A Tulip for Lucretius

by Ken MacLeod

I was deep in a Californian orgy when the summons came, like the voice of conscience. In fact: the voice of Father Declan, and not meant for me. But I had not been idle in the two years of the *Malacandra*'s passage, nor in the even more dragging months of its inching across the Martian surface like one of the old, brave little rovers. I had the ship's comms thoroughly tapped.

'Somebody rouse that goddamn atheist out of his fleshly lusts.'

So by the time Sister Agnes chimed on the partition, my succubi were back in storage and I was sitting, clothed, and in my right mind.

'Oh!' she said, when I let her through the door. 'You're all set.'

She looked more disappointed than surprised.

'I…overheard,' I said. 'And there's only one goddamn atheist on this ship. Though I think "fleshly lusts" is not quite *le mot juste* for what I've been roused from. What do you say?'

Agnes blushed prettily and looked away.

'The so-called sins of the flesh are spiritual,' she said, 'as you well know. But this is no time to discuss them. We have a permission to enter.'

I let that opening pass and followed her to the bridge. The virtual space had been expanded to allow everyone on board to crowd in: twenty-seven people, of whom three were priests, five were monks, three were nuns, fifteen were laity, and one was me, the token atheist.

('Token atheist' was my official position. I was on the mission so that, if necessary, everyone could swear in good conscience that it wasn't a Catholic mission - and also, I suspected, so that I would be on hand for dirty work. In the inevitable arguments we'd had about religion over the years, I'd sometimes twitted my interlocutors about how embarrassing it would be if they'd convinced me, and I'd converted.)

Father Declan was in the captain's chair, a handy swivel seat in front of the virtual view. The view showed a wall of sheet diamond and pink dust. The ship was right up against the outside of the city's dome, like a nose pressed to a windowpane. Shaped like a fist-sized chunk of Martian rock, the *Malacandra* had got this far undetected through the dust-storms after falling as a meteorite a couple of kilometres away. Now, likewise undetected, its carbon-nanofibre tendrils were tapping in to the city's nets. The sheet-diamond panes of the dome had joins between them, and these almost undetectable cracks had given us a way in.

Declan smirked at me. I nodded back and leaned against a bulkhead beside Agnes. The buzz of excited and nervous conversation died down.

'Now that we're all here,' he said, 'we're ready to go. We've hacked an entry permission for a body-works plant right in the middle of the Synth Quarter. Image templates uploaded, fake IDs generated from your agreed and rehearsed jackets. All clear?'

Nods all round.

‘Good. Let’s all join in a quick prayer.’ Declan winked at me. ‘With the usual exception, of course.’

Everyone else bowed their heads. I watched and listened, unmoved, as Declan hurried through a request to Mary, St Bernadette, and St Clive to intercede for our safety and success. After the ‘Amen,’ he looked up and made the sign of the cross in the virtual air. Then he was suddenly as brisk and businesslike as the Dublin street cop he’d been before his calling. He invoked the copier with a gesture and pointed us towards its glowing arch.

‘OK, everybody, by the numbers!’

One by one, as he called the roll, we walked through the glowing arch. I was number seventeen, and had plenty of time to see the expressions of those who went before me, as they wheeled around on the other side of the copier and walked back to their former places in the room. A weird, and in other circumstances downright funny, succession of anti-climax, elation, and concern flickered like shadows on every face.

Because, of course, a copy is just that. *You’re* still there when it’s over. At least, *one* instance of you is. The other–

‘Seventeen! Henderson, Brian!’

I stepped through the copier and instantly sat upright, naked and coughing salt water. After floundering and spluttering for a minute, I grabbed the sides of the tank, hauled myself upright, and stepped warily out on to a cold concrete floor. It was just like climbing out of a municipal bath. The room was long and low, dim-lit, furnished with wooden benches, stacks of folded towels, and tall plastic lockers. No one else had come through at the same time. I glanced along the row of tanks, empty except for two in which bodies were taking shape, grotesque, glittering assemblages of meat and offal, skin and bone. I had no idea where in the sequence of our party I had arrived: the body-manufacture was quite independent of our order of copying. Days or weeks might have passed, for all I knew.

The locker directly in front of me had my false name on it: Warren Dutch. It had been assigned to me automatically, as part of the process. All the names of Synths here were, well, synthetic: slave names, pornstar names. I grabbed a towel and dried off, then stepped over to the locker, naked and not ashamed, innocent of Adam’s sin: born again, again.

#

In my early teens, just as the hormones started to kick in, I had three secret, shameful wishes. I wished I could go to Mars, I wished I could be sure of not going to Hell, and most of all I wished I had never been born.

Be careful what you wish for.

Don’t get me wrong–growing up under the Reconstruction was not too bad. Compared to many parts of the post-war world, we had it lucky in the Dominion. The privations were no worse than those in the Confederacy, the Union, or Europe, and a lot better than what people had to endure in Asia and the Middle East. Even today, I bristle a little at too-easy jibes. You could play in the ruins, the war wounded and the otherwise deformed were treated with kindness (and childish cruelty, but that’s another universal, and I have no defence of that), and even education was (within its limits) thorough.

With me, compulsory church attendance didn’t rankle. I had no idea it was compulsory, because everybody went. Even if it hadn’t been, my parents would have made it compulsory for us. At Sunday School, we all learned by heart the *Shorter Catechism*, and enthusiastically chanted the Five Points of

Calvinism, the famous 'TULIP' formula:

'*Total* depravity! *Un*conditional election! *Lim*ited atonement! *Ir*resistible grace! *Per*severance of saints!'

I can't say we understood any of them, apart from total depravity. All kids understand total depravity. (I'll be fair: all boys, anyway.)

When you're a kid it all makes sense. Jesus was right about that. It's when you get a bit older that the contradictions start gnawing away at you. Like, you begin to understand physics, and relate it to theology. The big deal in Calvinism, the unique selling point, is that God Rules. Everything. Every particle. (Even if it's undetermined. Oh yes, I understood that too.) But if every particle, then every thought. (We were using pre-Reconstruction biology textbooks, which didn't mention evolution but which did describe neurophysiology.) Our teachers were quite proud of the congruence between Calvinism and physical determinism. Every particle, every thought.

Including every bad thought? Yes.

So why are we to blame for our bad thoughts, if… That's not given for us to understand. You mustn't think that.

So that thought, too…? Yes.

So God determined from all eternity that I should think it unfair that God determined my every thought from all eternity and still hold me responsible for my every thought? Including this thought? Yes.

Round and round it went, sending me sometimes into a thumb-biting spiral of despair. That was when I started to wish I had never been born. Hell didn't come to the top of the stack until I heard in a sermon that Hell and Heaven were perfectly and mutually visible. Hell would not be so unendurable without a perfect vision of the joy of the saints, and Heaven would not be so wonderful without a perfect vision of the torments of the damned. It seemed logical, therefore, that God would have thoughtfully provided the blessed with this delight, and the damned with this dismay.

To my thirteen-year-old brain, the notion at first made Heaven seem a sight more attractive than it had been hitherto. Whenever the eternal singing and harping palled, there would always be the endless horror video of Hell to watch. There were quite a few people, not all of them attending my school, whose eternal torment I could easily imagine enjoying watching.

The second part of the sermon made me sit up in the pew. The preacher explained that–however disturbing this might seem to our hard and rebellious hearts–a world with Hell was better than a world without Hell, because without Hell, the full glory of God could never be made manifest. It was better that evil should exist, and God's hatred of it be eternally demonstrated, than that evil should not exist at all. Because the greatest good was God's glory, and what was God's glory without His every attribute being made known to His creatures?

This comforting theodicy shook me. I had somehow managed to think, despite all I'd been told to the contrary, that Jesus' death on the cross was, so to speak, God's Plan B; that a possible world in which our first parents had not eaten the forbidden fruit was a genuine counterfactual.

But that outcome had never been possible. *This* world, Hell and all, was Plan A. Adam's sin had been eternally pre-ordained. There was no Plan B.

Pondering the matter, as I walked home in the company of my brothers and sisters and parents with half my mind on our Sabbath lunch, I realised that *there could never have been* any Plan B. God's decree was eternal. In that sense, everything that happened, down to the dance of every dust mote and deeper yet, was as necessary and inevitable as geometry. From God's viewpoint there was no time, no change, no chance, and no freedom: the universe was a single solid four-dimensional block, from 4004 BC to the unknown but likewise certain date of its dissolution. Beyond that, equally unchanging and unchangeable, lay the endless deserts of eternity: of ecstasy for the few, of agony for the many.

My thoughts tumbled on, one after the other, helter skelter. If the universe was unchanging from the viewpoint of God, wasn't it just as eternal and necessary as God? How could it be distinguished from God? How could *geometry* be distinguished from God?

By the time we all fell on our cold chicken I was half-way to a glimmer of Spinoza, only without the intellectual love of God.

The dark vision settled on my mind. You may wonder why I didn't take my perplexities to my parents or to the preacher. I had learned early and hard that questioning was itself a sin. I would no more have discussed these matters with these worthies than I would have shared with them my (likewise disturbing, likewise pathetically normal) sexual fantasies.

A year or so later–it seems longer–I was browsing one of the downtown second-hand bookshops. (The internet was firewalled, new publications censored, but second-hand bookshops had not yet been purged.) I came across a volume of Lovecraft. I opened it, started reading, and was hooked. I finished 'The Color out of Space' before I thought to walk to the counter and hand over my ten dollars. I took the volume home and read it from cover to cover, in secret and in delight.

Lovecraft's vision of the universe is of a vast, ancient, mindless, pitiless mechanism, within whose depths vast, ancient, malevolent beings lurk and may spring upon us at any moment. Reading his stories gave me a sensation of relief, of light, of freedom, of simple joy like that of a child skipping across a sunny meadow. A universe in which the worst that could happen was that the Old Ones would return when the stars are right and eat our brains was an infinitely happier place than the one in which I dwelt.

My wary further research (on an old Britannica disk still in the local library) revealed to me that, fictitious though his monsters were, the basis of Lovecraft's vision was his real belief. That belief had a name: materialism. One click took me to a history of the doctrine, and the name of a poet who had sung its praise: Lucretius. I had seen that name before, on the spine of a slim volume on the same shelf as Lovecraft. It had meant nothing to me then.

I made haste to the second-hand bookshop, and found the treasure I sought: a Hackett Classics paperback, *On the Nature of Things*, by Lucretius, translated by Martin Ferguson Smith. The cover was black, the title and details red, the poet's name white: a colour scheme that excited me obscurely. I glanced at a few pages, and was ravished. Here was a man who saw nature's beauty as well as its horror with the same unflinching eye. I bought the book and bore it home next to my skin. I devoured it with the same intensity and secrecy as I'd read Lovecraft, and with greater joy.

For the first time in my life, I had heard good news. I drank that black gospel to the lees. Its spiritual effect was astonishing, self-testifying. That life was meaningless and morality a human contrivance lifted the burden of sin. I was still totally depraved, but no longer responsible. My depravity came not because one of my ancestors had eaten an apple, but because all of my ancestors had eaten each other.

I applied myself to technical studies, got a sound degree in biomechanical engineering, and at the first opportunity left the Dominion for good.

#

I opened the locker door. A hydrochloric tang made me catch my breath–the locker (a specialised drexler, basically) must have just flushed its nanotech. Inside, I found a suit and shirt, a few changes of underwear, shoes, and a tote bag. Everything fitted perfectly. In the suit's pocket was a card. I thumbed it over quickly, checking the identity and back-story. Everything fitted there too. The card had a Dominion thou on it, enough for me to get by until I found a job. At the end of the row of lockers was a mirror. I checked my appearance, getting an uncomfortable jolt of a reminder of the last time I'd seen myself from the outside: when I'd looked in the face of the flesh I'd left behind after my first copy had uploaded. (In the virtual environment of the ship, with no need to shave or wash, I hadn't needed mirrors. Arrogance I'll admit to, vanity I won't.) As far as I could tell, I still looked much the same; a little more toned and sharp, a little younger. Teeth perfect, eyesight sharp. But so they had been in the virch.

Indistinguishable though the experiences were, it was curious to reflect that I was back in the flesh. A different flesh, to be sure: built from a remastered genome, with an optimized genetic code, intelligently designed, with no trace of ape or Adam in its ancestry–no ancestry, come to that. I packed the spare clothes in the bag, adjusted my expression to a cheerful confidence I didn't feel, strode to the exit, and stepped out, into the Dominion.

The Dominion–as on Earth, so not in heaven.

I found myself standing on a sidewalk of an unpaved street of rutted pink dust. A few slow electrical vehicles whined and coughed and stirred up dust-motes that settled lazy in the low gravity, wafted on the chill breeze. The shop-fronts and apartment buildings had the look of a strip-mall on the edge of town, which indeed they were. Neon and holograms blazed or flickered. The street, from what I could see, was part of a scurf of similar streets around the inside of the dome. So far, so familiar, from all the shattered Americas of my memory. What struck me as strange was the absence of litter and graffiti. This slum had the neatness of suburbia.

Turning around, I saw the true New Bethel, rising in tiers like a ziggurat under the geodesic sky, level upon level of shining white and gleaming gold, festooned with hanging gardens, crowned with a cupola-topped capitol hundreds of metres above ground level, a half-dozen kilometres away, and itself a good hundred metres high. It seemed to reach to heaven, or at least to almost touch the top of the dome. Above it, in an artificial breeze, the Cross and Stripes fluttered a rectangle of red, white, and blue the size of a football field.

The architecture was of spectacular vulgarity: imagine a Mormon temple designed by Albert Speer. Build it of sheet diamond. Crust it with baroque, eliminate the Catholic from the kitsch, and pile a Vatican and a St Paul's atop. Make it ten times bigger, then take it to eleven.

'Newly hatched, I see,' said a voice behind me. I turned, and saw my Lilith.

#

After my first decade of freedom, in Brussels…I sat in Du Bon Vieux Temps, admiring the St George and Dragon stained-glass window to nowhere and enjoying a Gaulois and a Trappist brew while scrolling the Jobs screens of *Le Soir* for something better than my part-time post as a distance lecturer at Louvain. The elderly bar-lady smoked too, the extractor fan rattled for us both, and in a cage a mechanical blackbird sang Johnny Halliday and Jacques Brel like it was his parlour trick.

Eyeballing job ads is for the birds, I thought, I should get with the programmers and buy an agent like everyone else. Just as I was about to give up, two words caught my eye: *biomechanique* and *athéiste*. And then a third: *Américain*.

Somebody was looking for a fluent English speaker with a good American accent, a background in biomechanics, and unshakeable irreligious convictions. I clicked Call on the ad, and found myself talking to a man with an Irish accent and perfect French. Father Declan O'Connell, a priest of the Roman Catholic Church.

'It's very simple, Brian,' he told me when I came round to the Cathedral's back office for the interview the following day. 'The International Court of Justice at Geneva is open to hearing a case against the Dominion. The plaintiff–whose name we can leave out of this–needs hard evidence of certain, ah, violations. The Church has the means and the motivation to collect that evidence, but for legal reasons which again needn't detain us, we need a hard-shelled, copper-bottomed, black-hearted atheist to take part in our, ah, evidence-gathering. You with me so far, Mr Henderson?'

'Sure,' I said, sipping Dowe Egbert *noir* and not at all sure where this was going. 'But–for a start–it's quite hard to make a human rights case against the Dominion. It's a horrible place, but run by the book. They're clever that way.'

'Quite so, Brian, quite so,' said Declan. 'Oppressing people without violating their rights is an old game. But the Church has been in the game for longer. She knows what signs to watch for. And the Dominion has rather given the game away, theologically speaking, ever since the First Church of the Reconstruction ruled that a certain class of beings has no rights.'

'Have they backslidden on the *race* question?' I asked, shocked. 'I'm sorry, I haven't been keeping up with–"

'No, not the race question, exactly,' said Declan. 'The question of the synthetic people, and of copies and uploads.'

'But the Dominion doesn't allow any of that!' I said. 'They regard all these procedures as sinful.'

'Not quite all,' said Declan. 'Copying and uploading, yes. But genetic reverse engineering, to create a human-like body from a completely artificial genome, they regard as well within the compass of man's dominion–just as the manufacture of AIs is, in their view. So far, the Church–my Church, I mean–would find itself in cautious agreement. Where these, ah, separated and misguided brethren have rather gone out on a limb is in confidently and dogmatically asserting that synthetic people–whether their brains have human minds copied in, or have native intelligence through growth from infancy, or have a copied artificial intelligence imposed on them–are quite outside the Covenants of Noah, of Moses, and above all of Christ. Or, to put it in secular terms, are not human and have no human rights. They are mere organic machines. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to copies and uploads, and of course to AIs.'

I shrugged. 'So that's the theory. Where are they doing it in practice?'

'In their Mars colony. That's the suspicion, anyway–that they're using synthetic people as slaves.'

'Why the hell–excuse me–would they need slaves in New Bethel? It must have all the machinery they need to live in luxury as it is. I thought that was the whole idea–to build a showcase.'

'A showcase not yet opened to the public,' Declan pointed out. 'We suspect that when the cameras *are* allowed in–twenty or thirty years from now, possibly–the Dominion hopes to have the system working so smoothly that the servile class of Synths'–he made a sour mouth as he used the slightly pejorative word–'won't even look like slaves. It's the process of making that class know its place that they wish to conceal.'

I shook my head. 'I don't see why they want slaves in the first place.'

Father Declan put his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers. ‘Come, come, Brian,’ he said. ‘You grew up there. Slavery is part of their *ideal*. The United Nations doesn’t allow them to practice it–it has even forced them to end the system of bonded labour–but the Dominion regards that as a concession. Having manservants and maidservants is part of what they regard as their right. And machinery just doesn’t cut it, psychologically–not in the way that having a creature of flesh and blood, indistinguishable from a human, that you can treat or maltreat any way you like, is.’

‘All right,’ I said. ‘I take the point. But you’ll have a hard time getting the evidence. The place is sealed tighter’n an ant’s butt.’

The priest sniggered at my vulgarity.

‘We have a plan to get around that,’ he said. ‘If you’re serious, I can explain it to you–after you sign a non-disclosure agreement.’

He opened his desk drawer and took out a piece of paper, and shoved it and a pen across the desk. I looked over the agreement. A straightforward promise, with horrendous penalty clauses, not to reveal anything about the job, whether I was accepted for it or not.

I signed. ‘It’s funny,’ I said, passing the paper back, ‘but it feels a bit like selling my soul to the Devil.’

Declan laughed. ‘From the viewpoint of the Reconstruction Church,’ he said, ‘what you’ll be doing is the exact opposite of that.’

And he told me the scheme. Brain-state copies of every member of the party–including him–were to be uploaded. The uploads would inhabit a virtual environment in a very small, dense computronium spacecraft that would be slung into a slingshot orbit from a spinning ESA tether, loop around Venus, land on Mars, sneak up on New Bethel, hack into the city’s systems, make new copies of our personalities, and download them into custom-made synthetic bodies inside the city. That way, we would find out how Synths were really treated in New Bethel. Provision would be made for getting our reports back to Earth. As for getting back ourselves–that was a bridge we’d have to burn when we came to it.

The really neat thing, from my point of view, was that I (in the flesh) would get half the total pay for my part in the job. The rest would be shared between any surviving copies that got back.

‘So after you take the copy,’ I said, incredulously, ‘I walk out with a hundred thou, for *nothing*?’

‘For the price of your soul,’ Declan chuckled.

Naturally, I went for it. I knew that one of me was going to regret this. I was the one who regretted it.

‘Fuck you,’ I told my first instance, from inside a computer. How could that bastard have done this to *me*? It was such a totally depraved thing to do.

‘At least you can be sure you’re not going to Hell,’ Brian Henderson told me.

‘Point,’ I admitted.

‘You can’t say that!’ the first instance of Father Declan hastily said, crowding his face into the cam. ‘The Catholic Church acknowledges that you have a soul.’

‘The Reconstruction Church doesn’t,’ I said. I grinned at them both, out there in the mortal flesh. ‘And you know as well as I do that’s the only Church I’ve ever had a moment’s worry might be right after all.’

#

Her name was Geneva Channing. Black hair, brown eyes, cheeky face. Long padded coat, open, over a sleeveless low-cut top, cropped denim skirt, bare legs, pixie boots. One thumb under the strap of her shoulder bag, the other hooked in her belt. Weight on one leg. That's how I first saw her. That's how I remember her.

At first I thought she was a whore, until she stuck out her hand and introduced herself. Whores don't do that.

'Warren Dutch,' I said, as we shook hands. 'And yes, I'm newly hatched.'

'Fine,' she said. 'Let's get moving.'

She caught my elbow and walked briskly up the street, in the direction of the city. Others on the sidewalk–the time was mid-day, the small sun high–spared us barely a glance. At one point, a heavy black vehicle, all fullerene armour and thick diamond windows, whined slowly past. It didn't need the big lettering along the side to proclaim that it was POLICE. A blank, visored gaze from within swept past my eyes, and went on. Geneva's grip on my elbow tightened for a moment.

'What's going on?' I said.

'I'll tell you in a minute,' she said. She gave me a sideways nudge. 'In here.'

In here turned out to be nowhere exciting. A narrow lunchtime diner that looked like it was going out of business. Two customers, near the counter. Geneva patted a tall stool near the door.

'Here,' she said. 'My treat.'

I could read the chalked board at ten metres–one advantage of an optimised genome.

'Black coffee, large, and a hot beef roll.'

She dumped her satchel, which struck me as a trust gesture, and sauntered to the counter. My gaze followed her ass, and met her eyes as she returned with a tray. She sat down and made her card disappear.

'Thanks.' I sipped the black java, and tore into the hot, sauce-dripping roll with my teeth. She sucked green liquid from a tall glass through a straw, whorishly, watching me.

'First food and drink in *that* stomach,' she said.

I laid the mug down, licked sauce from the web of my thumb and the corners of my lips.

'I'm not big on refinement,' I said.

'What were you,' she asked, 'before you were Warren Dutch?'

'Is that a polite question?'

'No, but I'm asking.'

'All right,' I said. 'I was a student. I needed some money. I saw the Dominion recruitment ad–five thousand dollars for a copy of my brain-state, plus a thousand at the other end, and a chance to earn some money and send some back. Not that I'm going to send that bastard a cent - I can't believe I was

callous enough to send a copy of myself here.' I shrugged. 'It seemed like a good idea at the time. You?'

'For me, it *was* a good idea at the time,' Geneva said. 'I was an addict. My life was a mess. Probably stayed a mess, back there. I took the same deal.' She grinned. 'I'm not just clean, I couldn't get hooked again even if I wanted to.'

'What are things really like here?' I asked. 'I mean, I've heard…rumours.'

'Oh–slavery and all that?' She smiled, made a flicking-away motion. 'Forget it. As long as you don't mind doing crap jobs for people who despise you, it's all right. We don't even get hassled by the church. No souls to save, see?'

'What about laws, the Dominion's cops?'

'They patrol. They keep order. Surveillance is everywhere. That's about it. No laws for the likes of us. Not even ID checks.'

I couldn't imagine a place like this without laws. It seemed far too peaceful. As for ID checks–

I looked down at my hands. Wrinkles at the knuckles, hair at the wrists, the first dirt accumulating under the fingernails…

'What's to stop any of us passing as citizens?'

Geneva wrinkled her nose. 'We have a distinctive body odour. We can't smell it ourselves, and it isn't offensive to citizens–we have to work for them, after all–but it's unmistakable. So I'm told.'

'That's clever,' I said. 'Limbic.'

She didn't know what I meant, so I told her.

'Oh, yeah, right,' she said. Already she sounded bored.

'Why were you waiting outside the body-shop?' I asked.

'I wasn't waiting!' she said, too vehemently. 'I work around here. Just happened to be passing.'

She saw my doubt. 'No, really,' she said. 'Whenever I see someone come out of a body-shop and stare at the city with their jaw hanging down, I say hello.'

'And give them coffee?'

'Sometimes.' She smiled. 'If they look interesting.'

'Oh. I hope I'm still interesting.'

'Yes,' she said. 'You're an interesting liar.'

She slurped the last of the green liquid. 'Let's move on.'

I followed her out. She led me around corners, into narrower and deeper alleys. Eventually, she stopped. We were in some kind of back yard, but without grass or garbage or doorways, an architecturally accidental space of left-over square metres. Frayed bucky-sheet walls of buildings like stacked cardboard boxes towered to a slit of pink sky above.

‘It’s safe to talk here,’ she said.

‘You said there’s surveillance everywhere.’

She shook her head, irritated.

‘We’re not important enough to spy on. The Dominion only cares about the streets and shops and places like cafés.’ She shrugged. ‘Sure, there are camera-beads and dust-mikes scattered all over the place. Fuck ‘em. No way can the Dominion keep track of all that, even with AIs. So talk, Mr Warren Dutch.’

I allowed myself to frown. ‘Talk about what?’

‘Who you really are. What you’re up to.’

‘Wait a minute,’ I said. ‘For one thing, what makes you think I’m not who I say I am? And for another, how can I know *you* are? If the Dominion wanted to keep tabs on newly-arrived Synths, someone like you would be a good way to do it. Doing things just like this.’

Geneva’s bitter laughter echoed up the chasm.

‘If you were who you say you are,’ she said, ‘you’d be coming on to me. If you were a trained agent, you’d never have followed me here. If I was a spy for the Dominion, I wouldn’t have let you follow me here. Do you think these bastards need *admissions*? They don’t even need torture.’

‘I don’t get it,’ I said.

‘Look,’ she said, patiently, ‘lots of countries wanted’–she shook her head, as if she’d misspoken–’*want* to know what the fuck the Dominion’s up to here. I mean, the Dominion’s official purpose is to conquer the world, so the rest of the world’s bound to worry about a closed Mars colony. What’s the easiest way to send spies in? The *only* way, really? The way you came. So the Union and the Europeans–the Confederacy doesn’t have the capacity–and so on have sent in dozens. Big mistake. There are, let’s see, about ten thousand Synths in this place. A hundred thousand citizens–’

‘What!’ I cried. ‘Already?’

I knew that the Dominion was launching nuclear-powered spacecraft to Mars from Nevada, but I’d had no idea the numbers had been ramped up to this extent.

Geneva frowned, then nodded, and raised a hand.

‘I’ll explain. Let me finish. The citizens are the best and the brightest of the Dominion and their kids, all thoroughly screened. The Synths are body doubles of desperately poor people, or rabble, adventurers, scum. Most of them work for citizens, doing menial chores because that’s the only work there is–or they try to turn a penny in the Synth fringe. A spy doesn’t have a chance here, because most Synths will cheerfully turn them in–there’s a good bonus–and anyway, working undercover in the city doesn’t get you close to any secrets. It’s not like you can get a job as a confidential secretary, or a lab technician, or anything like that. Cooks, cleaners, porters, butlers…none of them have access to anything.’

‘How about concubines?’ I said.

Geneva shook her head. ‘There’s a bit of that,’ she said. ‘Male and female. We’re not human, so it doesn’t count as adultery or fornication. And we’re not *beasts*, so it doesn’t count as abomination. There’s nothing in Leviticus about Synths. Synths and humans aren’t interfertile–well, Synths here are infertile in any case, but you know what I mean–so no complications. And from all I’ve heard, no pillow

talk. Wham bam thank you ma'am. No emotional attachments. They despise us, and they despise themselves for screwing us, or for otherwise indulging their kinks with us.'

Something in her tone told me this wasn't just something she'd heard.

'Opportunities for blackmail there,' I mused.

'You don't get it, do you? It's no sin.'

'I get *that* all right,' I said. 'There's still shame.'

She thought about that. 'Yeah, for some kinks. The chances of hitting on the right person and the right combination of circumstances are pretty slim, wouldn't you say?'

'Uh-huh. What happened to the failed spies?'

'Interrogated and exchanged, as far as I know.'

Well, that sounded like one way of getting back…not that I wanted to try it.

'All right,' I said. 'You tell me what you do, and I'll tell you what I do.'

She worked, she said, in the Fringe, doing odd jobs for various businesses. One of the odd jobs was seeking out new arrivals and pointing them to a particular employment agency. She could never be sure when new arrivals were going to emerge from the body-shops, so now and again she hung around outside one on the off-chance. She'd picked up quite a few customers for the agency that way. She never went into the city herself any more, not since…well, she wasn't going to talk about that.

I told her I understood.

And then, without mentioning that anyone else was involved, I told her about my mission. She laughed in my face.

'What's funny?' I asked.

'I lied,' she said. 'Just to see if you were telling the truth. You must be. You have no idea–'

'What did you lie about?'

She hesitated, as if unsure where to start.

'For one thing,' she said, 'there aren't ten thousand Synths and a hundred thousand citizens.'

Beat. *Oh.*

'…There are a *hundred thousand* Synths, and a *million* citizens.'

Oh, God.

I knew what those numbers meant, and for an irrational moment I didn't want to know.

'How long?' I said at last. 'How long has this place–'

'Fifty-seven years,' she said.

I couldn't speak. The number rang through my mind like a pealing gong. *Fifty-seven years fifty-seven*

years fifty-seven years…my mission had failed before I had so much as hatched from the drexler trough.

'Fifty-seven *Mars* years,' she added.

And then she cried.

I took her in my arms, and she took me to her place.

#

It wasn't a bad place, a small third-floor apartment a few streets away. It had two rooms, running water and all its amenities, a waste recycler, a drexler, a microwave, and a comms centre. There were chairs and tables. There were cushions and throws. By the standards of Brussels it was decent; by the standards of most of humanity it was palatial. Geneva saw it by the standards of New Bethel, by which it was a hovel.

I told her she had nothing to apologise for.

At that, she cried again. I found myself acting the host, sitting her down, finding something to wipe her eyes and nostrils with, something comforting to drink. We ended up facing each other across a table, hands clasped around mugs.

'What happened?' I asked.

'There was a war,' she said. '*Another* war. Between the Dominion and everyone else. On Earth and in space. This is all hearsay and rumour, but…as far as we know, *everybody* lost. There have been no new ships or colonists since then. Building a radio transmitter can get you shot, but some people have built radio receivers, with big dish aerials. They sometimes pick up signals from the sky–almost incomprehensible, probably coming from post-humans, maybe descended from all those uploads and copies and AIs that were knocking about the solar system back then. Nothing from Earth at all. The citizens don't talk about the Dominion as anywhere but here. As far as they're concerned, they won. This *is* the Dominion. And the citizens *are* the human race.'

I could see it all–human civilization, already battered by one nuclear war, could hardly have survived another in the same century. The Dominion had inherited most of the remaining nuclear arsenal of the former United States. That remainder–even allowing for all the nukes let off under the shockplates of the gigantic Mars-bound colony arks–would be more than enough to devastate the world. No doubt, the world had had something to say in reply. For all sides, it would have been Armageddon. Why should they hold back?

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world is grown grey with thy breath…

I must have murmured or mouthed the words.

'What was that?' Geneva asked.

'Nothing significant,' I said.

'I don't want significant,' Geneva said.

She stood up and swivelled, deft as a dancer, around the side of the table, to me.

'Me neither,' I said.

That was the last coherent utterance from either of us for the rest of a long, hazy, ruddy afternoon. What

can I say? We both had young bodies, we were attracted to each other, and we needed some consolation. In the course of the evening, as we fucked or recovered from fucking, padded around or sat about, and ate and drank and drowsed and watched the screen with half an eye, we talked and talked.

'It's strange,' she told me, as we sat in bed drinking something vile and alcoholic she'd concocted in the drexler, 'but I should be grateful.'

'Why?'

She held out and flexed a hand. 'For this body. It won't get old for a long time, it won't get sick, it won't get addicted. It gives me more pleasure than anything I ever had before.'

'I'd noticed.'

'And it hardly ever gets tired.'

'I'd noticed that, too.'

We smiled complicitly at each other.

That was when it struck me.

In the virch, I had become, I won't say blasé, but used to having a body much better than the flesh I'd left behind. Of course, it was a virtual body, whose existence was entirely in software, but the whole point of our having these virtual bodies and not others was that they emulated the bodies we were *going* to have, not the bodies we had been copied from. We even thought more clearly, though no less fallibly.

And so did everyone here. We were all slightly more rational than the human. No wonder there was no trash and no graffiti in the Synth Fringe! Peace, without laws enforced!

No loyalty to each other, either. I remembered what Geneva had said about spies being turned in. I wondered if that still lasted, after a century of life here, and no more spies coming through.

No children…

'Where do new bodies come from?' I asked. 'How did the Synth population get to a hundred thousand?'

'There must have been more copies to download than the citizens needed,' Geneva told me. 'It seems to be regulated automatically–as their population increases, so does ours. We don't control it.'

'But we *could*,' I said. 'We could even grow new Synths from infancy, if we wanted children.'

'We could, if we controlled the body-shops,' she said. '*If*. But we don't. I doubt if the citizens do, really. Like I said, it's probably automatic. We're a civic amenity, like the parks and the recycling.'

'You know what?' I said. 'We're better than them. That's the problem.'

She looked at me as I'd said something crazy. 'Explain.'

I explained.

The following morning, she took me to the employment agency.

#

Over the next few weeks, I worked in the city by day and talked in the ghetto by night–at first to Geneva, then to her trusted friends in ones and twos, finally to tens of people at a time. With every passing day, my convictions hardened. I waited on tables, I carried luggage or delivered packages, I combed hair and I washed feet. Sometimes I performed more intimate services. I saw the citizens in public and in private. They didn't see me at all.

There was much to admire. The great boulevards, the soaring buildings, the shining stairs, the lush gardens, the patriarchal domestic bliss. The men were strong, the women beautiful–bashful maidens, proud mothers, revered crones. Their gowns were works of art. The children were well-behaved and happy. Business flourished–for such a small and closed society, the market was lively, and even the architecture dynamic: though as solid and strong as marble, the diamond buildings were as easily modified or replaced as stage sets. Worship was simple and sincere; belief, to all appearances, universal. The whole place seemed a realization of the Dominionist dream of a society that combined Christian virtue with a patchwork application of the Mosaic code. I didn't see any stonings or scourgings. Any occasion for these had long since passed. Obedience had become a reflex. The preachers fulminated, the theocrats threatened, and the congregations and consultative assemblies listened, uncritical and unmoved.

I knew, from my own experience if nothing else, that this appearance wasn't the reality. There had to be people with doubts, with private agonies, with thoughts and desires they kept to themselves. There must, even, be some who envied us our lack of souls. Our bodies they might well envy too–their doctrine forbade tampering with God's image, otherwise known as the human genome. Their medical science, always cautious, had slowed further with isolation.

Science, of a kind, went on. There was an observatory. New products were invented, new styles designed. The environmental systems needed continuous maintenance. Occasional human or robotic expeditions sallied from the airlocks to scratch the surface of Mars. Great ingenuity was focussed on reconstructing the planet's entire geological history, all six thousand years of it. There was an ongoing, desultory discussion of when it would be necessary to build another dome. When that time came–and, given the size of the average family, it would be soon–the nanofacturing machines would do the job.

That time wasn't going to come if I had anything to do with it.

#

I sat behind a table in a small, sweat-smelling hall, and looked at thirty-seven perfectly-formed, attentive faces, all sitting in rows. The Synth Fringe had few places in which to gather–no politics, no churches, no schools–so Geneva had suggested gymnasia. This evening, she–my first convert, and my first apostle–was addressing a similar small crowd in a similar smelly little room.

'You are all despicable,' I told them. 'We are a contemptible folk, we Synths. We perform degrading labour for the humans, by choice. We don't even have the dignity of wage-slaves, who at least had the excuse of dependency. If each of us chose to live within our needs, we could live out of the drexlers. Instead, we troop into New Bethel every day, to earn enough for a little luxury, a little indulgence. We are slightly more rational than the humans, and for each of us the slight balance of advantage is enough to keep us making the same choice, day after day.

'We do not have to go on making–'

Somebody stuck a hand up.

'Yes?' I said, delighted to have provoked a response.

'If we all stopped working,' said the man who'd raised his hand, 'the humans–the citizens could stop the

drexlers. They already control what we can make with them. They could even stop us gleaning organics and minerals to throw in the drexlers. We'd soon have to go back to work, and be worse off than if we'd done nothing.'

'That's true,' I said, 'but what effect would our withdrawal have had on them–and on us? They would have a new respect for us, and we would have a new respect for ourselves. And that would be a beginning, for us. A small beginning, yes, but for the first time, we would be a *people*. We could even offer more to–'

The door opened, and a man and a woman came in, making to sit down at the back. A few heads turned. I recognised the pair instantly.

'Father Declan!' I cried. 'Sister Agnes!'

The man and the woman stood still and looked straight back at me.

'My name is Ginger McCoy,' said Declan. 'And this is my wife, Leona Topaz.'

With that, they sat down. I had wondered what had happened to the rest of my party, if indeed they'd ever come through. Now, I knew. They had settled in to the same life as the rest: natural Epicureans, living unknown. I doubted that their religion had survived much of this life.

'Like I said,' I went on, 'we are a contemptible people. But we could be a great people. If we respected ourselves, and made the humans–reluctantly as it might be–respect us, they would soon find that we have more to offer than the degrading and unnecessary services we provide. We do not have to be waiters, and chambermaids, and porters, and whores. We could be scientists, inventors, thinkers. We are physically and intellectually superior to the humans, and this need not be to their disadvantage. There is one service we could do for them that they can never bring themselves to do *for* themselves–we could make contact with the post-humans in the rest of the Solar system, and build a bridge between the human and the post-human. Who better than us to do it, who were once human ourselves?'

Agnes–Leona Topaz–stood up. 'May I interrupt?' she said, with a casual condescension that pleased me greatly.

'Of course,' I said.

'I understand what you're trying to do, *Warren*,' she said, almost snarling my slave name. 'When we arrived here, twenty-three Mars years ago, we tried the same. We tried evangelism. That broke against the wall of *intellectual superiority* of which you speak. Then we tried, well, you could call it liberation theology–our need for spiritual dignity, and all that rot. We even tried organizing what you are so careful not to call a strike. *That* broke on the Prisoner's Dilemma–action that would be rational for all is irrational for the individual. After a while, we found ourselves thinking with the same rationality as every other damned soul here, and gave up. We left our vocations. We're much happier as a result.

'And even if we *had* succeeded, what then? Do you imagine for a moment that New Bethel wants our *thoughts*? That it wants our *best*? Its elders would reject that with horror, and perhaps decide to dispense with our services altogether.'

'But not without some debate, some conflict being opened up,' I said. 'And that would cause questioning and dissent, which this place needs if it's ever to make any real progress.'

'Exactly my point!' cried Leona. 'The theocracy could foresee that a mile away. That's why they would never allow the question to even arise. If they saw the beginning of some stirring among us, they would

crack down on it before it could gather any momentum at all.'

Exactly my point, I thought, but I kept that to myself. It was time for me to take this to the next level.

'Crack down?' I said. 'And what would that mean? Their cops using their guns on us? Shooting us down? Well, be it so.'

I heard the collective intake of breath, and reached for a trace of Smith's Lucretius amid my mind's impressions.

'Death is nothing to us,' I said. 'We value life, but who among us fears death? If we thought we needed to, we could face it without flinching and without fear. Look into yourselves and tell me that is not so.'

For a moment, no one replied. The reply that came was not a contradiction.

'And then what?' This time, it was Declan. 'If it came to a fight, we're outnumbered ten to one.'

'Yes, we are,' I said. 'A hundred thousand of us, against a million of them. But most of that million are women and children, and we're all adults. And each of us, male or female, could take on more than five of their men. We are the better species–stronger, faster, smarter. If it came to a fight, we could win.'

'And *then* what?' Declan persisted.

'That depends,' I said, 'on how much resistance they put up. Speaking for myself, I would not be sorry to see this last remnant of a failed species wiped out to the last man, woman, and child.'

Declan stood up beside Agnes/Leona. With the stern cast of their features they looked more like nun and priest than wife and husband.

'That is abominable,' said Declan. 'Our physical and mental superiority doesn't give us the right to kill them, or so much as harm them, except in self-defence. That we could win–at terrible cost, for sure–I admit. But to go from that to genocide? It's unthinkable! They are still *people*, they are still *our* people. They and we are of the same stock–made in the same image of God, whatever you think and whatever they think! Deny or doubt if you will the existence of God, but you cannot deny what is meant by "made in the image of God"–that human life, no less than ours, is sacred.'

This time, it was I who drew breath. I stood up.

'I'll take your "made in the image of God" as a metaphor,' I said, 'and I'll give you another: "Born in sin and shapen in iniquity." Original sin! Total depravity! That's what the Dominionists believe. They believe that God has chosen them, not for any merit of theirs, but of His own free grace. That's what they believe, and that faith brought them to Mars and enables them to persevere.

'And you know what? They are right! They *are* totally depraved! And *so are we*. We too were born in sin and shapen in iniquity. Whose sin? Ours! Every one of us was, at some time, weak or greedy enough to send *their very own self* to this place, this hell. That is why we are a contemptible folk–because, in our hearts, we despise ourselves. We are totally depraved, like them.'

'Now wait a minute,' said Declan. 'You said we are superior to them, a better species.'

'Yes,' I said. 'We are. But by no choice of ours. We're better because we were *made* better, molecule by molecule in the drexler troughs. That's the free grace that was given to us. I suggest that we *use* it–and put the inhabitants of that whited sepulchre to the sword.'

I looked at the rows of shocked faces, and smiled. I had lost most of them, but it didn't matter. There is always a remnant. And there have always been more ways than preaching to spread the word.

'Here ends the lesson,' I said, as Declan and Agnes led a rush to the door. 'I'll be here again tomorrow night.'

I kept that promise. Fifty-seven people came to that meeting. About ten had been there the previous night. I had barely opened my mouth when the doors at the end of the hall burst open, and ten cops came in, guns levelled and shock-batons swinging.

'Death is nothing to us,' I told them, and walked forward.

#

We left eighteen of ours and all ten of theirs dead in that dingy hall, and took the weapons and the comms gear with us. We tossed a fire-grenade in as we left, and we walked forward, towards the armoured cars already screaming down the street.

By morning, smoke was rising from scores of places all around the Fringe. At every crossing from the Fringe to New Bethel, unequal battles raged. The crackdown that Angela/Leona had warned against was exactly what was needed to shift the balance of advantage between compliance and revolt–to break the Prisoner's Dilemma, and the prison. I don't know if it was betrayal or surveillance that brought the cops crashing through the door, and it doesn't matter. As soon as I started talking about revolt, the crackdown was inevitable. That was my plan, and Geneva's. Its success had a bitter aftermath for me, though not for her.

As all the worlds now know, we took New Bethel. Contrary to my wishes, my people didn't deal with the defeated according to their own scriptures. We are a better people than that. We are not totally depraved. I wish I could put it more strongly, but in all honesty I can't. We are slightly more rational than the human, but only slightly. And I, perhaps, more slightly than most.

For when I found Geneva dead in the ruins of the Fringe, I fought my friends with bloody fists rather than abandon the body.