as it is. 'The sky's cleared. Good

stars. Want to come out in the garden? We could choose a few of the best ones, and pull them down to put in her hair?’

‘Yeah. Good idea—’ But no. ‘No, I can’t. I can’t leave her.’

Not for five minutes. Now Sage came to see what Ax was seeing: a tangle of red curls, a creamy shoulder, the tip of her nose.

‘Sage, do you have guns in the house?’

Sage hesitated, knowing Mr Dictator’s opinion on firearms. ‘Er, yes.’

‘Thought so. Within easy reach?’

‘You want to get sorted now?’

Ax shook his head, disgusted that he felt better knowing they could defend her. She doesn’t want that kind of defence. She wants the world where she was free and my equal, which she believes is lost forever, and *I can’t give her that*.

‘No. Just wanted to know.’

‘Hey, Ax. Stop looking like that.’ Sage hugged him, and it’s strange how much more vulnerable, yet also (thank God) more *protectable* Mr Dictator feels in his arms than that fragile girl. ‘Sssh. Live for the moment. I love you, Fee loves you, let’s get into bed and I will be your teddy bear.’

‘Looks like Fiorinda’s bagged the middle.’

‘We can work around that.’

Fiorinda was thinking: Tyller Pystri must belong to all of us. The Brixton flat is Ax’s territory, Sage has the van. Shit, this is not tenable. I will have to have a place of my own. She couldn’t remember, right now, why the idea filled her with dread. But things happen as they must . . . and drifted into oblivion, to the murmur of those two West Country voices, the one from further west a little deeper, a little sweeter: but really, on the edge of sleep, almost impossible to tell them apart.

Fiorinda and Ax had fun fixing the water supply. Sage refused to take them to Tintagel, for fear of tourists, but they visited the standing stone and the waterfall pool, and climbed down the cliff path to the cove at the end of the track: but couldn’t take a bracing dip for masses of very unromantic stinking kelp. It’s usually like this in the summer, said the native son smugly. Keeps the tourists at bay. (There aren’t any tourists, at all: but this doesn’t get through to him.) On the last day they walked for miles along the South-West path, the sea another country laid out in silver and turquoise beneath the cliffs, larks shouting, the turf at their feet glowing with yellow trefoil, rustling with harebells. They came to a headland where there had been an Iron Age fort, out to the end of the promontory and sat among the flowers.

‘I wonder what Rivermead will be like in a hundred years’ time,’ said Fiorinda. ‘If not drowned, I mean.’

‘Part of the city,’ said Sage, ‘with a futuristic forcefield dome over the arena, tent-inspired architecture and all our wild and free ephemera set in stone.

Reading will be the capital by then. London’s shrinking, you know.’ ‘That’s if Ax wins his game,’ said Fiorinda. ‘If Ax loses, the watermeadow by

the Thames will belong to the otters and herons again, except for a few smoky huts. Might will be right, women will be property and the peasants will be revolting, just the natural way things ought to be.’

‘It doesn’t have to be a choice,’ said Ax stubbornly. ‘We can stay civilised and *still* get back to the garden . . . But I’m sorry I got you into this, both of you. It’s not your fight.’

‘Don’t be sorry,’ said Fiorinda. ‘We’re volunteers.’

‘We’re with you, Ax.’

They clasped hands and stayed there for a long time, looking into the west. Benny Preminder missed his monthly Liaison meeting. No picture postcard for him, nothing but a curt message, hardly civil, from Ms Marlowe, the Triumvirate are taking a little break. At the appointed time he sat alone in his office, smarting. *The Triumvirate!* Benny remembered when they hadn't even been famous. *I made* them. They were C-list popstars. But no one remembers that now. He took out the dossier from its drawer. (No big secret, why shouldn't he keep a Triumvirate scrapbook? Doesn't everyone?) He had some beautiful pictures of Fiorinda that he knew were fakes, but he had kept them anyway. A thrill went through him as he glanced at the forbidden. Forbidden, but licenced by what seemed to Benny a higher authority than the tiger or the wolf. . . And here were the notes, brief and concise. *April*. (Cuitos.) Mr Preston pays lip-service to ?democratic government?, but remains in final control of law and order. *May*. (Giamonos.) They are secure in power. The only threat to the Rock and Roll Reich is the instability of the Westminster gang. What was his news this time? *June*. (Samivisionos.) The Triumvirate took a holiday. He didn't know why, but he could *feel* a great change. Back at the start of this adventure, when Paul Javert was still his boss and long before Ax Preston made himself Dictator, Benny had been directed to explore the wilder shores of the Counterculture. They didn't all wear beads and dreadlocks, he'd found places where he could fit in. He'd been told to look for dirt, but *dirt* was not exactly what he had found. Nothing had come of his researches, nothing that Paul could use; but then later Benny had found himself *blessed*. He could think of no other way to describe it. He had began to know, occasionally, that there were things he should do (like keeping this dossier). He did them, and everything stayed sweet. Once, he'd seen himself as a kingmaker. He didn't crave the limelight, he'd planned to be guiding hand behind Ax Preston, or some other, more malleable candidate. When he'd realised he had a new master, he'd imagined he could still play that role. He knew better now: but sometimes emotional satisfaction is worth more than power. He would see their downfall, this had been clearly promised— He knew that presence he felt was in his mind, but it seemed to fill the room. He had no idea who his secret master was, whether it was someone he met everyday, or a demon (he laughed at himself) from another dimension. He had decided it would be wiser not to try and find out. He had locked the door against his secretary. He kept this room swept free of surveillance, not trusting the routine security service, using his own expertise. He put the book away (the dossier was nothing, a focus, a ritual): took out his box of props and lit an incense-studded candle. He should be naked: but better not, just in case of interruption. What message must I send? He didn't fully understand, but *he knew*. Kneeling by his desk, he looped the knotted cord around his wrists in token of submission, and fumbled a cut on the underside of his forearm, letting a little blood flow. Bowing his head, he whispered, in the ancient language that Ax Preston was trying in vain to suppress: *Come, master, come lord. Come soon. The fruit is ripe.*

3: Car Park Barbie

(Was: Sweetness and Light) Unmasked, Aoxomoxoa and the Heads (whitemusic.) NME album of the week *****

Rock and Roll Music, witch's brew of magic power chords, hijacked tech and untrammelled hedonism, is the essential soundtrack of the revolution, and anyone who needed to be told that by the high culture authorities makes us puke . . . But even political correctness is a poor excuse for this fearless stunt-dive into a bucketful of tasteful ditties for the overseventies. How the king of weird could make such anodyne choices leaves us reeling in the years, and finding Aoxomoxoa's Desert Island Discs leave much to be desired. The sentiment-fest is only relieved by two new tunes and a plaintive a capella rendition of 'The Diarrhoea Song', that the world could have done without. Yes, that's Fiorinda on the vocals on 'Ripple' and 'Atlantic Highway' and also (uncredited) playing guitar on 'Scarlet Begonias'. The antiques are unspeakably predictable (Psychokiller); need (ahem) no explanation (Son Of A Preacher Man; Mighty Real), and guess what, there's far too much Grateful Dead. George Merrick rules the sound with aplomb, Bill Trevor turns in a cool tenor solo or two, and my, Peter Stannen, you handsome devil, all the girls will be swooning now! Since you're going to buy it anyway, we'll unashamedly leap onto the bandwagon. The lads can sing after all, the dancing is a treat, and at least there are fewer opportunites for irritating Cornish bits. Don't forget to download a copy for your gran.

The Triumvirate returned from Cornwall with a new body language, a new collection of private jokes, and Sage was staying at the Brixton flat. In no time at all the story featured on Weal's 'Apokryfa': the same strip cartoon venue as had hosted the Fascist Junta skit that so annoyed Rob.

It's the night before the Reich gets on the road for the Festival Season. They're all in that pub near Vauxhall Bridge, which for Apokryfa's purposes is eternally hopping with leaders of the glorious revolution, plus colourful entourage. Chip Desmond and Kevin Verlaine, daftly garbed fashion-victims, have their heads together; mulling over the latest plot development. They think they have a handle on the sheep. Sage's Barbie Doll collection is a concept. Wild strawberries they can get their heads around. But what about those *bacon sandwiches*?

Fiorinda breezes by (Apokryfa's perennial Fiorinda-The-Unwashed, a bundle of garments with an absurdly tiny waist, a cloud of dirt and smells fizzing around her uncontrollable hair. Like PigPen in Charles Schultz's Peanuts, she *cannot* stay clean). A speech-balloon bounces back over her shoulder. 'It's like a Mars Bar party,' She's grinning ear to ear. 'Only different.'

Mr Dictator and the Minister for Gigs, drinking at the bar with Doug Hutton, the Reich's security chief, simultaneously choke on their beer.

How does *Apokryfa* get hold of these quirky details? Are they *genuine*? Early in July the gruelling Festival circuit brought them back to London for a

gala National Gallery opening called 'Stairway To Heaven: The Virtual Counterculture'. Immaterial works of genius filled Trafalgar Square, glittering with colour and causing consternation to the pigeons. A-lister guests stood about nattering and snacking, the PA played a medley of the Few's greatest hits. Ax, guitar over his shoulder because he'd been busking for the cameras, stopped by the maquette of Rivermead Palace —multicoloured and crinkly, like a kind of lo rise Barcelona Cathedral. Ax liked the plan because it was genuinely cheap, unlike some recycling projects: being constructed out of scrunched car bodies and plastic waste. He was sure he'd get used to the way it looked, (you have to be patient with architecture). He was *not* happy to see that the ridiculous flood proofing scheme, which involved pumping a layer of CO₂ *under the whole Rivermead site*, had resurfaced; so to speak. Tempting though it might be to have the Rock and Roll Reich afloat on a sea of dry ice, the expense was ludicrous. 'But Ax, Rivermead's yer showcase,' insisted the leader of the hippy barefoot

architects, a rotund lunatic with a beard like a bramble bush, known to his pals as Topsy. 'We're a flood country, we *need* to testbed way out ideas—'
'Fuck. I'm just a vapid materialistic rockstar, you're the eco-warriors. If you can't live with the river, move away. What happened to listening to Gaia?'
'What if we can get funding from Westminster?' asked a female barefoot architect, at which Topsy glared at her furiously. 'What if I pretend you didn't say that, Janey? Do you *really* want Rivermead

mortgaged to the suits? I don't care what they told you, they have no money: but if they had, I wouldn't let you take it. I said no, and I mean no.'

Silver Wing and her sister Pearl, wearing their butterfly dresses and looking adorable (from a distance), were fighting over the button that made the model heave up and down in its cellulose case.

'Stop that,' warned Silver, 'you're breaking it.'

'You stop. I was touching the button first.'

'STOP IT or I'll tear your fucking head off.'

Time to move on. Anne-Marie had a charming habit of simply letting her savage rugrats loose on public occasions, blithely assuming that someone she knew would be forced to pick up the childcare. Let the hippies handle it.

Fiorinda was with her gran. The old lady had zero interest in any kind of music, less than that in Utopian revolution: but something had inspired her to make a rare sortie from that cold house in the London burbs; the place Fiorinda had left behind when her baby died. Gran had expected a limousine, and probably a motorcycle escort. She'd refused the modest, green alternative of Fiorinda fetching her in a taxi, and come along with some neighbours: who were now mingling, mildly fascinated to be inside the most VIP enclosure in the land. Gran claimed she wanted to see a much-hyped portrait of her granddaughter.

Fiorinda suspected she knew the real motive, and had therefore launched a preemptive counter-attack on Gran's little hobby—

'You're behind the times, Frances dear,' said Gran. 'Everyone believes. You could buy magic at Tesco's now, if your boyfriend had *left* us any Tesco's. Why shouldn't I use my little powers?'

Gran was a witch, a Wiccan. She'd been plying her trade for years, out of the backdoor of the cold house, but in the present climate it wasn't so funny. 'Just stick to the herbal remedies. *Please*. No hexing, promise me that.'

She ignored the irritating reappearance of her original name. She hadn't called herself 'Frances' since she was eleven, as Gran knew perfectly well.

'You shouldn't listen to tell-tales,' said the old lady, and stopped in front a voluptuous, virtual purple female with fuschia-pink parted lips, crouched upon a gravestone in a midnight churchyard.

Clever Ax, *getting into Education* had proved a highly successful hook. The country liked it, the Media&Arts A-list no longer felt excluded. So much better than just ranting against the crypto-fascist Ancient Brits—a hopeless ploy as the Great and Good genuinely couldn't tell the two 'rival gangs' apart. Sadly, the big name, Counterculture-inspired art was about what you'd expect. Pickled sharks in dayglo. With huge tits.

'I don't have to listen, Gran. I know.' Gran had grown much smaller, the way old people suddenly do; but her

button eyes were bright and malicious as ever. 'You're the one who should be careful, dear. You can't go on suppressing your nature this way. It isn't right.'
Fiorinda grinned, unabashed.

'My nature is doing fine, trust me. Come on, I thought you wanted to see the

famous portrait.'

'Isn't this it?' Gran peered, affecting old-lady confusion, at the study in purple titled *Metal Calendar Girl*. 'It's *very* nice. Atmospheric, I would call it.'

'No, Gran. You know I never wear pink lipstick.'

Fiorinda and Allie took a break, sitting on the broad, black back of one of Landseer's lions, sipping frosted sherbert. It was fortunate that this wasn't a party where one would want to get drunk, because the sherbert was the only nice thing on offer. Above their heads a collar of shimmering perturbation (unoriginally titled 'Untitled') circled Nelson's column, as if that massive limb of ribbed stone was sporting a lilac and silver ballet tutu. A party of Islamist elders strolled by, casting a tolerant eye on the infidel excesses, and bowed to Ax's lady. 'I like the tutu,' said Allie. 'They should keep it. And *Whistlejacket* is amazing. I haven't seen a single other thing I can stand.'

'New Arts and Crafts Movement scores zero for Art,' agreed Fiorinda. 'But the Craft part is pretty good, we must admit. I mean the coding.' The show featured masterpieces rendered in virtual 3-D for the first time

(Stubbs, Constable, Turner: had to be English, of course). They were amazing.

She sighed. 'Bad news—'

'Sage has punched someone from NME.'

'Hahaha. The only problem with that review is that Peter now won't go out without a mask, in case he gets mobbed, so they all have to carry on wearing their skulls in solidarity. Otherwise Sage is very happy, or so he says. The bad news is my gran. She's fallen out with her lodgers again.'

'She hasn't hexed them?'

'Fraid so. Mrs Mohanjanee says she's also acting confused: I bet she's just putting it on because she knows she's in trouble. But she's nearly eighty—'

'Is she a *real* witch? I mean, can she do things?'

Fiorinda shrugged. 'I hope your kidding. I'm not worried about her psychic powers, I'm just afraid she'll get herself into trouble. But that's not the issue.' She stared into her glass. 'The issue is that you escape, you grow up, and then your fucking family returns to haunt you.'

'What about sheltered housing? You could find her a really nice place.'

'And throw away the key,' agreed Fiorinda, with feeling. 'It's a plan. Nah, I couldn't do that. What she needs is someone to live in that house, not obviously a nurse or a warden, who'll get on with her and keep her under control. What she *wants* is me. She wants me to move back there, the way I did when my mother was dying.' 'Has she asked you?'

'I don't let her, I sneak out of it. But I know what's on her mind. Fuck. What would I do? Have Sage and Ax visit me at weekends, huh?'

'No one expects you to do that,' said Allie quickly (making a mental note to warn Ax about this bright idea. Fiorinda must not go back to the scene of her hideous childhood. Not even part time). 'Don't even think about it!'

'Trust me, I'm not tempted. But I don't know what to do. It's not going to be easy to find a keeper she'll tolerate.' She prepared to slide down from the lion's back. 'I'm going to look at my portrait again, and congratulate the artist-bloke. I didn't dare speak to him when I had Gran in tow. And that will be my last mingle, okay?'

The artist, who was standing beside his much-hyped picture, talking to Chip and Verlaine, met Fiorinda's compliments with a stare of horrified fascination; and fled. She was left looking at the portrait while a small crush of people, held back behind an invisible line by her presence, looked at Fiorinda.

She Feeds And Clothes Her Demons. It was a 3-D image of a picture in a frame, oils on canvas, photorealist. The figure nearly life-sized, the frame antique. The material version was destined for the City Art Gallery in Toby Starborn's native Birmingham. A gaunt, weary young woman with red hair, wearing a tattered green dress, crouches among the roots of a fallen oak. Livid little Hieronymous Bosch nightmare creatures are crawling from cracks in the bark, from holes in the ground, buzzing in the air. She's feeding them cupcakes, sweets, chocolates; and giving them clothes out of a tapestry bag.

Starborn hadn't wanted Fiorinda to sit for him, he worked from photographs, but he'd asked to borrow the green silk dress, the iconic Fiorinda dress from *Dissolution Summer*. It had fallen into rags and been *buried*, like a pet hamster (only way Fiorinda's friends could stop her from wearing it) in Reading site boneyard. The artist, weirdly, had wanted it exhumed; but they'd said no. Fiorinda reached out to see her fingers go through the image: something everyone was doing to the virtual art—

'Do you like it?' asked Chip, looking over her shoulder.

'I think it's *good*, but creepy,' said Fiorinda softly. 'They're not demons, if he means the Drop-Out Hordes. There's no need to feel too sorry for most of them, they've made their own luck. But they're not *demons*.'

'You're not meant to think of art like that. You're too literal.'

'Okay, I'm literal. Shoot me.' She rubbed her bare arms, wondering about the shape of things to come. Is this us? Are we doomed to be sacred icons, public property, for the rest of our lives . . . ?

The radio bead in her ear – routine security – was letting her eavesdrop on several conversations. She could hear Anne-Marie, on the other side of the square, giving some media folk the benefit of her Countercultural Feminism. (All men are scum. Any woman who doesn't live in a bender with sixteen kids is denying her true self . . .)

Suddenly, AM's manifesto was cut off, and Doug was saying the Triumvirate were wanted urgently at Blue Gate:

They met in the crowd, Sage in his beautiful suit but skull-masked; Ax looking tired: he'd been the one chatting with the Prime Ministers and so on. 'Maybe this is it,' said Fiorinda, only half-joking, thinking of Massacre Night.

'Nah,' said Ax. 'I don't smell trouble.'

'It'll be nothing.' Sage pressed his fingertips, virtual and real, together, and pulled them apart, drawing out a skein of vivid blue sparks. Nice trick.

'Where'd you get that?' asked Ax.

'In the kids' workshop. Want some?'

At Blue Gate ('Blue Gate' at a public event, meant wherever the Few's own security had their command post), outside the iridescent screens that closed off the VIP area, they found no signs of alarm: just Doug and his crew entertaining a raw-boned ginger-haired bloke in grimy jeans, silver rings in his ears, a blanket round his shoulders. So, a normal Countercultural citizen, one of thousands, but something familiar about his seamed, alcohol-ruined face—

'Hi folks,' said Doug, grinning. 'Got someone here wants to thump Sage.'

'Hey, Sage,' said the ginger-haired bloke, 'told yez I'd be back.'

'Fergal!'

Ax laughed. 'What are you doing here, you crazy Irishman?' The stranger gave them a gap-toothed, blackened, charming grin. 'What would I be doing? I've defected, comrades. I've come to serve the cause. If ye'll have me.'

So this was Fergal Kearney of the Playboys, the Belfast band who'd been over

for the Rock The Boat tour last summer. Fiorinda hadn't met him, she'd been on a different line-up, but she'd heard the stories. Fergal was a living legend. A fine musician, destroyed himself with drink and drugs, always spoken of with huge affection and respect, despite a totally fucked-up career . . . Oh great, thought Fiorinda, stranded on the edge of the conversation. Another of those music biz guy-relationships, that I don't understand because the world ended before I could be trained in how to react, and now I'll never get it. She was prejudiced against the Irish.

Then Fergal turned to her. 'This is Fiorinda?'

'Yeah,' she said, 'this is Fiorinda.'

'Jaysus,' said the Irishman, staring at her intently but not offensively. His eyes were blue-green, in cruel contrast to his pocked, scarlet complexion. 'Y'er even lovelier than yer videos . . .' He gulped. 'It's a great pleasure. No, it's an *honour*.'

He groped under the blanket, which she saw was really some kind of Celtic mantle. A couple of police liaison officers, not quite as happy as Doug with this situation, made a half-move. Fergal brought out an Irish harp, most of the gilding gone but all the strings in place. 'I saw yez first on the tv, Dissolution Summer. I've never missed a chance since. Ye're the bravest girl I ever saw, an' a queen of the music. Ye'r worth ten of Ax Preston, which I hope he knows, and ten hundred of this bastard Aoxomoxoa: and now I've told ye, which was half me plan in coming to England. Here's me harp. I'd lay it at yer feet. But I'd only look a feckin' eedjit and embarrass ye, so I won't do that.'

She couldn't think of a response.

Fergal's complexion grew even more scarlet. He cleared his throat. 'Uh, well, that's the business done. Now, Sage, me favourite fallen angel, is there anywhere here a man could get a drink?'

Sage detested being called a fallen angel—a media term for former global stars, trapped and impoverished by the data quarantine. But the living skull merely beamed affectionately. 'Ooh, I think we could arrange that.'

They crossed the square, Fergal staring in frank curiosity at the A-listers, the armed police side by side with hippy guards; the slick and gaudy revolutionary art. 'Fock, this is amazin'. I niver thought, this time last year, ye'd still be keeping it all going. An' how's the band, Ax? Shane and Jordan, and yer girlfriend. Sorry, I shouldn't say that. Yer ex-girlfriend. Lovely woman, I forget her name, yer drummer. I don't see them. Are they here?'

'They're not in London at the moment.'

'Oh, right so. You know, there's been rumours, it's a shame. I'd hate to think that the Chosen—'

'Nothing's wrong with the band.' 'That's grand, because I can see how it must be tough, havin' yer frontman

into focking government politics—'

'I'm not into government politics. I'm into Community Service, state ceremonies and putting on a free concerts. Everything's fine, Fergal.'

The Few were delighted with their visitor. Federal Ireland was outside data quarantine (judged innocent of the Ivan/Lara disaster by the Commissioners); which made Fergal even more welcome. They took him back to the Insanitude, gave him a tour of the old pile—as much of it as wasn't Boat People accommodation—and then out to eat at their favourite Mexican. The Few were hungry for news, the Irishman insistent that the Rock and Roll Reich was *famous* out there, in the world they could no longer reach. They were the coolest thing going in the wreck of Europe—

'Fock,' he kept saying, 'here am I among the legends!'; and repeating with flattering pride stories of the Playboys' part in the mad panic tour last summer, when the Few and friends were racing around the Refugee-struck regions, through the worst storms of a century, staving off anarchy with rock concerts. 'Jaysus, that was the best hard fun I iver had on a tour, barring none. Dez ye recall that night in Manchester, or was it Preston, Sage?'

'Yeah,' said George Merrick. 'You bet we do. We're playing about our fifth Altamont in a week, the Manchester Irish are in the mosh, screaming *kill the Latvians*, and you *fuckers* start heckling from the side of the stage—' 'Aye, well, we're traditional musicians. We took offence, and rightly so, at the shite you were laying down. An then yer man Sage, ten foot tall in that fockin' spaceman outfit, dives thirty feet an' comes over and sez to me, 'Will we give you bastards what you are asking for now or later?'

'An' Fergal here,' supplied Bill, 'says, 'We didn't know you do requests. In that case, we'll have, 'A Nation Once Again', and then—'

'You left out, 'If Sage can find his voice in those tin knickers?', put in Chip.

'Yeah, there was the tin knickers remark. Think that was from Pierce Lyon.'

'Aye, that's right. It was when Sage picked up our Peezy – he's a little man – and threw him off the stage, that the fockin' punters took it into their minds to get involved. An' it was pissing down, and there was mud fockin' *everywhere*—'

'I don't think I heard this before,' said Ax. 'I fondly imagined we were all trying to keep the level of violence *down*—'

'Hey, don't listen, Sah,' protested Aoxomoxoa, the skull beaming rakishly. 'I don't remember the leprechaun-tossing, it must've been my shadow—'

'Oh Jaysus, I fergot, ye've turned over a new leaf. Will it be okay though if I tell the story of that barney we had at Glasto, first time we ever met—?'

The story of the famous barney at Glasto. Stories abounding, well known but worth repeating. Fergal Kearney, devouring red wine in astounding quantities, was still going strong when they returned to the San after midnight: living up to his reputation for the highest quality *craig*. Dilip and Chip and Ver stripped to bodymasks and cache-sex and went off to join the dance, (it was melting-hot in the State Apartments).

'Fock, this is amazin'. I niver thought, this time last year, ye'd still be keeping it all going. An' how's the band, Ax? Shane and Jordan, and yer girlfriend. Sorry, I shouldn't say that. Yer ex-girlfriend. Lovely woman, I forget her name, yer drummer. I don't see them. Are they here?'

'They're not in London at the moment.'

'Oh, right so. You know, there's been rumours, it's a shame. I'd hate to think that the Chosen—'

'Nothing's wrong with the band.' 'That's grand, because I can see how it must be tough, havin' yer frontman

into focking government politics—'

'I'm not into government politics. I'm into Community Service, state ceremonies and putting on a free concerts. Everything's fine, Fergal.'

The Few were delighted with their visitor. Federal Ireland was outside data quarantine (judged innocent of the Ivan/Lara disaster by the Commissioners); which made Fergal even more welcome. They took him back to the Insanitude, gave him a tour of the old pile—as much of it as wasn't Boat People accommodation—and then out to eat at their favourite Mexican. The Few were hungry for news, the Irishman insistent that the Rock and Roll Reich was *famous* out there, in the world they could no longer reach. They were the coolest thing going in the wreck of Europe—

'Fock,' he kept saying, 'here am I among the legends!'; and repeating with flattering pride stories of the Playboys' part in the mad panic tour last summer, when the Few and friends were racing around the Refugee-struck regions, through the worst storms of a century, staving off anarchy with rock concerts. 'Jaysus, that was the best hard fun I iver had on a tour, barring none. Dez ye recall that night in Manchester, or was it Preston, Sage?'

'Yeah,' said George Merrick. 'You bet we do. We're playing about our fifth Altamont in a week, the Manchester Irish are in the mosh, screaming *kill the Latvians*, and you *fuckers* start heckling from the side of the stage—' 'Aye, well, we're traditional musicians. We took offence, and rightly so, at the shite you were laying down. An then yer man Sage, ten foot tall in that fockin' spaceman outfit, dives thirty feet an' comes over and sez to me, 'Will we give you bastards what you are asking for now or later?'

'An' Fergal here,' supplied Bill, 'says, 'We didn't know you do requests. In that case, we'll have, 'A Nation Once Again', and then—'

'You left out, 'If Sage can find his voice in those tin knickers?', put in Chip.

'Yeah, there was the tin knickers remark. Think that was from Pierce Lyon.'

'Aye, that's right. It was when Sage picked up our Peezy – he's a little man – and threw him off the stage, that the fockin' punters took it into their minds to get involved. An' it was pissing down, and there was mud fockin' *everywhere*—'

'I don't think I heard this before,' said Ax. 'I fondly imagined we were all trying to keep the level of violence *down*—'

'Hey, don't listen, Sah,' protested Aoxomoxoa, the skull beaming rakishly. 'I don't remember the leprechaun-tossing, it must've been my shadow—'

'Oh Jaysus, I fergot, ye've turned over a new leaf. Will it be okay though if I tell the story of that barney we had at Glasto, first time we ever met—?'

The story of the famous barney at Glasto. Stories abounding, well known but worth repeating. Fergal Kearney, devouring red wine in astounding quantities, was still going strong when they returned to the San after midnight: living up to his reputation for the highest quality *craig*. Dilip and Chip and Ver stripped to bodymasks and cache-sex and went off to join the dance, (it was melting-hot in the State Apartments). Ax and his court settled regally in the Bow Room chill-out

lounge. Sweaty, glittering clubbers, passing in and out, made excuses to say hi.

The live band who'd been playing the ballroom arrived to pay their respects, and were graciously allowed to remain.

Fiorinda chatted with the singer from the band, a brash, overawed fifteen year-old called Areeka Aziz. Areeka was a Next Big Thing, and had been identified as prime Reich material. She must be recruited. Will you scrub hospital toilets, kid? How are you on digging potatoes for the cameras, teaching feral eight year olds to read and write? They'll listen to you: you're a rockstar. You do get self-defence training. This is what happened to me, now it's your turn.

Me, Ax Preston's chickenhawk—

The sound of that Irish voice grated on her. Fergal was at the other table and the company wasn't quiet, but she could hear every word. He'd reached the garrolous stage, he was explaining why he'd defected:

'Fockin' Dublin government sez there's no Countercultural Problem in Oirland, fockin' shite. Right enough it's not the Counterculture that's the problem, it's the fockin' bastards using it fer their own sinister aims, an' I know where it's heading. It'll be like the fockin' Catholic church all over again, and will the people rise up against the tyranny of it? Will they fock—'

That voice. She couldn't help it, she just didn't like that sound— 'Fockin' Irish, they're a race of political

masochists, they love their fockin‘

chiefs and princes an‘ a strong hand belting them. It’s like the man said in the play. *Abair an focal republic i nGaoluinn?*‘

The Few turned to George Merrick.

‘He says, ‘say ‘republic’ for me in the Irish?,‘ said George. ‘The point being, I reckon, that there’s no such word.’

‘Jaysus. I had fergot ye had the Gaelic. I shall have to watch me tongue—‘

‘There’s no word for *republic* in Cornish either,’ said George.

‘I’m only glad there’s a countrywoman of mine among ye to stand up for me.’

The Irishman cast a wistful glance towards Fiorinda, who was sitting with her straight back turned to him: still dressed for the artshow, feet tucked up under her storm-cloud indigo skirts, a silver grey bolero jacket covering her shoulders, a little silver cap on her burning hair—

He had raised his voice, which he didn’t need to. ‘I am not Irish,’ she said, turning her head reluctantly, the cut-crystal vowels very apparent.

‘Aye, well. Half-Irish, I meant to say.’

Chip and Ver and Dilip had just appeared, towelling themselves with sodden teeshirts. They stopped short. A *frisson* went round the whole party. You can’t talk about Fiorinda’s Irish ancestry—!What’s Fergal thinking of?

The rock and roll brat shrugged. ‘Tuh. My father was born in Chicago.’

‘Ye can be Irish by adoption, ‘tis a culture, not a race.’ Rufus O’Niall: born in Chicago of Black and Irish American ancestry, raised

in Northern Ireland by his adoptive parents, a minor Hollywood actress and a Belfast businessman. Became a megastar with a band called *The Wild Geese*. Married twice, divorced twice, nasty taste for very young girls. Had a daughter with London rock journalist Suzy Slater, a relationship that broke up when the child was four. When that daughter was twelve she was groomed by her aunt, procuress to the famous, and delivered to Rufus. The little girl became pregnant by him. She had no idea he was her father. Opinion differs as to whether Rufus knew what he was doing.

Everyone knows the story. *Shut up*, Fergal. But no, he can’t stop digging—

‘Yer dad’s a black-hearted swine, Fiorinda, as yez don’t need me to tell ye.

He’s one of the bastards I was just talking of. But I hate the whole fockin‘ Irish nation meself, an‘ I’m still an Irishman.’

‘I don’t follow your logic.’

‘Jaysus, girl, I’m saying don’t turn yer back on yer heritage, because one man did ye a terrible wrong when ye was too young to know—‘

‘What I want to know,’ announced Chip, loudly, flopping down in an empty chair, ‘is, when are we going to see some Gay Pride from Aoxomoxoa?’

‘Oh come on,’ said Rob, equally loud, lamming some of those art-workshop sparks at the insolent kid (Rob’s were acid yellow). ‘Leave the guys some dignity.

You want Fiorinda to make you a video or something?’

‘Hey, it’s a plan. That could be a nice little earner.’ ‘The words tigers and vaseline come to mind—‘ sighed Felice, rolling her eyes.

‘He’d never do it,’ said Allie, with regret, ‘not after everything he’s said about gays. He’s such a hypocrite. Okay, we use a body double. Should be easy. I’ll check my personal database.’

‘Nah. Has to be the boss. We’ll let ‘im have his mask—‘

‘Why is it always *me*?’ demanded Sage. ‘Why don’t you fuckers pick on Ax?’

‘Because I’m the great dictator,’ said Ax, leaning beside his Minister on the

sofa they were sharing, grinning complacently. 'They wouldn't dare.'

'You're his bitch, Sage,' said Dilip. 'We thought you knew.'

Fergal, looking confused, joined in the general laughter.

Fiorinda had escaped to the toilets, got there in time to throw up, violently, copiously. She clung to the porcelain anchor of a wash basin, staring through the face in the mirror. The raffish splendour of the State Apartments didn't extend behind the scenes. Here there were broken tiles, ancient fittings, dirt in the corners. Such is the shabby little hothouse of the Rock and Roll Reich, where every trapped soul knows what you mustn't say to Fiorinda, where everyone jumps a mile if someone dares to mention the dreaded name. Oh fuckit, this is ridiculous, put it behind you, worse things have happened to plenty of nicer twelve-year-olds, I was asking for it, *why am I fucking shaking?* Thank God Fergal Kearney would never know the abyss into which he had plunged her— Shit, what did I say to Areeka before I scooted? I was filthy rude to her, I know I was. *Shit*. Have to fix that.

Now I'm going back, and I'll behave like a human being. I can do it.

She opened the door. Sage and Ax were in the dark passageway outside (biological sex not an issue, but you don't invade the Ladies at the San unless you are *dressed* like a lady). Ax had her bag.

'Moving on,' he said, tucking it onto her shoulder.

'Raves to rave,' said Sage, kneeling to put her sandals on her feet.

'The night to explore.'

'What are you *doing*? I'm finem, we have guests, let's get back.'

'Not fucking likely,' said Ax. 'Fergal has had his audience. Let's hit the town.'

London was dark, motorised traffic scarce, but the night was warm and the streets were full of people: carrying their own lights, looking for the party. Sage and Ax and Fiorinda joined the shadowy carnival. Some unmarked time later they were in a club called 69 on the Caledonian Road, behind Kings Cross Station, dancing to Desmond Dekker, Marvin Gaye. Catching eyekicks of startled recognition in the fitful light, but no fuss from Ax Preston's children. At the back of the crowd Fiorinda danced with Ax, easy and close, letting the bittersweet defiant mood of the ancient music lift her. It was *so wonderful* to be in his arms, and Sage right there (leaning against the wall, meditatively smoking an Ananda, tenderly watching his lovers). Not jealous, not hurting, loving this beautiful guitar-man as much as she did. Devil take tomorrow, what does anything else matter, as long as I have my tiger and my wolf—

'Sage!' she stage-whispered, over Ax's shoulder. 'I have to have this Ax. Find me somewhere sort-of private. Right now.'

'What about you, Mr Dictator?'

'*Yeah*.'

'Okay. Leave this to me.'

He led them out the back, to a car park, dank and dark, by the Regent Canal, buddleia and willowherb sprouting from the asphalt, almost empty but for a couple of rows of derelicts that might have been there since Dissolution. Sage lifts Fiorinda onto the bonnet of a flat-tired Vauxhall, divests her of her pretty pants (he loves having her underwear in his pocket—) and stoops over her, the skull mask glimmering silver. 'My brat, but you don't like al fresco sex?'

'This isn't outdoors,' said Fiorinda, hugging him with arms and legs. 'This is an urban exterior, which is totally different, I *love* this—'

One deep kiss and he moved aside, saying All yours, Sah – a little atavistic ritual happening here, part laughing, part strangely intense. Fiorinda took Ax,

Ax silently powering into her, God, *wonderful*, while Sage kept watch at the end of the row. Then Sage was back, twisting Mr Dictator's hair in a silky rope, biting the nape of his neck, big cat style: *hey, brother, move over, I want her*, and it was Ax's turn to stand guard . . . The whole double act took about five minutes, and it was bliss. They sat in a row, backs against the defunct Vauxhall, passing a spliff: the rain falling on them like cold kisses. The air smelled of railway grime, puddles glimmered on black, cracked pavement. Fiorinda, a warm wall on either side of her, looked up into the opaque sky and couldn't stop grinning. Nobody understands us, she thought. Not anyone in this fucking country, not our dear, protective, demanding friends, no one: because *this* is all we want. Nothing else, just this. Forever, ever, ever.

'Good car to drive,' mused Sage. 'After a war.'

'Very poky ride—'

'Cheap to run' all. Couple of pints of snakebite and a handful of Bombay Mix, she'll go all night.'

'Lovely interior.'

'Mm, and great road holding—'

'You noticed that too?'

'Hohum,' said Fiorinda, pulling her hair across her face in two thick hanks of damp tangled curls. 'Fiorinda remains problematic role model for liberated young women of England.'

'Ah, no!' They grabbed her, swept her onto the bonnet again and fell to their knees, pressing the cold, rosy soles of her feet to their faces, kissing away the gravel and rainwater and dogshit. 'Fiorinda, angel, empress, we're stupid drunks, we thought it was funny, we didn't mean—'

'Idiots. Let me down.' So they lifted her down and cuddled her close between them: a little sad now, a little crestfallen. Sage leaned over and kissed Ax: rubbed his cheek against Fiorinda's hair and heaved a sigh. 'Ah, well. Me and my ruined fortunes.'

'Yeah. Me and my falling-apart band. Ouch, ouch, ouch.'

'He doesn't mean any harm.'

'Just not the soul of tact, our Fergal. It's not his fault we're caught in this trap.'

'As long as we can get pissed and fuck in a car park, in the pouring rain,' said Fiorinda, 'I reckon we have not lost the game of life.'

'I love you, Fee, because you are so wise.'

Sage went indoors to rescue Fiorinda's bag and sandals from becoming the objects of a Cargo Cult. They headed for home on the all-night Underground, the carriage almost empty and weirdly bright, Fiorinda curled up on Sage's knees, falling asleep. 'I wonder what he's really here for,' she mumbled. 'Fergal.' Sage and Ax exchanged a wry glance.

'I expect we'll find out soon enough,' said Ax.

Building Management found Fergal Kearney a room at the Insanitude, which he seemed pleased to accept. He came to the maisonette in Matthew Arnold Mansions, Brixton Hill, by appointment; on a grey summer evening two days later. Mr Preston himself came down to let him in. Fergal followed the Dictator upstairs, and stood looking around. He saw a big room, simply furnished: a gas stove in an old-fashioned fireplace, a few pictures on the walls, a couple of good North African rugs. Tall windows at the back stood open to a brick terrace on which stood pots of glossy greenery. You might call the style minimalist, but there was nothing precious about it. Just travelling light.

Here, on a stand on a bookcase, is the five thousand year old stone axe, the Sweet Track Jade, the one they gave him when he was inaugurated. Here's a pair

of car numberplates, AX1, which someone must also have given him. Mr Preston is way too arrogant for vanity plates, so they end up an ironic ornament. Here's an immersion cell, in a flat screen: Sage Pender's best work, Jaysus that's a pretty thing, and better not look at it too long for it will suck you in. Here's a framed piece of Arabic lettering, looks antique. The Irishman frowned. Ah, now, the Islamic question . . . The smell of cooking drifted pleasantly from further into the flat (Mr Preston's an excellent cook, that's also part of the legend). An open door gave a glimpse of a wide, low bed. A tortoiseshell cat crouched, glaring at the stranger, on one of the couches by the stove: poised as if not sure which way to run. He was trying to read the runes. How do they live together, these two beautiful, powerful men? How do things shake down between them: Mr Ax Preston, with the air of command on him that you could cut with a knife, and Sage, who surely to God (joking apart) is no feller's bitch—? He already knew, from the way he'd been greeted, to expect a little distance. Mr Preston at home is not going to be the same person as Ax, relaxed and half drunk at the Insanitude. There was nothing in sight that suggested Fiorinda, and this caused him concern. Why does she leave no mark? Ax had returned to the current jigsaw, seeing that his visitor was

preoccupied, and sat by it on the floor, calmly sorting pieces.

'You're alone here?' said Fergal, at last.

'Yeah. Sage and Fiorinda will be back soon. So, what did you want to talk to me about, or can it wait?'

'Yez don't keep any staff?'

'Fuck, no,' said Ax. 'I spend my life managing people. I come home I want to switch off. We have a cleaner three times a week, because if we didn't, with the best will in the world, the place would get disgusting. Other than that we do our own chores. Dunno what anyone sees in domestic servants, it's a crap idea.'

'That's not exactly what I meant.'

Ax grinned. 'You mean where are the armed guards?'

'Ax Preston is a very brave man,' said Fergal, somewhat sternly. 'That's part of the legend, an' I don't doubt it's the truth. But there's Fiorinda to think of. Fockin' Jaysus God, what if you two great lads was to come back here one day an' find her raped an' murdered? Would ye not be better with just a few of yer barmy army fellers around?'

Brixton is my village, thought Ax. I run SW2 as my private fief. You don't see the guards because I don't need them: I own the neighbourhood. But Fergal probably didn't catch the fascist junta issue of *Weal*. . . And one day, yeah, maybe this life will become too dangerous. It'll be time to get out, and take my friends with me. Hope I don't miss the moment. He smiled. 'The day we need to be protected from our people is the day we quit.'

'Fine words. But suppose you find out it's time to quit half an hour too late?'

Ax shrugged. 'Insh'allah. Please, make yourself at home. Sit down.'

The Irishman came over and peered at the jigsaw, a National Trust classic, featuring many different varieties of British sheep. Fiorinda had found it in a Help The Aged shop.

'You like sheep?'

'Very keen.'

'Hm.' Fergal dropped the shoulder pack he was carrying and sat down. His complexion had a dull, magenta cast today: he moved with the deliberation of an old man, or a painfully sober drunk. 'How d'yer Islamic backers feel, about you and yer man—' He nodded significantly towards the bedroom door. 'Do they not

find that a wee bit hard to take?’

‘Jaysus fockin’ God, Fergal. Don’t be afraid to ask an awkward question.’

‘I’m just trying to get a clear picture.’

‘I think they might find the video hard to take,’ said Ax, ‘so we’ll probably hold back on that, until we’re really strapped for cash.’

‘Fockin’ wind-up merchants. Fock it. I knew that was a big leg pull.’

‘Sure you did . . . Fergal, I converted to Islam to end the separatist war in Yorkshire.’ Ax picked out a fragment of shaggy-brown big sheep. No, it’s a piece of rock. ‘The mullahs knew what they were getting. Some of the Faithful are appalled that I perform on stage with a stringed instrument. . . But they’ll live with it, because I’m their warrior prince. I don’t pretend to be conventionally devout, I behave with reasonable decorum in public, and it works. The leaders of English Islam are in this for the long haul. They see themselves heading for a golden age, England an enlightened, multi-ethnic Caliphate. I’m a move on the board, a step on the way. They’re not homophobic, they even believe in civil rights for women, and they don’t give a toss for my dissolute lifestyle, if I serve their purpose.’

All true. It was also true that Ax’s conversion had been genuine, but he didn’t see why he had to discuss that.

‘Right so. There’s no Islamic problem. Ye know, I’ve never known a woman to really *enjoy* a ménage à trois. They put up with it if they have to, but they’re naturally monogamous. Are ye sure she’s happy?’

‘Fergal.’ Mr Preston was beginning to lose patience. ‘I find it hard to believe that the Irish government sent you over here to investigate my sex life.’

‘Fock. I’m not working for the government.’

‘So who are you working for? The Dublin chapter of the CIA?’

Footsteps on the stairs. The cat, who had partly settled, roused again and stared at the door. Sage came in, Fiorinda close behind him. ‘Hi, Fergal,’ said Sage. ‘Sorry, Ax, we should have called. I had to haul Fiorinda out of the DETR.’ ‘Environment, Transport and the Regions,’ said Ax to Fergal, politely. ‘The government department we mostly have to deal with. It’s okay, the stew’s taken no harm. I’ll put the couscous on to steam now.’

‘I’ll do it,’ said Fiorinda, quickly.

People who have a lot of pain and suppressed anger in them are often ‘tactless’: Ax had noticed this. As much as they want to please you, as much as they know they’re self-destructing, the totally unnecessary, needling comments will come tripping out. Fergal Kearney, poor devil, was well known for his terrible habit of saying the wrong thing. But there was something different going on this time. Even at the San the other night, Ax’d felt that Fergal was a man with a plan.

The Irishman ate sparingly, fortified himself with several glasses of red wine and continued to probe the weak spots, crudely but thoroughly. He was sounding them out, like a political refugee indeed: testing the ground.

He tried hard to make up to Fiorinda for his *faux pas* the other night, but she wasn’t having any. She hardly spoke, and disappeared to the kitchen at the slightest excuse. At last Fiorinda loaded the dishwasher (a very *green* dishwasher, but Ax refused to live without one), while the men moved to the couches by the stove, with a new bottle of wine. Giving Fergal Kearney spirits would be outright murder, but you had to accept that he needed his drug, in some form; beyond the point of no return.

‘So,’ said Ax, ‘did we pass? Now can you tell us who you’re working for?’ ‘I told yer,’ said Fergal,

'I'm working fer the Rock and Roll Reich, if yez'll have me.' He gave them his sweet, broken grin. 'Be easy, I'm not planning to make a move on yer girlfriend. But I've fallen for her, that's the truth, an' I've parted company with the Playboys – don't know if you heard. Me life's near at an end. Why should I not follow the gleam? I've nothen' better to do.'

He drank, and set the glass down. 'You know, it's a funny thing. The first time a doctor gave me a death sentence, I was terrible upset. I'd lie awake nights, grieving. Now it's on me, and I can't be focked to worry about it.'

This was chilling. Fergal was maybe ten, at most fifteen years older than they were themselves: and he was dying. They didn't doubt it. Last summer he'd still seemed indestructible, now the marks of the last straight were unmistakable.

'Okay,' said Ax, after a moment. 'That's half the story. And the rest?'

'Aye, the rest.' The Irishman looked at Ax uneasily. 'The tale is that you have no interest in conventional politics, Mr Preston. Fer your purposes you only need the culture, the lifestyle choices. Control the mob, and let the mob control the bastards in the suits. I hear ye have an army of yer own, and the polis eating out of your hand an' all . . . An' that's all well and good, in *your* hands. Becuz you're using this classic game plan (will I mention the Hitler word?) fer peace, and the preservation of all that's good in the modern world. But there's other people besides yourself that's seeing this fockin' cascade of disasters as a golden opportunity to change the rules—' He broke off, and waited for Fiorinda to cross the room. Give the Irishman his due, he might be tactless but he knew that Fiorinda wasn't just around to look decorative. She curled on the end of Ax and Sage's couch (like the cat, ready to make herself scarce at a moment's notice). Fergal nodded to himself, and looked hard at his glass, but did not touch it. Now it's coming.

'Mr Dictator, ye've got a problem.'

'I have several,' said Ax. 'Could you be more specific?'

'How well d'you know yer Prime Minister? Mr David Sale?'

Shit.

'We have a working relationship,' said Ax, sedately.

Fergal nodded, still with the air of someone weighing his words very carefully, hesitating over every step. 'But yez don't know him personally?'

'I wouldn't say he's a personal friend. No.'

'Did ye know he's a smack addict?'

Sage grinned. 'Yeah. He's a vegetarian an' all. We try to be broadminded.'

'It's not funny, Sage,' said Fergal, reproachfully.

'Addiction's a big word,' said Ax. 'I know David's using heroin a little; so do others. Personally, I don't like it: but it's not a guilty secret.'

'Aye, well. What if I was to tell yez he was getting into something worse?'

Fergal reached for his bag, took out an envelope and drew from it several seven-by-ten monochrome prints. He laid them on the coffee table between the couches. A succession of images: groups of seemingly naked human figures, cavorting in a dark background. Closer shots of a white shape, a horse, on its knees, black blood gouting from its belly, and the most eager of the worshippers pressed around the killing. Some heads were circled and highlighted.

Ax picked up the prints, one after another. One of the enhanced headshots, full face, and profile, was clearly recognisable as the English Prime Minister.

'What is this about?'

'This is about the Celtics,' said Fergal grimly. 'The folks that used to call themselves 'Ancient Britons'. There's a lot of this caper goes on in Ireland now.'

The soft end of it, the pilgrimages to the High Places, the feasts and the bonfires: an' even the Catholic hierarchy, fer what their fockin' opinion's worth, says it's fine and dandy. Something we never really should have left behind. Maybe so An' maybe ye're going to tell me the English Cabinet is welcome to enjoy a Pagan ritual, along with a needle-full of Mother Comfort now and then. But however that may be, according to my information, yer Mr Sale has progressed to the harder stuff. Harder even than you see him here.'

'What d'you mean by that?'

'Magic.'

'Real magic?' said Sage, taking up the pictures and frowning at them.

'I don't know what yez understands by the term,' said Fergal. 'The blood sacrifice would be real. An' effective, in that it brings us closer to what they want, which is the Dark Ages. How real do yez want it?' Pagan sacrifice was one the problems that kept Ax awake at nights. The

Celtics insisted they had a right to practise their religion, and it was difficult for him to deny that right, while avoiding an open split —although the *cruelty* of the killings stuck in his throat. He had to leave it to the campground councils, he had to leave it to the hippies themselves to condemn the bloodthirsty extremists.

But it was definitely not okay for the PM to go cavorting around bonfires.

Animal sacrifice was seriously illegal. The fact that it happened, the fact that there were secret networks, Countercultural and others, who gathered for these blood-daubed raves, was a national scandal. Thank God it couldn't possibly be *true*. David Sale wouldn't be such an idiot—

It doesn't have to be true. My God.

'Are you trying to tell me these are genuine pap-shots of the English Prime Minister at a so called 'Celtic' animal sacrifice?'

'Aye.'

'Oh, give me a break!' Ax dismissed the idea with a flick of his hand. 'I can see just by looking at them that these images have been faked to hell. I don't know who sold you this, but there's nothing in it. This isn't evidence!'

'I niver said anything about *evidence*,' said Fergal, with dignity. 'I should think a public enquiry's the last thing ye'd be wanting. I said a problem.' He stared hard at the Triumvirate, as if still trying to decide if he could trust them. 'I can't tell yez how I got hold of these. I don't precisely know where they came from, meself. But the pictures aren't all. According to me informants, Mr Sale knows a place where it goes beyond killin' animals, an' I can tell yez the where and when.'

They stared back at him, straight-faced. 'I don't believe you,' said Ax.

Fergal nodded. 'Aye. I can understand that. An' I understand how ye'll feel about the messenger. But ye had to be told. I'm a mouthy old drunk, but everything I said the other night's the truth. I have the greatest admiration for the Reich, and I'm not the only one. There's a world out there, wanting to believe Ax Preston's England isn't going to collapse into a pile of shite—'

'That's nice to know.'

'I was coming over to yez anyway. I wisht I hadn't had to bring this. Or I wisht you had laughed in my face an' said it was a pack of fockin' nonsense. But I see that's not how it is. An' now I'll leave the matter.' He stood up, delving in his pack again. 'Didn't bring me harp, I had a feelin' no one would ask me to play. But here's a present from Ireland. I couldn't carry much,' he added shyly. 'I tried to think what yez'd really be missing.' He put a gift-wrapped package beside the envelope and glanced diffidently at Fiorinda, who hadn't said a word through

the whole exchange. 'Are they good to yez, these two? Jaysus, I hope they are.'
'Oh yes,' said the rock and roll brat, raising cool, merciless grey eyes. 'They take me for walks, and I have my own bowl with my name on it and everything.'
Ax and Sage saw Fergal out. They came back and stood considering their babe. She seemed to be okay. 'How about a guinea pig?' said Sage to Ax. 'People speak highly of those big furry spiders,' said Ax. 'Apparently they can be very companionable.'

'Sorry.'

'But what do you think of him?' said Ax, sitting down again. 'Truly?'

'I think he's genuine,' said Fiorinda, at once. 'He puts my back up, but I have to admit, I think he really wants to join your rock and roll band. I hope to God somebody's using him to deliver loony disinformation, but I think Fergal himself is fine. Of course I could be wrong.'

'You could be, but you're not often. Well. Let's see what we've got.'

He opened the parcel. They had three cans of Diet Coke, a cellophane package of black peppercorns, and a bottle of genuine, hundred per cent agave, Mexican tequila.

Of all the countries under the Internet Commissioners quarantine, in the wake of the Ivan/Lara virus disaster, the three nations of Mainland Britain had suffered most: and England worst of all, having neither Scotland's connections with Scandinavia (where quarantine had already been lifted); or much benefit from the smuggling across the Irish sea. They'd lost not only e-commerce and financial services, but a crippling amount of foreign trade. It just wasn't worthwhile fighting through the maze of data-quarantine regulations, for the privilege of doing business with the poverty-stricken English. They laughed. The country was in more need of machine parts than

peppercorns. But even after the news he'd brought, it was impossible not to be touched by Fergal's bounty.

'I don't think we should decide anything until morning,' said Fiorinda. 'I'm going to practise. Soundproofing on or off?'

She often practised the piano late at night. It was the only way to find solid time, and she liked the echoing secrecy of those hours.

'Off,' said Sage.

'Mind if we join you?' asked Ax.

'As long as you don't talk.'

Fiorinda played Bach, rapidly and carefully, frequently taking a phrase apart, building it up again, obsessively smoothing out the kinks. Ax lay with his head in Sage's lap, watching her hands in the pearly glow of ATP lamplight. The music room, which was still their spare bedroom (are we ever going to get that guest room sorted?) was Fiorinda's territory. Her favourite dresses hung on the walls, her treasures were displayed: her guitars (including that awful old Martin); the red cowboy boots he'd bought her when they were first together. It wasn't easy to give Fiorinda presents. Those orange trees on the terrace, a triumph for Sage. . . but something you gave her joins the elect in here, you know you're doing well. Most of Ax's guitars were still in Taunton. Will I ever move them up here? If I do, will Jordan see that as my final betrayal of the band?

Fiorinda was right. Wait, sleep on it. But he kept hearing Fergal's question again. No, Ax did not *know* David Sale.

He'd sometimes felt a great respect for the man. It was David Sale who'd refused to panic, who'd let the Deconstruction Tour happen, without pouring petrol on the fire. Who had kept his head when Pigsty Liver was running riot, who had

kept the regulars out of the fighting in Yorkshire. Who had *created*, let it be said, the situation that had brought Ax to power. But Ax had never wanted to be in Sale's confidence, too much dirty water under that bridge. There was the question of how far he'd been involved in the Massacre Night conspiracy. There were other questions . . . Things Ax had preferred not to know.

At the artshow in Trafalgar Square, he'd seen the PM with a shiny group of fashionable Greens, expensively dressed in the latest 'Celtic' style. David Sale with the identical, bright-eyed, eager grin, same as Ax remembered from the Think Tank days: the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary thrilled at themselves for hanging out with rebel rockstars, dirty dangerous brutes like Pigsty, but we love taking risks: how *cool* are we? Oh, shit.

He'd brought Fergal's pap-shots to the music room, not meaning to look at them again, but . . . He sat up and studied the images: turned them over and found handwritten notes. Dates, locations. He pushed back his hair, rubbing his temples with calloused fingertips.

'I'm going to try and send a couple of faxes. I won't be long.'

Fiorinda went on playing, stubbornly, but in the end was forced to stop, turn her head and meet the gaze, blue and accusing. Sage had his hands in his pockets. He was wearing the masks less and less but the hands must still be hidden, if at all possible. One long leg crossed over the other, a sickle-shaped indentation by the left corner of his mouth, picked out very clearly by the lamplight. *He will be fifty*, she thought, with a shock. He will be this big, thin, middle-aged bloke, extremely used to getting his own way.

'What?'

'Fee, can you still do that trick of yours, with fire?'

Fiorinda's grandmother practised witchcraft. Sage had accidentally discovered (or been allowed to discover, he wasn't sure which), that Fiorinda could do some strange things herself. She'd made it clear that he was not allowed to tell anyone. Not even Ax.

'You mean like this?'

She held out her right hand, palm upwards. A dot like molten copper appeared, quivered on her skin, and then a vivid leaf-shaped flame was there. He even thought he could feel the heat. But the brain loves to be fooled.

'Is that an illusion?'

She moved her hand so the flame connected with the corner of a sheet of music lying on top of the piano. The illusion continued to convince his senses.

'Oh, Fiorinda—'

She resumed playing, having crushed the miniature blaze between her fingers. A wisp of smoke and the smell of scorched paper remained. 'Look. You've had genetic engineering that means you can pump out energy from your fingertips, enough to light a room or boil an egg. Ax has a chip in his head that means he can tell me all the postcodes in Billericay, and what the Ministry of Defence plans to do in the event of a nerve gas strike on Coventry, without pausing for thought. Don't talk to me about weird. I have unusual abilities that I was born with: I know about them and I've decided what to do, which is bury them. What's the difference? I don't see a difference. I don't know why you're raising the subject. I don't see how what I can do has any connection with so-called 'Celtic' animal sacrifices.'

The word Fergal used was *magic*, he thought.

'Of course not. Never said there was. You have to tell Ax, that's all.'

'Yes, okay, but not now,' Fiorinda temporised, cunningly. 'Not right now.'

Let's get over David and the blood-cult thing. *Then* I'll tell him. As soon as there's a good moment. Honest.'

4: The Grove

Two weeks after Fergal's visit to Brixton, Fiorinda was in the dead centre of England, on the border between Leicestershire and Derbyshire: on her way to an extra date on the Festival Season's royal progress, and taking a side trip to inspect a derelict property for the Volunteer Initiative.

The weather had changed. The sky was baking blue, heavy with heat and silence. She climbed a flight of mossy steps, from the fishponds lost in reeds and rushes to a weed-smothered rose-terrace. Neglect, but no crumbling ruins: how strange that seemed, and yet seven years is not such a long time. She sat on the top step, her back to the apricot-tiled, ambling façade of the old house. It was here, she told herself, feeling nothing.

This is where it began

Roxane Smith came up the steps and sat beside her, arranging the summer version of her trademark flowing garments.

'What were you expecting to find?' s/he asked. 'Ghosts? It's a pity the country around this charming lost domain is still soul-free potato fields as far as the eye can see, same as it was in Rufus's day. But we must feed ourselves.'

'Nothing. I wanted to see it again, that's all. Since we were passing.'

'Hmm . . . Is the manor still your father's property?'

They hadn't broken in, the gates at the road were falling apart, but the visit was unofficial. Time enough to trace the owners of an empty property if they decided the place looked useful for something or other.

'I'm not sure who it belongs to. It might be mine.' Chip and Verlaine were inspecting the swamp that had been Rufus O'Niall's

fishponds; feeling uneasy. What would Aoxomoxoa say about this visit? Verlaine spoke of the afternoon when, in a moment of dire folly, he had given Ax a dodgy neurological drug . . . and Sage had come looking for him. It bothered him that he couldn't remember a word his hero had said. The encounter played in his mind like a sunlit, horrible silent movie. 'You think you've seen him angry, Merry, but you haven't. He didn't touch me—'

'Commiserations.'

'Lay off. You're the one that lusts after him, not me. My feelings are pure. He didn't touch me because he knew if he touched me he'd kill me.' He glanced up at the terrace. 'Are we sure she's okay?'

'Never in doubt. Look at them, aren't they great? Our court philosopher and the young queen, in stately conclave.'

'Cool,' agreed Verlaine. 'Don't you *love* the way this is turning out—' A moorhen chugged from between stands of flowering rush, breasting mats of green. The water she revealed didn't look too malarial, it was brown and clear.

Chip got interested. 'Do you think there are *newts*? Let's have a look.'

'It might be yours?' prompted Roxane. 'Oh? How's that?'

Fiorinda rested her chin on her hand, gazing ahead of her. 'After I started singing with DARK, and someone outed me as Rufus O'Niall's daughter (It's okay, Rox. I've forgiven you), I got a lawyer-letter offering me money. The deeds of this house were in it. The band helped me deal with it, because I hadn't a clue, and his lawyers got a lawyer-letter back saying I don't want your money. With the deeds in it, torn up. I never heard anything more. I suppose you could say he was trying to make up, but I didn't feel like playing.'

'I was once raped by a stranger myself,' said Rox. 'Long ago. As I recall, the hardest part was convincing myself to let it go. That I should forgive myself, if I couldn't forgive the bad guy, and get on with my life. It took several years.'

'I wasn't raped. I was just taken, like a piece of fruit.'

When you can call what your father did by its name, thought Rox, you'll be free. Not until—

Fiorinda was thinking that she owed Fergal a debt of gratitude. He had knocked away a crutch that she no longer needed. It had been a shock to hear her father's name again, so casually spoken: but she was over that, and a shackle had fallen from her. Who's Rufus O'Niall? Just an ageing celebrity with nasty habits, who once did something to me that is unfortunately public knowledge. He doesn't matter, he can't hurt me now.

When she'd realised that investigating Fergal's story was going to bring her within twenty miles of this house, she'd decided she had to come and see. So here she was, and it was fine. No panic attack, no strangeness. She touched her throat mic and recorded, blandly, 'The house seems weatherproof, no gaping holes, no obvious vandalism. The grounds are level, well-watered, well-drained. However, the position makes this a wildlife refuge, in a sea of essential agribusiness: that could be linked to the National Forest corridor. I think that's what we should be looking at, pending further investigation.'

'Rox, is Fergal really dying?'

Enough said. Roxane understood, from the cool, very *Fiorinda* smile s/he was getting, that the subject of Rufus O'Niall was closed. One doesn't pester this young lady. Her confidences are rare treasure. 'Ah, Fergal . . . Every time I meet him I'm surprised he's still alive. He has a systemic cancer, and cirrhosis. The tumour suppressants make it difficult to treat the liver failure, and I'm afraid that's about it. But who knows? As long as he can keep himself supplied with modern medicine, he may have a few more years.'

'Can he play that harp? He seems to just carry it around.'

'He can play. Last summer he could still sing. You'd have to get him on stage.

Prop him against something, turn on the lights, he might surprise you.'

The ever-infantile Adjuvants came up from the ponds, duckweed to the armpits. '*Palmated newts*,' announced Chip. 'How about *that*? Enough to stop a motorway, if we had one planned. D'you want to come and see?'

'Pass,' said the philosopher and the young queen, in unison.

A bee hummed. A bird burst into song, one solitary voice, loud and sweet.

'What I can't understand,' complained Verlaine, 'is how they can call it a revival. Where are the sacred texts? Where did they turn up the liturgy of the ancient Celts? Who told them what they're meant to do?' Pagan rites held no terror for the Adjuvants. Nor Rox. They treated the whole

subject with a very English, affectionate scepticism. Hammer Horror and Narnia.

'I don't know about 'Celts?,' said Fiorinda, 'but if it's about ritual magic, you don't need ancient authority. Wicca isn't *old*. Someone invented it in the nineteen forties or something. According to my gran, anyone can do ritual magic. Get yourself sky-clad, get some candles, ball of red yarn might be handy: do whatever you think. Impro is positively encouraged.'

'Yeah, and I bet most of it absolutely sucks,' said Chip. 'Good tunesmiths are rare. Most people shouldn't be *allowed* to use their own material . . . er, present company excepted, of course.'

'Wanker,' said Fiorinda, amiably. 'I know how you talk behind my back.'

The Adjuvants rejected the concept of *original music*. Every scratch and sample

and scrap of lyric that went into their daft compositions was previously owned. The security crew, left with the van out on the road, started paging, complaining that they were bored. The party left Rufus O’Niall’s manor and drove on: to the obscure little country town where they might find proof of the Prime Minister’s involvement in a bloodthirsty Pagan cult.

The Triumvirate had investigated Fergal’s story as far as they could (as far as they dared), and then brought the problem to closed meeting in the Office: banishing the admin staff and shutting down the PA on the grounds that they needed to discuss the Irish recruit in private. Which was, in a sense, the truth. Ax had talked to Fergal again. The Irishman claimed he was just the courier.

He’d been contacted by people he trusted, who knew of his plan to come to England: he thought they were acting for another party, and he couldn’t say more than that. He didn’t know how digital images of the English PM had turned up in Ireland, on the wrong side of the quarantine barrier. He didn’t know anything about the source, or how the information about dates and locations had been obtained. He’d known what he was carrying, and of course that it was dynamite. He’d said what he’d been told to say, and that was it. He hadn’t been searched coming in. He’d come over unofficially, on a smuggler’s boat, and crossed into England from South Wales over the mountains, without passing through customs: which was likely enough.

‘It’s possible,’ said Ax, ‘that Fergal is telling us the simple truth, as far as he knows it. The data quarantine isn’t unbeatable. We can’t make so much as a phonecall across the barrier, but discs and electronic devices and e-paper can be smuggled both ways: we know it happens. I can see him having contacts in the Irish radical underground, I mean people with more sympathy for the Reich than for their own government. I can equally see the Irish Intelligence Services using someone like Fergal, with or without his knowledge. We can verify parts of his story, his route into the country for instance: but I’m expecting it to check out, and that’s not really going to tell us anything.’ The prints were passed around those schoolroom tables. There was a feeling

almost of relief, a sense that unfinished business was being resumed. Things had been quiet for a while, but no one here had believed the storm was over.

‘But the Prime Minister has minders,’ protested Verlaine, ‘They’d have to know; like the heroin. If he’s been doing this, somewhere there’s a file a mile wide. We’d have heard something. *You’d know, Ax—*’

‘Minders can be incompetent,’ said Ax. ‘Or his friends in Cabinet could be covering for him very efficiently, maybe not even knowing what it is they’re covering up.’

‘But why come to you?’ said Dilip. He rifled the images and passed them on to Allie with a shrug. Anything can be faked . . . ‘Whoever sent him, why send Fergal to us with this, and not to the suits? What does that imply?’

‘A misunderstanding,’ said Ax.

‘That’s a good question,’ said Sage.

‘Maybe they?, whoever they? are, have told the suits as well,’ suggested Chip. ‘Er, whoever it is you tell, when the PM is the problem—’

‘Maybe that’s Ax,’ murmured Allie. ‘Makes sense to me.’

‘But could there be any truth in the story?’ asked Roxane, cautiously. ‘That would seem to be the first issue, wouldn’t it? Can we find out?’

‘Not easily,’ said Mr Dictator. ‘I haven’t a clue how to find out if David Sale’s been dabbling in animal sacrifice. The Reich has no intelligence network inside Westminster. I’m sorry, major oversight, it just didn’t seem like the way to go. I started checking if the

PM's whereabouts were accounted for, on dates we'd been given. But then I realised—in time, I hope—that I was going to make people curious, because *I don't do that*. It's my policy to stay out of their business. I never ask a single unnecessary question.'

'We can't investigate down here,' said Fiorinda. 'Because we don't know how far he's already compromised. The moment anyone notices what we're doing, we risk launching the very scandal we're trying to avoid.'

'There's got to be *someone*,' protested Dora. 'Someone on the inside who could snoop, could ask the questions, without—'

'Who do you suggest,' growled Sage. 'Benny Prem?'

There was a mutter of disgust.

'There are plenty of Celtic sympathisers at Westminster,' said Ax, at last.

'There are bastards in positions of power who find all that neo-primitive, ne-feudalist shite very appealing, and say so openly. But the hypocrisy of English politics is sufficiently intact that if this story comes out, David will be forced to resign. If David resigns, the government will fall. If this government falls—'

'We are screwed,' said Sage.

The Heads were masked. As long as Peter didn't want to appear barefaced, they would support him. The living skull's expression was as bleak as the Few had ever seen it, as if this betrayal touched something deeper than they could guess. I wouldn't like to be in David Sale's shoes, thought Verlaine. If he's guilty and Sage gets hold of him. The Few were silent, straightfaced. Nobody was going to say it, but is a disaster for David Sale necessarily a bad thing? Do we *need* the government?

'The reason England is still in reasonable shape,' said Fiorinda, sensing resistance, 'is because we have what looks like a normal, legitimate State apparatus, working in harmony with the CCM. That's the illusion we've created. But we're not independent of the suits, and many if not most of them do not have the agenda. If David Sale's Coalition falls, there's nobody else we can work with. The Reich is done for.'

'You said, "down here",' Dilip noted, after a long pause. 'Meaning we can't investigate in London. What's the alternative?'

'We have dates and locations,' said Ax. 'We have a date and a location for a ritual allegedly coming off at Lammas, near a place called Wethamcote, in the East Midlands. There isn't a known hardcore sacrifice venue in the area, I was able to check that in police records: but that would figure. I imagine David Sale would be on an exclusive, well-protected, blood-fest network; if at all. Sage and I have a good excuse to go up there. We can see if Fergal's story checks out.'

'Wethamcote has an arts fest,' added Fiorinda. 'They call it Lammas Festival, but apparently it's just a perfectly innocent tourist fête. I'm going to invite myself, get the local viewpoint and pass on any information to Sage and Ax, who will be lurking in the countryside.' Allie stared. 'What? Fiorinda, you can't do that! No one knows what the fuck's

going on in the rural hinterland these days! They have a Pagan festival! They have blood sacrifices in the woods! They could be up to *anything*!'

The living skull looked (a rare sight) as if it thoroughly agreed with Ms Marlowe. 'Yeah, well. You talk to her . . . Fiorinda will be in the town, Ax and I will be with the barmies, having a look at the British Resistance Movement situation in the East Midlands, which is a genuine errand. If we find a hardcore ritual venue where Fergal's tip-off says we ought, that will be confirmation. If possible we'll get a look at the ceremonies: which David Sale is down to attend.'

'You're going to *bust*him?' exclaimed Chip. 'Wow. Er . . . would that help?'

'We're not going to bust anyone,' said Ax, patiently. 'If we find anything, we'll try not to get spotted. If they spot us, we'll back off at once. Very sorry ladies and gentlemen, we thought you were rural terrorists, no, please, don't bother to get dressed, we'll see ourselves out . . . We have to try and manage this fucking thing without offending the Celtics, that's the other bind. We can't deputise it, it's too sensitive, but I can't be seen to be actively hunting down the ritualists. If we find them, we have to make it look like an accident.'

'But what if he's there? What if *he's there*? What will you do then?'

'With luck, Chip, we won't know if he's there or not. The pap-shots were taken in the dark, in infra-red: if there's anything in them at all. Word is that the so-called 'respectable' ravers at these events usually wear digital masks.'

The pictures were with Rob. He nodded. 'Oh, yeah, I get you.' 'We've been caught like that,' said George, nodding. 'You think you're masked, and you're not.'

'I'm going to have to take this to David,' Ax continued. 'The pictures exist. If the story's true, someone could out him at any moment. If it's a hoax, that's nearly as bad, looks as if somebody's trying to destabilise our government—'
'Hohoho,' muttered Fiorinda.

'Yeah, thanks, as if that were necessary. . . . Whichever, I don't want to tackle him until I know what I'm talking about.'

'Lammas is the first of August,' said Allie, opening her laptop. 'Isn't it? That's two weeks Shit. Okay, well' She tapped keys. 'Fiorinda is *not* going alone. I will be calling for volunteers. Ax, this is going to fuck *you* up worst. You're supposed to be playing a residence with the Chosen at—'

'I know,' said Ax, cutting her off. 'Yeah, thanks. I spotted that.'

He'd been making an effort to play and rehearse with the Chosen this summer. As his friends and his lovers were well aware, it had not been working out. Of course, audience-wise the band was still a howling success: it would be a while before that changed. But Jordan Preston wasn't happy, he didn't like Ax's on-and-off role. There had been tearing rows, and the Chosen were taking *their* break from the circuit back in Taunton. The Few gave Ax space. It's a common tale, the rending and the tearing when someone gets bigger than the band.

Always painful, no matter what the circumstances. 'Hey, slow down!', Felice protested. 'Slow down! You guys go up there. You

find out the truth, you come back and Ax talks to the PM. I get that, that's okay. But what if the – the baby-impaling part is real? *Could* it be?'

The worst of Fergal's hints had been recounted, and lost in the discussion.

'The Ancient Celts,' said Dora, worriedly, 'were on the global high end of normal for human sacrifice, according to the archaeology. And the Romans said so too. I saw a programme.'

'Then we need to know about it,' said Ax. 'But I never heard of our lot doing anything worse than horses. I'm hoping *that* part is wild exaggeration.'

Wethamcote was a small town, long-time post-industrial: no railway, population about twenty thousand. A tributary of the Trent, called the Doe, ran through it. There was a lot more information on Ax's chip, none of it significant. It had been trying to reinvent itself as a tourist destination, with a brand new traditional summer festival, when Crisis Conditions and Dissolution had intervened. Allie reached the festival organisers by landline phone and found them touchingly keen, strangely normal-sounding. They were thrilled that Fiorinda wanted to play, short notice not a problem.

Ax and Sage had no difficulty getting themselves summoned by the barmy

army. On the evening that Fiorinda and her companions arrived in Wethamcote (after their side-trip to her father's house), the Dictator and his Minister were in a VI potato diggers' camp outside Tamworth, meeting some old friends. Fergal Kearney was with them. He had not been unwilling, on the contrary he'd been

determined to come along, but he was subdued. He knew he under suspicion.

The next night they were bivouacked outside Wethamcote with a picked squad of barmies, and in secure radiophone contact with Fiorinda. She reported that, yes, there *was* a rumoured sacrifice venue. Nobody they'd met would admit to knowing anything specific. It was strangers (said the locals): posh Pagans with private transport, from as far away as Leicester or further. Nobody wanted them, but the Wethamcote police refused to take action, and what can you do?

Ramadan had begun. Before dawn on the thirtieth of July, the Muslims washed themselves, prayed and broke their fast. By the time they'd finished the infidels of various stripe were ready to go. They set out to circle the town: moving with ordinary precaution, but not expecting trouble.

It was dead quiet out in the agribusiness. Not a bird. The men hated it. In the early days, the direct-action outlaws who'd become the cor of the barmy army had napalmed great swathes of green desert monoculture. They'd been convinced to give up the assault (forty-odd million people can't live on goat's cheese and nettles): but this landscape was still their heart of darkness, haunted by the great dying.

'They came for the tawny owls,' intoned Big Brock the re-enactment nut softly, as the men, two by two, crossed a stark expanse of last year's maize stalks, 'and I said nothing.'

'Because I'm not a tawny owl,' many voices murmured the response. 'They came for the water voles, and I said nothing,' piped up Jackie Dando,

Romany and ex-regular, entrepreneur who kept the band supplied with drugs.

'Because I'm not a water vole,' the sad chorus answered.

'They came for the buttercups,' sighed Brock, one broad hand on the hilt of the naked sword at his side, the other tucked in his rifle sling. 'And I said nothing.'

'Because I'm not a buttercup,' moaned the barmies, mournful and low.

Fergal, tramping beside Sage in the middle of the troop, glanced curiously at the living skull, clearly wondering what to make of this. Oh, you wait, thought Sage. You have no idea. They can keep the litany going indefinite.

'Brock.'

'Yeah, Sage?'

'Shut the fuck up.'

From the top of a rise they looked down on a small wood, roughly circular, a red earth track connecting it to one of the little grey lanes that wandered over the plain of the Trent. They knew there was a clearing in the centre, obscured by foliage. Their tech couldn't give them much detail. Wethamcote, with its church towers, couple of tower blocks, suburban housing, lay to the west. A farm and outbuildings stood about a mile away; there was no track between the farm buildings and the wood.

'The clearing wasn't there six years ago,' said Ax, 'for what that's worth . . .

It's a likely candidate; let's get down there.'

Onward. 'It'll be the horse-sacrifice,' said one barmy to another, 'that's the biggie.'

'You seen it done?' asked his partner, in a cautious undertone. They knew what Ax thought about blood-daubed Pagan rituals.

'Er, yeah, as it happens. Down in Kent, last year. Just out of curiosity.'

'That must make a fuck of a mess, disembowelling a live horse to death.'

'You bet. Don't worry, if we find an active venue there'll be no doubt.'

Ax was in the lead, watching the silent fields, feeling the mood of the barmies; missing Sage's physical presence at his side, but they couldn't both nursemaid the Irishman . . . He should have known that the smack meant trouble. But he had reached for that solace himself, when he was hard-pressed, and he hadn't had the heart to blame the guy. Shit, if I lose David Sale, what then? The choices that he'd made were forcing him down an ever-narrower path, to an end which he had foreseen, but foresight doesn't help. I'll have to quit the band, he thought. Jordan's right, this isn't fair. I have to admit that my life as a musician is over.

It felt like death. It felt like an unforgivable crime—

They reached the wood. The men fanned out, muttering about armed, sentient trees, trained to attack like Navy dolphins. Cyborg birds with cameras for eyes, Wiccan spiderwebs wired to the police station (obviously the police in town were raving Pagans, or they'd have closed the hardcore down). The jokes were many, but there was an edge to them. Ax kept his rifle on his back; so did Sage. The lads got into comfort mode. 'Please,' said Ax, resignedly, 'don't open fire on any squirrels, badgers, or bluetits—'

'N-not unless they shoot first, right Ax?'

'Nothing's going to happen.'

Their tech said there was nothing warm and big here besides themselves. The trees were thick and in full leaf. The lads moved through them, commendably silent. Everyone reached the perimeter of the clearing more or less together, and found a tall wattle fence around it, as if holding back the trees. There was a gate: barred but not secured; they went in. Inside the earth was bare and level, as if beaten by many feet. On one side, incongruously, stood a grey prefabricated hut, like a festival ground toilet block. The centre space was taken up by a gaping, smooth-walled pit, dug out to a startling depth. At the bottom, in the midst of the pit, stood two dark trunks of carved wood, like totem poles. Lashed to the top of each of these was the remains of a human body: a young man and a young woman. They seemed to have been naked, but it was hard to tell, through the blood, after the way the bodies had been ripped apart.

There was a thick butcher-shop smell, mingled with other scents less insistent: an earthy incense, piss and sweat, fecal matter, grease and fear.

'Fuckin' hell,' said Jackie, pleased, 'how's that for a smoking gun?'

'Shit,' gasped another lad, more attentive. 'How? H-how'd they *do that*?'

The totem poles were very tall, three, four metres: and the bodies appeared to have been ripped to bits in situ. 'Looks like . . . some kind of large meat-tearing animal?'

'Well, thanks, Sage,' wailed the young man. 'That's really fuckin' helpful!'

'Sorry. Okay, let's have a closer look.'

Aoxomoxoa swung himself over the rim, hung there and dropped lightly. He walked around looking up at the grisly remains. 'Dead no more than a day or so, I'd say. Fuck. Definitely claws and teeth. Dogs or something. Fucking big dogs. One skull crushed, front to back, not much face left. The other, er, missing.'

'Is someone recording this?' asked Ax.

'Yeah, Ax.'

'Good. Make it thorough, try not to disturb anything. Sage, will you get out of that, *now*.'

Chris, the lad with the cam, made his record. Brock unrolled a climbing rope, because even Aoxomoxoa might find coming *up* those slick walls a challenge. Fergal joined Ax. The rest of the barmies were hanging back, devoid of the ghoulish curiosity you'd expect from such a bunch of ruffians.

'We should get away from here,' whispered Fergal. 'Away, right now.'

The words sounded panicky. The look he turned on Ax was of stern, vindicated satisfaction.

Fiorinda and her escort were at the Rose and Crown, a fine old inn on Wethamcote's market square. She was at breakfast when the call came from her Triumvirate partners. She went off to her bedroom to talk to them. When she came down she told the others that the sacrifice venue was found, and they must

stop asking questions: lay off the topic. Nothing more. She lived with her special knowledge through the kiddies' bonfire building by the river, the madrigals and folkdancing in the square, the lunch in the mediaeval church (where the Christians were broadmindedly serving Lammas bread and ale). The crew had put up big screens in a public park, where Wethamcote's teens, and plenty of their elders, gathered excitedly for recorded footage of the summer's big outdoor gigs. Wethamcote hadn't had reliable tv or broadband reception for several years. They'd learned to live with the power-cuts, interrupted water supply and so on, but being cut off from the media had been, people said, the hardest loss. Made you feel as if you didn't exist. They had longed for the Reich to notice them, and nobody ever had. . . As Fiorinda walked to and fro, through the garlanded streets, people kept coming up, old and young, all dress codes, wanting to tell her how *wonderful* it was to see her. To be remembered.

The security crew fielded a graveyard full of posies.

The Adjuvants didn't seem to mind being sidelined.

It was five in the afternoon before she escaped. Roxane had just returned to the fray, from her afternoon nap: Chip and Verlaine were tireless. She left them playing bar billiards, and discussing with some locals when the ancient feast of Lammas *ought* to be celebrated. Given the calendar changes, right back to Julius Caesar. . . Upstairs in her pleasant room, with the wonky floor, the pretty view, the dead tv peering from its perch, she sat on the side of the bed, head in her hands.

Maybe this is it.

For a long time now, she had been afraid. Since when? Not when the old man took her, like a piece of fruit. Fiorinda had been *in charge* then, a child with a plan and not a qualm about trading sexual favours for her big break. Not when Rufus had left her pregnant, or even when her baby died. She had lived in pain (and to an extent maybe she always would, because you don't ever really get over stuff like that); but not *afraid*. Not even after Dissolution, when she found she could touch the fire, pick up a flame in her hand. Dreamlike, inexplicable, but so much of what was going on was dreamlike, bizarre. Ignore it, it'll go away.

She had only been afraid since the Mayday Concert at Rivermead when she had just turned eighteen, and her father came to claim her in the form of a bouquet of roses. She'd torn his flowers to pieces, blood on the thorns. She'd fought for her life that night and beaten him off, but she would have lost if Ax and Sage hadn't been there. She'd probably said some mad things, but luckily they'd been forgotten, disregarded. Fiorinda had a mega panic attack, brought on by stress and her damaged-child past, no other explanation needed— But Fiorinda *knew because she knew*. She knew what her father was, without ever putting it into words, not even in her own mind: and she knew she must never tell anyone. So then it was just living in fear, being very happy despite the fear. Forgetting the terrible immediacy of that night, hoping that she was delusional. Hoping Sage, who'd seen her with the fire, had forgotten or counted it as an optical illusion. Just poor damaged Fiorinda, still secretly obsessed with

her father, how embarrassing—

Then along comes Fergal Kearney, using the word *magic* with horror and revulsion, and crazy Fiorinda finds she knows DAMN well what he means. The horror in her blood. Two days ago she'd visited Rufus's manor house: found nothing there, not a qualm, and what a reprieve. . . But now this. The human sacrifice? No, something worse than ritual murder. Something in her lovers' voices. Something they weren't telling her, and the tone in which Fergal, back in Brixton, had pronounced that word *magic*.

Limitless fear. He is hunting me down.

He will break through these people to find me, these cheerful, suffering people of England, the way he once broke into my body—

She stayed like that for what felt like a long time, her thoughts in chaos, fists knotted and pressed against her temples. Then, moving briskly, she got up, changed out of her garden-party frock into practical clothes, tied her hair in a scarf and slung her tapestry rucksack on her shoulders. She slipped a note under the door of the room that Rox was sharing with Verlaine (for old sake's sake, though everyone knew it was Chip and Ver who were the item these days).

GONE FISHING, SEE YOU IN THE MORNING. She had a calm word with the security crew in the van, in the Rose and Crown's carpark. Hailed a cycle taxi and had it drop her at a roofless out-of-town shopping mall. Preparations for some theatre and dance were going on, but nobody saw Fiorinda. She set off on foot into the fields, heading for the venue Ax and Sage had described.

It took her about an hour to reach the grove.

Where the red track entered the trees a few wildflowers survived, in the margin of the potato rows. There's Rest Harrow, the creeping herb with small dark leaves and dusty pink sickle-shaped flowers, lover of edges and broken ground. 'I don't like pink,' she murmured – but she picked a sprig, because the flower reminded her of Sage and Ax, serenading her with her own music. She entered the enclosure, twisting the stem of Rest Harrow between her fingers, and walked around, looking at the objects hung on the wicker walls. Animal skulls. Clay pots full of grease. Stones and bones. Painted symbols, blah . . . Like gran's witchy basement. Nothing to be afraid of.

At last she knelt on the rim of the pit. Something in her rose to greet the savagery down there with the same acceptance, the same bleak welcoming that she had felt on other occasions. Massacre Night, a friend lying screaming, trying to hold his ripped belly together. The withered body of a murdered child. *Yes.*

This is the truth about the world, the inside of things, let it be seen, let everyone know . . .

But she remembered Fergal Kearney saying *how real do you want it?*, and her fear of spooks, of an evil superman, seemed like an insult to the dead. Poor kids, whoever you were. Poor broken flesh, I didn't mean it, what's worse than this?

Nothing. Her vision blurred, her eyes brimmed— She wiped her eyes and stood up. The sprig of Rest Harrow, with Fiorinda's

salt tears clinging to it, dropped into the pit. A toilet block, a little generator in a concrete hutch . . . well, how civilised. Bastards.

Better not stay too long. It's not what I thought, but this is an evil place.

It was twilight when she found the strip of trees where the barmies were camped. She'd called them once, been afraid she'd have to call them again and ask for more directions, breach of security, what a klutz. But no, a sentry loomed out of leaf-dapple shadows, a big sturdy woman-warrior (the barmy army had a few of those). A veteran: the enamel pin on her teeshirt, a circlet of moorland rushes, said she'd been at Yap Moss, the last battle of the Islamic Campaign. She

seemed reluctant to let Fiorinda by.

'Hi. Er, was there a password?'

'Oh, Fiorinda., I'm fucking glad you're here. This is bad shit. Really bad, unbelievable. *Dogs can't jump that high.*'

Unpremeditated, Fiorinda pushed the rifle aside and hugged the woman.

'Don't be daft.'

The barmies were in the middle of the trees, ragamuffin men, looking scared, sitting around in a circle. She knew them, at least by sight: they'd all been in Ax and Sage's guerrilla band, in Yorkshire. They all stood up, clutching weapons.

'I'm sorry,' she said, to her boyfriends. 'I had to see for myself.'

'It's okay,' said Ax. 'Understood.' They hugged her briefly, first Ax and then Sage. Everybody sat down. Sage's

arm stayed around her – an unusual public display of affection, but she wasn't complaining. 'Any new developments?'

'Well, the farmer's co-operating,' said Sage. 'He admits he's allowed the wood to be used as a venue for a couple of years. He claims he had no choice, which is probably true, but he's paid handsomely, anonymous packets of notes. He stays away from there, especially around the big dates, but he knew about the pit. He thought it was for the horse sacrifice. He swears he had no idea about the rest.'

'He gets a warning. The cars arrive late,' said Ax. 'They park in a layby, they leave before dawn. That's all we've got out of him so far, except he confirms the opinion of our experts—' A few of the barmies cringed at this, like pack members who have been nipped and cuffed by father wolf. 'He expects them back on Lammas' Eve, that is tomorrow night.'

'They'll be doing a triad,' offered big Brock, very subdued. 'They do three sacrifices over a feast like Lammas, an' keep the bodies displayed if they can get away with it, ter hallow the ground. But I'm talking animals, horses and dogs. Cats, if they are hard up. I've never heard of . . . anything the fuck like that.'

'I wish to tell you, Fiorinda,' muttered Fergal Kearney, 'that this is *not* the ancient ways, this is foul invention. The only meaning it has is for hurrying on the dark, which some bastard fellers think a fine plan—'

'Yeah,' Ax cut him off. 'Right.' He looked at the sky, reached in his pocket for cigarettes and took one out; but didn't light it. Last *sawm* he'd given up all drugs for the entire month. He didn't see himself managing that this year, but he could

hang on for half an hour. 'We're not talking to the local coppers, for obvious reasons, but we've arranged for reinforcements. We've called in the West Mid armed response squad, and sent for more barmies.'

'The farmer and his family are under close guard,' said Sage, 'in case they were thinking of giving anyone a call. We can't be sure we haven't been spotted and frightened them off, but *if* they come back, we'll be ready.'

'Like a night club raid,' said Fiorinda. 'Switch on the big lights, close down the exits and move in. Hey, is human sacrifice the new cocaine?'

Her levity did not go down well. Someone whispered, '*It wasn't dogs.*'

Another voice added, in a hollow tone, 'We were scared before we got near.'

'An' that's not like us, Fiorinda.'

'There was an aura.'

'Fuckin' Pagans. They use dark, inhuman forces.'

Angry glances shot around: there were Pagans in the band. You can believe in the old religion without being a sadistic murderous neo-feudalist.

'Oh come off it,' said Fiorinda, briskly. 'Pagans, Anabaptists, what's the difference where they go to church? What we have here are some sad bastards'

whose idea of fun is to watch human beings get ripped apart. There's nothing unheard of or supernatural in that, *unfortunately*.'

The barmies were not yet convinced. 'I don't believe in magic,' announced Zip Crimson, the sharp-dressing hippy kid who was one of the babies of this gang. 'It's fascist mediaeval screw the workers shite, an' I hate the stuff. But that's not to say it doesn't happen.'

'You could be right. All I'm saying is: not this time. I've seen the bodies. I know it looks bizarre. I don't know what the hell is going on, any more than you do. But trust me, there'll be a natural explanation. It wasn't *werewolves*.'

'Thank you, Fiorinda,' said Ax. 'I'm glad we can dismiss that option.' He put the cigarette back into the pack, saved by the realisation that he was starving.

'Now, can we eat? The sun is finally over the yard arm.'

The men relaxed, steadied and possibly shamed by Fiorinda's calm. A vegetable stew, which had been cooking in an ATP haybox stove, was served (the infidel had all waited to eat with Ax). Everyone ate with mechanical fervour, like good soldiers: Fiorinda did the same, because it would please the lads. They drank water—which the barmies carried with them. None of them would touch agribusiness ground-water—; apart from the Irishman, who had his medicinal ration of red wine. Fiorinda's saltbox was passed around, and even Fergal, who had hardly tasted his stew, made sure he got hold of it. As he dipped his fingers he looked across the shadows, and their eyes met. He put the salt on his tongue, nodded fractionally, and then quickly looked away.

It was late before the Triumvirate escaped to the officers' bender, set deeper into the trees. Sage and Ax shucked their rifles. Sage took off the mask and lit an ATP globe on the groundsheet floor. They sat around the glow, silent in the sheer relief of getting off stage. 'How d'you know it wasn't werewolves, Fiorinda?' said Sage at last.

'Of course it wasn't. Don't be stupid.' She untied her scarf and hid behind her hair from that penetrating blue look, the one that said *I am fifty years old, and you are making me tired*. 'I know. I shouldn't be here. No girlfriends on manoeuvres.' Sage had not wanted Fiorinda on this trip at all.

'Ignore him,' said Ax, 'He's having a male chauvinist pig attack, he can't help it. I want you with us, even if he doesn't, and you were right to come out to the camp. You were brilliant with the lads.'

'Tell me one thing,' said Fiorinda. 'Were they alive? When they got torn up?'

'Brock thinks they'll have been garotted first,' said Sage. 'Or doped, at least. The Celtics don't like a struggling sacrifice, it spoils the whole effect.'

'I suppose that's something. Even if you're making it up.'

Sage grabbed her, suddenly, in a fierce embrace. 'Stupid brat, you *terrify* me.

Whyd'you have to go there alone, *what* did you have to look at that for—?'

'I had to see.'

'I don't think we've frightened them off,' said Ax, off on his own angle. 'I think this is a blank space on the map, far away from the rest of their lives, where they feel completely safe. If they know that *Fiorinda* suddenly decided to visit Wethamcote they won't have put two and two together. They're not Reich fans and they're too arrogant. They'll be back, and we're going to bust them.'

'How many do you think are involved?' 'Not a huge number.' Ax finally took out his cigarettes, 'D'you mind?' His

lovers shrugged: he lit one and pulled on it fervently. 'Thirty to forty, max, from the traces, far as we've analysed the footage Chris took. Which accords with the farmer's story. He reckons there are around ten or twelve small private cars, some of them the same every time, and a couple of horseboxes—that's why he

thought of the horse sacrifice. He admits he's sneaked down to the layby to have a look, but his mind's a blank when it comes to number-plates.'

Fiorinda smiled. 'Obviously, the horseboxes were for the werewolves.'

'Yeah.'

The roof and walls of the bender were layers of fine mesh, stretched over a frame of rods and heaped with woodland debris: leaves, earth, twigs, moss. A little green caterpillar came swaying down on an invisible thread, into the light of the globe. Fiorinda caught it and returned it to the roof.

'What about David Sale?'

Sage shook his head.

'I can't reach him,' said Ax.

'Oh, God.'

There'd been occasions, over the last months, when the Prime Minister's Office had seemed unable to find Mr Sale. His staff had covered for him; but it had been awkward enough that the Triumvirate had known there was something wrong. They'd colluded with the cover-up, assuming that the PM was too smashed: wasn't fit to pick up a phone, make the meeting or whatever. That's the price you pay, the downside of tearing up the drug laws. Less death, crime and corruption, some vulnerable people going off the rails—

'I can't get hold of him, and I daren't persist because I'll make it obvious—'

'You've tried your all hours access *red phone* number?'

'Yeah. Lucky I've never needed that, because it doesn't work.'

'You think he's on his way?'

'That would be one reason why he doesn't feel like answering his phone.'

'We don't *know* he's involved at all,' Sage pointed out, weakly. 'We only have Fergal's word, and so-called evidence that could still be fake.'

'Oh, he'll be here,' said Ax. 'This is a set up.' He stared bitterly at the glowing end of his cigarette. 'I can believe David Sale is into Celtic blood sacrifice. I believed it the moment Fergal told us—as the Irishman fucking spotted. Sale's a natural groupie, looking for adventure, he always was. But human sacrifice? No. He's not a complete monster. He's been set up, he thinks he's coming to see a horse tortured to death, prove how wild at heart he is: but he's going to be here, and we can't reach him to warn him off. We have to bust these bastards. We have to bust them hard and I can see where it's heading, you don't have to tell me. And the Celtic thing will explode too. We're in over our heads. Fuck.'

'We've been in over our heads since Massacre Night, Ax.'

'Yeah, thanks. The thing that gets me is, whoever, or whatever agency arranged this set piece, what's the motive? What do they hope will happen?'

'Which way are they trying to make me jump?' 'Unless Fergal's genuine,' suggested Fiorinda. 'He's telling the truth, and the

people who sent him are friends?'

'Nice idea.'

The barmies were very quiet: an occasional murmur, a rustle of movement.

'What about the town?' asked Sage. 'Any suspicious characters, Fee?'

One of their fears had been that they'd come up here and find a gathering of media vultures, already circling, already knowing the worst and prepared to pounce. 'Not when I arrived,' said Fiorinda. 'There's a circus now, a small, dedicated circus: chasing after me. I'm sorry about that, Ax.'

'No problem. If things go the way I think they might, tomorrow night, a news embargo's going to be the least of our worries.'

They took off their boots and lay down together, on a heap of green bracken

where Sage and Ax's sleeping bags were unrolled, Ax in the middle, as most in need of comfort: and talked about what might happen tomorrow night, how they would deal with screw-ups, until there was no more to be said.

'Don't cry baby,' said Fiorinda, hugging him. 'At least it's not werewolves.'

'Yeah,' Ax buried his face in her beautiful soft hair, 'at least. But you could be wrong. The way things are going, nothing would surprise me.'

Sage got up to put out the lamp. He kissed Fiorinda's nose, sighed resignedly, and lay down again beside Ax, his arm around them both.

I *will* talk to you, she thought. I promise. As soon as this is over— Dawn came too soon. Fiorinda and Sage, left alone in the nest, woke to hear

their lover's voice reciting, somewhere close by, the Arabic words that cannot be translated but may be interpreted—

I take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak, from the evil of what he has created . . .

Later, Fiorinda got an escort back to the edge of town.

Preparations for the nightclub raid came together. More barmies skulking through the fields; the police contingent in two methane-burning hippy vans, disguised as travellers. Before dusk the tech was set up and there were close on a hundred armed men (including a few women, as the saying goes), under cover.

The hours passed slowly. At quarter past eleven, Sage, deep in the grove, in the silent cordon surrounding the clearing, heard a tawny owl hoot her question, *too-wit?*, and the male bird answer, from the other side of the wood. *Woo, woo.*

Brock would like that. The desert is coming back to life: but oh, at what a price.

He kept thinking of Fiorinda, this girl who is more stubborn than God, and seeing in his mind's eye those carcasses, the sheered planes of flesh, the ropes of blood, the major bones sliced clean through. *What the fuck did that?*

Fiorinda says there's a rational explanation.

And we believe she would know. The lads certainly believe she would know.

When did she become our authority on the impossible, and *how dangerous is that?*

Will someone tell me, by the way, what happens if she's wrong? Beside him, Fergal shifted uneasily. He was coping well with field conditions,

amazingly well, considering his state of health: he had the pickled toughness of a hard-drinking man. The rifle he'd been given – for the look of the thing, since everyone was armed – seemed to bother him. He kept fidgeting with it.

'You want me to take that? They're heavy buggers if you're not used—'

'Tell the truth,' whispered Fergal hoarsely, 'I'm wonderin' how I'd make out if it came to a firefight. It's not the first time I've had a gun in me hands. I wouldn't want yez to think that. But . . . I've niver killed a man.'

If it came to it, Fergal would keep his sheet clean. They hadn't given him live ammunition. There's too much that doesn't add up about our Irish 'defector'.

'Nobody's going to do any killing.'

'Aye, but. . . How's yer kid? I niver asked after him yet.'

'Marlon?' Sage shrugged. 'He's okay.'

'Marlon Williams, isn't it? I remember I met him onc'st. Lovely boy. Now that must be a very hard thing, not to have the naming of yer own son.'

'Knock it off, Fergal. Continue in that line, an' you'll annoy me.'

'Jaysus, there I go. I've a big mouth, God help me. I didn't mean to offend.'

The glimmering skull wore an eye-wrap that gave it the look, in the ashen darkness, of some solemn allegorical figure, Blind Justice? It offered Fergal a crooked grin. 'You're right, it's a hard thing. I can live with it. Now *shush*.'

Softly, in the distance, they heard the murmur of an approaching car. It stopped in the layby and two people emerged, a man and a woman. The

driver stayed inside. The pair had flashlights, they seemed to be checking for signs of danger, but they were confident and didn't waste much time. They got back into the car, which stayed where it was, without lights. More cars arrived an hour later. Barmy signals had detected the use of a radiophone, but hadn't been able to eavesdrop. These people were not amateurs. They arrived, they got out of the cars, they made very little noise. About half an hour after midnight they set off, in silence: dressed for a glitzy night out, carrying coolboxes, shading their flashlights, the women stumbling on high heels. Most wore masks, strange animal muzzles and horned things glowing in the dark; a few had naked faces. A small group went ahead: they stopped and barred the way where the track entered the grove. The guests were scrutinised and briefly questioned, one by one, but it was a formality, maybe part of the ritual. No digital masks were removed; no one was turned away.

Sage had been dividing his attention between several scenes: the dark wood around him, the live feed from the concealed night cameras; developments inside the enclosure. He spoke softly to Brock, next in the cordon; beyond Fergal.

'Hey, Brock, look after Irish for me, will you? I'm going in.'

Up against the fence he paused to review the scene inside again. An orderly line had formed outside the changing room. The first comers were emerging sky clad, later arrivals moving along. Grease tubs hanging on the wattle walls had been lit. The evening dresses of the women in the queue glowed with colour in the trails of smoky light.

Dinner jackets, glossy leather. No unwashed outlaws, no struggling rurals here: this was exclusively the Celtics' high society camp following. Figures, thought Sage. He would bet he knew a few hippies at Rivermead who would defend human sacrifice. But they'd never commit Personal Transport Hypocrisy to reach the venue.

A horned man went around with a horse-skull full of something dark, marking masked and unmasked faces on the brow. Brittle flurries of laughter and conversation rose, and fell, and rose again. Time to move. He stripped off the wrap and stowed it, switched the living skull to a conventional, charnel version, grabbed the top of the wattle fence and vaulted over. Ax was not available for much consultation, but it didn't matter. They'd agreed on what to do if the worst should come to the worst. Which it had. The night camera at the entrance to the grove had left no room for doubt. David Sale was here. A bare faced woman saw him as he landed. She beamed, eyes like pinwheels. Not much danger of being spotted as a stranger. None of these punters were likely to be facing the business part of the entertainment sober, even if they were convinced this was the acme of green cool. He hunched his shoulders and stayed near the tallest people, just in case; and watched the line going into the toilet block.

'Ax,' he murmured, touching his wrist. 'Do it now.'

An explosion of lights, a wail of sirens. Loudhailer voices: *This is the police.*

Instant uproar. Everyone panicking, trying to leave— Sage shouldered through the naked people rushing for the toilet block and

scrambling out of it, clutching their clothes. The last of them he shoved out as he pushed his way in. In the light of a dim fluorescent tube he saw lockers, basins, a row of cubicles. Strewn underwear, a glittering gown, lost shoes. Half in and half out of the last cubicle, two half-clothed men crouched over the naked body of a third: trying to get him dressed, against his feeble resistance. The man on the floor wore a bull's head. A white-face clown and a demon of some kind stared up at Sage in desperate consternation.

'Get out of here,' said Sage.

They left.

He shut the door (quite a riot going on out there), restored his own mask to its usual setting, squatted down, switched off the bull's head at the patient's wrist controller and administered a popper: a vicious dose of straighten-up. David Sale opened his eyes. His face crumpled like a protesting child about to howl, then he jerked into a sitting position, eyes popping, his back against the toilet.

'S-Sage!'

'Yeah. Sage. Aren't you lucky, and look, he's got real arms and legs. Want my autograph?'

The Prime Minister clasped the sting on his neck, looking terrified.

'What have you done to me?'

'Don't panic, it's just straighten-up. I haven't hurt you. Yet.'

'No, no. You don't understand. I must be naked. This isn't happening.' 'Shut up drivelling, put the mask back on and get dressed.'

The nightclub raid noises peaked and died down. A barmy signals voice in Sage's ear was telling him the bad possibilities (armed resistance, deaths, serious casualties) that had been avoided; the alarming discoveries (sophisticated weapons, mysterious high-tech devices) that were being made. The door opened a crack. Two barmies looked in: Jackie Dando and Chris Page.

'How's it going?' said Sage, over his shoulder.

'S'all over,' said Jackie chirpily, full of it as usual, and trying hard to get a good peek at the bull-headed geezer. The barmies didn't know who was getting rescued, but they knew he mustn't be recognised. 'No trouble, just a bunch of naked hoorays, frowning up and crying for their lawyers. We're minding their socks and knickers for them, Ax's orders. No one gets past us, right?'

'That's right. Wait outside. Be with you in a minute.'

'Okay Sage.'

David Sale dressed himself. He stood by the basins and took off his mask so he could smooth his hair. Sage had to work hard to control the impulse to put his *autograph* on the bastard's slack, abject face.

'The mask stays on. And please keep your mouth shut.'

The clearing was full of the aftermath of disaster, all too familiar. Sobbing people with blankets round their shoulders, armed police, armed hippies. But thank God, this time, no more blood . . . He kept the Prime Minister out of the light and took him through a fresh gap in the wattle fence; into the wood. Circled round to meet the truck that was waiting halfway down the track. Sage got in the

back with the PM, Chris and Jackie in the front with the driver. Off we go.

The sacrificial bodies had been retrieved, bagged and taken away. The extra barmies and the police were down in the lane, processing the night's haul and waiting for fresh transport. Sage, in a filthy mood, let it be said, had called to report that all was well (relatively speaking), and the bull-headed man was in safe lodging. An armed policewoman was sorting and packing clothes and personal effects, by the toilet block. Other than that, Ax and the Yorkshire lads, and Fergal Kearney, had the clearing to themselves.

Two new victims had been found, tied up and gagged, in a van that had come along after the cars. From the few questions they'd answered so far, they were street kids from Leicester. They were half-doped, and knew nothing. Some of the ravers had been making unsolicited disclosures (babbling like lunatics); the wiser human sacrifice fans, including the organisers no doubt, were keeping quiet. The horseboxes, which had turned up as predicted, were empty.

There was no sign yet of how the killing had been done.

The half-moon of the holy month looked down, wan and dim against the beams of a floodlight somebody had left behind, hung up on a branch. The barmies stared into the pit.

'Vultures,' suggested one of the lads. 'Or no, I mean trained eagles.' 'Maybe they tear 'em up somewhere else,' said someone else. 'An' bring them

here and strap them on them totem poles in pieces.'

'What about those kids what was going to be offered up tonight, then?'

'What do they offer them up *for*? What's supposed to happen?'

'Zip, you are an innercent. You and Fergal both. There's no *reason* for it. They do the sicko stuff because they fuckin' like it.'

'Anyway, Sage got a good shufti, and he said . . . Is Sage coming back?'

'Dunno,' said Ax. 'Look, I'm going down there, to see what I can find.'

'I don't think the forensic types have finished, Ax,' said Brock, doubtfully.

Ax gave him a pitying glance. 'Call yourself a hippy? Okay, I'll ask permission.' He went over and asked the policewoman.

'I'm sure that would be all right, Mr Preston,' she said, round-eyed.

'Good. If it turns out it's a problem, it's my responsibility.' The tackle that had been used to retrieve the bodies was gone. 'Hey, someone give me a rope ladder.

My name's not Aoxomoxoa, you know.'

The barmies had started one of their interminable arguments, as to whether werewolves require a full moon, or is that vampires, and what about the silver bullets. Ax descended a nylon ladder into the pit. It was more unpleasant to be down there than he had expected: like being inside a hollowed, rotten tooth. The air smelled foul, the ground was soft underfoot, scattered with an abstract design of luminous outlines, where suspicious traces had been photographed . . . They'd found no actual footprints except Sage's, apparently. He stepped carefully, wondering how much the 'forensic types' would be able to learn. The poles

loomed, seeming twice their actual height. He couldn't make anything of the carving, the light was too dim.

He walked round the walls, treading over the place where Fiorinda's sprig of Rest Harrow had been crushed into the mud, thinking of the organisation, the heavy machinery, how many more of these places there were . . . As if the cleared ground, on which he had hoped to plant his renewal, had started coming out in weird, festering sores. Something new, and terrible, and totally unexpected: but that's how it always feels, and it's not, it's the same disaster, *things fall apart*. The thought of the interview he had to face in the morning was like a lead weight on his soul.

'I don't like this,' muttered Fergal, up above. 'Why's he down there?'

'That's Ax,' said Brock, proudly. 'He's not afraid of any fucking thing. You shoulda been with him in Yorkshire—'

'Hey. There's a metal panel, with a skim of clay plastered over it! Shit, there are *sliding doors* in the walls of the pit! It's like an Egyptian tomb. I think I can shift it. Hey, this is it. This is how! You must be able to lock or open these doors from a distance, radio-controlled, but it's . . . switched off, or something.'

Something made a sound: a hollow, guttural cough.

Even Ax Preston fails to think out of the box sometimes. He'd forced one of the sliding panels, found a black space behind it and gone to fetch his torch, which he'd left by the totem poles. It had not crossed his mind that the tunnel might be occupied. He heard that sound and froze, knowing it instantly, on a level older than conscious thought. Instinctively he moved to get his back against a wall. Mistake. Now the ladder was on the other side of the pit. He'd dumped

his rifle before climbing down. He didn't even have a pocket knife.

The tigers trotted out on big, soft feet. There were two of them, one larger than the other. In the moonlight they looked absolutely huge. They looked as if they could jump out of the pit itself. The barmies stared down, jaws dropping. The only one who had a weapon in his hands and a clear shot at the beasts was Brock, and he seemed paralysed.

The tigers had not fed, they were probably hungry. They wasted no time. Both animals, beautiful, calculating eyes fixed on Ax, crouched fluidly, poised to leap. 'Oh, Jaysus fockin' God!' Fergal Kearney's own rifle was on his back, he didn't bother with it. He grabbed the gun that Brock seemed incapable of using and fired a rattling burst into the pit, eyes tight shut, raking wildly to and fro. Sage had come into the clearing just in time to see this happen.

He crossed the remaining space at a leap, unslinging his own rifle. The pit held two very big dead tigers, and Ax, looking stunned but apparently unhurt.

'What the fuck's going on?'

'Oh, God,' Brock dropped to his knees, covering his face. 'Oh, God help me!'

'It was tigers,' whispered Zip, awed, 'it was *tigers*. We never thought of tigers.'

The policewoman stood by her pile of binbags with her mouth open. 'They were going for Ax!' yelled another witness, excitedly. 'They were going

for Ax, Sage. He couldn't get out, an Fergal grabbed Brock's rifle, an' shot 'em!'

'Those were *Bengal Tigers*,' moaned poor Brock. 'There isn't a hundred of them left alive in the world. I woulda done it. *I woulda done it*, only—'

'Make that ninety-eight,' said Ax, climbing out. 'Thanks, Fergal. Good shooting.'

Sage said, 'Are you going to tell me *why* you were in the pit with two tigers?'

Proving something, huh?'

'I have no excuse,' said Ax. 'I was being unbelievably stupid. You can beat me up later.' Shoulder to shoulder, they turned to Fergal Kearney. The Irishman was sitting on the ground, the rifle discarded, holding his head and shaking.

'*Oh Jaysus*,' he was muttering. '*Jaysus*.'

'Are you okay, Fergal?'

'Just help me up, Sage, me darling,' Sage helped him up. Fergal clung to tall Sage, almost a dead weight. 'Ah, God, I don't know what's wrong wi' me, it was a wee shock, I'll be over it. That was fockin' loud. That's, that's somethen I never just done before—'

'You did good,' said Sage, intensely. He had taken off his mask. 'I owe you.'

The barmies crowded round, jabbering with shock and adrenalin and relief.

The tigers should be measured, no they should be left as they were. The Irishman was a natural marksman, but he'd made a fuck of a mess of his tiger-skin rugs, that's one thing you'll have to learn, Ferg, you don't want to use an automatic rifle on anything you plan to use for a souvenir after—

Police officers and barmy squaddies came running from the lane: Ax's unbelievable stupidity instantly became a deed of valour, but at least Fergal got top honours. The tigers were hauled out and found to be wearing radio control shock collars, which explained how they'd been trained and handled, but wouldn't have done anything for Ax. Ax tried to comfort Brock, who was a shattered heap: a situation not improved by his tactless mates telling him that the man-eaters would probably've had to be put down anyhow.

And now we'd better find this Irishman a drink.

'Why didn't you use your own rifle, Fergal?' asked Sage, as they left the haunted grove.

Fergal grinned sheepishly. 'Oh, I knew I woulda been firing blanks. If I was in your shoes, I would not've given meself live ammunition tonight, either.'

Sage had taken the PM across country to the M1, where he'd spent the night under guard at a run-down Travelodge. The debriefing happened at nine the next morning, by the roadside. Fiorinda's van stood on the hard shoulder. Ax and Sage had been to Coventry after Ax's adventure in the tiger pit. They'd brought Richard Kent, the barmy army's chief of staff, back with them. The Prime Minister arrived in the barmy army truck with his guards, looking exhausted by his short journey. He wasn't wearing his mask. Barmies brought him over to Richard Kent's big, dark, unmarked car. Richard joined the guards, leaving Ax and his Minister to talk to David alone. Fiorinda stayed out of sight. Sage sat in the back, unmasked. Ax sat in the front with the Prime Minister; who started off in a blustering mood. He'd been kidnapped, the police had over reacted, the barmy army should never have been involved. Last night's whole operation had been outrageous, unsanctioned, illegal—

Ax said he didn't think anyone over-reacted. After seeing the bodies displayed in the pit, they hadn't known what to expect. They'd had to respond with maximum force. As for the numbers, it's standard procedure. Numbers minimise violence in any kind of crowd control. If you can trust your men.

'And I can trust mine', he added, without any bluster at all.

David took this in, and changed his tune.

'Is this interview being recorded?'

'No,' said Sage.

'There would be no advantage,' said Ax, 'in preserving this conversation.'

They spent an hour with him, this haggard, unshaven, sixtyish bloke in his dishevelled evening casuals. It wasn't meant to be an interrogation, but he talked. He'd known he was taking risks. Yes, he knew that digital masks are transparent to infra-red. He wasn't an idiot! (Like hell, they thought . . .) But it was an issue of trust. He had believed he was with people he could trust. He'd had no intention of giving the Celtics political support. He had no sympathy with their anti-recovery, neo-feudal rhetoric. His involvement in the rites had

been personal, a pilgrimage, a sincere religious impulse.

He'd never visited Spital's Farm before (where the Wethamcote grove was located). He'd known nothing until he saw the bodies. No one had told him, he had not been warned. He'd thought he was hallucinating. He'd been off his head, a waking nightmare. You surely don't believe I would condone—?

At one point Sage had to leave the car and take a walk up and down. But he came back, and talked the businesslike compassion that the Triumvirate had decided had to be talked. The man must not be humiliated, or terrorised. He must come out of this feeling good about his rescuers, or else it was all for nothing.

They told him that they were going to try and save him.

'I called you to the scene of the horrific discovery as soon as it was secured,' Ax explained. 'You'd already approved the barmy army and police operation. Now Richard's going to drive you back to London. He'll stay with you for the next few days, and between reacting like a statesman to the hell that's going to break loose, you're going to tell him everything. Every detail. Please. We need to know how this happened, and just how much we have to hide.'

'Ax, why are you doing this?' David asked, tears of gratitude, and afterburn in his eyes. 'You could throw me to the wolves.'

'I don't want to. I want you to lead the government for me.'

There was another ground-shifting pause. 'You can come back from this, David,' said Ax (and using the man's first name, always a little awkward before, felt different now). 'We've come through a lot together. We can go on working together: we can get the country through this bad patch and reach the future we both believe in. We'll let you go now. You must be exhausted. Call me when you've had some sleep and we'll talk it all over properly.'

David nodded, wiping his eyes. His hands were shaking. 'Is Fiorinda here?

Could I . . . could I have a word with her?'

Sage and Ax looked at each other in the rearview mirror.

'She's listening,' said Ax, 'but she'd rather not talk to you just now.'

They left the car. Richard came over, they spoke to him briefly.

It was another hot day, bright sun in a blue sky over the flood-damaged plain.

They watched the dark car drive off and walked down to Fiorinda's van. As soon as he was inside, Sage exploded like a coiled spring released – nearly put his fist through a window, managing at the last minute to punch the upholstery instead.

'*Shit!* I do not want this. I want go back to being the giant toddler, *right now!*'

Ax collapsed on one of the back seats and held out his arms.

'One condition. I go back to being your mum.'

'Deal.'

'Idiots,' said Fiorinda. 'If people knew what goes on . . . Sometimes I'm

embarrassed to be in a relationship with you two.' She pushed herself between them and hid her face in the hollow of Sage's

collar bones; Ax's chin digging into her shoulder. She'd spent the night doing street-parties and bonfires, acting relaxed and imagining horrors: which had not come to pass, but she'd heard about Ax and the tigers.

God! This life.

But soon Ax freed himself, and stared out of the window. The heart of the country. Not far from here, on Bosworth Field, a long and ruinous mediaeval civil war had ended. . . He remembered the vows that he had made, at the beginning of all this. That he would keep the peace. That he would hold this country together, and keep faith with the future, *by any means necessary*. That he understood what it would cost him, and he accepted—

Except, of course, I didn't understand.

'You remember that coup we were worried about? The next blood-fest change of government, and how would we survive? You've just witnessed it. That's what happened last night. A paramilitary takeover, by me.'

'*Without* bloodshed,' offered Sage. 'And you didn't have any choice.'

Ax ignored him. 'The fuck of the thing is, we might not even preserve the last illusion of legitimate government, because I don't know if I can save David.

There are gaping holes, and I can't keep a news embargo going for long enough to stop them all. Fuck. I wonder *how many people*, including whatever bastards set this up, and Fergal's mates, and David's friends of the hardcore persuasion, and God knows who else, know just where the PM was last night?' 'There are always people who know the truth,' said Fiorinda. 'It never

matters. We'll pitch our version so the public will prefer to believe it, and get it out first. If you're in power, that's all you ever need.'

Ax's expression became even more desolate, if possible. 'Thanks a lot.'

'Nah.' She took him in her arms, his weary head against her breast. 'Thank inexorable fate. It's not your fault, Ax, I know it's not your fault. You were born to be king. Sssh. It won't be so bad, you'll feel okay about it soon.'

'Oh, I'm okay now. I just wish I was dead, that's all.'

Wethamcote had celebrated the new bread—the wedding of the Sun God and his Flower Bride—with street parties and bonfires: throwing bouquets, cheering while burning wheels were sent rolling down the streets into the river. Summer's consummation was over for another year. Market Square was empty, silent and bedraggled. Fiorinda slipped into the Rose and Crown by the back doors and was waylaid by an anxious landlady.

'Oh, *Fiorinda*, there you are, thank goodness. I'm afraid I have a bit of an emergency!'

Oh God. What now?

What now was an industrial-sized sink full of posies, in the pub's kitchen on this very busy morning. 'I have no idea what to do with all your lovely flowers!'

'Is there a hospital that might like to have them? The crew could deliver.'

'I can't ask them, dear. It's a bank holiday, and the phones aren't working.' Fiorinda, who disliked cut flowers intensely, was tempted to suggest the compost heap, but Wethamcote punters didn't deserve to have their feelings hurt, and Fiorinda didn't deserve the infamy.

'I'll see if I can get hold of a plastic bath. Will any shops be open?'

Mine hostess exclaimed that of course that was it! She could have Mae, (the kitchen help) put the flowers in the guest bathroom! She thanked Fiorinda effusively, and bustled off. Damn. That probably means no bath for me.

The washing-up in the other sink looked very fucking inviting. Gimme a pair of rubber gloves. Let me work here, for the nice fat lady, live in all found. I could meet my funky boyfriends in the bar, after I've done up the breakfast tables, and we could dream of being rockstars. It would be heaven.

But fate says no. I must live and die playing Stone Age Royalty.

She turned away and found herself looking through the open door of the kitchen straight at Joe Muldur, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed NME journalist.

'Hey, Fiorinda,' cried Joe, 'what's up?'

'Fuel starvation,' said Fiorinda. 'Two million clueless people – I'm lying, it's really far more – insanely determined to give up everything and be new-age nomads. Empty supermarket shelves. Plunging literacy rates.' She tucked her hand through his arm. 'But you don't want to hear about that, and I'm tired of it. Let's get some breakfast and talk about wheels on fire.'

br/> understood what it would cost him, and he accepted—

Except, of course, I didn't understand.

'You remember that coup we were worried about? The next blood-fest change of government, and how would we survive? You've just witnessed it. That's what happened last night. A paramilitary takeover, by me.'

'*Without* bloodshed,' offered Sage. 'And you didn't have any choice.'

Ax ignored him. 'The fuck of the thing is, we might not even preserve the last illusion of legitimate government, because I don't know if I can save David.

There are gaping holes, and I can't keep a news embargo going for long enough to stop them all. Fuck. I wonder *how many people*, including whatever bastards set this up, and Fergal's mates, and David's friends of the hardcore persuasion, and God knows who else, know just where the PM was last night?' 'There are always people who know the truth,' said Fiorinda. 'It never

matters. We'll pitch our version so the public will prefer to believe it, and get it out first. If you're in power, that's all you ever need.'

Ax's expression became even more desolate, if possible. 'Thanks a lot.'

'Nah.' She took him in her arms, his weary head against her breast. 'Thank

inexorable fate. It's not your fault, Ax, I know it's not your fault. You were born to be king. Sssh. It won't be so bad, you'll feel okay about it soon.'

'Oh, I'm okay now. I just wish I was dead, that's all.'

Wethamcote had celebrated the new bread—the wedding of the Sun God and his Flower Bride—with street parties and bonfires: throwing bouquets, cheering while burning wheels were sent rolling down the streets into the river. Summer's consummation was over for another year. Market Square was empty, silent and bedraggled. Fiorinda slipped into the Rose and Crown by the back doors and was waylaid by an anxious landlady.

'Oh, *Fiorinda*, there you are, thank goodness. I'm afraid I have a bit of an emergency!'

Oh God. What now?

What now was an industrial-sized sink full of posies, in the pub's kitchen on this very busy morning. 'I have no idea what to do with all your lovely flowers!'

'Is there a hospital that might like to have them? The crew could deliver.'

'I can't ask them, dear. It's a bank holiday, and the phones aren't working,' Fiorinda, who disliked cut flowers intensely, was tempted to suggest the compost heap, but Wethamcote punters didn't deserve to have their feelings hurt, and Fiorinda didn't deserve the infamy.

'I'll see if I can get hold of a plastic bath. Will any shops be open?'

Mine hostess exclaimed that of course that was it! She could have Mae, (the kitchen help) put the flowers in the guest bathroom! She thanked Fiorinda effusively, and bustled off. Damn. That probably means no bath for me.

The washing-up in the other sink looked very fucking inviting. Gimme a pair of rubber gloves. Let me work here, for the nice fat lady, live in all found. I could meet my funky boyfriends in the bar, after I've done up the breakfast tables, and we could dream of being rockstars. It would be heaven.

But fate says no. I must live and die playing Stone Age Royalty.

She turned away and found herself looking through the open door of the kitchen straight at Joe Muldur, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed NME journalist.

'Hey, Fiorinda,' cried Joe, 'what's up?'

'Fuel starvation,' said Fiorinda. 'Two million clueless people – I'm lying, it's really far more – insanely determined to give up everything and be new-age nomads. Empty supermarket shelves. Plunging literacy rates.' She tucked her hand through his arm. 'But you don't want to hear about that, and I'm tired of it. Let's get some breakfast and talk about wheels on fire.'

The Rose and Crown was like a rock-festival morning after, full of music journos and other hepcats who had caught up with Fiorinda: bog-eyed after the night's fun, drinking on hangovers and eating Full English. No one was phased by the dead landlines; that was commonplace. They wouldn't find out what was really going on unless they tried to leave town early, before the roadblocks were dismantled; or until Ax decided to lift the news embargo. Or someone local made an announcement, (the locals always find out). But they'd have to shout pretty loud to get heard in here.

She stood at the bar with Joe, chatting merrily and letting her compadres know, by glances across the crowd, that the debriefing had gone okay. So far so good. When Joe took off to find Jeff Scully, his photographer, she joined the Adjuvants, and a famous West End theatre director who'd become a passionate ally. He wanted to tell Fiorinda what a cunning little vixen she was, stealing the Ancient British (I'm sorry, I mean Celtic) Tendency's turf from under them.

'But politics apart, this is a *wonderful place*! These people are Ax's children,

living the life, rural style. Were you at the Ponds? My God, spectacular, terrific use of the moon and water, I must talk to that team. And all that fire. One could do something terrific here, cast of thousands, raw, Brechtian—‘

‘You’re booked,’ said Fiorinda, automatically. ‘Do it, we’ll finance you, somehow. Wethamcote needs something. They’ve been on their own too long—‘

Mae brought Fiorinda’s tinned tomatoes and fried slice, apologising because there was nothing else left. Chip nobly handed over his last sausage.

‘Hey, where did you get to the other night, you naughty stop-out?’ ‘I think she knows a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,’ suggested

Verlaine, grinning. ‘And she met there with Oberon and Robin Goodfellow—‘

‘You know, Sage would make a *great* Puck!’

‘Don’t fancy Bottom’s chances much—‘

Tim the theatre director luckily had been distracted by a passing acquaintance.

‘Stop it,’ muttered Fiorinda, ‘Have you no sense?’

‘Did you know,’ announced Tim, ‘we’re *completely* isolated? Like a J. B. Priestley. It’s *all* telecoms, not just the landline phones—‘

‘Yes, and I find it exquisitely nostalgic,’ boomed Roxane, arriving with his preferred breakfast: a large Bloody Mary. S/he raised his glass, with a grave nod, to Fiorinda. ‘Just when one thought boring normality had returned. Where were you, Tim, the morning after Ivan/Lara struck?’

The director took the question seriously: Fiorinda decided she’d better take the Adjuvants for some fresh air. They appeared to have been drinking since dawn, and they were getting out of hand. It was dead quiet outdoors. Shops were shuttered. A little red car sat alone in the middle of the carparking by the statue of Queen Victoria, a defunct firework lying on the roof.

‘So *tell* us, beautiful Fiorinda,’ demanded Chip, ‘we can be indiscreet as we like out here. What’s the story, morning glory? We want the gory details!’

A mud-spattered old jeep roared into the square. Joe Muldur jumped out, Jeff Scully close behind. ‘Hey!’ cried Joe, leaping over to them. ‘Spooky things are going on! We drove out to see if we could get network coverage, and ran into a roadblock. There’s been a huge Celtic Hardcore bust! The barmy army was

involved, and hundreds of armed police. The naked nutters have been caught eating babies, boiling innocent aliens, decimating the endangered contents of some deviant’s private zoo! A pair of *Bengal Tigers* got killed and eaten!’

‘*Hell* to pay,’ Jeff broke in, ‘when the English Public hears about that!’

‘The Celtics are going to be sooo embarrassed!’

‘Oh,’ said Jeff, taking in their expressions. ‘Duh. This is not news to you guys.

Of course it isn’t. Oh, dumb. This is why you were here.’

Fiorinda’s eyes did that beautiful and scary thing, where the pupils shoot out wide, and then zip back almost to vanishing point, so you seem to be looking at two frosted grey stones. ‘Press conference,’ she said. ‘My room, at the pub. Now.’

The Spital Farm affair was the biggest scandal since Dissolution. A network of high society hardcore-ritualists was laid bare. Cabinet Ministers tumbled. Several members of the Green Second Chamber were obliged to resign. The mainstream English Celts (formerly; the Ancient British) fell over themselves repudiating this horrific distortion of their rites, and declaring their loyalty to Ax Preston and the Reich. The premier Islamic radio station called on Mr Preston to throw out the whole sorry so-called government and take over: direct rule.

Ax dismissed this suggestion as nonsense.

David Sale made a clean breast of his own Celtic flirtation, and people admired him for it. His involvement at Spital’s Farm never became public. Those who knew didn’t talk,

and whatever agency had set the trap, they didn't emerge. The Prime Minister and Mr Dictator came out of it all very well, and reassuringly united. The fate of the tigers was buried on inside pages. One day at the end of the August Sage and Fiorinda met on a station platform somewhere – logistically – between Milton Keynes National Bowl and Cardiff Stadium, where they had been playing; respectively with the Heads and with DARK. Ax was still embroiled in the Spital Farm affair, and had been forced to cancel the rest of his festival season gigs. They were on their way to Brixton to spend a night with him: but there were hours before the next train to London, so they booked themselves into the hotel next door to the station.

Their stolen moments were marred by a spiteful receptionist, who decided to be scandalized that they weren't spending the night. 'I'm afraid this isn't *Tokyo*, Mr Aoxomoxoa . . .' But who cares: there was a room, with a bed in it. They made love, at length and blissfully, and lay together in the afterglow, discussing the strange stains on the ceiling; the curious, lurid growth of mould that rimmed the windows. Isn't damp hotel room mould usually black?

Fiorinda sprawled lax-limbed as a sleepy kitten, her cheek resting on his forearm, his crippled right hand warm in hers. He would hold hands now, almost without flinching, even when stone-cold sober. She had *trained* him.

'I hope Ax is in a better mood.' 'He will be,' said Sage, placidly. 'I think we've pulled it off. In a week or two

David will have forgotten his neck ever needed saving, and everything will be the same as before.'

'You know that's not true.'

Sage sighed. 'Okay, I know it's not true.'

'He's crossed the Rubicon. He must rule, or go under. Poor Ax, he has to be the only person in England who's surprised.'

'He's not. He just keeps *doing these things to himself*, and always forgets how much it's going to hurt. He has to forget, or he'd run away screaming.'

The implant figures under the skin of Sage's wrist moved time along, gently.

'Do you still think I should tell him about my weird tricks?'

'What if you don't, someone else finds out and denounces you as a witch?'

She sat up. So did he. They faced each other, naked to naked.

'I'm sorry, my brat. But it's the word—'

'I don't want anyone to know. I don't want to be a werewolf, Sage.'

'Don't be ridiculous. You're not a *werewolf*.'

'Oh no? Watch this.'

Fiorinda got down from the bed and sat on the floor in front of the minibar (which was empty, apart from a different interesting mould). She touched the door. Before you could take a breath, Fiorinda's hand was *through* the coated metal. There was a poisonous, molten smell, an implosion of heat. The front of the fridge collapsed inwards, bubbling, folding itself like a Dali clock. 'Fuck me,' said Sage. 'How are we going to explain *that* at reception?'

'Maybe we should throw it out of the window.'

She sat very still; he could hear her breathing. Then she reached out and touched the wreckage. He thought her fingers would be burnt to the bone: but no, a shift his eyes couldn't follow and the minibar was intact, as if nothing had happened. She looked up at him, this fragile naked girl; red curls down her back, the blood driven out of her face, sweat standing in clear drops on her forehead—

'Are you going to throw up?'

Fiorinda swallowed. 'I don't think so. Give me a moment.'

'How long have you known you could do something like that?'

'First time. I just thought I probably could. Mental experiments. Me, Einstein. Destroying something feels like nothing. Just a rush, a *horrible* rush. Restoring it is like climbing a towerblock with a car on my back.'

'Mm. You're hauling something back through the entropy barrier.'

Fiorinda grabbed her head, as if it was about to fly apart. 'Oh, fuck off. You are so fucking unsympathetic whenever I'm in trouble. I don't need a physics lesson, thanks. Do you understand what I'm telling you?'

'That breaking something is easier than fixing it? I knew that.'

'I'm telling you that magic is real, and the real stuff, *the hard stuff*, is deadly dangerous and fundamentally hateful, and I've got it, like a disease, but I don't want to have anything to do with it ever, ever, ever.'

'But no one was making magic at Spital's Farm?' She looked him in the eye. 'You are so *fucking* unsympathetic.'

'No one but Fiorinda?'

'I didn't do anything. And now you don't want to touch me because I'm a monster, and I don't blame you.'

He had been paralysed by astonishment. He jumped off the bed, picked her up and carried her back, wrapped her in the raggedy candlewick and the damp smelling blankets and rocked her in his arms. Hush, hush, baby. Sssh, little darling, everything is okay, everything will be all right—

'If ever you find out about anyone else making real magic like mine, tell Ax about me straight away. You won't have to. I'll tell him myself, instantly, if he ever needs to know—'

'I'm not going to make you do anything. Hush. There's just one thing.'

'What?'

'Back in July . . . What made you decide to visit your father's house?'

She cuddled closer. 'Nothing to do with this. That was just me, inspired by Fergal, trying to face my stupid past and put it behind me. Sage, are you and I responsible for things like Spital's Farm? Not Ax, never my Ax, he only wanted to save the world. We were the ones who said *everything's allowed*.'

'Nah. Hideous atrocities don't need rock and roll to get them going. Hey—'

He stroked the pure curve of her cheek with his lopsided claw. Bless her, she didn't seem to mind. 'Break the mood. We're in bed together, did you notice? Isn't that nice? We've half an hour: want some more?'

The London train was stuffed, their reserved seats long gone, every corridor

packed, a scrap of floor space grudgingly ceded to the Triumvirate partners.

Fiorinda slept, with her head on Sage's knees. But what would happen if you tried to pull a stunt like that with the hotel fridge, using ATP, cell-metabolism energy? You'd be dead before you started. . . So *what is she doing?*

My darling Fee, you are not telling me the whole story, and I think perhaps you're right: don't explain, bury it. Let's hope it stays buried. Sage tipped his head back against the rattling panel behind him, tried in vain to ease his cramped limbs, and thought of limousines. Rain dashed against dark glass, the English huddled together, damply steaming, in the cosiness of adversity. What if this is it? What if we never escape? As long as we're together, I'm not complaining.

On that extremely fraught morning in Wethamcote, Fiorinda had distracted Jeff and Joe with the very cool suggestion of a Rock and Roll Reich joint interview, maybe a kind of reality show. . . an idea that grew, a project that became highly significant to the Few, through the weeks when the Spital's Farm affair was burning itself out. In late September, the day before the live recording began,

Fiorinda visited the National Gallery. She wanted to look at 'She Feeds And Clothes Her Demons' again. The portrait lived indoors now, with the classic virtual masterpieces, in a specially lit room in the Sainsbury Wing. As she threaded the crowds she was startled to see Fergal Kearney, in front of the very picture she'd come to see. She wondered if he'd followed her, and snuck ahead to meet her 'by accident'. It would be typical.

Fergal had moved in with Fiorinda's gran, an inspired arrangement. The old witch liked him, and he kept her in order with surprising tact. Of course she couldn't resist dosing him, which worried Fergal's friends: but it didn't seem to do Fergal any harm. His health seemed better than when he arrived. His shy devotion to Fiorinda was not very demanding. She knew it was there, but he wasn't a stalker. They'd barely spoken since Wethamcote.

She hesitated: and went over to join him. They studied the weary goblin's nursemaid with her inadequate bag of treats. After a few moments he turned and looked at her. Fiorinda looked back, wondering if she imagined the knowledge; or the grave sympathy she read in the depths of his sea-green eyes.

'Well, Fergal,' she said, 'now you know some of our secrets.'

'Aye.'

She could have been referring to the truth about David Sale. She could have been referring to many things. 'What do you intend to do about it?'

Naturally enough, considering the state of his teeth and his liver, Fergal had awful bad breath, and he knew it. He covered his mouth, cleared his throat and edged away, embarrassed to have her so close.

'I intend to guard yer secrets with me life, Fiorinda.' 'Thank you,' she said. 'I need people I can trust.'

Bridge House

Outside the Castle Museum in the centre of Taunton there stand a block of granite with a bronze sword in it, buried halfway to the hilts. It features, as Chosen Few buffs will know, in an early video, the one they made for 'Glass Island'. Bridge House, our post-modern Camelot, is about a mile away. It's a solid, bourgeois, nineteenth-century dwelling in a fashionably dishevelled

garden (Milly is the gardener), that was drummer Milly Kettle's childhood home. The double garage that was the Chosen Few's first rehearsal space is there. A wisteria vine obscures the stone slab above the front door, plastered into place by Ax and Jordan Preston (long before Ax's conversion to Islam); that bears an inscription from the ruined city of Fatepur Sikri, *The prophet jesu says: this world is a bridge, make no house upon it*. In September of the year after his inauguration, straight

after the very low key celebration of the anniversary, Ax went down to Taunton, cancelling all public engagements, and spent several weeks at Bridge House with his band and his Triumvirate partners, his cat Elsie; and a ten-month-old baby, Ax's nephew, Albi. Visitors came and went. Much of what happened was broadcast live, on the English Terrestrial Channel 7 (Cult TV). The whole event became *Bridge House*, a fabulous collaborative work that, a landmark in the career of every artist involved; and they were many.

Before we enter that deceptively simple, deeply complex edifice of words and music, sound and vision, time and stillness, inspired impro, let's take a moment to wonder why. Why did Ax do this; and how did he get the brainy bruiser and our boho princess to agree? It's no secret that Ax's Triumvirate partners and his family band have never been close. And why the NME publishing deal? Why didn't The Insanitude label publish this? Why is Fiorinda, as 'Miss Brown', dressed in grey? What happened between George Merrick and the domestic robot? Why did our beloved leader drop everything and spend six weeks at play, when the country was reeling in shock after the Spital's Farm affair? There are

many questions, there are many answers; there is a richness of speculation.

What do we see? First and foremost we see a great deal of the original Chosen Few, playing together in that basement studio; with the addition of fifteen-year-old Maya, a cracking young guitarist ('Tot' Torquil Preston, who comes between Maya and Shane, the Chosen Few's bassist, is not musical, and has never been involved in the Reich). We see what a tight little band they are, and how obsessively they love making music: Ska and Metal; their roots. We hear them reminiscing about how it was. The Preston brothers growing up on a sink estate, seeing hardly another non-white face except for the Chinese family at the chip shop. Milly Kettle, the leafy suburban girl who met Jordan at college, joined the band, fell in love with big brother and crossed over to the wrong side of the tracks. . . (But now she's back again, and they're *all* living the leafy suburban life). We meet Ax's mother, Sunny, a Christian refugee from the Sudan: the woman who gave Ax his centre, and his will to do good. We meet Dan Preston, whose probable antecedents run the whole gamut of the port of Bristol, the likeable ne'er do well who gave the Ax his edge. We hear the brothers and their sister talk, immigrant hearts: about loving this landscape, this piece of earth where they were born, not made; and about being green. Light green, lazy green (by the standards of today). Recalcitrant car drivers, tobacco-smokers, lovers of gadgets, lovers of toys, lovers of tech. Ax is not a moderate revolutionary, anyone who thinks that makes a *big* mistake. But he's not a puritan. No way.

What does it all mean?

The effect of *Bridge House* is cumulative. There are no speeches, no statements. Celtic blood sacrifice is not discussed. The renewed threat of utter chaos throughout Europe, after the disasters in Italy, barely rates a mention. But there is a purpose. What we are offered is a glimpse of a compromised and *possible* Utopia, the future as Ax has dreamed it. A life of recreation. Of making art, with people you both love and hate (often equally, and at the same time). Expect no revelations, no soap-opera heated dialogue. Expect a disconcerting, self-examining openness.

Down-dressing Milly Kettle, no-nonsense haircut and gardeners' hands, sits in the conservatory answering interview questions, while the baby clambers around. Sunlight falls on her. 'I was Ax's girlfriend for six years,' she says. 'I loved him, I didn't understand him. We had great sex, we had some good conversations. I knew he wasn't faithful to me. I put up with it: you know, rockstars. I thought that was it, I thought that was all he had to give. He was Captain Sensible. Then when it

was all over I saw him with Fiorinda. He was a totally different person.'

How did you feel about that, asks the unseen interviewer, a barely-heard murmur.

'Gutted,' says Milly.

The wriggling baby suddenly seems too much for her. The interviewer's hands come into shot. It's Ax. He takes his nephew in his arms. He has no child. Fiorinda can't have children. The man and woman look at each other in silence. This is art, of course. But art is life. Life is performance.

In Dissolution England the Triumvirate and their friends are the Few we have Chosen. They are our Shaman. They take the hallucinatory poison, the wrecking-ball violence of these times and transform it for us. *Bridge House* is the algorithm of that transformation, a work of art, a set of instructions, a metaphysical packed lunch: survival rations for a journey into the dark.

The Glass Island video. Cartoon figures: twentyone-year-old Ax pulls the sword from the stone, Shane, Jordan and Milly hauling on him like a tug of war team. It becomes his guitar. The granite block leaps into the air. The Chosen Few try to flee: it splats them. Ax is our champion, but he can't die for us. Self-sacrifice is not an option for this messiah, he has to live. He has to keep his personal freedom, paradoxically intact, or his project is doomed and we all know it. Can our big brother have it all? Read the music, watch the movie, get your head into this immersion. Come, and see.

(from the Introduction to *Ax At The Bridge*, Dian Buckley, 20XX)

5: Lithium

The day began with a dreary hour or two of admin, getting nowhere because the world was still on fuel-starvation holiday. Moving on to a session in the Zen Self tent, wired up to the brain machines; which lasted until after dark. No joy there, either. He tramped across the site, through snow falling soft and insistent on the frozen slush that had been hanging around since Christmas. It was pretty, but immediately made him think of what the thaw would be like. Fucking insane neo-mediaeval crap, this Rivermead concept.

The van was cold and empty. He had to remind himself he'd warned his band, warned everyone, to leave him the fuck alone. Snow falling like death on the other side of the obsidian windows. He sat in the kitchen, staring at the mirror door, switching the mask on and off, thinking, what am I doing with my life? What do people see in that face? It has a weird symmetry. It has too much mouth. It has fine lines spraying from the corners of its eyes, and the pores are like cinder pits.

Shoulda stayed in purdah. I *liked* my purdah.

Fiorinda arrived about eight. He had to let her in, he'd locked the box. She pulled off her tam-o'-shanter and her coat, shaking snow from her hair. 'About time. It's *twelve degrees below* out there. What a winter. Is this because the Gulf Stream switched itself off, or turned upside down, whatever it did?'

'It's just snow.' He headed for his bedroom.

She came after him, cheerfully. She was wearing the red and gold Elizabeth dress that he loved: which touched him, but couldn't lift his mood. 'Rupert gave me a card for you. Shall I open it?' Rupert, the White Van Man of Reading Arena, was veteran caterer to the Few and friends: provider of many a corn pattie and cognac-soused breakfast, when Fiorinda and the Heads were Dissolution Summer staybehinds. She opened the envelope.

'Oooh. I'm afraid it's got a number on it.'

'Bastard.'

He'd been tinkering with the *Unmasked* immersions, that were still not working because he never had the time. He closed it all down and lay on the bed.

'There's a present, too, I think it's a buttered applecake. But you can't have it, as you called him a bastard.'

They got under the quilt together, because it was *fucking* cold, and he couldn't ATP-prime the heating, something wrong with it. Holding her sweet body, his cock wearily half-erect, he wanted to ask, *where's Ax?*, but he was too proud. Another winter of Dissolution and nothing changes, my darling girl and I are among the preterite, with our ruined careers and our love that might have been, and the man we both adore who is too busy saving the world.

Bang, bang.

'I wonder who that could be!' Fiorinda darted out of the bed.

Ax came back with her, snow on his sleek hair and his old leather coat.

'Glad you could make it.'

'Yeah, well. I decided to pop down, birthday boy. I needn't stay.' Sage turned his face to the wall.

'You can laugh. You'll be playing guitar when

you're ninety. I'll be an arthritic ex-ballerina by the time I'm thirty-five.'

Ax sat on the bed. 'Sage, I am not taking that. Fuck's sake, try to hang on. I'll be with you on the downhill slope to the grave in another six weeks. If I was to start recounting some of the charming things you used to say about me—'

'Don't!' shouted Fiorinda. 'Have some *sense*, both of you!'

'Sorry,' Sage rolled over. 'Truly sorry. Rockstar tantrum. I'm despicable.'

Ax leaned down and kissed him. 'Grow old along with me,' he said, entirely without mockery. 'There'll still be good times.' He looked at Fiorinda. 'Does he get his present?'

'He's been really horrible.'

'Yeah, but on the other hand he can't help it, and I can't be fucked to take it back to the shop. It'd be embarrassing. I'm supposed to have money to burn, and the woman's a major artist. Brace yourself, big cat. You have to look in a mirror.' They made him strip off his sweaters and stood him in front of the bathroom mirror in his slick black dungarees and shabby teeshirt. The present was a platinum and diamond torque. It lay at the base of his throat, warm from Ax's body, stunningly beautiful.

'I *love* it. My God, how much did this set us back?'

'Dirt cheap,' said Ax guiltily, 'think of all those defunct catalytic convertors.

Anyway, Fiorinda bought it.' Fiorinda's earnings were relatively unencumbered, apart from the tranche that

went to the Volunteer Initiative. Ax and Sage were slowly being crushed, financially: an unexpected side-effect of power. Ax was chronically short of disposable income. Sage, still rich on paper, had to support a major share of the Heads' sprawling feudal circus, besides his contribution to the Reich and Mary's maintenance (Marlon's trust fund was safely inaccessible).

'Bend down,' said Fiorinda. She unclasped the torque and wrapped it round his brow. 'Mask.' The living skull flickered into existence, adjusted itself and reappeared, its sombre beauty crowned by cold gleaming metal, diamond-fired.

'Now *that's* what a fallen angel ought to look like.'

The skull mugged, 'Aw, shucks,' and vanished again. He kissed them each in turn, and this became a complex, dynamic, three-person snog.

'I know what we should do,' cried Fiorinda, breaking out of it. 'We should feed him half Rupert's cake, to get his blood-sugar up, and play in the snow.'

'Huh?'

'C'mon Sage,' said Ax. 'We can fuck later. Snowball fight.'

They ate the apple cake, drank scalding real coffee with vodka chasers, and went outdoors. Not a staybehind was stirring under the dim, suffused blanket of the night sky. They found a bank and made angels, they fought with snowballs until their gloves were soaked and their hands hurt, and came to rest, Ax rolling spliff on his lap on the lid of his smokes tin, by the White Van. They'd been hoping to get something hot, but Rupert was not responding. 'Hey, look,' Fiorinda waved the spliff.

'There are lights in the Blue Lagoon!'

'That's weird,' said Ax, 'on a night like this. Let's go and check it out.'

He followed them, not suspecting a thing, while they examined the snow and remarked on the number of footprints, quite a crowd, what on earth's going on?

They went in round the back, through the bar known as Bartoli's Hideout, through the curtains of marquee membrane, and *Shazzah!* The big tent was laid out for cabaret and full of people, colour, lights. He realised he'd been betrayed, spun round and found George and Bill and Peter, his brother Heads, his own *band* had appeared, barring the way, arms folded, grinning like idiots.

Practically everyone he knew in the world waited nervously.

'Okay, okay. Thank you very much. Let's party. Just don't make a habit of it.'

The entertainment at Sage's thirtieth birthday party, MC'd by Roxane Smith, his old bones swathed in a fantastical fake-sable cloak, was a splendid sampler of

Dissolution Music, featuring veterans of god-like status. The Few themselves didn't play (leaving it to the professionals), but in one of the breaks Fergal Kearney, without leaving his place at a table of demi-gods, took up his harp. The techies quickly gave him a sound cone. The whole company fell into silence. The legendary Irishman, burnt-out as he was, commanded an audience. He played three beautiful instrumentals and then decided to embark on 'Who Knocks', Sage's hideous, graphic domestic violence song from another lifetime. The ravaged voice was still compelling. Everyone held their breath. Sage had stalked through the crowd, to where Fergal was sitting. He listened to the end and then moved in: big, potent and scary even without the mask. 'You're an insolent bastard, Fergal.'

'I was just thinking,' Fergal grinned up at him, sure of his bardic rights. 'Ye've come a long way since the lad that wrote that, Aoxomoxoa. A fine long way.' 'You're right,' said Sage, grinning back, blue eyes bright as the diamonds: grabbed Fergal's ginger head and planted a kiss.

For the finale, the Chosen Few took the stage with a set of the most trashy, sentimental buddy-songs ever recorded. Sage armed himself with canapés and bombarded them: the band ducking and diving, Mr Dictator looking absurdly young, playing up a storm, all of them laughing like maniacs.

Fiorinda cheered and stomped with the rest. He is made of crystal, she thought, everyone can see what's going on inside. Yet no one knows him completely. Not even Ax, not even me.

The crime of witchcraft returned to the statute books that winter, which Ax didn't like at all, however cautiously 'criminal witchcraft' was defined. But he had to make concessions, after Spital's Farm, and this was one of them. Most of the other fall-out was positive. Ax's reluctant coup was even, arguably, a great artistic success, since it led to the making of *Bridge House* . . . And the *Chosen* became Jordan's band, as justice demanded: but Ax would be an associate, a collaborator, a guest star — the way Fiorinda worked with DARK. Fiorinda saw a new culture taking form, distilled by Ax Preston's personal

alchemy from the slavery and excess of rock and roll. Children would grow up with Ax's manifesto, schools would teach the message. Make music, have fun, tend the garden. Above all, be good to each other: because that's the only way we're going to get through. It would be fake, it would be flawed, it would be mostly lip-service, the way these things always are: but it would be a damn sight better than what might have been. She was very uneasy about the Witchcraft Bill, given her weird secret: but it couldn't be helped. She was working on a new album (which would become *Yellow Girl*). She had her tiger and her wolf, her Drop-Out charges and the Few. She was busy and happy . . . Afraid and happy. Alain de Corlay — leading French radical who'd found it intellectually amusing to front Europopsters *Movie Sucré*, when this new world was in its birth-throes — came over to talk to Ax. He was intrigued by the Zen Self project, despite Aoxomoxoa's close involvement. The Triumvirate went out to eat with him at a restaurant they'd never heard of. Fiorinda wore the dove grey suit that she'd had made — by George Merrick's tailor, the master craftsman responsible for the *Unmasked* outfits — for the 'Miss Brown, Mister Blue and Mister Red,' video: which her lovers found extremely sexy. But the look made Fiorinda uncomfortable. Maybe that was it. Or the interminable length of the meal; or Sage and Alain, winding each other up: babbling about the *dérèglement de tous les sens*, the final assault of futuristic, *magical* science on all certainties. . . She was allergic to the word magic. Something went wrong, anyway. The fear got the

better of her happiness, it weighed on her like a nightmare beast.

In the middle of the night Sage woke to hear Fiorinda crying, reached out for her and *could not find her*. She was gone, vanished, only her voice left behind, a desolate and terrified ghost . . . Panic flooded through him, he put on the light and she was crouched on the pillows, in her slip of a cream satin nightdress.

'Hey, sweetheart, what is it, what is it? Sssh, hush, it's okay, I'm here—'

'I lost my baby, my little baby. What did I do with him? Oh dear, oh dear—'

She stared at Sage, eyes wide open but blinded in terror and grief. 'Oh Sage, where is Ax? He's gone, and my baby's gone too, and it's my fault—'

'Ax is right here beside me, where would he be? Hey, Ax, wake up.'

Between them they soothed her and coaxed her back under the covers. When she seemed to be sleeping quietly they found dressing gowns and went to the kitchen. Ax sat at the table and took out a cigarette. Sage looked for the Ndogs, chose a popper and pressed it to his neck. Each addict to his own.

'What's that?', said Ax.

'Just potassium, tobacco-head. I'd forgotten to take it.'

'Why don't you eat a banana?'

Eating a banana would not address the rate at which the neural-aligner called 'snapshot' drained the system of vital elements. He was Olwen's best labrat; he couldn't make the gaps between rides wide enough, but he wasn't going to get into explaining what went on. He knew he could convince Ax in five minutes, that what he was doing was okay. He was saving the calming, reasoned arguments for when Fiorinda needed to be pacified.

'Not so easy come by, these days. What d'you think? What should we do?'

The room was kitchen-white-bright: electric light in here, not ATP. They looked at each other, baffled, saddened. Fiorinda had been sterilised without her consent when she was thirteen —after she'd given birth to her father's child, the little boy who had died when he was three months old. They knew she longed for a baby, and believed it was possible the sterilisation could be reversed. But she hated doctors, and refused to consider *going to the whitecoats*.

'I don't care if she never has a kid,' said Ax. 'Well, okay, I'm lying. I'd give a lot to see her with my baby in her arms. Or yours, big cat.' But Sage had Marlon.

'But what I want is Fiorinda. She nearly died, the first time. Did you know that?'

'Yeah.' Sage poked at the jumble of poppers in the incense box, sorting out a few gentle downers. 'But she was a child then. It would be different.'

'I think she doesn't want to go to the doctors because . . . It's a fuck of a thing to get into, fertility treatment: talk to Felice. Leave aside the Green dilemma, you can give yourself years of pain and misery, and end up with nothing.'

'Are we *sure* it's the baby thing? What else happened tonight? She wore the suit. You know, that suit pisses her off. She's not Fiorinda any more—'

'I love her in it. Makes me so horny. Our babe in gentleman's tailoring is the most erotic thing I've ever seen.' 'Me too.' They grinned at each other. 'But I'll *burn* it, if it gives her nightmares.'

I was talking about the Zen Self. Could it have been that?'

'Nah. Why on earth. . .? Fuck, we'll have to tell her she's doing this.'

'I don't know: I don't want to make a big deal over a couple of broken nights.'

'Okay. See how we think in the morning.'

Sage came and sat down, pulled his chair close and put his arm round Ax's shoulders. Ax leaned back against him (the oxytocin thrill of all physical contact, that lingers for months or years), reached for a lighter and sparked up.

'You ever thought of giving up, Ax? There's other ways to get high.'

'Knock it off,' said Mr Dictator, firmly.

Dian had sent them an early copy of her book. Congratulations were in order, and they better be tactfully phrased, the media babe is *proud* of this one. Here's the sword in the stone, on the front. Ax sighed, leafing the pages..

'Strange woman. Pop-journalists live on a planet all of their own.'

'As rebel-icons it is our fate to become corpses in the mouths of the bourgeoisie.'

'Don't fucking start . . . I hope she never finds out about *why* we did Bridge House. The crass actuality of Fiorinda's horsetrading.'

'Nah, she'd spin it to make herself look good. Never pity them, Ax.' They looked at the pictures, already touching and nostalgic as old family

photos. 'Are you *sure* you want a kid?' Sage yawned. 'You know, they can wake up howling fifteen times a night, and do it for months—'

'I'm sure. But not if it's going to fuck her up.'

'So this is what you do,' said Fiorinda, coldly.

She stood in the doorway, hollow-eyed and tousled. 'You get together in secret, late at night, and discuss loopy Fiorinda. I'm so sorry about the fatherhood yearnings. You want to trade me in for a fully working model?'

The two men stared at her, guilty as charged.

Don't answer. There is *no* correct answer.

'What happened?' she asked.

'You had a nightmare,' said Ax, cautiously.

'Oh, I see. Have I been having nightmares often?'

'One or two,' Sage admitted. 'It was me and Alain, wasn't it? Pissing you off.'

Fiorinda gave him a sour smile. 'That's right, change the subject. Full marks for low cunning, let's talk about something else than babies. Okay. Fine . . . You are kidding yourselves. There's no *beyond all limits*. What happens after the total derangement of the senses is you settle down and become an institution.'

'Please forgive us,' said Ax. 'We won't do it again.'

'Whatever it was. We are tactless oafs, but we love you.'

'Oh shit, okay. I'm being horrible. Come back to bed. I love you too.' She did not break their sleep again, but she was starting to remind them of the

damaged teenager they had known. One evening a couple of weeks later Ax was alone in the flat, reading government papers and wondering where his girlfriend had got to. Sage was in Reading, occupied with the Zen Self. At last Fiorinda called. He asked her where she was: she said she was out, and it transpired that she meant out with someone else, yeah, and why not? She would not be home before morning, so don't wait up and I'm switching my phone off now.

He settled to his work again, feeling lonely and shaken.

There'd been a time in the past when Ax and Fiorinda had both played away relentlessly, and in the most hurtful way possible. So, not new bad news.

But *what's happening?* What's happening to my darling—?

Shortly Sage arrived, big and bouncy, growling about the fucking trains.

'Where's Fee?'

'Out.'

'Oh,' said Sage, surprised. 'Back soon?'

'No.' Ax kept his eyes on the documents. 'She's at the 69, with that Chinese drummer. Not sure of the name. Very pretty young guy. She won't be home.'

'What?'

'You heard.'

'Ax, I don't get this. She asked me to come up tonight.'

'Welcome to my world.'

'Shit. What's *wrong*? What the fuck is wrong?' 'Don't know. Could be that she's nineteen, wild and free, whereas you are

turning into an unavailable neuroscience nerd and I am a *fucking* bureaucrat.'

Ax went on reading. Sage, on the opposite couch, chewed the surviving joint of his right thumb and staring at the gas flames. Silence reigned.

At last Sage jumped up. 'Ah, this is no good. Leave that. Get your coat, c'mon, you can drive me somewhere.'

Ax found himself guided, swiftly and surely (curiously, Sage was a good navigator when not behind the wheel) towards the south-west motorways.

'Sage, what is this? I am *not* driving you to Cornwall.'

'No, no. Devon will do fine.'

Ah well. What's the point of being a rockstar dictator, if you can't burn up some Private Transport Hypocrisy records once in a while. They reached Croyde at two in the morning. Sage led the way through the chill, sea-scented night, the sparkling moonlight, to a café with a weatherboard upper storey, and chucked gravel at a window. A woman's torso appeared there rosily in lamplight, generous naked breasts, broad moon-apples eyeing them. She opened the window and leaned down.

'Oh, hi, Sage.'

'Hi, Mel. Keys, keys!'

'Just a minute.'

She vanished, came back and chucked a bunch of keys into Sage's cupped palms. The keys opened a cavernous workshop on the beach, smelling of wax

and solvents; white dust hanging in the air. They suited up, took a couple of boards and headed for the water. Before the first plunge Ax was ready to rebel, IT IS FEBRUARY YOU MANIAC, but once he was in it the sea was thrilling: warmer than the air, full of tremendous life. The waves came in beautiful sets, straight as if drawn by a ruler, not big, but big enough. There was no rivalry, no competition, not tonight: it was pure joy.

When they'd had enough they sat on the beach, insulated by good suits and warmed by all that energy. The moon was fabulous. Ax sifted cold silky sand through his fingers. 'Maybe we're not quite over the hill yet.'

'Nyah, this proves nothing. My dad's over seventy and he surfs.'

'Your dad is *over seventy*?'

'Yeah. He's seventy-five.'

'He doesn't look it!'

Sage's dad was five foot eight or so, olive skin, silver-dusted jet-black hair: you could see he'd been the spit of Marlon Williams when he was a kid.

'Mm,' agreed Sage gloomily. 'He doesn't, does he? People will be taking him for my younger brother in a year or two.'

Ax grinned at the sea. 'Fancy a fuck?'

Sage glanced at him sidelong, looked at the sky and laughed, glittering with mischief. 'Shit. I was planning to jump on you.'

'Go ahead.' 'Too late. It wouldn't be the same. Well. There's a mattress in the loft.'

The mattress was very seedy. The icy dark air wrapped them round. They lay together afterwards, intertwined, unwilling to move; while the cold crept over their sweated skin, and breathing slowed—

'D'you think we're taking this too seriously?' whispered Ax.

'No baby, I don't. I never would have believed I'd end up in bed with a bloke, but you're the love of my life. You and Fiorinda, both. *Nothing* else matters.'

?I meant, the way she's behaving. As if she's really fucked off with us—'

?Oh. Hahaha . . . Well, maybe. Maybe we just have to stop being boring.'

?But you're the love of my life too. You and Fiorinda. *Nothing* else matters.'

?All we need to do is remember that.'

They pulled a disreputable rug over themselves, slept for an hour and zoomed back to London in the dark of dawn, a steady hundred and forty clicks around the potholes and the surface breaks. Sage, curled up in the passenger seat, opened an eye and mumbled plaintively, do you have to drive so fast?

?Yeah.'

She was home before them. She came out into the stairwell as they let themselves in down below.

?Hi,' said Sage, ?did you fuck your pretty Chinese kid?'

They stood looking up: eyes shining, purely delighted to see her back safe.

Her heart turned over. She couldn't believe she had been trying to hurt them.

She realised that the words that might have burst from her. . . *I think my father is trying to make me pregnant again.* . . . were completely and utterly mad, and there was no way in the world she would ever speak them—

?Yes I did,' she said, in a small voice. ?But I don't know why. I'm an idiot.'

They bounded up the stairs and hugged her.

?I don't mind if you want to fuck other people,' said Sage. ?Well, I do, but that's my business. As long as you come home—'

?You missed a *great* night out,' Ax told her, between kisses. ?Stick with us, sweetheart. We're not dead yet. We'll show you a good time.'

And everything was good and wonderful again, for a while.

In March Kevin Verlaine had a bad snapshot trip. This was a first. The rest of them had all taken a hammering, despite the most careful mood-control and pre medication. The afterburn from a bad one was horrendous, though you lost the actual memory very quickly. (In a way, Ax had been lucky. *Physical* symptoms meant you just must not touch the stuff.) Only Ver had escaped. They'd teased him about the purity of his life; but now no longer.

He was so distressed they had to keep him in the recovery room, deep inside the eau-de-Nil dome. Sage sat up with him (Ver couldn't bear to have anyone else): wearing the living skull mask; which the patient found comforting. Hour on hour, listening to the kid's incoherent despair, and telling him, over and over, *there's no new bad news*. Whatever you saw, it's always been there. The world is the same as it was yesterday. You lived with it then, you can live with it now . . . By morning Ver was calm and Sage was exhausted. They ate breakfast

together, alone, because the patient was still fragile – Rivermead yoghurt, Welsh honey, fresh bread; and the weak malted ale that was the current romantic alternative to coffee: Staybehind breakfast beverage of choice.

?Sage,' said Verlaine, ?does Ax know about the *Flowers for Algernon* scenario?'

Flowers for Algernon was the nethead term for what might happen —if you kept a primitive pre-Crisis chip in your head for too long. Yes, Ax knew the risks. No, he would not consider getting rid of the thing. He *needed* his chip. Sage felt a prickle of unease . . . Verlaine had cut his long hair recently, not short enough to be an annoying *imitation* of his idol; but getting there. Silky brown curls clustered close around his head. He looked innocent as a child.

?He knows. Tell me about it. Fucker thinks he's the exception to every rule.

What put that into your head, Ver?'

?Something I saw on the snapshot. I don't think his chip had *failed*, that wasn't what gave me the horrors, but something—'

This was another first. It was nearly twenty hours since Kevin Verlaine had taken the neural aligner and made his brief, elliptical voyage to the State of All States. He wasn't supposed to remember a thing by this time—and it didn't matter, anyway. Everything they knew said the snapshot 'visions' were noise, not signal. They were not glimpses of the actual future (if there is such a thing); or past, or present. You wake up from sobbing at your lover's deathbed, with a host of circumstantial detail, but it doesn't mean *you were there*, it's some kind of metaphor the neurons have invented.

No one here gets out alive, we knew that already—

'Oh really?' Sage, zinging to full attention, kept his tone perfectly casual. Fuck. If only Verlaine were still hooked up. *This we have to see*, it could mean nothing, but I need to know what is going on inside that curly head, right now—

At that moment something came into the sunlit green honeycomb cell, filling every angle of the walls, every atom of the air. A limitless sweetness, bathing all of existence; an intensity, a perfume, a sound, a delicious taste. Synesthesia. Sage and Verlaine smiled at each other, involuntarily, more tender than lovers.

The world is terrible: and yet when we have approached *the whole* of all that is, the penumbra of that contact falls on us as this ravishing delight—

That's the Zen Self. That's what keeps people addicted to the quest.

The visitation passed. 'Shall we log that?' asked Verlaine.

'Yeah. How d'you feel now?'

'Oh, better.'

'D'you remember what you were just saying?'

'No. . . What was I saying?'

'I can't remember either,' Sage lied. 'Come on, let's check you out.'

He found nothing, not a trace of whatever had been going on: and the kid was fine. No problems, no damage, cleared A1 for more devastating neuronautical adventures, lucky lad. When Verlaine had gone back to London, Sage went over Verlaine's trip again, with Serendip. It turned out that the young Adjuvant had

been given a double dose of snapshot. Olwen had discovered that the capsules were going walkabout, so she'd changed the system: the new delivery method had been subverted by human error. Oh, fuck, so much for our health and safety standards, thank God he took no harm, better keep him on the bench for a while.

Later, Olwen was intrigued by Sage's report: but by then Verlaine no longer remembered remembering anything, and his scans showed no confirmation. She suggested a telepathy artefact (they happened all the time, a useless irritation).

Sage could have been worrying about Ax's chip himself.

Consciousness and memory are worse than DNA for contamination errors, said the guru. We have to be very, very careful not to be fooled. And no, Sage, *you will not* up your own dosage. We're making progress. Just be patient.

Fiorinda went to the Benelux with DARK, crossing by sea through mean spring weather, as the tunnels were completely out of commission. Their set featured the new DARK album *Safo*; and the debut of some songs from *Yellow Girl*. The flood countries were not calm: they had an interesting time, dodging riots and living on their wits. Meanwhile *Unmasked*, the first album to escape from Gulag Europe (legitimately, through a mathematically-proven virus-free Swedish transcript) had scarfed up five Grammys. The Heads had official confirmation via the Internet Commissioners: plus a disc of the award ceremony, which Sage and George had to convert, with a lot of hassle, to a format that would run on their quarantined hardware: already obsolete, frozen in time—

It was April. The Few went down for a preview of the new Rivermead Palace,

before the Mayday opening ceremony. Fiorinda the no-fixed-abode brat was about to have a place of her own at last, the royal suite on the upper floor. The main room was huge, with vast rectilinear windows (justified as solar-collectors, really there because Topsy the architect was a closet sixties fan). The party settled there, after the obligatory tour, when they'd sent the architect away, to watch the Grammy show on Fiorinda's neo-arts-and-crafts pewter framed wall screen. The Heads were playing it down, ashamed to have been singled out. 'It's the Apocalypse Now awards,' growled Sage. 'First they machine-gun you, then they give you a bandaid.'

'Don't I remember,' said Ax, 'You were the one who thought the Internet Commission ought to take us out and shoot us, after Ivan/Lara?'

'That was before I knew they were going to make their sanctions permanent.'

'Fucking typical,' complained Bill. 'First time 'e lets us make a mass-market record, and he has to wait until we're stuck in the gulag with our assets frozen.'

Aoxomoxoa's fans in England must have greeted the revelation of 'Unmasked' much as the crowd at Newport greeted Bob Dylan with his electric guitar—

Aoxomoxoa's friends cheered and jeered. *Bob Dylan!* How're we going to keep him down on the farm now—? Silver and Pearl Wing, leaders of the rugrat-pack had retired to Fiorinda's neo

arts-and-crafts bedchamber, to share a spliff; sitting on a roll of leftover rush matting. 'When you look in a mirror,' said Silver, 'does the person feel like you?'

'No. Because it's a reflection.' Pearl liked to cut the crap.

'Think about it. Does it match the person you think you are inside? It doesn't.

That's because your body image inside your brain has no face.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Oh, nothing.' Silver paused for a thoughtful draw, spliff clamped elegantly between her fourth and fifth fingers. 'Just something Sage was saying to me.'

Beside them on the floor lay a package of mottled bark-paper. They were planting a charm, which they intended to retrieve when loaded with psycho sexual power, and use for business purposes.

'We'll put it in the middle. That's where Fiorinda sleeps and female sex energy is stronger.'

'How do you know?'

'Mum says so. Don't you ever listen, cloth ears? Male sex energy is piddling.'

'No, I mean how do you know Fiorinda sleeps in the middle?'

'Easy. Just watch them. She's always in the middle.'

'How can you tell where the middle of the bed's going to be? It isn't here yet.'

'Feng Shui.' Downstairs Ruby and Jet, Anne-Marie's three-year-old and five-year-old, wandered around, tugging at wall hangings, clambering on artistic furniture.

Smelly Hugh, AM's villainous-looking but gentle partner, nursed Safire, the new baby, while AM gave the Powerbabes a herbalist consultation. Felice was pregnant at last, after years of sorrow. Rob was ecstatic, glowing like a pregnant girl himself. He had longed for children, but Dora and Cherry had been adamant: it had to be Felice's baby first, or no babies at all. . .

Roxane presided, magisterial, over the happy, homely court; from one of the Roman cross-framed storm-timber chairs. If Ax is a shameless socialist, and Sage is passionately conservative, that leaves Fiorinda to lead the party of Gladstone.

Fiorinda a Liberal? That doesn't sound right. S/he smiled at hir mistake. Of course. Our young queen, compassionate nihilist, is above politics, and served with equal devotion by her government and her loyal opposition.

Long may the coalition endure!

I hate rush matting, thought Fiorinda. It hurts your feet, and food gets stuck in it. Thank God I'll never actually have to *live* here. Is it crazy to feel nostalgic for a sign that says AUTOMATIC DOOR NOT WORKING? For the smell of carpet glue? Bitter malaise possessed her, *this is not my world*. . . Fergal Kearney, over the other side of the great sunlit hall, watched her with puzzled sympathy. She rearranged her face. Look happy: that's your job. Stone Age Royalty.

'Tell us what's going on with the Zen Self, Sage,' suggested Cherry, tickling Safire's chin. 'Like when you told us about quantum cryptography that time.' 'Yeah,' agreed Felice, 'That was cool. Eve was the bad guy.'

'What is consciousness?' suggested Rob, trying to sound scientific.

The weird science cabal, Dilip and the Heads, Chip and Ver, grinned at each other. 'Ah . . .' said Sage. 'How long is a piece of string? *Consciousness* is different things to different people. It depends on the situation. It depends what you're trying to measure. It's not a very useful concept—'

'Okay, he doesn't know the answer,' said Ax. 'Better try another question.'

'Every moment of perception has its global brain state: perceptions, recall, emotions, sensations, all bound together. Your sense of your self is formed by a crucial collection of these brain states, stored in memory. It's a blurred template, just enough for us to get by. But all those global states are also real objects in information-space, also known as the sum of all possible states, and there the record is perfect. Achieving the Zen Self, which means gaining unlimited access to the State of all States, would *incidentally* include the entire past, present and future, of the information-states that make you, you. What we're doing is rewiring our brains to take that weight. If we dope your firing patterns right, under certain conditions, you move into phase with information-space for a very short time. Every time you repeat the experiment there's a lasting physical effect, tiny but real. Your brain gets closer to being able to process your 4-D awareness.'

'And that would be the Zen Self?' suggested Dora. 'Er, no. Zen Self, stable fusion with the State of all States, is another huge scale-up. But achieving the first level might trigger the second. That's what we hope will happen.'

'So what do we get out of this?' asked Ax. 'Time travel? Psychic powers?' Sage shook his head, smiling with wondrous sweetness; and so did the other labrats: a very strange effect. Peter Stannen, who was now learning to live without the veil, was particularly beatific.

'The Zen Self is an end in itself. If you were doing it you'd understand. But trust me, Ax, there'll be applications. One day, my lord, you will tax the stuff.'

'You get visions of the future,' said Allie. 'I saw about that on Channel Seven.'

'Nah, total rubbish. Popular misconception.'

(AX MUST GET THAT CHIP FIXED!)

Allie looked bemused. 'But the drug, snapshot, does give you visions?'

'Information-space is sort of an eleven-dimensional kaleidoscope,' explained Verlaine helpfully. 'Or, um, it might be sixteen. Are we on eleven, fifteen or sixteen currently, Sage? There's no way of knowing that what you see under snap is, uh, real, so to speak, or just an aspect.'

'It's all real, really,' murmured Chip. 'And nothing is real, too—'

'Snapshot's a nickname,' said the boss. 'The drug's a neural aligner. Snapshot? is what the scanner does. In case something falls off the edge while you're out-of-body, like vision or motor control or whatever, Olwen's scanner has a *rescue me* snapshot of your last normal state, so she can re-install—' He realised, a little too far into this cheery description of routine brain death,

that some of his friends, including his girlfriend, were staring in horror.

Hmm. Maybe I better back-pedal.

'Of course, it's never happened.'

'You LIAR!' shouted Fiorinda, jumping up. 'You *bastard!*' She stormed out.

'You'd better go after her,' said Allie, 'and by the way, if you've really been doing what that sounded like, risking your life and, and your faculties like that, and not telling her, you *are* a bastard.'

Sage went after Fiorinda. Ax looked at the weird scientists. 'Has it?'

'Not seriously,' said Dilip, caught between two awesome fires.

'We're talking picoseconds,' said George. 'No danger. An' Olwen's in charge.'

'Like hell.' It was well known that Sage could wrap Olwen Devi round his crooked little finger. Ax pulled the Les Paul, which he'd brought with him on this auspicious day, into his lap, and plucked a couple of softly zinging chords.

'Information-space, mm. . . Pity that stuff does not agree with me.'

Fiorinda was sitting on the plinth of the dead-cars sculpture at the main entrance.

She looked up as Sage joined her. She wasn't angry. 'Don't worry, I know I can't stop you. I wouldn't try.'

He sat beside her. 'When we first met, you were like Einstein in a hamster cage. I remember thinking, after I'd talked to you a couple of times, fuck, no wonder he has to sedate himself with alcohol. He'd go bonkers in this biz, otherwise.' 'I felt much the same about you, my brat.'

'Huh. Very funny.'

This tired-eyed, secretive, twenty-year-old girl is almost singlehandedly directing the drop-out hordes operation, an economy of four millions. People, that is, not currency. When the media folk want to know what's her role in the Triumvirate she says, *I'm the girl. I do the housework, of course.*

Some household.

'I wish I could stop you from dismissing what you do. What's the VI budget at the moment? A rough estimate?'

'I never think of it like that. Think about the money and you're lost, I think of it as a shape,' said Fiorinda. 'A four-dimensional puzzle: everything has fit inside the envelope and everything has to keep moving . . . Okay, I love Ax's England, I love my fascinating hobby. But it isn't what I want.'

'Fiorinda, what's wrong? Tell me what's wrong. I know you're not happy.'

'I can't begin to tell you how fake it felt, on tour with DARK, pretending I was still a musician.'

He knew she was lying: expertly, instantly protecting one secret with another. But what could he say? The light of spring was so beautiful. Beyond the tented town, a mist of colour moved like smoke through the budding trees on the other side of the river. She turned to him. No words, just a look, a sad gaze in which both of them were drowning—

'Excuse me.' Pearl Wing had appeared. Silver and Pearl were in principle pretty children, sweet oval faces, soft, pale brown hair and Chinese black eyes: but temperament came shining through. Pearl stood four-square, arms folded, tenacious: a bulldog puppy in a smocked dress.

'Can I ask you something about your sex life?'

'Go ahead,' said Fiorinda, 'if you feel lucky, punk. Try it.'

Pearl skipped a step backwards. 'Who sleeps in the middle?'

'Hahaha. Usually I do,' said Sage. 'Now clear off.'

Mary Williams was sending Marlon to boarding school, and Sage was *over my dead body* . . . Mary got her way, but as a trade-off Mar was allowed to visit Brixton. He developed a huge crush on his dad's girlfriend: dropping her name

all over the place, as he cut a swathe through the young scene at the Insanitude. *My sort of step-mother, you know, Fiorinda* . . . Sage hadn't been allowed to have his son on a visit since Mar was four. The improvement in relations with his ex was a profound relief: ironic that it should come when his miraculous new happiness was running into trouble.

Fiorinda is unhappy: Ax is burying himself in his work.

And Sage is conflicted, seeing both sides.

One day he met Fergal Kearney in the Mall, Sage coming away from a meeting in Whitehall; Fergal from the Insanitude. The Irishman was heading for St James's Park, to feed the ducks. Sage had been wanting to talk to Fergal. A problem was developing between the London barmies and the Kilburn Celtic

street-gangs. The 'Celtics' were not necessarily Celtic Nations-origin, but the Few's certified native Irish rockstar would impress them. Fergal had a lot of clout with the barmies as well. He'd been formally inducted, after Spital's Farm, with the proper militarised hippy ceremony: something Ax and Sage had never achieved. And probably they'd better not—

They strolled by the lake, and discussed Fergal's possible role.

'How are you keeping? You're looking better.'

'Fer a man with cirrhosis and a cancer fighting over his bones,' said Fergal, ruefully, 'I'm in fine shape. A fine fockin' defector I've turned out to be. . . I'm a crock, Sage, me darling. Some days, I'm jest incapable of rising from me bed.'

'You don't have to get up in the morning to help with this.'

'Well, other days I'm not so bad. The ould witch is dosing me, and I believe there's something in it.' He gave Sage his gap-toothed grin. 'Okay, I'm yer man. I jest hope I don't say the wrong thing, and have yez punching me lights out over the negotiating table. That wud be unfortunate.'

Sage laughed and shook his head. 'I don't do that anymore.'

'Aye. I was fergetting,' agreed Fergal regrettfully. 'Those days are gone.'

They sat on a bench. Ax's England passed by, ignoring the Minister for Gigs and his companion. Fergal took out a greasy paper bag and threw crusts, judiciously favouring the little brown mallard ducks. 'And when you've sorted the Kilburn Celtics,' remarked Sage, staring at the

scuffling waterbirds, 'you can get rid of Benny Prem for me.'

Fergal shook his head.

'Aye, I can understand how you'd feel about that feller. He has a slimy little little way about him – though I think I've niver seen him but on the telly. But there must be something in him, or Ax would throw him out. It won't be that Benny has any secret hold over him, will it?'

Prem, Sage thought, was like the obnoxious favourite of some old style rock and roll megastar: the guy everybody hates and you can't figure it, until you realise *of course*, he's the man with the drugs. Not in this case, *of course*: but it was like an addiction, this refusal to let go. Benny was the one that got away, the one person who *never* succumbed to the Ax effect. And we can't have that, can we?'

He sighed. 'Benny's been with us since the beginning. I think Ax feels we owe him something. But I think he's dangerous. I've a strong feeling he has contacts with the so-called ritual magic persuasion. They still exist, you know.'

'Like rats in the house. We fockin' ought to have exterminated them, when we had the chancst. But it's a wee bit difficult to see how, with non-violent methods.'

He won't listen to me, Sage was thinking. Over Benny Prem or anything else.

When did he stop listening? Is it Ax who has changed? Or is it me? All I know is that *she's unhappy*, and that's not in the contract. Being the third party in the

threesome, like being the Minister for Gigs. . . It was okay, because I love him. But what if Fiorinda is unhappy? What then? Fergal cleared his throat, venting a whiff of carrion sauced with red wine.

Sage realised he'd been silent too long: the Irishman was looking uneasy.

'No offence, Sage me darlin' but if ye're lairy about Mr Preminder, is it not Ax himself ye should be talking to?'

'You're right,' said Sage, 'Why didn't I think of that?'

He didn't talk to Ax. He was afraid of where that conversation might lead.

In July they went to Tyller Pystri, the first time they'd visited their spiritual home all year. Sage stayed up late, working in his studio—a small, damp room, full of hardware, that had been the cottage parlour. Ax and Fiorinda were sleeping upstairs. Fiorinda's nightmares had started up again, and they were sharing the burden. One night on, one night off. He was glad of a chance to work on the *Unmasked* immersion code undisturbed, but feeling depressed.

Why are we sleeping apart? It's not right, especially not *here*—

A south-west gale was roaring, through the Chy gorge. He was distantly aware of it, through the code. It was a warm spell in a cold summer; but wild.

Something came into the room behind him. Menace and dread.

He spun around, stripping off the eyewrap. Fiorinda stood there, naked. She crossed the room, a savage grin splitting her face, and leapt astride his thighs.

Her nails bit into his shoulders. 'Fuck me,' she said. 'Come on, fuck me, fuck me.

Pretend I'm six years old. I'm your little girl, fuck me—' One look in her eyes, and he knew he wasn't going to talk her down. He came out of the chair holding her and carried her into the living-room.

He didn't think she was strictly conscious, but when he reached for the Ndogs incense box she recognised that. She exploded, fighting like a wild cat, clawing at his face. Okay, no drugs . . . One of her dresses lay by the door to the stairs, the storm-cloud indigo. He pulled it over her head, pulled her arms through the sleeves, added a Guernsey from the back of the kitchen door, grabbed his keys and hauled her, struggling, out into the night. He hardly knew what he was doing, just knew he had to *get her out of this*. He got her into the Volvo, pushed her down, strapped her in . . .

Zoom round to the other side of the car. Drive. Out of the gates, *can't see a thing*, ah, the lights, fucking retro handicraft, you have to *switch them on*, that's better. He was on the track to the sea before he realised it hadn't occurred to him to go and wake Ax. *Shit*, what if Ax is lying in a pool of blood? Oh, *shit*.

No blood on her. My God, what am I thinking? She's just in one of her night terrors, this is what they're like, I have to calm her down, that's all.

They never took the Volvo beyond the house. The track was terrible, trough full of rocks but too bad. This is an emergency.

As I was walking through Grosvenor Square, he sang softly,

Not a nip to the winter but a chill to the air From the other direction, she was calling my eye—

Could be an illusion, but I might as well try. The first time I saw you, my darling,

that cold night in Amsterdam, I said to myself, she is my soul, and it was no illusion. Not often in your life you get to be so right as I was when I decided,

come what may, I would never leave your side. What's wrong with you, baby?

This has been going on too long, and getting worse. We won't set the quacks on you, but we have to *talk about it*. He kept on singing, clutching the wheel of Ax's precious car in his ugly, untrustworthy hands, eyes glued to the potholes. A thin, small voice started to join him, from a long way off.

She wore scarlet begonias, tucked into her curls,

I knew right away she was not like other girls—

'Where are we going?'

'To the sea.'

'But it's the middle of the night.'

'Best time. Let's finish 'Scarlet Begonias?.'

He kept on singing, up the hill and across the cliff-top pasture, a mile and a half of inchworm, painful driving. She didn't speak again, but she sang with him, their golden oldies, things they'd taught each other when she was fourteen. The path down the cliff had suffered since last year. It was beyond a joke, he kept an iron grip on her arm: but the cove was just what he wanted, a moon-curve of white sand swept clean by the gale, glimmering under the cloudy, starlit sky. He stripped off, stripped her of the Guernsey and her dress, and ran with her into the boiling, buffeting water. Fiorinda started to laugh, breasting the tumult and leaping like a dolphin. The change was so immediate it shocked him, but *trust me*, said the ocean, and he did, but he didn't let her out of his reach. She jumped into his arms, wet hair, arms and legs, slippery as melting ice.

'Had enough?'

'Yes!'

They plunged out into the air again, and now the south-west wind didn't feel cold. Fiorinda wrung salt water from her hair. Sage dragged a plank of driftwood into a windbreak shelter of boulders and they cuddled close, a nest of clothes around them. 'Now,' he said. 'Tell me about it. This time *you must*. Do you remember coming down to me tonight?'

'I remember being in the car, and you were singing. What happened?'

'You were sleepwalking. Tell me about the nightmare. Will you tell me?'

'No.' She grabbed his crippled right hand, holding onto it hard. 'Oh, well, yes. It won't sound like much. I had a bad dream . . . Then I thought I woke up and someone was fucking me, a horrible fucking that I had to bear because I had no right to refuse.'

'Shit. Is that the nightmare? Is that what you haven't been telling us?'

'I don't know. Maybe. I forget. I'm being raped by someone I can't refuse, so that's not rape . . . and I can't open my eyes. Then I manage to open my eyes, and the man who's fucking me is you, or Ax, but I know it's really my father. And then I wake up.'

'Your *father*?'

'If it's you, it's not so bad. I can say, fuck off you sad bastard that's ridiculous, you can't fool me. But if it's Ax, that's awful, because *it could be true*. I try not to believe it, but Ax is getting so different. He could be turning into m-my father, the rock lord, and that's . . . I think that's what all this is about. M-my father is trying to m-make me hate Ax.'

'What? Fiorinda, slow down. Your *father*? You mean Rufus O'Niall?'

She looked at him. The babbling girl-child vanished, as if a wave had gone over her. Fiorinda's invincible defences rose, shutting him out.

My God. *What is going on?*

'Oh,' she said. 'I don't mean *literally*, Sage. I mean that's what my nightmares are about. It's classic, isn't it? My father fucked me, and now that I'm grown up it all comes back, all the suppressed memories. I just have to get over it. I have to get him out of my head. *Then* I can go to the doctors and we'll see if I can get pregnant, but it won't matter if I can't because maybe we can adopt a baby, and I'll be free and we'll be happy.'

Now she was crying, the tears spilling down her face. He pulled the Guernsey

round her shoulders and held her close. 'You should have told us. Darling little Fiorinda, trust me. One day he *will* be gone. One day, you'll look for that black hole of an obsession and it just won't be there. You'll know that you could see him coming, and you wouldn't even bother to cross the street.'

'You mean Mary,' said Fiorinda softly.

He sighed. 'Yeah. I mean Mary . . . I mean, I understand. I always did.'

They moved apart. Fiorinda hung her head, hiding behind a rampart of salt-wet curls, and drew in the sand with her finger. 'It's true I was obsessed with him. Even right up to Dissolution Summer, he

was all I cared about. But you're wrong, Sage. I'm *ages* past that stage. He means nothing, I just want to be rid of him and . . . somehow I can't be.'

'When we first met,' said Sage, 'I was afraid I'd remind you of your father, because I'm so fucking big, and you like a child in my arms. I thought you could never possibly want me. It used to make me desperate.'

'Sage. Idiot. It never crossed my mind. Sometimes I think you're me in another skin, which can be weird, but I *never* thought you were my father . . . Oh! Is that why you wouldn't fuck me when I offered, that time?'

'Hm. As I recall, it wasn't a very appealing offer.'

'Hahaha. Nobody talks to Aoxomoxoa like that! You said you weren't so hard up you had to jump my scrawny little underage bones, and I was so mortified.'

He smiled, between rueful and tender. 'Well, I lied.'

'I was *so fucked-up*, when you met me. I was like spoiled meat.'

'I knew. I knew you felt like that. And I was scared, Fiorinda. I didn't dare to touch you, because you were so fragile and hurt, and I'm a coward. I was afraid I'd *break* something, the way I always do . . . It was Ax who took on that job.'

The wind and the sea roared. The beach had an unearthly luminescence as their eyes grew accustomed to the night. 'You gave me unconditional love,' she said, 'when no one had ever loved me before. It's something I can't ever repay.'

She climbed into his arms, with starry eyes and a sweet and joyful smile. 'My Sage, you are so good to me. Did I ever tell you, I'm madly in love with you?' Fucking-with-intent to cut Ax out would seem the greater crime, but holding her naked in his arms, feeling nothing but tenderness, he knew he'd never been in worse danger.

'C'mon. Into the sea again. One rush, and then home.'

On the way back they stopped at the waterfall pool to rinse off. He carried her under the holly trees (ouch, ouch ouch) and doused them both in the churning pot, unbelievably much colder than the sea, which the Chy had pummelled for itself in a dark rocky dell. It was magical, but his hands were starting to act up. When they were dressed he offered her the keys. Fiorinda could drive, though she rarely wanted to. She refused, laughing, oh no, I'm the girl, *you* drive. He was too proud to explain. He tackled the lumpy descent to Tyller Pystri with extreme caution, Fiorinda beside him in his old Guernsey and her rustling skirts, singing under her breath and smiling angelically.

'What's up with you, brat?'

'Nothing. I'm very, very happy and I love you very much.'

'Nyah—' He switched on the skull, rotting flesh and lively maggots version.

Fiorinda yelped, and the Volvo swerved. Crunch. They both jumped out to look. Oh, shit. The left headlamp had collided with a corner of jutting rock.

'I was driving,' said Fiorinda.

'Don't be *stupid*. I was driving.'

They stared at each other, for too long.

'I shouldn't have been driving,' said Sage. 'My hands are fucked.' Silently they got back into the car. Fiorinda nursed it home, through the gates and onto the hardstanding under the twin beech trees. There was a light in the living-room.

'I'll do the talking,' said Fiorinda. 'It was my fault. My pathetic nightmare.' Ax didn't make a fuss about the car. They spent the rest of the night together in Sage's bed. But things were not good. In the morning Fiorinda remembered some of what she'd said on the beach, and was very frightened. She decided she would walk to the garage shop to see if they had any chocolate. Leave them alone together: it was the only trick she knew. When Fiorinda had left Ax came into the studio and sat in a tattered armchair.

'Tell me what really happened?'

Sage tried to tell him.

'What do you mean, she *frightened* you?'

'What I say. She was like *not herself*, literally, when she came downstairs to me. It was horrible. And you slept through this?'

'I slept through it. Fuck, look who's talking. You should've woken me.'

'I'm sorry I didn't, I don't know how that happened. Could we keep to the point? I took her to the beach because . . . well, to break the mood, and then she started talking about her father. Listen to me, Ax. She said things, really strange things, that, if I took them a certain way, I would be very scared—'

'You're telling me Fiorinda's going nuts?' 'No . . . ' Sage could not say what was on his mind. It would take too long, he

would have to go back to first principles, and it would be beyond belief. 'I don't know what to think. We know what happened to her. We know things like that have a way of surfacing years later. That's what she says herself, and it could be true, but I'm afraid there's something else, something worse—'

'What are you on about? She's been under horrible stress for years, and now it seems like every woman friend we have is either pregnant or dandling a baby. It must be fucking painful, humiliating even, and it brings back the hell she went through when she was thirteen. What more do you need? We knew she was vulnerable, we knew what we were taking on. We can help her through. But you're not helping by getting melodramatic in the middle of the night, taking her *skinny dipping*, for fuck's sake—'

'Crashing your car.'

Ax shrugged. 'Oh, forget that. I knew you'd dent it sometime.'

'We're too old for her,' said Sage, abandoning all hope of a serious discussion.

'I expect that's why I got the father stuff. She wants a boyfriend her own age and she doesn't know how to tell us. Come to think of it, nothing more likely.'

'Bastard,' said Ax. 'You know so fucking well how to screw me up. You always did.'

'I could say the same of you.'

'You should have woken me.'

'I wish I had.' Sage left the desk, and kissed Ax, fiercely. 'Let's go next door.' They moved next door, to Sage's bed, the sexual heat between them stronger than as ever, while trust and faith were foundering; isn't it often the way.

Reading Weekend came, the end of August: Fiorinda and DARK headlining on Saturday night. The crowd was huge, in defiance of Travel Restrictions Hell, and there were record numbers at the big screen sites up and down the country. DARK's set, climaxing with a glorious rendition of 'Chocobo', Fiorinda's superb dancetrack from *Friction*, was the live music event of the year.

The Dictator and his Minister missed the whole thing. They'd taken oxy again and were in Bartoli's Hideout, kissing and caressing, and discussing the ever fascinating topic, *did (does) Fiorinda fuck Charm Dudley?* How blessed it is to have someone who shares a lover's fears. 'No, no no. Yeah, they used to roll-around fight. But there wasn't anything sexual in it. I *saw* those fights—'

'You say that because you're kidding yourself, Sage—'

On the big screen above the bar, instant replay: Fiorinda and Charm duetting on 'San Antonio Rose'. Fiorinda in her silver and white cowgirl dress and the red boots, looking so wonderful, playing so tight with Charm, *do they or don't they?* Fiorinda and DARK walked into the Hideout in a posse. The dike rockers and Harry Child, DARK's new bassist (replacing Tom Okopie, who had been killed by a British Resistance landmine, in Boat People summer) closed up around their singer and walked straight out again. Sage and Ax, locked in their twisted obsession, didn't even notice. 'Jaysus,' said Fergal, one of the unwilling spectators. 'Why the fuck do they do

it? It's no wonder she's mad with them. That stuff eats yer brain.'

'They do it,' said Dilip sadly, 'because if they don't do oxy occasionally it'll be bloody murder, they'll be at each other's throats.'

'And break her heart,' muttered Rob.

'And break the Reich.'

Fiorinda came back alone later, and teased her boyfriends the drug fiends into some semblance of normal behaviour. Whatever she said to them when she took them home, it worked. Things were okay again; for a while.

She dreamed that the Few were visiting a bathhouse. There were glistening tiles, turquoise pools, mirrors, drifts of white steam; everyone was naked. She knew it was a dream, because this was something they'd never done. She was sashaying around with her tiger and her wolf on either arm, having a fine time. But why do I keep looking at myself? Why don't I look at my friends, some of whom I have never seen naked before? Surely I'd be interested. Why don't I look at Sage and Ax? They are glorious. Am I not proud of them? She had no choice. Something behind her eyes wanted to dwell on these breasts, this small waist, this bum, these slim thighs, and Fiorinda must comply, she must stare into every reflecting surface . . . She woke, sweating, sitting bolt upright: but she did not scream.

She'd trained herself not to scream.

Sage and Ax were fast asleep. Where are we? It's Brixton. Huddled there, arms wrapped around her knees, she imagined telling them

that she was being attacked by a psychic monster. But if this was Rufus O'Niall why did it feel like her deepest self? Like the stupid choices of a fucked-up, worthless little girl? And what good would it do for Ax and Sage to know? What could they do? She would tell them nothing. She would fight her own battle.

Sage was dead to the world, a warm rock. She slipped out of bed, round to Ax's side, and crept in beside him. *Little cat*, he murmured, and they moved together, into the way they used to hold each other, falling asleep, before the threesome began. Oh Ax, my darling Ax. I can't be losing you.

Ax spent a bizarre amount of his time *signing things*. It seemed archaic but apparently it was necessary. Signing til his wrist ached, all the while making lists in his head, like the lists he used to make in Dissolution Summer. But grittier.

Restore mixed arable farming

Recruit more hedgeschool teachers

Recruit competent drop-outs to the 'Nation of Shopkeepers' project Convince Boat People recruits to

above that they'll be accepted, not stoned to death, in isolated rural communities
Build a lot more solar, wind and wave plants. Quickly
Keep the CCM united. Which means keeping the Celts happy But try not to compromise on pagan rituals

Street-fighting

Measles vaccination

Anti-science riots

All the while haunted by a young Indie star, in the first flush of success. You want me to sign your arm? This tattered inner from a vanished jewelcase? Your forehead, your pants, your bum? Hey, okay, no problem, form a line, let me give you my special smile, let me recruit you to my cause. Yes, even then. Because the world was falling apart, and Ax had to use the power fate had gifted to him, he had no choice. He had a stand-up fight with Fiorinda over the Call-Up Bill. She said, what happened to lifestyle choices? What happened to, *?Utopian revolutions turn rotten in about six weeks if you impose the Good State by force—?* He said this isn't about Utopia, it's about survival now, and she said, *yeah, I spotted that. Your survival, you mean. The first rule of politics: stay in power.* He said you have to do drastic things in desperate situations, and it was a temporary, emergency measure—

?What is temporary about this?' she yelled. ?This is not *temporary!* We are not going to get to the other side, Ax. There is no other side!'

They were in the living-room of the Brixton flat. Sage hated their fights, he usually managed to be elsewhere. Ax walked away, as far as the terrace windows: the Brixton back gardens planted with vegetables, urban field strips.

?You knew this was what I wanted, from the beginning.'

?Did I? What I remember is that you told us you never wanted to run the country. You said that was bullshit.'

She cries in the night, and he goes on doing exactly what makes her unhappy.

He couldn't help it. He would work himself to death at this impossible job, and make her hate him, because it was better than facing the pain.

What happened to the sweet love you and I had?

?Oh Ax,' she said. ?My darling Ax. *The house always wins.*' Fiorinda sat up late by the old gas stove, wrapped in her gold and brown shawl,

trying to read: Elsie curled on her lap. There wasn't much heat in the flames, the pressure was too low, but the sight of them was comforting. She couldn't concentrate, she stared around, looking for ghosts.

There on the bookcase is the Sweet Track Jade: the stone axe, ancient symbol of civilisation in England, which the Few gave to their beloved leader on the night of his inauguration. There is the *Times* cartoon of Mr Dictator, with Sage and Fiorinda as big cat and little cat, that they'd decided they liked, and bought the original. There's the take-off of a famous Hockney picture. Sage and Ax drinking sherry on the terrace, the cat walking on the wall, Fiorinda just a glimpse of party frock. ?Mr Preston, Mr Pender, and Elsie'.

Here is our life, hollow and empty. Here am I, trapped in the official story.

She heard Sage come in. The Heads'd had a gig in Camden, something about promoting country life. Sage ambling up the stairs, into the bathroom, where he pisses gallons, singing that he has a brand new combine harvester, *and I'll give you the key.* Into the room, stumbling only a little, and shedding his coat. He wore brown corduroy trousers tied under the knee with string, a white shirt without a collar and a red kerchief around his throat. He looked stunningly beautiful,

slightly ridiculous, and *very* smashed.

?Ax not back yet?’

This was the night of the Call-Up Debate. Ax was at the House of Commons. ?Nah.’

?D‘you know what’s going on?’

She shrugged. ?I suppose David and Ax are getting their own way. The camera angles will make ten MPs look like a crowd, and there’ll be a thrilling hard-won victory around two a.m. I think that was the plan. Check the Parliament Channel and find out.’

?Can’t be tossed.’ He descended beside her in the old Aoxomoxoa style, something between collapsing and folding up like a telescope.

?You’ve been pouring horrible, horrible quantities of alcohol down your neck, haven’t you?’

?Fraid so.’

?Shit. I really needed someone to talk to tonight.’

?You can talk to me.’ He lifted her onto his lap (Elsie snarled and fled). ?I will listen. I jus‘ won’t remember in the morning, an‘ then you can tell me again.’

She wrapped her shawl around them both. ?I can’t live like this.’

?Now, tha’s a shame, because I was just thinking . . .’ His soft mouth traced her hairline, his arms tightened in the warm hold that would never fail, ?I would happily spend the rest of my days *like this*. There could be minor improvements, we could both be naked and my cock safe inside, but this is very fine.’

?I’ve lost the music. I get up on stage and it’s a job, a fake, I don’t believe in my songs anymore, they’re all stupid, meaningless.’ ?Sweetheart, we all lose the music. You’ll find it again, soon as we get through

this part. A little crash-an‘-burn, wandle in the widlernesses, de rigneur, my brat.’

?Idiot. You’d better go to sleep, you’re not making sense.’

When Ax got in he found them like that, fast asleep in the pearly glow of an ATP lamp. He sat on the opposite couch, took out a cigarette and smoked it, watching the lovers, thinking: you’d have to have a heart of stone to want to come between them.

Stones in his heart.

Sage opened his eyes. ?Well? Did you win, you and David?’

?Yeah. Let’s go to bed.’

Two days after the Call-Up debate Dan Preston had a massive heart attack. No warning. Ax’s father had hardly been near a doctor in his life. In better times maybe he’d have lived; or maybe not, who can tell. As it was, he was dead before they got him to a functioning cardiac unit. He was fifty-eight.

Straight after the funeral Sage had to go to Edinburgh on a trade mission. The Scots were interested in developing bi-location phones. (Strange the way the cutting edge keeps moving on and out, at least for a while, when a civilisation dies). Fiorinda took over Ax’s diary as well her own, so Ax could stay with his mother. She and Sage kept in touch using the new, commercial model bi-loc.

Fiorinda had never tried ?faceting‘ before. It sounded like modern drugs, but Sage persuaded her. They knew they’d better stay off sex, but one thing led to another and they couldn’t resist.

He thought he was making love with her naked soul.

When he came home, he and Fiorinda didn’t say a word to each other about what was going on between them. There was nothing to be said, nothing to be done; and Ax must never know. Ax, on a normal phone, told them he was glad he’d been getting on better with his dad over the past year or so, and Dan had never wanted to get old, so as sudden deaths go it was okay. And his mother

was bearing up.

The night he came back from Taunton the three of them had terrific sex, the best sex they'd had in months. When Fiorinda was asleep Ax and Sage got up and sat drinking single malt, discussing the Edinburgh trip. They couldn't have had this conversation with Fiorinda: she went ballistic at any mention of politics at the moment. . . A decade or so down the line those canny Scots might be drawing up a new Act of Union, the way things are heading. (Wales isn't going to object. Basically, the Welsh don't give a bugger. Most of them don't care if the government is in Tokyo, as long as it's not in Cardiff). . . And it wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen.

'We'll be long gone,' said Ax. 'The Reich will be history.'

'The modern world will be back in place. We'll be rockstars again.'

'Mm.' Ax looked into his glass. 'You know that Romanian gig?'

'The Danube dams?' There'd been endless Crisis Europe invitations: people who wanted Ax to break up fights, speak at conferences; even to tour with the Chosen. The Dacian Greens were the latest. They wanted Ax to arbitrate with their government, and other factions, over freeing the great river.

'Yeah?'

'I'm thinking of accepting. I've been thinking for a while that I ought to get out there into Europe, see what's going on. I'll be back by Christmas.'

When he'd convinced his partners, Ax went to Reading to see Olwen Devi, because Sage had insisted that he have his chip checked out, and it was something Olwen could do. She decided she needed to give him a general health check while she was at it. Ax, like his father, was the *never had a day's illness in my lifetime*, and he didn't like the idea. But he submitted. The report was good. The heart was fine; last you a century. The lungs likewise, though Olwen seemed less pleased about that. It always annoys people when a tobacco smoker doesn't show any sign of suffering from it. Everything was fine, except for the chip. She said he ought to get rid of it at once, which was a shock. It hadn't been serviced for years and he'd known it needed fixing (no alarming symptoms, but he knew). He hadn't been expecting anything so final. The idea of living without his other mind, his library, his internal security, was a hard blow.

'We'll have to see about that when I get back.' They were debriefing in the new Rivermead Palace health centre. Rain

stormed at the small square windows in Topsy's thick metal-and-mulch walls: seems like we'll be inaugurating the new Rivermead flood refuge soon. . . Olwen looked at him compassionately. She wore the Zen Self mainframe as a jewel on her finger: she understood.

'I want to do it now, Ax.'

'I have to go to Romania. This is not the moment for brain surgery.'

She might have asked what was so all-fired crucial about the trip, but she did not. She knew from the look in Mr Preston's eye she would get nowhere.

'All right. As soon as you get back. Hm. I'll give you a facet of Serendip. She'll look after the implant, you will have her resources to call on, and that will be fine for a few weeks. No longer!'

He went up to Yorkshire to see Sayyid Mohammad Zaid, his mentor in the Faith. They talked at length, alone, with Mohammad's family; and with other vital English Islamists. They spoke of the Islamic Community's duty *to be* the presence of God's mercy and compassion on earth: a spiritual hegemony, far greater than material power. Ax extracted a firm acknowledgment that the secret plan to make England into an Islamic State was indefinitely on hold, a result he'd been

working towards for a while. These goodwill agreements might fall apart the moment your back is turned, but they mean something. He stayed three days, and came away feeling his burden lighter. If I've fucked up everything else, he thought (too weary and deadened for prayer, thinking only of England), that's

one good choice I made. From Bradford he went to Easton Friars to see Richard Kent, the barmy army's chief of staff; then a circuit of the big staybehind camps and urbans, talking to hippy councillors and green gangstas.

So many people wanted a piece of Ax. He even managed to make it (alone) to a last Liaison Meeting with Benny Prem. Poor Benny, behind his enormous desk in his big empty office: it was like visiting some cranky old lady. Benny was in a huff, feeling slighted as usual. He wanted to know if there'd be Liaison Meetings while Ax was gone. Ax said Fiorinda might be forced to cancel, as she would be very busy, but he'd remind the Minister.

Benny said, sulkily, 'Does Sage always do what you tell him?'

'When he feels like it,' said Ax cheerfully, ignoring the insolence.

I will even miss *you*, he thought, as he took his leave. Absurd as that might be.

He kept Benny on out of pragmatism, though he knew his partners didn't believe that. But sometimes he looked at the guy and saw himself: the mixed-race boy made good, overcompensating. He hoped he could persuade Sage to visit Benny, just for form's sake. It would be a kindness (not that Benny could appreciate kindness, poor bastard). And it would be wise.

Benny was only pretending to sulk. He was excited. Ax was leaving the country. He still didn't know who his patron was, and nothing had changed except that Ax had gone from strength to strength. But he had faith: he was *sure* something would happen now. Fiorinda had been very surprised to discover that everybody, including Sage,

took it for granted that *she* would be Ax's deputy. But she'd accepted her fate.

They'd had the briefings, Fiorinda and Ax with the suits and the Ceremonial Head Of State staff. There was one more thing, a conversation he didn't want to have at home. He came to find her when he knew she'd be working late in the Office at the San, and waited, chatting with anyone who offered, until everyone had gone, even Allie.

'Lot of memories in this view,' he said, staring out through the Balcony doors.

Gold gleamed on the Victoria Monument, the Japanese banners at the Insanitude Gates fluttered in the light from the lanterns that hung there; Central London was in profound shadow. He could remember when that darkness had seemed very strange and ominous. Not anymore.

'Yes,' said Fiorinda.

He looked at the sacred noticeboards: corkboard ruthlessly knocked up on the gaudy, shabby walls, repositories of holy Reich relics. The old, filled ones were never dismantled; they were framed and sealed. Allie sold scanned copies as Few merchandising and you could see the attraction. Here's the whole history of our strange days inscribed in old wristies, jokes and gnomonic messages on Post its. Withered memos, photos, newspaper cuttings.

Like a folk museum, touching and sad.

Fiorinda watched him, looking puzzled, until he came to her desk. 'D'you recall the day we sat around those tables and I told you all I was going to demand the repeal of the death penalty, or I would quit?'

'It was another world.'

'Yeah . . . People are making such a fuss about this Romanian trip. Makes me wish I'd made a habit of going to conferences. Maybe the Chosen should do a

foreign tour, the lazy bastards, and I could tag along, pretend I'm still a rockstar.' He sat beside her, looking at the ring she had given him, turning the red bevel so the inscription caught the light. *This too will pass.* 'We never had a romance, do you remember? We just climbed into bed together and that was it. No fireworks.' 'I remember plenty of fireworks.'

'Maybe, later. But I like to remember the way it started—' He'd better shut up. He was getting maudlin, going to ruin everything. 'I want to give you something.' He showed her the bi-loc. It was a clunky early version, but not the standard prototype. 'This is a tricky kind of satellite phone. It works through my chip; it's the one we used to hack our way out of the quarantine. I want you to have it, so you can always reach me.'

'But you're not leaving Europe.'

'No, but . . . Telecoms go down, networks crash. I can't lose my chip, and you won't lose this. You don't need to know anything technical, it's like a normal bi loc to use.' He closed her hands over the handset. 'Call me if you really need me.'

But be careful, we don't want aggravation with the Internet Commissioners. Don't tell anyone that you have it. Not even Sage. He, well, he'd be happier not knowing I've given you contraband to look after.'

'Okay.'

She tucked the phone in her bag. They stood up, and hugged each other. The veil was very thin. He knew that he had only to say the word, one plea for mercy, and she would pity him. She would be his little cat again. But he had vowed to himself that he would not say that word, and he wasn't going to break down now.

'I'll miss you very much,' she whispered.

'Me too,' said Ax. 'I'll miss you. You'll look after Elsie for me, won't you?'

'Yes. I'll look after Elsie.'

Just before Ax was due to leave Fiorinda and Sage went down to Cornwall by train. Ax had things to do: he followed them in the Volvo the next morning. The visit to the cottage was a last-minute *tour de force*, but they'd all wanted it. It was November, and the floods were out. The Somerset Levels looked like melted tundra, the once and future landscape of mere and marsh and hilltop towns clearly discernable. He stopped at Wheddon Down in the rain to recharge, bought a sack of damp birch logs for the price of a cup of coffee and heard that the Tamar was threatening to break its banks: but when he reached the river it looked okay. He talked to the Flood Watch, one more patient conversation with the English, and crossed over the Guinevere Bridge one more time. On Bodmin Moor he stopped the car. He wondered about Sage's wolves, and thought he would get out and listen for them; but he didn't. He wiped his eyes, and drove on.

He had been daunted, almost *frightened*, at the thought of this last night. But it was okay. They stacked Ax's logs in the hearth to dry, they did the usual Tyller Pystri things; they talked about Ax's trip. It seemed to Ax there was a painful silence behind every word they spoke, but if his lovers felt the same they made no sign. At midnight they banked the fire. Sage and Ax went out in the dark and rain to take a piss, a little ritual. They'd always liked pissing together. And so to bed.

He didn't sleep. In the morning he packed the car. Fiorinda was driving back with him, to see him off. Sage was staying at the cottage. Ax couldn't remember how this arrangement had been made, but it was settled. Separate goodbyes. He walked out to look at the Chy, and then went into the studio. Sage was sitting

there staring into space. He jumped up when Ax came in. The words won't come. The last chance to break the silence is here: and then it's gone, and the words didn't come. They hugged.

'Stay off the smack, okay?'

Ax had been an occasional user, once, long ago. Sage the ex-junkie had hassled him into giving up.

'Is that all you can think of to say?'

'It was a joke. Uh, poor taste. I meant, look after yourself.' Sage thought, if he'd been Ax he'd have an itemised list, covering every

reckless thing Ax might think of doing, and he'd extract a promise for every one.

Don't take drugs from strangers. Don't jump in pits with tigers. Don't march on Moscow, don't . . . Don't take on the world, fuck's sake, it's bigger than you.

'I just want you to come back safe.'

'You . . . same.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Sage.

Ax nearly said, forgetting he'd wanted separate goodbyes, *at least you could have come to Dover* But he didn't. Fiorinda was waiting: she and Ax got into the car. Sage came down the track, loping beside them through the rain to open the gates; and this is the last moment. The little Chy roaring, the leaves on the oak trees tattered gold, Sage in the rear view mirror, bluest eyes, there, he's gone.

The ferry (a massive old thing, rattling empty) left Dover at six in the evening after several hours' delay. Fiorinda was long gone. He'd told her he didn't want her to wait around. The rest of the Dacian expedition had settled in the saloon, getting stuck into some merry drinking. They were picking up a chartered flight to Bucharest in Paris. Ax stood by the rail in the stern, guitar-case over his shoulder, and watched the cold, grey water churning away.

I don't blame you, brother, he thought. I *do not* blame you.

When had he realised he had to go? After that night at Tyller Pystri in July? Or before that, or later? It seemed to him now that he'd always known that he was living on borrowed time.

You can't give a guy like Sage limited access to the love

of his life, and expect him to accept the idea: sit there like a dog with a biscuit on his nose. Not indefinitely. This is *Aoxomoxoa*, for fuck's sake. And you can't go on

watching the girl you love tear herself to pieces . . . They would never have left me, they would have been loyal. He set his teeth at the thought of their *loyalty*, letting Ax tag along, all three of them knowing the real situation. Fuck that. I had to leave. No more nightmares now. She'll be happy. She'll get the sterilisation reversed, she'll have his baby. Oh, God, have I really kissed her for the last time?

Really never hold my darling again?

The pain in his heart—

He'd left his bag indoors, but he'd brought the jade axe out on deck. He took it from inside his coat. The Sweet Track Jade: dropped or laid as a sacrifice by the causewayed road from Taunton to Glastonbury, more than five thousand years ago. A slim, unpolished, leaf-shaped blade of blue-green stone, perfectly crafted, beautiful to hold. What a rare thing to own: my badge of office. One last good

look. A swing from the shoulder. There, it's gone. He didn't see the splash. Will an arm clothed in white samite rise, to hand his sacrifice back to him, to restore his loss? Nah, no arm clothed in white samite. Nothing.

He watched the water for a while, fists in his pockets, the wind and rain whipping his hair, then he went back into the warm saloon. So that's that.

The pain in his heart—

He'd left his bag indoors, but he'd brought the jade axe out on deck. He took it from inside his coat. The Sweet Track Jade: dropped or laid as a sacrifice by the causewayed road from Taunton to Glastonbury, more than five thousand years ago. A slim, unpolished, leaf-shaped blade of blue-green stone, perfectly crafted, beautiful to hold. What a rare thing to own: my badge of office. One last good

look. A swing from the shoulder. There, it's gone. He didn't see the splash. Will an arm clothed in white samite rise, to hand his sacrifice back to him, to restore his loss? Nah, no arm clothed in white samite. Nothing.

He watched the water for a while, fists in his pockets, the wind and rain whipping his hair, then he went back into the warm saloon. So that's that.

The pain in his heart—

He'd left his bag indoors, but he'd brought the jade axe out on deck. He took it from inside his coat. The Sweet Track Jade: dropped or laid as a sacrifice by the causewayed road from Taunton to Glastonbury, more than five thousand years ago. A slim, unpolished, leaf-shaped blade of blue-green stone, perfectly crafted, beautiful to hold. What a rare thing to own: my badge of office. One last good

look. A swing from the shoulder. There, it's gone. He didn't see the splash. Will an arm clothed in white samite rise, to hand his sacrifice back to him, to restore his loss? Nah, no arm clothed in white samite. Nothing.

He watched the water for a while, fists in his pockets, the wind and rain whipping his hair, then he went back into the warm saloon. So that's that.

The pain in his heart—

6: One Of The Three

Ax was in Romania, and having a wild time of it from what they could make out (communication wasn't easy). George and Bill and Peter had come back to the van, in Travellers' Meadow: they were hoping to get the boss to talk about a new album. On a cold Sunday morning Bill and George sat browsing sections of the *Staybehind Clarion*; drinking tea with condensed milk and whisky chasers. There was no fresh milk. The Rivermead Organic Dairy was having trouble with the wrong kind of grass. Peter lay on one of the astronaut couches, thinking about his latest kaleidoscope. Making kaleidoscopes was his secret vice.

Fiorinda walked in, barefoot and tousled, wearing an ancient blue cashmere sweater, the ravelled hem a couple of inches above her knees. Morning Fio, mm um. As she boiled a kettle and stretched for mugs the fine wool moved, beautifully revealing, over the slender, rounded body beneath —making you realise how very chaste she usually dresses. (Fiorinda in her party frock turns cartwheels on stage, all you get to see is more frills.) She left, giving them a sleepy smile. George drew a breath and quietly, slowly, exhaled.

'He'd kill yer,' said Bill, without looking up.

'Not even in jest, Bill Trevor,' said George sternly. 'I'd rather top me'self than do anything to harm that little girl. Nah . . . I just feel like her dad, jealous of the boyfriend. Not,' he added, hurriedly, 'her particular dad, mind you.'

'It'll wear off,' Peter consoled them. 'She's going to be with him all the time now. You'll get used to it.' George and Bill looked at each other. Yes. It's true. Peter Stannen is an alien

lifeform. 'I hope I die first,' said Bill.

Fiorinda had to get back to London. Sage walked her to Reading station, went to the gym and spent some time at the Boat People's Welfare Office, embroiled in Town vs Counterculture vs Refugees issues. When he escaped he headed for the North Bank, once a parade of classy riverside residences, now a wilderness frequented only by the kids of the campsite. He needed to think.

When the three of them were first lovers they used to play a game: what does it take for the most perfect, brilliant sex in the universe?

One big cat, one little cat, one animal-tamer One stud, one babe, one chameleon

Two musicians and an artist (not sure I liked that one) One white boy, one coloured boy, one yellow girl

One Muslim, one Methodist (lapsed), one Pagan (VERY lapsed).

How about this one? Two cyborgs and a witch.

The anti-science tendency had never kicked up about Ax's chip, the Zen Self quest; or Sage and Fiorinda's Rivermead gene-mods. If they'd thought about it, they knew they'd get nowhere. The public, the voters, just didn't feel negative on those issues. . . It's not harming the sacred holy environment, is it? So what's the problem? If someone managed to unmask Fiorinda as a witch, *that would be different*. He didn't know what would happen, but it would be bad. Ax, at the least, would look as if he'd been lying to the country for years, denying the reality of so-called psychic powers. And what if someone outed her while Ax

was away, and she didn't have the protection of Mr Dictator's personal prestige?

We have to have that conversation, the three of us. The one we never had after Spital's farm, soon as he comes home. I'll talk to her, she'll see reason. . .

Ax's absence was a reality check. Sage and Fiorinda's secret love affair, which should never have begun, was over: not a word, but they both knew it. They loved him, they would stick by him, end of story. But now he was free of that madness, the problem of her magic emerged in sharp, scary relief. The weird feats he'd seen her perform. That night in July at Tyller Pystri, the things she'd said, unguarded and in the grip of her nightmare. Things he should have said to

Ax, the morning after. . . There's no such thing as 'magic', Ax. All the New-Agey miracles of your reign, fake as the next bleeding Madonna, far as I'm aware. But I know a way, outside chance, that power of that kind could be *created*, it's in the Zen Self science, I've known about it for years. Trust me, I'm serious. If I'm right about what's happening we're under attack, and if Fiorinda is lying about it, to protect us, that's because she's afraid there's nothing we can do—
Failed to tell him any of that. Sidetracked, and there was never a better time. The situation in Bucharest sounded exhilarating. There was ice and snow. Packs of feral dogs roamed the streets, likewise feral packs of humans. The official CCM of the Danube Countries was at war with its factions, the Gaia wants-us-to-commit-suicide party was at war with everyone, and oh yeah, the suits were also involved. Mr Dictator said it was hectic, and he didn't know if he would be home for Christmas. He sounded energised and focused: Ax restored, Ax in his element.

Well, he'll come back, and we'll sort the problem, the way we always do. But *oh God*, if there was a way to make her mine that wasn't so tainted. He's not the same person, I could take her from him now, I know I could. If I could be sure we'd ever forgive ourselves—

He was lurking in a tumbledown summerhouse, looking out on the ruins of someone's tended lawns; the river glimpsed through branches, dark and full under a frail pall of mist. Two dead leaves drifted, floated, like dancers through the dim air. He watched them, his mind filling up with blank stillness; with sadness. There was a tiny sound, a little sigh. A small girl had materialised beside him: sitting there with her pale brown head bent and fists thrust in the pockets of a homespun woollen frock.

'What' you up to, Silver?'

'Oh, nothing. I'm just thinking.'

No peace for the Minister. He sighed, and caught one of the dancing leaves. It reminded him of Fiorinda: sunburst yellow is really her colour, not green—

'Okay, catechism for you. What tree's this from?'

'Er . . . beech. I mean oak. What were you thinking about?'

'None 'er your business. Field maple. Oak are the long crinkly ones,

remember? Now tell me why they fall off.' 'Because the trees are decide-uous and they decide leaves in winter isn't cost effective.'

'Fair enough. Describe me the mechanism.'

Silver glowered. 'It's done by horseshoes. Why do you know all this stuff, Sage? You're not a herbalist. Who told you?'

'I dunno. I think my mum must have told me, a long, long time ago.'

'How do you know it's still true?'

'Good point.'

The child stared at him. 'What did your mum look like? Was she nice to you?'
Something rapped against the crumbling woodwork, barely missing Silver's skull. Pearl was astride a branch, bare legs and feet dangling, wonderfully camouflaged by dirt, grinning like a juvenile post-human gargoyle.

'I stalked you! I stalked you!'

'Fuck off!' yelled Silver. 'You little *creep*. I found him, he's *mine*.'

'Right,' said Sage, giving them the skull mask, with menaces. 'That's it. *Go away*, both of you. Get lost.'

The little girls scooted, in fear and trembling. A couple more years, he thought, and that won't work any more. The over-thirties will be killed and

eaten. A chime in his ear.

'Sage?'

'Hi, Fee. What's wrong?' Not very loverlike, but Fiorinda *never* calls just to hear the sound of your voice— 'Sage, the axe is gone. The Sweet Track Jade. I suddenly noticed. It's gone.'

'Huh? William must have moved it.'

William was their cleaning person in Brixton.

'I've asked him, and he says no. It's not here. It's *gone*.'

Her voice trembled with dreadful import, Fiorinda of the nightmares, 'Okay.

Don't cry, baby, I'll come up. I bet I can find it.'

'I won't be in. I'm going to see Gran and Fergal . . . Could you meet me there?'

Most of the house was shut up. Boarded windows stared from the gloom, over the tall laurel hedge. He found his way to the door of the basement, where Fiorinda's gran and Fergal lived, in a cosy rat's nest; stuffed with furniture from the empty rooms above. She let him in, and winced away from his kiss, as if malicious eyes were watching. In the old lady's bed-sitting room, squeezed full of mahogany, Fergal was cooking supper, cabbage and bacon and potatoes, on an ancient gas stove; refreshing himself with draughts from a pint glass of red wine. Gran sat in bed, wrapped in shawls, swigging home-made elderberry liqueur and flirting shamelessly with her keeper.

Sage kept up his share of banter through the meal, and the old lady glowed: she loved male company. Fiorinda traced kitchen knife marks on the ruined tabletop with her fingertip; hardly spoke and ate nothing. Her gran seemed unconcerned. Fergal kept casting wistful, worried glances at Sage; but he didn't comment. They left after the first rubber of whist. Fiorinda closed the garden gate, switched on her torch, and shuddered. 'I hate this place more and more. The moment I step inside, I feel as if someone's shoving concrete down my throat. I don't know how Fergal stands it.'

'He seems to get on with your gran okay.'

'Oh, he's wonderful. I should come and see them more often, but *I can't*.'

They went back to Brixton: the Sweet Track Jade could not be found. They couldn't remember when they'd last seen it. Neither of them had spent much time at the flat since Ax left. Sage tried to reassure her, but they were both unaccountably shaken. The Jade was a potent symbol, Ax's most precious possession; after his beloved Les Paul (which of course had gone to Romania).

'We can ask him where it is next time he calls.'

'No we can't,' said Fiorinda. 'No privacy.'

They couldn't call Ax, he didn't have a private number. He had to call them, and the calls from Romania came through to a landline phone in the Office at the San. They hadn't been paying attention, they hadn't realised how strange and lonely this was going to feel, because, because. . . They drank wine, smoked spliff, had incandescent sex: went to bed and had more. Later, Sage woke and found her sitting up, hands pressed to her forehead. Her skin, when he touched her, was cold and clammy with sweat.

'Fiorinda?'

'Oh God, shit. Shit, shit . . . I think I was my mother in that dream.' She returned to herself. 'It's nothing, Sage. Just a stupid dream, caused by having to visit my gran. I don't want to talk about it, let's go back to sleep.' She snuggled down, tugging him with her. 'Mm, I love waking up in bed with you, you're so big and warm. Is Ax asleep? I want to be in the middle.'

'He's in Bucharest, sweetheart.'

He knew she didn't get back to sleep, and neither did he.

Constrained by the lack of privacy, they didn't ask Ax about the Jade. It did not turn up, and suddenly they didn't want to be together. Fiorinda stayed in London; Sage stayed in Reading. Working as Ax's deputy, in his office downstairs at Brixton, Fiorinda studied briefing notes he'd left for her. He'd been very thorough. Contingency plans for everything. She looked around and chills went up her spine. This is like a dead person's room. This room has been *cleared*. The office hadn't changed, Ax was always neat. The knowledge was in Fiorinda.

A week passed. On Saturday it was the Full Moon dance night at the Blue Lagoon; Fiorinda went down by train. The Staybehinds were settling into their fifth winter of principled squalor, unafraid. Things were getting tight but they wouldn't starve, not yet. Fiorinda would help out from the drop-out hordes rations (date-expired cakes, apricot jam, tinned mackerel); and you can make alcohol out of practically anything. There's plenty of calories in alcohol. It was a quiet night, no outsiders; only the staybehinds, Sage and the Heads and Fiorinda. She wore the red and gold 'Elizabeth' dress. They left early, around midnight. Fiorinda didn't want to go back to the van, so they walked up to Rivermead

Palace, to the official residence where she never resided. Hand in hand, harmonising softly, *oh darling save the last dance for me . . .*

The sky was overcast, the moon invisible. The scent of cold woodsmoke, the faint stench of the campground reminded Sage of Wharfedale, and a barmy army bender that he'd shared with Ax Preston, four years and a thousand lifetimes ago. At the foot of the grassy bank below the dead cars sculpture they stopped and he began to kiss her. She opened her coat; she unfastened the fascinating hooks and eyes in the front of the stiff bodice so his clumsy, urgent hands could find her breasts. She was thinking that the dull way she felt, not aroused at all, would have been okay for Ax. Ax didn't mind if you were a bit out of tune for sex. But Sage never wanted anything but *bona fide* celestial music—

'You're thinking about Ax.'

'Yes.'

They parted and sat on the ground, a few feet away from each other. Fiorinda was shaking. She desperately didn't want this, but here it was.

'Fee. Do you love me best? Do you love me more than you love him?'

'I loved you first, only I didn't know it. I love him with all my heart, but I've never felt about Ax the way I feel about you.'

'Then come away with me. We can't do this. This is impossible. We have to leave, jump ship, before he gets back. I can't lie to Ax. I can't bear it anymore.' 'He's not coming back, Sage. That's why he took the Jade. I don't know what

he's going to do, but he's not coming back. Fucking Romania in November, fucking *Danube dams*, was it likely? We accepted it, we said yes, yes, fine, fine, we paid no attention because *we wanted him to go*. We thought it would be a break from pretending, a nice little holiday. But he left because he knew we were cheating on him.'

'Cheating on him? Huh? How do you—'

'You know we were.'

'He wouldn't leave us like that, saying nothing. He wouldn't just walk out—'

'Yes he would. It's exactly what Ax would do. Do the necessary thing, cost what it costs, and sort the details later. He decided to get out of our way.'

'Oh, God. You're right.'

'I know I'm right.'

Sage gasped in agony, the recent past suddenly, horribly, irrevocably present to him: Ax coming into the studio at Tyller Pystri that last morning, looking so alone, so lost. Oh God, and his father died two months ago. He made nothing of it, so neither did we. We ignored him. Clear and sharp, how callously they'd betrayed that beautiful guy, *who has given his life for us, time and again*. How they'd thought, we'll have our secret life, and it will be okay because he'll never know . . . As if Ax wouldn't know that they had stopped loving him. He covered his face.

'Oh Ax. Shit, I can hardly bear to look at you.' Fiorinda looked at him, unflinching. 'Yeah. You and me, we're just fuck

buddies. It's Ax you love, I knew that. You'd better get out of here. Go after him.' She stood up. Sage stood too, and grabbed her. They clung to each other, bone-hard. This is it, he knew: right now, our only chance. Drive the van to Southampton Water, get a ride across to France, find a plane that's going back to the real world. We'll live in Alaska, up in the mountains, cabin in the forest, lose ourselves, never hear about Ax's England again. The big crazy Englishman and his beautiful wife: I've dreamed of that. We'll be happy.

Just have to make sure we never speak his name.

'You have to come with me. You're right, he *knows*. This is what he wanted, for us to be gone before he gets back.'

'No!' she sobbed, pulling away. 'I won't leave Ax. I won't *ever* leave him.'

He wouldn't let go. He kissed her, eyes and cheeks and hair, forcing his tongue between her teeth, mastering her body, overwhelmed by his own strength, by sheer despair. Fiorinda fought back, struggling, terrified, knowing she hadn't a chance—

He backed off, staring at her. She pulled her dress and her coat together.

'That's interesting,' she said, clipped and cold. 'I never thought I could be afraid of you.'

'What have you to be afraid of?' said Sage. 'You could fry me to a cinder in a moment.' And where is Ax? Where is Ax to say *fuck, what is this? This is a nightmare. Who started this stupid conversation? Stop this, you lunatics* . . . Fiorinda crouched on the grass, her face on her knees. Sage knelt beside her, head bowed. Silence.

'What can we do?' she whispered. 'Tell me, please?'

'We can go back to the way we were,' said Sage at last. 'You and Ax will be lovers, and I will be your best friend. It worked. All we lose is the sex, and that's no loss. I'm not fit to be your lover. I knew I wasn't.'

'But what shall we tell him?'

'That I tried to rape you? That I can never touch you again? On an open line?'

'Sage, *don't* . . . We could write to him. We could send a letter by courier. But oh, what if someone else read it? You can't be sure what happens to a letter.'

'We can't tell him,' said Sage. 'Ax is flying dambuster raids in decrepit Cold War bombers, with half-trained eco-warrior pilots, and I don't have to be there to know he's taking insane risks with his life. We can't tell him this.'

'We have to wait until he comes back,' whispered Fiorinda.

'Yes,' said Sage, clutching at straws. 'We'll tell him, best we can, on that open line, that we love him, we need him, and he should come home soon as he can.'

'When he comes back we'll tell him what you said, that you and I can't be lovers anymore, he'll understand and it will be all right.'

'Yes. Now I'm going to the van.'

They stood up. Fiorinda, biting her lip, said, 'Sage, don't take it all on yourself.'

It was me too, never doubt that. I was in it with you, all the way.’ Cruel to be kind. He steeled himself to hold her (one last time, because from now on friends can hug Fiorinda, but not me); but she looked so forlorn. ‘It will be okay, baby. It will be all right.’ And now let go. Let your arms drop. Walk away and leave her crying. Go on, do it. You knew from the start it would come to this in the end.

Fiorinda walked into Rivermead, passing the hippy watchmen in their self-elected livery of red and blue, who had probably heard and seen most of that. So it goes. No secrets from my household guards. Stone Age Royalty. This brand new mediaeval bedroom that feels so ominous. . . The bed was not in they had stopped loving him. He covered his face.

‘Oh Ax. Shit, I can hardly bear to look at you.’ Fiorinda looked at him, unflinching. ‘Yeah. You and me, we’re just fuck

buddies. It’s Ax you love, I knew that. You’d better get out of here. Go after him.’ She stood up. Sage stood too, and grabbed her. They clung to each other, bone-hard. This is it, he knew: right now, our only chance. Drive the van to Southampton Water, get a ride across to France, find a plane that’s going back to the real world. We’ll live in Alaska, up in the mountains, cabin in the forest, lose ourselves, never hear about Ax’s England again. The big crazy Englishman and his beautiful wife: I’ve dreamed of that. We’ll be happy.

Just have to make sure we never speak his name.

‘You have to come with me. You’re right, he *knows*. This is what he wanted, for us to be gone before he gets back.’

‘No!’ she sobbed, pulling away. ‘I won’t leave Ax. I won’t *ever* leave him.’

He wouldn’t let go. He kissed her, eyes and cheeks and hair, forcing his tongue between her teeth, mastering her body, overwhelmed by his own strength, by sheer despair. Fiorinda fought back, struggling, terrified, knowing she hadn’t a chance—

He backed off, staring at her. She pulled her dress and her coat together.

‘That’s interesting,’ she said, clipped and cold. ‘I never thought I could be afraid of you.’

‘What have you to be afraid of?’ said Sage. ‘You could fry me to a cinder in a moment.’ And where is Ax? Where is Ax to say *fuck, what is this? This is a nightmare. Who started this stupid conversation? Stop this, you lunatics* . . . Fiorinda

crouched on the grass, her face on her knees. Sage knelt beside her, head bowed. Silence.

‘What can we do?’ she whispered. ‘Tell me, please?’

‘We can go back to the way we were,’ said Sage at last. ‘You and Ax will be lovers, and I will be your best friend. It worked. All we lose is the sex, and that’s no loss. I’m not fit to be your lover. I knew I wasn’t.’

‘But what shall we tell him?’

‘That I tried to rape you? That I can never touch you again? On an open line?’

‘Sage, *don’t* . . . We could write to him. We could send a letter by courier. But oh, what if someone else read it? You can’t be sure what happens to a letter.’

‘We can’t tell him,’ said Sage. ‘Ax is flying dambuster raids in decrepit Cold War bombers, with half-trained eco-warrior pilots, and I don’t have to be there to know he’s taking insane risks with his life. We can’t tell him this.’

‘We have to wait until he comes back,’ whispered Fiorinda.

‘Yes,’ said Sage, clutching at straws. ‘We’ll tell him, best we can, on that open line, that we love him, we need him, and he should come home soon as he can.’

'When he comes back we'll tell him what you said, that you and I can't be lovers anymore, he'll understand and it will be all right.'

'Yes. Now I'm going to the van.'

They stood up. Fiorinda, biting her lip, said, 'Sage, don't take it all on yourself.

It was me too, never doubt that. I was in it with you, all the way.' 'Cruel to be kind. He steeled himself to hold her (one last time, because from

now on friends can hug Fiorinda, but not me); but she looked so forlorn. 'It will be okay, baby. It will be all right.' And now let go. Let your arms drop. Walk away and leave her crying. Go on, do it. You knew from the start it would come to this in the end.

Fiorinda walked into Rivermead, passing the hippy watchmen in their self-elected livery of red and blue, who had probably heard and seen most of that. So it goes. No secrets from my household guards. Stone Age Royalty. This brand new mediaeval bedroom that feels so ominous. . . The bed was not made up, no one had known she would sleep here. She took a quilt from one of the carved oak chests and lay under it, on the lumpy, scratchy, embroidered bedspread. We won't fuck, and we'll work hard. Ax will come home, and everything will be okay. She felt shattered but relieved, as if something rotten had burst open. She was in shock. The pain didn't start until later.

Ax did not get back for Christmas. Since all was well at home, he'd decided to stay on in Romania after the dambusting, for a fact-finding tour —then go straight to the Flood Countries Conference in Amsterdam, in January.

The Conference, which had started life as a meeting for alt.techies, had grown in the planning. It had become a major event, the first truly Pan-European gathering of Countercultural leaders and luminaries, journalists and activists and academics, since the Crisis began. A few years ago national governments would have been uniting to suppress by force. Not any more. The eco-warriors, the techno-green revolutionaries, might be the only people with any solutions.

Sage and Fiorinda were trapped: they had no plan but the one they'd formed, half-drunk and in shock, after the Blue Lagoon that night. Unjustly, irrationally, they felt abandoned. They desperately needed him and where was Ax? Too busy saving the world. *You go for it*, they told him, on the open line. Obviously you should be there. You do what you have to do. We miss you like hell, but we can run the show for a while longer.

Ax's entourage came home. The Netherlands government had not been happy about having Mr Preston at the Conference as England's Ceremonial Head of State; and that suited Ax fine. He would be travelling as a private citizen from now on. Christmas and New Year went by. There were reminders (street fighting, rural terrorism) of how near they were to the edge, and to what extent the stability they'd achieved rested on the personality of one man: but then the Conference began, and all was well.

It was like the Islamic Campaign, England watching Ax on the news.

The Flood Countries Conference had caught the mediafolks' imagination, and was inspiring feats of broadcasting that hadn't been attempted since Ivan/Lara.

It was no easier to get hold of Ax in person than it'd been when he was in Romania, but his friends could follow his exploits on radio and video, and sometimes on live tv. It was as if someone had opened a window in a stuffy room. They'd been locked in on themselves for so long. Now something was happening in Amsterdam, in the Tropenmuseum and the Lyceum, that revived the thrilling atmosphere of Dissolution Summer. Do we make through it to techno-green Utopia? Or do we fling ourselves into the dark? It seemed as if these questions

were really being decided.

The Few and friends gathered at the Insanitude to watch Ax dominating the Data Quarantine debate: arguing fiercely for restored global connectivity, while roundly condemning irresponsible attempts to break out of jail. It was scary for those who knew that Ax himself had hacked the quarantine, and that there were people in his live audience in Amsterdam who could out him. But he got away with it. He had the Conference eating out of his hand. Of course.

No one would have dreamed of leaking the story, but before Ax left it had been common knowledge, among Reich watchers, that the Triumvirate was in trouble. After the Data Quarantine gig Sage took the train back to Reading alone. He'd tried staying with her in Brixton, sleeping in the music room; it didn't work. It hurt them both too much. So, Sage and Fiorinda were separated and nobody had commented, which told you something. Public figures in disgrace have to accept tactful silences, with humility. . . The Heads were in Battersea. Olwen Devi was in Cardiff. He spent some hours alone in the van, brooding in shame and misery. At four in the morning he went to the Zen Self dome and let himself in to the

labs. He knew that Serendip was aware of him, but she wasn't going to start treating him like a burglar. He thought of Ax as he prepared himself. Blood test, just for the sake of interest. He grinned sourly at the stress hormone profile that appeared on the screen. Yeah. About what he thought. You can't use snapshot as a crystal ball. But if you give it the right type of brainstate to work on, you might get a result . . . That beautiful guitar-man has an amazing ability to do the right thing, the thing that will work, putting everything else aside.

Why can't I do that? Why am I such a fuck-up?

He had noticed, over the years, that Fiorinda sometimes knew what was going to happen before it happened; without knowing that she knew it. It wasn't a big effect. Only a nitpicking obsessive, passionately interested in the babe's every word, would have clocked it. Fiorinda was terrified of her own power, and it could be she had good reason. He could not put her under a scanner. But he could do what he liked to himself. We thought it was all or nothing, we never thought of side-trips, interim stages. But if Fiorinda has blindsight, and if Verlaine remembered his vision—

The drug entered him. Intravenous is slower, he waited.

A moment later he was back in the lab, wide-eyed, heart pounding, bathed in sweat. 'Well,' he said, aloud, when he could speak. 'That's . . . quite an answer.'

When Olwen Devi came back the next day he argued his case (telling her nothing about where he'd been). He convinced her to let him take the same massive dose again, under controlled conditions. The neurological results were

thrilling. It was the solution to a long impasse – and, as so often happens, devastatingly simple. But Sage was on his own. When the other labrats tried the new approach each of them in turn received a stark, imperious warning.

Go no further, or you will be destroyed.

They had reached the final engagement. There was only one champion now.

In another enclave of Ax's England a very different feeling was stirring. Mr Preston has found a new role, on a larger stage. Of course he'll be back, he'll complete his five-year term, nobody doubts that! But it's time to start thinking the unthinkable, who will come after him? Countercultural President is a post which has become – as everyone knows, though Ax has preserved the forms of democracy – the centre of all power and policy in England.

We must be ready.

A few interested parties met in Benny Preminder's office: an eclectic mix. Four

devout Celtics, gamey-smelling hippies in full neo-mediaeval drag. Two middle aged Countercultural superstars from the Green Second Chamber. Five 'suits' – up-and-coming mainstream government hopefuls —who had grasped that the *other* Counterculture was much broader-based and stronger than the rockstar version. Techno-green Utopia can't compete with the ancient roots. Benny himself presided, and those fuckers at the Insanitude would have been surprised at how he relished the irony. What about the Minister for Gigs? Wouldn't he be Ax's natural heir? Murmurs of assent, and respect from the new radical Think Tank. Benny did not go along with the current fashion for 'discovering' Aoxomoxoa as an arts science genius. Please. This is still the fellow who brought 'The Diarrhoea Song' to *Top Of The Pops*. But he was tactful.

'I don't think Sage is our man,' Benny smiled discreetly. 'He's a very clever guy, of course, but he's not a political animal. We must look elsewhere.'

'Then it should be Fiorinda,' proposed one of the hippies, a massive Amazon, her features etched from brow to chin in spirals of indigo.

Or what about Ax's nephew, Albion Preston? An infant prince, a regency?

That could be attractive, but the country isn't ready for hereditary rule, not yet.

Rob Nelson? Who he? Not a strong enough image. . .

Fiorinda then. They could all live with the idea of Fiorinda.

Benny let them talk. When his expert knowledge was invoked once more, he agreed that Fiorinda was a good possibility. 'The little lady is a realist,' he said, with that discreet smile, 'As long as we're not planning a *hostile* takeover.'

They went on trying out ideas: cautiously, always with the proviso that Ax steps down of his own free will. Always with the assumption that the next President is close to Ax, someone who'll keep up the good work. Benny said little: it was early days. None of them had noticed the empty chair at the head of the table—or if they'd noticed, they said nothing. He felt like someone who has been watching a stage magician, or a trick artist.

Nothing seems to be happening. Vague passes in the air, random brushstrokes. Then suddenly, from nowhere, the picture emerges and you see that every move was planned. Nothing was left to chance, you can't believe you didn't get it sooner. . . These rockstars, they're so easy. Just set them up, and watch them fall. The winter became very cold. Old people died in unheated rooms, recalcitrant beggars who insisted on sleeping rough froze to death. Fiorinda, who had hated the Call-up, was grateful for it now. The delightful prospect of being organised into forced labour (real soon now . . .) seemed to be keeping borderline cases at home. In Amsterdam the green nazis were saying, on the strength of two hard winters, that it was *Die Eiszeit*. Europe would die by ice, not by flood. And let Gaia's will be done. The Conference was running well beyond schedule, but Ax had decided to stay until the end, since everything was fine at home.

Oh yes, Ax. Everything's fine . . . How could he be two hundred miles away, and so totally out of reach? She dreaded the phone calls: still on an open line. The Netherlands authorities reserved the right eavesdrop on all the delegates' telecoms, but surely Mr Preston could have fixed something. Obviously he didn't want to. He didn't want to talk to Fiorinda and Sage in private. But that was okay: they didn't want to talk to him either, not until they could touch him. They longed for his return, and dreaded it. On Ax's birthday the Reich held a mediaeval banquet. It was supposed to be

in the Quadrangle at the San, but the marquee proved to be too huge, so they'd moved it to Horse Guards Parade. There were too many vegetarians to justify roasting an ox, the splendid pavilion was made of something other than painted

canvas and the flaming torches were fake: but the ambience was authentic. Freezing mediaeval draughts. Jongleurs and troubadours working the crowd. Armed guards in fantastical red and blue livery. The cross-tables were packed with Insanitude staff and their families, notable Boat People, Volunteer Initiative stalwarts, exemplary crewpersons. The Few and friends had a High Table on a red and blue swathed dais, but descended from thence in fine chivalric spirit to serve the dinners.

There was an interminable award ceremony, countless prizes for Best This and Most Promising That. Trust Allie, the prizes were good and the winners were popular: the Admin Queen knows how to keep people pulling together. David Sale, as special guest, made a jolly speech about being a wannabe radical rockstar (he did not mention heroin, or Celtic blood sacrifice). Fiorinda responded, with a few good jokes and the little wild-cat grin. She did not mention how depressing she found the company of those liveried guards; their far-from-mediaeval weapons on open display. While she was speaking Sage and the Heads turned up, skull-masked. She couldn't help noticing that Sage was *extremely* smashed. She smiled through the applause, and took her place again between Allie and Dilip. Rob and Felice had a five-month-old baby girl with them, Ferdelice: fast asleep, unbelievably beautiful. Cherry was at home in Lambeth with Dora, who was two weeks off her due date and getting pangs that might be real. Allie told the exciting story of when she'd been birth-companion to her sister. She didn't want her own kids, she wasn't the type, but she *loved* her twin niece and nephew, totally bonded to them. Chip, in tipsy solidarity, announced he was feeling broody— Fiorinda kept an eye on the Heads' end of the High Table. Fergal was there, that was good. He wouldn't be afraid to pitch in if there was trouble with the boss. Nor think any worse of Sage for it, alas. Hard-drinking men understand each other.

She noticed that Fergal was watching Sage with intent, fascinated attention; then she realised why, and felt sick.

'?Scuse me folks.'

The tent-kitchen was a crowded, shadowy cave: charcoals glowing, ATP slow cookers hissing. Insanitude management, cooks-for-the-night, were serving out frumenty and junket, marzipan sculptures and a kind of fruit-porridge, on rows of big trays. '?Not ready for you yet, Fiorinda!' they shouted. '?A few more minutes!' The leaders of the rugrat pack were under a table, running a game of Blackjack. She'd known they'd be out here, getting warm and nicking treats.

'?Silver. No, not you, Pearl, *Silver*. I want you to do something for me.'

'?What is it?' said Silver. '?I'm busy . . . Hit me, banker.'

'?I want you to bring Sage to me.' '?Oh, yay!' Silver grabbed her takings, shot out of the casino and bounced to

her feet. '?What should I tell him?'

'?Don't tell him, bring him. *Lead him to me by the hand*. I mean it. I'll be in the cloakroom. Can you do that?'

The kid's face fell at Fiorinda's tone. She nodded, and darted off.

One end of the kitchen had been partitioned off for coats. Fiorinda dismissed the person who was minding them, and waited. It was very cold. ATP patches glowed dimly on the dark walls. A surplus of coats, no room for them on the racks, lay on a trestle table, like a heap of dead animals.

Silver appeared, leading Sage by the hand.

'?Thanks. You're a good kid. You can go now.'

The skull mask turned towards her voice. '?Hi, Fee. What's the problem?'

He stood uncertain, towering in the dim light. She watched him wonder what the fuck to do next for a few moments, then let him off the hook.

'Can you see anything?'

'Er . . . no. Not really.'

'Oh my God, Sage.'

'Sssh, hey, it's okay—'

He stepped forward and located the edge of the trestle table, the gestures of his masked hands so casual you wouldn't have known anything was wrong: the perfect master of surviving on stage in altered states. From the table to the coatminder's chair. He collapsed there, carefully, and took off the mask. 'It's nothing.

A little bleeding behind the retinas. I'll be fine tomorrow, promise.'

No one had told her. *Sage had not told her* what he was doing: but she knew all about it. The fucking media folk couldn't get enough of the Zen Self project now. The thrilling story of how Aoxomoxoa was killing himself with weird drugs, in the name of science, had equal billing with Ax in Amsterdam.

'If that's *true*,' she said, trying to keep her voice under control, 'why are you here? Doing the I'm-so-hard-I-can-saw-my-own-head-off? Why aren't you lying in a darkened room with a cold compress over your eyes? *Don't* tell me Olwen know you're doing this, because I don't believe it—'

He was wearing the blue-dyed 'Mister Blue' leathers, with a dark red shirt.

He'd let his hair grow out since November, and someone had dressed it for him in yellow Celtic corn-rows (she imagined Zen Self groupies). Unshaven beard glinted silver-gilt along his jaw. Shambolic, rail-thin, oversized male megababe: the fucked-up glamorous rockstar, to perfection. Oh, but where's my Sage, who would never fail me?

'Uh, didn't mean to piss you off. I just thought . . . should make an appearance.'

Three Heads came into the cloakroom, unmasked, worried and guilty; swiftly followed by Dilip, Chip and Verlaine: the whole weird science cabal.

'You're a fucking idiot,' said George to the boss. 'I'm very sorry, Fiorinda.'

'You'd better take him home.' Rob and Fergal, Felice and Allie appeared, pushing through the partition with

a waft of kitchen warmth and noise. Felice was holding the baby in her quilted carrier. Roxane, Anne-Marie and Smelly Hugh were close behind them.

'What's going on?' said Rob. 'Is this a private bust-up, or can we all play?'

'Nothing,' said Sage, 'is going on. I made a . . . hm. Did something I shouldn't. I'm sorry, er, Fee. Really sorry. I'll call you in the. In the—the—'

'Morning,' supplied Fiorinda, shaking in fury and terror. 'Sage, what did I ever do to you? *I don't deserve to be this frightened!*'

'Nah, don't be frightened . . . Little glitches. It happens. Fine tomorrow.'

'Bastard. When did you last inject heroin?'

'Huh? Um, I dunno. Ten, no, shit, eleven, no, fuck, nearly thirteen. I think, nearly thirteen years ago—'

'Too good to last,' said Fiorinda bitterly.

'This is beyond a joke,' said Rob. 'We *need* you, Sage. Are you out of your mind? You have to lay off the Zen Self shit, at least until Ax gets back.'

Now the battle lines were drawn. It was a stupid venue for it, but this fight had been brewing for weeks, and once they'd started they couldn't stop. Voices were raised, harsh things were said. The weird scientists quit the scene, taking Sage with them. The mundanes gathered around Fiorinda in silent dismay. The Few had never been divided before. They had been closer than brothers and

sisters, closer than a rock and roll band, united against the world. Fiorinda sat on the coat-minder's chair. Felice handed the baby (still sleeping, the little angel) to Rob and put her arm round Fio's shoulders.

'Sweetheart, can you tell us what's gone wrong between you two?'

Any of the scientists would have thought that was an irrelevant question. To everybody left in the cloakroom it was crystal clear that Sage, the ex-junkie, had taken to extreme behaviour because he'd bust up with Fiorinda.

'No. I don't want to talk about it. We'll be all right when Ax comes home.'

'We have to *tell* Ax,' said Rob. 'Right now. Enough is enough.'

'I heard it's murder trying to record the new album with him,' said Dora.

'That's from the crew. God, if *Heads crewpeople* are telling tales, it must be bad—'

'We don't have to tell Ax anything,' said Fiorinda. 'He's not on another planet. He knows about the Zen Self. What are you going to say? That Sage is doing weird drugs? For fuck's sake. . . I'll talk to Sage. He'll tell me why he's doing this. Sage wouldn't do this to me for no reason.'

'Yes he fucking would,' snapped Allie. 'He's *poison* to you. He always was.' Fiorinda didn't react. She just shrugged, and shook her head.

David Sale came through from the kitchen and stood there in his suitish dinner jacket. 'Is there anything I can do to help?'

The Triumvirate had hated David Sale after of the Spital's Farm affair. But when you've hauled someone back from the brink, and covered up for him, and forgiven his sins: and you were being cynical and pragmatic, but the person believes you sincerely care about him, it turns out there's the basis for a genuine relationship.

'No,' said Fiorinda, getting up. 'Thanks David, but no. C'mon, folks. We're on. We have to serve the mediaeval pudding course.'

Two days later Sage was at the Office, perfectly lucid, eyesight fine, doing early work on the Festival Season line-ups with a very frosty Allie Marlowe. Rob and Allie and the Babes still wanted to get Ax home at once, but Fiorinda said no. She said she'd talked to Sage, and he wouldn't do anything so stupid again; and Ax would be home really soon, anyway.

She'd talked to Sage. He'd come to Brixton to try and explain. They'd stayed up all night: saying terrible things, renewing their hopeless vows, pleading with each other for some solution that didn't exist. Snapshot abuse hadn't been a big topic. . . They pulled themselves together, and did a video-postcard to send to Ax, something the censors wouldn't deface. They made a big effort, because they were afraid he must have heard rumours. The video said we're fine, we're happy, the Rock and Roll Reich is doing great, don't you worry about a thing. *Ain't misbehaving, saving it all . . . Love you.*

At least Fiorinda wasn't having nightmares anymore. They'd stopped.

In the scanner lab, Olwen's ace neuronaut lay on the recovery couch. She sat beside him, watching his still face. What do you see? she wondered. He never gave reports anymore. . . She'd dismissed the medical team, they wouldn't be needed. Sage's vital signs were fine, considering what he'd just put himself through. She could give him the calcium and potassium herself.

From the first trial, almost from the first time she'd set eyes on the tall young man in the eerie and beautiful mask, she had known that he would be her star. Visual acuity was part of it (he can see the colours of the stars). And his digital art. Even, paradoxically, the hippocampus damage caused by his long, traumatic childhood illness. He had outstripped the others, even Verlaine, long before his breakthrough over the dosage. He had taken wild risks, and she'd been happy to

let him. They were two obsessives together, determined to go all the way. Now she was afraid she'd been complicit in deliberate self-destruction. He opened his eyes and gazed at the misty-green angled planes of the ceiling.

'How do you feel?'

'I'm good.'

'Keep your head still.'

She checked his eyes. No bleeding this time. No problems on the screens. She unhooked him and sat down again, taking his crippled right hand in both her own. 'Sage, I have to talk to you. You are getting ahead of my technology. You have to let me catch up. My scanner cannot model what's happening in your brain now, when you are in phase. Serendip doesn't have the capacity. You realise what that means? If you lose something when you are out-of-body, I won't be able to reinstall. You could lose your sight. You could lose your motor control, your power of speech, your proprioception, *permanently*. It could happen tomorrow.'

'I know,' he said, turning his tranquil blue gaze towards her. 'I understand. I've worked without a wire before. Used to do it all the time.'

'I was willing to help you, for the quest: but don't think you're doing this for the Zen Self now. You're doing it because you are very unhappy, and my darling, I can't allow that. I won't assist you to kill yourself.'

'You're wrong,' said Sage. He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his shirt. 'It's true, I'd sooner dance the night away with my wild best friends. But since I can't do that, never no more . . .' He grinned at her, very sweetly. 'Some drugs you only take when you're desperate. It doesn't make the experience less amazing. I'm not suicidal, and if I was, I wouldn't do it this way. I wouldn't bring the Zen Self into disrepute. Trust me. I know what I'm doing.'

'You have to slow down.'

'I have to speed up.'

She went with him to the lab-exit. Two of her team-mates joined her, Zen Selfers in red and green, to watch him walk away. They'd all taken snapshot in their time; or that drug's predecessors. They knew the allure. There comes a point when you are told, by some grim physical warning, that you have gone as far as you can go, and then all you can do is serve the ones who will venture on, always a little further. It was a fine day in very early spring, a clear sky: light without heat. Reading Arena, seen through the frame of the exit, had the intensity of the penumbra, the usual after-shock of an experiment. Every blade of grass distinct, every passing face a Rembrandt portrait.

'Do you think he will kill himself?' asked one of the Selfers.

'No,' said Olwen, 'I don't. But I think Ax has lost his Minister. And God knows I love that great boy, but for all of us, that may be the greater disaster.'

'But Ax is coming home, isn't he?'

Olwen touched the ring on her finger, the many-faceted golden-white stone that was the Zen Self's mainframe computer. 'Maybe.'

The Flood Countries Conference was over, at long last. Finally, a message came: Mr Preston would be flying into Cardiff with some Welsh mediafolk, no reception committee please, he would make his own way to London. This was very puzzling. They told themselves it was a Crisis Conditions fuck-up, crossed wires, and all would be explained when Ax reached England.

Not long now. . .

Sage sat by the river, where the bank was wide near the Caversham Bridge. His eyes were open, but what he saw was Fiorinda moving away from him,

through a crowd of people in evening dress, her silver curls threaded with whimsical strands of copper red. Still walking like she's got oilwells in her backyard, same as she did when she was fourteen years old. Ax was there too, in white tie and tails. He saw them meet, he saw Ax's flashing smile, unchanged . . . But where is that cathedral-roofed hall, with the light-filled windows? Why such a wrenching pang of joy; and how much more of this can my heart stand? He imagined the lump of muscle full of hairline fractures, stress on stress. One day it will just shatter into bloody flinders—

George was sitting beside him (how long's he been there?).

'Hi, boss.'

'Hi . . . George, what would you say was the prettiest blossom tree, this time of year?'

'I reckon that would be the wild cherry.'

'Yeah. I believe you're right.'

Sage relapsed into silence. George considered the former giant toddler genius with very mixed emotions. You had to respect the way he was keeping going. Doing what he was doing, and still pulling his weight as Ax's Minister: and all on no drugs whatever, except for the snap. Not a lot to eat, no proper sleep and no sex. Not that the celibacy was an issue, given the amount of snap the boss was pumping into himself. . . But none of the Heads could forgive the way Sage was treating Fiorinda. They would never have believed it of him.

Partly, George blamed Ax. You can't fucking treat the boss like that, no matter what he did. Tell him that you love him, and then walk off and leave him. He's the sweetest-natured bloke that ever breathed, but he's not the most steady character. You have to know that, and you have to accept it.

Townies and Staybehinds strolled by, oars stroked the water. Silver and Pearl, with their little brother Ruby had got themselves a skiff and were flailing around in mid-stream, a danger to traffic. 'Those Wing kids,' said George. 'They are a liability. I ought to warn you, by the way . . . Smelly told me he and AM are planning to ask you to take Silver off their hands.'

'Hnh?'

'Well, she's got her periods. She's coming up on eleven or twelve. They're thinking, they couldn't do much better than see her set up as junior wife to the Minister for Gigs. 'Long as Fiorinda approves, of course.'

'What?'

Ha. That fetched him out of Neverland. But George's satisfaction was shortlived, the boss looked so utterly horrified, so *desolate*.

'This is it. This is the world Fiorinda saw, and we wouldn't believe her.'

'Don't take on. It's just hippy nonsense. I'm not proposin' you accept the offer.'

'Oh, fuck, George. This situation gets worse and worse. *I want out of it.*'

George sighed. He stood up and reached a hand to pull tall Sage to his feet. 'Don't we all. C'm on. Let's get to London. And thank God Ax is back.'

Ax was in England, but nobody had yet spoken to him, not even his partners. Apparently he'd spent the night in Taunton (according to a garbled message from the Welsh media-folk with the plane), and he'd be at the Insanitude today.

But he wasn't answering his phone, and they hadn't been able to get through to Bridge House, either.

Allie had left several messages, to no avail. Fiorinda came to the Office straight from a Volunteer Initiative hospital shift. The room was empty except for the Few, who were standing together beside those schoolroom tables. 'Don't come too close,' she said cheerfully, feeling so uncertain (oh, what

will I say to him?). 'I'm harmless, but I stink of disinfectant. We have a typhus outbreak on our hands, fucking hell.'

For a moment she saw Ax in the middle of the group of people, but he had changed. His body had thickened, shoulders bulked; his hair was cut short. Something odd about the way he was standing.

The man turned, and it was Jordan Preston.

'Where's Ax?' she said.

Sage shook his head.

'He isn't here,' said Dilip.

'He isn't back,' said Allie, tight-lipped. 'We didn't understand the messages.'

'He's gone to America,' said Jordan. 'He sent a scrambled video, with that Welsh crew. They delivered it to us: we've decrypted it. Do you want to see?'

No intro, straight to Ax on the screen. He was in a room that looked like an open-plan office — worn, grey, utilitarian carpet and ranks of windows — that had been turned into a dosshouse. He sat on the floor, smoking a cigarette, his guitar-case and a backpack beside him, a paper cup serving as an ashtray. He looked very like himself, which was a shock, somehow. His hair in sleek wings, the carnelian ring on his finger, eyes that smiled, but didn't quite face the camera. Figures crossed in the background, out of focus. 'Hi,' said Ax. 'I'll make

this short. I've been offered a meeting with the Internet Commissioners. It means I have to go to the States, undercover. I have to leave at once. I'm afraid I can't pass this up. If we don't shift that fucking quarantine soon, the breach could become permanent. I'm not sure when I'll be back, depends how it goes. I'm glad everything's okay. I know you'll be fine, and, well, remember you're volunteers, you're always free to quit, and thanks for everything. Sorry about the cloak and dagger stuff.'

Someone off screen said, 'Hey, Ax—'

He said, 'Yeah, in a moment.'

'Sorry this is so rushed. I'll be in touch when I can.'

Something in the recording triggered a wallpaper effect. Briefly, Ax's face was in every cell of the fly-eye wall, smiling and turning away. Then he was gone.

'Fucking typical,' said Jordan, bitterly. 'The US, it's what we always wanted. Why now? What the fuck's he playing at? Why just *him*?'

Between Fiorinda and Sage there passed a long, strange look. Yes. Good morning heartbreak, come in, sit down. This empty world is ours.

'Well,' said Fiorinda, with a glance around, gathering the Few, 'So Ax has gone to America. Good for him. It's about time the Rock and Roll Reich had a US tour. We'll just have to hold the fort for a while longer.' The punters were given a cover story about further important travels, and they

accepted it: the Floods Countries Conference had put them in an international mood. They wanted Ax back, but they liked the idea of him out there conquering the world. David Sale was thrilled. Like Jordan, he had a knee-jerk reaction to the letters U S A. The Few were shattered. Ax had been away for nearly six months. How *could* he not come home? How could they go on managing without him? Jordan was even worse off. He stayed in London, at the Snake Eyes house on the Lambeth Road: a lost soul. When he tried to get himself sorted in a gangsta pub, the South London Yardies turned him over to the barmy army for correction. Fergal brought the miscreant to Battersea Reach, where Sage had been living since Ax failed to turn up: taking a break from the quest for Fiorinda and the Reich; although he couldn't be near her—

'If you want to stay in this town,' Sage told him, 'get yourself a street map.'

There are places I wouldn't go without an invite, an 'I've been living here off an' on for years. Also, do you *really* have a use for a firearm—?'

Jordan said he knew about Sage and guns. Everyone knew about Aoxomoxoa on the Islamic Campaign. Fucking war hero. You think that makes you—

'That?' said Sage, starting to get irritated. 'That wasn't a war. One shopping mall bomb in Leeds took out worse casualties than most of our pitched battles. I've been in videos with more risk to life and limb.'

'Yeah. But then there was Yap Moss.' Sage recalled arriving at Easton Friars with Ax, after the battle. We handed the

French girl over to Intelligence, and then we were told the casualties. Nearly three hundred dead, on that stretch of winter moorland, and that was when the army was just guessing about the Islamists . . . He remembered the shock, the feeling that he had crossed over, that he was no longer human, by any terms I used to know. Don't envy me, he thought. Don't you dare *envy me*, where I am now and how I got here. I'll take a lot from Ax's brother, but I won't take that. 'You're right. Yap Moss was different. That's why that's where it stopped.'

He pushed back from his desk, tugged open a drawer and took out an automatic pistol, checked the clip and held it out. 'Go on, take it. Go and blow someone away in an alley, find out what it feels like. Go ahead. But don't come back to Ax afterwards.'

'Ax isn't coming back,' said Jordan, furiously. 'He's quit. He's left us all stranded, you and Fiorinda know why, and no one knows what the fuck's going to happen now.'

In the background, Fergal sighed.

Jordan glared, Sage stared, and it was Sage who gave way.

Jordan was an idiot, but he was wise enough to see what it might mean, for him and his family, if the struggling knife-edge Utopia started to break up—

'Nothing's going to happen. Ax will come home, everything will be fine. Take the gun. Learn how to use it. You're right, you should do that. Just in case.' Jordan shook his head. He looked strangely satisfied, as if all he'd wanted was to see that gesture. The gun pulled, some acknowledgement of the way things really were, the other face of Ax's England.

'I've changed my mind. Milly wouldn't have one in the house.'

'Tell her I say so.'

'Ax fucking hates those things, I know he does. I reckon I'll leave the rock and roll gangster stuff to you, white boy. It's more your style.'

Jordan left. At a glance from the living skull, Fergal stayed.

Sage removed the clip, shoved clip and automatic back into the drawer and stared at the clutter of his room. All this life, dry and dead, like a worn out carapace, like an exoskeleton ready to be shed. Must think about Taunton. Can Bridge House be made safe? Milly will not like armed protection. Not at all. I'll get my head in my hands. Maybe not tell her. Be discreet.

'Was it about the rat-catching?' prompted Fergal.

He wondered how long he'd been silent.

People were dying of typhus in Central London, the first notable outbreak of disease in the capital (by some miracle) since the cholera in Boat People summer.

The London barmies were busy decimating rodents with glee and megadeath efficiency: something someone should have thought of long ago.

'No . . . something else. Fergal, you come from West Cork, don't you?'

'Aye,' said Fergal, 'Skibbereen. I haven't been there in a while.'

'That's where Rufus O'Niall lives, isn't it?' 'In Cork? Aye. In his bran' new ancestral castle, on his

fockin' private island.'

'You had any personal dealing with him? I mean, in recent years?'

The Irishman's sea-green eyes studied Sage, with reserve. 'I've niver been back to Cork in many years, an' I don't move in them circles. He was a Belfast lad when I knew him, I wouldn't say personally. I hear he's an ill feller to cross.'

'So they say. What happens to people who cross Rufus? Exactly?'

'Oh,' said Fergal, getting to his feet; definitely uneasy. 'Ye'll probly' know all my stories of him. He's that sort of feller, that's all.' He cleared his throat, 'I'll be on me way, an' leave yez to the computer work.'

Sage looked up and the room was empty. Who was here just now? Oh yeah, Fergal. Fergal, and Jordan Preston. Something about a gun. He checked the drawer, automatic still there. Who took out the clip? Was that me? *Shit*. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and slowly, doggedly, recreated the last ten, fifteen minutes. He was used to the aphasia now, intermittent fault, he could work around it. Stone-cold-sober blanks in business hours were something else: with the authority I have, the responsibility, *oh shit*. But he wasn't going to stop. He groped for a pack of Anandas, struggled to take out a cigarette and failed. I will forget her name. And I cannot tell her why. The blood thrummed in his veins, *oh Fiorinda . . .*

But he wasn't going to stop. A late Easter. April well begun, and it was only the fifth Sunday of Lent.

Roxane

Smith, in hir role as post-gendered Christian (otherness was the theme for this Lenten season) gave the homily at the evening service at St Martin's in the Fields.

S/he was very surprised to spot Aoxomoxoa, standing in the shadows at the back. He returned with hir in hir taxi to the rooms s/he now occupied in a service block on Queen Anne Street. S/he lit the stove in hir living room – the central heating was minimal – and opened a bottle of wine. Sage, fists buried in the pockets of his leather jacket, sat in an armchair, taking in the book-lined room: the awards, the netsuke, a few good prints, a few cheap gewgaws that meant much. His natural face had been his face for months, a long time. S/he realised s/he'd been missing the mask. It's a strange and very beautiful thing.

'Well, Lord Jim. What can I do you for?'

'Oh? When did I stop being Mikhail Lvovich?'

Years ago, in the lost world, Roxane had made a game of calling Aoxomoxoa after various high-culture fictional characters. The next time their paths crossed, s/he would *know* that Sage's 'satiabile curiosity' ('The Elephant's Child', Rudyard Kipling) had forced him to track down the reference. And s/he would smile. It was a good joke on the king of the lads. Mikhail Lvovich Astrov was a character in a Chekov play. Tree-hugging conservative, daydreamer doomed to slave at the grindstone, takes his vodka without bread, indulges in a pointless flirtation with another man's wife. (But that last was unintentional comment: Sage had been Mikhail Lvovich since Dissolution Summer.) 'I don't know,' s/he said, pouring wine. 'You tell me.'

'Put me out of my misery. What did Lord Jim do?'

'He's someone in a Conrad story. He ruined his life by jumping ship in the midst of a disaster, leaving a crowd of hapless punters, as he thought, to drown.'

'Uh-huh.' Sage nodded. There was a lengthy silence.

'I need to ask you something. It's about the Zen Self project.'

Roxane sat in the opposite armchair, and sipped hir wine. 'If you must.'

'Okay, so, I'll try to be brief. You'll have heard about the visions, where you might think we can get previews of the future, but in fact we don't.'

'Yes. I saw a programme about that, quite recently.'

?You see, the time you spend in phase with information-space is infinitesimal. You bring back a whole story, and it's bullshit. Emotional truth, that's what we say. We can tell when someone's reached phase from the physical record, but it's impossible to tell whether you visited the future, the present or the past. There's no difference; there's a difference but it's very complex, so complex it's invisible. You have visited *the whole*, and every point is interconnected, over and over, with every other point. You may assume you, so to speak, visited the future if you come back remembering something about your son grown up, but you could be wrong. Are you following this?'

Roxane shook her head.

?It doesn't matter. This is not the question. Anyway, that's how it was. Then I had the idea, because of something that happened to Ver, that if you took a lot more snapshot you could stay in phase longer, deeper. More would stick and it would speed things up. Nobody believed me, because the science says it shouldn't work, but it does. I'm the only one who does it. No one else is nuts enough.' Ghosts of tiny muscle-movement braided and flickered across the planes of virtual bone: the skull is grinning ruefully.

?Yes, I heard about that.'

?You see I asked a question, back in February, which is something else that's not supposed to work, but it did. I visited a very revealing moment . . . Snapshot goes for the jugular, if it gets a chance. You may have heard that. You must be calm when you take it because if you're full of adrenalin and corticosteroids, stressed is the term, you'll see stuff that matches. I did that, and I got my answer, but now I'm not sure.'

A pause that lasted, longer and longer.

?Can you tell Fiorinda about this?' Rox asked gently.

?If I could tell Fiorinda, do you think I would be here?'

?So you're going to tell me?'

?No. Okay, now here's the issue where I need advice. I want to achieve the Zen Self for myself. I don't know if this makes sense to you, but once you've seen that you could be complete, once you've seen it's *possible* to be complete, it's a goal that's irresistible.'

Roxane nodded. ?Yes. You came to the right place. I understand.'

?Huh? Oh, you mean your surgery? I never thought of that. Well, good, maybe you do understand. So there's two reasons for me to achieve the Zen Self. One is that it's something I must do, or things will turn out very badly. For my Fiorinda, and my Ax, and, fuck, *generally*. The other is my own salvation. So why do I do it? This is the problem. This is very fucking important, Ax, sorry, I mean Rox. If I choose the wrong motive then I won't achieve the Zen Self, it's as simple as that. I know I won't, because I will falter, I will fall, unless I'm absolutely certain.' The skull laughed silently, in breathtaking detail: the naked minutiae of a human expression. ?Please tell me. Should I be thinking selfish, or stupid?'

?I don't know what to say.'

There was another long silence.

?The details are useless. Like a memory that you cling to, and it was never really like that, you know what I mean . . . But not the significance. That's real. When your firing pattern is in phase with information-space you're *there*, wherever you landed, and it's *from the brain state* of there that your mind constructs the visions. Emotional truth. So I can't be wrong. I can be wrong in every detail, but I can't be wrong in what I know. I'm not trying to change the future. You can't change the future, and it's changing all the time anyway: that's

simultaneity. It's a paradox. Eleven-dimensional kaleidoscope, like Ver said. But if I don't choose right, it will be disastrous. Yeah, it's confusing. Tell me.'

'I'm afraid I don't see how I can help.'

The skull grinned at hir, not very pleasantly this time. 'You know, you saved my life once. You remember the Africa Tour? Mba

Kyere?, I am passed over? Mary had told me she was getting married, and her bloke would adopt Marlon and I would never see him again. Bullshit, but I believed it. I was trying to kill myself. Not smack, alcohol, much more efficient. George said to me, you know, if you die now, Roxane Smith's gonna to write your obituary. Kept me alive.'

Who'd be a critic.

'I am glad to have been of service. There are few rockstars I'd rather keep alive.'

'Hahaha. All I want is an answer. Just say what you think.'

I genuinely didn't understand the question, s/he thought. But s/he was moved to pity, and by the memory of what Sage had been to them, through this long dangerous journey. S/he remembered Massacre Night, blood seeping from the mask. Pigsty's goons had to rough him up: it didn't bother him at all, he was thinking only of how to protect us. Sage dead calm and rock-steady, from the moment the shit hit the fan. Our tower of strength.

'Do what seems right to you, Sage. We've trusted you all this time. Trust yourself.'

The skull looked amused, and then cast down. 'Is that it?' he said. 'Oh fuck.

That's a challenge. Okay. Thanks.' Silence again. S/he realised Sage was not aware of these silences, which were

curiously *infectious*. The two of them might have gone on sitting for hours, in this anonymous room laden with mementoes.

At last he shifted in the chair and said anxiously, 'I hope . . . It wasn't because you fell out with Chip and Ver over the Zen Self that you left Notting Hill—?' Roxane set hir wine glass on the small Afghan table at hir elbow and folded hir elegant, aged hands around one knee. 'No, Sage,' s/he said with dignity, chin up. 'I found myself *de trop*. The boys would not have banished me; I withdrew.'

'Oh. Right.' A little crooked smile of fellow-feeling.

'It doesn't matter. My relationship with Kevin was always based more on love than on sex, and the love is still there.'

'Well, I think I'll go now.'

S/he went with him to the door of the room. 'Sage. When I feel the need to call on supernatural power, I get on my knees – which is not so easy as it used to be – and I perform an arcane invocation that begins, *Our father in heaven* . . . As you say, every detail may be fucked up; the significance is not. I have been young, I am now old, and I have never found, or heard of, any tech fix or psychoactive drug that bettered my results.'

The skull looked at hir, almost as blank as a Hallowe'en mask. S/he was suddenly very disconcerted. Has Aoxomoxoa really visited eternity? Does he know the truth about what lies there? *Know* it, beyond argument, beyond faith? Don't tell me, s/he thought. Please, let me cling to my illusions. But Sage was on another tack.

'Did the punters drown?'

S/he shook hir head. 'They didn't. They survived. But I'm afraid it didn't do Lord Jim a lot of good.'

'Figures.'

S/he offered hir hand. He took it and bowed over it, the mask vanishing so that it was his natural hand s/he held; his natural face that smiled at hir, as he went out the door. Roxane was left wondering if the whole strange, unconversation s/he'd just had with the Few's mad scientist might possibly be under the seal of the confessional.

Perhaps so.

As soon as they knew what had happened to Ax, Fiorinda went north for a meeting with DARK. She had to resign from the band: she was unavailable, from now until don't know when. It was hard. She hadn't known it would be hard, she'd thought this was the least of her worries: but she was giving up her life. This is how Ax felt, she thought. At least she wasn't taking their lead guitarist away. Drums, bass, keyboards, two guitars, and everyone could sing if pushed. Charm said, yeah, and we'll change our knickers frequently, bossyboots. Fuck off, this is *myband*: but what's this in the tiny polecat eyes of the dike-rock empress? Could it be sympathy? They did a last gig, live at the lambtonworm headquarters in Middlesborough-on-Tees, and she left for London.

Ax had disappeared off the face of the earth. There was no mention of his 'undercover meeting' on the Internet Commissioners' quarantined satellite link, and they couldn't ask, because they had no way of knowing who was in on the secret. They might not hear from him for weeks; or months.

Sage might be dead by then.

The weird science cabal couldn't help her. The Heads, *Sage's band*, had given up on him. Dilip and Chip and Ver were as bad as the punteres, still in thrall to the fucking quest: they knew what Sage was doing was insane, and incredibly dangerous, but they admired him madly and they wouldn't stop him if they could. At Reading Mayday concert the Heads did an *Unmasked* set, and the mosh roared *Zen Self Zen Self Go For It Sage!* as if he'd invented a new way of juggling with chainsaws. Fiorinda, watching from the side, because she had not been able to stay away, saw how the dancing had been reduced to what he could manage (muscle weakness), and her world darkened. She had already seen Aoxomoxoa on stage for the last time. Gone. Never no more.

She went to Olwen, feeling scared because she was afraid of Olwen Devi. The meeting turned out to be tough in a different way from what she'd expected.

Fiorinda had friends she loved that she had also fucked, but she had never fucked anyone *for love* except Ax and Sage. She'd thought other people were the same, and she hadn't realised how Olwen felt. It was awful. Olwen didn't say a word of reproach, but they both knew it was all Fiorinda's fault for not being content with one boyfriend.

But Olwen was helpless too, and that was Fiorinda's last card.

It was hateful, pathetic.

The position she was in made her blood boil in impotent fury.

They had stopped seeing each other because it was such hell, but she stayed at Rivermead where she could at least be near him, and hear about him. She managed what work she could, and David and Allie were very good about it.

When she heard Sage had gone to visit Mary, and to see Marlon at his boarding school, she knew it was over. He wouldn't be doing that except to say goodbye. But he came back, and she found out that the Zen Selfers were still talking weeks or months. Sage was weaker, they had to space the sessions out, and he couldn't take so much of the drug. So there was still hope.

Months! June, July, August? Ax could be home.

A few days after she started hoping again, it was all over the campground that

Sage had been 'out' – that is, brain-dead – for nearly six minutes. His brain hadn't suffered because they'd been supercooling him and pumping him with oxygen, but his heart had started bleeding and given them a big scare. It had been touch and go. Now Olwen Devi was refusing to give him any more life support, so he was leaving. He would go to the Zen Self parent company in North Wales. They regarded Olwen as a renegade, but they knew about Sage and they were willing to help him, as long as he understood the terms. With them, there was no way back. Win or lose, once you pass through the gates of Caer Siddi you don't come out again.

One night in the last week of May, Fiorinda sat at her piano; in the great upper room with the windows facing west. There was a fire burning in the enamelled metal fireplace, but the room felt cold. She'd been sitting there for a long while, not playing, just looking at nothing. Occasionally she'd rub her bare arms. She was wearing the red and blue printed chiffon that she'd worn when they went to Tyller Pystri, the night they asked her if they could both be her lovers. Elsie the cat was curled up asleep in front of the fire. Someone knocked at the door. She went to open it and there was Sage. She had known he would come to her. She'd been afraid, but he didn't look as if he was dying. He was leaning against the door frame with the collapsible look he got when very drunk, and Sage-very drunk was someone she had known and loved, God knows, since the very beginning. She stood back and let him walk in.

'Remind me,' she said. 'Where are we in the rules? Am I allowed to touch you?'

'You're a vicious brat.'

He crossed to the hearth, moving with the stringless-puppet uncoordinated grace of Sage-very-drunk, and sat in one of the cross-framed chairs. 'Come and sit on my knee.' It was only then that she noticed he wasn't wearing the mask. She hadn't seen his natural face since the time he came round to Brixton, after the mediaeval banquet. Oh yes, the night we cried. His hair was shorn again, and she was glad of that. He looked like himself, only very thin and very tired.

She sat on his knee. His arms closed warmly around her. She pulled open his shirt and burrowed her face against him, inhaling the scent of his skin.

He kissed her hair. 'Oh, Fiorinda . . . I'm leaving.'

'I spotted that.' She sat up. 'Nothing would get you into a room alone with me except *oh, Fiorinda I'm leaving*. I know all about it. Olwen Devi won't give you life support any more, so you're going to Caer Siddi, to achieve the Zen Self or die in the attempt. Oh *God*,' she wailed, hammering at his chest with her fists, 'do you ever listen to yourself? What's *Zen* about it? Where is the *don't cling! don't strive!* in what you are doing to yourself? How can you reach something called 'the Zen Self' by force, by hustling?'

'It's not like that.'

'What is it like then, *bastard*?'

'Fee, please don't talk to me like that tonight. *Please*.'

'What, you think I ought to be nice to you because after tonight we'll never see each other again? You're off to kill yourself, and I ought not to waste our last precious moments yelling? For fuck's sake!'

'I am not going to kill myself.'

'Like hell.' 'This is something I have to do, Fiorinda.'

She freed herself, though it was terrible to leave his arms, and stood in front of him, shivering hard, but *still fighting*. 'You're doing this to punish yourself, because we cheated on Ax and we can't ever be lovers any more. Is that fair,

Sage? Do you really think that's fair to me, or fair to Ax? Or, or, fuck, to England? I still love you, you know. Are you telling me that without sex there's nothing left between us?'

'I shall love you till I die.'

'Great. So when's that? Next Wednesday?' Her knees were giving way, she knelt, shivering, and stared into the flames. 'No, I'm wrong. This is because of my magic. You think you'll have magic powers like me. Shit, how can you want the filthy stuff?'

'It might be different, coming to it the Zen Self way.'

She turned and stared at him in contempt and disbelief.

Sage got down beside her, moving carefully into one of his giant pixie poses.

He was so calm. 'I want to be complete,' he said. 'I don't think this is anything like your power, Fiorinda. Though I think, I suspect, that you may have made your power like it. Zen Self is like when you are for a moment very happy, and you truly forgive and understand the whole terrible world, including yourself and everything you've ever done. It's like getting back to that state where everything is right, via the tech, and making it physical reality. Everything in your whole life fits, it's coherent, and you are *there* in all of it. There's nothing you're afraid of. There's nothing you have to forget, or cut out, or hide, or deny.'

That's what I want. I have seen it, and I cannot turn back.'

'So join a fucking monastery.'

'Too slow.'

She remembered being with him by the river, in another Maytime, and he had told her that he wanted to go into the desert, to find himself. We never listen when the people we love are saying the most vital things. 'You could wait till Ax comes home. I love you, Sage. I'm not totally surprised you're doing this. It's always been in you, you've always wanted *everything*. But please wait. Just wait.'

'I can't. It's now or never.'

'What did Mary say?'

'Oh, I didn't tell her. I meant to, but it wouldn't work. But it was okay. I'll never know how to behave to someone I injured so shamefully, but it was better. Almost like two normal divorced parents, discussing the kid with decent forbearance.'

'What'd you tell Marlon?'

'Something like the truth. He . . . he was scared. I've always told him too much. I don't remember all of it. I get blanks, you know. I tried to leave him smiling.'

Fiorinda looked down. Tears fell on her hands.

'I've made a new will. George knows, he'll tell you about stuff like that.' (If he's left me Tyller Pystri, she thought, I'm going to kill him.) 'I've told Ruthie to look after the cottage until Mar decides what he wants to do with it. You and Ax can go there any time, if you want. My desk's sorted, I mean, my Minister for Gigs desk. Allie very nobly helped me with that, though she hates my guts. She loves you, Fee.'

'I know.'

He took her hand. 'Now listen, my brat. You have the Few, and David, and you have Fergal, who will look after the barmies in London and down here in the south. You have a tough job, but there are people you can trust. You don't *need* me, Fiorinda. You're much stronger than I am.'

'What shall I tell Ax?'

'Tell him that I love him. Tell him I didn't have any choice. Tell him I'm sorry.'

And the seconds ticked away, and the minutes ticked away, soundlessly. This crippled hand, holding mine. It will be gone. He will never touch me again. She could not conceive of what it would be like, on the other side.

'Just stay with me here, for a few days—'

'I can't. George is going to drive me to Caer Siddi in the morning. He hates my guts too, but I'm still the boss, an' rock and roll feudalism's good for something. I, um, I need to get there soon. I need medical support, pretty constantly. Caer Siddi's one of the few places, if not the only place—'

'In the morning!' 'Yeah. I'm sorry, I thought you knew. We'll be leaving early. Don't get up to see me off. Please don't do that. This is our goodbye. Well, that's about it. I'd better go.'

They stood up together. He was very pale, under the wheaten gold of Ndogs sunscreen. His blue eyes had that inward, covert concentration they get when he's so smashed walking across a room is a feat of acrobatics. So this is it.

'Stay with me tonight. Stay here with me, just once, what harm would it—'

He shook his head, ruefully. 'I wouldn't be any use to you, babe.'

Fiorinda gasped and recoiled, and her stricken face broke him. He stumbled and half fell, to his knees, clinging to her, sobbing, 'Oh God, *Fiorinda*. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Oh please Fee, I love you, don't send me away like this, please don't be like this, please—'

She crouched over him, holding him, rocking him, stroking her fingers through the warm lamb's fleece. 'All right, all right, I won't be horrible. Don't cry, don't cry. Always love me, and it will be all right. Darling Sage, it's okay. I don't mind if you have to do this, I don't care about anything, as long as you always love me—'

'I'll always love you.' He stood up, wiped his eyes and bent and kissed her, the soft pressure of his lips, his hands on her shoulders. 'My brat. Goodnight.'

She went into the mediaeval bedroom, in which the three of them had slept together only once. He is still here. I have hours and hours left. The hours passed, the light began to grow around the curtains at her windows. Before it was fully light she got up, washed her face and left the building. She hurried across the arena and the campground. The morning was cool and fair, the tented township very quiet. She came to Travellers' Meadow, and the van wasn't there. That preposterous grey space capsule, which had been her home, her rock, her refuge, the centre of her life since Dissolution Summer, was gone.

She stared at the bare earth where it had stood, stunned, trying to grasp the size of this task that the two men of destiny had left for her. In Rainsford's-the Gym, just out of curiosity, she had once tried (when they weren't looking) to lift one of those fat weights that Sage and George tossed around so casually. What happens? *Nothing* happens. There is no strain, no mighty effort, no terrible costly victory. Absolutely nothing shifts.

I cannot do this, she thought. I can't keep Ax's England going. It's impossible. Something touched her hand. Silver Wing was beside her, a skinny unbrushed child in a brown smock, her small face pinched with grief, her eyes brimming. Silver didn't say a word, nor did Fiorinda. They hugged each other. He's gone. Our wild best friend, our beautiful lord. He's gone, and nothing's going to bring him back.

*I leant my back against an oak
Me thought it were a goodly tree
But first it bent, and then it broke
And so proved false my love to me*

7: Big In Brazil #2

They were sleeping on rock, in a cave. It was very cold. Ax got out of his sleeping-bag and went to the entrance. We are on the slopes of Mount Elbrus. I am in the ancient world. Far into the distance below, the Caspian basin was on fire. Eco-warriors had set gas and oil reserves alight a year ago, and no one had yet managed to cap the flames. The landscape, under a reddish, Martian dawn, looked like fucking *Mordor*. But the strangeness of it gripped him, and he intensely wanted Sage to see this. A stab of pain: a glimpse of what was waiting for him, when he let himself feel his loss. But not now. He spoke aloud, quoting from the *Odyssey*: *‘For in my day, I have had many bitter and shattering experiences in war and on the stormy seas—’*

A voice behind him joined in, also speaking Homer’s Greek.

So let this new disaster come. It only makes one more.

‘You know the *Odyssey*?’

The older of his minders grinned, his seamed face and the gaps in his teeth reminding Ax of Fergal Kearney. Lalic. ‘I’m a Macedonian. Come and have breakfast.’

With Serendip on his chip, a facet of Serendip, that is, Ax could speak and understand any language that hit him. It felt somewhat like demonic possession, but he could handle it. He was afraid it meant he was behaving as if everyone he met belonged to the same tribe: luckily the eco-warriors didn’t give a shit for national identity. Murderous factions yes, borders no. This war is everywhere.

He’d met Lalic and Markus, the younger minder, in the last days of the dambusting tour. They’d said *come with us*, and here he was, on a pilgrimage.

The small plane took off from a boulder field. They flew north, over the flames, with the cinder-grey pans of the Caspian sea floor in the east; a sullen gleam of water in their distance. What’s that great wen? Oh, fuck, that’s *Stalingrad*.

Volgograd. They landed in marshland. (Lalic and Markus flew by sight, since most of their instruments were bust. They treated their little plane like a motorbike; they’d park it anywhere.) Walking through reeds, they came to a stretch of water, like an arm of the lost sea. There were hippy guys with rifles, who provided a boat. ‘What’s going on here?’ he asked, expecting another Apocalyptic Environment-Damage story.

‘Sssh. Wait. She’ll come.’

Something very large glided up. He saw an eye. He’d never seen such a big fish. He’d never been near to such a big, living wild thing in his life.

‘She is a sturgeon,’ said Lalic softly. ‘We think she’s two hundred years old.’

‘Not such good caviar,’ said Markus. ‘Beluga. But okay when there is nothing else left. This is our reserve, it’s what we do: but they are too few to recover; all the sturgeon will go. She is our partner, mascot, wife, you could say. Magic fish.’

The magic fish, fifteen, even twenty feet long, had the muzzle and barbels of a bottom feeder. She cruised around, seeming gravely interested.

‘The war is already lost. Here, as in the South,’ said Lalic. ‘In the west you hear rumours: running out of water, no more fertility in the soil, and you start fighting in the streets. We go on fighting too, with bombs and guns, but we know. We are losing, it is too late, it’s finished.’

‘You can’t say that,’ said Ax. ‘We’re not dead yet. This isn’t the end of a long campaign, we’ve only just begun. We can turn it round.’

He was thinking of Lalic and Markus, and the magic fish, when he set out for the Floods Conference venue, in Amsterdam one January morning, in the different

cold of the North Sea coast. The city had reliable grid power, wave power mostly. Good for them. The sky was clear of smoke and the air clean, which made a pleasant change from Bucharest; or London. He walked by the Singelgracht, looking at the buildings, taking in the atmosphere, a dark shape swimming through his mind, like meeting life itself, *life* with eyes looking back at you. He was thinking that none of the mistakes he'd made in England mattered. Spend time with Utopians whose concept of the Good State is that everyone eats meat once a month and we never run out of ammunition (and Lalic was a Doctor of Philosophy once, by the way), and you learn to respect the scale of this task. You make a mistake, you *move on*. Don't waste time on it.

Just as well the distances in Amsterdam were small. Ax hated bicycles, and he couldn't buy a bus pass. He'd had a ridiculous conversation with a young woman at the Metrostation: no I can't sell you a *strippenkart*, Mr Preston, because you're an eco-warrior, but could I have your autograph? At least she'd had the grace to produce *Put Out The Fire*, and the 'Miss Brown' single. New Year's fireworks piled in funeral pyres, a flotilla of drab, icebound houseboats, white faced coots pattering across the grey ice . . . he almost ran slap into someone standing in his path. It was Arek Wojnar, Polish music publisher and radical computer geek: a stocky bloke with a skull-stubble of dark hair, slightly mad looking pale blue eyes and a light-the-sky smile.

'Ax! I said to myself, that's the amazing Mr Preston, and I was right! Striding along, thinking world-changing thoughts. Which hotel are you at?'

'No hotel. I'm dossing in the Tarom building.' The block that had housed the Romanian Airlines office was providing accommodation for a raft of Eastern Europe hippies, who had no money at all.

'Oooh, is *that* where the English are?'

'No, just me. I'm here on my own.'

'I see! Travelling light. Good! I was worried for you. You have been spending so much time among the suits.'

Arek was no mean suit himself when it came to wheeling deals and preying on hapless artists. But he reserved the right to be a wild and free idealist in his spare time.

'Yeah, I was worried too.'

By the time they reached the gabled, turreted Tropen Institut, the winter pavement was awash with dreadlocked outlaws, sober hippies, adventurous suits. They met Alain de Corlay, and moved through the day in an enclave of techno-greens-with-music-biz-connections. Debates, seminars, posters: how much new bad news can you take? The conference was far bigger than had been

planned, much of the programme had been moved to university halls, but the museum remained the centre; its tropical dioramas making a very fitting backdrop. These jewel islands that are drowning; this colourful Southern poverty, choking on its own shit. This showcase of human diversity which has become a relentless casualty list. . . On bilingual placards Ax read the Netherlanders' core interpretation of what goes on, the same from Aleppo to the Philippines, *in times of trouble, the people will cling together and support each other*.

My bus pass would seem to be an exception, he thought. But he liked the sentiment. These different *facets* of Europe, their oddness, their sameness— In the afternoon there was an angry debate in the glass-roofed Light Hall, the biggest museum venue. The topic in the programme quickly became irrelevant, it was a slanging match between the techno-greens and the pan-European Celts. The media people had turned out in force, and it was heartbreaking to see their

pleasure and relief. *Aha! A binary opposition! Now we get it! Hold the front page!* But what can you do? At the end Ax had to duck out to escape being mobbed by fans—the classic rockstar experience, which he'd never had before in his life. He was outraged, even a little frightened. He'd been living in a hothouse where there wasn't a media person, or a punter, who would say *boo* to Mr Preston. Back at the Tarom (having spent a while in a stockroom full of Javanese puppets and carved totem sticks, guarded by kindly Tropen staff), he found Arek, Alain and a bunch of other techno-greens, making themselves at home. 'Ah, here he is,' said Alain, maliciously. 'The man of the moment. It was those fucking dams, Ax. You are *feared!*'

'I didn't do anything. I was just holding the coats.'

'Of course! You didn't do anything. Nothing is going on in the Danube countries but a lot of running around, gang shootings and knife fights. Along comes Mr Preston and, so quietly, so gently, tells the suits, now let's be reasonable, this is going to happen, let's see if we can have it happen in a controlled way. And . . . KABOOM!'

'Alain, you can't call me violent. I am getting stigmatised as the moderate around here, just because I don't like bloodbaths—'

'Our US correspondent is looking for you, Ax,' said someone in Alain's party. General laughter. 'Yeah,' said Ax, accepting a paper cup of coffee from Alain, at the hot drinks station. 'Anyone here from the English Counterculture and speaks English? I caught that.'

Alain's eyes narrowed. 'Oh yes. Another thing, what's happened to Mr Phrasebook? *When* did you learn to speak French like a human being?'

'He was speaking Polish earlier,' said Arek, acutely. 'I think it's his chip.'

'Nah, evening classes.' However, the truth would be more annoying, and even in this empty world, annoying M. de Corlay remains a worthwhile project. 'Oh, okay, it's Serendip. I have a facet of Serendip on my chip, that's who's doing the ST. And it feels bizarre,' he added, unaugmented, 'so I'm going *au naturel* for the evening, if you don't mind. English or nothing,' A feeling like gentle claws withdrawing their grip.

'*Nom d'un nom,*' said Alain. 'Possessed by the machine. Ax, what are you doing to us? You realise how the Celtics, those savages, how they'll *love* this?'

'Nyah, you're just jealous.'

They all went out to a big bar on the Leidesplain and argued techno-greenery until the French decided they had better things to do. Arek stayed with Ax, eyeing up non-revolutionary pre-clubbers through a haze of cannabis smoke, and complaining of the dullness of life in Krakow, where Countercultural violence had never taken off – just endless bitching about the Quarantine. The music loop in the bar featured the dancemix of the Heads' current single, 'Heart On My Sleeve'. Also Fiorinda's 'Chocobo'. They came round incessantly.

'How familiar it is, how *Polish*, this pointless factionism. Did you know, Ax, I am a Celt! The Ancient Celts were everywhere, a truly European *phenomenon*, I know I must not say race. My eyes are typically Celtic! I can be on both sides of the bloodbath! But who would have thought Western Europe would be the first to go? It's unreal.'

'Anyone who looked at a population density map, that's who,' said Ax.

'You think it's that simple?'

'I think when the shit hits the fan, suddenly things get very simple, and that's the worst fucking shit of all. The challenge is to keep things complicated.' Here comes 'Heart On My Sleeve' again. . . Arek propped his chin on his hand

and gazed at Ax, soulfully. 'How did you do it, Ax? I have been trying to get Sage into bed for years, he has just laughed at me. Held me off with one hand, you know—'

Ax shrugged. 'Try getting him killed a few times. Wreck his career, steal his girl, make him into a murderer. Worked for me.'

'Oh dear, don't tell me you two have fallen out. My perfect couple!'

Ax would have to find the right tone for answering questions about his lovers.

'Nah, just joking. Nothing's wrong. We're fine.'

Arek shook his head. 'It's the girl. You should ditch the girl. She had made trouble between you, of course she has. Women always make trouble—'

'You know,' said Ax, 'Sage is right. The gay nation stinks. Bunch of shit-for-brains self-centred misogynist wannabes. I fucking hate 'em.'

'Okay, okay! I step off the holy ground! But my God, you must not part with Sage! He is your Charioteer. Your hero-companion, your guide in battle. That's very Celtic!'

'Arek, I wouldn't mind just *not hearing* the word Celtic for a few hours.'

Someone came up. It was the US Correspondent. She wanted to introduce herself, which, at this juncture, Ax found extremely welcome. Arek grinned and winked. 'Now I'll go and find some other conversation for a while. You want to come along to the darkroom at De Olifant later, Ax? It might be fun, huh?' The US correspondent was a futuristic-Utopian who'd been around in the

chatrooms, before Ivan/Lara. She'd usually been dressed (so to speak) as the Addams Family butler. He tried not to look taken aback. He'd had 'Lurch' down as a female teenager, shy and bold, full of naïve enthusiasms, which appeared to be right. He hadn't envisaged her weighing-in at sixteen stone (or thereabouts; and she wasn't tall), with a sparse thatch of straw hair, a slab of whey face and tiny eyes almost devoid of brows or lashes. He offered a cigarette. She looked at the pack with alarm and said earnestly, 'I think it's *great*, the way you're the eco warrior king of England, and, but, but you smoke cigarettes and you take drugs and you drive a sports car. That's so cool.'

Americans won't say 'Dictator'. They just won't. It pissed Ax off no end to be associated with the departed royals, but he knew there was no use arguing.

'It's not a sports car. Let me buy you a drink, then.'

'Oh no. No! I'll buy. It's wonderful to meet you, er, Ax—'

They chatted. Her real name (sorry, her original name) was Kathryn Adams.

She was a journalist, kind of, by profession. He detected hero worship, for which he wasn't in the mood: but she disarmed him, somehow. Within a few minutes she'd explained her appearance. She'd been a trisomy, a Down's Syndrome. 'My parents had the learning difficulties fixed, but not the cosmetic problems because they're Christians, and now I'm grown, I've decided I like looking like this. I like being invisible.' He didn't doubt the story. Expensive futuristic stuff, that kind of therapy: but she smelled of serious money. Invisible? Not exactly, but 'Lurch'

was a very smart cookie, and nobody would guess; nobody would *look* at her too often. What a decision. Ax did not think of himself as vain, but he couldn't imagine it. Made you wonder about those filthy rich parents, what they'd done to their kid's self-image. . . In the end she had to get back to her hotel. Ax found Arek, who had got himself totally smashed, and hauled him out of a fracas with a bunch of Belgian hippies –something about the European Flag, and the good name of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I can do this, thought Ax. In Bucharest he'd been an automaton, performing the 'Ax Preston' routines and feeling nothing. He'd been afraid of Amsterdam,

where there'd be people he knew. But he was okay. Walking on knives, but he was fine. He was good.

Next morning at the Tropen, Ax was eating his breakfast, alone at a table in the museum café. Alain sat down, bright-eyed and malign.

'So, you left the Milky Bar Kid home alone? Was that wise, my friend?'

Ax ate his black rice pudding. Shards of soft, fresh coconut on top, fucking ace. What it is to be off the offshore island. 'Why wouldn't it be wise?'

The little Breton put his head on one side, eyes snapping with *Schadenfreude* (or whatever is the French for that). 'Hm . . . I should tell you, when I was in Reading last, I said to Sage if he and Fiorinda needed a place to run, they could come to me.'

'Oh yeah?' Ax was unmoved. 'What did he say?'

'He didn't say anything. He hit me. With force. Then he picked me off the floor and we went on with our conversation as if nothing had happened.'

'We drop the subject,' said Ax, grinning.

'Of course. You trust him, that's your business. Not another word.'

The days passed. The European Crisis opened up before him. There were scuffles between technos and Celts; that led to conference-goers being banned from every decent club round the Rembrandtsplein. There was a live album recorded at the Paradiso, Ax playing guitar in a Floods Conference supergroup: a very mixed bag. The Van Gogh Museum was stormed by art-for-a-cause locals (street theatre, no damage to a major tourist attraction). Ax managed to avoid the English contingent, and the rest of the British nations, by the simple expedient of becoming the spokesperson for the techno-greens, a role that everybody seemed to think belonged to him anyway.

He felt like a visitor from another planet, because no one knew what was going on in his head. No one knew that in his heart he had quit the job that made him famous. Maybe his secret freedom made it easier for him to take on the Conference. He knew he was doing well. The quarantine debate went like a dream, and yeah, of course he was aware that the US correspondent was in the audience. Alain jeered at Ax's 'tendresse' for the Ugly American (and general sucking-up to Uncle Sam), but Ax ignored him. The kid was interesting, whoever she was: he liked her.

One freezing night, alone for a change, he bumped into a music-biz delegate from Dublin who told him that Feargal Kearney was rumoured to be dead. Vanished from the Irish scene about two years ago, and died in a rehab clinic somewhere on the wrong side of the Quarantine. Ax was guilty of not liking Fergal much. When someone 'accidentally' shafts you, in some needling way, *every time you talk to him*, then on some level he's hostile, even if he did save your life. But he didn't contradict the story – just in case Fergal really had faked his own demise. They'd never got to the bottom of how their defector had acquired the David Sale evidence. It was always possible that he'd left serious enemies behind him in Ireland.

Another day he went with Arek to the Stopera, to see one of the stranger signs of these times. In the underpass between the Town Hall and the Musiektheater, the Amsterdammers kept an exhibit showing Netherlands sea-levels. There was a woman standing by the plaque representing 'Normal Amsterdam', the basic sea-level of Europe. She was swathed in grey, she wore a wreath of dead flowers and birds, her face was blurred: she was about three metres tall.

'Can you see her?' asked Arek.

'Yeah.' 'What do you think? Is it a hoax? An art-for-a-cause stunt? A trick of the

light?’

‘No,’ said Ax. ‘I could be wrong, but no.’

No one knew what she meant. The *grey lady* had simply appeared. She had become the Conference mascot, but no one claimed responsibility. She was insubstantial, but unlike a traditional ghost she turned up on photographic film and other recording media. Ax thought of the unpleasant apparition he and Sage had once met in Yorkshire. This was broad daylight but the feeling was the same: a compelling presence, a bending of reality.

‘She’s crying for us,’ suggested Arek. ‘She is Gaia, weeping for our fate.’

‘More likely she’s crying for herself. I don’t know that Gaia is on our side.’

‘But why now? Ax, what is happening to this stupid world? An economic crash and *pouf*, there are ghosts in the streets. I don’t think I like it.’

‘You don’t have any problem with the Blessed Virgin Mary.’

They turned and made their way through the *grey lady*’s small, permanent crowd. Maybe if she stayed she would become a shrine. ‘That’s different,’ said Arek. ‘The spiritual should be spiritual. Visions are supposed to be in the heart, and good Catholics know this, though we like our fairytales. This is *wrong*, it feels dangerous. You keep telling me our crisis is a normal market adjustment, Ax, but this is not normal. Serious laws are being broken!’

Ax shrugged. ‘It has to happen occasionally. A new model will come along.’ As he cut his swathe through the Conference, making it work because that was

automatic, the pain began to overwhelm him. Every time he made one of those painful open-line calls he could not stop himself from hoping that Fiorinda would cut through the bland, damn the eavesdroppers, and beg him to come home. Every time he returned to the Tarom dormitory late at night he imagined that Sage would be there, a dearly familiar tall shadow rising from one of the scruffy armchairs in the unlit lobby, *hi rockstar, just thought I’d drop by . . .*

Why didn’t they come to him?

They were pretending they didn’t know there was anything wrong, but they were lying: he could hear it in their voices. He forgot that he’d walked away so the lovers could be happy, all he knew was his burning pain. The video birthday-card (which reached him in the first week of March) destroyed him.

Fiorinda and Sage in the music room in Brixton, singing ‘Ain’t Misbehaving . . .’

So beautiful together. If he could have reached them, he’d have killed them both with his bare hands. He was in company, he had to look pleased. Late that night he went up to the Tarom roof (the only privacy available). The Rijksmuseum was strung with fairylights; there were people skating in the dark. He smashed the disc, ground it under his heel, then crawled around picking up the fragments, because this was all he had left of his darlings; and cried, and cried, and cried.

The Conference came to an end. The *grey lady* might remain until deep waters drowned her, but the cheap hotels were emptying, hippy caravanserai were being dismantled. All the coverage was retrospective now. Tell us, Mr Preston? Who came out on top, the Celtics or the technos? Where’s the next round

going to be held? What has the Conference achieved? Where are we going? Six o’clock one morning, in the rain, Ax sat on a bench looking up at the house where Rene Descartes had once stayed, in hiding from the world. *Everyone in this town except me is thinking about business. . .* But Ax had no philosophy to fill his empty head. Throwing the Sweet Track Jade into the sea had been a cowardly childish gesture. He knew he had to go back to England and resign, make it official, and then what?

He had no plans.

I'm over, he thought. I'm *finished*, and this is how it feels.

Later he met Lurch for breakfast in the Ekeko café at the Tropen. The US Correspondent was staying at the Amstel Inter'Continental, a fact she'd touchingly tried to keep from her impoverished European pals. The Light Hall was being prepared for a new exhibition. They took a nostalgic stroll through the dioramas, this entrancing giant dolls' house so haunted by the great dying: the slaughtered forests, the bleached corals, the eroded soils. The dancing, the funerary rites: everything must go. She asked him about Sage and Fiorinda.

Everyone did that, naturally. The hot couple of the hour—

'They have a pact not to write about the relationship, don't they? How does that work? I mean, all musicians write love songs. Is it legally binding?'

'I don't know how it works. I don't write lyrics, I'm out of it.' 'What about 'Heart On My Sleeve'?' How can Fiorinda think that isn't about

sex?'

'It's the relationship that's off-limits, sex is okay. Or it could be,' added Ax, for whom the topic was galling as well as miserable, 'she thought it was about someone else.'

'Where did you think you were heading, setting up the Rock and Roll Reich?'

'Lurch, to tell the truth, a lot of things happened by chance.'

'But you did have a ground plan?'

'Are you recording? I suppose you are, since you record everything. Look, why don't you give me a list of the questions, and we'll work something out.'

Takes one to know one. He had spotted at their second meeting that she had a gizmo of somekind in her head. Eyesocket cam, probably. 'I'm sorry,' she said, crestfallen. 'I should have asked permission.'

'Well, it's customary. But don't worry about it, I don't mind.'

So Ax talked – about the Rock and Roll Reich, and the poisoned world, and the music, and Utopia. Luckily people need to be good to each other, it's as natural to us as greed and murder, arguably more natural, by a small but vital margin, or we wouldn't have this problem as there would not be several billions of us. . . . They had settled in the Yemen exhibit, a peaceful little upper room with dark red velour couches around the walls.

'What about the music, is it still important? Or has it become irrelevant?' 'I've been thinking about that.'

Ax turned the ring on his right hand,

wondering if this interview would ever be published. He didn't see how. 'I think it's important, because when we need to prove we have the right to lead, we present our credentials by getting up on stage. By our mastery of the music, our skills, and passion and knowledge. . . Rock music is about *self-expression*, which has its dangers, but it's an improvement on who has the biggest war-chest.'

'But can that kind of power endure? Will the Reich last a thousand years?'

'I never expected it to last. Something will survive. Nature is profligate, a lot of wonderful things are ephemeral, doesn't mean they're not worthwhile—'

He was thinking of the love affair. The American girl nodded respectfully.

'What will you do with this? I thought you weren't allowed to re-import any kind of digital device once you've taken it out of quarantine. Won't your gizmo be spotted at immigration and destroyed, with all your records?'

'Not if I declare it. I plan to do that, and have the recording bonded until it can be cleared for downloading. It won't lose value. . . There's just one other thing.

Why did Sage write a track about Watergate? That's so weird.'

He sighed. Okay, forget the Ax Preston spiel. Aoxomoxoa is *much* sexier. Tell me. 'It's a beach.'

?Oh. In what sense? Uh, what kind of a ?beach???

?A beach with sand, not an ancient political scandal. A surfing beach in Cornwall. She nodded, with the look journalists get when they know you are winding them up. Moving on. ?Where are the other musketeers this morning??

?The other musketeers??

?Arek and Alain, explained Lurch, with a shy grin.

?Oh yeah. Ax smiled at her. ?Then I suppose I'll have to call you D'Artagnan. She blushed with pleasure, and looked sweet – a triumph of the human spirit. She's a very good kid, and when you get to know her you can see it shining, no matter if she's, er, not conventionally attractive. He'd put some effort into protecting Lurch from the ribald cruelty of the techno-greens (both male and female). But he hadn't had to make a big deal of it, even with those who most hated and despised the USA. People liked her.

?The other musketeers are coming down from this, he said. ?They have things to do, places to go. They are packing.?

Lurch drew a deep breath. She gazed at him so nervously and solemnly that for a frightful moment he thought he'd have to deal with a sexual proposal. She wants me to take her virginity (no question she's a virgin). Oh, great.

?Ax, would you come to the USA??

He grinned. ?Yeah, probably, if anybody asked me. I'm a rock musician.?

?I'm asking. I'm, um, the truth is I'm here for the Internet Commission. I'm empowered to ask you to come back with me and talk about ending the data quarantine. They want to meet you in person. You're the one they trust. Ax was thrown into turmoil. His sense of destiny was rekindled. He had *seen*

that Kathryn Adams was worth cultivating, and here was his reward. But the dazzling offer, paradoxically, cruelly, made him feel that he must get back to England. If his lovers wanted him, in spite of everything . . . then he would go straight home, and the Internet Commissioners could wait.

He couldn't bring himself to call them direct, though security had been relaxed and he could have done that. He called David Sale instead. He didn't mention the data quarantine (he didn't trust the connection that far). He said he'd been asked to intervene in something, and it meant a few more weeks away. He was still going to quit. But this wasn't the moment to announce his resignation.

No problem, said David. You have a *wonderful* deputy. You carry on with the great work! He wanted to know how Ax felt about Sage and the Zen Self.

?He's been getting some amazing results, but he's pushing himself *very* hard. I expect you know about it—?

?Mmm, yeah, said Ax. He had not been paying attention to the Zen Self bulletins. ?So, my partners are getting on fine without me??

A slight delay. A guilty tone, when David answered.

?Oh yes . . . Er, I supposed you've talked to them? About this other trip??

?Of course I have, Ax lied. ?They want me to go for it.?

So that was how it was. Ax is out of the picture, everyone knows he's been dumped. Ax can carry on being good will ambassador for as long as he likes, nobody needs him.

He deleted Serendip. He would declare his chip, but he wasn't going to try taking *her* through US immigration. She was probably a state secret, and a Welsh state secret at that. Goodbye gentle claws in my brain. I'm sorry it wasn't a closer relationship: some people can be friends with a computer, some can't . . . From now on it would be the wrong kind of pidgin Spanish, and the wrong kind of

English. He arranged some cloak and dagger stuff to cover his exit, and made the video that would travel back to England.

It had to be short because he was about to break down in tears.

He waited a week in Seattle, confined – no, *asked to stay*– in the hotel room to which he'd been smuggled, in case he was recognised in the street. He thought this was ludicrous until he checked the entertainment and discovered the scads of Rock and Roll Reich sites, cartoons, fanpages, interviews – all pure fiction, none of them admitting this in the smallest print. Oh well, better to be talked about than not talked about. . . He channel-surfed, honed his openness to unexpected difficulties and off-the-wall opinions, and played guitar to pass the time. From one of his windows he could see into a vacant lot, where two north west coast native persons had set up house with a mattress and some sodden cardboard. They drummed and sang, on and off, through the drenching spring nights. Just like Brixton, really.

There was a new, exclusive interview with Sage in one of the online glossies.

The splash had Fiorinda in a pink party frock, with a wreath of roses (sloppy: she detests pink and she hates cut flowers) gazing up passionately into the eye sockets of the living skull: a tempting yet decorous opening superimposed—

SAGE ON FIORINDA

When they first met, she was fourteen years old She's the wildest, rawest talent in the Rock and Roll Reich

Her boyfriend is the post-human, post-Muslim, post-modern king of England . . .

What does Aoxomoxoa really, really think?

He decided he didn't need to find out.

When the meeting came it was a damp squib. He sat in a spartan office with half a dozen funky leisurewear types, five men, one woman, and they spent an hour saying nothing. Lurch, also present, was deeply, deeply mortified. She asked him to please stick around, more will come of this, give it a chance. Ax had no idea what to do with himself. He had no money. He didn't care. He lay on his bed in the hotel room, feeling no desire for food, alcohol or any other drug: a million miles away from prayer, without a thought of God, gazing at the Les Paul, which stood in a corner in its case.

On the third day of this themeless meditation the phone rang. He picked up the handset (antique, ivory-coloured, to go with the Art Deco theme of the room). 'Hi?' He thought it would be Fiorinda. 'Hi . . .' A male voice, a long pause. 'Are you Ax Preston?'

'Yeah.'

'Uh, heard you were in town. D'you want a gig?'

Thus began the unofficial, low-down, Ax Preston US Tour. He played in the back rooms of bars, in small venues; in the private homes of US musicians. When transport wasn't provided he travelled by train and bus. He didn't want a car, and even here, in the heart of empire, air travel was not for normal people any more. He met famous names, he played the Blues where the Blues were born. He slept in cheap rooms and unbelievably fancy rooms, and walked around semi tropical towns at night when he couldn't sleep, talking to anyone who offered. He felt like Johnny B. Goode. He knew that to many of the people he met, punters, promoters and musicians equally, he was a curiosity (the post-Muslim, post-modern king of England). But to others he was an interesting, pretty-good guitarist; which was all he wanted to be. And the fingers still worked, though it seemed to him he couldn't remember the last time he had really played.

Something drained out of him. Some kind of demon.

He knew for the first time how utterly, insanely burnt-out he had been before he left England. He knew that his task as Dictator was over, but that he would return to the struggle, in some way. He had lost everything, and he was happy. He was in this mood when he got the call summoning him to Washington, DC. It turned out Lurch was a genuine fairy godmother. Ax was going to meet the President. She came to DC herself, and they had a rendezvous at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Park: FDR looking vulnerable and chipper in his wheelchair by the gift shop, handsome walls of dark red granite, water features. A soup kitchen line of poor people, executed in bronze (strange notion). I HATE WAR, said the writing on the wall. THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF. Lurch was *exalted*, and jittery. They took the lunch she'd brought to a quiet spot by the water. He understood (with more sympathy than he'd felt in Amsterdam) that he was a figure of noble romance to this redoubtable girl; poor kid. On the other hand, she was nervous as a mother hen about the impression he would make on Mr Big.

'Don't wear your *it's the ecology* teeshirt.'

'I was thinking of wearing my Deep Throat suit.'

'Huh?' said Lurch, looking seriously alarmed.

'Watergate,' said Ax. 'Sorry.'

'Oh. You can see the building you know, it's on the bus tour. Ax, Fred's truly smart, but he has to have a handle to pick things up by, and *he thinks you're in charge*—'

Ax laughed. 'Whereas you know I'm not. It's okay, I'm used to that problem.' Two majestic, angular herons flew over, low and strong like cruising missiles. Grey squirrels and the sparrows chattered in a wealth of green. A squirrel came over and peered at them enquiringly. Ax broke off the crust of his sandwich.

'Hey, you mustn't feed them.'

'Why not?' 'It creates an artificial food chain.'

Well, God forbid the great US nation should *create an artificial food chain*.

He shook his head. Controlled hilarity at America, part of his cure. 'You people—'

Lurch gazed at him with reverence. He knew why their rendezvous was at this location. She didn't need to tell him that she saw him as a new FDR, bearing the great American's banner into the future that shaped so darkly, not only for Europe but for all the world. 'I know you'll do it right.'

Ax met the President at seven a.m. in a room with a tasteful repro version of the Insanitude's frozen-in-time décor; but stunningly *clean*. It wasn't the top venue, but at least it was in the West Wing. It was like meeting the most sacred icon of someone else's religion. You're not a believer, but you're affected by the aura. Mr Eiffrich talked about the quarantine (though it was not, he pointed out, strictly his baby). The need for it, and the reasons why the goalposts for restored connectivity had been moved. Yeah, several times . . . Ax didn't get the feeling anything was shifting. He got the feeling that the leader of the free world didn't know what the fuck to do with the funky green Ceremonial Head of State of a former world-class country, that's totally gone to the dogs—

The party moved on to a buffet breakfast. Ax and the President stood side by side, having scrambled eggs spooned for them. You could get caviar, genuine Russian, with your eggs. Ax declined the luxury. Got any boiled babies?

He kept his tongue behind his teeth. No Lennonisms. 'I can't get over your accent,' said Mr Eiffrich.

Ax was tired of hearing that persons of colour were supposed to speak the

same piccaninny who's-in-the-house argot, wherever in the world they were brought up. He was equally tired of hearing that idiotic circumlocution *persons of colour*. He was the only non-white on the eating side of the napery this morning. 'Put me in the front room, turn out the light, you wouldn't know if I was black or white.'

'Hm. I was expecting Estuary English, because you all seem to speak that way now, with some Caribbean, usually it's Jamaica. But I can't get your mix at all.'

'It's West Country,' said Ax. 'With Manchester-Merseyside. The whole music biz is affected by that, it's historical. Some US English, from tv culture. But there'll be Jamaica in there, a little. And my mother's from the Sudan.'

'Oh? North or South?' They moved on along the table.

'North. But she's a Christian.'

An acute glance. 'How'd she take your conversion?'

'My mum takes everything well, Mr Eiffrich.'

'Call me Fred. C'mon, let's eat. Let's talk. Tell me about the Amsterdam gig.

My niece, she records everything and sees nothing, you know what I mean?'

The freshness of the morning had gone before Ax left the White House. He drifted at random over green lawns and came to rest at the feet of yet another eighteenth-century minor deity. How the crowds vanish in the vastness of the sacred places, I'm in the ancient world again. He remembered his first meeting with Mohammad, at the end of the Islamic campaign. The recognition, the

feeling of rightness. His encounter with Mr Eiffrich had been nothing like that.

But it had been a good conversation, good business, a good beginning for a task could be passed on to others; and Ax could start planning his return trip.

It appeared, amazingly enough, that it was Ax Preston's England that had been snarling-up global connectivity (something he would have had to spin, in Europe, if he wasn't quitting!). *Not* the raging civil disorder and social collapse on the Continent, oh no, no, no. It was the rockstar with the hippy army, taking over Buckingham Palace. And here's me thinking we were the ones that looked sensible and reassuring. There you go, no accounting for taste: but now the President had met Ax, and decided he's an okay sort of guy (the Ax effect again, weird how it hardly ever fails).

The President of the USA might be only a titular monarch, kind of a Fujiwara, feudal Japan situation, with the great lords of commerce calling the shots. But he had friends in high places, reverence for his traditional standing . . . and that's how things work. Person to person, it always comes back to that. A smile, the look in someone's eye, an exchange of pheromones, and everything flows.

He sat on the plinth of the statue, thinking about his lovers. He'd been thinking of them a great deal while his mind was on its journey to recovery, feeling terrible about the way he'd left them. How bewildered they must have been, how abandoned they must have felt. He'd been ready to go back and tell them he was sorry, even before Lurch's phonecall. Now that would be his next task. They were made for each other, I can't stand in their way. Yeah, tough to accept, but what the fuck was all the rage and despair about?

If they will let me, I'll be their best friend. He saw himself accepting the role that Sage, noble soul, had accepted once, and been prepared to bear for a lifetime. If my big cat could do that, then I can. And it would be cool (balm for his pride) if he could say, oh yeah, and the data quarantine is fixed. Which he should know before he left, and he was confident.

Ready to leave, he took a look at his minor deity. It was John Paul Jones, Revolutionary War hero. Great tactician, always in trouble, ended up as rear

admiral to Catherine the Great, of all things. Dishonourable discharge, died in France . . . The story was instantly in his mind, presumably from his chip. He'd long ceased worrying about the difference between chip memories and 'real' memories. Another populist hero who outlived his glory days. Greetings, compadre. But I won't go to the bad. I can't be their lover, but I can love my darlings, which is the important thing, and no one can take it away. For the sake of what we had, I will make something positive of the rest of my life. I swear it. *Surrender? I have not yet begun to fight.*

He returned to the Four Seasons and told the friendly desk staff he'd been to see Mr Eiffrich. They thought that was pretty funny, and told him again about how England is that place where it rains all the time. In his room, using his pay-as-you-go phone, he called Lurch, discreetly let her know the good news, and said no, he didn't want company tonight. Alone but no longer alone, Fiorinda and Sage restored to him, he slept for hours.

Later he went out (in a downpour) to eat at a tapas bar, DC style, booths and islands all majestic polished wood; a little stage at the back. When he was eating the waitress came and ducked down by his table. 'Excuse me, Mr Preston, would you play for us?' The bar staff and manager were grinning hopefully. He'd met this reaction before, in DC. Maybe they don't know why he's famous but they've heard he'll do this sort of thing, and it sounds like a desirable freebie.

'Yeah, okay. You'll have to provide the guitar.'

So he played, sitting on a stool with an acoustic guitar, the pick-up plugged into a little amp. On the low-down, in the USA, he'd had to get used to stepping over cables again. He was a free agent; they didn't have a clue what to expect. He gave them Willie Nelson, *blue eyes crying in the rain* . . .

Goodbye, my blue-eyes, goodbye my darling girl. I love you both, I know it's over; and I'm coming home.

The next day Lurch came to the hotel. She told him he had a gig at the White House. The President would be honoured if Ax would play at a reception. It would be in a couple of weeks, and she knew he wanted to get home, but he really ought to do this. There'd be other meetings on the data quarantine that he'd need to be part of, anyhow.

Ax felt, irrationally, somewhat demoted. Put in his place. 'I don't suppose you'd care to arrange for my assets to be unfrozen, if I'm staying? I think the Chosen have *some* US earnings piled up in bond.'

'Don't worry about expenses. I'm embarrassed you ever thought that.'

Lurch (aka Kathryn Adams) was used to the kind of money where you never, ever have to think about it. She had the rockstar mentality on the subject (though she'd be hurt if you told her so). Ax's behaviour, walking out of the hotel in Seattle and going on the road, had been mystical and strange to her. It hadn't crossed her mind that he simply wanted to be in charge of where his next sandwich was coming from. So we get to know each other, and there are jarring moments, but she's still a very good kid, this fairy godmother of mine. And the leader of the free world is her Uncle Fred.

'Okay, let's look at the line-up.'

She hadn't expected the question, but she located the information and showed it to him on her virtual-screen palm-top. The line-up at the White House put Ax on stage with a notorious outfit of blood-daubed-Celtic wannabes who openly supported Europe's green nazis, and a crew of African-American so-called Islamist hate-merchants whose enemies were Uppity Females, Christians, Homosexuals, Asians, Koreans, Jews. . . These were respectable corporate

earning name bands. They were just making a buck, all in fun and in the scared name of free speech, and Ax would be a fool to take offence.

He sighed. He could see someone had tried hard to put together a themed package. 'Sorry, Lurch. I can't do this.'

He tried to explain why not, and made her understand he was serious. I don't have to play if I don't like the company. I've never been that kind of rockstar, don't plan to start. Thanks, but no. Lurch *blanched*. He would not have thought her whey face could turn whiter, but it did. She argued her case, becoming agitated. The person who put this together didn't understand. I do, I tried, but what the President, uh, or people round him see is, they'll see you *being awkward*. Please Ax. You can do this. You have to do it.

Sorry, said Ax. Credibility issue. Surely the White House can understand a credibility issue?

Ah, well, he was thinking, watching her shocked face. So that's the way things are, and that nice civilised patrician gent I was talking to was really Pigsty Liver For whom might is right, and now I've bust the deal—

She left, saying she'd get back to him.

Ax, crestfallen and exasperated, wondered if his life was actually in danger (she had been so flustered), but decided not. Fred Eiffrich isn't Caligula, he's just an emperor whose favour is easily lost. Too bad. And if Ax no longer had a patron in this town, that was okay. He had a contingency plan.

In the morning he took the Metro to Dupont Circle, bought himself coffee and a muffin and went to sit in the park. People walked briskly, a school class of teenagers were doing drill-exercises. Sparrows flirted and chirruped and hunted scraps. The central fountain featured a *ronde* of undraped forms, male and female: sleek, pallid stone. Two white guys, clad in running shorts and singlets, sat on the rim of the bowl talking quietly. Could one of them be my man? He wondered if he'd been stupid about the gig, but decided he'd been right to say no as an opening gambit; see what Lurch comes back with. . . . On his VIP ticket he'd have flown into Shannon by private jet (no flights to England, but he could have handled the rest of the journey). Getting out of the USA otherwise, when he had little money, wasn't supposed to be here, had a chip in his head and came from a contaminated country, was not going to be straightforward. But he'd been working on it.

I like to be in charge of my next sandwich.

The sparrows caught his attention. What a strange city it is, where nobody feeds the birds. He wanted to crumble some of his blueberry muffin for them, but respect for Lurch's feelings restrained him. I'd hate to create an artificial food chain One of the little birds hopped to within inches of his foot, without the bait. She looked up. He saw in extraordinary clarity the blonde stripe above her shining dark eye, the soft pelt of smoky brown feathers. She reminded him of Fiorinda, and he had a wistful thought that she might come to his hand. He could almost feel the tiny claws, digging into him—

Oh

He recognised the penumbra of something untoward happening in his brain, and the next instant *there was Fiorinda*, her living ghost: Fiorinda, in her stormcloud indigo and the orange fluffy cardigan, one arm across her breast, the bi-loc set in a white-knuckled grip against the side of her head. His heart *leapt*. Oh God, she has remembered. My telecoms-allergic babe finally realised *why the fuck* I gave her that thing. She looked as if she'd been crying.

'Ax!'

'Fiorinda, my baby. What's the matter? What's happened, sweetheart?'

'Ax, you have to come home. Sage has gone. Olwen wouldn't give him life support any more. You don't know because he wouldn't let us tell you, but he was taking far too much snapshot, in the Zen Self experiments. He said he couldn't stop, it was something he had to do, and now he's gone to Caer Siddi.' The moment he saw her, the moment he heard her voice, the world turned upside down and righted itself, and he was *there*, in the world he thought he'd lost, loving her and Sage, grasping that they were in trouble and he'd have to sort it out—

'You two haven't been getting on then, I take it. And the stupid bugger wouldn't let you tell me. Fiorinda, don't cry, it'll be okay. Just explain to me what went wrong—'

She shook her head, her trouble only darker. 'N-not at this distance, Ax. You don't understand, he's *gone*. He was, I think he was dying when he left Rivermead. No one who goes to Caer Siddi ever comes out again. He's never coming back. *Sage is gone*. Things are okay here but not too good. Fergal's taken command of the London barmies, apparently Sage told him to do that, but I'm not sure, what do you think?'

'I'm on my way. I'll be with you soon as I can. Fiorinda, *don't worry*. It won't be as bad as you're making out. I'll talk to Sage, I'll go and haul him out—'

'Oh.' She looked around. 'You're outside. Can other people see me? Do I look weird?'

'Yeah, they can see you, like a ghost. They won't worry. It doesn't—'

'Shit. I'd better break the connection, this is contraband. Please, please come home as quickly as you can. I love you.'

She had vanished before he realised that he could have touched her.

He was on his feet. He sat back on the bench and reached for his cooling paper cup of coffee. His eyes were fixed on the Art Deco fountain; his mind was racing. I must go home, I must get back. They've had a bust-up over the Zen Self, and Fiorinda's alone: but there's something else. Something I ought to know. *I can feel it*. Ideas started to click together in his mind, hints he'd dismissed, disregarded inferences, a cascade that he couldn't stop. Straws in the wind, random objects out of place that reveal the direction of a great secret mass of moving air—

'Oh my God!' he gasped, starting to his feet again, his whole body thrilling with fight-and-flight. 'My God, Sage—! What have you done?'

If desperation had been enough he would have dived through the ether, around the world, and snatched her out of danger, as if from a burning building. A youngish, good-looking Hispanic bloke, in worn-down funky leisurewear, was coming towards him. 'Mr Preston? Hi, I'm João. You waiting for me?'

It was his underground ticket home connection.

The man offered his hand. In the split second before he took it Ax recalled that this was no longer a gesture between negotiating strangers in the USA. Yesterday morning the President clapped Ax around the shoulders and squeezed his arm, getting physical without a qualm; but he didn't shake hands. They don't wear gloves, that would be too weird, but they don't touch skin to sweaty skin on the first date. Bio-terrorism's a real danger. He remembered, but he took the hand because it was too late, and everything went black.

Where am I? He was lying on his side on a hard, dusty surface. He thought it was wood, floorboards or planks. He was handcuffed, blindfold; he couldn't hear anything. When he moved, he found the cuffs were locked to a wall. Further inventory: he was wearing teshirt and underpants, he had some bruising he'd

rather not think about, a sore face, the taste of old blood in his mouth, but no serious physical pain. Where am I *now*? I've been moved. I was somewhere different, floating in a sea of drugged daze, they have moved me. A blurred impression of the past few days began to surface. He lay still, deathly afraid, *Oh, Fiorinda . . .* Okay, it could be worse. I could be naked, could have been hurt much worse. This isn't *too* bad. This is not an absolutely hopeless fix. Objective one, calm yourself. Be open and ready for whatever chance comes. At last, footsteps. Someone ripped off the blindfold.

It was the bloke from Dupont Circle, with others. Two deeply tanned white guys, one with grey bristle hair, the other much younger. Two stocky, dark skinned guys, alike as brothers; and a tall, thin man black as tar. They all had handguns. The older white guy was clutching his and looking trigger-happy. The others less so, guns in reserve.

'What's going on? What's happening?'

'Same as last time, Ax. You've been kidnapped. You know the score, you cooperate, be nice, or we'll hurt you.'

He sat up, cuffed to the wall, and tried to look around without appearing to do so. The bed had no mattress, just dusty planks. No window was in his line of sight, and neither was the door. A sink in a corner. Bare dingy-brown walls. It could be a very cheap, shabby and dirty hotel room. He couldn't hear traffic.

'So, what is it you want?' He gave them a rueful smile. 'Contrary to the sound of the thing, I don't have easy access to large sums of money, but—'

'It's not for money!' shouted the old white guy, the gun shaking in his hand.

'We're not interested in your fucking money!'

'Hey, we *do* want money!' countered one of the two stocky guys, in a hurry, as if fearing Whitey would wreck the deal.

'Yeah, but this isn't *about* money!' repeated the older bloke, furiously. He sprang forward and gave Ax a smack in the face with the side of the gun that knocked his head back, ringing, stinging. 'This is about the blow!' 'I don't have any cocaine, either. Not on me.'

'I mean the MARKET! This is about what *you did*, you bastard. And you're going to fucking UNDO, or you will never see the light of day again!'

'This is not personal,' said the man from Dupont Circle. He put his arm around Ax's shoulders and leaned in close, warm breath, a sickening jolt of fear.

'You know, Ax, I am your biggest fan. I admire very much the Rock and Roll Reich. Fiorinda, the Powerbabes, the Reading Festival, I am there. Be good to each other, I believe that. But you have to help us. You don't know what you did. I know you'll help us when you understand.'

The white guy started ranting again. The others joined in, saying things that

were slightly more coherent, no less lunatic. They were in the drug business, or they had been, until the market crashed. Their careers had been wrecked by the legalisation of recreational drugs in Europe – above all, the synthesis of artificial cocaine. They held Ax Preston responsible. He had ruined their lives. What they expected him to do about it was unclear. He was a hostage—

That seemed to be it.

Deathly afraid, he lived for days in that room, chained to the wall, taken twice a day, handcuffed and blindfold, to a toilet: talking whenever they would let him, trying to romance them, trying to find out where he was, hoping he would get to speak with someone rational. He got nowhere. It dawned on him that there was no one rational, no one in charge. He was dealing with an amputated limb, a flailing poisonous tentacle no longer connected to any organised body. He could not call Fiorinda; the

b-loc link was one way. But it was okay. She would realise something had gone wrong and call him again. All he had to do was stay alive, she would send the cavalry. Unless. . . Unless the the nightmare he'd envisaged, just before this disaster, was real, and it had intervened.

The kidnapers were volatile, but not violent. Not even older Whitey, apart from the tantrums; which grew less. They didn't hurt him anymore, though he knew it was in them: especially in João. After a few days they let him do without the blindfold except for the toilet trips. They gave him food, rice and beans; and water from the sink. João kept saying he would borrow a guitar so that Ax would feel at home. Ax Preston, he always has his guitar. Like Jimi Hendrix.

One day, maybe the tenth or fifteenth from Dupont Circle, the six of them arrived together, with another man. The newcomer wore a suit of white overalls, like a house-painter. He was carrying a rigid metal briefcase.

Ax's heart stood still.

'Hey,' he said, 'what do you want me to do? I didn't cause a global recession, and I can't disinvent synthetic blow, fuck's sake, can't put the genie back in the bottle—'

'Ax, we have to prove that we've got you,' said João, reasonably. 'This is a good thing, be calm, don't worry. When we have proved that we really have Ax Preston, then we can have the ransom paid, and everything will be fine. We are not bad people, Ax.'

'Take a photograph,' he whispered, his lips scarcely able to move. 'That's fucking stupid,' said one of the stocky pair (only João had a name, so

far). 'Don't be *stupid*, Ax. Pictures can be faked. What would a photo prove?'

'Blood sample. Tissue sample.'

They already had his ring, the ring Fiorinda had given him, along with everything else he'd been carrying. They had plenty of ID.

'We could cut off your hands,' said João. 'But we will only take something that you don't need, that losing it will not make you less of a man, but more.'

The man in the painter's overalls set his briefcase on the floor and opened it, with the stoic expression of someone who knows he should be in a better job. Ax couldn't see into the case, but he could see the man donning a pair of slick medical gloves. He watched, rigid with fear, as older Whitey and João confabulated over a needle and a syringe, works that had been travelling loose in Whitey's denim jacket pocket. Is this a clean needle, are you sure? It doesn't *look* very clean. Oh fuck.

'Don't put me out,' he said, urgently. '*Don't put me out*. I have to be conscious!'

He struggled furiously, things having reached the point where there was nothing to be gained by staying calm. They got him strapped down, face down, on his bed of boards. Okay, okay, I'll keep still. Don't knock me out!

But they did.

When he woke again he was still lying in the dirty room. His wrists were cuffed in front of him, but not fastened to the wall. He put both hands to his head and found a crusted, sticky dressing over the place where they'd shaved a patch of

hair and cut open his skull. If that gets infected, I am fucked. He could not remember his own name, but he could feel it, like something he could touch through a veil, through water. All kinds of knowledge were immanent in him.

The engine was working just as it had been before, but the syncromesh was gone.

If that gets infected I am fucked . . . The person who could put that thought together knew everything, but like an amputated limb, a lost arm of the sea.

He tried to get up and fell off the bed. Right arm and leg (or maybe left arm

and leg, same side, anyway) were not responding. He tried to crawl and found that the limbs that felt paralysed moved, more or less: but he couldn't think about it or everything went haywire. He remembered effects slightly like this from, whooooh, long time ago, long time ago. When the chip was first put in. Says the amputated limb, the lost arm of the sea.

He crawled in the direction of the daylight, the place where he'd always known the window must be. He pushed himself up the wall, with great difficulty, and touched glass. He was looking out of a window after all this time (not a fuck of a clue how long, at this moment). Aha. Beard. Touch his chin. The beard is grown way past where it was, it is soft and sparse. I don't grow much beard, but what there is is strong enough for a daily shave, annoyingly. I will not grow a beard. He remembered promising Fiorinda that.

Says the amputated limb, the lost arm of the sea. He could not make sense of what he saw. He noticed for the first time that he

couldn't make sense of *anything* he saw. Not his own hand in front of his face. Light and shadow, greyscale; other than that, scrambled pixels. *I cannot do this.*

He turned and let himself slide down again with his eyes closed, tears burning his eyelids. Oh fuck, oh Fiorinda, I can't get there, *what's happening to you?*

He stayed for a long time in the same position, in the sweltering damp heat of the dirty room. Nobody came. Every few hours, or maybe every few minutes, he had no way of telling, he opened his eyes and tried again. The need to shit will come. Where will I shit, where will I piss if they don't take me to the toilet? I'll choose a corner. I can handle getting the pants down and up, cuffed. I think can do that. There's water in the sink. Live on water, for a long time. Someone will come. I'll think of a way to beat this. I will. He opened his eyes and tried again. He opened his eyes and tried again, and had the strangest sensation of the whole input being *there*, but unavailable. The animal can see perfectly. Ax can't. Now this is what Sage warned me about. The brain becomes parasitical on the chip, routing everything through there, so if the chip goes you are fucked: and I *wouldn't listen*, because I couldn't consider giving up my special stuff. Poor Sage, he must have been scared to death. What an arrogant stupid wanker I am.

He opened his eyes and tried again, he opened his eyes and tried again, not knowing whether he would lose everything that had been left to him, but giving thanks to God for what he had. I have Sage, I have Fiorinda, I can think of them.

God is merciful. He thought of them. The faces were not clear, but he could feel them, filling his heart.

It could have been days later: he opened his eyes and tried again, and the dirty room took shape. God is good. God is great. It looked different. Could be a different room, for all he knew. He listened, am I deaf? There was not a sound. He pushed himself up the wall and looked out of the window. The dirty room was on the first floor of a breeze-block building in a row of similar buildings. It seemed to be on the edge of a town. The street below was broken up, and trailed away into red stones and earth. He could see derelict industrial things beside a broad, nearly-dry river-bed. On the other side of the nearly-dry river, the green rafted towers of the trees began. They go up forever. They go on and on.

Where the fuck am I?

It took him many weeks to come back from losing his chip. The neurological effects were terrifying, but most of them passed quite quickly. Psychological withdrawal was in ways much worse. The shakes. Disorientation, inability to concentrate, inability to eat, or even to swallow —and a fathomless, engulfing despair that wouldn't give up. He had lost England, he had lost the Qur'an. He

had lost his mind, become an animal like these animals his captors. It was like being in Hell, because there was no escape. The cartel took care of him; they wouldn't let him die. He would wake to find one or other of them spooning sugar-water into his mouth. They brought him fresh clothes, they brought a slab of foam and a sheet for the boards of his bed. They cleaned the dirty room a little; they fetched in some furniture. João brought the promised guitar, and an amplifier so they could have a real concert. There was no power in this building but apparently there were others nearby that were still hooked up. The kidnappers ran a cable to Ax's room: João told Ax he must try to play the guitar. He must try to get better. He discovered they still had the chip. João carried it around in a dog-eared Jiffy bag. The cartel would sit looking at this Jiffy bag, in Ax's room: arguing about where to send it and getting nowhere, bewildered by the task. They were afraid they would be traced by their DNA on the package. It had them (especially Martín, old Whitey with the hair-trigger emotions) crying in frustration. How could they send something to England? An unreal place. Buckingham Palace Road, London. Beyond imagining.

Ax had fallen into the hands of the unculture. They were grown-up toddlers. They had no idea how to follow through, how to make a project work. He tried to convince them to send it to Kathryn Adams in Washington (he had no qualms about using her name. They knew about his US sponsor. They knew everything). They wouldn't. They weren't taking that kind of risk. Eventually the bag vanished. He supposed they'd sent it somewhere, but they wouldn't tell him anything. He sat in the corner of his bed, cuffed to the wall again except for the toilet trips, trying to calculate the time that had passed while he was incapable. Three months? At least three months since he had been kidnapped . . . He must get to England at once. Fiorinda was in trouble. The terrible urgency coursed through him, scouring his blood: there was nothing he could do.

He thought of how his lovers had pleaded with him to be more careful. Sage saying, *Some nutter's going to walk up to you and shoot you in the head, Ax. Have mercy on me, take some precautions.* But Ax wouldn't listen, because Ax Preston mustn't go that way. No bodyguards, no armoured limousines, no razor-wired VIP lounge, *fuck* that. So he had carried on impressing the punters with his attitude, and his darlings had let him behave like an idiot, because they'd known he could hardly stand the life his choices had forced him into. They'd let him try to stay human. They didn't know about the petty kick he'd got out of walking modestly among the common people, with his secret all-areas pass. Knowing that at any moment (even in Washington DC), he could get treated completely differently. Such balm for all the years of being not-famous. He thought of that sneaking thrill now, with cruel shame.

So this is where I end up, this is how I pay.

I knew I would have to pay.

The dirty room was in a ghost town. When he'd woken up cuffed but not drugged he had held off from screaming for help, because he was Ax Preston and he wanted to rescue himself. He'd been angry with himself about that, later, but maybe it'd been for the best. If he hadn't been killed straight away by trigger happy Martín, it would have done no good. No one lived around here. When his hearing recovered he sat and listened to the silence for hours on end (a branch falls, a bird cries, something four-legged trots along the ghost town street). He knew that the emptiness went on for miles and miles. He would hear the cartel's battered RV drive up; or the rust-bucket Ford that belonged to Martín, jolting over potholes. He would hear them coming from a long way off, and he would

hear them leave, the noise slowly dying away.

Martín and João were Brazilian. The others were US, except for Orfeo, the black man, who was a Cuban. But Ax didn't think this could be Brazil, he couldn't see how they could have transported him so far. I travelled by road for a long time, I think . . . I think I'm in Mexico, or, what comes next? He could not remember the names of any Central American countries. His thoughts crawled around the gaping hole where the chip had been, like lost souls. It's more than three months. But now I'm stronger. Now I can get started. Escape. Befriend them, romance them, get the cuffs off.

There's a road, I can follow the road.

His arm and leg weren't good. Getting better, but not very fucking good.

He was rarely alone. Most often at least two of them sat in the dirty room with him, night and day, and the others would be in the RV. They swopped around. Someone (João?), was wise enough not to allow anyone to have a special relationship with the prisoner. It was no burden to them, apparently, to spend their whole time hanging out in this dump. They had nothing better to do. He kept a count of days on the wall. When they spotted it (the marks were fingernail-faint) there was a long discussion, and they decided to let him continue. But all the days were the same. He improved his Spanish, and learned

to speak some Portuguese.

From an early stage he had tried to reach his lovers by telepathy. Not as crazy as it sounded . . . he knew the Zen Selfers took telepathy for granted. They routinely came across what they called 'telepathy artefacts', different people's thoughts bleeding into each other, in the course of their experiments. Ax had been amazed by this, but they weren't impressed. It's a bust, Sage had told him. The signal-to-noise problem's ludicrous, and what's wrong with a phone implant? In this endless silence, and since thoughts of them filled his heart, he hoped the signal-to-noise problem should be less.

Nothing clearer than a feeling ever came back to him, except once.

One day, one hot, damp silent afternoon, maybe around the seven months mark, he was alone. He was sitting with his eyes closed, enjoying the rare pleasure, when he heard Sage's voice saying softly and distinctly, like the start of the first track of *Unmasked*,

'Hi, Ax.'

He opened his eyes and there was Sage, crosslegged at the other end of the bed. He was unmasked, tanned, wearing white drawstring trousers and a teeshirt. Bare feet. His hair had grown out and was combed into cornrows. He was very thin. He smiled without speaking: and suddenly Ax was at Yap Moss, absolutely *there*, on the winter moorland, Sage with him; wearing the living skull mask. They were about to say goodbye, it might be forever, and plunge into the

battle: and even now, knowing all that would come after, it was a good way to part. No hugs, no tears, no last minute avowals: just I say, 'Transmission Mast—' which is where we'll regroup if we survive. He says 'See you there,' —and we swing away from each other, into the mêlée. The moorland faded. Ax was back in the dirty room. Sage was still there, like a b-loc living ghost, his blue eyes and his beautiful mouth between solemn and smiling. But his face began to break up, pixel by pixel: a trick he used to do with the mask, that Ax had never liked because it had always seemed as if the process wouldn't stop, it would go on until not only the mask had vanished, but the face under it. Which was exactly what happened now, until Sage wasn't there anymore.

For a long time Ax gazed, feeling the white light of absence.

He didn't know what he had seen, a ghost or a vision; or a figment of his imagination. But he knew certainly that Sage was gone, and he must mourn his friend and lover as dead.

Fiorinda was still alive, in her desperate trouble. He knew that, equally surely, though he never saw her, not a glimpse. He thought they often passed each other, in the hot nights when he couldn't sleep, like prisoners treading opposite circles in an exercise yard.

Fiorinda in her dark world, and I in mine. There were no seasons. Sometimes rain fell in pounding silver rods for days, but

there was no pattern to it. Rain or no rain, the dull heat continued unbroken. The cartel had more discipline than Ax had given them credit for, and they kept it up for an incredible length of time. They didn't know how to get hold of a ransom, but they knew how to handle a hostage. No one was ever alone with Ax; Ax was rarely alone. Ax had no idea where he was, and was never given access to any clues. Sometimes the guards brought music or videos to the room, but never a radio. He gathered from their squabbles that João allowed no careless talk: no one outside the group knew about the prisoner.

The routine of keeping Ax cuffed to the wall, except when he was taken to the toilet, was *never* relaxed. But discipline finally broke down over the guitar – which had been lying in a corner, forgotten, since they realised their brain damaged hostage couldn't begin play it. João became convinced that Ax had recovered. He'd be able to play, if he wasn't handcuffed to the wall. There was a huge discussion, which ended with an agreement that Ax's conditions should be changed a little.

Ax kept out of it, and didn't mention that his right hand motor control was still shit.

The RV turned up with a stranger on board. Ax was very scared when he saw this, immediately associating a stranger with the freelance brain surgeon. It didn't help that the guy was dressed in grubby white overalls. But no, all this one did was tear up some grimy vinyl, pound out a hole in the concrete floor with a chisel and mallet and set a thick metal hasp in there, in cement.

Ax was left alone with the handyman for a good ten minutes. He knew it couldn't be an accident. He could see exactly where this was going, but if there's no chance, you take anything, so he talked to the guy anyway. The stranger – thickset, coffee-skinned, wedge-shaped Indio features – kept his eyes, behind plastic goggles, on his job. *You are not like them*, said Ax. *You are normal, you come from the normal world, from sane people. Help me. Tell someone.*

No response. Maybe one shifty glance, quickly quenched—

The cartel came in and sat there watching the cement dry. Baz, the younger white bloke, combed his stringy blond hair with his fingers and complained the whole thing had been unnecessary. Ax could have played with one hand chained to the wall. João made smalltalk with the handyman and tried to engage Ax in a staring match; which Ax declined. Then João and the stranger went out. Felipe and Simon, the stocky brothers, unlocked Ax from the wall and took him to the window, a gun in his back. The Indio, with his toolbox and half a bag of cement in one hand, was taking a wad of notes from João. It looked like a lot of money, but Ax didn't even know the currency so he couldn't tell. The man turned to get into the RV. João took out his gun, shot the handyman in the back of the head and stood there, while the shot echoed, looking up at Ax.

See what you made me do.

João came back indoors and offered Ax, still loose from the wall, a cigarette. ?Just so you could play

guitar, Ax. Just so you could play again.'

'You were going to do it anyway,' Ax shrugged indifference.

One of the more unpleasant things was that he knew he had been raped, more than once, back at the beginning, in the time he didn't remember clearly. He had a strong feeling it had been João, the major Ax Preston fan, and only João. He couldn't be sure. He could never be sure it wouldn't happen again. In a situation like this things could get much worse, at any moment. Live with it.

João laughed, sat down and started a fake conversation with his pals.

If you think that's the first death on my conscience, thought Ax, you haven't been paying much attention to your favourite sensational soap-opera, bastard. Now Ax could be shackled at the ankles with his hands free, and play that guitar. He said he was tired, he would try it out tomorrow. João accepted the little show of resistance. He was clearly feeling pleased with himself.

Night fell. Ax listened to the cartel arguing about how to get rid of the corpse, his eyes fixed on the darkness, his shoulder against the wall: a useless soldier, guarding a door he could not guard, that was thousands of miles away.

He dreamed he was with his friends. They were in the blasted ruin of a stone walled cottage, in the Yorkshire village where Sage had been captured once in the Islamic Campaign. There was a war going on again, they were at the front line. It was good. He'd forgotten about his friends. He'd forgotten that he loved them, and how much they'd been through together: but here they all were, dirty, cheerful, very much themselves. Rob and the Babes, Allie and Dilip, Chip and

Ver and Rox; and the Heads. Allie and Rox were loading antique rifles, like something from the Wild West. Sage was jiving around, cheerful and serene, distributing the guns, making sure everyone was in cover, singing a rude ska song, *Push wood on the fire, Jackie, Good wood on the fire Jackie*, a tune the lads used to like. But Jackie Dando wasn't here, only the Few. When Sage reached Felice he kissed her deep and long (Ah, we all knew about *that* piece of chemistry, and we knew they'd never do anything about it: Rob would have gone beserk). Rob smiled benignly. Nothing could break this mood, this lightness. It came to Ax that the reason they were so happy was that they knew they were going to die, probably within the hour. Die together, die trying.

Butoh God, where's Fiorinda?

He woke soaked in sweat, full of dread, his heart pounding.

I have to get back to England, *right now* . . .

The dirty room came back; the terrible urgency seeped away. It was afternoon.

Martín and Orfeo were playing a game of cards, a coolbox of beers at hand.

Martín saw that he was awake and came over with a bowl and a spoon.

'You must eat something, Ax. You'll get sick, you'll die.'

He had stopped eating, a sudden and involuntary failure. He'd been trying to play the guitar, and it had opened old wounds. Orfeo the Cuban folded his lean height down beside the bed (shadow of my Sage rises in memory) and took Ax's hand. Ouch. The sores on his wrists were worse again now the cuffs only went on at night. His ankles were giving him hell, also. 'We're your friends, Ax. We don't want you to get sick and we don't want João to hurt you. Come on, you know we don't want to hurt you.'

He couldn't stop the tears.

'If you're my friends then for God's sake, *let me go*—'

The black man and the white look shook their heads sadly. The cartel would never let him go. They'd given up hope of the ransom. They were keeping Ax out of inertia, like a troublesome pet; but in the end they would kill him, and it

would be better so. What else could happen? He imagined himself returning to England after endless years. Sage dead, Fiorinda's agony over, everything that we meant forgotten, what would I do, how would that be life?

Martín's cellphone chimed. He listened, looked significantly at Orfeo, and the two men left the room. Ax heard the Ford start up and rumble away.

He reached over and picked up the guitar.

He couldn't play very well. But he could play. *For in my day, I have had many bitter and shattering experiences in war and on the stormy seas . . .* Where's that from?

It's from the *Odyssey*. What if my library comes back? What if I have copied stuff, back-up in the grey cells, that I put there without knowing I was doing it? He leaned his head against the wall, his fingers falling into stillness. Ah, there's no pain like hope.

What's that? What's that sound?

He could hear someone playing a guitar. Someone else out there in the ghost town or the jungle was playing an electric guitar—

Martín and Orfeo fooled him by coming back on foot from wherever they'd gone. They came into the room and looked at him; and the guitar he'd hurriedly set aside.

'What was that you were playing?'

'Nothing much.'

'Play it again. I liked that.'

So he played again, casually picking out the tune he had heard.

I'm lonesome since I crossed the hill, and over plain and valley—

'A strange rhythm,' said Orfeo, who liked to think he was informed about music. 'Where is that from, Ax? West Africa? Mali?'

'Nah,' said Ax. 'Somewhere much weirder than that.'

Felipe and Simon arrived in the RV, bringing cooked rice with tuna flakes. Ax ate, willingly and with appetite, which pleased everyone. Orfeo tested Ax's teeth (a little obsession of his) and insisted Ax eat the lime that had been squeezed over his rice, chewing the skin and pulp. You will thank me, he said, genuinely kind. Martín wanted them to hear that curious tune. So Ax played 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' for them, but differently this time. Returning power coursed through him, he felt utterly unafraid. The certainty of destiny.

The four kidnappers were transfixed. 'My God,' said Orfeo, when Ax stopped to rest his hand. 'My God, this is really Ax Preston.' A day passed, two days. Ax didn't do anything, he didn't say anything. He

felt as if he was holding his breath. Very early in the tropical morning, on the third day from the afternoon when he had heard that other guitar, Felipe and Simon were sitting with him, and Baz, the younger white guy. They all heard the sound of a helicopter, circling overhead.

The cartel representatives hurried down to the street. Ax was left alone, shackled to the wall, listening to the sound effects. A strange vehicle. Voices, talking in Spanish. Suddenly, gunfire . . . and then all hell broke loose.

Helicopters. Something heavy (it sounded like an APC) roaring up the washed out road. Felipe and Simon screaming at each other, having fled back inside the block. More firing, thunder of booted feet, shouting in New World Spanish and American English. Men and women in uniform filled the doorway of the dirty room. 'My God,' said the man first through the door. 'My God, this incredible. You were given up for dead, Mr Preston, months ago. This is unbelievable!'

'I'm glad somebody believed,' said Ax.

They freed him from the cuffs. They helped him upright and wrapped him in

a blanket (Ax thought of Massacre Night; of the clearing at Spital's Farm), and took him outside. There were an amazing number of soldiers milling around, American and Mexican. The officer in charge said they'd found the ghost town house a week ago, and come up with the guitar ploy to signal that help was near. They'd been monitoring the warm body count in the house, so they'd known it was safe to open fire as soon as those three men came running out . . . Their information had been that Ax was in imminent danger of execution. The doctor who dressed his sores (and ripped-up fingertips), a black bloke with humorous eyes, appraised Ax's bearded face and said, 'You don't look much like him.' 'Who?' 'Ax! Rose. I'm into classic hard rock.' 'Sorry. Not a single tattoo. How many of them did you get?' 'We killed three here. We'll get the others, don't worry.' He was in the back of the APC, dressed in camouflage fatigues, sipping a cup of US armed services bouillion, when the girl who had believed in him arrived, She'd been kept back, out of the firing line. He'd known it *couldn't* be Fiorinda, unless she'd forgotten everything she ever knew about playing guitar. But he'd hoped. One look at Lurch's face, and he knew the news was not good. 'Hi.' 'She was holding the Les Paul, in its case. 'I've, um, been carrying this around since you've been gone.' She gave it to him, took out a pack of cigarettes and gave him those too. 'I'm so glad.' 'So am I,' said Ax. 'Thank you, Kathryn. I owe you, mightily. Tell me about Fiorinda. What's been happening in England? I'll need to talk to David Sale—' 'No . . .' The Ugly American wet her lips. 'David Sale's dead.' 'David is *dead*? David Sale is *dead*?' he repeated, stunned. 'Ax, there's no easy way to tell you . . . It's a different world. Things have changed so much. I don't know where to start.'

8: The Night Belongs To Fiorinda

Fiorinda put the bi-loc phone back in its hiding place in that never-furnished spare room; which had been partially colonised by Sage's stuff, but remained a complete dump. *Sage*. Ghosts of him . . . She was hiding the phone from herself as much as anything. If she had it in sight she'd be calling Ax every five minutes, and she mustn't do that. In the kitchen Elsie was playing don't-step-on-the-floor, mad-eyed little cat perched on the fridge, psyching herself up for the suicidal, really insane bit where she leaps for the hood over the cooking hob. Claw marks scoured in plastic showed the frantic record of failure.

'Don't do it,' said Fiorinda. 'Life is still worth living.' She sat at the kitchen table, in afternoon sunlight, pressing her hands over her eyes to hold the memory of that cool grey morning, thousands of miles away.

The day Sage had left, as soon as it was too late, everything had become clear to her. Her father had been screwing around with her, trying to break up the Triumvirate, and Fiorinda, FOOL, IDIOT, had played into the bastard's hands. One of those drowning moments when your blood turns to ice-water.

If she had only told Ax and Sage . . . If she had told them what? What could they have done? A terrified little voice deep inside said there was no defenad. Felipe and Simon screaming at each other, having fled back inside the block. More firing, thunder of booted feet, shouting in New World Spanish and American English. Men and women in uniform filled the doorway of the dirty room. 'My God,' said the man first through the door. 'My God, this incredible. You were given up for dead, Mr Preston, months ago. This is unbelievable!'

'I'm glad somebody believed,' said Ax.

They freed him from the cuffs. They helped him upright and wrapped him in a blanket (Ax thought of Massacre Night; of the clearing at Spital's Farm), and took him outside. There were an amazing number of soldiers milling around, American and Mexican. The officer in charge said they'd found the ghost town house a week ago, and come up with the guitar ploy to signal that help was near. They'd been monitoring the warm body count in the house, so they'd known it was safe to open fire as soon as those three men came running out . . . Their information had been that Ax was in imminent danger of execution. The doctor who dressed his sores (and ripped-up fingertips), a black bloke with humorous eyes, appraised Ax's bearded face and said, 'You don't look much like him.' 'Who?'

'Ax! Rose. I'm into classic hard rock.'

'Sorry. Not a single tattoo. How many of them did you get?'

'We killed three here. We'll get the others, don't worry.'

He was in the back of the APC, dressed in camouflage fatigues, sipping a cup of US armed services bouillion, when the girl who had believed in him arrived. She'd been kept back, out of the firing line. He'd known it *couldn't* be Fiorinda, unless she'd forgotten everything she ever knew about playing guitar. But he'd hoped. One look at Lurch's face, and he knew the news was not good.

'Hi.' She was holding the Les Paul, in its case. 'I've, um, been carrying this around since you've been gone.' She gave it to him, took out a pack of cigarettes and gave him those too. 'I'm so glad.'

'So am I,' said Ax. 'Thank you, Kathryn. I owe you, mightily. Tell me about Fiorinda. What's been happening in England? I'll need to talk to David Sale—'

'No . . .' The Ugly American wet her lips. 'David Sale's dead.'

'David is *dead*? David Sale is *dead*?' he repeated, stunned.

'Ax, there's no easy way to tell you . . . It's a different world. Things have changed so much. I don't know where to start.'

8: The Night Belongs To Fiorinda

Fiorinda put the bi-loc phone back in its hiding place in that never-furnished spare room; which had been partially colonised by Sage's stuff, but remained a complete dump. *Sage*. Ghosts of him . . . She was hiding the phone from herself as much as anything. If she had it in sight she'd be calling Ax every five minutes, and she mustn't do that. In the kitchen Elsie was playing don't-step-on-the-floor, mad-eyed little cat perched on the fridge, psyching herself up for the suicidal, really insane bit where she leaps for the hood over the cooking hob. Claw marks scoured in plastic showed the frantic record of failure.

'Don't do it,' said Fiorinda. 'Life is still worth living.' She sat at the kitchen table, in afternoon sunlight, pressing her hands over her eyes to hold the memory of that cool grey morning, thousands of miles away.

The day Sage had left, as soon as it was too late, everything had become clear to her. Her father had been screwing around with her, trying to break up the Triumvirate, and Fiorinda, FOOL, IDIOT, had played into the bastard's hands. One of those drowning moments when your blood turns to ice-water.

If she had only told Ax and Sage . . . If she had told them what? What could they have done? A terrified little voice deep inside said there was no defence against her father's power. But that was learned helplessness (hope to God—) and she had remembered the phone now. She had talked to Ax. She wished she had touched him, but no, better not. I don't want bi-loc, I want him *here*. I'll touch

him when he's here. Oh, my Ax. My darling. Sage is gone, there's a monster stalking us, but we love each other again and at this minute *I'm happy*. George had reported that he'd delivered Sage to Caer Siddi without further medical emergencies (and she trusted George not to lie about that). So there was hope.

Ax will come home; we'll fetch him out. Ax is right, the Heads and I are fucking idiots about Sage. We're like hypnotised rabbits. Yes master, of course master, of course it's right for you to drag your own brain down your nose with a fishhook . . . *Why* did I let him go?

Shit, why don't I go up there and get him back myself? What a coup!

She knew she was kidding herself. But you have to refuse to believe the worst while it's staring you in the face if you're going to achieve anything at all. That's Ax Preston's philosophy, and we can learn from it, we realists. Elsie jumped: flailed, scrabbling, and fell. No pots on the stove, so not really spectacular.

'Stupid cat,' said Fiorinda; picked her up and carried her, kissing and cuddling, into the living room, where she sat down with her own phone and called Fergal Kearney. Now I will get a grip. For a start, I will find out what's happening with the London barmies. There's something *odd* about this idea that Fergal has 'taken over'. The barmy army doesn't work like that, I'm sure it doesn't.

She worked in Ax's office downstairs: visiting meetings, responding to memos, reading reports. Tracking the maze of surplus-trading whereby the Volunteer Initiative scraped the barrels of pre-Crisis over-production. Okay as long as she was locked into the system, lonely and heartsick whenever she raised her head.

I'll commute to the Insanitude in future, she thought, or Whitehall if I have to.

Working here isn't good for morale. At seven in the evening the entryphone chimed. She remembered she'd asked Fergal to come round. She answered, and there he was in a window on her screen.

'Good evening, Fiorinda,' he said gravely, 'will you let me in?'

'Of course.'

They went up to the living-room and talked, and opened some wine. Fiorinda had been sexually active (or acted upon) since she was twelve years old. She had no illusions about the male heterosexual mind, so the unease she felt didn't bother her. His thoughts are roaming, he can't help it; he's okay. Strangely enough (or not so strange), she'd never been completely alone with Fergal before. It was mutual. Fergal was shy of female company: Fiorinda was afraid that he'd say something about her father. Having someone around who (maybe) knew Rufus O'Niall's secret made her feel more secure, but she didn't want to talk about it. She hadn't expected him to stay long, but he was in no hurry to leave. They were both non-eaters, not interested in food, so they opened more wine and went on chatting.

Next thing Fiorinda knew, she was in bed and Sage was fucking her. A moment at the wellspring, the wingspan sweep of his shoulders, his taper waist, the beautiful muscles of his bum . . . but no. *This is not Sage*. She was in the nightmare, the worst nightmare. She fought out of it and lay there shuddering. No one to call, no comfort.

The evening wouldn't come back to her. Damn. I

must've got drunk. She couldn't remember what she'd said to Fergal, or what he'd said to her. The whole conversation was gone. Fuck. I'm an idiot. Something moved heavily beside her in the dark. A body turning over, a disgusting waft of carrion breath. *Oh, shit*, thought Fiorinda. *Shit!* What the fuck possessed me—? Fergal put the bedside light on and there he was, propped on one elbow, his coarse-grained face and aging, geezer's body, rusty mat of hair around his nipples, slackened flesh over middle-aged muscle, red tan stops at the throat and

the rest is cheesy-white. Then he laughed, and all thought of dealing with this daft, embarrassing situation ended. For a moment Sage was there: a perfect simulacrum, except for the malevolence.

Fiorinda shot out of bed and grabbed her kimono.

'Who are you?'

Sage was gone. Fergal sat up, legs over the side of the bed. He had an erection, but his sea-green eyes were blank, watery, bewildered. He looked like an old man in hospital. 'I'm dead.'

'What?'

'Oh Jaysus, I'm dead, can't someone kill me?'

'Of course I won't kill you. I don't kill people. What the fuck's going on?'

'Augh! This can't be right. Why the bluidy hell can't someone do something?'

His eyes came into focus. For a moment someone she had never met before was staring at her, out of such fathomless fear and agony it caught her breath— The entryphone light on the wall by the bed was winking.

Fergal leaned towards it and listened. 'Aye,' he said, 'come up.'

She ran into the living-room. This is going to be bad, I'm an idiot, *why* am I here alone? Because we are wild and free, citizens of Utopia. Because I'm supposed to be safe, Brixton is my . . . The door opened. Three big, Celtic-style barmy army types came in. Oh yes, she thought, I remember. Fergal took over. One of the men grabbed her. She didn't struggle or scream. If I'm to die, I'd die before I could be reached. If not, I don't want this public, not until I *think*. The other two started going through the room.

'What are you looking for?' she asked, calmly.

'Something they can use,' said Fergal Kearney, coming out of the bedroom, and she noticed that the Belfast brogue had gone. He was dressed. He sat at the back of the big open room, turning a chair to face the scene that Fiorinda and the three men made: very relaxed, one leg crossed over the other. She didn't understand, and then she did, because one of the barmies had found Elsie.

Poor Elsie, she's not half as tough as she makes out. She was scared out of her mind, so cowed she didn't even spit until the men began to hurt her. Then she spat and clawed and bit and yowled and struggled, but it didn't do her any good. Fiorinda yelled, 'STOP IT!' and 'LEAVE HER ALONE YOU BASTARDS! WHAT DO YOU WANT?' But they weren't going to stop, whatever Fiorinda surrendered. It wasn't that kind of torture. There was only one way to stop what was happening. The agonised little body went limp.

The two men put Elsie down on the rug, tried her eyes and shook her a bit.

'The cat's dead, Rufus,' said one of them, doubtfully.

Fergal laughed. (No. That's not Fergal Kearney. It never was.) A rumble of soft thunder. A body that belies its occupant. Behind him on the wall Mr Preston and Mr Pender were taking sherry, in a clear, cool, dispassionate light . . . She was conscious of the grip on her arms as something that was happening far away, but acutely, immediately conscious of each breath she took. The sound of air taken in, the expansion of her lungs. The cat's little mad presence trotting around the flat, insistent lap-seeking missile. She loves Ax best. She loves him with all her tiny heart. But Sage and I, we can be useful occasionally. We know where the food is, we'll watch when she shows off.

'What do you want?'

'I want you.'

She stared at him, fighting her thoughts into order, fighting terror and bewilderment: seeing the long masquerade, stunned and yet not surprised. The

first time I met Fergal Kearney, I felt sick to death . . . But Fergal saved Ax's life! Oh, he didn't want Ax dead. He wanted to *destroy* Ax. That's what this has been about. He's not going to kill me either. He doesn't have to rape me, he can take me any time, he just did. No, he's not going to kill me. He wants more.

The smile that Fergal's face was wearing sat uneasily in the facial muscles of a difficult, diffident loser of a dead artist. 'This is nothing,' he said. 'This is just so you know where we are at. If you're wise, you'll tell no one. Think about your options.'

She was released. The men walked out, shutting the door behind them.

She listened, counting them out of the front door. She ran to the spare bedroom, unearthed the bi-loc, ran with it into the unused bathroom adjoining, smashed it on the terrazzo floor. Oh God, if he'd known I had this: a piece of weird tech *slaved to Ax's chip*. Oh God, what use he could have made of it. Trembling, she swept up the bits and dumped them in the plastic and metals bin. One problem dealt with.

She went back to Elsie. The men had put all the lights on, the room seemed very bright. She dimmed them – and remembered that the fake Fergal had been able to light the ATP lamp by the bed, which shouldn't have been possible for him. The only thing I know is that I don't know if he has any limits.

Oh, shit. Think, think, think.

'Elsie,' she whispered, 'you can come out now, sweetheart.'

The tortoiseshell cat stirred, curling herself up as best she could. She licked one of her paws and looked up at Fiorinda, bewildered.

'Now, darling,' said Fiorinda, stroking the little warm head, 'listen to me. I'm not completely helpless. In a way I've been preparing myself for this for, ooh, a long time. Long time. In a way, I always knew it would come. There are things that I can do, or at least things I can try. I've been incredibly stupid. Well, I don't know, maybe not so stupid . . . Anyway, I'm on the case now. I think I can hold things together. I think I can hold the pass until my Ax comes home. But I can't protect *you*, Elsie, my darling. I can't let this happen again; and it would.'

Her heart stood still, her gaze poised in darkness. *I can't protect Ax's little cat.*

'So you have to go to sleep now. Curl up and go to sleep. You know Ax loves you. And I love you, and even Sage loves you, though he pretends not. I've seen him stroke you. I've caught him *talking* to you, before now. So you go quietly to sleep, little one, thinking about how we love you. Go to sleep, go to sleep.'

She carried on stroking and murmuring until she was sure that Elsie was really dead this time. Then she packed up, swiftly and resolutely, and headed for Rivermead, just as the dawn was breaking. The new building, the fixed abode she'd never wanted, already consigned to sorrow and disaster, was the place where she would fight her battle. Not on this holy ground. She took Elsie's body with her, it was no time to go digging holes in the Brixton garden; and otherwise someone might find a dead cat in the rubbish and think that was *very* weird.

The day after Fiorinda moved to Rivermead, David Sale called her with urgent news from the Internet Commission. Mr Preston had disappeared. The quarantine talks had gone very well indeed, but then Ax had vanished.

Everything possible was being done to trace him. They agreed to keep it to themselves for now. 'We don't know,' said Fiorinda – who knew Ax had been alive and fine, and on his way home, the morning before, but could not tell David this. 'I don't think he counts as missing yet. It could be he's ducked under their radar because he wanted to. He may have his own agenda.'

Ax didn't come home. She could not call him: she had smashed the bi-loc. She

slept uneasily, and woke, and wandered her shadowy rooms. She wasn't alone. There were plenty of people in the building, but no one else slept in her suite. She had been dreaming of her early childhood. She found a tall mirror, framed in metal, and stood looking into it, still in the atmosphere of the dream, still held by scraps of memory she had not known she possessed. Who is this woman? This sallow, worn-down redhead with the flinching shoulders and look of dumb endurance? It's my mother. What a dog's life she must have led, long ago, between him and Carly. How English, how familiar. The horrors that hide behind closed doors, in suburban streets . . . Carly Slater, Mum's sister, the procuress, had told Fiorinda the child that her mother had mortally offended the music biz world. She'd been cast out: that was why she'd become a bitter, recluse. Later, Fiorinda had looked for traces of her mother's downfall, and found none. Suzy Slater had just dropped out and vanished, for no visible reason, after her break up with Rufus O'Niall.

It was because you knew, she thought. You tried to keep me out of it, but you knew what he was, and that one day he would come back for me, and there'd be nothing you could do. No wonder you were the way you were.

'Mum?' She touched the glass. I never had a mother before.

Once upon a time there were two sisters. Suzy the journalist had an affair with a big rockstar and got pregnant by him. Little sister, whose career consisted of wanting to be around celebrities, was incredibly jealous. Their mum claimed she was a witch. Suzy didn't believe in that stuff, but Carly did. She moved in those circles, she made herself useful and attractive to Rufus O'Niall. So then maybe Rufus started fucking them both, enjoying this piquant situation, until he tired of the rows and left for fresh pastures. But he didn't forget he had a daughter. In due course he sent Carly, still his creature, to the cold house of Fiorinda's childhood. It was the year when Fiorinda's mum was ill in hospital. And Carly took the girl to be seduced by her father

A child, three years old, peeping in through a bedroom door, sees something that she doesn't understand, only that Mummy's crying. They're hurting Mummy and Mummy can't stop them. MUMMY'S NO USE. You hate Mummy because how else could you bear it, seeing her so helpless, so beaten? You grow up from being three to being eleven, and you're a little monster: hard, gullible, selfish, greedy. You're easy meat when Carly arrives, looking so glamorous. You don't have the slightest idea, and when Mum finds out what's going on, she says nothing because she dares not. She's afraid, so afraid.

Then there's the terrible year, and then the little girl escapes. But the happy ending didn't last, too good to last. All she'd achieved was to bring ruin on the people she loved. He destroyed Ax and Sage and Fiorinda, now he's going to destroy England, all because of me, and I don't know how to stop him.

There'd been a leap in the traffic on the Internet Commissioners' satellite link. The media folk were onto it, and they'd become less docile without Ax around. Somehow, suddenly, there was a buzz of damaging rumour. Allie and Fiorinda and David had to go public: Yes, Ax was invited to the USA, for talks to bust the data quarantine deadlock. Yes, it's true that the US authorities believe he may have been kidnapped. But there's every reason to hope he's alive and well.

As soon as we have further information we'll let you know.

On a warm June evening, when this news was spreading through the country to shock and disbelief, Fergal Kearney came to Rivermead. Fergal had taken to going about with an entourage. Three big barmy army squaddies (unfamiliar faces, but who knows all the London barmies?) were always with him. Nobody

liked this. It was a point of honour, with the Few, that except on public occasions they walked unprotected in the crowd. But no one said anything, because Ferg was a well-loved figure who had a lot of credit. He'd come to see Fiorinda, nothing odd about that. He went to her rooms, with his friends.

She was alone. She had too much on her mind for casual company.

Dusk filled the wide windows of the solar. The sky was overcast; elven glimmers marked the tented town. She opened the door for her visitors, walked away from them and stood looking out: Fiorinda with her hair brushed and burnished, wearing an antique violet satin sheath dress that left her arms bare,

and narrow dark blue trousers. There was a fire in the grate, despite of the warmth of the night, and the air was scented by big planters of living flowers.

Fergal's men took the rock and roll princess and set her in one of the cross framed Roman chairs. They set another chair opposite. Fergal went to stand beside this throne, his eyes dull, his gap-toothed mouth hanging open.

The timbers of Fiorinda's chair sprang back into life, just as they had left it. Branches clothed in cold, sodden grey bark swept up and engulfed the girl's body, bearing down thickly on her arms and across her breast. Grey twigs tangled into her hair and tugged backwards, holding her head like a bridle so her face was lifted, chin up.

Something like smoke came out of Fergal's mouth, trailed to the floor and grew. Then a big man with chestnut skin and the curling, shining black hair of a Restoration monarch sat in the opposite chair. He wore an ample purple mantle, with golden gleams in it and fringes of gold, over fashionable evening casuals, Italian sandals on his silk-clad feet.

He was not young, but still flamboyantly goodlooking.

'I knew,' said Fiorinda, her stretched throat moving, her eyes forced to gaze at him, 'that if I stuck around here long enough, eventually you would turn up.'

'Did you want me to turn up?'

'Oh yes . . . Rufus, I have an offer for you.'

He laughed. 'Really? Make me your offer.' 'I will be your consort. I will be everything you want me to be.'

'Everything I want?' he murmured. 'What a promise.'

'Only you have to leave Ax and Sage, and all of Ax's friends, alone.'

'Hm.'

'Forever.'

'Now, Fiorinda. I don't sign contracts that say *forever*.'

'I think you do. I think you've signed one already, why not another? Come on, don't balderdash me. Say yes, why piss around? You know you're going to.'

He laughed again, soft thunder. 'My bossy little girl. You haven't changed!'

'Well,' she said, 'think about it.'

Rufus raised an eyebrow, incredulous. 'I should *think* about it?'

'Listen. You don't just want me, you want the Rock and Roll Reich. I know you do. You want it partly to get back at Ax, but you really *want* it too. Ireland's still living in the modern world, and you don't like that. Ax's England as your private fief would suit you down to the ground. You took your time putting this together. You were the one who set David up, with the human sacrifice ring, and then brought us the evidence so we'd have to do something about it; and Ax would be forced to take power in a way he never wanted. You sent me those bad dreams. You knew I wouldn't tell them what was happening, and it would make big trouble between me and my boyfriends. You've been very patient. Why rush it now? Sage is gone. Ax isn't coming back. They're finished. You know that, and

I know that. The people need time to get used to the idea. What you should do is you should *court* me. You court me, you win me over. Gradual change, we both have our credibility intact. Do we have a deal?’

The three barnies were looking nowhere, doing nothing. Fergal Kearney, the dead man, stood unoccupied, like a strange, awkward polychrome sculpture. Rufus sat and smiled, not at all displeased at having his own plans explained to him by his little girl.

‘Let me see.’ He rose, a haze like smoke around him, crossed the floor and leaned over her, appreciation gleaming in his eyes, the thick shining curls of his hair seeming to touch her shoulders. He stroked his lower lip, weighing it up. His hands were manicured; the oval nails stained, not varnished, deep blood-red. ‘If you run away I won’t come after you. I’ll stay here like a fox in a chicken run. You don’t want that. If you tell anyone what I am, I’ll know it and I’ll worse than kill them *instantly*, man woman or child. They will be where Fergal is. Do you know where he is? He is in Hell. A real, physical scientific Hell, Fiorinda. It doesn’t matter that his body will die eventually, for him it will never end. Do you understand? I can make eternal torment a reality.’

She nodded, as far as the bridle would let her. ‘Okay, got that.’

‘If you leave your body, at any time: the same. I will put your friends in Hell.’

‘Leave my—?’ said Fiorinda, and then, ‘Oh.’

Rufus chuckled. ‘Yes. You understand. But you know so little. *You have no idea*, my child, my only true child. Don’t you want me to teach you? Aren’t you even curious?’ She stared back at him, unafraid. ‘About what? There isn’t anything special about what you can do. Magic is just power. You have the power. I know that. The rest is verbiage.’

‘Ah! You still have your thorns. My briar rose.’

He stooped, as if he would kiss her.

‘You’ll take me when we seal our bargain,’ she said. ‘Not before.’

Rufus laughed, stepped back and bowed. ‘So be it. I consent. I can wait.’

He returned to his place and sat for a while watching her. The living ghost vanished. Fergal came back to life; the squaddies returned from their blank patch, the men left. When they were gone, the Roman chair reverted to its normal state. Fiorinda dropped to the floor, arms round her knees.

Well, that didn’t go too badly.

When she could walk without her legs giving way she went for a prowling around the building. She thought what had happened must have had an effect: she’d find people crying, hiding under their beds. No one had noticed anything untoward. Everything okay? Yeah. G’night, Fiorinda.

They liked seeing her around at night.

Back in her rooms, she crouched by the dying fire. My father has sold his soul to the devil (I don’t believe in the devil, but it describes the situation). I don’t know the extent of his weaponry, I don’t know how I can stop him in the end.

But one step at a time. *One step at a time*, that’s the way. He likes to listen to me talking bullshit. I have real power over him, power he chooses to give me, but it’s real. Have to see how long I can spin that out. He’s old, there might be something there. And I’ll think of something, it will come to me. Oh, *fucking hell*.

I can’t protect forty million people!

But I can try.

Fiorinda ran the Few ragged through the dreadful length of that summer. She never stopped. She spoke to the nation officially (such of the nation as could reach a Big Screen or a working tv) only once, making a firm plea for calm. But

she spoke to the Counterculture, and the crowds at the Crisis Management gigs, incessantly. Schmoozing every front row, trailing around every campground, as if she'd made up her mind she had to tell the people of England *one by one*: that Sage would achieve the Zen Self, and return in triumph. That Ax would come home with the end of data quarantine in his pocket; and meantime, business as usual. Utopia on a liferaft, stick together against the dark.

We'll do this for Ax. He trusts us to keep on track.

The bricks-and-mortar media folk had finally started noticing that the Celtic Movement was the majority in the English Counterculture. Fiorinda didn't let that idea go unchallenged, she insisted that the Celtics were also Ax's people, but she puzzled her friends by ignoring the resurgence of things like illegal ritual sacrifice. They began to wonder at some of her behaviour.

The anniversary of Ax's inauguration ended the nonstop Festival Season.

Sayyid Mohammad Zayid, Ax's sponsor in the Faith and the leader of English Islam, came to London on a delicate mission. He and Allie met Fiorinda in the

small office she was using at the Insanitude. It was October the fifteenth; there had been no news of Ax since he had disappeared in May. Mohammad and Allie had to tell Fiorinda that her relationship with Fergal was causing scandal. He'd become her most trusted advisor, and people didn't like it. The Islamics, especially the young men who were Ax's passionate supporters, felt that Fergal was influencing Fiorinda so that she favoured the Celtics whenever there was trouble. . . (There'd been several outbreaks of bloody street-fighting between 'Celtic' 'Islamic' and 'techno' gangs over the summer, despite Fiorinda's efforts).

Their cause was just, but Fiorinda in person, spruce in her dove-grey trouser suit, bearing her terrible grief with grace and pride, defeated them. They tried to talk to her, but she was a stone wall. She would not take their advice.

Mohammad Zayid believed that Aoxomoxoa's love for his friend's wife (in his mind he had always called Fiorinda Ax's wife), should have remained chaste. Sage had been right to repent, and dedicate himself to the great scientific project which was also a spiritual quest. But he attached no blame to Fiorinda, this brave dedicated girl, protector of the poor. The woman is never to blame.

'Aye, well, we've spoken and we'll leave that. But five months now, lass. The troops need your encouragement. You must speak to the nation.'

'There's nothing new to say,' said Fiorinda. 'We hang on, *keeping the Celtics on board*, until Ax comes home. End of story. I don't want to say it too often. I'll get tired of repeating myself. I'll sound insincere.' Mohammad, the badger-bearded Yorkshireman in his good, subdued

tailoring, was looking older, and very weary. He had loved Ax like a son.

'I know it's hard, Fiorinda. I'm not asking you to give up hope. But—'

'Did you do anything about getting a new kitten?' asked Allie, helplessly.

Ax's cat had disappeared when Fiorinda moved to Rivermead. It's the way cats behave, but Fiorinda had loved Elsie, and she must be so lonely—

Fiorinda rolled her eyes. 'Oh, for fuck's sake, Allie, er, sorry, Mohammad—'

They went together to the Office. A much-travelled Jiffy bag had turned up, that the postroom thought the Few should look at. There was still masses of this kind of stuff: the fanmail of Ax's disappearance. At first they'd opened it all personally. Now they let the postroom and the police filter everything: and the loss of that chore had been another small death. Fiorinda sat by Fergal Kearney, substitute bodyguard. Mohammad, with a curious glance and a reserved nod for the Irishman, took the place on her other side.

The Few were united again, their quarrel over the Zen Self long forgotten.

Everyone was here today; except Peter Stannen, who was in North Wales, at Caer Siddi in North Wales. The Heads believed that Sage was still alive. They were taking turns at staking out the Zen Self HQ, obstinately trying to get in contact with him; to tell him what had happened.

'This could be a live one,' said Chip, brightly, 'if you go by the stamps.'

The others set their teeth. But the boy can't help it. 'It's been through quarantine,' said the techie who'd brought up the packet. 'It

passed through at port of entry and ended up in our normal mailbag. We've given it the usual tests, and then some. It's harmless: I mean, you can open it.'

Fiorinda looked at him. He kept his face blank. She put on latex gloves and goggles. The techs insisted on that, even while they told you a strange packet was perfectly okay. Her tongue felt thick in her mouth; her heart had started thumping. Layers of parcel tape had been stripped away, the seal loosened. She finished the job, aware that this was ritual. I must, officially, be the first to see— There was a sheet of folded paper. She glanced at it, and passed it to Mohammad. There was a ring. Everyone knew the ring. There was a bundle of surgical dressing, stained with old blood and other fluids. Fiorinda peeled it open, releasing a faded waft of putrefaction. A silicon wafer lay there, clotted with tissue and tangled with a few long, dark hairs. Fiorinda took off her goggles and stared at it, breathing slow.

'It's his warehouse stack. They've sent us his brain implant.'

Verlaine gave a sob, and stifled it with his fists. No one else made a sound, but the circle of tables rang with shock, and acceptance. Terrible relief.

'Oh God,' whispered Felice, at last. 'Oh, Ax—'

'Ah,' breathed Mohammad. He bent his head and murmured in Arabic, prayer that no one here could join, a part of Ax's life that none of them had understood.

'He isn't dead,' said Fiorinda, tallow-pale. 'He is not dead.' 'Be Jaysus,' said Fergal Kearney, shaking his head, 'this is doing no good. Ye

might be better off to face it, Fiorinda me darling. Time's up.'

Typical Fergal, crashingly tactless whatever the circumstances. Even at this juncture, the Few winced and looked away. What does she see in him?

'Time is not up,' said Fiorinda, distinctly. 'This is not the moment for any sudden changes. That would be crazy.'

Fergal cleared his throat. 'Maybe yez'll change your mind.'

She ignored him. 'I'll have to call David. Allie, I need you too.'

The Prime Minister came at once: Fiorinda and Allie spent the afternoon with him. The packet, the ransom note, the chip and Ax's carnelian ring were taken away for forensic. The news was despatched to the US search operation, via GCHQ. The data quarantine was still in place, the connectivity deal was going through, but it had been delayed by Ax's disappearance.

The kidnappers wanted a global ban on the manufacture of synthetic cocaine, an end to European taxes and regulation on imported recreational drugs (except alcohol and tobacco), and a large but not huge sum in hard currency. They wanted these terms made public, and publicly accepted, on all major global tv channels and news-sites, or his friends would never see Ax Preston alive again.

'We could offer them the money,' said Fiorinda. 'Can we find the money—?'

'We can't do any of the other things,' said Allie. 'But we could try that.'

'I let him go,' said David. 'I was the last person to speak to him, I was excited

and I told him he should go. I had no right. I can never forgive myself.' They thought they ought to draft a press release, because they knew the news

would be leaked (the Insanitude was not secure); but it was beyond them. They decided it could wait until tomorrow. Fiorinda went back to Brixton, refusing to let Allie come with her. She desperately needed to be alone. She knew David and Allie had been humouring her. . . Ax had to be dead.

The bad guys cut his head open. He's dead.

The flat was immaculate. The night her father had revealed himself she'd tried to clean the cat shit, piss and blood from the rug where Elsie had died. William the cleaning person had done a much better job. The aching cleanliness was an expression of William's love and sympathy, but the place felt like a morgue. She fetched Ax's old leather coat, which had been sent from Amsterdam where he'd left it behind, and sat hugging it on the couch by the cold gas stove. Will they give me his ring? When can I have his ring? She couldn't cry. She just wanted Ax's ring. She would have stayed like that all night. But something started to grow in her: a horrible premonition. Finally her phone rang.

'Hello, Fiorinda.'

His voice was slurred, oh, shit. 'Hi, David. What is it?'

'I . . . just . . . wanted to say I'm sorry. . . He was so good to me. You guys, all so good to me. I should have stopped him. My fault. America. Not safe.'

'David, where are you? What are you doing? I'm coming round.' The phone went dead but thank God it had been a landline call and she could trace it. David had started using heroin again. Fiorinda had spotted him, challenged

him over it and made him lay off: but now she was very scared. She took a taxi to Battersea to pick up George and Bill and the Heads' First Aid kit. Within an hour from the phone call they were at Canary Wharf, where the Prime Minister had a bolthole. She'd kept trying to call ahead all the way: no answer. They went straight up. David's Secret Service minder was sitting in the lobby outside the flat, watching tv. He thought the PM was asleep. He was shocked to find that somehow his own phone had switched itself off, which was why Fiorinda had been getting no response. The front door was locked, bolted on the inside, no response from within. Fiorinda was *incandescent*. She insisted they must get inside, at once, right now—

And there he was, the Prime Minister of England, dying in his sad hideaway furnished from a style-catalogue, with his needle and his spoon—

They should have been able to save him. George and Bill were perfect masters at drug-related First Aid. He was still breathing, all the signs were of a simple overdose. But it didn't work out. When they got him to hospital the whitecoats discovered massive, irreparable brain damage. Twelve hours later Fiorinda, who was at Battersea waiting for news, got a call to say that David's wife (they were amicably separated), and his grown-up son, had been advised that there was no hope. They'd decided to let David go.

The media of the three nations kindly called it a tragic accident. Crisis Europe tabloids invented a conspiracy masterminded by the ex-Royals, linking the death of the PM to Ax's disappearance. The English, Countercultural and otherwise, took it for granted that David had topped himself due to horrible stress; and forgave him. He'd had his faults, the old raver, but he'd been much loved. He had a cracking funeral, watched by millions on the big screens of the Countercultural Very Large Array.

Allie put the most hopeful possible spin on the ransom note, and the media folk backed her up as best they could. It was lucky they hadn't briefed the press already, before David died. They were able to make something of the poignant irony: if only David Sale had lived to know the 'terrific good news'.

Fiorinda understood that her bluff had been called.

Time's up.

Ferg called, Fiorinda. He says you invited him to stay the night. Shall I make up a guest room? Fiorinda's friends were suspicious, but the Rivermead housekeeper had no idea. She wouldn't dream of questioning Fiorinda's behaviour, no matter what, but she thought of Fergal Kearney as a harmless old geezer, a kind uncle, a shoulder for Fiorinda to cry on.

'Yes,' said Fiorinda. 'Any of the bedrooms on my floor, that'll be fine.'

The night was dark. The Rivermead Palace had no draughts, no sighing woodwork or rattling windowframes, but there was a wind blowing somewhere.

The leaves on the Tyller Pystri oaks were tarnished green and gold. Somewhere, anywhere, three people could lie under a hedge, rain on their faces, without a

house or a home, no direction known, don't care. And I loved them both. Plenty of people have weird relationships, why shouldn't we? Nobody understood, nobody knew. It was just us, and no one else.

She stood in front of the tall, metal-framed mirror where she had seen her mother, in her cream and green kimono. It was very pretty. Such a fresh green, reaching up from the hem in abstract fronds, into magnolia-petal clouds. Dr Barnado's, Battersea. You get a better class of charity clothes at Dr Barnado's.

Why should I be afraid? Ax loves me, Sage loves me. I love them both.

Everything real is good, and *this will work*. Until I think of something. She let the gown fall open and looked at her body, still yellow-brown wherever it had been exposed to the summer's sun. He likes his daughter to be white, gets a kick out of having a white girl-child in bed; but tough. It'll have to do.

This is my body, for the last time.

She went to meet her father.

Olwen Devi was in the Zen Self main space, helping to dismantle one of the more complex neuroscience rides. It was a cold and rainy morning; the dome was empty except for Zen Selfers. They were making their preparations for departure quietly, so that when they were ready they could vanish overnight . . . Fiorinda wandered in, her shapeless old rain jacket over the violet satin sheath, bare legs, army boots. She came over and watched, head down, fists buried in her pockets. 'Rats leave sinking ship,' she said. 'Very wise, Welsh rats. Where going?'

Olwen straightened. 'Yes, we're leaving. I'm sorry, Fio, but we must.'

'No, don't tell me,' said Fiorinda, 'that's right, *don't tell me*. Don't trust me.'

The rock and roll princess had lost weight she could ill afford to lose in the last months. She still looked wonderful on stage, but this morning her sallow, rain-streaked face was haggard and her stubborn jaw oversized. Her eyes were sick-animal. She walked away. She had no business in the Zen Self tent. She was just moving about at random, because it eases the pain; and stealing a moment of truth. Got nothing to say to Olwen Devi, but at least don't have to put a face on.

Nothing to hide.

'Wait—'

The guru had followed her, and laid a hand on her sleeve. Fiorinda looked at the ring on Olwen's finger. Could Serendip do anything? Nah. She's just a computer, dumb bundle of noughts and ones, however you dress it up.

'What?'

'Fiorinda, removal of an implant, even if it's done crudely, need not be a disaster. Ax was supposed to be away for six weeks. That chip should have come out as soon as he got back, it was not in a good state. You may take it from me, if it hadn't been removed, he would be in worse trouble by now.'

Fiorinda nodded, indifferent, and wandered off into the rain. There was no question of a violent coup. The remains of the Coalition Cabinet stepped down of their own free will. A cross-party group, drawn mainly from the Green Second Chamber, took over; inviting special representatives from the CCM majority – Celtics, that is – to join them. It was the end of the limping hybrid system (said the advertising); the first genuinely Countercultural Government of England.

The Few were not surprised to find that Benny Preminder, their hateful Countercultural Liaison Secretary, was closely involved in these changes. They were dismayed, but they'd worked with a hostile government before. Keep up the free gigs: they're a reassuring ritual. Look after the drop-out hordes. Protect the science base.

Fall back. Adjust. We don't need to be centre stage to keep Ax's vision alive. Pray that nothing worse happens.

One night in November Rob Nelson woke up in a hotel, on the motorway somewhere outside Northampton. Felice was asleep beside him. Dora and Cherry in the living-room of the suite with the babies, Ferdelice and Mamba. Members of the Snake Eyes rhythm section snored gently on the sofas and the floor. Room space was tight: the place was half closed-down, much of it unfit for occupation. They'd been on stage until after midnight, playing in a dance venue in town that was icy-cold until the sweat started running, and now it was . . . He looked at his watch. *Two a.m.* Shit. He got up, feeling very angry and wishing he'd elected to sleep on the bus. No one comes hammering on my door at 2 a.m., waking my babies. That's out of order! It was Doug Hutton standing there.

'What are doing, banging on my door?'

'I'm sorry, Rob,' said the Few's security chief. 'I had to fetch you, not call you.'

'What's wrong with using a phone?'

'I dunno. You'd better get dressed. I think it's urgent.'

Rob followed Doug through spooky corridors to the barely lit, dilapidated lobby, his breath puffing ahead of him in the cold air. He was amazed to see Fiorinda by the desk in her old winter coat, her hair wrapped up in a scarf, her pale face bleak and sullen.

'How did *you* get here?' he gasped, as if she'd flown in from another planet.

'Doug drove me. Come on.'

He felt wrong-footed. Fiorinda could still have that effect on him, shades of his old distrust for Ax's arrogant rock-royalty new girlfriend. Outside there was a car waiting. He got into the back, thinking, *there's a reason for this, so I'm not going to shoot my mouth off*, and was amazed again to find Dilip sitting there.

'What's going on?'

'I don't know,' said the mixmaster. 'Trouble of some kind. She's not saying.'

They drove into the countryside, along very dark lanes. Fiorinda giving Doug directions, with a penlight and a road atlas. At last they pulled off.

'You stay here, Doug,' said Fiorinda. 'You two, with me.' There was a white-painted fence, and beyond it an unlit carpark. They were in the middle of nowhere. Trees loomed against a pallid, suffused sky. Fiorinda stood looking round, still telling them nothing.

'I was nightwatchman,' said Dilip quietly, 'at the San. She arrived with Doug, said I had to come with her. Not another word. What d'you think's going on?'

'I don't know.'

Nightwatchman meant Dilip'd been in charge at the Insanitude. The club was very quiet these days, Immix and fx were out of style. But often Celtics would

turn up and make trouble, it took one of the Few to talk that down. . . They both looked at Fiorinda, her head bowed, shoulders hunched and her arms wrapped around herself. It crossed both of their minds that she'd finally flipped. She'd been behaving very strangely since Ax's chip had come home; or longer. It had shocked everyone when they'd realised she was sleeping with Fergal. Not that they begrudged her any comfort she could find, although it was seriously offensive to the Islamics, but it was so *unlikely*—

'Fio?' said Dilip, cautiously, 'are you okay?'

'This is a Roman site,' said Fiorinda, as if he hadn't spoken. 'Or pre-Roman. There's the remains of a theatre, through the trees. That's where the pit will be.' Rob had noticed a display board, traces of ragged laminated surface dimly gleaming. So this was a venue for Celtic ritual. But why are we here? His skin crept. Can she possibly be part of it. . .? Then he saw the van, dark paintwork, no lights, parked in a corner. A jolt of adrenalin: something rose up from the ground there, bigger than a big dog, blackness visible on darkness.

Fiorinda grabbed his hand. Rob was instantly disarmed. 'It's okay, Fio—'

'We can do this,' she whispered, intensely, '*we can win*, we can all get safe home, but you have to trust me. Don't either of you move until I tell you.'

She'd grabbed hold of Dilip too. She let go of them and walked towards the van. Something like black smoke moved to and fro: as if measuring the threat she posed, as if it was thinking of springing at her throat. Rob might have seen reddish eyes, the shine of bared teeth.

Dilip caught his breath. They both started forward.

She turned on them savagely. '*Stay put*. Do what you're fucking TOLD!'

So they stayed put. Fiorinda walked slowly up to the dark-coloured van: and the black smoke thing was gone. The branches of the trees tossed and sighed, like restless, barely contained wild animals.

'Okay,' hissed Fiorinda, 'we're in. Come on. Help me.'

She gave Rob a tyre-iron that she had been hiding under her coat. He grasped it with relief. Things began to make sense, some kind of sense. He forced the doors. Muffled shapes shifted and made whimpering sounds inside the naked shell of metal. Fiorinda produced a torch and switched it on.

'*Shit*,' breathed Dilip. 'It's started again.'

'I think it never stopped. I know what the sacrifice was for, now,' she whispered. 'I know what *bringing on the dark* means. Let's get them free.' Rob had a pocket-knife, and so did Dilip. While they were cutting the kids'

bonds she kept watch, leaving them the torch. The human sacrifice victims were two boys and two girls, white kids; in their mid-teens. They were skinny and draggle-haired, but clean as butcher's meat and dressed in thin white linen tunics, tied at the waist with gold cord.

'Why leave them dumped here?' wondered Rob.

'They weren't left unattended,' said Dilip.

When the gags came off the kids didn't gasp or sob, not a sound.

'Who did this to you?' asked Rob, gently. 'Who brought you here?'

But they were drugged, or scared catatonic. There was nothing in the van, not even a tarp to hide the terrible freight. They stripped off their coats and covered the children, one coat between two.

'This *country*—' muttered Rob. 'Is there a light switch in here?'

'I can't see one. We should call the police. Unless Fio already has.'

They heard vehicles approaching. Rob got down to join Fio; Dilip stayed with the kids. A bigger van, still without lights, came into the carpark. It stopped.

Dilip thought of the black-smoke creature, which Fiorinda had outfaced. In certain states of consciousness the internal and the external world can change places: the presence of horror can be visible. If this *wasn't* the police, then it was trouble unthinkable, very bad trouble—

It was the police. Fiorinda had called them. They took over; the rockstars bowed out. Later, they debriefed the incident in the Office. Fiorinda had had an anonymous tip-off. She'd called the police and rushed to the location herself, picking up Dilip and Rob on the way. She hadn't told them what was going on because she'd been hoping it wasn't true.

Sorry, Rob, sorry, Dilip. Didn't mean to freak you out.

'?Jaysus fockin' God!' said Fergal. '?An' what if it'd been a fockin' ambush, Fiorinda me love? Whut then? Was it yur business to go after these lost kids?'

'?They're Ax's friends,' said Fiorinda. '?That makes them my business.'

Fergal gave her a fond, gap-toothed grin. '?Aye, well, that's a fine broad definition, fair enough. But ye'd be better to stick to yer volunteer work, in future, me darling. T'wud be more fitting.'

There were things that Fiorinda's explanation did not explain, but Dilip and Rob didn't want to talk about it with Fergal around.

Nobody could talk to Fiorinda, because Fergal was always around. He was her official boyfriend, he was lording it over the London barmies; he was courted by the new government. The Reich was sidelined, but not Fergal Kearney. The Few didn't care about their own loss of status, fuck's sake, but the sight of Fergal taking the place of Ax and Sage was *outrageous*. How could Fiorinda let this happen? Allie finally cornered the elusive princess in the Office at the end of a working day.

'?Sorry, I'm in a hurry,' said Fiorinda breezily. '?I have a gig in Richmond.' She was still doing lo-key solo spots, though Fergal didn't like it.

This is where she rips my throat out, thought Allie. But it's either now, or I ask her secretary for an appointment, and get told *Miss Fiorinda's very busy*. My God.

'?You have to give me five minutes. I need to talk to you about Fergal.'

Fiorinda, poised for flight, seemed to change her mind, or relax her guard. '?Oh do tell. I'm betraying Ax? Fuck it, what do you expect me to do? Turn celibate for the rest of my life? That may be your little bolthole, Allie. It's not for me.'

'?I wasn't going to say anything about—'

'?Hey, maybe you think I should committ suttee, only we'd have to burn me with just the implant and a bit of dirty lint, not having a dead body.'

'?NO!' yelled Allie. '?Knock it off, Fiorinda! That's NOT what I think. I think my leader, my ONLY HOPE in a shit situation, has become so infatuated with a deceitful, destructive drink-sodden middle-aged geezer that her *stupid* choice of play-away fun is ONCE MORE going to rip the country apart—'

Oh no. Didn't mean to say that. Didn't mean to say any of that—

Fiorinda said nothing. Her face had gone tallow-pale, her mouth was set tight.

'?I'm sorry,' said Allie. '?I'm like a rat in a trap. Screaming pitch.'

'?Me too,' said Fiorinda. '?We're all like it. It's stress.'

'?About Sage. I didn't mean to say—'

'?Shut up, Allie.'

Fiorinda sat down, took out her smokes tin, lit a spliff and handed it. '?Okay, let's talk about Fergal. I know he deceived us. I know he's a Celtic sympathiser. But I'm going to keep things going, for Ax, because *he's not dead* . . . and this is the way to do it. I don't know if you ever noticed, but the Counterculture is very male-oriented.'

'Ha!'

'I need a consort. I need to keep hold of the Celtics. He fits the bill. I admit it's not my greatest idea ever. But until I think of something better, you'll have to trust me.'

'It's er, a marriage of convenience?' said Allie. 'Is that what you're saying?'

The doors to the Office opened. Fiorinda's secretary (recruited from the Celtic majority) looked in. 'Oh, Aoife,' said Fiorinda casually, 'I was about to buzz you. I'll be along to my room in a moment, thanks.'

The girl left. Allie stared at Fiorinda, round-eyed, open-mouthed.

'I'm glad we've had this useful talk,' said Fiorinda, meeting the stare. 'Now spin this for me. Get the Few, and the staff, to accept what I'm doing—'

'My God. Does she spy on you? How bad is this? Tell me, Fio.'

'I'm getting my share of the deal, Allie. I'm fine.'

Allie nodded. 'You have to talk to Mohammad,' she said, abruptly. 'You need him on board too, or the Islamics are going to explode over you and Fergal.'

'You're right, I should have done that. I'll get to it.'

They were silent. 'What a weird conversation,' said Fiorinda at last. 'Do you ever think about the way things used to be, Allie?'

'Sometimes I get a kind of reverse déjà vu. It doesn't seem real.' 'We'll never get back there.'

'No,' The spliff was finished. Unpremeditated, they gripped hands. Allie felt that she'd been dealing with a stranger for weeks, and this was Fiorinda again: but how changed. Like Fio with a deathly illness, hollowed out inside.

'This is our life,' she said, suppressing her shock and pity, 'the only one we've got. I can't stand what you're doing to yourself. But I believe in the Rock and Roll Reich, and I've seen the bloodbath route . . . I'll help you all I can.'

Allie talked to people, discriminating carefully. Fergal is a necessary evil, we need him because we have to work with the Celtics; Fiorinda isn't blind to her lover's faults, but she respects his differences and he respects hers. He gives us a chance to influence the new régime. . . Like dealing with President Pigsty; here we are again. Not everyone was satisfied, but it was an improvement.

Fiorinda talked to Mohammad. She couldn't tell from the blunt, yet reserved way he responded whether he understood too much or too little: but whatever he did, quietly, within the Islamic community, it worked. The violence died down. Islamic media went quiet about the 'Celtic takeover'; although some of the comments about Ax's faithless wife continued.

The Brixton flat was shut up. Fiorinda and Fergal used Fiorinda's mother's house as their *pied à terre* in London. They lived at Rivermead Palace. The Few had never been invited there: which had been one of the things they'd stupidly failed to understand. When Allie knew the truth, she and the Babes invited themselves: bringing Rob and Doug along to take Fergal out drinking. The babies had been left at home. The women settled round the fire with spliff and wine, on hippy beanbags; dismissing those terrible chairs.

'I don't see how anyone can think of God as a human being,' mused Allie, 'it's too much, impossible. God must be an abstract. The colour purple, you know—'

'You going to smoke that?' said Cherry. 'Or philosophise? Pass it over here.'

'I don't believe any of that shit,' said Fiorinda. 'Never did.'

She should have known the Few would cause her trouble, she should have fed them some plausible line, but now she was glad she hadn't. Let Allie do it, thank God for Allie. The warmth of wine and cannabis flowed, loosening her grief.

Surreptitiously, she wiped her eyes. Felice moved over and hugged her.

'Hush, baby. You're among friends. You can cry for those sweet guys tonight;

we all miss them too.'

'Did they *really*,' wondered Dora, 'serenade you with 'Stonecold'?''

'They really did,' said Fiorinda, 'They serenaded me with my own music, and then they took me to Tyller Pystri, where they got down on their bended knees and they proposed. It was the most absurd performance I ever heard of.'

They cackled and rolled their eyes. 'You are a jammy bugger,' said Cherry.

'Both of them, what a jackpot. Hey, I'll take Sage,' offered Felice.

'Yeah. We know,' chorused her fellow Babes.

'I'll take Ax,' decided Allie, judiciously. 'He's *elegant*.'

So here I am, reflected Fiorinda. Where I knew I'd end up from the moment the shit hit the fan. Left behind by the heroes, down among the women. Reduced to chattel status, and getting fucked by bastard who took over because I go with

the territory. But I don't care, I will keep the faith. I will bring them all safe home.

She closed her eyes and lay with her head on Felice's cushiony shoulder, thinking of how much she loved her prince, and how proud she was to have known him. She knew Ax was alive and he would come back. Sadly, she was afraid she wasn't going to survive that long. But one moment at a time. Take it one moment at a time.

Rob had been apprehensive about going out with Fergal and Doug, but it was okay. The Irishman was the same as he'd always been (if you forget the part when he'd saved Ax's life, and we trusted him). He does the talking. All you have to do is sit there and nod.

Fiorinda had been most afraid for the Heads. She knew she could trust Dilip and Rob to accept that she had a plan, and work with her. The Heads might decide it was their male-animal duty to die in Fiorinda's defence, whether she liked it or not. She was wrong. George and Bill and Peter had weighed up the situation and resolved that they would do nothing to endanger their adopted princess. They would look at the larger picture, review the options there, and carry on trying to get the boss out of Caer Siddi. It was Chip Desmond and Kevin Verlaine who decided they weren't going to take this anymore.

The Notting Hill flat had changed after Rox left. First they'd lived around the spaces where her furniture and books had been, then *spaces* had encroached until they'd got rid of everything except the fx generators, the home entertainment, a gel-bed, and the pieces Roxane had found it inconvenient to move. They'd lived in an ever-changing virtual world, nothing real but the floor and walls, and been immensely pleased with themselves – until Fiorinda came round and said it felt like being in a tv studio, and where was her autocue? Which had deflated them slightly. Deflated wasn't the word for it now.

Idleness and misery had closed over their heads. Their careers were on hold. The Rock and Roll Reich made few demands on the Adjuvants now that Fergal and the Celtics were in the ascendant; and the Zen Self project had deserted them. They couldn't hang out at the Insanitude, because Fergal or his minions would be there. They couldn't go and lean on Rox for support because, because. They had money, enough for whatever treats this sixth winter of the Crisis could provide, but they hadn't the heart for dissipation. There was nothing to do but mourn for Ax and Sage, and sit in their naked rooms watching daytime tv.

One afternoon, like too many other afternoons, Chip lay on the gel-bed.

Verlaine sat crosslegged on a fat sideboard that had belonged to Roxane's grandmother. The Second Chamber was on the box, they were jeering at it listlessly. In their curtainless windows Cézanne iterations blanked out a dark December day.

'It's classic,' said Chip. 'First the romantic violent phase, that was the Deconstruction Tour. Then the internecine struggle, the power structures reform, and the revolution gets taken over by a new set of suits identical to the old set. Except totally unaccountable, different buzzwords, and they now have a taste for blood. Fucking horrible, fucking predictable.'

'It was never *our* revolution,' said Verlaine. 'We only tried to make it better.'

'Fat chance. The world is too strong. We fought the law, and the law won.'

Fiorinda's appeasement was successful, to an extent. The Volunteer Initiative was still going, and the hedgeschools; and a raft of Ax and David's legislation. But they weren't in the mood to look on the bright side.

'Were we killed at some point without noticing? Is this Hell?'

'I wonder what he's got on her,' sighed Verlaine, gazing wearily at the screen.

'That's no secret. She's giving Fergal sexual favours and consort status, because he's threatened her with bloody civil war in the Counterculture, if not all of England, if she refuses to play.'

They contemplated, miserably silent.

'I wish we could get something on *him*,' said Chip. 'Something slow and painful.' Silence again for a moment, then he began in a different tone, 'Pippin, what if we could? What if we could *discredit* the bastard? Like we did Pigsty, remember? Find out something that even the Celtics won't take. I don't know what, but I bet he has shit we can stir—'

'He doesn't. The Intelligence Services did a job on Kearney, after Spittal's farm, and came up empty, and Ax trusted their results. He's just a hardened oldschool radical rockstar who lied to us and got away with it because *radical* can mean totally opposite things.' 'Yeah, English Intelligence, yeah, but . . . but that was then. In the full flush of

data quarantine. Things are a lot squishier now. I betcha if we hack around a little we can get to stuff that the spooks couldn't reach. We wouldn't need a plan. Just start by finding out anything we can about Fergal Kearney—'

They were desperate for action.

Verlaine got down from the sideboard. 'Merry, I believe you're right. The young queen is in durance vile, we must rescue her. It's a secret mission. This might be dangerous, and we *must not* get caught. We will be risking our lives.'

A pause for thought.

'Let's do it,' said Chip.

Fiorinda had a new double life. She was still nominally Mr Dictator's deputy, she was still managing the Volunteer Initiative. The Second Chamber Group planned to make her Ceremonial Head of State. Rufus seemed to like that idea, and he was indifferent to the charity work. But now, instead of being a rockstar in her spare time, her job was being Fergal's girlfriend. When his friends and associates gathered in the upper room at Rivermead, on the long winter evenings, Fiorinda was their hostess. She saw documents and overheard conversations that made the most hair-raising rumours from the Floods Conference a reality. Sometimes she was able to use her knowledge: tipping off the police (reliable police, people she trusted) over ritualist venues, getting threatened people out of the way of trouble, securing food supplies before they could be destroyed by the Gaia

wants-us-to-commit-suicide fanatics. Sometimes she intervened directly.

Rufus didn't seem to care. He liked to indulge her over trifles. Fergal's friends never appeared to put two and two together . . . and this had puzzled her considerably until she'd realised that Fergal's inner circle knew the bizarre truth.

They knew that Fergal Kearney was really Rufus O'Niall, occupying another

man's body, and they weren't going to tell him his girlfriend was a security risk. They wouldn't say *boo* to him.

Sometimes she played the piano. Sometimes Rufus/Fergal called her to sit at his feet so he could fondle girl-flesh while he dominated the conversation. Most often she sat with her sewing (she was not expected to offer the drinks and canapés; there were servants for that). Watching and listening. And as she watched him, the rock-lord among his courtiers, she began to hope.

Rufus wanted England. He wanted his daughter-bride on the throne beside him, public ritual sacrifices of the unfit, a populace stripped of the 'freedoms' and 'civil rights' of modern civilisation; and an end to the masquerade. He was tired of occupying Fergal Kearney. He wanted to possess England, and possess Fiorinda, in his own shape.

He had prepared the ground. He expected the Second Chamber Group to deliver the goods, and Fiorinda saw it dawning on him that they wouldn't do it. Not at the pace he wanted. The Rock and Roll Reich was holding up, holding on, and Rufus wasn't prepared to wait. Benny Preminder, a frequent visitor at Rivermead, had been working for

Rufus for years, of course. Benny must have been turned long ago, and it was galling, if she'd cared, to realise how easily the Triumvirate had been fooled.

Slimy little Benny Preminder leads a charmed life—

But that phase was over. Now Benny was like the thrusting manager who has introduced the terrific new star to the corporate backers, and begins to regret it. The Celtics were telling Rufus he could go global. (Fiorinda could not discover *how* they planned to use Rufus's magic: maybe they hadn't yet worked it out) He very interested in their proposals. Meanwhile, on the England deal he was getting restive, he was starting to feel double-crossed.

Benny can't hold him, she thought. He's a *rockstar*.

She had a triple life. The third life happened between the sheets, and involved a dead man's body with carrion breath. But the less said about that the better. Every moment an embattled island. I am going to win.

Fiorinda's gran, who had known it was Rufus all along, dosed her with potions and ointments intended to restore her fertility, and told her the Pharaohs of Egypt always used to marry their daughters. Fiorinda didn't bother trying to get Gran see the enormity of what she was doing. Talking to Gran about morality just made you feel as if you were going nuts. Rufus was unconcerned. She had no idea what he could do. Maybe he could reverse the sterilisation right now if he felt like it. But she was glad she'd held out, when Ax and Sage had been trying to get her to go to the whitecoats. At least she could hope there was one less horror to contemplate.

In the earliest days of spring Fiorinda started to have yet another life. It happened in a small room in the North Wing of the Insanitude, called the Fire Room; it involved Fiorinda and a young woman called 'Lurch', in the US, talking to each other (one pad key) in lines of type. She was anxious about this world, because secret resistance to the Fergal Régime was a situation she'd been trying very hard to avoid. But she loved it. Now there are two people, talking to each other directly, who actively, positively believe Ax Preston is alive.

The winter passed. April came and the Rock and Roll Reich,, though battered, was standing: but the broad beans in Fiorinda's courtyard garden weren't doing so well. Slugs delighted in the damp nooks in Topsy's Barcelona Cathedral walls. They got up very early, in prime commuting distance from snack heaven. Fiorinda moved doggedly along the rows, plucking slimy bodies with her

bare hands; dumping them in a pot of vinegar. Silver and Pearl were impressed, but preferred to stick to more civilised means of slaughter. The morning was rain washed, the sunlight weak and cool, the leaves so green. Bless, thought Fiorinda, a word that came to her often now and she didn't know why. Bless the beans, I suppose. Bless you, beans. Flourish so I can eat you . . . a slight contradiction there, but never mind.

Her troops were getting restive. The Fergal Régime encroached and Fiorinda's story that she was keeping the faith by appeasement was wearing thin. But she was winning. Rufus was sick of the masquerade; and Fergal's poisoned body

(she thought) was failing. She wasn't sure whether this last was a good or a bad thing; but she felt it was good. He'll quit. He will take me with him, of course, but he will leave my friends alive and well, and he will leave England in peace, because he's going to honour his bargain. Not from pity, fuck no, but *because he wants a willing sacrifice*. That's magic—

'What a slug likes best to eat,' muttered Silver, squatting on one of the mosaic paths, dealing summary justice with a lump of brick, 'is dead slug—'

'Hey, have you filled the beer traps?'

'In a minute,' said Silver. 'I'm making a *cordon sanitaire*.'

'You're making a filthy mess.' Fiorinda raised her head and saw the pert cones of Silver's infant breasts pushing at the fabric of her smock. I'll have to say goodbye to my handmaidens, she thought sadly. I'm going to have to forbid them to come near me.

'Where did Pearl get to?'

Silver looked guilty. The courtyard had several exits. One of them led, via a cute little artsy-crafty stair, directly to Fiorinda's rooms. She never let them go up there. Naturally it was from this door that Pearl appeared, hiding something under her cardigan when she found Fiorinda staring at her.

'What's that you've got, Pearl?'

'Nothing.'

'Give.' Pearl reluctantly handed over a tired-looking, lumpy packet of mottled green paper. Fiorinda saw at once what it was, and her blood ran cold. '*What's this?*'

'It's a charm,' whimpered Pearl, cowed by the blaze of Fiorinda's eyes. 'Silver hid it under your bed. T-to collect sex energy. *She* made me fetch it.'

'It was ages and ages ago,' whined Silver, equally scared. They were utterly forbidden to enter that bedroom now. 'W-when it was Sage and Ax—'

'You stupid little fucks! Fucking idiots! *Get out!* Get out of here, fuck off, go!'

She ran with the packet to the water-closet toilet on the colonnade that led to the old hospitality benders, where the Wing children lived with their mother; tore it up frantically and dumped it. Whoosh. That's the way to do it. Her stomach turned. Clinging slime on her fingers. Dead slugs.

She pitched her face over the bowl and chucked and chucked. Oh God.

Head in her hands, she leant against the wall. Not much longer. He'll take me to his private island. He'll try to make me join him in his devil's bargain, and this time Ax and Sage won't be there. I'll refuse, I'll resist. I'll be torn to pieces, and then Rufus will do whatever the hell the Celtics want him to do: and there will be no one who can stop him.

I can't help that. I have no answer.

One step at a time. One step at a time. I'm winning this round, but the endgame could be sticky. I must remember he's humouring me. The only power I have over him is that I know the way his mind works. . . I must get the most vulnerable people out of his sight, because this 'bargain' might not hold to the very end. She'd

despatched all three Heads to Wales, to concentrate on their daft mission at Caer Siddi. Rufus never shown any interest in Ax's band, but she'd had Allie fix up a tour of the Highlands for the Chosen, to be on the safe side. That dealt with the Preston brothers and Milly, and Ax's mum was going along to babysit little Albi. I must get Mary Williams and Marlon sorted, Doug too. Her stomach heaved again; she tipped herself over the bowl and vomited bile and water. Someone was knocking urgently on the door. Fiorinda hauled herself to her feet and opened it.

It was Anne-Marie. 'Are you okay?' The girls came back in a state and—
'I'm okay.'

Fiorinda crawled back to the toilet, which she didn't feel safe to leave. Anne Marie bent over her.

'Are you *pregnant*?'

'Fuck, no.'

AM took her hand and squeezed it. 'They told me. I know why you were so upset. I know what he's got on you, love,' she whispered, black Chinese eyes shining with tears, Scouse accent abrasive. 'I've always known, becoz I'm one too, you know. But no one will ever get it out of us.'

Anne-Marie claimed she had minor psychic powers. The law against witchcraft was not Fiorinda's biggest worry, but this was careless talk and she wasn't going to encourage it. 'Dunno what you're talking about,' she mumbled, sticking her head back in the toilet. Chip and Verlaine, moving with extreme caution and covering their traces

meticulously, hit paydirt. They'd traced Fergal to a very superior rehab clinic in Sweden, where he'd stayed after he'd parted from the Playboys. They'd hacked into the records and read about Fergal's drug habits; his sorry medical history. They'd found notes on his liver and his lungs and his lymph nodes, of which they understood not a word. But they had also found brain scans – which after their Zen Self experience, they could read like print. These scans were rather amazing. They showed *severe* damage to both the hippocampi, vital engines of memory transcription and recall. More than damage. It looked as if those two little deep-buried organs had been burned out with a hot wire.

'He's dead,' said Chip, wonderingly. 'He's the living dead.'

'Let's translate the Swedish, see what the whitecoats have to say.'

The whitecoats proved equivocal. The scans were described as anomalous, no further comment. Fergal Kearney had checked himself out soon after they were taken. No forwarding address, no aftercare appointments. Chip screwed up his face in bemusement. 'If these scans are Fergal Kearney, our man isn't. Someone whose brain looks like this would have *no memory*. He couldn't function.'

'Hm. I wonder who paid his bills? It's a very classy joint.'

They couldn't get anywhere on that issue. The Swedish hospital took far better care of its financial than its medical records. They sat on the bare floor of their décor-impoverished environment, pulling faces, trying to figure it out. Paydirt that makes no sense.

'Someone who gets his memory fried out of his head, *deliberately*—'

'Why the fuck would anyone do that?'

On the morning of the Mayday concert, Fiorinda visited Reading Site Boneyard. So few years, but already this corner of a field, sown with wildflowers, strewn with strange hippy memorials, had softened and grown old. Here's Tom Okopie's memorial, his name and his dates and the Greek word Α?Α?? . . . Which means love. Tom, who fucked me when I was fourteen and he was eighteen, and some would think he took advantage, but I didn't. So long, Tom.

Freedom to flail. Here's Martina Wyatt, the Countercultural Think Tank's Riot Grrrl, who died on Massacre Night. So long, Marty. She supposed she must add Ax Preston and Sage Pender to the list, sexual partners she would never see or touch again. But I can go on loving them. Whatever Rufus does, the memory of my dead will be with me; and I will know that I won my fight.

So I will be okay. Somehow, I will be all right.

The arena was thronged as she wandered through it. Why don't they stay away? Because they've forgotten everything Ax tried to tell them, thought Fiorinda. They can't see any difference between us and the fucking Celtics. It's all the Counterculture, isn't it? It's all green-is-good, wild-and-free, rock-and-roll.

Ah well, it just goes to show. People *actively prefer* the crappy junk food. Bless. Little thirteen-year-old boy, bug-eyed, mud to the armpits, must have

slept in a binbag out in the rain last night. Bless. Evil-tempered woman that sells tofu salad wraps that taste of ammonia. Bless, naked woman with stupid expression. . . She reached Rupert the White Van Man's van, *Anansi's Jamaica Kitchen*, and bought a cup of dandelion and chicory 'coffee' with a hefty slug of cognac. Rupert didn't want her to pay, but she pleaded with him and he took her money, for old time's sake. Rastaman, there's more grey in your dreads than the first day I met you. But your smile is still wonderful. Bless you, Rupert.

She had no idea what this 'bless' business meant. She couldn't remember how long she'd been doing it. Most likely it was just a nervous tick. But if he can curse, maybe I can bless. It's worth a try. If there is justice in heaven . . .

Unfortunately, all the evidence we have says no.

She saw DARK coming towards her. They'd come down from Teesside a week ago: she'd been rehearsing with them. She was hoping she would not fuck up too badly on stage this afternoon. But hey, what if I do? It surely won't be the first time. Though it might be the last.

Not everybody at Reading hated the takeover, but enough did to make the atmosphere backstage of Main Stage poisonous. The Second Chamber Group had decided to turn Mayday into a political rally, with public speakers dominating the bands. Green lords and ladies were swanning around, very pleased with themselves: infuriatingly delighted to be *hanging out with the Few*. Benny Preminer looked particularly happy. Here he was in the inner sanctum, and not a thing the rockstars could do.

The old guard, the rockstars themselves, were keeping themselves to themselves, as far as they dared. Fiorinda sat with DARK – Cafren Free, Fil Slattery, Gauri Mostel, Charm Dudley and Harry Child. Rob Nelson and Dilip Krishnachandran were with Anne-Marie's helpmate, Smelly Hugh: who was recounting a puzzling cartoon he'd seen in *Weal*.

'Fucked if I know what it meant. You know those tigers Fergal shot? Male and female. Big cat and a littler cat, right? Well, in this cartoon, it's like, the tigers are Sage and Fiorinda, and Fergal is protecting Ax, so he kills them.'

'Well bizarre—' muttered Rob vaguely. Smelly was a slow thinker. Explaining *anything* to him would drive you up the wall.

'Yeah, but it's not really Ax. It's meant to be *England*, so that makes . . . Er. Either of you two know what leg-iti-mate succession means?'

'It means *bollocks*,' Dilip yelled at him, beyond endurance. 'It's *bollocks*—'

'Oh,' said Hugh, meekly. 'Right . . . I was only asking.'

'Hey,' Rob gripped the mixmaster's arm, 'calm down, DK.'

Chip and Verlaine came into the area. They saw Fergal and went right up, pleased to note that he had several fully tooled-up media persons in close

attendance. They'd thought hard about what they had to do. They knew it was on the cards that they'd end up getting shot. Or macheted to pieces: some of the weapons around the Irishman were not very civilised. But they had to confront him in public, in a way that didn't involve the others; and where they had a chance of being heard before the minders intervened. Backstage at Mayday was their choice. They were sure this was what Ax would have done: take the direct action, sort the details later.

'Uh, Fergal,' said Chip. 'We want to show you something.'

Verlaine laid a pair of gleaming cells on the plastic tabletop in front of Fergal, and held up a third so the sunlight brought the colourful image to life.

'These are scans of your brain, Ferg. Taken in that hospital in Sweden, where you got your natural, organic memory machinery burned out.'

'We can only think of one reason you'd do that,' said Chip. 'We think you've got a big implant. We think you went all the way, ditched your human self, and it's just a bunch of *evil, futuristic anti-Gaia* microchips that's talking to us—'

'Because otherwise you can't be walking around, with scans like this.'

The Adjuvants had scripted this with care, trying to make the language simple but arresting. They spoke loudly and clearly, but with good-humoured calm.

They hoped they sounded like Tarantino gangsters, *interesting* gangsters, *not the kind that instantly needed shooting* . . . They had calculated rightly. Nobody pulled a gun, Fergal himself seemed fascinated. By the end of their delivery the whole crowd around Fergal, celebs and minders, liggers and media folk, was attentive, silent and mystified. The music and the muffled crowd noise from the arena surged up, suddenly vivid. In the background Fiorinda was on her feet, white as milk, Charm and Gauri holding her back— 'So we want you to take a new scan, F-fergal,' said Chip, beginning to quake.

'Prove it isn't true,' explained Ver. 'But if you're *not* this person, who are you?'

Fergal stared at them. There was a murmur of astonishment from those onlookers who could see his face. 'Fock—' he whispered. 'Fock—'

A slack-jawed old man with sea-green eyes, his voice as thin as a reed. His head began to jerk and nod—

'*Fergal!*' said one of his own men, grabbing his arm. 'Come on. Get you out—'

But Fergal didn't get up. He fell down. He fell from the chair like a suit of clothes folding.

'Heart attack—' cried someone, urgently.

'Oh *God*, what's that smell—?' cried someone else.

Fergal Kearney lay on the bruised grass, shrinking like a wax model held in the flames, his clothes wetly stained, his face melting from the bones. He lay there, in seconds, dead and putrefied.

Fiorinda had stopped struggling and stood transfixed. No one was looking at her yet. A bunch of the politicians rushed up to the body, Benny Preminder at the fore, brandishing his dogtags – an absurd gesture, but he didn't look absurd.

'I'll take care of this. I'm Ben Preminder, Countercultural Liaison Secretary, this is mine.' He stooped over Fergal, theatrically grave, and stood up again.

'Someone call the police. This man may have died by witchcraft!'

A babble of disbelief, a surge of people trying to get a look, or to get away.

'No one leaves!' cried Benny. 'There are suspects who must be questioned!' 'Come on, princess,' muttered Charm Dudley, putting a ferocious lock on her singer's upper arm and hauling. 'Out of here.'

'What? Why should I—?' gasped Fiorinda, shaking, mulish, resistant.

'For fuck's sake,' hissed Gauri. 'Just don't argue.'

If they could have got her onstage they might have made it. The enemy wouldn't have wanted their own goons grabbing the princess in front of that crowd, and it would have been a brave Thames Valley police chief who allowed the arrest of Fiorinda on Red Stage at Reading Festival Site. But they didn't think fast enough, and Fiorinda was screaming to the Few and friends that they were to LET THIS HAPPEN! SORT IT LATER! So what support they had was scattered and uncertain. It was DARK against the world, and of course they lost. The police turned up and took over. Fiorinda was escorted to Rivermead, where she spent the next days in her rooms under armed guard, while Benny marshalled his evidence. Then she was formally arrested and charged with the murder. This would be the first ever attempt to enforce the witchcraft law. No one knew how the case should be handled, they were looking back hundreds of years for precedent. But Benny thought he could make it stick.

9: Love Minus Zero (No Limit)

The Heads tried to race back from Caer Siddi, but they were stopped at the border on the English side, hassled, kept waiting for personal transport permit vouchers; and finally informed there was a curfew due to Fergal Kearney's death, so they couldn't travel until the next morning. In the end it took them three days to reach London. They found the Insanitude crawling with strange hippies, who said they were looking for evidence of criminal magic. Allie had called the police, but the Met declined to intervene.

Of course there was stacks of 'evidence': as for criminal, it depends where you draw the line. The hippies left eventually, taking random items that had caught their fancy. A set of bongos, several expensive fx generators; scented candles. Fiorinda had been taken from Rivermead to a grisly Victorian remand centre on the outskirts of Reading. She had been allowed no visitors, and she hadn't been allowed to speak to a lawyer – on the grounds that there was as yet no procedure for dealing with someone who could kill by magic. The Heads got in because the assistant governor was a fan. She was very confused about Fiorinda, but she couldn't resist George, Bill and Peter; fresh from Caer Siddi, where her hero Aoxomoxoa was pursuing his thrilling quest.

They met the heartbreaking sight of the rock and roll brat literally behind bars. At least the screws left the room, so they had some illusion of privacy. 'It's to protect you,' said Fiorinda. 'Iron's supposed to be proof against witchcraft.' 'Does it work?' asked Peter. 'Well, I'm still here. I haven't turned into a bat and flown away.' 'Don't talk like that,' said George. 'We'll get you out, my love. This is ludicrous.'

'Fiorinda,' said Bill, urgently, '*don't* talk like that. Don't be a fucking idiot. Nobody has a sense of humour when you're on the wrong side of the law.'

She smiled. '*Py kefer Myghter Arthur? Ny wor den-vyth an le—*'

It was the first half of the Cornish couplet that served as password and countersign for the secret resistance. George felt as if someone was squeezing his heart in a vice, '*Whath nyns yw marow; efa vew, hag arta efa dhe.*'

Where is Arthur? No one knows, but he lives and he's coming back.

'I've been working on my Brythonic intonation. How am I doing?'

'Not bad,' he croaked.

Unfortunately they were no longer in touch with 'Lurch', the American girl who was convinced that Ax Preston was alive. The Insanitude direct link with the US had been spotted and closed down. There was no more solid *evidence* that Ax was alive than there'd ever been —but they knew how Fiorinda had been

clinging to that lifeline.

They would not tell her it was gone, it would have been needless cruelty.

The situation looked ominous. Fiorinda's personal popularity was immense, but Fergal had died and rotted in minutes, in seconds; before upwards of a hundred witnesses. *Millions* had seen his death now, televised. As for Chip and Verlaine's bizarre story, forget it. The autopsy had been scrupulously correct. The inside of Fergal's skull had been soup, nothing could be said about strange brain surgery, but there'd certainly been no microchips. Meanwhile Benny was amassing witnesses who would recount 'strange rumours' about Fiorinda going back to when she was fourteen; denouncing the Few as traitors who had been getting rich off the Reich (helped by Fiorinda's evil magic); setting himself up as the defender of Ax's honour.

A few brave media folk were holding out, but this rewriting of history was published and broadcast widely. Worst of all, no one had talked about it, for obvious reasons, but most of her closest friends had suspected for a while that Fiorinda was 'a witch'. She must go on denying it, they must all deny it, there was no question of coming clean now: but it wasn't a good start. Some of the Few would be in real problems if they were questioned under oath.

They tried to give her a hopeful spin. You're the nation's sweetheart, he's just pissing around, he won't dare to hurt you. Fuck, there's an *army* of staybehinds and drop-outs who'd *die* before they'd let anything happen—

Fiorinda paced her share of the room, arms folded over her breast, head bent. She came up to the bars, and her eyes flashed in that strange Fiorinda way, pupils flared wide and then down to pinpoints.

'George. Did Sage trust Alain?'

'He's not *dead*, Fiorinda,' said George. 'You got no reason to say he's *dead*—'

'Did Sage, who is dead or he would be here, trust Alain de Corlay? I think

Alain's okay, but I know I'm losing track, so help me with this.' He gave up. 'The boss trusts Alain.

They got their differences, but it's surface, playfighting, er, more or less. Alain's solid.'

'Good. I want you three to take Marlon and Mary to Brittany.'

'Fio, I think we should stay in England,' protested Bill.

'*You think wrong*. Think mediaeval, *idiots*. I have no child. Ax has no child. One of the three has a son. Listen to what you've been telling me. Suddenly Benny is Ax's champion. Legitimate succession. Get it? Now convince Mary however you like, but get Marlon out of the *fucking* way, before he's a *dead* legitimate heir.'

She wiped her eyes. 'Oh, and the Chosen can't stay in Scotland, I'm afraid Benny could reach them there. Get them to Brittany too, and Sunny (Sunny Preston was Ax's mum). I wish I could send all the Prestons to the US, but that's a r-remote possibility. *And don't fucking argue* with me.'

George accepted defeat, heartsick. 'Okay, Fio. Anything you say.'

'Clearing the decks,' said Peter, nodding gravely. 'In case things get dodgy.'

'Yeah, Cack,' said Fiorinda, with a very loving look, Peter's old nickname bringing back the ghost of their happy days. 'Just in case.'

She tried to think, she tried to plan, but it was like trying to jump back onto a racing, spinning fairground ride. She'd been able to think of getting the Heads out of the way, and Mary and Marlon, the Chosen and Sunny, because those tasks had been on her agenda. She could not form new ideas. She spent her hours staring at the opposite bed in her cell; which didn't have an occupant. She could not believe that this body was her own again. It didn't feel like her own. What am I supposed to be doing now? Refuse to admit I'm a witch. Ax's girlfriend

can't be a witch. That would be a real fuck-up.

What else?

Nah. Don't think there's anything else.

She recalled the long evenings at Rivermead, and Benny Preminder's secret little smiles. How he'd enjoyed seeing Fiorinda humiliated, how unfair that grass-cuts like that can still hurt when you're in far, far worse trouble. Ax was always nice to Benny, and we didn't understand but Ax knew it was the only answer. If you have to deal with people who hate you, make nice unless you're going to flat-out assassinate them. But I was rude to him whenever I got the chance, and probably that's why he turned against us and let Rufus in. All my life, every time I could do something wicked, or stupid, that's what I did.

Every time I had a choice, I chose wrong.

She wanted to think about Ax and Sage, but the memories wouldn't come: that part of her was dead already. All she could do was wait for Rufus. Every day, every hour, she waited for him, the way she had waited at Rivermead. The cell door would open and Benny Preminder—or a screw, or someone she loved; whoever magician chose to ride—would walk in. A smoke would fall from Benny's mouth and Rufus O'Niall's living ghost would be there.

He didn't come that way, he came to her mind instead. She could see him: the big lordly man with the chestnut skin and shining black curls. She could hear his voice, rich and strong and so anciently thrilling, telling her that he had not

abandoned her. This was a test. All you have to do is use your magic, Fiorinda.

Iron bars can't hold you. I'm waiting for you in Ireland. Remember when you were a little girl, how you wanted me to love you, and make you my bride?

We shall rule the world together.

I can't do this. I can't fight anymore. *Please* someone make it stop.

At the end of May Charm and Gauri and Fil visited her. She'd been moved again but it was the same set-up as the Heads had described: Fiorinda behind bars, like Hannibal Lecter, in a basement with no natural light. She was very thin, in her prison overalls.

'You took your time,' she said.

'We've been inside ourselves,' boasted Fil, who was sporting a cast on her arm.

'What did you do?'

'Fucking pathetic compared to first degree murder,' said Gauri, two fingers splinted and a limp. 'We got beaten up resisting arrest, and they sent us down for that.'

'It was your arrest we were resisting,' Charm had a support collar, a bad split lip not yet healed and a crop of yellowing bruises. 'Don't you remember?'

'Vaguely. I never had a degree before. Hey, does *by witchcraft* rates an A*?'

'Triple First,' said Fil. 'Summa cum laude. Defo.' But tears started in Fiorinda's eyes. 'Why doesn't Allie come to see me?'

'She can't,' said Gauri. 'None of the Few are allowed.'

'Oh. Well, I've had Benny Prem. He asked me why did I hate my common-law husband, and why did I start a riot? I kind of pointed out I didn't start the riot, I tried to stop it, and he hinted maybe I should plea bargain.'

An uncomfortable silence. 'Maybe you should,' said Gauri.

Fiorinda took this on board. 'No, I won't do that. I didn't kill Fergal. I can't tell anyone how he was killed, but it wasn't me. I'm innocent.'

The screws stayed by the doors. They were very upset about the way Fiorinda was being treated, but they wouldn't leave the room. There was a painted line on

the floor, which DARK were not to cross, but it wasn't alarmed. This room had nothing electronic in it, on the theory that magic interferes with that kind of stuff. They'd been warned not to try and touch her, or give her anything. The visit struggled on painfully. When time was up, Charm stepped over the line and shoved her hand through the bars, closed in a fist. 'Quick. Here. Take it.'

It was Ax's carnelian ring.

Fiorinda pushed the hand away. 'No, it's no use. The screws would take it from me, and anyway, I'm not the same person.'

That was the last anyone saw of Fiorinda. They heard she'd been moved again, but nobody could find out where. The situation was hardening. It was a case of get out and hope for the best, or stay and end up in the same boat, unable to help her anyway. Ax was rescued in the middle of July. He had been chained up in that room for a year and two months. He spent a week in hospital, and then flew back to Europe in a gas-guzzler jet plane from the President's fleet: Ax and Lurch and a couple of minders alone in the forward cabin. They came in low over the south-west of England, in a clear blue morning. Ax looked down through the window beside him at a place that looked like Narnia. Such a golden green, such enchantment of light and shadow, it couldn't be real, it could only be a cutscene from a fantasy game. Oh my God, there's Silbury Hill. There's *Avebury*. He was gripped by an emotion that had no problem co-existing with his terrible grief and fear, so it couldn't be joy. But it was something.

He realised that the plane had stopped losing height.

'What's happening?'

Lurch had just woken up. 'I'll find out.'

She had a throat mic. He couldn't make out the murmur of her questions, or anything of the replies. Apparently Lurch had some difficulty herself. She left her seat and came back after an agonising five minutes.

'We can't land.'

'We can't land at Heathrow? Well . . . where then?'

'No. We can't land. New update, it wouldn't be safe. It could be disastrous.'

'*Shit.*'

She was saying that if he landed in England it would be Fiorinda's death warrant. The bastards would be pushed into finishing the job.

'Have we enough fuel to get us to Paris?'

'Just about. We can reach Alain de Corlay now. Do you want to talk to him?'

'Yeah. I'll talk to Alain.'

They landed at Charles de Gaulle. Ax was taken at once to a gravelly urban campsite on the outskirts of Paris, where a fair-sized contingent of the barmy army was quartered, under the command of one of Richard Kent's staff officers. Richard had stayed in Yorkshire. It must have been staggering for the barmies to see Ax alive. He didn't feel a thing. He walked round, seeing all these faces bewildered by amazement, so gripped by fear for her that the last year had collapsed into nothing. He talked to people he knew as if he'd last met them a week ago. He knew he was freaking them out, but he couldn't help it.

The tale of what had happened in England beggared belief . . . yet he had seen it. That morning at Dupont Circle, when Fiorinda called him on the bi-loc, she'd asked him a question about Fergal Kearney. His mind (maybe chip-driven) had leapt into overdrive, snatching a new picture, a whole *gestalt* shift, from clues like that garbled bar-story he'd heard in Amsterdam. He'd *seen* that Fergal was an enemy agent: he'd even known who had to be running the bastard. He'd known his darling was in terrible danger, from a vindictive devil who had already once

destroyed her— Maybe it was just as well he'd known, and been tormented by that vision, all the time he was helpless. Or else he'd be a gibbering basketcase now.

The rest of the barmies, plus assorted civilian emigrés were at Alain's place in Brittany. The Chosen were there, and his mother. Marlon Williams; and Mary. The Powerbabes, Roxane; the members of DARK, Anne-Marie and Smelly Hugh, and all the children. Anne-Marie's family had had to leave, because of AM's magic. The Babes, DARK and Rox had got themselves into dangerous trouble and had had to be moved out. The rest of his friends were still in England. The Heads had recently returned there to organise a jailbreak. They were waiting for the word to go ahead.

From Suresnes they went to an old brownstone building, on the Isle de St Louis, long occupied by Alain and his crew. A council of war was convened in a first-floor room with swooping chandeliers, a football-pitch of polished oval table; windows overlooking a courtyard where chestnut trees towered. There were barmy army staff officers and netheads, French government suits, and significant French Counterculturals, including Alain and his musclebound girlfriend Tamagotchi. Alain wore his Ferrari jumpsuit, Tam was a tin-foil Courreges space person; adding a glimmer of rockstar lightness to the proceedings. Sayyid Mohammad Zayid was there, with an entourage of English Islamic soldiers. Richard Kent, at Easton Friars, was with them on a video screen. Until this morning they'd still hoped that Ax's return would work miracles.

Richard had been due to be at Heathrow with enough force, disguised as military honours, to protect Ax if things went sour. It was clear now that Benny had never intended to let Ax land. He had nothing to gain and everything to lose by allowing Ax Preston back on English soil. So they were back to the cat and mouse game: Preminder warning them he couldn't guarantee Fiorinda's safety, using the threat of her death 'by mob violence' to hold off the invasion that he knew was being prepared.

Benny, who had seized the initiative when Fergal Kearney died, claimed to speak for the Second Chamber Group, the acting government: but he might not be the leader. It was thought that there was someone else in the background. They talked about the invasion. The 'Free English Army' had been gathering for months, sneaking over to France in small parties, partly financed by Allie's ransom fund. They had weapons, ammo, sea transport. No air power, but there would be a first wave of parachutists, dropped from borrowed helicopters. There was resistance on the ground, waiting to join them. They believed popular feeling was on their side. But the Celts were organised too, and the other nations of Britain neutral at best. Wales, Scotland and Ireland, though they acknowledged Ax's claim, still recognised the Second Chamber Group as England's legal government.

Ax felt himself going into an *Ax Preston* routine, and let it carry him. Details, difficulties . . . Which cities can we count on, what about the regions, what fuel and power sources will we control? *I have been here before*, he kept thinking. The barmies had been ebullient, convinced it would be a walkover now that Ax was back. He must keep them that way: but the people round this table were not so optimistic, and rightly so. This was not a good situation, *not* a walkover. He worked hard at making everyone believe he was still Ax Preston, and wondered (his mind wandering) when should he break it to his backers that he didn't give a flying fuck? Not now. Get Fiorinda out of jail first.

When everything had been said he gave them a speech he'd been thinking out on the plane, because he'd known there was a very good chance that he'd end up

here, rather than on the tarmac at Heathrow. Short and positive. It seemed to go down okay. He dealt with a blur of congratulations, the flesh-pressers, and went into an adjoining room with Mohammad and Alain, Lurch and Tam.

It was a quiet salon, decorated in brown and gold. Someone had given him a letter from Fiorinda, written before she was formally arrested, and smuggled out of Rivermead. He read it, put it in the inside pocket of his jacket and walked over to a mirror on the wall, to hide the tears. So Elsie's dead. My little cat; I won't see her again. The face in the mirror stared like an old friend who knew you when, and you don't want to meet him because you don't want to be reminded.

'You look the same as you always did,' said Alain. 'The astonishing Mr Preston. My God. A year chained up in the jungle, and ten days later he's planning the first invasion of England since the Conquest.'

'Better without the beard,' said Ax.

I have been here before. What did Verlaine say, a long time ago? Time is a helix. Time is a kaleidoscope: the pieces remain the same, only the pattern shifts. He remembered sitting in a hotel room with Sage on the night of the Armistice

Concert after the Islamic campaign. When he had vowed he would die before he played the game of soldiers again – and here he was, back from the dead.

Be careful what you swear to God.

This was the ops room. A work table spread with desktop hardware, maps, documents, phones, reconnaissance images. They sat around it and entered a different atmosphere: the world of the Floods Conference, where the fate of England was part of a much larger problem. A world that had recently become very, very strange. He wondered how Mohammad came to be at home here.

But there was so much he didn't know.

'We can speak freely,' said Alain. 'We are secure as we know how, in here.'

'So let's talk,' said Ax. 'Bring me up to speed.'

'After David died,' began Mohammad, 'and Fergal revealed his true colours, Fiorinda dealt with the situation her own way. She spoke to me in such terms, eventually, that I had to accept what she was doing. But I had George Merrick onto me, and Richard; and Alain here. We started making plans—'

'Fiorinda was keeping the peace,' said Lurch, to Ax. '*By any means necessary*. She was saving lives.'

'She 'as immolated herself for your fucking Utopia, Ax,' said Tamagotchi.

Ax wanted to slap them both. How dared they think they had to defend her? 'The warning Fiorinda gave me,' Mohammad went on, grimly, 'and the

evidence of my own eyes, told me your wife was the intimate hostage of a very evil man, and more. That we faced something more than human evil—'

'This would be the Celtic secret weapon problem?'

'They have grown fangs, Ax; the masters of those rabid primitives we were fighting on the streets of Amsterdam,' said Alain. 'We have known for some time that the Celts were looking for a way to reduce the population of Europe, but *drastically*. They have spread cholera among the drop-outs, they have destroyed food stores, but it's been small stuff. We've lived in fear of a major bioterrorist attack, but we knew there were ideological objections. An engineered plague was too 'science'. It could even be they were restrained by commonsense, not wishing to include their own hides in the firesale . . . Last winter we learned, I speak for the French Counterculture, for the techno-greens, that the means had been found. It was in England, and it was not scientific, it was *magical*—'

Ax noticed the young American's worried frown. Like the word dictator, he thought. They just won't have it. Well, they'll have to learn.

'Well then, Fiorinda was passing information to us, but could tell us nothing about this 'magical weapon'. Naturally we suspected Fergal was involved. Then Fergal died, in that spectacular way, and Fiorinda was accused. We learned, over here, that her friends were secretly convinced that she *was* a witch. We couldn't believe it, of course, it seemed madness. So we took over where those two boys, Chip and Kevin, had left off, and tried to discover the truth. We traced a connection between the 'Swedish clinic' you have heard of, and a certain Rufus O'Niall. We put this together with other information, disregarded information, strange tales of Rufus, his extremist affiliations, his power to destroy anyone who thwarts him . . . This is very hard to believe, but we are sure we are right. All this time, Fiorinda has been in the hands of her father, who was wearing the body of Fergal as a disguise; and it is Rufus O'Niall who is the Celts' super weapon.'

Ax nodded. He could not trust himself to speak.

'You don't look surprised, Ax. Did you *know* this, about her father?'

He thought of the dark exercise yard in which he had walked with Fiorinda, unable to speak to her, unable to touch her, knowing the horror his girl had hidden, and that he couldn't save her. The wet heat of Central America fell on him like a shroud. How could he explain all that to Alain?

'Just before I was kidnapped I'd realised Fergal had to be some kind of imposter. And Sage had tried to tell me, more than once, that there was something *weird* going on, something about Rufus, and that the bastard was still after her. I didn't believe it. When I was stuck in the jungle I suppose my mind was more open. I finally put the clues together.'

'Fathers obsessed with their daughters, kings who lock their daughters away, and try to possess them, it's the fairytale of patriarchy,' said Tamagotchi.

'The worst crimes are family crimes,' said Mohammad. 'Always.'

'You said it,' said Lurch, child of stunning privilege, a princess of the empire. In front of him, Ax had a blown-up detail from the latest GPS images of central London. They had GPS again, so civilisation returns, in time to monitor its own destruction. He was looking at the reason why he hadn't been able to land at Heathrow. There was a bonfire piled on St Stephen's Green, outside the House of Commons. He could see the raw wooden steps leading to a platform on top, a pole sticking up. A roped perimeter surrounded the pyre, mounted police standing guard. Obviously the stage set was meant to terrify, but it wasn't a bluff. The bastards meant business. Any time, any day, they could switch on their rent-a-crowd lynch mob, and this was how she would die.

His skin crept. I think I dreamed of this.

Push wood on the fire, Jackie, Good wood on the fire, Jackie—

Our last stand, and I knew she was lost.

'We don't know *how* they mean to use Rufus,' said Alain, 'but as you may know, Ax, the Zen Self research, and our investigations, here is France, into *la féerie scientifique*, says the potential is there.'

'We have found that magic is like telepathy,' said Tam. 'Like the telepathy artefacts of Zen Self experiments. Power of ancient legend that exists in reality, but it's pitiful, like a vestigial limb. If Rufus O'Niall is what we think, he is like nothing on earth. He is like the wild, crazy version of some element that can only be created in a lab, for picoseconds, but that we know to be awesome.'

'And he's Fiorinda's father,' murmured Mohammad. 'She has refused to confess that she is a witch,' continued Alain, 'But the

people who are holding her know she's O'Niall's daughter, and perhaps they

know for sure that she has inherited something. That's good because it gives her value, but equally, it means they will never release her.'

'But if she has, uh, magical powers,' said Lurch, hopefully, 'can't she use them to escape? In some secret way, that wouldn't be obviously weird—?'

Tam and Alain rolled their eyes. Americans!

'I doubt she'd do that,' said Mohammad kindly. 'Not after all she's suffered rather than take that road. She has her reasons. She won't do it now.'

'We must try and break her out,' said Alain, after a silence. 'Your return has made the situation highly volatile. We have a plan, but Rufus – who is still involved, we don't doubt – will surely intervene, and what then? I won't conceal from you, it's a desperate situation. Our only hope is in the anti-Rufus, the White Rabbit, our Rambo—'

White Rabbit and Rambo were codenames. 'Who is Rambo?' asked Lurch.

'Is it that a person, or what? A Hollywood human fighting machine?'

'Tuh! Not Rambo, *Rimbaud*, proto-rockstar, alchemist of the mind. It means our blue-eyed madman, the champion of the quest.'

'Sage is dead, Alain,' said Ax. 'I'm sorry, but *I know*. He died months ago.'

Alain put his head on one side. 'You think so? I hope you're wrong.'

'So . . . we have to make a decision . . . ' Ax had lost the thread. He was trying to find Fiorinda's presence in his mind, but she was not there, she was gone— 'You're worn out, lad,' said Mohammad. 'There's nothing to decide right now. Let's get you to bed.'

'Me? No. I don't think I'll sleep.' Ax searched around the table for the faces of his friends. Where's Allie, and Rob and Dilip? Where's everybody gone? He was startled to see the bandages on his wrists, where the cuffs had galled. Am I free, or is this another dream?

Alain went to him. He had noticed, in the barrage at the end of the meeting next door, that the astonishing Mr Preston did not like to be touched, so he didn't touch. 'You needn't sleep. Just eat something, take a little soup, and lie down.'

'Would someone stay with me? I'm afraid to wake up back there.'

'I'll stay with you, don't you worry,' said Mohammad.

George and Bill and Peter were hiding in a drop-outs' hostel in Peckham. As returned emigrés they'd be arrested at once if they were spotted. For others it was less clear-cut. They got by from day to day, Rob lying low at Snake Eyes, Allie at the San. The club venue was closed, of course, and the Reich Office, but she was allowed to keep the Volunteer Initiative limping on. They met Dilip, who sofa-surfing, here, there and everywhere, in the back of a pub in Vauxhall. Not the old drinking hole made famous in Apokryfa, another place that they believed wasn't under surveillance. Old habits die hard, they were still trying to spin the machine. Dilip was working on a poster campaign, he'd brought roughs along for them to look at. Fiorinda as Sita, the kidnapped princess at the heart of the *Ramayana*; Hindu myth of the Good State. Virtuous Sita, captured by demons, and rescued by an army of heroes. . . Dilip had drawn Fiorinda in a garden, walls as high as a prison yard, defying the advances of leering demons—who bore close resemblance to Benny, and other members of the Second Chamber Group. The prisoner had been moved again, this time to Holloway, which was scary because of that piece of conceptual art at Westminster; good because the old dump was infested with *Myghter Arthur*, so they were getting news. She's okay physically, was the latest word, but she's in solitary, and very low.

'She looks too *passive*,' said Allie. 'Couldn't she be more energetic?'

'I think we want her to look innocent and helpless.'

'Maybe you're right. Okay, let's print it. Get it on the streets.'

'Flyposting after dark, it makes me feel so young.'

Someone behind the bar pumped up the volume on 'Not In Nottingham', the song that had led to DARK's hurried exit. Originally a cute tune from the Walt Disney cartoon of Robin Hood: the dike-rockers gave it hell.

Robin's gone, Maid Marian's in durance vile, Everybody's trampled by the bad guys . . .

The backroom clientèle exchanged knowing glances. We should find another pub, thought Dilip. Who turned up the sound? This is not safe.

'What next?' muttered Rob, under the music. 'I don't know the story of the Ramayana. The army of heroes and then what? The happy ending?'

'Ah, not quite,' Dilip frowned. 'First she has to walk through fire.' 'Ha! The demons make Sita walk through fire? You don't say!'

'Er, no. To prove herself untouched by the demons, to satisfy the people, she has to walk through fire—'

'You're kidding.'

'Dilip!' hissed Allie. 'For fuck's sake—!'

'No, no it's good. We take the neo-feudalists on their own ground, legend. Sita is perfect. She's the selfless protector, ideal womanhood.'

'Fuckit, man, we don't want Fio idealised and dead!'

They argued. Dilip agreed to think of another heroine, they left separately, crestfallen. Waiting for that knock on the door, you carry on like ghosts of yourselves, keeping busy: clinging to scraps old routines.

The Heads were using their Oltech phones as little as possible, waiting for the order that would set a desperate plan in motion. They stayed indoors a lot. Their natural faces had become too familiar in the Triumvirate's reign, and you'd get stopped by the police for wearing a digital mask. The news of Ax's deliverance came. Ax was flying into Heathrow, and elation gripped the secret resistance, but there wasn't any excitement, hostile or positive, in the regular media. When the happy ending didn't work out, the Heads weren't surprised.

'Occasionally,' said Bill, dryly, 'it niggles at the back of your mind that we are fucked. Done for in some mysterious way that can't be beat, no matter what.' 'Yeah, it niggles. The score keeps racking up against you. You know there's no

chance, no hope, you just keep on until the lights go out, that's all. They knew the jailbreak had to be now, if ever; but instead of Paris they got a call from Olwen Devi. Olwen, who'd escaped with her Zen Selfers early in Fergal's reign, was at Reading. She said to come and meet her there, in Travellers' Meadow. They took the train (in different carriages, and walking separately from the station to Richfield Avenue). Rivermead was in enemy hands, but the Meadow was so far untouched; mostly deserted. They'd parked the van on its old pitch when they came back from Caer Siddi. It was still there, plumes of seeding meadow grass grown halfway to the windows. They let themselves in and powered up the systems, from force of habit and for old sakes' sake.

Olwen arrived a few minutes later with a couple of Zen Selfers. The Selfers were in drab civvies, not their uniform red and green. Olwen had compromised: a terracotta choli blouse and a grey-green sari.

'What's going on?' asked George.

He couldn't handle the expression in Olwen's eyes. He wasn't ready for it.

She sat at the kitchen table. 'You know, George,' she said, 'if somebody managed to reach the Zen Self, they might have extraordinary powers. It's possible someone like that might be able to manipulate this solid world as if it were the software of a fantasy game. We saw that possibility, you will remember,

and made nothing of it. The goal was far off, and we were probably mistaken. But that was my quarrel with Caer Siddi, long ago. For them, reaching the Zen

Self was everything, it was the end. I believed someone must go, and come back.‘

‘Why bring this up now?’ said George. ‘What are you telling us?’

‘Go to Rivermead. Now, right away, all of you.’

So they went to Rivermead.

It would be harsh to say the staybehinds were collaborating. They were living with the situation. The Heads walked together through the campground, bare faced. They knew they were recognised, but you have to rely on your instincts, and they felt safe. The long-familiar scenes, revisited, seemed extraordinarily vivid, full of detail: the faces like tiny portraits in a Bruegel, maybe. There was a sorrowful gaiety in the air, mirror image of the anger and the joy of Dissolution Summer. Now we are grown, we know how terrible life is and that there’s no way to fix it. But the sky is still blue, the grass is still green, and we stick by the choice we made. We’re staybehinds, we’ll stay.

The Rivermead complex was definitely enemy territory, occupied and run by Benny’s version of the Counterculture. But no one challenged them when they walked in. They went up to Fiorinda’s rooms, which felt like the first port of call, wondering what they would find. The door to the suite was open.

‘Anyone at home?’ called George, peering into the solar.

No answer. The room looked as if it hadn’t been used recently, but it was clean and the plants had been tended. A mass of living honeysuckle, trained over an arch, stood by the windows: flowers, foliage and green berries all together. Someone stepped from behind the flowers and stood looking at them, the living skull quiet and sombre.

‘Oh, fuck,’ said George. ‘I thought no one ever came out of Caer Siddi.’

‘No. Usually you can’t.’

The time when they would have been overjoyed to see the boss was long gone. They stared. ‘What happened?’ demanded George. ‘We’ve been trying to reach you since Ax was kidnapped, why the fuck didn’t you take any notice?’

‘Your messages didn’t reach me, I’m sorry. Just hang on a minute. I’m looking for something, and I’m not sure—’

He forgot to finish the sentence. They watched him prowl around the room: a big, thin bloke in anonymous blue jeans, a biker jacket and that unmistakable mask. That sounds like Sage’s voice, and that looks like the way Sage used to move, but *who was this?* How could they be sure? He stopped by the piano, the skull frowned a little, he passed a skeletal hand over the polished wood that finished the treble end of the keyboard. A small recessed panel appeared, where there had been none before. At Sage’s touch (if this was Sage), it slipped aside.

‘Oh *shit*—’

He sounded so like himself they came to have a look, and that was a barrier crossed. The secret compartment held Fiorinda’s saltbox, and a tightly folded envelope addressed to the boss. He picked it up, as if it might burn him, and opened it.

Dearest Sage, It’s completely irrational to write to you, but my letter to Ax might not get out of England, and anyway I’m not feeling rational. I want to tell you what I did and why, so that you can tell him when you see him. I know I was an idiot about Fergal Kearney. We all were but especially me, because I knew, and I didn’t listen to myself. As you’ll know by now, when you and Ax were both gone he came and took me. I couldn’t do a thing, because I won’t use magic and anyway I didn’t dare. He said if you tell anyone I will kill them. I knew that could mean like, the next second, so I kept my mouth shut and tried to think of an answer. It comes to me now that he’d made that promise in my bad dreams, so even though really I knew all along what was

happening I couldn't tell. Rufus would have killed you, killed Ax, and put you both in Hell. I know I used to dream about you two dead, or being tortured. But maybe I'm just making excuses. Anyway, that's how I turned into Fergal's girlfriend. I lost some friends and I don't blame them, I was acting very strangely. But the Few stood by me. You must tell Ax that whatever they let happen and whatever they did, it was because I said so and they trusted me. Tell him I was trying to save lives, and anything else was secondary. Like a chess-playing machine. Me, Deep Blue. No brain, no ideas, just one simple objective. For the record, I don't think there is a way out. I think we are all doomed, and it makes no sense to keep trying. But it made sense to Ax so I did my best, because I love him. I had hoped that Rufus would give up and go home, taking me with him: but don't get me wrong. Chip and Verlaine were right to do what they did. They didn't know the real situation because I hadn't told them, and they did rescue me. I hope someone keeps telling them that. Well, that brings me to where I am now. Which is not so bad. It's a lot better than the option I thought I was facing. I don't want to stop writing because I don't want to give up the illusion of talking to you, but I think I must, and now I'm going to hide this by magic, how irrational can you get?

If anyone's reading this it's almost certainly not you, so I won't get too sentimental. I want to say always love me, but I don't want you to be miserable. There, I said it anyway. Still your stupid brat.

Fiorinda

'Fiorinda—' He stared at the place where her pretty handwriting faltered, as she wrote that Chip and Ver had done the right thing, then he put the saltbox and the letter in his pocket and turned to the band. They'd accepted Fiorinda's secret compartment without a flicker of surprise, and he wondered at that.

'What the fuck happened to you?' repeated George.

They sat down together on the storm-timber chairs. 'I don't know where to start,' said Sage. 'The Caer Siddi people didn't tell me anything, because . . . It's a long story. Can it wait? We need to talk about the jailbreak; that's why I'm here.'

They felt very unsure. This is Sage, but *it's not Sage*. George almost thought of asking the boss to unmask . . . The double doors to the solar opened quietly. A young man stepped in and closed them behind him. His golden brown hair was a smooth bell to his shoulders, he wore the red and blue livery of Rivermead, which the enemy, had retained. He looked like pre-Raphaelite page, at ease in his archaic costume—

'Rambo?'

Sage didn't seem surprised to be called Rambo. 'What is it?'

'They know you're back, and they figured out what it means. I shouldn't tell you this, but . . . you'd better get to London. Right now. I mean, really quickly.'

Fiorinda had realised that the news of Ax's return might have the ironic effect of hurrying her death. She hadn't known that this was the day until they came to fetch her. No chance to choose a last breakfast, huh, there's another myth

shattered. But she didn't mind. She went along with everything, thinking about animals in slaughterhouses, people in concentration camps, condemned prisoners the world over, guilty or innocent. You should fight to the last, but you don't. It's a hormone shift, and pity the people who aren't wired for it. Or who haven't had the experience to prime them for it. Fiorinda was lucky; she had already given up. It didn't even bother her that she would not see Ax. She'd been used to that idea for a long time. She was genuinely glad to be cuffed, to hear the roaring and thumping of the other prisoners giving her a send-off, to get in the back of the van. The noise kept up. It reminded her of different rides, through different crowds: most of all of the time when she and DARK drove into Newcastle on the Rock the Boat tour – playing Pictionary in the back of the bus while Tyne and Wear went berserk with terror over the refugee hordes.

Not shocked.

No, I'm not shocked that they'd do this to me. It was always in them, that was

the whole point, the fact that we knew this kind of thing is in everyone.

So it's okay, Ax. Not new bad news.

She climbed the steps unaided. The bloke who strapped her to the pole wanted something, oh fuck, he wants me to forgive him. Okay, okay, I forgive you, now leave me alone. It was horrible, unbearably horrible, having her arms strapped up, but it won't be for long. Actually this is the good bit, so enjoy.

Count the moments. Think of Ax and Sage. You must not leave your body (she remembered that she had made this bargain), but there are infinite degrees just this side of the escape from time and space. Find a tiny niche where it's possible, where it's possible, even now,

To live, in one embattled island after another, and feel—

The state of affairs that morning at Westminster was chaotic. Inside the House of Commons the Members (the ineffectual remains of the Lower Chamber) were debating whether Fiorinda should live or die. They knew what was going on outside, but they kept fighting this verbal battle, as if it were as vital as the other. On the way from Holloway to St Stephen's a mass of people had poured out of a fleet of buses, surrounding the van and giving belated support (sort of) to the story that she'd been dragged here by an uncontrollable mob. This crowd had now collided with another violent crowd: Fiorinda's defenders, alerted by the grapevine. The police, also piling out of buses (though many police had already been on the scene) defended the lynch-mob from the protestors, with measured insanity. Fiorinda's escort had brought her to the scaffold, and were proceeding in an orderly fashion, while the battle raged.

The police, mounted or in full riot armour, swayed to and fro. They did not fire on the crowd. Senior officers were still on the phone, making last minute attempts to delay the actual execution. Mr Dictator was in Paris, in a few days Benny Preminder and his junta might be history. The Metropolitan Police didn't want to be caught out. But the drama had an unstoppable momentum. Fiorinda's defenders kept pouring in to Parliament Square, but so did others: a second

wave, not hired to play a part, genuine punters, determined to see the witch burn. There were bursts of gunfire (but the police still didn't fire on the crowd) as Fiorinda climbed the steps, as she was fastened to the restraints. It wasn't clear which side was firing. Her defenders kept fighting, hand to hand, but the water trucks that were supposed to get here must have been stopped, and somehow, however it happened, suddenly the bonfire had been lit.

Dilip and Allie were together. They'd been separated from Rob and Chip and Verlaine, in the mêlée. Dilip saw the first flames, he heard the huge gasp of indrawn breath: the whole crowd, the police too, stunned by this final enormity. The weather had been damp, but the wood was soaked in herbal oils, organic natural accelerant. Within seconds the pyre had flames running all through it.

'Green branches,' howled someone. 'Put on green branches, put it out—'

'Oh Sita,' he whispered, 'Oh Sita—'

Oh England, oh my country, how can any of us come back from this—

Allie, battered and trampled, eyes burning from teargas, saw a tv crew in the churchyard, *still filming*. She stared, dumbfounded. Are people watching this on tv? In the places that have reception? In their living-rooms? Is that possible—?

The long grey van scattered the crowd as it slammed to a halt. Sage leapt down. By now the flames were like a wall. George raced after him and grabbed his arm— 'Boss! No! Come back! It's too late, you'll kill yourself. It's no use. She's *dead*, Sage, she's already dead—'

Sage spun around, decked him savagely and raced on, going through the

cordon of mounted police like a whirlwind.

He heard the crowd give a yell, fuck them, and jumped onto the charred and flickering wooden steps. Thank God, despite of the efforts of the people who were breaking green branches from the churchyard trees, there was far more flame than smoke. When the steps broke under him he launched himself upwards, onto the platform, where Fiorinda was hanging limply. He cut her free and leapt down again with her body in his arms, had to dive through a wall of fire, but that's not hard, hardly even dangerous, it's a circus act.

He was on the ground, and here's the water trucks at last: a cold onslaught caught him, he and Fiorinda were drenched.

Into the van. George slammed the door, Bill gunned the engine. Out of here.

Maybe the mod had changed sides now they'd seen Aoxomoxoa, but it was no time to take a bow. Sage grabbed the oxygen mask Olwen thrust into his hands and pressed it tight over Fiorinda's mouth and nose. He held her, upright against him, in agonised suspense. It takes *so little time* for smoke to kill. But she was breathing, taking great gulps of the medicine. Her eyes opened. She saw the living skull and at once her whole body came alive, her smoke-scoured eyes alight with astonished joy. She reached up, still gulping at the oxygen, and got her arms around his neck. 'Ah, my baby,' he whispered, rocking her, the skull's grin buried in her tangled, smoky curls, 'my sweetheart, my brat, my darling.

You'll be all right now, everything's going to be all right—'

He laid her down on the astronaut couch and watched Olwen and a Zen Selfer take over..

'You okay, George?'

'I'll live.'

'Didn't break anything, did I?'

George rotated his jaw, tenderly. 'Don't think so.'

The city of London rushed by.

'She'll do,' said Olwen softly. 'She's going to be fine.'

Sage left the couch, and came and collapsed at the kitchen table, head in his masked hands. Water from his clothes puddled on the floor. Peter was driving.

Bill had pulled some vodka out of the freezer-womb. He poured a hefty shot and nudged Sage's elbow with it. The living skull goes *no*— a very familiar miserable toddler headshake. Bill nudged the elbow again.

'C'mon,' said George. 'Get it down yer. You'll feel better.'

He was still outraged. The assault on his jaw was nothing, and the bonfire stunt had convinced him this could only be his boss. But he walks out on us, he *deserts Fiorinda*, goes off on his own selfish trip, and then after a year, suddenly he's back, with no explanation, nothing. . . However, he took the glass and stuck it in the boss's mitt, closing the crippled fingers securely, as he'd so often done—

He started, and stared. The living skull looked back at him— 'Boss. Will you take off the masks?' said George, slowly releasing Sage's hand.

Sage nodded. He unmasked and sat there, head bowed, blue eyes downcast, hands on the tabletop. 'Cack Stannen,' called Bill, 'have yer co-pilot take over. Get yer arse back here.'

The Zen Selfer beside the driver took over. Peter came back.

They stared at the boss. 'You made it,' said George. '*You made it*, didn't you?'

'You reached the Zen Self,' said Bill. 'Oh, fuck. That's what Olwen meant!'

'No,' he said. 'No. Not all the way. I couldn't. Something turned me back.'

'You didn't go all the way,' Peter was shocked. Sage *always* goes all the way.

'So what happened then?' said Bill, after a moment.

'I was out for a long time. But I . . . I had to turn back. When I was reachable again, I found out how long I'd been away; and the people at Caer Siddi told me what was going on in England. So I called Olwen, and here I am.'

He looked at the glass in his hand, knocked back the vodka, and choked.

'Shit. Sorry. That's the first time I've tasted alcohol in a year and a half.'

'You gone off it?' wondered Bill.

'No!'

Bill put his arms around Sage's wet shoulders and hugged him. George did the same. Peter, never comfortable hugging anyone, grabbed Sage's hand and shook it violently. His brother-Heads examined the boss, really looking at him for the first time. They were shocked at how thin he was. But not in bad shape, he's surely not been lying in a scanner plugged to life support for a year . . . What the fuck happens at Caer Siddi?

'What was it like?' asked Peter, 'what was it like, nearly getting there?'

The boss smiled. 'It was good, Peter. 'Spite of everything, it was very fucking good. I'll tell you about it, if I get the chance. But not right now, I've got other things on my mind. I came back to do something. I'll see her safe, and then I'll get on with it.' He swallowed hard. 'Just tell me one thing. How long? How long was she . . . did that bastard . . .? Shit. I can't say it.'

'My impression is he started hitting on her the moment you left,' said George.

'She held out, and put him off. I think she had to let him have his way, to save our lives, after Ax's chip turned up and David died. That was last October.'

'*We didn't know* what was really going on,' said Bill. 'Fuck, how could we?'

Seven months. Sage reached for the vodka, poured another shot and downed it, with more success this time.

'I don't want to talk to Ax. Don't let me have to talk to him.'

'*You don't want to talk to Ax?*' exclaimed Peter. 'Huh? But what'll we tell him?'

'You'll have to do it sometime,' said George, compassionately.

'I can't. What would I say?' Sage set down the glass and wiped tears with the

back of his hand. 'What could I say to him, George? But I can't anyway. Ax

mustn't know what I'm doing. I'll tell *you*, but you'll have to promise me you'll

keep your mouths shut. Ax and Fiorinda mustn't be involved.' Hours later, at the barmy army HQ at

Easton Friars near Harrogate, he slipped

into the room where she was sleeping. 'Do you want us to go?' whispered one of

the medics. He shook his head. He'd just wanted to see her again, before he left.

From Easton Friars he returned to London, to the roof of a tower in the City

that belonged to *eks. Photonics*, his boss. But he walks out on us, he

deserts Fiorinda, goes off on his own selfish trip, and then after a year, suddenly

he's back, with no explanation, nothing. . . However, he took the glass and stuck

it in the boss's mitt, closing the crippled fingers securely, as he'd so often done—

He started, and stared. The living skull looked back at him— 'Boss. Will you take off the masks?' said

George, slowly releasing Sage's hand.

Sage nodded. He unmasked and sat there, head bowed, blue eyes downcast,

hands on the tabletop. 'Cack Stannen,' called Bill, 'have yer co-pilot take over.

Get yer arse back here.'

The Zen Selfer beside the driver took over. Peter came back.

They stared at the boss. 'You made it,' said George. '*You made it*, didn't you?'

'You reached the Zen Self,' said Bill. 'Oh, fuck. That's what Olwen meant!'

'No,' he said. 'No. Not all the way. I couldn't. Something turned me back.'

'You didn't go all the way,' Peter was shocked. Sage *always* goes all the way.

'So what happened then?' said Bill, after a moment.

'I was out for a long time. But I . . . I had to turn back. When I was reachable again, I found out how long I'd been away; and the people at Caer Siddi told me what was going on in England. So I called Olwen, and here I am.'

He looked at the glass in his hand, knocked back the vodka, and choked.

'Shit. Sorry. That's the first time I've tasted alcohol in a year and a half.'

'You gone off it?' wondered Bill.

'No!'

Bill put his arms around Sage's wet shoulders and hugged him. George did the same. Peter, never comfortable hugging anyone, grabbed Sage's hand and shook it violently. His brother-Heads examined the boss, really looking at him for the first time. They were shocked at how thin he was. But not in bad shape, he's surely not been lying in a scanner plugged to life support for a year . . . What the fuck happens at Caer Siddi?

'What was it like?' asked Peter, 'what was it like, nearly getting there?'

The boss smiled. 'It was good, Peter. 'Spite of everything, it was very fucking good. I'll tell you about it, if I get the chance. But not right now, I've got other things on my mind. I came back to do something. I'll see her safe, and then I'll get on with it.' He swallowed hard. 'Just tell me one thing. How long? How long was she . . . did that bastard . . .? Shit. I can't say it.'

'My impression is he started hitting on her the moment you left,' said George.

'She held out, and put him off. I think she had to let him have his way, to save our lives, after Ax's chip turned up and David died. That was last October.'

'*We didn't know* what was really going on,' said Bill. 'Fuck, how could we?'

Seven months. Sage reached for the vodka, poured another shot and downed it, with more success this time.

'I don't want to talk to Ax. Don't let me have to talk to him.'

'*You don't want to talk to Ax?*' exclaimed Peter. 'Huh? But what'll we tell him?'

'You'll have to do it sometime,' said George, compassionately.

'I can't. What would I say?' Sage set down the glass and wiped tears with the

back of his hand. 'What could I say to him, George? But I can't anyway. Ax

mustn't know what I'm doing. I'll tell *you*, but you'll have to promise me you'll

keep your mouths shut. Ax and Fiorinda mustn't be involved.' Hours later, at the barmy army HQ at

Easton Friars near Harrogate, he slipped

into the room where she was sleeping. 'Do you want us to go?' whispered one of

the medics. He shook his head. He'd just wanted to see her again, before he left.

From Easton Friars he returned to London, to the roof of a tower in the City that belonged to *eks. Photonics*, his father's company. Before he went to Reading,

to meet the Heads and search Fiorinda's rooms, he'd arranged to borrow a

helicopter and a pilot from his dad. Olwen was on the roof, with Joss Pender.

Fiorinda was rescued, but Ax was still going to have to invade, because Benny

Preminder wasn't going to fold. The Celtics wanted a showdown, and Fiorinda

was *not safe*, though surrounded by an army of ruffians who would gladly die for

her. Joss and his son, the skull-masked giant and the slight, dapper software

baron, talked a little. How *eks.*, had survived 'Fergal's regime, despite the anti

science backlash, due to Joss's low cunning. Polite nothings, to take the place of

the things that should have been said.

Olwen spoke with Serendip. The Zen Self mainframe must go with Sage: a

facet would not be enough this time. 'You may not come back, my lady.'

If the jewel were destroyed, 'Serendip' could be recreated, but a clone is not the same person. It was hard for both of them.

Our friendship will remain, answered Serendip, calmly. In the state of all

states, where nothing is lost. We are together there.

'Thank you for this, Stephen,' said Joss, as the rotors began to turn. Sage was surprised: his dad had called him 'Sage' for years. Not in any friendly way, either. He'd believed Joss was very glad to pretend that Stephen, the sick child from hell, the teenage junkie, had never existed.

'For what? I should be thanking you.'

'For trusting me. For letting me help you, for once in your life.'

Sage took off the mask. 'Thanks for being my fixer.'

They embraced, tall Sage very awkward with the transaction. Olwen gave Sage the ring. He put Serendip on his finger, hugged Olwen, and climbed into the machine. It rose and soared away. The pilot turned and smiled shyly as Sage put on his helmet. 'Hi, Sage. It's good to have you back, Sir.'

'Hi,' said the Minister for Gigs, smiling in return. He relapsed into silence and they soared, they flew westwards. Sage thought of his band, of Ax, of his friends. All over now.

Fiorinda slept for twelve hours, woke feeling almost human and persuaded the barmy whitecoats she was fit to get up. She ate a big bowl of lentil soup, with some very tasty brown bread, to prove it; while they found her some clothes. Showered and dressed (her hair charred at the edges and still stinking of smoke, but never mind) she went in search of company. Easton Friars was buzzing. Everyone was too busy with the war effort to pay attention to a rescued princess. This put her out a little, but she found the Heads eventually, doing nothing in a bare, echoing games room on the ground floor. When they saw her they shot to their feet, their mouths open.

'Fiorinda!' gasped George. 'You're unbelievable. You aren't supposed to be—'

'I'm not *ill*,' said Fiorinda. She perched herself on the arm of a scuffed and balding leather armchair. 'I was nearly burned at the stake, which was quite an experience, and I've no doubt I'm going to crash horribly when the reaction hits me. But for the moment I feel wonderful. It's amazing what not being in prison, and getting a little good news, will do for you.'

George and Bill and Peter sat down slowly, nodding.

'Yeah.'

'Incredible good news.'

'We was just saying that to ourselves,' Peter assured her, with transparent guile.

'Where is Sage?'

Three guilty faces. She discerned that Peter, at least, had been crying. Oh, God. Crash horribly. NO! This is not the moment to crash. 'Where the fuck is he,' she snarled, 'What's he up to? Don't piss around. Just *tell me*—'

'He's gone off to do something important,' said George, unhappily.

'Oh yeah? Like what kind of important? Does Ax know? *What is Sage doing?*'

'Ax knows,' said Bill, 'er, some. He may not have the complete full details—'

Fiorinda set her teeth. 'Oh fine. Absolutely *fine*. So, he's doing something stupid and he has not told Ax. Shit . . . has he gone off to assassinate Benny?' 'No!' The Heads looked relieved, though no less unhappy. 'No, no,' said

George, reassuringly. 'He's not *daft*. Fuck, what's the use in assassinating Benny?'

'Much as it would be a result,' put in Bill.

'It would be politically untenable,' said Peter, 'an' it wouldn't work either.'

'No, no. Fact is, he's gone after your dad, Fiorinda.'

'He's always wanted to,' Peter explained. 'An' he reckons now is the time.'

There was a well-hammered dartboard across the room, flanked by equally

pockmarked portraits. Nineteenth-century hoorays. Did they come with the house, all these tatty old pictures? The world was shaking around her. This world which is still in blissful ignorance of what Rufus O’Niall is.

‘Oh God. Oh, God. He can’t do that. He has *no idea*—’

‘Yes he does, Fiorinda,’ said George, looking her in the eye. ‘*He knows about your dad*. He’s got a plan. An’ he wouldn’t let us go with him, but he’s taken Serendip. I mean, not a facet, Serendip. Olwen’s lent him the ring.’

‘Sage has a plan!’ wailed Fiorinda, jumping to her feet, beside herself with rage and terror. ‘Oh, great. You know fucking well Sage never had a plan in his life, beyond *go for it until you got no armies left*. He has Serendip, oh wonderful. What can a fucking computer do? He doesn’t need *computer*—’ Suddenly, she quieted. She stared at them, in wondering certainty. ‘He needs me.’

They stared back, her guardian angels. Big George. Aquiline Bill, so aloof from the whole vulgar rockstar business. Peter, wrapped in his strange innocence.

They were determined, but *in their dreams* they could keep her out of this. ‘Okay, how bad is it? I was on that bonfire yesterday, and I know he was here last night. Has he left the country?’

‘Not yet,’ said Peter, eager to say something positive. ‘Not ‘til morning tide.’

George and Bill glared at him, disgusted. ‘Thank you, Peter. Right, I want the details. Everything. Come on, *now*.’

10: The Elephant’s Child

Padstow Harbour at first light, one morning in July. The boats moored at the quayside, several ranks deep, were stirring with the dawn. The harbour was a more workmanlike place than it had been a few years ago. There’d have been people about at this hour, but Mr Dictator’s invasion was imminent and every port in England was under curfew, nobody allowed near.

Sage however, had had no trouble getting on board. He moved round the deck, making ready to cast off. The sound of an engine speeded him up, but didn’t distract him. He could deal with anything Padstow’s Coastal Security could suddenly mobilise.

The car turned and headed up New Street. Fiorinda stepped between crates, cables, and stinking puddles of rape-seed engine oil: dropped from the harbour wall and crossed quickly, from deck to deck, to the sleek, dazzling white hull of the *Lorien*. Sage looked up to see his rock and roll brat coming over the stern, dressed in barmy army urban camouflage trousers and a drab teeshirt. He straightened, horrified.

‘Fiorinda. What are you doing here? *How did you*—?’

‘I talked to George, stupid. I’m coming with you.’

The look of sheer horror turned to deeper distress . . . ‘Oh no, Fiorinda. You can’t. . . He’s your father.’

‘Sage,’ Fiorinda advanced with menace down the deck, ‘I don’t know if you ever noticed this, but the word *father* doesn’t mean a whole lot to me. Fear not. If the Furies decide to come after me, *they will get a piece of my mind*. I know Rufus is my father. If I knew everything that had happened to him in *his* life, maybe I would even pity him. Maybe I even do. But leave aside what he did to me long ago, when you were gone, he took me in the body of a dead man, held me under threat of destroying everyone I loved, and he raped me in the body of a dead man for seven months. *Trust me*. I do not need to be protected from the trauma of helping to take him down.’

He didn’t seem to know what to do with his tall body, whether to stand or

kneel, or jump over the side.

'I wasn't there,' he gasped, between flight and desperate abasement, 'Oh, God, I wasn't there, and there's no excuse, nothing explains that—'

'You weren't there. So what? You would only have got yourself killed, and I'd have had to do exactly the same, stepping over your dead body first.'

He nodded, tears spilling, taking every word like a well-deserved blow. 'I knew that. I knew he was coming for us, and I couldn't beat him. I knew the only way I could save you, save anyone, was to reach the Zen, *but I didn't know he was already there*. I left you alone with him, I told you to trust him—'

'Oh, brace up. You didn't know, I didn't know. We were fucking stupid, we couldn't see what was staring us in the face, because we were having our guilty love affair. You weren't there and I got raped, but you're alive, you came back in time to save my life, and then you fucking RUN OUT ON ME AGAIN! Instantly!

I can't believe it, I can't believe it! And how is Ax is going to feel, *you bastard*, when he finds out?' She had reached him, shaking with fury and terror. 'Sage!

You can't kill my father. You cannot kill him! You – you have no idea. He will tear you to pieces!'

'No he won't,' said Sage, pulling himself together. 'It's okay, Fee. He won't.'

On his tanned right hand he wore Olwen's ring. The jewel flashed sunlight.

'Oh yeah, they told me,' she yelled, and leapt at him, so he was forced to catch her in his arms. 'You have Serendip. Fucking wonderful! A *computer* isn't going to help you—!'

'Fiorinda, no, it's not like—'

She pounded at him with her fists. 'He'll tear you to pieces. He'll *tear you to pieces* and that will only be the start—'

'Fiorinda! *Look* at me!'

'You bastard! How can you do this? You fucking idiot!'

'Look at me. *Look*.'

He finally managed to get her attention, to get her to look into his eyes.

She stopped fighting. The time that passed was very short, but when they returned Fiorinda was smiling. They were kneeling, face to face, his arms around her, her hands pressed to his chest. She laughed, they both laughed, hugging each other, without a care in the world.

'Hey,' she said, tugging his head down to kiss him, kisses all over his face,

'forget all that, it's all stupid. We're together again, let's just be happy.' 'Good plan.' Fiorinda pushed her face into the hollow of his throat, breathing

in his warmth. This is Sage, this is my Sage—

'George said you didn't make it.'

'I didn't go all the way, but I got far enough that you're not alone any more, my brat: and Rufus is going to get a surprise. Now—' He unclasped her arms from around his neck, and kissed her hands, 'let me go, *not for long*, but I have things to do.'

'Don't you dare run away.'

'I won't.'

She followed him around in the daybreak, uncertain whether she'd made her point or not. He'd given way a little too easily. Not that she'd know, but this seemed to be quite a toy. The silvery masts were arrayed with strange gleaming futuristic vanes that didn't even look like sails, the wheelhouse held so many winking instrument desks it was like the bridge of a starship. 'Who's is the boat?'

'Friend of my father's.' He grinned over his shoulder. 'Can't help the name.'

'Do you know how to *work* all this stuff?'

‘Nah, but I have a facet of Serendip in the system. She’ll sail the *Lorien*; I’ll be taking her orders. C’me here, lemme show you. You just have to follow the prompts.’ Charts and radar, windspeeds, homeostatic systems . . . She leaned against his side, saying ‘yes’ occasionally: loving the mere sound of his voice, the beautiful mobility of his face. The laughter lines around his eyes and mouth were deeper than they had been. His hair was cropped and he was cleanshaven, but she had the feeling he’d been living rough, outdoors, gone through the second degree-burns stage to get that tan; and a winter too: what *happens* at Caer Siddi? He was wearing a nose-ring, something she hadn’t known him to do for years. But what a lot of information—

‘Hey,’ she said, suddenly, ‘why are you telling me all this?’

‘Ooh, just making conversation.’

Somewhere underfoot there was a sigh and a murmur. Sage grinned at her.

She looked back and the quay was moving. Padstow Harbour retreated, the trees above that pretty jumble of buildings still dark under a depthless sky.

‘We’re leaving! What changed your mind?’

‘Can’t think of what the fuck else to do with you, my brat. I can’t just leave you standin’ there, and who’d help me? There aren’t too many people in Padstow, off the top of my head, would piss on Steve Pender if he was on fire. Let alone hold Fiorinda down, screaming, while he runs off without her—’

‘Again. . . So you agree we’re going after Rufus together?’

‘We can discuss it. Let’s get up the front, I want to watch this bit.’

She sat on the rail in the bows while the Camel River slipped by. Sage, his arm around her, his cheek against her hair, counted off the landmarks of his misspent youth – which she’d never seen before, because he’d never wanted to come back here. The Doom Bar, Brea Hill, Hawker’s Cove, Trebetherwick: names that had fascinated her when she was a pre-teen Heads fan. There are the dunes where Aoxomoxoa lived in the famous beach hut, when he was writing *Morpho*. There’s where the Hoorays used to have their parties, and Steve Pender used to sell them drugs, and experiment on their tiny minds with his proto-immersions.

The river opened into the expanse of Padstow Bay. The murmur of the *Lorien*’s engine cut out. They slipped down together to the deck, hugging and kissing, until Sage was on his back, Fiorinda lying on top of him, propped on her elbows.

‘What am I going to do with this horrible Sage?’ she crooned, ‘I’m going to eat his strawberries, nibble bits of his dinner, I might even *tidy his room*. Oh Sage, what idiots we were. The moment Ax had gone we knew how desperately much we loved him, and we were such *fools* we thought it was a disaster.’

‘Instead of being the best news we ever had in our lives. Fiorinda, what do you think? Do you think he still loves us?’

‘Don’t be stupid, of course he does. That was just a spat.’ She put her head down on his breast, and they lay in silence, just breathing. She slipped her hand under his teeshirt, to feel the warm beat of his heart. ‘How thin you are. What happened at Caer Siddi, Sage?’

‘I don’t know what I can say. I was *out*, of this body, for a very long time.’

‘Are you going to tell me how long?’

His left hand gently massaged her spine. ‘When it scares me less to think about it. . . I had no idea. It felt like a single perception, there was no illusion of duration, no anxiety for what I’d left behind. I could have been gone for hundreds of years, Fee. I would never have known the difference—’ ‘But you were *there*, where you are complete.’ She propped herself up again, to look down into his face. ‘What brought you back, my pilgrim? Miles to go and

promises to keep? If it hadn't been for Rufus, would you have stayed?'

'No!' He grabbed her, bone-cracking tight, arms and legs, showering her with kisses. 'No! Don't you *ever* believe that! I came back for you and Ax, a whole life that would not miss one second of. This is, *this, this*, holding my Fiorinda—'

'Okay, okay, I believe you! Knock it off, you're breaking my ribs!'

He relaxed. Side by side they gazed at the sky.

'Serendip says we've left the bay,' said Sage. 'Let's have a look.'

The *Lorien* had entered a vast, transparent world of blue. Not a sign of human activity, only the seabirds. Hardly a sound but the slap of the waves against the hull. Sage looked up at the complex planes of the sails, shifting and adjusting to catch every lick of breeze, and consulted silently with the mainframe. 'That's it,' he said. 'Everything's fine, perfect conditions. Nothing happens now for hours, except more of this. The next incident should be Fastnet. There's food, how about breakfast, d'you want to eat?'

She did not want to eat. She wanted to sleep, she felt as if she had a year of sleep to recover, but neither of them wanted to leave the blue world. Sage fetched a rug and they lay down again, indifferent to the hard bed, the way they always slept when they were alone: Sage wrapped around her back, Fiorinda holding his hand tucked against her breast.

'Sage, can I tell you the worst thing?' He steeled himself. 'Tell me anything.'

'I think I killed my baby. I'm afraid I killed my baby, to stop Rufus from getting him. I didn't know I was magic, but I knew what he wanted. I was only a kid, but I'd spotted he didn't leave me until he knew I was pregnant. I wouldn't have known I was doing it, I would have been just wanting to keep him safe, but I'm afraid. . . .' She started to cry, hiding her face. 'Oh, Sage it was *okay*. It wasn't as bad as you think, even the worst. I had my plan and I was taking it a minute at a time. But I would lose concentration, and then I would remember that there was no other side, because I knew from the start I could bargain for other people but not for me. He kept on at me and on at me, even in prison. I—I would be with him for ever, with the dead man, fucking me, oh dear, oh dear—'

'Hey, ssh. Hey, sweetheart, look at me, *look*—'

They escaped together, again, to the refuge she had found or created long ago, which she had dared not visit since she'd known the truth about her father.

What will happen now? she wondered. *What will we do, Sage and I?*

What a strange thrill, to think that perhaps they had a future.

'That could get addictive.'

'Mmm. Certn'ly a pleasant kick.'

'But I prefer to stay in the unreal world. Only, my head is so full of hateful—'

She cried and he held her, telling her, you did not kill your baby. You looked after him, you loved him, he died of pneumonia, accidents do happen. Hush, my brave girl. You did amazing. You did fantastic— 'Am I spoiled meat? Will you and Ax never want to fuck me again?'

'Don't be ridiculous. But I don't want to because Ax isn't here—'

'Yes. We want Ax, we won't fuck without him. Say *everything real is good?*'

'Everything real is good.'

'Will you sing me the Jigglypuff song?'

'Coming up.'

So he sang a cartoon lullaby, and rocked her, and eventually she slept. Sage stayed awake, watching her sleeping face, not deceived by the ephemeral, adrenalin-fuelled recovery. It's going to be hard, he thought, it's going to take a long time. But Ax will be with her, and she'll know she's loved. She'll be okay.

The *Lorien* flew on, cruising at thirty knots under sail, like a knife through butter, what a boat. He watched the silvered alloy wings shifting, he watched the beauty of the ocean, and tried not to think of what he'd like to do to Rufus O'Niall. No anger, no ultra-violence, don't muddy the waters, just do what has to be done. It was late afternoon when the computer woke him.

'What is it?' There should be at least another hour of the crossing. 'Something wrong?'

'No,' said the voice Serendip used when she spoke aloud, welling from the empty air. 'Everything's in order. I didn't want you to miss the dolphins.'

There was a school of them, a striped kind. They stayed for miles, surfing the bow wave as if the *Lorien* was a big ship: leaping up, bright-eyed, to beam at their whooping and cheering audience. By the time they left, banking off and vanishing to the south, the yacht had passed between Fastnet Rock and Cape

Clear and changed her course. They were heading into Roaring Water Bay, at the southern tip of West Cork, with its skein of islands strung between the sailing ports of Baltimore and Skull. One of which, the hourglass-shaped Inis Oir, Island of Gold, was the private property of Rufus O'Niall.

Their perfect breeze was breaking up as they left the powerful calm of the open sea; and they were not alone anymore. There were other smart pleasure craft, chugging ferries; fishing boats and little outboard-motored dinghies. They went down to the galley and brought back sandwiches of bread and sliced ham, with some red wine. The wine was extremely superior, wasted on both of them, but they ate, and drank it anyway, passing the bottle between them at the rail, admiring the traffic. It was very strange to see all these people out enjoying the beautiful weather—as if through a clear but impenetrable veil.

'Okay,' said Sage, 'given the situation at home, and given that this trip would be breaking quarantine, if there was nothin' else going on, this is the tricky bit. We can be sure there are suits in the *Dail* who would be glad to hold our coats while we take out Rufus, but officially the Irish government is neutral and we must not be caught.

'No need to worry about the radar on Mount Gabriel – that's Mount Gabriel, the hill above Skull – it won't spot the *Lorien*. But there's three Irish cruisers standing off Kinsale, which is a little too close, and Serendip's not sure what they're doing there. We seem to have sneaked by . . . just have to hope for the best. It's the right time to be coming into the bay. This is party central for West

Cork sailing folk, it's hit the pubs hour and we are lost in the crowd: fuck of a sight better than trying it after dark. We have a fake radio identity, and *Lorien's* radar profile is non-existent. Once we're between the Calf Islands and Inishodriscol, that's the one over there—

'You're very convincing, motor mouth. Is this all from Serendip?'

'Not all of it. I'm remembering some: I've been here before. My dad brought me on a sailing trip, when I was fourteen. Last-ditch bonding attempt.'

'Was that good?'

'Diabolical. I hated him, I couldn't do fuck around the boat, an' although I didn't count myself as addicted it was my first experience of missing the smack, which he knew nothing about, an' he would have gone beserk—'

'I get the picture. Hey, shouldn't we be talking about what happens next?'

'Yeah. Let's get parked first.'

The *Lorien* slipped through the islands, the sunset behind her, looking no way out of place; just very classy. On the land side of Inishodriscol they lost the crowd. They passed Rufus's boat dock in the waist of Inis Oir, with the village

climbing above it. About half a mile further, and they entered an inlet under engine power. There were no buildings in sight, only rugged little cliffs, capped with a rising ground of gorse and heather. It was darker suddenly, without the great sky.

They went back to the wheelhouse. 'So,' said Fiorinda. 'What now?'

'Ah . . . Well. We're somewhat exposed. There's not much chance he doesn't know we're coming. But we have things in our favour. Rufus is a fearsomely powerful magician, but he's also been a superstar for forty years. He hasn't the sense he was born with. He can't tie his own shoelaces.' Sage grinned. 'As I would know. Also, if he's like any other senior rock musician I ever met, he's more than a little *deaf*.'

Fiorinda crossed her eyes. 'Eh?'

They laughed. But there was something wrong. Sage had been acting shifty since they left the ocean and turned towards the land. Oh, here it comes. He took her hand and led her to one of the cockpit chairs. A solemn look. She realised they'd never had that discussion he'd promised.

'Sweetheart. I'm going on alone.'

'Don't do this to me.'

Never trust Sage when he gives in easily, over anything. 'Fiorinda please.

Please, my baby, have mercy on me. How could I ever face Ax if I let you come along? You can't be involved. No one must know that you or Ax were in on this.

I brought you with me because I realised you were as safe on board the *Lorien* as you could be anywhere, and I have been so happy with you today. But you're going to wait here. The *Lorien* won't be seen, even if someone comes looking. I have a mirror-routine running, sampling the light on the rocks and the water.

Serendip won't let you leave the boat; she'll stop you by knocking you out if she has to, but she'll stay here as long as it's safe. If I'm not back when the next tide turns, or if for any reason it's time to go, she'll take you home.'

'You bastard,' said Fiorinda. 'I should have known.'

What could she do? Make things harder? No.

She looked out at the inlet, thinking, this is *Ireland*, where I have never set foot, while he went below. When he came back, he'd changed into his sand-coloured suit. He looked amazing. She kissed him goodbye and watched him row to the cusp of beach. He must have been rowing for the fun of it: as soon as he got out and shipped the oars the dinghy came gliding back to the *Lorien*'s side all by itself. He waved, blew her a kiss, and set off into the gold and indigo twilight. She sat for a while, chin on her hands.

'Serendip. I'm very sorry I said that about you being only a computer. You wouldn't hold me here against my will, would you?'

'Of course not, Fiorinda,' said the empty air. 'And apology accepted.'

'Thank you. Tell me when I should go after him.'

He looked back, from the ridge. The *Lorien* was invisible. There was nothing to be seen except the water and the rocks; and a couple of odd shadows. That's good, he thought, that's *very* good. He climbed down into the next bay, and here there was a real beach, a great wide sweep of golden sand, with romantic little cliffs and picturesque boulders; and the castle on the opposite headland, facing the west. Nice pad, Rufus. Location, location, location.

He walked by the ebb tide, where the minor colours of twilight lay caught in the wet sand, thinking of the miserable fuck-up he'd made of his life, and how he'd failed his darling, again and again. But Ax trusted me. When Ax left, he trusted me to look after Fiorinda. He was wrong, but *Ax trusted me*, I remember

that and it all falls away, the chances missed, the hope refused, all that sorry record. I'm all right now. I'm sorted.

The cliff was a piece of piss, likewise the curtain wall of the bawn, the outer defence of Rufus's castle. The stonework was new but it wasn't sheer; the infra red traps and the photo-opportunities easy to miss. Once within the bawn he forced an ordinary Yale lock on someone's back door in the domestic staff's quarters. Everyone was out, according to Serendip; for the moment, anyway. He sat gathering himself, looking around: at kiddie art magneted to the door of the fridge, the ancient oilcloth on the table, the brand-new webtv beside the cereal packets; a photo of a football team. A dog-eyed, sepia Jesus gazed from the wall, pointing to his Sacred Bleeding Heart . . . This palimpsest of histories that we live in. These human things, that look so precious, so vulnerable and fragile: but it's not true. A tiger is vulnerable. Trees, rivers, mountains, *they* are fragile. He wondered about the woman who ruled here. Did she have opinions? Or did she just live from day to day, not knowing anything except that she loved a few people? He thought he ought to have a clear head. Why am I doing this? To avenge my darling? To protect England? To save the billions? Are my motives pure?

I don't know.

I'll just have to wing it.

Serendip told him it was time to move on, warm bodies approaching. He went through the house, out the front door, and he was in the inner courtyard of Drumbeg, an open space surrounded by handsome stone buildings, either new or much restored; and the tower.

It was half dark. There were armed guards, but they were avoidable. The dogs were more alert. Two Dobermans came trotting up, through the pools of shadow between the security lights: heads low, silent, trained to give no warning before they attacked. He put on the mask. *'I don't like dogs,'* he said softly, in the back of his throat. They took the advice, and returned to their routine patrol. Sage had noticed, years ago, that animals seemed to *understand* the mask. The results could be unpredictable, it wasn't something he'd try again in a hurry on a nervy fucking big police horse; but dogs aren't dangerous.

Now he met a real obstacle, but it was the last. The door at the base of the tower was double-timbered, thickly covered with fanged studs of polished iron, and the lock was a massive, ancient thing, not amenable to high-tech persuasion. But he still didn't need magic, which was good. He wasn't sure of the limits of his new-found superpowers, but it seemed to make sense to conserve them. He took out a ring of heavy-duty skeleton keys and Serendip told him what to do. And here we are, in at the front end.

The ground floor of the tower was surprisingly small. He had seen plans, and a video (an interview that the lord of Drumbeg had done in here, carelessly, years ago), but imagination is stronger. He'd still been expecting an English, baronial-style hall. The room had no furniture except for a mass of ancient weapons, lovingly displayed on the white walls. Fine, silky rugs on the stone flagged floor; a stone spiral staircase in one corner. Across from the entrance another, modern door, promised different territory beyond. That was the way to the guardrooms; but Rufus's private army wouldn't come running unless someone raised the alarm. A brass pitcher full of leaves and hothouse flowers stood in the cold hearth: the glossy magazine touch. On the wall above there was a picture in an Art Deco frame, a soft-porn portrait of a very young girl, displayed on a woodland bank, her little breasts uplifted, her knees open, lips

parted and gossamer wings spread wide.

The girl was Fiorinda, of course.

Someone came down the stairs, treading softly. It didn't sound like Rufus.

Who could this be? When, apparently astonished beyond caution, this person had crept out into the middle of the floor, he turned around. A woman of a certain age stood there, dressed in a long green open robe over a slinky catsuit type thing: slim as fashion, long legs, a superb pair of tits, glossy, aubergine coloured hair. She stared at him, wide-eyed. Ah, I know. 'Carly Slater,' he said brightly, bowing a little from his height. 'I think we met, once. You won't remember. Some fucking VIP lounge somewhere.'

She bolted for the stairs.

Sage followed, leisurely. He could hear music.

The source of the music was in the room at the top which, Irish-style, was the great hall, and here was the traditional rockstar castle stuff that he'd expected below: a minstrels' gallery, massive black oak antiques, a grand piano, costly knickknacks, fabulous paintings; and a fabulous view, lost in the evening, through broad windows all around. No sign of Carly. He didn't see Rufus either, at first. A wallscreen, maybe three metres across, hung opposite the stair. It was showing the Inauguration Concert at Reading, of all things. Aoxomoxoa, skull-masked, in his sweeping black and white kimono, towers predatory over Fiorinda. Give me your hand, he croons, meaning, *I'm going to have you*, and she answers, pure as crystal, raising her starry eyes.

Vorrei e non vorrei—

Intimidated? Not she. She'll take the Don apart, this one.

'Can you remember the future, Steve?' enquired a man's deep voice, rich and musical, received rockstar with just the trace of an Irish accent.

'Me?' said Sage, grinning, strolling forward, hands in his pockets. 'I can't remember anything. Too many drugs.'

An armchair under the screen turned (it didn't scrape on the floor). A big man was sitting there, relaxed and magnificent, shining black curls on his shoulders, a much photographed face, not so young as it once was. 'Aoxomoxoa,' said Rufus.

'How times change. Last time we met you were the fart-sucking faceless king of the lads. Now you're the sex god that every man, woman and child in Ax Preston's little manor wants to *fuck*. Or be fucked by. But Aoxomoxoa, they say, loves only that grey-eyed slip of a girl who is the queen of England . . . I've been expecting you. Take a seat, make yourself at home.'

The screen had switched to 'Atlantic Highway'. Four skull-headed idiots bounced over the potholes in a terrible old wreck of a car, convertible as in someone sawed the roof off, chief idiot sporting pink sunglasses and a Goonhilly Earth Station baseball cap. On backwards, of course. In a moment the masks will disappear. They'll cruise along Newquay seafront, all the tat edited out, and step out into a suave Cornish Riviera.

Sage folded himself into a black-oak baronial chair, facing the lord of Drumbeg, his hands still in his pockets, legs stretched out. 'Is this what you do with yourself these days, Rufus? Slob around in yer carpet slippers, watching my old videos?'

Rufus took a couple of draws on the cigar he was smoking. Then he decided to offer the box, pushing it across the massive, mediaevaloid coffee table that stood between them. No doubt these were very fine cigars. 'Please, help yourself.'

'Wasted on me, thanks. They make me throw up.'

'Really? But you're smoking a cigar in this video, a little further on.' 'It was a prop. I don't recall if

anyone actually smoked it; I cert'nly didn't.

Have you been studying my fucking videos as a *hobby*? Now that is sad.'

Rufus pulled the table closer to him, leaned down and spooned a quantity of white powder from a silver bowl, cut it deftly and offered a silver straw.

'What about a little blow? It's Bolivian, certified organic.'

Sage shook his head. 'Not my drug.' He noted that he was being offered, in some sense, fire and salt, and wondered if there was a ritual significance. Fucked if he cared. No, in these circumstances, has to be the right answer.

Rufus leaned back. 'How old are you, Steve? Thirty-one, thirty-two? The perfect age for a rockstar. You've made the shitloads of money. You don't yet realise that no matter what the fuck you do now, you're on the downward slope. But all those people looking at you, they know. They've seen you take the step beyond the top, they've seen you topple. You can write your rock symphonies, fill the Superbowl, but you're *over*. Oh, you don't mind if I call you Steve?'

This earned a big sunny smile. I mind, if my opponent tells me he's rattled?'

'Not at all. My grandad still calls me Stephen.'

'Maybe you'd like to see some pictures I took of her when she was twelve years old. The ones I took for the artist . . . She was very compliant, a real little professional.'

'No thanks.' Rufus looked irritated. He crushed out the cigar in a chunky bronze sheelanagig ashtray. 'Then what *do* you want, Steve? If you're not prepared to accept my hospitality?'

'I'm here to kill you,' explained Sage, placidly. He took his hands out of his pockets and laid them on the arms of the chair, in full view. The jewel on his right hand caught shards of light from the fake-flambeaux around the walls. 'I'm gonna break your legs and peg you out and leave you for the tide. Anythen' else you need to know?'

The big man, in his dark, gold-fringed mantle, majestically filling that chair, drew a long, measured breath.

'Partly because of what you did to my babe,' Sage went on, 'I have to admit that, though I'm fighting the idea: because that would be revenge, an' I know it would be wrong, an' only store up trouble. Partly because *you won't stop*, Rufus. Everybody knows you won't. You're beat, you're not king of the hill anymore, but there's no way anyone can say to you, be a good lad and retire quietly, and you'll do it. You'll keep coming back, fucking everything up. And partly—'

Rufus laughed heartily. 'What, more? How many excuses do you need?'

Sage was reminded of something he'd had to face. The person he'd *liked*, in Fergal Kearney's body, though with a different voice, and eyes, and physical presence: the misfit, loser, but also a really clever and knowing guy, had been in some way Rufus O'Niall. God help me, of course I liked him. He is her father. 'And partly for your sake, Rufus. Because I've some faint idea what it might feel like, being where you are. Think of me as the doctor. I've come to get you out of the shit you are in. You don't have to die if you don't want. We could talk about other ideas.'

The two men looked into each other's eyes.

There was a silence.

Suddenly the magician surged to his feet, sweeping up the mediaeval coffee table like a mad, huge shield. 'Damn you to hell!' he shouted. He flung his shield and charged forward, unstoppable, stormed past Sage and rushed out the room. Rufus ran down the stairs to the bedchamber on the floor below, leaped inside and barred the door. He was very stirred-up, not at all concerned. He called the

guardroom and spoke to O'Donoghue, his security chief. In rapid fire he ordered everybody out: men, domestic staff, the lot. They could sleep in the village, or wherever the fuck they liked. He didn't want them around. For what was going to happen, he wanted a free hand.

O'Donoghue didn't question or protest. He knew better than that.

Rufus broke the connection, feeling profound relief. He had stopped something that could have been a fuck-up. Now what? He paced up and down, lacerated by memory. The terrible shock, when he had seen her on stage at that fucking Inauguration Concert, for the first time. Oh God, *she's changed, she's changed*. Until then he hadn't cared what happened. He hadn't been phased when she fought him off, the night when he tried to initiate her. That was just girlish rebellion, very sexual, to be expected. He hadn't given a shit about the boyfriends. She was still his creature, he knew he could reach out and take her, any time. But when he'd seen her, on the screen, and he had known *she's changed, she's changed!* God, the burning outrage. Those two bastards, they took her from me, they changed her. That doesn't go unpunished! They're going to be sorry they were born.

And he hadn't let it go unpunished.

He thought of Aoxomoxoa's little litany; well here's mine. I want Fiorinda back. I will make her mine again, and she will bear the child, *my son*, that only she can bear. I want the Celtic future, and I will help to make it happen. . . . He laughed, full and hearty. Right to the last moment, he would have saved her. But he'd been prepared to let Fiorinda die if he had to, for the sake of the larger vision: the more so because he'd felt she was dead already. It had not been his magical child, the broken-spirited thing, cowering in that prison. Now she was alive – and without Rufus having to intervene at all.

Thank you very much, Steve!

Now I'm going to wipe that grin off your face, you insolent bastard.

He went on pacing, from sheer excess of energy, the space that surrounded the great bed. There should be fresh rushes in here, arm's-length deep. They say they can't find a supplier who'll change them daily, it's maddening. She's alive. I will take her back. I will make her mine again. The English Celtics had sent him messages, warning him to expect an assault, because Sage had returned from

Caer Siddi. They'd advised him to double his security, or get himself out of the way. As if they thought he didn't know. As if they could tell him what to do.

Like fuck.

The way I deal with this is mine. I take no pissant advice. This is MINE.

What shall I do with him? I can do what I like with him.

It was not a problem that Sage was within the gates. The tower was a mantrap. Oh no, having the enemy inside is no disadvantage; this place is custom-built for that situation. The chieftains who ruled here, five hundred years ago, never dreamed of a life without armed guards at the door. They weren't fools. They knew you can't have power without the accessories.

He grinned to think of how he'd wrecked that fantasy, in Brixton.

'Thank you for saving her life for me, Steve,' he shouted. 'And congratulations. You trained her up to be a good fuck. She was a cold little fish when she was a child. It wasn't the sex that held me, she made all the running there. I loved her for her mind.'

Silence. But he knew the bastard was out there, listening.

'You can't kill me. If you had the power, you haven't got the balls. You can only kill when you're following orders, and master isn't here now. You're Ax

Preston's dog. Everyone knows it. They laugh at you, all your old mates. Hey, how does it feel, bitch? How does it feel, taking it up the arse from a coloured boy, Aoxomoxoa?' He wondered at himself. How *young* he felt. Like a teenager. 'You never talked to Ax much, did you?' came Sage's voice. Rufus listened carefully, placing him. 'When you were Fergal. I remember noticin' that. You knew he'd see through you. You were never afraid of me. I'm stupid. I'm a pussycat.'

Out on the stairs Sage sat crosslegged, whistling under his breath, arraying his weaponry. He'd been carrying his Roman legionary's shortsword concealed under his suit jacket. He laid it beside Fiorinda's saltbox. Doesn't look like much, but he had relied on Drumbeg being well-supplied, and he'd been right. And a handgun, the automatic from his desk in Battersea. Like George always says, it's a sin to ignore the obvious. So what was the plan? The plan was to come here, bullshit Rufus into accepting single combat, and then . . . er . . . win.

He liked this plan. It was simple. It had no moving parts. It was Sage-proof. The other option, where the evil magician repents, was an offer that must be made, and Rufus knew that the offer was real. However, let's face it, not a serious contender at this stage. But it does seem to wind him up nicely!

He thought of wrestling with George, and how you should handle yourself with an experienced opponent who outbulks you by a margin, and who has a cunning mind behind the weight. Who can pin you down, if you let him. Be careful, be careful. A moment ago he'd been on the point of yelling, '*What happened in England, Rufus? You couldn't get past my babe, could you?*' God help me, I am such a fuck-up. Don't get him thinking in that direction. He mustn't start thinking about Fiorinda.

Be careful!

Shit, he had nothing belonging to Ax. Oh. Yes I do. I am Ax Preston's bitch. He laughed. You think I don't want to belong to him? You think that's an *insult*? 'Hey, Rufus, you just sent your private army away. Why d'you do that? With a homicidal deranged intruder in the house? Wasn't that kind of a strange move?'

Oh, fuck. *Be careful!*

Rufus opened the door of the bedchamber. Sage fired instantly, at point-blank range. The magician should have copped two bullets in the forehead, and another in the chest, not heavy calibre but big enough to leave no doubt. Nothing happened to him. The bullets fell, spent as if they'd travelled for miles, and chimed away down the winding stone stair.

'I have a charm against firearms,' he said, grinning like a barracuda. 'Not a soul of them will harm me or anything of mine. Have you not heard the stories?' 'Worth a try.'

'Jaysus Fockin' God, that was poor. I expected better.'

Sage was breath to breath with the ghost of Fergal Kearney: a waft of carrion, sea-green eyes looking out of torment. Rufus caught him in the moment of shock and pity with a mighty cuff around the head, and followed it through with a twist of the arm and a thrust of such violence Sage went sprawling, tumbling out of sight around the curve of the stair. Rufus laughed. Not such an old man, Steve!

'I was pretty sure I couldn't shoot you,' called Sage. 'Maybe you're right an' I shouldn't have tried, without warning. Listen, we can talk. I *know* how it feels to be where you are. Are you sure you don't need help?'

'Are you pure in heart?' shouted Rufus. 'You'd fuckin' better be, Sage me

darling. If you are not, then get out of here. Go. Because I'm going to tear your soul from your body, and put you living into Hell for all eternity. You can't withstand me. Believe it. *Are you pure in heart?*'

'Nothen' like. There's places in my heart it'll be a long time before I dare go near. But I'm on my way. I'm good enough to take you. You're not so tough, old timer.'

'My son would have been ten years old!' howled the magician.

He rushed to the landing below, his eyes aflame, his hair coiling like Medusa snakes, his good looks contorted into a mask so furious that even the king of the lads recoiled. Sage tried to run down another flight. Rufus leapt on him and dragged him into the room where the chieftains had dispensed justice, which was a library now. Then they fought in earnest, Sage a few inches taller, Rufus broader and heavier: grappling and gouging, around the booklined justice chamber and the bigger room next door, a superstar's toy recording studio, leaving a trail of wreckage, shattering anything movable, no holds barred, two things becoming clear: Sage was trying to move the fight downstairs, out to the beach, presumably, so he could carry out his promise. Though he fought like a madman, his intent was always to get back to the stair, get out of these rooms. But he could not succeed, because the other thing that became clear was that Rufus was stronger by far than the younger man.

And he grew stronger.

Whenever Sage could escape, he wasn't fighting, he was running away. He'd put the Roman sword under his jacket before he took those potshots; he never had a chance to draw it. Rufus was happy with no weapon but his bare hands. Around and around they went, until at last Sage escaped, and almost made it down the next flight. But Rufus was playing with him. He came on in another great rush, laid hold of Sage by the shoulders, wrenched him off his feet and sent him crashing against the wall. Sage was up again at once, only to be met by a tremendous lock around his neck and under his right arm. He couldn't do a thing, he was like a struggling child. The man's strength was monstrous.

'Now you start to understand,' said Rufus in Sage's ear, hot cheek pressed against the shorn fleece, *'now—'* He closed his teeth in Sage's scalp and gnawed, shook his head from side to side, spattering blood, and started to haul him back up the stairs, nothing in hell Sage could do, Rufus's grip was so inhumanly powerful. If he had managed to brace himself immovably his head would have been torn off, his arm ripped from its socket. So they arrived back in that room with the armchairs and the big screen and the expensive art. 'Listen, let me tell you,' said Rufus, with unhurried relish, holding Sage

pinned beside one of the windows. Sage stared back, through the blood that was streaming down his face. He had no breath left for taunting. 'You're gonna take a fall now. It's enough to break your bones. You can stop them from breaking, but you'll be draining your power, and you don't know how to open yourself to replenishment. I know you don't. I can feel it, and *I know you*. You don't know how to *take* what you *want*.' He shifted his hold to shoulder and thigh, unperturbed by his opponent's resistance, heaved back and took a swing, as if with a battering ram, and Sage went flying, crashing through the glass, out into the night, and tonight and to the courtyard three floors below.

Fiorinda had reached Drumbeg while the fight on the stair was going on. She had found Carly Slater, in a little room above the entrance hall which had a hole in the middle of the floor, where the old inhabitants of this place used to chuck down missiles at invaders. She had not been very surprised to find her aunt. She

was well-informed about Rufus's present and past life, after her months with Fergal. She knew that Carly had been with him all along, had never been parted from him, not really, since the long ago—

When Fiorinda found her, Carly had been sitting on a little stool, a doll made out of yellow straw in her lap, which she was rapidly, urgently, picking apart while the sounds of battle raged overhead. Now Fiorinda had ripped the dolly to pieces. The tight curl of yellow hair she had found in its heart, she'd kissed and put inside her teeshirt, next to her skin. Carly had offered supposedly upsetting suggestions, while they were disputing possession, as to how she'd got hold of a piece of Aoxomoxoa; she had not succeeded in distracting Fiorinda. Now Carly was up against the wall, wrapped in stone the way Fiorinda had been wrapped in the resurrected branches of the storm-timber chair.

She stood listening, taking great breaths. The air seemed thickened, richer. She felt as if everything gave off sparks. *What a rush* this magic is. It's a dreamworld. Everything's contracted. Nothing's in focus except what matters, but in that context, you can do what you like. Exactly what you fucking like—

Sage had not fallen. His exit from the window had not been much more of a challenge than recovering from a misjudged stunt dive. He'd ended up clinging to the stonework, finding purchase with his fingertips and the toes of his climbing boots, flexible as dancing slippers. My name is Aoxomoxoa, Rufus, you've seen the show: and now I have superpowers, but I'm not going to jump. For once in my life I am not going to ask for trouble . . . Keeping a three-point hold on the tower, he tugged the nosering apart with his free hand and sent a spider wire thickening and spinning downwards. Secured the top end, by thrusting the ring itself into the mortar between two courses of stone and twisting it so it expanded, a tiny explosive piton, locked in there. Who needs magic when you have Heads stagecraft? He wrapped his sleeve over his hand with the line wound round it: kicked off and bounced, abseiling down to the ground.

Another cheap round. He could feel none of the damage he'd taken; what damage? In fine shape, boiling with energy, he walked briskly to the front end of the tower again, the legionary's sword naked in his hand. He looked up. Fiorinda was looking down at him, from the murder hole.

Her presence at once seemed very reasonable. Of course she's here!

'How's it going, babes?'

'Not too bad. I met Carly. I have her wrapped up for you.' She dropped into his arms and he hugged her, laughing, the bare sword in his hand.

'You are a *bad* brat, and I am never going to trust Serendip again. D'you know, I think that computer's fallen out with me, she hasn't said a word since I started fighting Rufus. I detect tetchy vibes. Hey, Fee, what happened to jeopardising your immortal soul?'

'I d-decided my immortal soul can take a couple of knocks,' gabbled Fiorinda, her whole mind and body on fire, 'if I have one. It's a good cause, isn't it?'

'I don't know.' He set her on her feet. 'I don't know anymore. Oh, Fiorinda, this is dangerous stuff. I just this moment realised I am smashed out of my brain, and I didn't even know it, which is *not* the way I'd meant to approach—'

'I told you, I told you. *Fucking* dangerous, oh, my God—'

They grabbed each other, raining furious kisses, fused into one being,

flooded with incredible arousal. 'Can we do this? Fee, can we do this, I mean Sage—' 'I *know* what you mean. I don't know! I don't know! I don't think I can

stop.' 'God, this is amazing, I can't tell you apart from me—'

'We need Ax!' wailed Fiorinda; and then immediately, horrified, 'Oh no, no, no. I don't want Ax here. I don't want Ax to have anything to do with this!' Her distress sobered them and the world came back: the ground floor of the castle tower, and air that was cold as old stone. At some point the lights had gone out. The weapons on the walls caught gleams from the summer night outside.

'Nonsense,' said Sage, earnestly. 'Ax was worrying me, before he took off. May I say, both of you were getting me depressed, with your political differences, I fucking *hated* that. But he is okay. He's not a monster. We're the ones in danger!'

'I *know*,' said Fiorinda, with the same urgency. 'I *know* he's okay. But for a moment my head is clear, so it was worth being scared. Sage, I'm in this. I'm not leaving you to do this alone. Just tell me one thing. Who is winning?'

'Me.'

He did not look as if he'd been getting the best of the fight.

'You're absolutely certain about that?'

'*Absolutely*.' Sage grinned like a tiger, stone cold sober, and took the saltbox from his jacket pocket. 'You'd better have this.'

Suddenly, Rufus was at the open doorway. Fiorinda and Sage sprang apart.

What's going to happen now? How did he get down the tower? He didn't come by the stairs. Maybe he'd leapt from the shattered window in the great hall. He

was clearly on fire as they had been, oh, *but much more so*. He had shed his purple mantle during the wrestling bout. He was wearing it again, wound and tied around him so as not to impede his movement. His still-beautiful face was transfigured, exultant. He looked at Fiorinda, one glance, and then ignored her.

'I have never had competition before!' he shouted, and swept weapons from the walls, testing and discarding. He tossed a second sword to his opponent, choosing a heavier model and a barbed trident for himself. 'You're right! This is the way to settle it! This is the Celtic way! Come on, bastard, fucking take me on, would you? Let's do it!'

Call that round one to Sage.

Sage leapt at Rufus. Battle was rejoined, a clashing and clanging of metal in the dark, sudden sweeps of whiteness across the empty courtyard as the security lighting woke, Sage running whenever he had the chance, as long as Rufus would come after him, determined to lure the magician away from his home ground—

Fiorinda stood clutching her head between her hands, seared by her father's glance, appalled by the traps that magic sets. Rufus wasn't supposed to know she was here! She had meant to be Sage's secret weapon! Oh God, I can't challenge him if he knows I'm here. Such a coil of ancient fear and grief and twisted longing around him, how can I reduce that and come out winning? Sage

was right, he's my father, he has the power and I'm no use.

Carly dropped from the murder hole.

Oh boy. *Shit*. How did she do that? How *could* she—?

'Have you got a phone?' demanded Carly. 'I'm going to call the police!'

She zoomed across the dark hall and started hammering a number combination into the lock on the inner door. Fiorinda chased after her. The door flew open, Carly hit a light switch and there was an empty room, with common room type furniture, drab tables and chairs, tall padlocked cabinets around the walls. An armoury.

'Where is everyone?' said Fiorinda, staring.

'Rufus sent them away,' gasped Carly. 'I think your fucking boyfriend made him do it. We've got to stop them, Fiorinda. They're going to kill each other!'

'Yes,' said Fiorinda.

Carly had grabbed a landline phone and pulled it to the floor. She was on her knees, stabbing at the keypad, the stiff skirts of her green robe ballooning round her, sheeny purple hair falling over her face. Fiorinda walked over, took the phone and threw it onto the stone floor. 'You're not going to call anyone.'

The two women stared at each other.

This is Carly Slater, procuress to the famous, who took the child Fiorinda to Rufus O'Niall's country house to be seduced. Unjustly blamed for this crime, in a sense, because she was only obeying Rufus. . . Looking at her, Fiorinda was eleven again. She was in the cold house where Rufus O'Niall had pursued his affair with the Slater sisters.

I didn't like you, Carly, but I liked all the treats.

'I think I once saw you in bed with my mum and Rufus,' she said. 'Do you remember? I didn't know what you were doing to her, I didn't understand that I was seeing magic, of course. But I was scared to death.'

Carly stared with large, grey-green eyes. 'Kill me,' she whispered.

'Not a chance. I want you to grow *very* old.' She twisted off the lid of her saltbox, flicked her wrist and sent a white spinning curl of salt to fall around Carly's skirts, a circle on the floor. 'Try getting out of *that*, shit-for-brains. You're not going to help Rufus. Nor do any more magic tricks on my Sage. Got it?'

Carly made a keening sound and stared at Fiorinda out of the place where Fergal Kearney had been. 'For pity's sake. Kill me.'

Oh fuck.

She didn't look very different from the first day Fiorinda had met her. Ten years isn't long, for a fashionable woman with access to every cosmetic aid. But there was a deadness in her features. Carly's face was a mask with something looking through the eyeholes. Her hand came down, slowly and as if stealthily – Fiorinda watching, fascinated – and swept a break in the ring of salt.

Fiorinda crouched, instantly: shoved it back in place, and felt an appalling rush. *What* a rush. Her ears were ringing, her eyes darkened.

'My bossy little girl,' murmured Carly. The slim hand came down again, same stealthy *intense* gesture.

Fiorinda made the ring whole again, thinking furiously. She wasn't afraid to use the saltbox, although the box had been a present from Gran, which meant it was very dodgy. So what? All magic is untrustworthy, and hey, I can take over the means of production as a revolutionary act. I've read about that . . . But she could see where this was going. He moves, I move. I'm pinned down. If I break and run, I've lost him. I could kill Carly, but no, *I won't do that*. I won't murder this horrible woman, who is completely helpless, that can't be a good move.

There, he's broken it again, and I fix it. The rush was indescribable, it tasted of metal and blood; it tasted of something huge beyond measure: but it's okay, I'm doing the hard thing not the easy thing, fixing not breaking, holding him off, refusing, like when I was in prison, only *Imustn't lose my concentration*.

She lost her concentration—

Carly rocketed to her feet and leapt over the ring. Her robe caught fire; she screamed and beat at the flames with her hands, but already, trailing little whirls of smoke, she was scrabbling the tables, the desks, searching for focus material – paper, pencil, wax, cord, anything a witch could use. Fiorinda had been knocked out, flung away somewhere. She came back, into her body, ran at Carly and caught her by the hair and saw, with a sickening delight, how the imprisoned

creature looked at her: Carly's head pulled back, Carly herself still in there, mortally terrified, *just the way my mother was*. Oh God, Sage, this is dangerous. I will kill her, and then there will be no way back. I will be what Rufus is— Oh, my Sage, fight for me, and I will fight for you—

The swordfight went on and on, a hard, archaic slog. No one came running, though the lights must have looked very strange and the dogs in their kennel were kicking up a hell of a racket. Perhaps there were often strange nights, when the dogs at Drumbeg yelled their heads off, and Rufus's peasants and his men at arms just knew to stop their ears. Imagine it: Rufus pays well, demands complete loyalty, and gets obeyed: implicitly obeyed. It's nothing you can persuade anyone to talk freely about, but he's a very ill feller to cross.

Sage had taken a couple of slices, including a bad one in his right calf muscle that he'd copped one time when he had Rufus down for a moment. These cuts, like the bitewound in his scalp, were not worrying him, but they were bleeding freely. Rufus was unscathed. On the other hand, the fight had moved out of the bawn: Sage still falling back, and Rufus racing joyously after him. They were through the gates – which the duellists had found standing open, the gatehouse deserted, the alarms silent. Sage did not know if he had disarmed the system himself, or if Fiorinda had done it; or even Rufus, the better to pursue the joy of battle. All the magic runs together, as if to one end.

The fight was on the grey road now, that ran through the castle's grounds, along the top of the cliffs. Sage wanted to get down to the beach, and there was a path, but he couldn't get Rufus to take it. Never mind: he was on the right track, *he could feel it*.

What is happening here is that two men, each of them able to engage *directly* with the whole fifteen-dimensional kaleidoscope, are trying whose ability to change the world is greater. Their super powers cancel each other out, *almost*. This male-animal contest, the cut and thrust of the heavy weapons, the bloody, sweating struggle, is the form that they have chosen; to decide the question. A sword fight has a rhythm that each partner tries to destroy: and that's essentially what's happening in all the dimensions. Whose rhythm will set the tune? Which of us has the edge? It's overwhelming, it's glorious, to argue your cause with *the state of all states* on equal terms. To handle the world as if it's the contents of your own mind . . . (see that word *handle* there: you can't get away from the physical, Magic is a physical thing—)

But Rufus had the same power as Sage, though he came by it differently. He'd been using magic for a long time, and he wasn't losing.

The Irishman was singing. Tears of emotion stood in his shining eyes and ran down his cheeks. He had no death wish. He was sure he was going to win, though he knew by now he'd been disinformed. Sage chose to return to mortality, he did not *fail*. The bastard has much more control than he made out— *When I lie upon my bed of slumber, thoughts of my true love rise in my mind— I turn around to embrace my darling. Instead of gold 'tis the brass I find—* Sage didn't feel like singing. He was here to kill a man.

A lock. Aoxomoxoa and Rufus O'Niall, knuckle to knuckle in a clinch neither could break, Sage holding off that wicked trident in Rufus's left hand with his shortsword. Sage had put on the mask, for old times' sake. The living skull shone in the dark.

'When did you first know you were different, Steve?' demanded Rufus, his hot breath inches away. 'That you were *more*? Richer, stronger, *too much*? Was it when you were two, three years old? You found out that nobody could best you.

So you found your way up to the rock stage, which is the greatest theatre of power, *pure physical sexual power*, in the whole fucking world, and you ruled.' Rufus tried to force the disengagement. Sage wouldn't let him.

'So you're on stage in front of a million worshipping punters, and it's *already over*. You've become their meat, they're giving you *nothing*.'

'You shouldn't let it get to you Rufus,' gasped Sage. 'It's just a well-paid job, with foreign travel, weird hours and good holidays. Think of it like that, an' you won't go nuts—'

He fell back, Rufus leaping after him, and felt the change from paved road to rough grass under his feet; and heard the sea, closer now. A thrill went through him, a recognition so sharp he couldn't tell if it were joy or terror: and then he knew. *He was in the Zen Self dome, in January of the terrible year. He had taken a massive dose of snapshot, because he thought he could force the drug to tell him whether Rufus O'Niall really was a threat . . . Ax was in Amsterdam, Sage and Fiorinda were in despair.* His eyes flew open, in the cold dark lab: and he knew.

So this is where I went. A clifftop. The dizziness of the blood I'm losing, the feel of these weapons, the sound of the sea at my back. The moon a blurred seal of silver in the overcast, not a star in the wide east, above that dark loom of rising ground . . . The details are not the same, but *this is the moment* from which I returned knowing I'd been right about Rufus, and that the only way I could beat him was by achieving the Zen. I tried again and again to find out more, until there were no more visions, until the naked imperative of the quest took over. But *this is it* . . . Oh, shit, I'm here! I made it!

I'm on the wave now. I can't go wrong. And then he clung to the pure, sweet air on his face, the scent of gorse and peaty earth, ah, cling to this—

Sage had faltered. Rufus laughed, and hauled back for a gigantic swing. His opponent, instead of parrying it, dropped on one knee, caught him and cast him down. Rufus went flying into empty air. He landed in a heap, five or six metres below, and lay still for a long time, long seconds. Sage looked down. Slowly but inexorably, Rufus rose to his feet. There was a billow of darkness that must be shed blood on the dim sand where he'd been lying, but he laughed again, full and hearty, and stretched his arms. 'I could take on the world!' he shouted. 'Wouldn't you like to know how I do this, you bastard?'

'No,' yelled Sage. 'Because I know what it's cost you, an' I think you're a fucking lunatic. Call yourself a rockstar? You can't even run a balance sheet.'

This is who I am. This is my completion. Now I leap.
—into the dark.

Remembering the future is the same as remembering the past. Nothing stays the same; you never remember the same thing twice. He felt he should have leapt straight down, but no, it was a double somersault and a pike. He wished he

could have made it three, partly to fuck Rufus up, partly to absorb some energy; jump straight down eight or ten metres, even superman would snap his shins.

He landed rolling, arms spread, a weapon in each hand . . . and that's the end of the preview, don't know what happens next, only that it's nearly over.

They circled on the sand, both men moving heavily now. I'm very tired. That's all it feels like, I'm very tired and I want to lie down. But I've drawn blood, an' I couldn't do that before. I can finish him. Thank God his power is divided. Thank God Fiorinda came along. I could never, ever have done this alone.

Rufus didn't even see the crucial stroke coming at him, the high sideways sweep that severed his vertebrae. He was thinking of something else. His blood leapt up like a fountain uncapped. The body stayed on its feet. The head had

vanished. Where the fuck did it go? Sage dropped to one knee, leaning on the Drumbeg sword. The blurred moonlight was confusing, he felt very dizzy—
‘Steve!’

He looked around. Rufus’s head had landed on a flat-topped boulder, down by the sea. It was upright. The eyes and the mouth gleamed.

‘I’m not dead yet.’

Sage got to his feet and made for the boulder. He was so tired he could hardly stand. He was fascinated by this head. ‘Rufus,’ he muttered, swaying. ‘You’re kidding. You can’t come back from this.’

‘Hahaha!’ said the head. Sage dropped his legionary’s sword.

‘You have her, but neither you nor Ax Preston shall enjoy her. Never again.’

Whatever. He took hold of the Drumbeg sword in two hands and heaved it over his shoulder. It felt heavy as lead. Raising it took for ever, but he was getting there, reaching the point on the arc where he could pitch forward, chop the fucking thing in two. His senses deadened by exhaustion, he didn’t realise until the last moment that Rufus’s headless body had come stumbling up behind him. He swung around and parried the body’s swordstroke, but the barbed blades of the trident were thrust into his unprotected right side and twisted there, the weight of a big man’s falling body behind them.

‘Hnnh!’ said the head, with deep satisfaction.

Fiorinda had realised that Carly was getting stronger. She had been exultant, and very frightened. She had to respond to the power turned against her, she’d felt herself leaping to meet it, and known she was done for, ruined if this went on much longer. But it didn’t. . . The last bout was in front of the cold hearth in the ground floor of the tower, under the picture of Fiorinda when she was twelve years old, the fairy girl with beestung lips and little rose-tipped breasts. In all the length of their duel they had only moved between the modern guardroom, and this hall. It had felt like light years. She didn’t know if it was early or late, or if a whole night and day had passed. She cast yet another arc of salt (the floor was scrawled with them), completed another circle, and this time the magician inhabiting Carly had no riposte.

She felt a different rush, a dying fall. Blue flames

leapt from the circle, wrapping Carly like a flickering pelt. A flame-shaped creature clothed in blue fire stood there: and then whooshed away into nothing, leaving the woman’s body lying on the floor, shuddering.

Fiorinda stared at the cruel picture of herself, the innocent and ruined child—
Sage!

She ran: out of the hall, out of the bawn, found the path and scrambled down to the moonlit beach. She raced to the tumbled bodies, shoved the Rufus hulk aside and bent over her lover. ‘My baby, my baby,’ she whispered, tears falling, stroking the bloody lamb’s fleece.

The head sat on its rock. Its eyes were half-open, already sunken in the broad, deep sockets. It was mumbling fragments of words, some kind of threats, but it shut up after she’d filled the mouth with salt and sand. She lifted it by the hair and dumped it where she could keep it in sight.

Sage opened his eyes. He was pinned to the sand by an incredible weight, not pain, something more fundamental. Fiorinda was there, holding his hand.

‘Hi,’ he whispered. ‘Cracked it?’

‘Yeah, we cracked it.’

‘You better get out of here, my brat, before the Gardia arrive. Take Serendip.

The *Lorien* will get you home.’

‘No. Olwen’s coming with a helicopter. I sent for her.’ ‘Ah, that’s good. Good you’ll have company.’

But you should still get back to

the boat. ‘He tried to raise her hand to his lips. ‘Oh. I can’t move.’

‘I’m stopping you from moving, my darling. Don’t fight it, lie still.’

‘Right,’ he sighed, smiling up at her. ‘Make it last . . . But I can talk to you?’

‘Don’t talk too much. You know what I want to do after this, Sage?’

‘Mmm . . . No.’

‘I want to travel. You and Ax, you’ve been everywhere. There’s so many places I haven’t seen. I want to go to Milan. Will you come with me?’

‘Why Milan? There’s nothen’ there but a few shops . . . an’ a Formula One

course. Oh, okay, Milan . . . How long . . . d’you think it’ll take them to get here?’

‘About five minutes.’

Sage’s eyes widened. ‘*Huh?*’

‘Er, fact is they’ve been waiting out at sea on a Navy frigate that Richard managed to borrow for me. Hey, remember Venezuela! Did you really think I would have come along without back-up? We couldn’t do anything for you going in. You had to be alone, you were right about that. But I reckoned it was okay for us to fetch you out, so I set it up and I didn’t tell you because you would have argued. You are so dumb, Sage. Didn’t you realise you might get hurt?’

He had not expected to be alive.

‘You’re a very sneaky brat!’

‘Hahaha. Me, Boudicca!’

His breath caught. ‘How long did you say?’ ‘Bout four minutes now. Sssh. Hang on, my baby.’

‘Talk to me.’

So they talked, softly, about the antics of little plastic armies on the kitchen table at Tyller Pystri, in the lamplight of an evening long ago, until Sage couldn’t talk, he could only look at her, and the seconds ticked by; and she knelt there by the tide with his life in her arms, flickering like a candleflame in a draught—

‘Will they get here, Serendip?’

‘Everything’s fine, Fiorinda. Don’t let him go.’

When the helicopter landed, that’s how Olwen and the Heads and the medical team found them: Sage lying at the edge of the sea. Fiorinda holding him, the magician’s head beside them. Olwen Devi saw the great dark ragged gap under Sage’s right ribs and stared at Fiorinda, open-mouthed in appalled amazement.

‘Just do it!’ snarled Fiorinda.

They had his riven body onto the stretcher and an IV pumping plasma into him as swiftly as George Merrick’s hands would move.

‘Hi, George,’ whispered Sage.

‘Hi, boss. Got the bastard, did yer?’

‘I did.’ And at last he closed his eyes.

The helicopter rose and rattled away, eastwards, Sage’s body hooked up to all the life support they had. Rufus O’Niall’s head was in a sack, and Fiorinda kneeling on the floor, clinging to Sage’s lax hand, tears streaming down her face. *God send each good man at his end, such horse such hounds and such a friend.*

Six days after Ax’s velvet invasion—as the media people were calling it—he was in Somerset, facing a pitched battle. At first everything had gone well. Benny Preminder’s régime was in disarray. A hastily commissioned emergency Prime Minister had welcomed Ax’s return. In Yorkshire and the North-East, people were celebrating now. In London they were ringing the church bells and throwing street parties. (Amazing. The mob that tried to burn Fiorinda must’ve been aliens, popped in from another dimension.) But it wasn’t over, by no means. The Celtics were digging in, wherever they held the balance of power,

and in the South-West they were determined to fight. The success of an invasion is measured in hours, but the hours can stretch to days. Ax had come to meet them, because he couldn't let this go on, and here he was, not thirty miles from his home town, facing a situation he couldn't defuse.

The barmies were encamped on the north flank of the Polden Hills, facing the enemy across the valley of the Brue. Early on the morning of that sixth day Ax was in a canvas mess tent with his friends, waiting for news. Kathryn Adams had returned to the US. Alain and Tamagotchi were in Paris, and Mohammad was in Yorkshire. Rox was in London. Allie and Dilip and Rob, Chip and Ver, should have been there too, but they'd forced Ax to admit they had a right to come along with the army. To be here, on this neo-mediaeval battlefield—
The news that meant either peace or war would not reach them by telecoms. Negotiations would be over immediately, if the Celtics detected any anti-Gaia modern means of communication in use, and the Celtic netheads were *good*, so it wasn't worth the risk. They didn't know how the news would reach them. They'd been eating breakfast, a tired spread of bread and cheese and jam, some very suspect sliced meat; vacuum jugs of dandelion coffee. The Few, what was left of the Few, sat over the remains of this buffet, making hopeful conversation. Ax studied a paper map. He'd been so savagely in need of his chip, these last days, that if he'd been anywhere near a working neuro-prosthetics clinic he'd have demanded a replacement over the counter, *do it to me!*

Failing that, he had to devour the map and *think, visualise*, because it's always the detail that counts, the lie of the land—

'We need to retake Reading,' said a militarised Dilip. 'If we could walk in there, and make it look never in doubt, that would swing it.'

'Yeah,' agreed Rob. 'We could do it. The town's ours. They may not love the staybehinds, but they hate the fucking Celtics.'

Allie said, 'Ax, do you want that briefing on Greg Mursal now?'

'Greg what? Who he—?'

'He's the Prime Minister.'

He glanced over with a wry grin. 'Sorry. Yeah. I'll get to it.'

The emergency Prime Minister, alas, was not a major issue. The people who were in a position to control the future of England were just about two miles away, in the enemy camp.

Push wood on the fire, Jackie. Good wood on the fire, Jackie—

'I'm going out for some fresh air.'

Outside the tent Ax's driver, a Welsh Independent Volunteer called Bronwen Palmer, slouched in the open door of her jeep. *Stay with the vehicle* was the only way to hang on mps – mobile power-sourcing, otherwise known as motor fuel. Take your eyes off your ride for a moment, even if you're driving the Dictator himself, and it will get siphoned, the fuel-cell will be drained; or it will vanish. Ax nodded to her, took out a cigarette and looked north. Glastonbury Festival site, was over there, beyond the Celtic position, a *great wen*; dwarfing the little towns of Shepton Mallet, Street and Glastonbury itself. Something like a hundred thousand people. Women who *actively want* to bear fifteen babies before they're thirty, and see fourteen of the kids die. Pagan priests who *actively want* to keep the 'unfit' in dogkennels and sacrifice them on feastdays (with the occasional glorious physical specimen for dandy); because Gaia has spoken . . .

He didn't believe it. As the leader of the Rock and Roll Reich should know, it's all surface and moonshine. But surface and moonshine can be monstrously effective, you can have a wild idea and haul the people along with you *for a while*;

he knew that too. The warriors wanted their pitched battle, it was their day in court, and either they would have their way, or Ax would back down, lose the initiative, and there'd be hell to pay. He did not want the job of *dux bellorum*. He almost wished he'd refused, but back in Paris it had seemed there was no other way, and maybe that was still true, if there was hope at all— 'What pisses me off,' he said, 'is the number of people who think I'm

surprised the Reich ended up like this. I am not surprised. *And* the other people who think this proves there's something fundamentally wrong with being green, with treading lightly, or loving this beautiful country. There is *absolutely fuck-all* wrong with the music; or with turning your back on consumerism. The Celts are criminal lunatics, but they're not responsible for the Crisis.

'After the Second World War, when the world was obsessed with Global Thermonuclear meltdown, Albert Einstein said he didn't know what kind of weapons would be used in the Third World War: but he knew that if there was one, the Fourth World War would be fought with sticks and stones. As it turns out, the Third World War was fought with rotten money, and peasant soldiers in client states, over decades. But it looks as if Einstein was right.'

'You could duck this,' said Bron, 'and win a war of attrition.'

Yeah, right, he thought. Like the Welsh did, when the last global civilisation was tumbling? 'Nah. I'll fight. It's the best option, when you look at the alternatives. What are you Independent Welshpersons going to do?' he added, in her own language. 'Clear off back to the valleys would be my advice.'

'Taking a wild guess, we'll wait and see, and leg it for the winning side at the worst moment for the other fellers.'

'Right.'

'Of course, I'm talking about the Northerners. Hypocritical tight-arses.' She had not expected Ax Preston to be like this, an unassuming feller with a

few strands of silver in his dark hair, a demon for work and a distracted look.

Didn't know what she'd expected, really. She liked the directness. He gives you the feeling he's not just moving his mouth, to be polite: he's *talking to you*. That's what I will tell people, she thought.

'Are you going to smoke that cigarette? Er, Sir?'

'No. It's Ramadan.'

It will be Yap Moss again, he thought, tracing the landscape with his gaze, fitting it to his plans. And they don't know. Very few of the so-called warriors over there were in Yorkshire, very few have been in combat. They don't know what can happen in an afternoon. He felt sickened.

The Celtic command post was a Iron Age roundhouse prefab, with a reed thatched roof and wattled walls. Fiorinda and the Heads drove up to it, Fiorinda in the front with George. She was dressed as she'd been at Drumbeg, but cleaned up; and her hair was brushed until it glowed. Rufus, in the sack at her feet, muttered like something overheard in a bad dream.

They parked a respectful distance from the tooled-up warriors guarding the doorway. There were shouts of excitement somewhere not far away, but here the crowd was silent, pressing close and staring: sombre, tattooed, pierced, wild haired men and women.

'Rehearse me again,' said Fiorinda. George repeated the Irish with her.

'I've got it.' She pushed back her hair. 'I *wish* I had some make-up.'

'You look terrific,' said Bill.

'Never better,' said Peter. 'I never saw you look better.'

'Knock 'em dead, my love,' said George. 'You're on.'

They were supposed to have a safe conduct. Unarmed, no wires, no panic buttons, nothing, they walked in: Fiorinda casually swinging the sack. Inside the roundhouse it was, unexpectedly, almost as light as day, because there were ATP patches all round the walls. Fiorinda grinned when she saw that. A trestle table of pale raw timber faced the entrance, across a space of beaten earth and the hearth pit; a row of people, mostly men, sat behind it. Others were standing on either side. She recognised intimates of those winter evenings at Rivermead, but not Benny Prem, Glastonbury leaders. The rest of those at the table were Scottish and Irish 'military advisers'. She knew some faces in that contingent too: people who damn well ought to know better than to be in this company.

'Hello Jack,' she said brightly, to the worst of those who'd seen her humiliated as 'Fergal's' whore, 'where's Benny?' She grinned. 'Is he not feeling well? Hello Phil—' This to Phil Maclean, Scottish radical rockstar: who had been a friend of the Reich last time they met. 'How's the band?'

She emptied her sack onto the table, lifted Rufus's head by the hair and set it upright. Salt trailed from the mouth; which moved, slackly, but no distinct sound emerged. The life in it was running down at last. There you go. One dead magician, boys. Think about it, those of you who know—

She said her piece, looking the chief of the Irish party straight in the eye.

'Coir paisean a bhi ann, agus nior fear, bean no leanbh sin Eireann Naofa, go dtabharfainn mise no mó churadh an locht.'

It was a crime of passion, and there is not a man, woman nor child in Holy Ireland, that would give me or my champion the blame.

There was a dead silence.

'Well?' said Fiorinda.

One of the men at the table (which of them was the first would be cause for endless speculation) stood and bowed, without a word. Then another did the same, then one of the women. There was a rush. They were all on their feet. One or two even dropped on one knee. The armed guards around the walls decided to pitch in, going down in a wave.

Fiorinda drew a breath, and nodded.

'Good. That's very sensible.'

The tableau came to life. A babble of voices.

'No, I'm sorry,' she told them. 'Later. Now I have to be somewhere else.'

She walked out, the Heads close around her, into the waiting crowd. The bonfire at Westminster rose up and there was bile in her throat, but she raised her clasped hands above her head. 'It's peace!' she yelled. The warriors cheered.

She and George and Bill and Peter leaped into the jeep and roared away. While Fiorinda was pulling her stunt, Sage was on his way from the Celtic camp

to Ax's position, escorted by an enthusiastic crowd. Neither of them had yet seen Ax. They'd come to Somerset straight from the South Wales branch of Zen Self labs; where he'd been patched up sufficiently that he could sit in a car. It was a tour de force, but worth it at this juncture, when something like 'the return of Aoxomoxoa' could swing the balance. He was drugged to the eyeballs, and as comfortable as possible, it'd be a while before he could *lie down* anyway. All he had to do was smile, like dowager royalty; maybe a little wave now and then. He was not afraid for himself, because all this seemed like a dream, anyway. He was afraid for Fiorinda, walking into that den of wolves without him. But she would be fine. She could look after herself, and she had George and Bill and Peter— The jeep coughed and died. They were halfway up a little lane, eaten away by flowers and grass, that lead to Mr Dictator's camp. He stayed the back with his

medical support, while the driver and his mate decided what to do. They'd run out of fuel, must have been ripped off, better leave the hero and go and fetch help. . . Everyone in the jeep knew that Sage couldn't move from that backseat, but the cheering crowd of Aoxomoxoa fans had no idea. These were the Cornish Celtics, coming over to Ax's side because their hero had returned. Shit. Fate has called our bluff, or put it another way, fucking stupid cock-up. He hated the thought of being carried out of here on a stretcher, but it might have to be. There was a sudden commotion. Four young men came barging through the crowd, hauling a great big roan horse, saddled and bridled in Celtic retro style. Everyone was overjoyed. What a great solution!

'Aoxomoxoa! Aoxomoxoa! Can you ride? Uh, Sir?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I've never tried.'

If Olwen had been there she would have stopped him, but the Zen Selfer medics wouldn't argue with Aoxomoxoa. He had achieved the quest! He almost wished they *would*, but too bad. Can't let the punters down. He knew that if the fight happened it would be a close thing, could hang on a thread, and *Ax is not going to lose because of me*. Still a few dregs of superpower in the tank, I'll be fine. So he climbed on board the fucking horse, and the Cornish all ran along with him, cheering, through a gate, onto a flowery hillside where hordes of barmies came racing down to join the fun shouting madly—

'It's Sage!' 'It's Aoxomoxoa!'

Ax and Bronwen stood and stared while waves of barmies swept by, whooping and shouting. The roan horse came up, surrounded by the tumult, and then the crowd stopped shouting. Sage and Ax looked each other over, the horse took a few more steps; it stood and Sage slid down, very carefully, as if he were deeply suspicious of this mode of transport. He leant on the big roan's shoulder.

'Hi, rockstar.'

'Hi, other rockstar. How was Ireland?' 'Terrific. But I don't think I'll be going back for a while.'

Sage dropped the reins. Bronwen Palmer (what a story to tell) caught hold of them and stood there at the turning point. Mr Dictator walked into his Minister's arms, and the crowd of barmies gave way to a second wave of staff, officers, war correspondents and close friends. 'Ah, *shit*, muttered Sage, head down, his face hidden against Ax's throat. 'Can't do it. Brother, get me out of this, *please*.'

'No problem. Leave it to me.'

Ax left the hero propped against the bonnet of Bronwen's jeep. He was shocked and frightened: when he'd seen his big cat riding up the field like that he'd thought, *thank God, he's not so badly hurt*. But he showed no sign of fear as he advanced on the eager company. 'Okay, fuck off. He's *my* boyfriend, have a bit of sensitivity. I get him first. You can have him later. You heard me, *go away*.'

Everyone backed off very smartly. Ax returned to the jeep, smiling. 'See.

Nothing to it. I could have been taking lessons from Aoxomoxoa—'

Sage wanted to tell Ax that he'd been sure he must die on the beach at Drumbeg, and ever since then he'd felt that he was dying, dreaming all this while he was dying. But now he knew he was alive, and he was sorry, again, sorry, Ax, I fucked up, I didn't mean to do this to you. He wanted to explain so many things, but there was no time. There was blood in his mouth.

He stood on the cliff. He leaped.

'Sage?' said Ax. Sage tumbled forward, so Ax had to take his whole weight, and felt the rigid body brace, and laid him down with terrified care on the bruised grass – his head thrown back, blood on his lips, wide-open eyes still passionately reflecting the blue of the sky.

?Sage! Oh shit, please, no, *Sage*—‘

Fiorinda walked along a corridor in the Rivermead medical centre. Reading had been in Ax’s hands since the day battle of Glastonbury had been averted, a week ago. She didn’t think she’d ever feel the same about Reading site, but the medical centre was okay. It was very quiet. She opened a door and looked into a pleasant room filled with summer daylight, simply furnished. There were two empty beds with covers and pillows piled and folded on them: slight burdens, and lying very still. She stood for a moment, looking at that scene, then turned from what might have been, to the world that she had made.

The third bed was also empty. Sage was propped in the windowseat with his feet up, wearing white pyjamas and a shabby blue cardigan. His scalp wound was taped up, his face bruised and he was holding himself oddly. He looked a little rough, but if you didn’t know better, you’d never have guessed the state he was in . . . That’s why they were at Reading. The staybehinds had been able to protect a great deal by co-operating with the usurpers—including the cutting edge full-cover health clinic; here where Ax had provided a safe refuge for the future he believed in. This was the first time she’d been allowed to see him since that insane stunt at the battle ground, but *Sage was going to be all right*. No dirty magic involved, thank God, just the staggering miracles of modern medicine.

?Hello,‘

?Hi.‘ He turned his head; he smiled at her dreamily.

?How are you?’

?Oooh, not too bad. Patched up again. Got through countless pints of other people’s blood while they were doin’ it, as the synthetic kind don’t work very well on me. Some of it Bill’s and George’s and Peter’s.‘ His voice shook, his eyes tearing. ?I always d-did find it useful to have a band with the same blood group.‘

?Rock and Roll feudalism can’t be all bad. Does it hurt very much?’

?Nah, I’m fine. Got a shunt in my arm: I’m tanked to the eyeballs, an’ I intend to stay that way.‘ He tried to laugh. ?You know, I don’t understand Olwen Devi. One minute she tells me I must never, never touch any kind of recreational drug again in my life, ever. Next thing I know she’s giving me unlimited access to this *excellent* smack—‘

Fiorinda crossed the room. They were silenced, solemn-eyed and almost afraid, because of what they had done together at Drumbeg.

?I killed your father, Fiorinda.‘

?*I hope he stays dead*,‘ said Fiorinda, with feeling.

?Well,‘ said Sage, lightening up, ?if he doesn’t—? Deliberately, he took his hands out of his cardigan pockets, and folded them around his knees, ?I’ll just have to kill him again.‘ ?Augh! *Sage!*‘

?What’s the matter?’

?Your hands!’

?What, these?’ He held them out: Fiorinda grabbed them, these undisfigured hands, tanned from outdoor living, with long squareish palms, square-tipped fingers, strong thumbs set wide: hands she’d never seen before but instantly familiar, full of life, full of Sage.

?Oh, my God . . . Were your hands like this in Ireland?’

?Yeah. I *thought* you hadn’t noticed, you strange girl.‘ He blinked. ?Woman.‘

?*I had a lot on my mind* . . . Oh, Sage, how? How did this—?’

?I don’t know. When I came back from the Zen, at Caer Siddi, these were my hands, that’s all. I didn’t do it, I didn’t even ask . . . well, shit, maybe I did. I just came back and these were my hands,‘ he repeated. ?Call it a side-effect.‘ His face

broke up, like a little child's. He reached for her awkwardly, without moving his rigidly held torso, tears spilling through thick yellow lashes.

?*Oh, Fiorinda*, I don't want to die! I thought I would, I would achieve the Zen Self, and beat Rufus and I would die, I thought that was the deal, but *I don't want to leave you*. I want to stay with you and Ax, but I'm so scared this damage can't be fixed. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, oh, and *I left you alone with him*, why am I such a fuck-up, why am I *always* like this? Oh Fee—'

She held his head against her breast, she had meant not to cry, she'd meant to be cheerful and positive, but she couldn't help it. ?Hush, hush, poor baby, you are *not* a fuck-up, my Sage, you are my darling, you did fantastic, you are going to be all right, little Sage, baby Sage, we will look after you, poor baby—'

Ax had allowed himself to be waylaid because he wanted to give them space.

The three of them were so shattered and battered it would be a while before the love affair was an issue, but he wanted to signal that he understood, and that it was okay. He walked alone to Sage's room, rehearsing what he would tell them, *I love you both very much. Whatever you want, that's what I want for you too*. They're the lovers, I'm their friend. We get that straight, from the start . . .

His big cat was in Fiorinda's arms, both of them sobbing like fools. His heart turned upside down, he was across the room in a second and taking Sage from her, completely unable to stop himself: *I'm never going to let you go*, he was babbling, *I'm never going to let you out of my sight again*—

?You shouldn't have left us!' wailed Fiorinda. ?It wasn't his fault!'

?I know, I know—'

Ax held Sage's battered face between his hands, God what a *joy* to touch him, and kissed him, tenderly and delicately, not to hurt him, but then, irresistibly, they were kissing each other deep, soul-deep—

Fiorinda got up on the windowseat, took possession of Sage's free hand and watched, her heart filled with golden light. ?Maybe this is the moment,' she said, ?when I have to remind you he's off sex for a while.'

?Oh really?' said Ax, with a shaky grin. ?How long?'

?No time limit. Until his new liver gets big enough to kick in.' ?Shut up, Fee.'

?And the nanobots have picked out all the tiny bone fragments from his chest cavity and his right lung, so then he can have the artificial lung rem—'

?I said *shut up*. You're scaring me—'

?I was barely getting started.'

?I think we want you scared,' said Ax, fervently, ?I think we want you *terrified*.

Listen, Sage. As soon as they'll let you out of here, we're going to Tyller Pystri. We'll stay there, the three of us, long as it takes to get you totally well, and then I don't know what the fuck we'll do, we'll do whatever we like. I'm quitting the Dictatorship anyway. But if we go Cornwall, you have to promise me—' He broke off. They were both staring at him with strange expressions.

?Oh shit,' said Ax. ?I'm doing it again aren't I? I'm taking over—'

?You're quitting the Dictatorship?' repeated Sage, slowly.

?Yes. I haven't done my five years, but I want out. It's my decision, you're not responsible. I've had enough. I've realised what a wanker I was being—'

?Oh, hush,' said Fiorinda. ?Forget all that.' She held Sage's beautiful hand against her cheek. ?Er . . . these plans. Do they imply we're going to give our fucked-up, ridiculous relationship another try?'

?Aren't we?' asked Sage, anxiously.

?If you'll have us, Fiorinda,' said Ax. A short time later Olwen Devi, Dilip Krishnachandran and some Rivermead

medical centre staff came into the room. Sage was in his bed, propped up high (his torso must be upright). Fiorinda was curled up on the coverlet, beside him. Ax fast asleep in the chair by the bed, holding Sage's hand. Carefully, Olwen checked the telltales taped to the back of Sage's left hand, the tube in his nose, the diamorphine shunt in his arm. She studied the monitor screens, consulted silently for a moment with Serendip, and seemed satisfied.

'Should we wake Mr Preston and Fiorinda?' asked one of the nurses softly.

'No,' said Olwen. 'Make up the other two beds, and then we'll leave them.

Sage will come to no harm. I believe there are two people in this room who have more power over life and death than anything I can offer.'

Dilip knelt, lifted Ax's free hand and pressed it to his brow.

'And the third is just the king of England.'

He replaced the hand gently. Ax never stirred.