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PANTECHNICON

SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY AND HORROR



PANTECHNICON

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We've a couple of big announcements in Panttechnicon-land, so we'll get right to them.

Oh, and hello.

First: As you may have noticed, Panttechnicon now carries an ISSN. We're quite chuffed by this, as (among other things) it now means that we can be stored in the British Library. Yep. Electronically. They're quite clever, those librarians.

Second: As of Issue Eight, Panttechnicon will be paying for all fiction that we publish. This will be a flat rate of £5 per story, payable either via PayPal or Amazon vouchers. See our submissions guidelines online for more details.

In other news, the stories for the first Panttechnicon Anthology have been chosen, and editing is underway. Keep an eye on our website for updates - we'll soon be unveiling the titles and authors of the selected pieces.

Speaking of the website, we've got content galore. Check it regularly for new reviews, podcasts, articles and gems you won't find in the PDF. And if you fancy becoming a regular contributor, drop a line to Editors@Panttechnicon.net and let us know what you'd be willing to do.

Panttechnicon is still free. If you love it, please pass it on to people you know who may also come to love it.

The Web Across The Door - DF Lewis

As I was walking up the stair, I met a man who wasn't there.

He didn't even comb his night-strewn hair. His face was not ugly, nor was it handsome. His figure was without even a sign of portly or lean.

His clothes were drabber than they were smart; so drab the darkness could hide them in further folds of themselves. His voice picked out words from silence, words which meant little more than the creaks of the floorboards. His touch was like touching one of my own hands with the other. I put him down to nothing but a haunting thought - or, perhaps, at least, the ghostly residue of some man who had once anciently been an infant chimney-sweep.

When I reached the top, I looked back to see his back backing off down the stairwell, disappearing into nothingness—if something could disappear that was never there in the first place.

I lowered myself into half-a-kneel, half-a-bend, all mixed with a crumpled crouch, and picked up from the tousled stair carpet a loose strand that must have floated there from his head of night-strewn hair. I held it closer to my child-young eyes and watched it scribble like the filmic interference on old celluloid, in shapes of words that meant nothing to my childish mind beyond their mere audibility as softest carpet-slipper sounds.

"What you doing dear?" asked my mother, as her tall figure half-filled the slanting yellow shaft of a half-opened bedroom door.

"Following myself up the wooden hills to Bedfordshire," I said as pipingly plaintive as possible. After all, I had an image to maintain.

"Don't be a soppo and go to bed. It's high time, darling, you were in dream land."

My mother's voice was the only one that could hold sweetness as well as righteous anger.

I dropped the hair that wasn't there. I let out my lungs with breath blacker than the sooty air and sucked in a new draught, one that was tinged with the yellowness still left there by my mother's now extinguished light from her bedroom door.

I was suddenly a child again, one that no longer needed any childish image to remain my mother's darling. But upon trying the doorknob of my childhood lair, I found it wasn't there. Only a choking head-mop of tangled air.

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Non-Fiction

Caroline Callaghan, Jamie Halliday, Lee Medcalf, Sean Parker

With thanks to

John Jarrold, Marie O'Regan, and all our contributors

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The Trapper

Jacob squatted over the hole in the ground and let his guts go. He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut with the pain. Stars danced around in front of him and his knees buckled.

‘Godammit!’ he bellowed, as another jet ripped out of him and splashed into the fetid pool below. He had to fight to regain his balance and his breath rasped as another bolt tore through him.

The rabbit caused it. He shouldn’t have brought it home, but the traps hadn’t yielded him anything for the past few days and Mary was getting weak which wasn’t good when she was five months gone. But the table was bare and even though the rabbit was covered in a sea of maggots, Jacob took a chance by trying to cook the badness out of it. But spoilt meat is spoilt meat no matter how much you crisp it in an open fire.

A faint beam of light swept across the ground as the front door opened and his wife Mary spilled out and fell onto her knees, moaning and crying out for Jacob.

Jacob pulled off his trousers that had gathered around his ankles, threw them away from the pit and ran towards his Mary. He was bent double as his guts twisted, and another jet of hot mess splashed down the back of his legs.

In the dim light, Mary looked ghostly. When he first met her, when she was thirteen and he was twenty-nine, she had a lithe body, firmed and toned by years of hard labour in the Earl’s mansion. Years went by and after boredom and six miscarriages, that litness left Mary and a thickness settled in on her face, thighs and ass. Now, after four days of losing body fluids from near every orifice, a slight whispered memory of the original Mary was back.

“I don’t want to lose this baby!” she screamed; her eyes bulging, her skin stretched tight across her skull. For a moment there Jacob had a mental flash of nicking her face with his knife. Just a small cut. Her skin splitting.

“Hush,” he whispered, running his clammy hand over her sticky brow. He tried to run his hand

AUTHOR: Johnny Mains

through her hair but it was too dirty and matted. She moaned and Jacob weakly pulled her up and lifted her skirt up high around her as she shat without knowledge.

The air had had a leaden chill about it for days now, and the first flakes of snow drifted in through the valley.

Jacob opened his eyes. He recited the names of his childhood pets, waiting for the crippling pains to course through his body. After he repeated the list of names twice over and nothing happened, he slowly sat up. Mary was next to him, her face a sickly grey, sweat plastering her dirty hair to the side of her face. Though the room smelled of shit, neither of them had fouled the bed during the night.

He slid out from beside her, his feet firm on the earth floor. He stood up slowly, pushing his stomach in, his joints cracking with the sudden movements. He looked around for his trousers and remembered they were outside.

He opened the heavy wooden door and stared at the white canvas before him. It had snowed heavily, maybe eight inches. Jacob closed his eyes and swore under his breath, willing the snow away.

“I still have my baby, please say I still have my baby,” Mary moaned. Her eyelids fluttered as she struggled to push her self up into a sitting position. Jacob opened his eyes; the snow was still falling. He slammed the door, the wall shaking with the force.

“You will be fine. Worst over now. Have to get a fire going. Lost my pants in the snow. You’re gonna have to repair the other ones with the rip in the leg.” He strode across the room in two paces. He sat on the straw covered bed, the wood protesting under his weight. Mary was naked, her pale white body covered in hundreds of criss-crossed scars. Not caused by Jacob, but by her father. He had taken a

keen eye to her when she was six, she told him once. And if she complained she got a whipping.

Jacob placed a hand on her breast. It was hot, feverish and he squeezed her nipple between his two rough fingers. She moaned, trying to push his hand away. In a flash he was on top of her, pushing her legs apart, the smell not putting him off as he forced his way into her. She turned her head to one side and threw up into the straw, a watery effort. Jacob finished after a few seconds, and climbed off of her, walking to the back of the room where he found his torn trousers. He threw them onto the bed.

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High above the world, probably as far up as Heaven itself, Jacob knelt into the snow.

From a distance he looked at the fox caught in his snare. The noise it was making; a high-pitched rasping. It was losing the struggle. After another ten minutes Jacob walked through the white drifts and into the woods to the snare. He cut the dead fox free. He dropped the carcass into his bag, which already contained two squirrels and a rabbit. A wind cut through the trees, and Jacob shivered, pulling his rough jacket up tight, and wondering whether he would be able to make it back to the house in time. He thought not.

Roasting the rabbit on the spit, he took a swig from his bottle of moonshine and thought about Mary. He thought she was going to lose the baby, just like all of the other ones she had lost. Her womb was diseased; nothing good would come from there. Jacob entertained the thought that the Devil had corrupted her insides. Probably happened when her Daddy roughed her.

-

"I don't want you to go trapping without me now," Mary whispered as she rested her head on his chest.

Jacob pushed her roughly away. "What the hell you on about woman?"

She looked at him with pathetic eyes. "I don't want to be left alone no more. I want to come trapping with you."

Jacob slapped her. The noise filled the room.

"You wanting to lose that baby you got inside of you? Those mountains aint a place for a woman in your condition to be. Pull yourself together."

Mary looked at Jacob intently, the colour drained from her face. "I think there's ghosts in the woods that want to take my baby from me. I've been having these dreams. They're reaching into my belly and ripping the baby out. I want this baby, more than anything. Don't let them take my baby away! DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE WITH THEM!"

Mary burst into tears, and Jacob looked at her impassively.

"The noises – they sound like a baby crying. Then like a lamb screaming, like when you do a slaughter."

Jacob made a fast decision.

"I'll make a camp on Proulx Ridge, and you can stay there. It's not too hard for you to get there and it's far enough away from the house. You can't come up no further though, or it wont be the ghosts you think is gonna take your baby, it will be the mountains."

Mary looked at him with utter devotion.

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They were in the pup tent, the wind screaming outside like the Devil himself. Mary was uncomfortable, her bump more pronounced, nearly at full-term. Jacob closed his eyes and said a quick prayer of thanks for God letting Mary go this far. The Devil had been vanquished from her womb, but had moved upstairs into her head.

The change was there for Jacob to see. Mary had said that the ghosts had followed her to the tent, and she could hear them scratching. The snow was still deep, she couldn't walk far; she was more of a prisoner in the tent than she was at home. When she slept, she talked in her sleep saying that the baby would be killed, would be eaten alive.

Sometimes when he came back from a day's trapping, tired and frustrated, he would think about throttling his wife to death. Just leaving

her face down in the snow. What heat that was left, melting everything where she lay. Then as the seasons moved on in slow but sure time, she would disintegrate into the ground and become a cairn of sun-bleached bones. Forever protecting the remains of her child.

Mary thought that the baby would come soon, so they made their way back to their wooden shack.

“OH IT HUUUURTTTS!” Mary screamed, her body soaked with sweat, her dress bunched up around her waist.

“Push you bitch, PUSH!” Jacob yelled. The heat of the fire was on his back. It felt hotter than Hell’s own kitchen. He held the crown of the baby’s head and as Mary let out one agonising scream, the baby turned around and it was out, followed by a huge glut of greasy fluid.

The cord was wrapped tightly around the baby’s neck.

“DAMMNATION!!” Jacob shouted, using his teeth to rip the umbilical cord in half. Hot liquid entered his mouth. It tasted foul. With the cord separated, he unwrapped it from around the baby’s neck.

Mary started to scream.

He slapped the child on the back, held it upside down. Rubbed the baby’s chest. A girl.

The girl was dead.

“What’s wrong?” Mary’s voice shrieked.

“The child is dead Mary. It came into the world dead. You were right. The ghosts have gotten to it.”

Mary let out a scream, her frail mind finally snapping in two.

“GIVE ME MY BABY!”

Jacob whipped around and threw the baby into the fire. It hissed and a tiny arm started to blacken almost immediately, such was the hunger of the

flames.

Mary leapt off the bed and Jacob tried to stop her, but for one so slight, she pushed him away from her as if he was paper. He crashed into a chair, banging his head hard.

Mary screamed as she knelt and grasped in the raging fire for her baby. A hot spark of wood spat out, landing in her lap and her dress caught on fire. It caught quickly, then her hair started to burn. She tore the baby from the flames, scattering glowing logs of wood. One landed in a pile of old rags that were heaped in the corner.

Mary started to rock her baby. The flames started to eat her face. She hummed a lullaby and rocked her baby back and forth.

Jacob came to and screamed out loud as his wife was totally consumed. He got up to his feet and crashed to the other side of the room, grabbing his pup tent and bag and ran out of the house, coughing from the thick smoke.

They were so far away from anyone, even if the fire were noticed, no one would reach them for days.

Jacob stood there, knee deep in the snow, watching his house burn down to the ground. It went quickly. And from the middle of the pyre he could hear his wife, still singing.

Jacob trudged through the heavy snow; his face cracked and blistered, two fingers on his right hand blackened and not far from falling off. A thick fever was coursing in his veins, and the ghosts screamed along the valleys he trekked through.

It had been a good few weeks since the fire, and in that time dreams of a dark and untold nature had terrified Jacob to his very core. In every one Mary would slowly walk towards him, covered in flames and she would be begging him to save her – begging him to love her.

He would feel intense heat in his arms and would look down to see that he was holding the child, skin blackened and cracked – revealing tenderly cooked flesh.

As Jacob walked on, the mountains served to hold him bound. Madness came.

A rabbit was sitting eating a small tuft of grass bursting through the snow. With his good hand Jacob withdrew his knife and threw it at the creature. His throw was weak and the knife landed harmlessly. The rabbit held Jacob's eyes for the longest of times then hopped away.

Jacob picked up the knife and was just able to make out his reflection in the dull metal. He ran the pad of his thumb over the blade, it was still wickedly sharp. He smiled as he ran the blade across his throat.

After a while he fell to the ground.

He lay there, face down in the reddened, melting snow and he let the ghosts take him.

Johnny runs www.allthingshorror.co.uk

The Fandom Menace

This column originally appeared in Pantechicon online in April 2008.

AUTHOR: Lee Medcalf

The Age of Innocence

Okay it may come as a shock (or a relief) to you fellow SF geeks out there but I have managed to actually have sex!

Too much information? Okay let's put it another way: thanks to a fluke of finding a wife who understands my obsession, I am the father of two girls. Two girls who, I hope, will at some stage learn to love the genre which has kept my imagination alive for over three decades. It's perhaps a foolish wish - after all what kid ever wants to grow up like their parents? But regardless I plough on hoping that Katie (my eldest coming up for 4 in June) might find something other than Barbie and Thomas the Tank Engine to enjoy.

One of the many challenges I faced as an SF parent was one of startling simplicity, yet fiendish nonetheless. A challenge I'll wager that many of you may face when the time comes.

Simply: In which order do you show your child the Star Wars films?

Do I stick with accepted wisdom and show her the classic trilogy and then hit her with the inferior prequels? Or do I show her the films in episodic order?

I deliberated long and hard on the matter but eventually decided on episode order and so we settled down together to watch The Phantom Menace. Now I didn't expect a 3 year old to get the whole trade route cobblers, nor did I expect that Midichlorians would make much sense either, but she watched it and didn't pass much comment on it once the credits rolled, leaving me deflated. But later that day something happened which made me re-evaluate the nature of fandom.

Picture the scene: Katie and her cousin Josh are at my parents' house, happily drawing away when Katie starts with an opening gambit of "I saw a film and it had a funny man called Jar-Jar. He made me

laugh"

"I liked that film too," responded the slightly older Josh. "Jar-Jar is funny. I like the Jedi too. They're cool"

The next thing I know, before I have a chance to sign the papers disowning them both, there is a maelstrom of communication, not eloquent naturally, but very expressive between the two that showed that the pair had genuinely loved the Phantom Menace, possibly one of the most reviled SF movies in recent memory. Afterwards Josh led Katie by the hand to the living room and he introduced her to Doctor Who. Again I doubt that she really got the plot but Pokemon-style Adipose won her round even as I just sat there and gritted my teeth bemoaning the state of Doctor Who as it stands right now.

Then it hit me... This is the next generation of SF fans right here before me, going through and watching stuff in the same way I had 30+ years previously. But more than that, these kids would grow up to be the internet SF nerds of the future and that future would contain opinions wildly off the beaten track from the accepted norm of today's standards.

A future where The Phantom Menace didn't come with 30 years of emotional baggage attached or Doctor Who wasn't a cheap historical drama with SF trappings and a guy called John Nathan-Turner bugging things up. The landscape would change quite fundamentally. More interesting is that the whole thing with Katie and Josh threw my own likes and dislikes in to sharp relief: was I really hating films and TV shows now because they were rubbish, or because I, like many SF fans and geeks like me, am getting too old? In turn finding themselves stuck in their ways, the equivalent of starting a sentence "in my day..."

It's a shock to the system I can tell you and, if you think about it, suddenly you find yourself questioning exactly why you continue to watch

SF shows and movies while moaning about them 99% of the time. They're not for us any more. The argument that George Lucas held up when *The Phantom Menace* was released - "The Star Wars films are for kids" - may actually be right! The original series was enjoyed primarily by 6-16 year olds upon its release and the fans grew up as the series did, but ultimately moved on whereas the series target demographic stayed constant.

In the end all this results in the abandonment of a generation of fans still waiting, expecting their next fix of a favourite show or film to have moved on with them, resulting in a painful backlash when it becomes clear that it hasn't. Occasionally there are rare moments when this does happen; The success of *The Empire Strikes Back* shows how a pre-teen audience grows up to angst-filled teens just as their favourite series follows suit emotionally. And it's these moments that are the cause of the rise of a touchstone word when it comes to hopeful previews of new SF media:

Dark.

Yup, everything promises to be "darker", "very dark" or variations on that theme when it comes to anyone over the age of 30 describing an up and coming show or film. It's almost like we're trying to convince ourselves as older fans that by enjoying something "dark" or "gritty" it somehow validates the fact that in the cold light of day we're still watching men in rubber batsuits fighting crime or watching overweight toupee-wearing Canadians fly about in space ships fighting people with Cornish pasties strapped to their heads: in short, something essentially childish.

Does that mean we should stop watching and enjoying our favourite genre? Perhaps strap leather patches to the elbows of our tweed jackets and take up golf? Of course not! But what it does mean is that for those of us out there in the big wide internet that seem to spend all the time jumping up and down on a franchise or story because it's "too childish" or "it isn't as good as it used to be", we need to gain a little perspective. And in turn exercise a little tolerance and understanding for those who profess a love of something that the general consensus of geekdom deems unacceptable. Because in the end what may be at fault is not the person who, for example, likes *The Phantom Menace* or *Nu Who*. It may be you for being too old

and set in your ways to enjoy it as well.

*Lee Medcalf is currently educating Katie to the foolishness of her *Phantom Menace* love using hot housing techniques and water torture.*

Blood

I'll come right out and say it. I've seen a ghost.

In fact, the whole of my recent history has been a farrago of shocks and mysteries that I can't even begin to explain. Which is a tad surprising, given that I'm an investment banker, at the dull end of a dull profession, and my chief ambition is to open a book store specialising in first and second edition Victorian novels, preferably somewhere nice like Greenwich Village.

And the ghost? To be truthful, it wasn't in any way scary at the time. But, you see, the memory of it still pops into my head now and again. In particular the one detail.

However, to begin at the beginning. Talk is cheap, but time is money, as are air fares, and so the preliminary meeting of a proposed task party to investigate the bank's staffing levels was held via video-conferencing link between our Boston and New York offices. It was then that I first met Brad Chandler.

The meeting was even more chaotic than these things usually are. That was entirely down to the Chairman, Marty Rainier, Vice President in charge of Internal Finance, but without management or any other skills save the complementary abilities to put across other peoples' ideas with persuasive bluster and then to claim them as his own.

Now he chuckled at his own jokes while everything around him went to hell. People on both sides wandered in and out without a word of explanation, to take a leak or catch a coffee, safe from any reprimand. There were competing voices and constant interruptions, breaking all the rules of video-conferencing.

As if by accident, the guy in charge of the remote control at the other end kept zooming in on the prominent cleavage of an attractive blonde colleague. The majority of female attendees in both locations were not amused. One latecomer in New York, distinguished by red hair and sloping shoulders, strolled blatantly in front of his colleagues to an empty seat. As with several of the others, his contribution after that was non-existent.

AUTHOR: **Brian Wright**

Brad Chandler stood out even in this shambles. He said little at first, seemed ill at ease, more on edge than I was ever to see him again, shaking his head every so often as if unable to believe what was going on around him.

Then, gradually, he took control both of himself and the meeting; and I quickly realised that here was a complex personality, with enough ice on the surface to sink the Titanic - he later told me he'd put himself through college with his poker-playing - but burning inside with ambition and other less obvious emotions. It was clear he hated his boss, Marty Rainier.

When order was restored, largely because of Brad's crap-cutting interventions, we soon ran through the agenda. He proposed that a smaller sub-committee should be set up to run the day-to-day affairs of the task party. Surmising that this was where the power and eventual rewards would lie, I strongly supported his idea, and sensed rather than saw the look of appreciation he directed at me across the ether. Brad and yours truly were both voted onto the sub-committee.

Marty, following his usual tactic of maximum kudos for minimum effort, decided it was enough for him to chair the video-conference meetings of the full task party to be held once every couple of weeks. In actual practice, these would do little more than rubber-stamp the decisions of the sub-committee.

Realising this was the case, people lost interest or found better places to be, which meant that attendance at the video-conferences rapidly dwindled to the inner core. The big blonde and the red-headed nonentity, for example, were among the first casualties and I never saw either of them again, lost among the thousands of drones in our Manhattan beehive.

A few days after the first video conference, I flew to New York with a colleague to spend some time

with the other members of the sub-committee. Up close and in the flesh, the coldness in Brad's eyes became apparent, but his dynamism and quick intelligence were similarly accentuated. Our relationship was defined from the moment I showed pleasure at his throwaway compliment on a piece of work I'd done.

I have always slipped easily into the role of acolyte, you see, and here was a man clearly going places. I decided he was someone who would stick with me if I stuck by him. The next time I visited headquarters, he invited me out for a meal and it felt as if I'd been given some sort of award.

Brad's wife came along, too. Trish, dark and petite, a third grade teacher, a carer and embracer of good causes, seemed different to her husband in every way. While she was voluble and self-dramatising, he was as buttoned-down as his shirts; she loved Mahler, he listened to Nirvana; she supported Greenpeace, he was a fan of Green Bay. Yet they seemed fond enough of one another.

We ended the evening in a noisy Irish bar off Times Square. By midnight, I was gone, awash with the black stuff, and ready for my hotel bed. When I made my excuses to leave, Brad gave me one of his unblinking, unnerving stares, which seemed only slightly diluted by the alcohol he'd consumed.

"What do you think of Trish?" he asked. "Looks good, uh?"

In spite of his casual tone, it felt like another defining moment in our relationship. I struggled to concentrate. "She's very good," I said. "But not my type. No offence intended." He said nothing, but I knew my answer had been just right.

Something strange happened at the next video conference.

One of the New York attendees, Arch Flugelmann, was another of the nobodies at whom the task party initiative was directed since its ultimate aim was to shed staff. He was the sort of guy who wouldn't say boo to a very small duckling, let alone a goose. He didn't even have the nerve to stop coming to the meetings like those others who felt they had nothing useful to contribute. He wasn't much to look at either, which was why I was doubly amazed by the thought that entered my head when I saw his

balding pate on screen.

He's an adulterer.

And thereafter the words crossed my mind every time I looked at him. He was always a nervous person, fidgety even when just sitting and listening to others talk, and he didn't look so very different then, but the thought kept coming until I had to make a conscious effort to edge him out of my vision.

Although puzzled and not a little disturbed by my reaction to Arch, I decided that I couldn't do much about it. At the following video conference, though, he wasn't in his usual place and there was laughter at the other end, led by Marty Rainier, when I commented on the fact. "Arch is having a few problems at home," someone said. "Seems his wife discovered he's been playing games with one of the girls here. Too embarrassed to show his face, I guess."

More laughter.

I thought long and hard about it afterwards, but there seemed no rational explanation for what had happened. I've always been able to empathise with other people, I suppose, to sniff out how they are feeling and to respond appropriately - it's one reason for my small success in the business world, you see - but this had been different, even a bit frightening. I hoped it was a one-off.

On my next trip to New York, I went to the theater with the Chandlers and then for dinner afterwards. Trish began to tease me in the restaurant. "Why aren't you married?" she asked. "Don't you like girls?"

Although he was lounging back, I could tell that Brad, too, was interested in my answer. "I like lots of girls," I replied. "For a start, there's Edith Wharton, then there's Mrs Gaskell, George Eliot."

They looked at me stupidly for a moment before Trish burst out laughing. Brad, however, remained expressionless even when she explained the joke. Later on, after we'd consumed a lot more wine, Trish began to rub her foot against mine under the table. I moved my leg and looked towards her husband, but he appeared not to have noticed.

Another video conference, another happening.

The target this time was the buffoonish Marty. He was more subdued than usual, even making a feeble attempt to impose his authority on the meeting, and the thought came to me without any warning.

He's hiding something.

Luckily, the meeting was a short one as the life of the task party was coming to an end and we were simply sharpening up on the final proposals. Yet when I looked at my notes, the word MONEY, always in upper-case, appeared several times in the margin of every page.

This time I was more perplexed than worried. Deciding to utilise my new-found telepathic skill, I phoned Brad to ask if he suspected any sort of financial irregularity in connection with Marty Rainier. He was immediately interested. "No, but what have you heard?" I was expecting that one so had my answer off pat - it involved a mysterious contact who had gotten a whisper.

I could tell Brad wasn't overly impressed, but he said he'd get on to it. As I knew he would. For a moment, I almost felt sorry for Marty Rainier. And sure enough, within a week he was escorted from our New York building by a gang of security men, never to return.

It seems that some of our sales people had been running a scam involving heavily padded expense accounts. Marty had recently gotten wind of the fraud, but held off taking action for fear that, as Vice President in charge of Internal Finance, he would be expected to take his share of the blame.

Unfortunately for him, financial institutions will tolerate just about any kind of impropriety or incompetence, just so long as it doesn't involve the loss of their own money. From the moment Brad, regretfully, placed his evidence in front of the Management Board, Marty Rainier didn't stand a chance.

So Brad took the huzzahs and approbation, the most manifest sign of which was promotion to the position recently vacated by his boss. And the recompense for yours truly? Well, apart from virtue being its own reward, I was only too pleased to accept Brad's offer of a post as his deputy, especially

since it meant coming to live in New York on a substantial wage increase. Greenwich Village was getting closer in every way.

On the day we started in our new jobs, Brad and I went to his favourite bar to celebrate. Trish joined us there. As the spirits were lowered and spirits got higher, Trish started to stroke my calf with her foot. Although Brad was drunker than I'd ever seen him, I could tell he knew what was going on.

He didn't look pleased, you see, so I decided to get my message across once and for all. As her stockinged foot reached towards me again, I scraped my shoe very hard down her shin. She drew back with a yelp of pain and Brad laughed.

"Fuck you." Trish stood up and stared at her husband until he looked away. I suddenly got the feeling that what bound these people together was much closer to hate than love.

She turned to me. "And as for you, you smug bastard, why don't you ask him what his last slave died of?" She left us sitting in an awkward silence.

Brad must have read the question on my face. "She's only kidding," he said. "We're buddies. You do right by me and I'll see you alright."

I could see him debating whether to go on. Drink finally won out over discretion. "It's just that some people can't resist temptation. Not everyone's like you."

This was high praise indeed, from Brad, and it emboldened me to put the question into words. "And what did your last slave die of?"

The inner fires were on his cheekbones, visible even in the dim lighting of the bar, but there was a deep chill in his voice. "Let's just say I have a way with a baseball bat." Then he dug me in the ribs. "C'mon, you boring old bastard, don't you know a scam when it's run at you?"

We both laughed and raised our glasses to the memory of Marty Rainier. And all the time I was thinking, I'm going to do everything in my power not to cross this man.

I soon learned exactly how Brad's last slave had died. It was no secret. The guy's name was Dean

Sirkowski and he had worked directly to Brad in Internal Finance; until he'd been found in his apartment one night with his head beaten to a pulp, apparently the victim of a random break-in. The perpetrator or perpetrators had never been caught. Mark it well, this had happened two or three days before that fateful first video conference

"Such a sadness," said a middle-aged secretary, cornering me by the water cooler to peddle what was already stale news. "They were very close, you know, Dean and Mr Chandler, socialised out of work and everything. Poor Mr Chandler was so upset."

I bet he was.

Now yours truly might be dull but he's not stupid, and my initial instinct was to get the hell out of there and open a book store in Kansas City or somewhere suitably far away. However, Brad shows no sign of remembering our conversation in the bar and anyway, given his new high-flown status, has far more important people to socialise with these days.

On the few occasions we do hit the town - I generally try to ensure other people from the office are also around - Trish is notable by her absence. Brad has hinted that she doesn't want to be in my presence ever again. Suits me. And so I grind it out, counting my money and the days.

My fear of Brad has diminished to the extent that I'm almost looking forward to meeting with some of the people in our Chicago office next week, my first video-conference since moving to New York. It'll be interesting to find out if I still have my strange new gift, you see, and maybe the opportunity for another step up the ladder. At the very least it will bring some excitement into my banker's life.

Oh, you were wondering about the ghost?

Well, I was looking through my secretary's desk one day when she was out to lunch, searching for a clean disk for my computer. She isn't the best organised of people and in one of the drawers I came across an out-of-date hard copy of the bank's internal telephone directory, which had colour pictures of every employee in the building.

I still don't understand why, but I turned to the index and looked under "S". And there he was, Dean

Sirkowski, wearing a buttoned-down shirt in the style of his erstwhile boss. Although I felt sure I'd seen the face before, it was the physical peculiarity that clinched recognition, the shoulders plunging away from a long-stemmed neck. What is the term for it? Ah, yes, slope-shouldered.

Now some people might think it's cool to see a ghost, especially one that appears at a distance of several hundred miles and does little else but sit still for an hour. You could even argue that the whole thing was nothing more than my telepathic powers converting Brad's disturbed and disturbing brain patterns into an hallucinatory image, scarcely counting as a ghost at all.

In fact I have sympathy with both those viewpoints. But there was the shock of coming across his photograph and recognising him. Then, on top of everything else, the one difference in his appearance. The devil in the detail.

It's the one reservation I have with regard to the upcoming video-conference - I just hope that no-one in Chicago will be harbouring a secret that is too dark and nasty. Because it still disturbs me, on occasion, thinking about that first time.

Sirkowski, you see, being Polish-blond in life. And me with the vision of that red, red hair...

Interview: Barry Wood

BARRY WOOD is a Canadian writer of dark short fiction with several publications to his credit. His story NOWHERE TO GO - a tale about a retired novelist caring for his sick wife in rural Nova Scotia - is about to be published in POSTSCRIPTS #14 from PS Publishing. Another story, WARM MILK, will be appearing in THE ASHEN-EYE shortly. He has a self-published audio cassette of short stories entitled BARRY WOOD'S SHORT STORIES.

He works full time in government administration and writes in his spare time.

CAROLINE CALLAGHAN caught up with Barry in order to find out more about him.

Where were you born and raised and where do you now live?

I was born in the tiny village of Mosherville, Nova Scotia, Canada. It has about twenty-four people. Not much happens there and it has lots of flies in the summertime. I've lived in Halifax since I was nineteen. It's at the water's edge. Navy ships sit in the harbour along with sailboats and cruise ships visiting in the summer months. I visit the library often.

You're now 49. How long have you been writing and what got you started?

The first story I wrote was when I was about ten or so. It was titled MRS VOLGER. It was about a little boy who looks in the window of an old woman's house to later find that she had been dead for a few days and what the boy had seen was actually her ghost. I read that story in front a few people at the community hall and that got me hooked. I have no idea whatever happened to the story but I no longer have it. My stories were also sent around the classrooms at school and fellow students could scribble their opinions. All I can remember is one jock's comment: "So-so, not too bad".

Do you deliberately network with other writers/editors/publishers? If so, how?

AUTHOR: *Caroline Callaghan*

I don't go to conventions nor do I belong to any writer's groups. I don't try to network with other writers or editors or publishers, but everything just seems to fall into place. I have a MySpace page. MySpace is fantastic for everything—including readers. I've always believed a writer is only as good as his or her editor.



You work full time. How do you manage to fit writing in around other aspects of your life?

I write only extremely short stories so I've never had a problem fitting everything in. I had the opportunity to write a book for a Newfoundland publisher, but I just couldn't do it. Perhaps I just didn't want to do it. I like very short stories.

Would you consider yourself a "career writer" (ie. do you aspire to be a full-time professional writer), or are you a "hobby writer" who writes in his spare time and is happy to continue with the day job?

I'm neither a career nor a hobby writer. I just write a short story when I feel like it. Maybe some day when I retire I'll live in a little house on some island and just type the days away.

There is sometimes a bit of an argument between career writers and hobby writers relating to payment for publications. On the one hand, some believe that a writer shouldn't write for free as it sets a precedent for publishers/editors to pay a pittance to writers. On the other hand, some say publishing in non-paying outlets is great experience and also a useful way to support/build up the small presses. Which side of this argument would you say you are on?

I used to post my stories for free on my site, but I

don't any more. I sometimes give snippets but there comes a time in most writers' lives when they ask themselves, "Why would a reader buy the cow when he or she can get the milk for free?"

Your writing is quite dark. If you were a literary critic, how would you describe your own work?

Very short pieces of dark prose about ordinary life and ordinary people that involve a killing or something dark. The conversations in the stories are how real people talk. The stories are tight meat-and-potatoes ones needing no extra condiments. No fancy or big words.

Usually there's a sneaky twist in the stories. Sometimes the main character has the innocence and childlike personality of Alfred Hitchcock's Norman Bates on one hand, but a discomfiting quality on the other. Sometimes the victims are the innocent ones. Sometimes the stories are profoundly sad. There's little gore and no headless monsters and the reader uses his or her own mind's eye to see the disturbing action. The simple writing sometimes fool readers into believing that all will work out smoothly, but then something bad happens. The writing has been compared to that of Sherwood Anderson.

You have a story – NOWHERE TO GO - being published shortly in POSTSCRIPTS magazine. POSTSCRIPTS is probably the foremost UK genre magazine, one which all writers aspire to be published in. How did you feel when you found out your story had been accepted for such a prestigious magazine? Is this your first story in print?

I had a story published in last year's issue of WRITER'S POST JOURNAL and other publications throughout the years, including a kid story in SMALL STREET JOURNAL in Maine in the United States. I've had several stories published locally in community papers. When I sent NOWHERE TO GO to POSTSCRIPTS magazine, I was told quickly it had been accepted and I am grateful to its publisher, Peter Crowther, for taking on my story.

What's your career plan in terms of writing? Where do you see yourself in, say, five years time?

I don't see a lot of change. However, I have considered privately printing a new story I've just written titled A FAMILY MATTER. It's a short tale about an ordinary family and one of them just happens to be a serial killer.

Finally, apart from the fact that you're a writer, what's the one thing you'd like people to know about you?

I like to write and to receive handwritten letters especially from authors. So far, I've only received one handwritten letter from a reader. Hmmmm.

And what's the one thing you don't want them to find out about you?!

There are too many things—I shouldn't imagine I could just come up with one!

You can find out more about Barry Wood and his writing at:

<http://www.barrywood.net>

And his MySpace page at:

<http://www.myspace.com/barrydeanwood>

Readers who would like to ink Barry Wood a letter by hand, please contact him via his website.

Death Knock

Emily sat in the remarkable stillness of the room, watching the dust motes dance in the shaft of sunlight that always sliced through the gap in the curtains at this time of day, fading the picture on the television to white nothingness and annoying Gary. He would also have had something to say about the dust. But the television was silent and dark, the room had gone un-dusted for a week. And Gary was dead.

For the first couple of days since the accident, Emily hadn't even had time to assimilate the fact that he had died, spread-eagled across the main road near the shops, his neck bent awkwardly and his sightless eyes following the scorched-rubber trail left by the car as it braked, too late to avoid him, as he came back from the shop. They gave her the plastic carrier bag along with his wallet, keys and a handful of loose change. She'd looked inside, at the plastic bottle of souring milk, the lightly-crushed carton of microwave noodles, the packet of 20 Marlboro lights and the bottle of Jacob's Creek Semillon Chardonnay.

"The bottle isn't broken," she'd said to the policewoman, who nodded sympathetically. Emily took the gold and white cigarette packet from the bag and turned it this way and that, marvelling at it as though it was something new and exotic.

"I always said these things would kill him," she smiled, and then broke down into great, snotty, hacking sobs, leaning on the WPC's shoulder until she could gather herself together and put the kettle on. There then followed an endless parade of family, friends, work colleagues, neighbours. There was even a vicar. Emily stared, uncomprehending, at him as he told her Gary had gone to a better place. She looked around the living room, at the 42 inch HD-ready LCD TV, the DVD recorder, the Sky+ box, the MP3 player, the laptop, and all the shiny, silver boys' toys.

"What, PC World?" she'd said. The vicar had frowned at her. This was not the time for jokes. She apologised and put the kettle on and listened politely to his stories of Heaven then, when he'd left, lay on the bed and stared at a packet of Nurofen for an hour, wondering if it was enough to

AUTHOR: **David Barnett**

kill her and whether she'd meet Gary again if there was.

And now, now she was alone. Had been all day. They'd telephoned, of course, told her they'd come round. Do some shopping. Some washing. She'd smiled and said she was all right. It was the funeral on Monday. She needed some time alone.

As she sat in the living room, the dust motes the only moving things, she wondered if it had been the right thing to do. The house felt alternately big and empty and small and encroaching. She missed Gary terribly but could feel his presence everywhere, in the depression of the cushion on his favourite chair, in the stale ashtray he kept by the back door, where he stood and smoked and stared at the twinkling stars while she waited for him to come to bed and put an exploratory hand on her thigh so she could turn to him and pull him towards her.

When the doorbell rang, it jolted her so hard she did a half-leap from the sofa that would have been comical to watch had there been anyone to see it, and if her face hadn't been streaked with the washed-away remains of the mascara she'd bravely applied that morning in a vain attempt to drive forward the life that everyone softly told her must go on.

After doing her best to fix her panda eyes and brushing her hands down the front of her blouse and skirt, Emily opened the front door an inch. The house opened straight on to the street and very often the doorstep was occupied by some salesman or con-merchant or religious bore. The day after Gary died, her dad fixed a security chain to the door, perhaps convinced that she was now a vulnerable, single woman who would be preyed upon. Emily peeped out past the chain at the man who stood there, a rather shabby raincoat draped over his bony frame. He was in his forties, or maybe his fifties; it was difficult to tell. He wore a pale, slightly soiled suit and a tie hung skewed from his frayed collar. He smiled sympathetically and ran a hand through his grey hair.

“Mrs Hexham?”

Emily shook her head. “No. My partner’s name is Hexham. We weren’t married. I’m afraid he’s...”

She left it hanging there, and the man nodded, still smiling, but looked as though he was going to burst into tears himself.

“Yes. I know,” he said sadly. “I heard about it. I’m from the Argus.”

Emily felt her backbone stiffen and her eyes narrow. The local paper? What did they want? “There’s already been a death notice in the classified columns,” she said. “The undertaker looked after it, I think. It should have gone in today.”

The man shook his head, looking up and down the street as though he was trying to tell her he was acutely aware that his presence on her doorstep was somehow inappropriate. “No, it’s not that. My name’s Harry. Harry Swinford. I’m a reporter with the Argus.”

Emily’s head spun. A journalist? Visions of Gary, living a secret double-life. Debt, perhaps. Bigamy, maybe. Crime.

Seeing the look on her face, Harry Swinford bared his grey teeth again in a smile. “I thought perhaps a tribute? To Gary? He was young...” Swinford glanced at the cutting from the death notices he held in his pale hand. “Twenty-eight. He’ll have known a lot of people?”

“He was very popular,” Emily found herself saying.

“We could do a piece,” conceded Swinford. “Nice little write-up. Just about his life. Funeral arrangements and stuff. Possibly a picture.”

Emily understood the words the man was saying, but couldn’t really assimilate them. She was surprised, in some deep, tear-soaked corner of herself, to find she was un-hooking the security chain and opening the door wide, beckoning this man in and leading him into the living room.

“Tea?” she said as Harry Swinford sat down on the chair. Gary’s chair. It was all people had said to each other for the past couple of days. “Tea?” In that

kind of despairing but chin-up kind of way. “Tea?”

“Not for me,” smiled Harry Swinford. “I’ve been guzzling it all day at the office. Now, why don’t you just tell me about Gary?”

Emily began cautiously at first, her description of Gary sounding sterile and stark even to her own ears. Then she took a deep breath and, encouraged by Swinford’s slightly furrowed brow and easy smile, began to talk. She talked for forty minutes or more, dredging up every memory of Gary she could summon, crying and laughing and raising her eyebrows in mock annoyance, just as she did when he traipsed mud or brick-dust in through the front door. Throughout, Swinford nodded and murmured and made sharp, swift marks on his spiral bound notepad, the shorthand dancing across the lines like a writhing alien script.

At last, she had no more to say. She paused and looked at Harry Swinford. Had his hair grown darker as the afternoon sun began to sink over the rooftops opposite? Was there more colour in his cheeks? Did his eyes suddenly twinkle with light and depth? Swinford waited, his chewed pencil poised, until he realised she had finished. He slowly closed the notepad and slipped it into the pocket of his raincoat.

“That was lovely, Emily,” he said quietly. “A lovely tribute.”

“When... When will it be in the paper?” she asked.

Harry Swinford stroked his chin. “As soon as possible. Let people know about the funeral. Of course, what we really need...”

“Yes?”

“Well, it always looks better with a picture. A nice photo. Do you have one you could lend to me? I’d get it straight back to you.”

Emily bit her lip, her gaze straying to the framed photo on the mantelpiece, her and Gary on Corfu a couple of years ago. Swinford followed her eyes and smiled brightly.

“Oh. Oh yes. That’s a lovely picture. Tells the story, doesn’t it? How much he was loved.”

Before she really realised what she was doing,

Emily had taken the frame down from the mantel, unclipped the back, and was handing the print to Harry Swinford, who took his notebook from his pocket, slipped the picture between the pages, and replaced it with exaggerated care.

Swinford stood and she led him to the door. She suddenly felt... better wasn't right. But it was almost as if there was a weight lifted from her, a burden that she had carried around since Gary died. Friends and family were all very well, but they didn't need to hear what sort of person Gary was. They already knew. Telling it all to a stranger made Gary seem more real, somehow; drew him back from the dark abyss that she had been sure she was already losing him to.

On the doorstep, Swinford turned and shook Emily's hand. There was definitely something different about him. He seemed more... whole, Emily supposed.

"Thank you so much, Emily," he said.

She smiled back and made to shut the door as he walked off down the street. Before she snapped the door closed she yanked it open again, meaning to ask Swinford to call her the day before the story was printed, but as she looked left and right along the street, now shadowed as the sun dipped beyond the chimney pots, he was nowhere to be seen.

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"It's quiet," said Asif Baig as he surveyed the pile of dog-eared manila files on his desk - each one containing the case histories bashed out on a manual typewriter, accompanied by hand-written notes and scrawled diagrams - that his boss Dorothy Culpepper regarded as a suitable filing system for the work of a department of Military Intelligence Section 5.

No matter that there were only two of them in the Department for Extra-Usual Affairs - not counting Ms. Culpepper's docile hound of indeterminate breed, Satan, and Marie Stokesley, the silent, sulky teenager who could see dead people and who helped out from time to time. DfEAU was still a government body and an MI5 offshoot at that. Records should be properly filed, and that meant computers. Ms Culpepper had been aghast, her thin and inappropriately lipsticked mouth opening

like a wound at the prospect of being dragged into the 21st Century, but Asif had been insistent. She had capitulated, but on the condition that he input all the information himself. Several weeks and hundreds of files into the process, he was now beginning to regret it.

"October's always quiet," said Dorothy Culpepper, looking up from the Telegraph crossword and fixing him with a withering, steely, Bette Davis glare. "Paranormally speaking."

She was built like a cat, wiry and thin and fragile-looking, but with a startling agility and toughness for someone of her age. Asif knew of no other woman in their eighties who could move as swiftly as Dorothy Culpepper, nor who had a mind sharpened to such a piercing degree. Of course, she wasn't actually in her eighties; technically, she was much older. She had promised to explain it all to Asif one day, and he was still waiting. But he knew better than to press Dorothy Culpepper on personal matters.

It was unseasonably warm for October, albeit still only the first of the month; earlier that day Dorothy had told Asif that if this was climate change, then she was all for it, and might take her decrepit old Mini Cooper for a spin in the afternoon to contribute to global warming a little more. Traffic whispered by on the Horseferry Road and Satan, slumped like a sack of potatoes in his basket by Dorothy's desk, flapped a baggy ear at a persistent fly.

Asif stretched. If his family in Bradford could see him now... well. He didn't know what they'd think. His father was grudgingly proud that he was working "for the Government", but repeatedly asked for more details, which Asif couldn't give. His mother was just pleased he had a job for which he had to wear a suit, and was concentrating on the search for a suitable girl to marry him off to. Which was an endless source of amusement to Daniel, the boyfriend he would never be able to introduce to his family.

"Why?" he said. "Why's October quiet? Paranormally speaking?"

DfEAU was tasked to investigate all the weird, way-out stuff that no-one else could, or wanted to, or even believed in. Since Asif had arrived and

swollen the department's official numbers by 100 per cent, DfEAU had saved the world at least once, by his reckoning. But the occupants of the little office on the Horseferry Road would never get headlines or the thanks of a grateful nation. They were MI5's nasty little secret, an embarrassing reminder that for all the hi-tech glitz of spywork in the post-Cool Britannia world there were still things in dark corners that could not be easily explained, identified, catalogued and given a positive spin by the PR department. DfEAU was a necessary evil, as far as the sharp suits and marketing bods at Thames House were concerned, and with Dorothy Culpepper presiding over Britain's response to threats of a paranormal nature to national security from a shabby room at the top of two flights of dark stairs, the phrase "mad woman in the attic" had been used more than a couple of times, and once even by the Prime Minister, if Thames House gossip could be believed.

"October's quiet because everyone's conserving their energy for Hallowe'en," said Dorothy, taking a menthol cigarette from her packet and lighting it up.

"Really?" said Asif.

She gave him a pitying look and was just about to launch into a scathing demolition of him when her telephone rang.

"Culpepper," she barked, blowing a smoke ring. "Dale. How are you?"

It was Peter Dale, their liaison officer at Thames House. Dorothy frowned darkly at the telephone for a minute, then said: "What? E-mail? Don't you fucking dare..."

She slammed down the telephone. "We've got a job," she said, stubbing out the cigarette in a makeshift ashtray fashioned from a metal no smoking sign. "He says he's e-mailing me some documentation. I told him... well, you heard me. He's doing it anyway. You can sort it out while I go and buy some more fags. I'll take Satan and he can have a crap. Do you want anything?"

Asif shook his head and transferred to Dorothy's vacated seat as she clipped a lead on Satan's studded collar and dragged the protesting dog out of the door. Peter Dale's e-mail was already landing in

Dorothy's in-box. He opened it up and began to read.

The e-mail turned out to have several attachments of police reports concerning an individual who appeared to be conning his way into people's houses by pretending to be a reporter for a local paper in some mid-sized Home Counties dormitory town. There were seven incidents, in all, spread out with a gap of three or four days between them. Each visit was to the home of someone who had very recently - generally only a day or so previously - been bereaved. Nothing had been stolen from the homes, unless the photographs of the dead relative which most of the families had willingly handed over could be counted.

"I don't see what it's got to do with us," said Asif. "Surely just a matter for the local police. What's the national security issue?"

Dorothy waved one of the print-outs at him. "The fourth incident was at the country pile of a rather high-up official at the Home Office," she said. "Their daughter was recently killed in a road traffic accident. You may recall it?"

Asif shrugged. Dorothy continued: "They turned him away but reported the visit to the police and the security services. Someone must be leaning on MI5 to sort this out."

"But why us?" said Asif again.

Dorothy scanned the message from Peter Dale. "Apparently this chappie has used the name - and matches exactly the description - of an actual reporter from the local rag."

Asif waited for Dorothy to enlighten him further.

"One Harry Swinford." She looked up and lit a cigarette. "Who, apparently, has been dead for three months."

-

The editor of the Argus was a florid, jowly man in advanced middle age by the name of Hardacre. His newspaper was housed in a steel-and-glass building constructed around a monstrous printing press, and his office overlooked a car park and a slowly emerging retail park being built on the brownfield

site opposite. Once Asif had, on Dorothy's direct instruction, "cleared things with the local plod" they made an appointment to see him and that afternoon were ushered into his office, the grand, polished furniture which had obviously seen service with many previous editors - presumably in much more newspaper-like surroundings than this anonymous edge-of-town site - incongruous among the whispering air conditioning and fortnightly-tended pot plants.

Hardacre regarded them with a baleful glare from behind his tidy walnut veneer desk, on which a computer hummed quietly. After looking them up and down for a while, this ancient crone with the over-made up face and the cocky-looking young Asian lad with spiky hair and sharp suit, he grunted and indicated they should sit in the two tubular-framed chairs on the other side of his desk.

It had been a strained journey out to the sticks for Dorothy and Asif. He had recently purchased - or at least made the first payment on - a silver BMW and wanted to give it a run out. Dorothy wanted to take her old Mini, on account of Asif imposing a quite intolerable smoking ban in his new motor. They flipped a coin and Dorothy lost, subsequently either sulking or directing acid comments about his driving all the way. Although she had, gasping as though for air, chain-smoked three of her menthol cigarettes as soon as Asif had pulled up in the Argus car park and let her out of the car, she was still in a foul mood and in no frame of mind to brook Hardacre's slightly-sneering expression.

"Department for Extra-Usual Affairs?" he said, reading from the note his secretary had left him. "What the hell's that, then?"

Dorothy's face tightened. "We are a department of Her Majesty's security services and you would be advised to provide us with all the assistance we need," she said.

Hardacre leaned back in his chair, steeping his fingers on his bulging stomach. "Security services, eh? Sounds juicy. And this is about the Swinford thing?"

"You tell us," said Asif.

Hardacre shrugged. "Few weeks ago, we started getting calls from people. Someone had been

knocking them, claiming to be from the Argus."

"Knocking them?" said Dorothy.

"Knocking on the doors of people who've lost someone in an accident, or to an illness, that sort of thing," explained Hardacre. "We call it a 'death knock' in the trade."

"How utterly dreadful," muttered Dorothy.

Asif leaned forward. "Does this happen a lot? People posing as Argus reporters?"

Hardacre made a face. "Sometimes you get the news agencies who'll pretend to be from local newspapers, trading on the paper's reputation in a community. But I haven't heard anything like this before. Six or seven of them now."

"So you brought in the police?" asked Asif.

Hardacre nodded, spinning his chair slightly and gazing out of the window. "Had to. Paper's professional reputation, and all that. If someone was using our name to con their way into other people's houses..." He paused and looked back at Dorothy and Asif. "So why is this a security issue, then? This bloke a spy or something? Al Qaeda?"

Dorothy ignored his question and said: "When did you start making the link with Harry Swinford?"

"That was the name this bloke was using on the knocks," said Hardacre, shrugging.

"And Swinford was a reporter here?"

Hardacre nodded. "One of the best. Died three months ago. Only forty-nine. Cirrhosis of the liver." He mimed putting a glass to his lips. "Liked a drink, did Harry."

"Don't all journalists drink?" said Dorothy innocently.

Hardacre frowned. "Not these days. Not like the popular image of us. Harry was one of the last of a dying breed. He'd roll in pissed, often as not, having slept in his suit. Sometimes he wouldn't come in at all. But, in a funny way, you could always rely on him. Journalism was his life; it was second nature to him, like breathing, or eating. And he was king

of the death knocks. I could probably count on the fingers of one hand the number of times Harry Swinford was turned away on the doorstep.”

Hardacre paused, reflectively. Then his gaze snapped to meet Dorothy Culpepper’s. “But why this interest in Swinford? This is just somebody using his name. He’s dead and buried.”

“Humour us,” insisted Dorothy. “Tell me about his private life.”

Hardacre rubbed his chin. “What’s to tell? He didn’t have one outside work and the pub.”

“Family?” said Asif.

“He’d gone the old route,” said Hardacre. “Trained on a local then went off shifting for the nationals. Spent ten years or more running around at all hours for the red tops. That sort of life isn’t conducive to a family. He was divorced before he came to us.”

“Did many go to his funeral?”

Hardacre wrinkled his nose. “Harry was a... difficult man to like. He was curmudgeonly. The younger reporters could have learned a lot from him, but he didn’t have the inclination to teach them. Thought standards had gone right down the drain.”

“Have they?” asked Asif.

Hardacre sighed. “It’s a different job, these days. It’s all profit margins and sales figures and new media. We’re chasing internet users as hard as we’re trying to reign in falling sales. It’s a brave new world, and Harry Swinford was resolutely old school. So, to answer your question, no, there weren’t many at the funeral. Me and the deputy editor and maybe one of the older reporters. No family, no old buddies from the nationals. Harry Swinford is gone and forgotten.”

“Perhaps,” said Dorothy thoughtfully.

Now it was Hardacre’s turn for questions. “Why exactly are you investigating this, then? And what’s in it for us? I presume we’re going to get a story from this since I’m helping you out.”

Dorothy smiled thinly. “I doubt it.”

Hardacre shook his head. “You’re not going to threaten me with a D-Notice, are you? Because-”

“They’re called DA-Notices now,” interjected Asif. “And all the work of DfEAU is subject to standing order number five, which covers all United Kingdom Security and Intelligence Services and Special Services.”

“And are quite voluntary,” said Hardacre, looking at him through narrowed eyes.

“The DA-Notice isn’t the reason you won’t publish, though,” said Dorothy mildly. “Mr Hardacre, Asif and I need to have a chat, but we’ll be back in touch a little later. In the meantime, do you have a recent photograph of Harry Swinford we could borrow?”

-

Dorothy and Asif found a small cafe in the town’s High Street and pondered the information they had gathered so far.

“Have you got any ideas?” said Asif, sipping his watery tea.

“I think so,” said Dorothy. “But I’d like to speak to someone who has seen this reporter first hand. Do you have the list of people he’s visited there?”

Asif riffled through the sheaf of police reports. “There’s a woman not far out of town. Emily Parker. Partner died after being hit by a car. She’s the last one to be visited.”

Dorothy drained her cup. “Let’s take a look then.” She stood and loudly addressed the waitress who came to clear their things: “That was by far the foulest coffee I have ever tasted. Should I fall ill from drinking it you can be sure to get my doctor’s bill.”

-

Emily Parker was small and blonde and pretty, but her eyes were red raw from sleepless nights and brimming over with the sadness of the bereaved too young. After examining Dorothy Culpepper’s ID she numbly slid the security chain off the door and invited them in to her silent living room.

“Tea?” she said carelessly.

“Lovely,” said Dorothy. “Anything to get the taste of that horrible coffee I’ve just had in that cafe out of my mouth. But don’t worry yourself; Asif here will make it.”

While Asif bustled about the kitchen, he listened to Emily telling Dorothy about the visit of the man who claimed to be Harry Swinford. As he brought a small tray with three cups on it into the living room, Emily was saying: “...and I waited a couple of days but nothing appeared in the newspaper. I was going to telephone them to ask when it was going in but another reporter came, a young woman. I was a bit confused and told her that someone had already been. That’s when the police were called.”

She sipped at her tea and looked at Dorothy. “Who would do this? Are they getting some kick out of speaking to people who’ve lost loved ones? It seems very cruel.”

“It does,” agreed Dorothy kindly. “We’re still investigating, so we can’t say for sure yet.”

She took the photograph of Harry Swinford from her pocket and showed it to Emily. It had been taken about a year previously, Hardacre said, for use in the paper on Swinford’s picture by-line. He hadn’t changed much up to his death, apparently.

“Is this the man who came to see you?” asked Dorothy.

Emily studied the photo. “Yes. Well, sort of.”

“Sort of?” asked Asif, perched on the edge of the sofa.

Emily nodded. “I mean, that’s what he looked like when he left. When he arrived he looked... different.”

Dorothy arched an eyebrow in invitation for Emily to continue.

“He looked... paler,” she said uncertainly. “Like... washed out. But by the time I’d finished talking and he was ready to leave he looked-” she stopped and looked at her hands, knotted in her lap, then at Dorothy. “I know this sounds strange, but he looked

more alive.”

Outside the house, as they sat in Asif’s car, Dorothy gave him a to-do list. “First, we need to put an insert in tomorrow’s Argus. A death notice. For a young woman, say twenty-six, died of some horrible disease. Put something like ‘after a long illness, bravely borne’. That should pique his interest. But before that you’ll need to find us a house.”

“A house?”

“Ring headquarters. They’ll sort it. We need an address for our dead girl. While you’re putting the ad in, ask that Hardacre chappy how easy it would be to make a mock up newspaper dated the day after Harry Swinford died.”

“What should it say?”

Dorothy cleared her throat and began to dictate as Asif scribbled down the words.

Asif was still perpetually amazed by the abilities of those at Thames House to procure just about anything. Within two hours of putting in his request to Peter Dale, he received a call back directing him to a modest semi-detached house on a middle-class housing estate close to town. It was decorated and furnished and had a well-tended garden. Whether it was an MI5 safe-house or the property of someone who had simply been paid a lot of money to vacate it for 24 hours he didn’t know. But Dorothy had been delighted with it, saying: “Excellent. Now I can claim for two hotel rooms and pocket the cash, and we can stay there tonight.”

Asif spent the rest of the day fulfilling his other tasks, while Dorothy, as far as he could tell, took herself off to smoke cigarettes and drink Singapore Slings in the bar of an expensive hotel, which she managed to return from with a receipt for two single rooms that bore a figure that made even Asif’s eyes water. “Nice little earner,” she cackled after showing it to him. “Now, I think I’ll take the double bed. Wake me when the first edition of the Argus is out.”

Dorothy was already up, smoking cigarettes (in the garden, at Asif's insistence) and drinking coffee when the courier brought the package from the Argus. She grabbed the copy of the first edition of the newspaper and flicked through to the classified ads.

"Here we are," she mumbled through the cigarette hanging between her lips. "Collins, Amanda. Beloved daughter and granddaughter, passed away aged 26 after a long illness. Funeral to be held on Friday. The family requests that this be a celebration of Amanda's life and friends and family are asked not to wear black. No flowers by request, donations instead to Cancer Research. Excellent work, Asif."

Asif flushed with pride, the way he always did when Dorothy tossed him a crumb of praise. "What now?" he said.

"Now," said Dorothy, "we wait."

Dorothy was having a doze in the armchair when the doorbell rang. She opened one eye and met Asif's gaze, from where he was sitting in the kitchen diner, reading the Argus.

"Is that him?" he mouthed.

Dorothy stood stiffly, rubbing her neck. "Let's see, shall we. I'll get the door. You wait in the kitchen."

She went into the hall and opened the door a crack, peering through at the figure on the doorstep that was clearly Harry Swinford. Emily Parker had been quite right; he was paler than his photograph, almost transparent in the low afternoon sunshine. Dorothy made a show of blinking at him and said: "Yes?"

He raised an eyebrow at Dorothy's age, then evidently made a calculation that she was a grandmother or possibly a great-grandmother. He smiled sympathetically and said: "Is this the home of Amanda Collins?"

Dorothy nodded assent and waited for him to continue. He smiled again and said: "Terrible business. I'm from the Argus. Name's Harry. I don't suppose you'd like us to put something in about

Amanda, would you? I'm thinking a tribute, perhaps a photo? She must have had a lot of friends..."

Dorothy nodded and indicated that the reporter follow her across the thick pile of the hall carpet and into the still, quiet living room. He perched on the end of the sofa, a man at ease in the homes of others, teasing their grief from them and allowing it to fuel the ticks and scratches of his shorthand pen on the crisp, clean page of the faint lined notebook always cradled in his left hand.

"Maybe you'd just like to tell me about Amanda," murmured the reporter.

Dorothy leaned forward and looked into his pale, translucent eyes. "Maybe you'd just like to tell me about you, Harry."

He frowned, glancing around slightly. "I'm sorry?"

"Just tell me about you, Harry. Tell me about why you're sitting here when you're dead."

Harry Swinford tensed, his knuckles whitening as he gripped his Biro. Something like panic flitted across his face. "Dead? Why, that's..."

"It's all right, Harry," said Dorothy soothingly. "I understand. I know about these things. It helps, doesn't it, Harry? Sitting in these chairs, speaking to these people. It's what you did best. It's all you knew. No matter what was going on in your own life, the rows and the anger and the loneliness that followed, you could always be relied upon, couldn't you Harry?"

"I was a pro," he said quietly.

Dorothy nodded sympathetically. "You were the best, Harry. That's what your editor says about you."

Harry looked at her with shrewd, narrow eyes. "That what he said? So why'd nobody come to my funeral? Why'd I die alone in a cold flat with a bottle of cheap vodka in my hand? Why does nobody remember me?"

"Is that why you come to these houses, Harry?" asked Dorothy. "Do you like the grief, the love?"

"I never had it," said Harry in a small voice. "It

warms me.”

Dorothy nodded and Asif appeared at the doorway from the stairs, where he had been watching with interest. Harry Swinford looked at him. “Who’s this?”

“My associate, Asif Baig. He has something for you.”

From within the manila envelope Asif held in his hand he withdrew a copy of the *Argus*. He crossed the room and handed it to Harry Swinford.

The reporter unfolded it and regarded the front page. It was dated three months earlier, and the right side of the page was taken up with a photograph of him. Of Harry Swinford. The headline read: “MUCH-LOVED REPORTER PASSES AWAY”.

“Passes away,” muttered Harry. “I always hated that.”

Nevertheless, he began to read softly to himself: “The world of journalism was rocked yesterday when popular and hard-working veteran reporter Harry Swinford died.”

Swinford looked up at Dorothy and Asif. “You never put ‘yesterday’ in an intro. It dates the story immediately. And veteran? How old did they think I was? Who wrote this shit?”

Asif glanced nervously at Dorothy but she simply smiled tightly. “Someone not as good as you, Harry. That’s the point. They missed you. They still do.”

He looked up. “Really?”

“Really. And think about all those people you helped, all those bereaved families who found it such a relief to just sit down and talk to you, and how you made it real for them by putting the stories of their loved ones in the paper. You let them move on, Harry. You allowed them to let go. And now that’s what you’ve got to do.”

Harry nodded absently, still looking at the front page. “Yes. Let go. Move on.”

“You did a good job, Harry,” whispered Dorothy Culpepper. “Now it’s time to go.”

Harry nodded again and, without a word started to walk towards the door. With each step he seemed paler and less distinct, until by the time he reached the front door he passed right through it, leaving a shower of small cards behind him on the welcome mat.

Asif dashed to the door and opened it, but Harry Swinford was nowhere to be seen. He bent down and retrieved the stack of multicoloured rectangles from the floor, standing and leafing through them.

“The photographs of everyone whose families he visited since he died,” observed Dorothy. “Keep them safe and we’ll have them returned.”

“What now?” asked Asif, shivering despite the still-warm afternoon sun.

“Ring Hardacre on your mobile and give it to me,” ordered Dorothy. Asif complied and handed it over when he heard the ring-tone. After a moment Dorothy continued: “Mr Hardacre, I’m just calling to tell you that you won’t be having any more trouble from Harry Swinford.”

There was a pause, then Dorothy glanced at Asif, her eyes glinting, and she said: “A story? I don’t see why not. How about ghost of dead reporter gets to stories before living *Argus* staffers do?”

There was another silence from Dorothy, during which Asif could hear the tinny ranting of the florid editor, then the connection was killed. Dorothy allowed herself a self-satisfied smile and handed back the phone.

Asif pocketed it and said: “So, what did he say?”

Dorothy laughed and took his arm. “No comment,” she said. “Now come on; I believe there’s a glass of gin with my name on it rolling off the presses somewhere even as we speak.”

SF101: Last and First Men

by Olaf Stapledon

THE AUTHOR

“William Olaf Stapledon was not a great poet, nor even in some conventional respects a very good novelist; but he was a mythmaker, and as such he was unique. In his chosen field, his books stand absolutely unequalled in their combination of intellectual brilliance, imaginative sweep, and tragic dignity.” - Basil Davenport

Olaf Stapledon was born in the Wirral, near Liverpool, in 1886. However, much of his early childhood was spent living in the area of the Suez Canal, until his family returned to the UK for him to begin his education. First he attended Abbotsholme School, before moving on to Balliol College, Oxford where, in 1909, he received a BA in Modern History.

Between then and the outbreak of the First World War, Stapledon briefly taught at Manchester Grammar School (an experience he did not enjoy), as well as working at the family shipping offices in Liverpool and Port Said, Egypt.

During the war, Stapledon served with the Friends Ambulance Service, an experience which confirmed his pacifist stance, and also incidentally provided material for a segment of the novel *Last Men In London* (an interesting but not essential work in which one of the Last Men concentrate on the life of just one man in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Shortly after the war, he married Agnes Miller, with whom he remained for the rest of his life. They had two children, Mary and John.

In 1925, Stapledon received a PhD in philosophy from the University of Liverpool and in 1929 he published his first (non-fiction) book *A Modern Theory of Ethics*. His next work, *Last and First Men*, was quite a departure, in which Stapledon chose to use the form of a future history to address his philosophical (and other) concerns. It was in the genre of Science Fiction that his work is best remembered, although he was reputedly unaware of this branch of literature, at least during his first

AUTHOR: Sean Parker

writings in this field.

Describing himself as a socialist, Stapledon found world politics (and especially the idea of achieving world peace) increasingly important. He corresponded with such writers and thinkers as H.G. Wells, Bertrand Russell and J.B. Priestly. During the final five years of his life, frequently participated in lecture tours and, in 1949, he was the only Briton to be granted a visa to attend the Conference of World Peace in New York. Throughout his life he continued to write fictional and non-fiction works.

Stapledon died of a heart attack in 1950, aged 64.

THE NOVEL

Epic. That covers it. Just about, anyway.

The late Arthur C. Clarke is quoted as saying that “no other book had a greater influence on my life,” and the echoes of Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* (as well as the tremendous *Star Maker* which followed it) can indeed be seen in many of Clarke’s greatest works. The sense of distance, the mind-boggling time-scales, the sheer scope of the works and the depth of imagination therein are what Stapledon is rightly known for, and these elements are present in abundance in this novel.

Many are of the opinion that the later *Star Maker* is the greatest of Stapledon’s work (or at least his work in the field of SF) and this may indeed be the case, but one advantage that *Last and First Men* has is the human touch. That is if you count the fact that the book tells the entire future history of the human race (in all of its eighteen very distinct variations). As it is, entire civilisations rise and fall in the space of a paragraph, entire planetary populations live and die in a chapter. The novel covers roughly two billion years, right up the deaths of the last humans (one cannot really call them men) on Neptune, and it is one of these Last Men

who is the indirect narrator of the novel.

The novel takes the form of a brief history of the human race which is communicated to the 'present-day' author with his barely-adequate mind by means of a combination of one way time-travelling telepathy.

The book gets off to a bit of a shaky start. Events since its publication in 1930 show that Stapledon was way off the mark in almost every respect, but saying that, the history of the devastating British / French war still makes entertaining reading, in much the same way as H.G. Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come* does - as a product of its time. Stapledon's perceived anti-Americanism in this section of the book may have gone some way to losing the whole work the wider readership that it certainly deserves, which is unfortunate, but time seems to have dimmed any resentments that this might have caused.

Still, it is not such details that are important here; in fact Stapledon admits in his introduction that the book may well seem 'ridiculous' to future readers. One major failing though is that no mention of space flight is made until man has evolved into its fifth distinct species, but this and other omissions are more than made up for in many, many other ways.

Civilisations rise and fall with a dizzying speed, and on more than one occasion the human race teeters on the brink of complete extinction. The physical properties of each variety of mankind vary greatly. Fourth Man consists of little more than giant brains, whilst others are airborne, or inhabit societies based around the concept of music. The Second Men have to attempt to survive under hundreds of thousands of years of repeated attacks from the strange cloud-like beings of the planet Mars - a meeting of life-forms that ends badly for all concerned.

By the time of the Fifth Men, life on Earth has become impossible due to an impending catastrophe in which it is expected that the moon will come hurtling downwards. Thus, in an early example of genetic engineering in fiction, Mankind readies itself for the move of its population to Venus. Here, it involves itself in the wholesale terraforming of the planet, leading to the genocide of the (presumed unintelligent) water-based life

forms that they find already inhabiting the place. This episode is one of the most uncomfortable of the book, with the Last Men justifying this behaviour in a somewhat unconvincing manner.

Venus is thus the home of humanity through the rise and fall of three completely distinct species. The expansion of the sun many millions of years in the future renders yet another move necessary - this time to Neptune, which, as it turns out, is to be the last stop for mankind.

Not that extinction faces them in anything like the near future - over half of the life-span of the race is spent on its inhospitable new home. Nine varieties of human life evolve in the thousands of millions of years that they have left to them. The end result is the Last Men, the eighteenth distinct species, and the crowning achievement of the race as a whole. One of the more detailed sections of the book concentrates on this strange, but still somehow human, society.

It is at this point in time that disaster strikes. Distant star after distant star are going nova, possibly due to a failed experiment by an alien race. The sun lies in the path of this huge swathe of devastation.

Quite how a novel with no characters as such can manage to be so moving - especially with the collapse of the last society on Neptune, all its achievements worth nothing - is one of the major successes of *Last and First Men*. Admittedly, many readers find parts of the book to be somewhat repetitive due to the cyclical nature of the rising and falling of the various races and civilisations, but in a way this merely adds to the feeling of aeons passing, of man struggling up to the heights that he is capable of attaining, only to fall away again and again. As the last remnants of humankind strive to remain noble in the face of impending doom (and on the whole fail), they try to find some meaning in all of the countless years passed, of the countless lives lived - and maybe, just maybe, they succeed.

OTHER RECOMMENDED SF NOVELS BY OLAF STAPLEDON

Odd John (1935)
Star Maker (1937)
Sirius (1944)

The King is Dead...

I knew I was dead as soon as I stepped into The Reaper's Arms.

AUTHOR: Alister Davison

Marilyn Monroe stood behind the bar. She was serving John F Kennedy, who was nursing the worst hangover in history. Despite his best efforts, blood and brain matter dribbled between the fingers pressed against the side of his head; judging by the empties that surrounded him, it wasn't stopping him having a good drink.

Marilyn's laughter mingled with the sounds of the fruit machine as I walked to the bar. I glanced across, saw the two Jims - Hendrix and Morrison - crouched in front of the three wheels, looking to see which was their best nudge. The lights flashed off their face in a psychedelic show I felt sure they'd appreciate.

There was one other person; a morose James Dean sat alone at a table in the corner. He had his hands curled around his glass, like he was hanging onto it for dear life.

Life. I almost laughed; there was none of that here.

'What can I get you, sugar?' Marilyn asked.

I looked at the selection in the fridge, those that were lined up behind her, wondering what the deceased drink of choice was.

Kennedy nudged me gently with his shoulder. 'Irish whiskey's good, young man.'

'Yeah,' I grinned at Marilyn. 'I'll have one of those.'

'Coming right up.' She blew me a kiss and spun to face the bottles, the skirt of her dress twirling almost as high as her waist.

I sat down, and Kennedy laughed when that white fabric settled. 'What you in for?' he asked me.

'Car crash,' I realised. 'Wasn't even my fault.'

Kennedy jerked his finger at James Dean. 'They all say that.'

I looked at him, and Jimmy shrugged, hands still tight on his glass. 'What have you got?' he asked, his words slurring, eyes never quite settling on me.

'Three movies.' Marilyn was back with my drink. 'That's all he did, yet here he is.'

She said more but it was lost in the noise. The bandit was paying out, the team of Hendrix and Morrison were celebrating; they hugged each other, then both played air guitar. Jimi used his tongue, of course.

'Oooh,' I heard Marilyn shiver. She had her hands on her cheeks. 'I wish he wouldn't do that. It makes me all,' she looked at me, then Kennedy, 'well, you know.'

JFK chuckled, rolled his one good eye. 'You alone, son?' he asked me. 'Anyone missing you?'

We'd had a fight, Victoria and me. One of those end of the world arguments that you're never sure what they were originally about.

Whatever it was, it had to be enough to make me storm out, get in the car, and drive. In a bad mood, I was careless, and I lost control.

So there I was.

'Yeah, I suppose there is.'

Marilyn leaned on the bar, exposing her ski-slope cleavage. 'Maybe you should give her a call, honey,' she winks. 'Let her know you're in good hands.'

I looked at JFK for advice. 'But I'm dead, aren't I?'

He raised his glass, winked at me and took a sip. 'Sure you are, but there are always ways.'

My mobile was in my pocket, and I was surprised to see there was still a signal in the afterlife. I dialled Vicky's number and waited.

Not for too long as it happened. Straight to voicemail, her recorded message asking if I'd like to leave one of my own. Hearing her voice made me yearn for her, long for everything to be the way it was before... well, you know.

'Vic, it's me.' There was static in the gaps between my words, but I kept going anyway. 'I'm sorry, babe. Call me back.'

Call me back? How was she going to do that?

Marilyn's hand touched mine, sending a heat through my body that finished at my groin. 'Don't worry, she'll try.'

I smiled back, shuffling in my seat, uncomfortable with the tightening of my trousers. 'You think?'

'I know, sugar.'

I sensed she was about to tell me more, but her eyes moved away from me. That beautiful face creased into a frown as she looked over my shoulder.

'Darn,' said JFK, looking in the same direction. 'I was starting to forget he was here.'

I turned on my stool to see the toilet door propped open by a bloated figure in a white jumpsuit. He belched, strode out and let the door slam shut behind him.

'I tell you, I needed that,' said Elvis. 'I'm sure I've just lost a stone. That's business I had to take care of!'

I watched him walk to the bar, flares flapping, rhinestones and diamonds gleaming. Impressive, but as he got closer, I could see the Hawaiian garland wasn't as bright as it used to be; there were stains on his clothes and the once boyish face was shrouded in stubble.

He sat next to me with a groan that matched the creaking of his stool. Could be a lot worse, I supposed, than being sandwiched between these

two legends.

'Drinks are on me,' I told Marilyn. 'And get one for yourself.'

She nodded, but her smile was tight and showed no teeth. Even JFK was silent, content to study the bottom of his glass.

'Thankyouverymuch, son.' Elvis lowered his Vegas shades and peered over the top of them with small, pinhole eyes. 'New here, ain't ya?'

'Just arrived,' said Kennedy. 'Keeping himself to himself, having a couple of quiet ones.'

'New blood, eh?'

I didn't like the way Elvis was looking at me; his eyes weren't right, too beady for my liking. It was like he was weighing me up, assessing my potential.

Over his shoulder, Morrison and Hendrix had given up on the fruit machine, and stood talking quietly, glancing once at me before looking quickly away.

'Here you go, boys.'

Marilyn had three whiskeys lined up on the bar. Kennedy didn't touch his, and I was picking up mine as Elvis downed his in one.

'Come on, baby,' he laughed. 'I could do with the competition.'

Why not? It wasn't like I could get any worse than being dead.

I necked it swiftly; it was good stuff, didn't even burn on the way down.

'Another!' I said, slamming the glass on the bar.

Marilyn was about to speak, but Elvis got there first.

'He's sure,' he growled. 'Clear?'

Kennedy sighed, got off his stool. 'I gotta pee,' he said.

'Wouldn't go in there if I were you,' Elvis warned.

'Not for a couple of minutes, anyway.' He held his nose and guffawed. I laughed too – it was infectious.

Kennedy went anyway, head held low, one shoulder of his grey suit darkened by gore.

'I like you, son. You're my kind of guy.' Elvis raised his glass, and I clinked mine against it. 'Cheers.'

And that's how I ended up getting mortally drunk with The King.

But this tale isn't finished. Not yet, anyway.

I'd been in there for God knows how long (He knew) and drank God knows how much (that too) when Elvis reached into his jumpsuit for a business card and slapped it on the bar.

'You should give that number a call,' he said, voice crystal clear.

'Yeah?' I picked up the card. 834 5464 54837 printed there in gold leaf. Apart from that, it was blank. 'Where's it for?' I didn't recognise the area code; maybe it was somewhere it Limbo?

'A man.' Elvis leaned closer to me, the seams on his jumpsuit groaning at the pressure. 'A man who can get you what you want. Anything you want,' he added quietly.

'Anything?' I looked around; Marilyn was busy wiping tables, there was nobody within earshot.

'That's right. Anything. Not everyone gets it, but I like you, son. I like you a lot. I don't wanna see you unhappy, so,' he tapped the card with a chipped fingernail, 'that's between you and me.'

'Anything?' I repeated.

The King laughed, and the others looked at us for a brief moment. 'You want to be with your girl, it could happen.'

I shook my head. I'd read enough to know about these deals with the devil; no doubt if I asked to be with Vicky, she'd end up dead in here too. I voiced my concern.

Elvis shook his head. 'Doesn't work like that.'

'I could be alive again?'

Elvis nodded.

'Everything back the way it was? Before our argument?'

'Uh-huh. As you wish, so shall it be.' He patted my shoulder. 'Think about it, kid, while I go and take another dump.'

I watched him waddle off to the men's room. He looked more bloated than before, and his clothes had taken on a yellow hue, like he'd been photographed in sepia.

'You be careful what you wish for, honey.' Marilyn was back, and her whisper in my ear sent shivers down my spine.

'What's the catch?' I asked her.

'You know, I don't think there is one.' She shrugged, laughed, and I waited patiently for her breasts to stop bouncing before I spoke; it only seemed polite.

'You're sure?'

'As apples is apples.'

'Just don't let him in,' Kennedy muttered. 'Live your life, not his.'

It was, I know, too good to be true. But how could I not? I could be alive again, ready to start over. I'd know my mistakes, the right choices that I should make. Too good to refuse, more like.

It was another twenty minutes before Elvis came back out, a foul stench following him through the door. He looked better for his ablution, now dressed in black leathers and whistling a tune I couldn't quite recall.

'Mr. Presley,' I said proudly, 'I'll do it.'

He grinned, and I swear there was a sparkle in that smile. 'Atta boy.'

No catch, Marilyn said, and she was absolutely right.

Maybe you're surprised at that, thinking this was one of those cautionary tales with a twist at the end. Perhaps it is, and the twist is that there's no twist.

Suffice to say, I dialled that number and was put on hold for a few seconds before being transferred to a most helpful young woman.

She took all my details (well, the ones I could remember), then asked for my wish.

Simple, I said; let me go back to the morning of the argument, and I won't storm out in a foul temper and crash the car. Nothing complicated in that.

I woke up, we never had the fight, and I drove to work in the best of moods.

Two months later, and it's never been better. We're off out and I can't help but smile smugly at my reflection as I comb my hair.

'Love the new look, my man.' Vicky pecks my cheek, gives my bum a nip as she walks past.

I laugh, watching her leave the room. Yep, it's never been so good.

Back to myself, I make sure the sideburns are level one last time – they're perfect, just like life.

'You almost ready, honey?' Vicky asks, her voice floating from downstairs.

'Uh-huh-huh. I'm ready, baby.' The jacket I've picked is a little loud, but why not?

I hear her laugh, that tinkling sound that I love so very much.

That phone number is still in my head, but there's been no need to ring it again; everything's just so right.

I'll confess to texting it once by mistake, after a drink too many: THE KING LIVES, it had said. I'd given it no thought.

Until now, when I hear Vicky singing a tune, one I once couldn't quite remember, but has now come immediately to mind.

Devil In Disguise.

I smile at myself – I'm being stupid. I wink, point a finger at the new me in the mirror. 'Let's take care of business.'

Icon Oddities: The Music Career of William Shatner

With the probable exception of Richard O'Brien, it's safe to say that no actor aspires for cult-stardom. But it happens. Young, ambitious, and unassuming actors take on a cheap horror-picture or a low-budget TV series to pay that month's rent. "It's just a stepping stone" they'll say, but twenty years later they're still tagged as that character.

Bruce "Don't Call Me Ash" Campbell's feature debut in *The Evil Dead* has never left him; Mark Hamill will always be shorthand for Luke Skywalker (not even Han Solo); and Bela Lugosi could never quite unstring the cape of Dracula. These guys never set out to be Horror/Sci-Fi icons, or cult-heroes, but one big-role overshadowed their entire careers. Eternally type-cast, closely recognised as a character, or stranded in a genre: cult-stardom, despite perks, isn't the ideal career move. But ever versatile, many iconic actors have tried/failed/succeeded with at least one very surprising (or at least sadly amusing) career move.

In this article I'll be celebrating, and respectfully mocking the atypical exploits of one of sci-fi and horror's most iconic stars. There's a lot to choose from but inevitably topping the list is ol' Captain/Admiral James T. Kirk aka Sir William Shatner.

Despite working quite prolifically in film and television since the 1950s, he's forever been an actor-against-the-world, always performing as though there's something on the wing. Despite an enviable talent for all things dramatic, he's never quite made it to the top of the mountain, and he's often found himself at the brunt of a lot of jokes (hair/weight/career), but he's never given up. With more professions than he's had wives, Shatner has found himself as author, director, screen-writer, stage performer, reality TV personality, Kellogg's cereal salesman, horse-breeder, convention attraction, game-show host, self-satirist, paint-ball champion and part-time race car driver. He even had a stint as the gung-ho manager of WWE wrestler Bret "The Hitman" Hart.

AUTHOR: **Jamie Halliday**

But more loved, hated, celebrated and vilified than all of these extracurricular activities combined is the man's near legendary musical career.

Sir Ham-A-Lot's forty year music career began with 1968's *The Transformed Man*. A bizarre concept album that combined classic literature (*Hamlet*, *Romeo & Juliet*) with popular songs of the time (*Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*, *Mr. Tambourine Man*, *It was a Very Good Year*). A bold and inventive idea he was never forgiven for.

Among other scathing reviews and dubious honours, *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* was voted "the worst Beatle's cover of all time" in a 2003 TV poll.

Shatner's musical style dispensed with gimmicks like melody, structure, or singing. Boldly going where no man had gone before, Shatner's (arguable) rap blueprint featured the same clipped-narration that plagued/blessed (delete to preference) his acting career. His Shatnerian take on Shakespearian dialogue was thought as funny as it was laughable, and *The Transformed Man* was not well received.

Following *Star Trek*'s cancellation, a C-List Shatner did his best to keep busy through the '70s. This included televised performances of songs like Elton John's *Rocket Man* (as seen parodied in TV's *Family Guy*) and Harry Chapin's *Taxi*. People kept laughing, even De Forest "Bones" Kelley famously quipped "Damn it Bill, You're an actor not a singer". Then something wonderful happened: Shatner got the joke; Shatner got good and Shatner got is his own back.

In 1998, experimental piano genius Ben Folds went solo from the popular Ben Folds Five. Folds counted an obscure little record entitled *The Transformed Man* among his favourites, and when it came time to record his *Fear of Pop* project, he employed a recently deceased Admiral Kirk to

contribute guest vocals.

Shatner hadn't changed, he still spoke and smarmed his way through his two tracks (the gorgeous *In Love* and its delicate companion-piece *Still in Love*) but Shatner brought depth, wisdom (a charge rarely levelled against him) and personality to the largely instrumental album.

Ben Folds being a very accomplished songwriter helped Shatner combine his skill for character-driven performance with musical accessibility. Hooks, melody and intelligent musical arrangements litter *In Love* all of which complimented Shatner's sincere and believable portrayal of a bitter and deceitful lover. "At puberty I was sworn to secrecy by the international brotherhood of lying, fickle, males," bellows Shatner in his most convincing performance since "KHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAANNNNNNNN!"

Six years later (Or: one Emmy nomination and one Emmy win later), Shatner set the record for most "difficult sophomore album" ever by releasing his second record *Has Been* thirty-six years after his debut. On the two tracks for *Fear of Pop*, Shatner managed to impress, or at least not embarrass himself, but on *Has Been* he put together a strong, consistent and hugely enjoyable 11-track album.

Shatner writing all but three songs himself (one a cover of Pulp's *Common People*, *That's Me Trying* penned by acclaimed novelist Nick Hornby, and *Real* written by country singer Brad Paisley) made what - to the disgust of many - is a great record.

As expected of Shatner, there were jokes; *Ideal Woman* was a *My Sharona*-esque rocker about a loved-one's bad habits. But there was self-doubt in the shape of *It Hasn't Happened Yet* a masterfully performed piece about his unfulfilled ambitions; and there was a sense of astounding defeat with *What Have You Done*, a poem about the death of his wife. But there was beauty (*Together*), and there was anger (*I Can't Get Behind That*), but best of all, there was fight. The album's title-track see's Shatner blasting back at critics and fans who've ridiculed him over his career: "Has been implies failure, not so. Has been is history. Has been was. Has been, might again".

Ben Folds returned to produce *Has Been*, just as featured artists like Henry Rollins, Aimee Mann,

Joe Jackson, Lemon Jelly and Braid Paisley came to pay tribute to the iconic actor. *Has Been's* title and content acknowledged Shatner's failings as a performer and a man, but over the 11-tracks, the (then) 74 year-old actor/rock-star proved he wasn't done trying.

The album enjoyed a spell in the US charts before Shatner got tied up with the success of TV's *Boston Legal*. He occasionally returns to showcase his Golden-Throat, as he did on his third collaboration with Ben Folds for the *Over The Hedge* soundtrack; a fine contribution to Lemon Jelly's 2005 album '64-'95; a spot as a special guest crooner for Brian Evan's 2005 live album; a TV-Land "William Shatner Live in Concert" special; not to mention further Price Line commercials which saw him "bust a move".

2008 even saw another addition to the Shatner discography with a live narration of *Exodus* featuring musical accompaniment from The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra. But it'll always be the uniquely compelling experiment-gone-wrong of *The Transformed Man* (that's really not too bad) and the autobiographical pop of *Has Been* that really represent what this crazy old guy is all about.

His long and varied career has seen him rise and fall as often as a rubber ball. For fans there's been a lot to choose from; camp classics (*Shoot or Be Shot*), '70s schlock (*Kingdom of Spiders*), a 'video nasty' (*Visiting Hours*), Oscar winners (*Judgment at Nuremberg*), self-satire (*Free Enterprise*), and children's animation (*Over the Hedge*): Perhaps you like Kirk, or TJ Hooker, or maybe Denny Crane, you might even like Ranger Bob... but I always think of his music.

It's amazing how much credibility your musical taste can lose when you admit that "In Love" by Bill Shatner is probably your favourite song, but if we've learnt anything from Shatner's music, it's that credibility comes and goes but William Shatner is forever. Rock-On and Prosper.

The Dopple Gang part two: Jumped by the Dopple Gang

Murder. The obvious choice.

AUTHOR: Colin Sinclair

Jake could make his troubles vanish in a soundless blaze of superior alien technology. No mess, no body. No trouble.

He began to make a list in his head. An inventory of the arrogant and the overbearing; a catalogue of obnoxious false friends, nullwit bullies and tiresomely tedious assholes. Obstacles in his path. The kind of folks who could do with saying a big Hello to Mr Bright Flash.

It was a long list.

Jake was hunched down and hidden in a cold and remote corner of the docks area, way back amongst some rusted rail tracks and worn down warehousing. In his gloved hands he cradled the smooth silver shape of the D-pistol. The Disintegrator. The single most incredible thing that Jake had ever seen. Apart from that strange woman and her gorilla bodyguard, obviously. And that guy who looked exactly like Jake. Evil Jake.

These were very strange days.

Jake looked out across broken ground, scrub grass and weeds struggling to survive in their own little patch, all bordered by tired, slumping buildings and weary, raggedy fencing.

The world moved on the same. People still went about their brittle daily lives. Traffic still growled along the choked roadways through the city. Insurance Adjusters were still soulless agents of Satan.

Franklin. The insurance guy. He was pretty high on the list.

Jake hefted the shiny metal pistol in one hand. Pointed it experimentally at a slow fat pigeon that was loitering a few feet away.

Sighting down along what he figured was the

barrel, Jake pressed his finger lightly against the slight depression that seemed to function as a trigger. Watched as the pigeon scratched at a twisted fragment of plastic.

“Bye-bye, pigeon,” said Jake.

The pigeon paused in its fruitless search for sustenance and turned to gaze up at Jake.

He held the gun steady, keeping his eye on the target as this pigeon began to slowly hop, skip, jump towards him. Or rather, towards the half eaten Bologna with extra mustard sandwich that was lying at Jake’s feet.

It was the pigeon’s lucky day. As it settled in to peck its way through a feast of sesame seeds and breadcrumbs, Jake finally lowered the gun and sighed.

Murder. That was going to be a problem.

Jake had spent many years hating crowds. Loathing the press and bustle of people, the roar and growl of voices raised in unison. It grew from an incident in his childhood, lost in the scrambling waves of bargain hunters during a toy shop winter sale. His parents nowhere to be seen - Jake couldn’t hear them over the shouts of glee and cries of “Mine!”, “I want that!” and “Get your own bitch!”

On that day, and many times since, Jake dreamt of special device that would enable him to painlessly and quietly extract himself from these awkward situations. A one shot blissful take-down with which to cut a broad exit route through troublesome crowds, mobs and even queues if the need arose.

Even now, after years of living in the big city and gradually learning to control his irrational fear of

the huddled masses, Jake still felt the occasional yearning for some kind of merciful Stun Pistol.

Such a device would be the perfect solution to so many of life's problems. Boss giving a you hard time? Zap. Waiting too long to get to the counter at the DMV? Bzzt. Need a table right now and that rowdy bunch of stock brokers are next in line? Zap zappity zap.

None of it seemed worth killing over though.

Killing people to make life more comfortable. It really wasn't his style.

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Money. That was an option. An easy, victim free procedure. Extracting dollars from a large financial institution that already had more coin than it knew how to spend.

Who could argue with that?

Cut into the vault, knock out the cameras. Take the money and run.

Beach-front property in a far away place where they valued privacy and asked no questions.

Nothing was ever that simple, of course.

For a start, some questions were inevitable. Those sinister black hats in the government wouldn't even care about the cash. They'd be more interested in getting their hands on whatever it is that cuts vault doors in a flash.

Jake remembered reading this crime novel once where the leader of the heist team explained, in depressing detail, how stealing a big chunk of loot only changed your life for the worse. You had to sit on your assets, keep a low profile, stay in your shitty job until the fuss died down, spend nothing until you knew the coast was clear, and never ever spend big. Spending big had people looking for answers, and that meant they'd be looking for you.

Jake shook his head. Maybe he just wasn't cut out for the role of criminal genius. That would explain why crime looked so terribly complicated.

Besides, what would his parents say when they

saw how their golden boy turned out? Both of them were long dead now, but Jake didn't fancy the thought of them burning with shame in whatever afterlife they might have gained.

His mother died in childbirth, along with a brother Jake never got to know. His father died in agony as cancer ate away his stomach while an asset-stripping conglomerate swallowed up the family firm and scattered the broken pieces to the wind and the wolves.

Trust funds and vacation homes on three continents were carried off in litigation fees, some unworkable land in the mid-west was still the centre of a tornado of claim and counter suit.

Jake moved on alone. He gained a mediocre English Literature degree from an uninspiring college in Maine. He dreamt, once upon a time, of becoming a teacher. A lecturer, a likeable old sort with a leather-patched corduroy jacket, smoking clove tobacco and swapping anecdotes with an adoring, ever changing coterie of bright young things. So much for dreaming.

Jake had a clerical job, working for an office supplies firm. A branch of a branch of a sub-contractor to a major international. His role was something managerial, on paper anyway, but he had never encountered any of his supposed underlings, never led a team building weekend or signed off on employee reviews.

Orders were filed, checked, filled, delivered. Somewhere a robotic warehouse did all the heavy lifting. Jake just moved documents from one side of his desk to the other, actioned the odd top priority request, drank bad coffee from the machine in the hallway. Sometimes he smiled half-heartedly at fellow workers who ruled their own little logistical empires from identical cramped offices, exchanged meaningless mantras about the state of the world, the monotony of the daily grind, the endless rat run routine.

Sometimes Jake pretended that the business was the legitimate front for an elaborate, super-shadowy branch of the intelligence services. An order for two-hundred filing cabinets in Albuquerque was really the Go code for a black-ops kill team halfway across the world. Waiting for the Man. Taking out the trash. Strictly QT.

Did Pittsburgh really need sixteen roll-top bureaus by 9am Wednesday, or was a senior figure in the world of international terrorism about to jog into a storm of hot lead?

Jake found this helped to pass the days.

It was no use. Jake had never had the heart for aggressive action, never summoned up the energy and vision that his father had looked for in an heir.

It was decision time. Jake knew exactly what to do.

Not far from where he sat, a loop of rusted railings marked the outline of a stairway leading to a long flooded lower level of the building. Jake stood at the top of the steps for a moment or two, wondering just how deep it went.

Deep enough, Jake thought, and dropped the Disintegrator pistol. The splash echoed to the ceiling.

Jake stared into the slow moving blackness of the water until the ripples faded away. Life settling back into place. Everything normal again.

He didn't hear The Lady arriving, but her voice was clear and calm:

"Right choice," she said. "Top class."

Jake blanked her, kept his eyes down as she moved up and stood right by his side. He could sense her effortless grace.

"All upside," said The Lady. "Flying colours."

Jake turned to look at her. The Lady's outfit was the same clear, smooth, blinding white. She had taken off her mask. Her skin pale and soft. Eyes bright. The whole world faded and fell away into drab, lifeless backdrop.

"You look so real," Jake spoke quietly. "Everything else is wrong somehow. Distant. Under glass."

"Side effect. First contact. Shake you up a little." The Lady tapped the side of her head with a gloved

finger. "Brain jolt."

"Were you-" Jake started. "I mean. You were going to kill me?"

The Lady frowned. "Serious? What kind of game you expecting?"

Jake could feel anger flutter, deep in his chest. "Game-"

"Test," said The Lady. "We needed to know your kind."

"Kind?" Jake said. "I'm a human being. This is Earth, remember? Where the hell are you people really from?"

The Lady shook her head. "Jake, I explained all this. We're the same as you. We're not aliens, we're not from the future. We just took another path."

Jake glanced at Grills, crouched nearby, still armoured up in sleek black and rocking back and forth on massive booted feet.

"Yes," said Jake. "A very different path."

The Lady explained the test. Jake stood numbly by her side and understood about half of what she said.

In certain circumstances, Border Patrol agents would leave behind markers, gimmicks, gadgets, even weapons.

"Then you just hang around and see what happens?" Jake said.

The Lady nodded. "We're looking for a type of people."

"And I'm your type?" Jake tried a wry smirk.

"You have a singular talent. A rare quality."

"Wow," Jake said. "This is getting better and better."

"Focus," said The Lady, a slight frown creasing her mouth.

Encountering dimensional twins and vortex walkers tended to be an overwhelming shock to the delicate human system. Vomiting. Squealing. Curling up into shivering foetal balls in quiet corners. These were the typical responses.

“Energy wrinkles. Convergence dynamics. Who knows?” The Lady shrugged. “Grills there is the science geek. I’m all about the sharp threads and the free travel. Bottom line. Some people react better to their incursion experience. A chosen few. You.”

“You’re saying I’m special,” Jake said. “People say that a lot.”

Grills shifted forward, arms raised, hands clenched. Jake took a step back and Grills began miming. Body shaking, balled fists held up at eye level. Even with the tinted visor Jake got the point.

“Because I didn’t cry.”

“Absolutely,” The Lady said. “And you weren’t bleeding from the eye sockets. Or any other orifice. Key skills in our line of work.”

Jake nodded slowly. “Is this going somewhere?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who passed the test.”

“Just because I didn’t rob banks and kill people?” It wasn’t the worst recruitment procedure Jake had ever encountered. Definite top ten.

“You refrained from disrupting, corrupting, destroying or creating. You followed The Rules. It’s a good first step.” The Lady smiled. “Want to take a giant leap?”

“What if I had done something? I mean, I could have killed. Easily.”

The Lady shook her head. “Billions of Alter Earths. Trillions of people.”

“You’re saying you don’t even care,” said Jake.

“I’m saying we try not to care too much. That’s another Rule.”

The Lady signalled to Grills, who started working at a curious belt and braces style harness.

“Now, unless you have a more pressing engagement,” The Lady looked around the derelict warehouse lot, taking in the tired building and the dull straggles of vegetation. Near her feet, the pigeon puffed itself up, protecting the scattered remnants of a deli-wagon sandwich and a cold cup of half-caff no-foam latte. “Shall we?”

“What’s my alternative,” said Jake.

The Lady waved a white clad arm to encompass the whole scene; the contented pigeon, broken concrete floors slicked with green slime, a tang of rotting long dead things and heavy smoke grey clouds cloaking the cityscape beyond the fences.

“This is it,” said The Lady.

Jake imagined his waterlogged lonely apartment, thought of the congested streets and the mindless chatter of legions of dead-eyed consumers, all of them fixed on the brightly coloured widescreen, but everyone missing the big picture. All this world offered was fighting your corner, looking for the fancy car, the larger piece of pie, the top floor office with the barest glimpse of parkland and an occasional shred of sky. Being too busy with the struggle to actually worry about living. Not his style.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Grills strapped Jake into the harness, then ran a thin connecting cable to a hook on The Lady’s belt. That same one they used on Evil Jake. He felt like a dog on a long leash.

“Purely precaution. Wouldn’t want to lose you so quick,” said The Lady.

“Whatever you say.” Jake paused. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Best not get too familiar at this stage,” said The Lady, clipping her mask back into place. What she said next was distorted. It sounded a lot like: “You might not survive this.”

“What?” said Jake, and the world went away.

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Jake was ill. His stomach was roiling and boiling, looking for an exit. His head felt hollow and fragile, slightly detached from his body, and standing up straight was a torture. The bare concrete floor beneath Jake's feet looked cool and soft and welcoming.

"Drink this," said The Lady in her masked and distant voice.

A tumbler of pale violet liquid was pressed into Jake's trembling hands. He sipped at first, then took a long swallow. Revolting cloying sweetness overwhelmed his taste buds. A choking tightness gripped his throat. "What the hell is-" he croaked.

The Lady unhooked her mask and she and Grills took a few careful steps backwards. Keeping out of range. Waiting.

"Dimensional conversion is a bit of a cage rattler. Best to purge the system. Get back on the level," said The Lady.

"That doesn't answer my question," said Jake. His tongue felt numb and flat.

"It's an emetic," said The Lady, and smiled. "Just go with it, you'll feel much better. After we clean you up."

Waves of nausea crashed over Jake's head.

He had to let go.

-

Later, after Grills had led him to a small but functional glass and chrome washing area and supplied some fresh, non-descript clothes, Jake was almost human. Slightly fuzzy around the edges, but talking and moving like a real person.

This all seemed terribly mundane. Bare floors, stark walls, recessed lighting. It looked more like the entrance to a pretentious restaurant than the gateway to a multi-dimensional security operation. Jake was beginning to think he had misunderstood the work involved. He began picturing rank after rank of cubicle offices, piled floor on floor, with eager drones pushing papers and ticking boxes. Just like his job back home but no doubt buried in a fortified bunker hundreds of metres under the

Earth.

It was difficult not to feel disappointed.

The Lady was waiting for them, standing beside a large black door. The surface was sleek, like polished crystal, and Jake could see strange spirals of light dancing deep inside.

A wave of the hand, and the door vanished. It did not swing open, or slide gently out of sight; the swirls of light bloomed soundlessly, filling the blackness, and when the glare had faded, the door was gone.

A wall of sound and sensation shivered through the room. A long corridor stretched away, curving ahead. Jake stepped forward numbly, following The Lady, the arched roof above them sweeping up now to a high vaulted ceiling.

They emerged at the periphery of a vast circular space, its entire volume filled with noise and colour. Evenly spaced windows, high and wide, revealed clear skies and endless tracts of rainforest; distant mountains edged the far horizon with pale ribbons of rock and snow. Jake stopped, almost lost his footing when Grills stumbled into him from behind.

There was shouting. Laughing. Dancing. Marching even. Jake saw a cadre of black clad soldiers lock-stepping a snaking trail through a bustle of multi-coloured women and children, saw two cops – they had to be cops – checking papers on a shaggy faced fat guy sitting on a ragged pile of suitcases. Everywhere was movement, everything was chaos.

It was Mardi Gras and the Rio carnival, fighting it out across an airport check in area the size of Central Park. Jake wished for a Stun Pistol.

The Lady paused a little way ahead, turned to Jake and smiled. "Welcome to Nexus-Centre," she said. "Welcome to Zero Time."

Horror Gems: Sundown

AUTHOR: *Jamie Halliday*

Third verse, same as the first. Welcome to part three of my horror hunt, continuing my well meaning adventures into the abyss of theatrical flops and ex-rental bargains. For my third time lucky attempt I'll be covering the infuriatingly rare SUNDOWN: THE VAMPIRE IN RETREAT in all its campy glory.

SUNDOWN is a 1990 feature from the once promising director Anthony Hickox, and as the title suggests it deals in vampires, and lots of them. Though this time around tradition, Transylvania, and Bela Lugosi are very much out the window.

The story revolves around a small Texan town dubiously named Purgatory which is home to vampires, sand, and not much else. Under the watchful eye of Count Mardulak (David "Kill Bill" Carradine) the town's vampire population are trying to kick the habit, giving up their blood-sucking past and integrating with Joe Average. The town is tested when Mardulak calls in scientist David Harrison (Jim Metzler) and his family to help put the finishing touches on a blood substitute that will help satisfy Mardulak's thirsty neighbours.

Against their animal urges the people of Purgatory are on their best behaviour. Until Jefferson (John Ireland) the vampire equivalent of the BNP leader begins rallying Goths and punks (the generally undesirable types) into action against this betrayal of their vampire roots. While Mardulak is obsessed with escaping his blood-drenched past and perhaps one day gaining God's forgiveness, Jefferson is dead set on establishing the Vampires' supremacy over man, their conflict climaxing in an undead civil war, and an awesome western duel. If all this wasn't problematic enough for the Harrison's and Mardulak, Robert Van Helsing (Bruce "Don't call me Ash" Campbell) is in town looking for a bit of genocide.

Unashamed of my fan-boy tendencies I'll admit that it was Bruce Campbell's presence in this epic that attracted me to the picture, but SUNDOWN's charms don't end with Mr. Chin. Rather, SUNDOWN is a wonderful little film and certainly one of the better horror hybrids. A mix of comedy, horror and western this picture could have been a

bit of a headache, but the film handles its comedy well, and the horror and western elements seem to make comfortable bedfellows.

The gags never become too obvious or too frequent, and refreshingly it never occurs to the characters that what they're doing is silly, which gives the plot and the characters enough depth for an audience to actually feel something whilst watching it. This horror western pre-dates FROM DUSK TILL DAWN, and totally eclipses much of its competition. In a world where the word "vampire" is synonymous with "yawn" SUNDOWN is gush of fresh blood.

The film doesn't particularly excel on spectacle or visual flair. It's shot rather simply and the effects and gore are kept to a minimum. But Hickox does a fine job of telling the story and focuses more so on his colourful characters than showing off his own obvious stylistic skills. Hickox would later showcase his enviable talent for depicting the fantastic in subsequent films WAXWORK 2 (which got one up on the original) and HELLRAISER 3: HELL ON EARTH. Hickox was a great talent, and I'm a big fan of his first four films, but it looks as though the critical panning of his HELLRAISER sequel has seen him somewhat relegated to weaker B-movies with dodgy titles like WARLOCK: THE ARMAGEDDON and CONTAMINATED MAN. Regardless, he certainly has it in him to make entertaining B-films and I hope to see more from him.

Casting director Caro Jones is a queen among women, she did an outstanding job bringing together the delightfully colourful group of European actors and actresses that populate Purgatory, with very few of them allowing themselves be a mere face in the crowd or victim #3: they really ham it up and leave a lasting impression. B-Movie King Bruce Campbell is ever pleasing as a bumbling Van Helsing, knocking out the same awesomely over-the-top performance style that he perfected with ARMY OF DARKNESS. David Carradine manages to be both sophisticated and savage in a good showing as Mardulak, and the discovery of his true identity is a very satisfying

twist, which he played to perfection. No one really disappoints in their roles but other stand-out performers include M. Emmet Walsh (CRITTERS, BLADE RUNNER), Deborah Foreman (a staple of cute '90s indie films), and the late John Ireland.

SUNDOWN is pretty well liked, and has received generally positive reviews. Yet poor distribution really hampered the picture's success. With the VHS long out-of-print, no DVD, or even any exposure on the SKY channels, you won't see SUNDOWN unless you're really trying to, which doesn't work in favour of any film, much less the straight-to-video horror movie. Hopefully Vestron will finally make use of the film, or will at least sell the rights to someone who knows how to handle their horror, such as Anchor Bay.

Ultimately, Hickox's sophomore effort is probably his best work so far, and features what is arguably Campbell's best performance outside of the-big-four (THE EVIL DEAD trilogy and BUBBA HOT-TEP). SUNDOWN is a minor classic, it's funny and touching, and really deserves something of a cult audience. My only regret is that more people haven't had the pleasure of sharing in its charms. Bring on the night.

Availability: A PAL VHS can be picked up via www.amazon.co.uk and somewhat illegal looking DVDs are often available from www.ioffer.com, which is unfortunately the best that's available at the moment. Even the reliable German DVD market hasn't thought to put this film out. There isn't even a laser disc. Zilch.

The Fandom Menace

This column originally appeared in Pantechnicon online in May 2008.

Time for some perspective

Normally in these articles I tend to shy away from targeting any particular area or clique of fandom, because quite frankly what I say can easily be applied to fans of any particular show, book or movie. But nonetheless for good or ill I've felt compelled to look at the fandom of Doctor Who. Basically down to two reasons: One, Who is currently on and in the public eye compared to something like, say, Star Wars at present; Two, because while surfing the big wide interweb it's become painfully clear that in Who fans there lies for all to see a very obvious delineation between those who *were* fans and those who *are* fans that isn't so blatant in other franchises.

You see, in recent months leading up to the latest launch of the Doctor's adventures, I've seen - and partaken in - a number of forum threads revolving around the series, and seen some fairly hard line and militant views on the subject which even as what could be generously termed a casual fan I found rather narrow minded. But further investigation around other SF sites found the story to be much the same: Doctor Who fans seemed to split in to two distinct groups - those who are fans of the old and those who are fans of the new, and for the most part never the twain shall meet in their own views of the others' love of the series.

It struck me as an almost fundamentalist system of belief and, much like fundamentalism within religious groups (the most easily comparative analogy) the fans of Doctor Who (split in to Old Who and Nu Who fans) seem unable to square the tiny differences in their own minds, or even accept that the hated elements in the opposing show are just as obvious in the show they love the most.

I had a similar conversation on a forum in which I essentially posited this very point. That, in effect barring the budget, everything that was wrong or perceived to be with Who is just as relevant with regard to the old series as it is with the new one.

AUTHOR: Lee Medcalf

Issues that the older fans were levelling at Nu Who could be seen to essentially be nothing more than criticisms about the old series updated for a new group of fans. Some examples:

Nu Who Critic Point 1: The Assistants are rubbish and essentially stunt casting (with Billie Piper and Catherine Tate).

Ignored point from the old series: Bonnie Langford.

Nu Who Critic Point 2: David Tennant / Christopher Eccleston overact and gurn their way through pretty much every episode, dominating every scene they're in with an OTT performance.

Ignored point from the old series: Tom Baker was clearly the model of subtlety, while Colin Baker gave a nuanced and level-headed performance every episode, neither leaving teeth marks in the wobbly sets at any point.

Nu Who Critic Point 3: The visual effects lack the charm of the originals and the CGI creatures are crap.

Ignored point from the old series: So no one noticed the Zarbi were blokes in black tights wearing big polystyrene ants on their heads. If charm equalled cheap and unconvincing I'd understand this point.

Nu Who Critic Point 4: Russell T. Davies screwed the series up after bringing it back from the dead.

Ignored point from the old series: I don't recall John Nathan-Turner getting much in the way of fan mail towards the series end.

The list goes on but I'll spare you all the churlish comments. The point remains: everything that has been levelled at Nu Who is a non-criticism simply because, as I see it from a casual observer's point of view, the series hasn't changed one jot beyond the size of the budget.

Interestingly, when faced with these points on the forum one fan of old Who did the written equivalent of waving a dismissive hand exclaiming

that I was saying nothing new and most Old Who fans knew the old series' shortcomings. This was an odd thing to say in my opinion, given that this was tantamount to saying "I don't care how bad the series I love is, it's the new series I'm going to shit on because it's not mine to love!"

I'd given up the will to live by the time the initial reply had come back, having gone through a whole comprehensive history and explanation by the same responder as to why Tom Bakers goggle-eyed goofing was any different to David Tennant's sub-Kenneth Williams sneer in the overacting front, because ultimately these excuses struck me as hollow justification for an innate hypocrisy that fandom in general has.

In essence saying "I think X is shit because of issue Y; but if that failing appears in a show I love, it doesn't count", is a kind of fundamentalist viewpoint I simply don't understand. Surely being a fan of something is revelling in the joy of its existence with other like-minded folk, and if the thing you love continues on surely that's a good thing, encouraging new fans in to the fold. Alas what seems to be the case is that with every subtle change things become more tribal, infinitely secular and ultimately intolerant due to some minor change or perceived adjustment to something old fans saw as forever preserved in amber.

I've trodden this path within these articles before about the fact that fans are their own worst enemy but in the past few weeks it's become clearer than ever when the Who Fandom is put under the spotlight. Where the kids who are the target demographic (see Fandom Menace #6) the BBC strike gold with Dr Who, hooking them in and in turn encouraging a whole new generation to seek out the older stuff, but where the older fans are concerned the BBC have failed them by ignoring them and making a business decision for the majority audience, not constructing something for someone who can tell you what a Sea Devil is and the names of the three people who played them, while simultaneously pulling out a ream of signed photos of said three actors.

It's this failing that I think subconsciously sits at the back of the mind of every Who fan over the age of 25: the fact that the show is no longer being made for them, or as I mentioned in the last article that ultimately they're just too damned old for it

now. So they bring to bear adult sensibilities and critical faculties on something they no longer feel an emotional attachment to now they've moved on, and the series stays firmly targeted on an age group that no longer involves them. This causes a backlash reaction that isn't just limited to Dr Who fans - Star Wars fans and those rare "old skool" Battlestar fans all act in the same way. But given the way that Who has been revived so spectacularly and in turn been embraced so wholeheartedly by casual fans as well as the SF target audience of 8 to 16 year olds, the reaction online has been seen as a little more extreme.

One interesting point raised by a friend of mine during the discussions about this article was that while it seems all light-hearted and fun these hard-line stances being taken between two groups of fans of an SF show, if the wording was given a more religious tone, in that context wars had been started over less extreme points of view and nitpicking of minute of scripture (or in SF's case canon).

But why is this? What is it that causes such loathing in fans of the old versions of revised series? Is it as I suggested, that there's a subconscious hatred for a series that is no longer yours? Or is it something a bit more primal, a realisation that things move on, proof positive that something you loved is now the domain of a new generation and you as a fan are disposable?

Whatever the reason, it's something that may have been around since Conan Doyle, when he brought back Sherlock Holmes after his supposedly fatal confrontation with Moriarty at Reichenbach Falls - only now with the internet giving voice to the disgruntled original fans has it become more noticeable.

But ultimately what point does this bemoaning serve? Sure you can be critical of poor writing or acting, but the criticisms between old and new versions of a series as illustrated above always seem to be more general and ultimately more petty. In the end it's almost as if the thing that the fans hate the most, ironically, is the fact that the object of their affection is actually popular!

Fearing reprisals Lee Medcalf is currently booking a flight to Nepal and leaving no forwarding address.

Weird Tales: A Time-Travelling Interview With DF Lewis

DF Lewis' contribution to the genre is legendary. With a highly distinctive writing style, he has published over 1500 stories - mainly in small press magazines during the 1980's and 1990's - along with several novellas. He has had stories in three volumes of BEST NEW HORROR and five consecutive volumes of THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES, as well as in other anthologies. In 1998, he received the British Fantasy Society's Karl Edward Wagner Award.

AUTHOR: **Caroline Callaghan**

interested in his future writing career than being chatted up. And I remember the interview well... it went like this...

As a writer, you've published an amazing number of stories. Your work defies categorisation and it's been suggested (by Graham Joyce) that you write 'in a genre of one'. How would you describe your writing?

Currently, he edits and publishes the much acclaimed NEMONYMOUS series of anthologies. The latest, CONE ZERO, is due to be published shortly.

So, how does such creativity function? To try to find out, I embark on an incredible journey through the imagination of DF Lewis. Now, Des, where are we and what year is it?

The bus station pub in a Lancashire seaside town and the date: 1967. Full of locals and students in an unlikely but positive mix. Nearby is a 'psychedelic' room with a juke-box playing 'Hey Joe' by Jimi Hendrix, and its special lighting effects give all white clothes a shiny ghostly glow in the near-darkness. It also shows that the girl I'm dancing with has a bad tooth that the normal light outside hadn't revealed. I thank her for the dance and return to the Public Bar where you want to ask me about my creative writing later in the century as if it has already been written and published. I sip a pint of mild and cider mixed together. My friends Pete, Laurie and Jim Lamba are at a nearby table where I was sitting earlier, and they're thinking perhaps that I'm trying to chat someone up again, so they pretend not to know me so as to give a no-hoper like me the best chance possible. Little do they know that I am talking about 'DF Lewis' with someone who's more



I think there are many influences over the years upon the way I write. Being in a 'genre of one', if that is true, by the way, is a problem rather than a blessing. Influences, such as Music, Poetry, textured fiction like Dickens, Poe, Elizabeth Bowen, Lawrence Durrell, AS Byatt, Thomas Ligotti and Robert Aickman, plus the influence of my own 'default' in a thickening word-style while my brain 'trip-switches' at the very point of putting pen to paper, plus a love of Art movements like Dada, plus writing-for-myself.... Yes, a difficult question. I think I'll get back to the juke-box. (Laughs). I know ... my fiction is trying to create a new reality that does not come from the more traditional devices of 'suspension of disbelief' (a skill of which I am incapable and of which, for example, Stephen King is a master) but comes more from a time-travel channel for dreams. Before I get too pretentious or bogged down in actually giving you what's turning out to be a fiction as an answer to your sensible straightforward question, how would you describe my fiction, as I know you've told me you've read some?

Yes, I certainly have. I sometimes re-read

your stories, and regularly find something new in them each time I do! I wonder, do you enjoy what is, in a way, playing games with your readers – making them ponder on the various meanings of your stories?

Before I get too carried away, a lot of my fictions are up front and unmysterious – like A PIE WITH THICK GRAVY in THE BLACK BOOK OF HORROR – but, even there, I see things in it myself that I didn't see before when I read it again! So what I'm saying, yes, I do enjoy not only playing games with potential readers but also with myself. What lies behind this, I often wonder? I believe in 'The Intentional Fallacy': a theory over the years (a theory held by many) that the author's intentions are unknowable and, even if knowable, irrelevant to interpreting or evaluating a creative text. I think this is also true of one's own work, one's own hazy intentions... I think I like to horrify not only by describing horrific things but also by laying traps in the text ... but who knows? I may horrify myself if I try to delve into my own mindset too deeply here!

You've received some harsh criticism of your writing on the one hand, and some tremendous accolades on the other. Have you ever been tempted to make your writing more accessible, more 'commercial' and 'marketable'?

Yes, I have been tempted to change all manner of courses in my writing life, but I know in my heart of hearts that I cannot change the DF Lewis style, tone, texture, call it what you like. When I do try to be more straightforward or linear, I soon slip back into what the demon inside of me wants me to write. This has happened many times. One change of course I did implement was in 2000 when I ceased submitting stories, mainly caused by the influence of the Internet. I then decided that I would publish all my previous published stories (and new ones) on that damned beast called the Internet under the overall title of 'The Weirdmonger Wheel'. This was all part and parcel of the considerations implied in your question. The main purpose for me is to write and be read, not make a financial living from this activity. And I think I do get more readers these days for my stuff that would otherwise moulder inside old magazines; magazines that in turn moulder inside my cupboard. At this point, I also started publishing other writers' work, but in print. What was all this

about? Let me think. Please ask me a question not relevant to this issue before we return to it. Or shall we have a quick jig next to the juke-box before continuing? No, on second thoughts, it sounds as if they are playing Cliff Richard's 'Congratulations' at the moment!

OK, let's go in a totally different direction then. I know you enjoy classical music. Personally, I feel that your writing is to literature as Stravinsky's music is to classical music. Would you say that was a fair description of your work?

Yes, although I know nothing about music technically, I often immerse myself in non-vocal abrasive stuff like contemporary classical music, and older more poetic chamber music (Schubert, Brahms...). Although he is not one of my very top favourites, it is interesting that you should pick on Stravinsky, because in the early nineties there was going to be another published book of my stuff entitled STRAVINSKY AND THE DARK FEAST but, at the last moment, and for a reason I forget, it didn't come out. (By the way, I've got into Goldfrapp in recent years and a group with the same name appears in my novella entitled WEIRD TONGUE). And, you're right, also, I feel, to compare my stuff to music. I think my fiction goal (if I'm ever successful in reaching it) is concerned with a dream-combination of (a) the meaning of the words and (b) look/sound/syntax of the words irrespective of their meaning. Mad, maybe, but I can only tell you how it is.

Your writing often has a dreamlike (or, rather, nightmarish) quality to it. Where do you get your ideas for stories? Do any of them come from your dreams/nightmares? Do you ever re-read your stories and think 'What was that doing inside my head'?

Yes, I'm fascinated by reality and unreality and a hybrid which is neither. Fascinated by non-being and the question of identity, all of which seems to bear upon dreams and vice versa. I have written straight after dreaming about the dream, but rarely. More often, I tend to seek a 'tone' that is dream-like, with control from the conscious mind coupled with a relaxation of that control (automatic writing?) – a difficult balance to strike of control and non-control. It's a frame of mind that I feel

myself entering (I described it as ‘trip-switching’ earlier in our conversation, or perhaps you didn’t hear because of the noise of the juke-box!)... and is it relevant to your question about me being surprised (shocked?) at what must have been inside my head when writing one of my fictions? Yes, indeed! That shock is why I’ve used a passworded website for a small part of ‘The Weirdmonger Wheel’, probably!

Although you haven’t submitted any of your stories for publication since 2000, you’re still writing of course. When you write, how do ideas come to you? Do you tend to get a fully formed story in your head or do you just start writing and see where it goes?

I normally start writing and see where it goes, I think. I say ‘I think’ there, advisedly. Because it is a bit of a conundrum. Many may believe that the ‘start-writing-and-see-where-it-goes’ school of writing is a bit of a cop-out or a bit pretentious and, indeed, it is both those things! I have no excuses. These days I’ve been writing what I call ‘DFL thingies’ that tend to derive from exercises for the Writer’s Group I attend on the Tendring Peninsular Coast. These exercises are geared to random titles picked out of a hat. Some are written over the period between meetings and others as speed-writing exercises during the meeting itself.

Since 2001, you’ve been concentrating on publishing other people’s work in the NEMONYMOUS series – famous for its ‘late labelling’, with authors’ names only being revealed in the following issue . Can you tell us how the concept for that came about? And why are you now preferring to publish other people’s work rather than your own?

I was worried that this type of question would be asked. I’ve never satisfactorily answered it. Have a look at the ‘Baser Pulps’ on the wonderful ‘Vault of Evil’ website: these are the old Small Press covers being visually streamed like internet music. These are where my 1500+ stories were published in the eighties and nineties. These images are now presented as a Dada Happening. And NEMONYMOUS was/is a Happening in a similar manner. NEMONYMOUS was the world’s first ever anonymous anthology in 2001 and has

developed like a crazy but subtle monster ever since. NEMONYMOUS as a word had no Google entries at all in 2001. Now try to Google it! Google WEIRDMONGER, too (the name of the trade paperback book of my selected stories)... and I’m proud of my brainstorming approach to Horror. But this approach is not to everyone’s taste. I cannot now fathom NEMONYMOUS’ genesis (or parthenogenesis). On a simpler, saner note, I just enjoy publishing fiction work by other writers (work that appeals to me) and paying money to



them for it. It is also for a selfish reason of self-satisfaction, a reason that is a paradox! And I love paradoxes. I have no illusions about my own need for self-glorification in posterity, but there are easier ways I could have gone about it!

And, why the name change – first ZENCORE! and now the CONE ZERO themed anthology?

‘I don’t know’ is the simple answer. ZENCORE! was a title suggested by someone who was taking part in an on-line contest to name NEMONYMOUS SEVEN: with a promise of a free copy if the title was used. Whoever suggested it has so far not claimed the prize. I found out subsequently that ‘Zencore’ is a trade name for a form of herbal Viagra! CONE ZERO (the title of the forthcoming NEMONYMOUS EIGHT) is a near anagram of ZENCORE! and I am to blame for that! I have had hundreds and hundreds of distinct stories about CONE ZERO sent to me, and a whole new genre of fiction has thus potentially been born!

As an editor, then, what are you looking for in a story? What kinds of work do you like to see from other writers?

A story for me should be a new experience, nothing that has been done before. Something that sticks in the craw. Words that choke you as well as have meaning as normal words. I’m nothing, if not pretentious.

So, what are your future plans, both in terms of writing and also editing/publishing?

Well, I want to publish CONE ZERO and then get it into as many reading hands as possible. Additionally, in 2010, I intend to start submitting my own stories to publishers again in the traditional manner. By then, I would not have submitted any stories off my own bat during a period of 10 years. You see, I am not afraid to admit failure in the process of 'The Weirdmonger Wheel' as an internet-portfolio submission process; a general process that was originally intended by me for all of us to do away with sluggish slush-piles.

Finally (and I've always wanted to ask an interviewee this), if you were interviewing yourself instead of me doing it, what one question would you have asked yourself (you can give us the answer too if you like)?

What do you think of death? What about that full stop that comes after the natural process towards self-extinction? But I suppose the answer is unknown but, if known, it is an answer as filtered by the DFL fiction 'thingies' that were produced by accident, if not by intention, to avoid that natural process.

On that note, I fear we'll have to draw our mutual journey to a close, Des. Thanks for an interesting interview. It's been a pleasure having this imaginary drink with you!

And now it's time for our jig together by the juke-box, Caroline. They've put Jimi's 'Purple Haze' on just for us. These are interesting times. And Time, for me, is a friend, not a foe.

You can find out more about DF Lewis and his work, and access The Weirdmonger Wheel, at www.weirdmonger.com

Tranquil Sea

There is a side of the moon that is never seen by those living on Earth. Locked in synchronous rotation, the moon shows only shows its good side. From the surface of its mother planet one can see the dark spots of its maria, the dark seas of dusty basalt. Always hidden, on the far side of the moon, is an ugly arrangement of pits and craters strewn across the unseen landscape, the grey frieze of a choppy ocean. Many of the larger craters earned grand-sounding names: Arzachel and Bel'kovich, Gärtner and Poincaré, Maginus and De La Rue.

On the centre of the far side, the crater Daedalus is spread 93 kilometres wide, sunk three kilometres deep into the cold surface. Despite the common misconception, this far side is not in permanent darkness, and when the time came for the Daedalus crater to transform, it was drenched in white sunlight.

Three people, encased in thermal webbing and personal energy fields only a millimetre thick, stood on the very edge of the crater. A fourth member of the group watched from a pre-fabricated facility nearly a quarter-mile south, which was fitted snugly into a smaller crater like an acorn into its cap. He watched the rest of his Advanced Technologies team an array of monitors, documenting this crucial moment in their work.

Maria had helped develop the technology. Shortly after the conception of the idea five years previously, the gracious representatives of the massive Karlson Enterprises had funded its development specifically for this purpose. Working in conjunction with the Global Space Program, the conglomerate had rapidly enticed the kernel of that idea into full growth, and now it began to bloom spectacularly before Maria's eyes.

She watched as her colleague and older brother, James, finished laying the traps on the very tip of the crater's curved edge. She had laid fifty of them herself, positioning one after each of her low-gravity hops, ten feet apart. There were a hundred of the objects in all, which they called traps but were in fact depositories, cylinders seven inches tall

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on pivots that would tilt on command, pouring out the contents of the shiny tubes. All of them were connected by a long-wave wireless signal, which in turn was joined to the control box in Maria's hand.

'Everything set?' she called. She needn't have raised her voice, but she often forgot that the thermal webbing that ran from ankle to jawbone had a built in radio.

James waved from further along the ridge. 'All set, little sister.'

'Preparing the traps.'

She flicked a few switches on the control box. Behind her and to her right stood the construction tower, which had been hastily put together to provide a better view of the Daedalus crater. James was climbing the ladder that would take him to the lowest platform, about a storey high. From it he would be able to look across Daedalus and observe the whole process.

Even from her current position at ground level, Maria could see how the crater had changed during the previous fortnight. The concave curve, which had been naturally terraced for centuries, maybe even millennia, had been ground smooth by automated machines. The little cluster of stalagmites in the very centre, which James said reminded him of termite mounds, had been knocked down. The crater was now an unbroken, sweeping disc deep-set into the white-grey surface of the moon, as perfect as the inside of a bubble.

All that work had been necessary for the new technology to work properly. Maria was about to find out of so much effort had been truly worthwhile.

'Ready?' James asked her over the radio.

She turned back to see his face, earnestly excited behind the near-invisible film of plasma that protected him from the airless atmosphere.

'Traps are ready,' she replied. 'Hope you're all watching.'

'With our full attention,' said a second voice in her ear.

It was Director Karlson, the representative of the company that was funding the Farside Radio Lab they were constructing. He was about ten metres above where James now stood, on the construction tower's second platform. Maria didn't like him being there beside Daedalus, but even less did she enjoy having him where she couldn't see him, even at a distance. It made her anxious.

'I'm activating the process now, sir,' she said for Karlson's benefit. 'Traps warming up... Ready to initiate the nanite flow... I'm tipping the traps now.'

She pushed the button. All one hundred depositories launched, each cylinder generating its own momentum in the manner of a rocket-propelled grenade. They arced up and over the crater like missiles and the traps tilted on their pivots, spilling out a watery black-grey substance that moved independently of the moon's moderate gravity.

The droplets drifted downward in a half-shower, partially vapour, and fell against the curved ramp of the crater. The substance poured, rolled, swam over itself to get to the bottom of the hollow, which was a full eighty kilometres wide. Several clouds drifted directly towards the centre, in a glide that animatedly and actively through the thin air towards their objective.

'Nanites moving as expected,' Maria reported. 'They're making fine progress.'

James began to say something, but Director Karlson interrupted: 'What is the status of the programming software?'

'Operational,' Maria said shortly.

'How long until it can be implemented?'

'A few hours yet. We can better view the process from the facility.'

'You go ahead,' he replied. 'I'd like to view things

from out here for now. Watch as it all develops.'

'Your choice,' she said, and called to James. 'You coming, big brother?'

'On my way.'

They left the edge of Daedalus. As they approached the pre-fab facility that had been their home for the last month, the nanite flow continued to move of its own volition in the vast crater behind them. Microscopic machines clawed their way to a pre-programmed location, configuring themselves into a position stored in the complicated software that each of the millions of nanites shared. As the grey layer spread across the barren stone, all of its infinitesimally small facets reflected the black sky above and the bright stars it contained.

'You know what I hate about this contract?' James said as they reached the outside of the facility.

'Mike Hudd-Karlson on your back every step of the way, like a damn monkey?'

'Not that. It's not being able to see Earth. We never get to see home here. It feels the moon isn't even turning.'

'Aren't you happy I flew you here?' she said, laughing.

'Flying shuttles is easy compared to what I have to put up with. You know how homesick I get.'

As they arrived at the single-story facility the siblings stopped and looked upwards, taking in the view of the wide spread of stars. The sun was over the horizon, spreading its white light across the naked lunar landscape and filling each of the many small impact craters with thick shadow. It was a landscape of contrasts, black against white, like the first footage of the original moon landing. Nowhere could they see the blue glowing orb of Earth; they stood at the antipode of the globe, the centre of the far side.

'Come on,' Maria said quietly, 'let's get inside.'

'Yeah. I'm tired.'

They entered the airlock. It was a form of energy field cool enough to allow solid objects to pass through. It contained the air within the facility at the same time, keeping the vacuum at bay even as it allowed them to enter.

The interior of the place was cold-looking, sparsely decorated due to the uneven application of budget. All of the members of the team had agreed that the tech came first; they were a small private company that dealt in research for advanced technologies, at one time four-man strong and now only three.

Since they had been headhunted by the great Karlson Enterprises and liberally funded, the AT Group had been employed by governments around the world, particularly in the US, and now the Global Space Program. Although they had to endure the presence of one of the Karlson Directors, who were notorious for being a pain in the ass and dogging those that they sponsored, the group still retained the freedom to lump all of their resources into doing a good job at the expense of luxuries.

James sometimes regretted this.

‘God, I wish we had a TV in here.’

Maria slouched on the cheap threadbare sofa and laughed.

‘I’m sure the signal would be perfect here, right in the centre of the PAC,’ she said.

She referred to the Protected Antipode Circle, which was proposed in 2005 and officially established twenty years later, when it became apparent that if a ban of radio transmission devices was not enforced, a valuable opportunity would be wasted. Backed by groups such as SETI, and eventually the European governments once the States followed suit, the Circle had been set up on the far side of the moon to protect it from having transmission devices built there, enabling such things as radio telescopes to be used without being hampered by other human-generated signals. That was what the whole project was about.

Maria observed her sleepy brother. He looked ready to fall asleep right there in his chair. His fist supported his rounded cheeks, which were plumped up beneath his dark-ringed eyes. With

the invisible energy field now shut down, his hair was free to straighten out into its usual short twists and ruffles. He would have been much more comfortable at home, Maria thought, in his king-size back at the apartment they shared. The facility would later be amended, reinforced and annexed to become the Lunar Farside Radio Laboratory, dedicated specifically to interpret and redirect the radio waves picked up by the massive dish. Until then, though, the place would remain unaccommodating.

Seeing that her brother was now fully asleep – and knowing from experience that waking him would take nothing less than a large aircraft taking off right outside – Maria decided to proceed to the operations room alone.

Once there she found Theo Callas engaged with the unfamiliar computer systems. He was slumped in an auto-ergonomic chair with one leg up on his knee, struggling to comprehend a large, thin-paged operations manual.

‘This,’ he said, tossing it onto a computer console, ‘is utter tripe.’

‘No pictures?’ she joked, sitting in another chair and picking up the book. She didn’t bother opening it, but used it as a platform to drum her fingers on.

‘Very funny,’ said Theo.

He tweaked his neatly gelled hair with the tips of fingers, perfecting a style probably ten years too old for him. He professed a great dislike for any sort of fad or fashion, but would defend to the death the right for a person to look as he chose. At forty, Theo appeared too young to possess the wisdom that he did, much of which seemed to grow out of the trials he had faced in the past. His lined, wide Greek face seemed specially made to perfectly disguise his feelings whenever he wished to do so.

He finished with his hair and began playing with one of the screens mounted above the consoles. ‘I gather everything went well?’

‘Perfectly,’ Maria replied, leaning back in the chair. ‘It’s been a long day.’

‘How is James? He’s not been in thermal webbing since—’

‘He’s fine. I’ve been trying not to mention it to him, but it’s all so similar to last time, and it’s difficult.’

‘We can’t always talk about our tragedies easily,’ Theo said. His hand dropped from the screen’s control settings, leaving the image on a view of Daedalus and its rapidly-spreading film of nanomachine technology.

‘Want to talk about it?’

‘When have I ever talked about it?’ he said, staring at the screen. ‘If I’m not over the worst of it after a year, I never will be.’

Maria had been dozing off, but now she opened her eyes. The monitors were relaying pictures from the other construction towers that had been erected further around the circumference of the moon. She could see the broad expanse of the Sea of Tranquillity, and on another screen the dark vista of one of the moon’s maria, her namesake, which were in reality vast flat plains of fine-grained basalt. The one Maria could see was Mare Serenitatis, the Sea of Serenity. It was right beside the Mare Tranquillitatis, and together with six others they made up the features of the forward-facing side of the moon.

Maria shared an inexplicable affinity with those marks, which were made dark grey from being less reflective than the white rock around them. Although they were flat, they appeared to have a depth to rival the eyes of any fifties bombshell, as bottomless as a telescope tilted towards space.

Maybe there is the feeling of an echo there, she’d thought once to herself, the night after helping James and Theo erect the pre-fabricated facility. It wasn’t an echo of depth – that would be proud and self-absorbed of her. It was an echo of echoes, of emptiness; it made her despair.

Jerking her suddenly from her daydreams, she was shocked to see an unfamiliar figure on one of the screens. The camera was looking into one of the rooms of the facility, even though Maria was sure that all of the cameras had been set up outside. It showed one of the living quarters, a bedroom drenched in shadows, and on the bed with its feet bunching up the sheets crouched a large man, or

maybe an animal. She couldn’t make out any facial features between the hunched shoulders, as it was almost entirely eclipsed by darkness. All she saw was its bulky outline and the movement of its long, thick hair, shifting slowly even in the windless facility, and the blurred glare of its white-blue eyes.

She gasped at the sight of it and jabbed her finger in the air, drawing Theo’s attention.

‘What?’ he said, and between looking at Theo’s golden face and then turning back to the monitor, the figure had disappeared. The camera showed only the bedroom and the made-up bed, and no signs of any disturbance.

‘What is it?’ Theo asked, becoming fatherly. That was all Maria needed: her clingy brother on her left, and a doting father figure on her right.

She just rubbed her eyes groggily and put her experience down to a trick of the shadows. Theo laughed a little and then took the operations manual off her again, trying a second time to decipher its meaning.

Quietly Maria left, telling him that she was going to sleep and that he should wake her once the nanite flow had fully completed its program. She walked past the sleeping James, but didn’t stop when she reached her apartment. Instead she checked all of the unoccupied rooms, and found that all the doors were locked. She searched every one of them, but they were all empty.

Yawning widely, Maria went back to her room to sleep, satisfied that what she’d seen had been little more than a phantasm conjured by her exhausted mind.

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They were still on Earth time, and when Michael Hudd-Karlson saw sunrise, he had already been awake for several hours. The sun seemed a little larger there, on the far side of the moon where he was 380,000 kilometres away from the surface of the Earth. The orb burst over the horizon, spilling its light across the new Daedalus crater.

Rather than reflecting off the pale rock, it shone and glinted over the nanite flow that had fully covered the inside of the hollow. Electrical currents

sparked between the billions of tiny machines, reinforcing a signal that had been created inside a computer. The signal carried the programming, which carried within it a three-dimensional image of what the flow should look like: the curved interior of a massive radio telescope. Already the dish was over three-tenths formed, ribbed at intervals to reinforce the huge metallic structure. The sun shone along each line and facet, forcing Karlson to shield his eyes.

Progress is satisfactory, he thought, and the discreet metal headset that he always wore began to punch complex patterns against the subspace molecules around him. The sequence created a signal; the signal projected itself towards Earth, where the other Directors would be waiting for his report, and the reports of two hundred other Karlsons.

The Karlsons were not technically related. They were men who had worked their way to the top of the hierarchy in the Karlson Enterprises offices, earning themselves certain privileges – namely, a piece of the real Richard Karlson II's brain tissue, or rather a piece of his cloned brain. This was partnered with routine physio-chemical treatments that would allow each Director to become, only partially, a piece of the Karlson entity.

This Director, whose name had once been simply Michael Hudd, had relished the opportunity to share the same genetic material, even some of the thought patterns as the great entrepreneur and philanthropist. The copper framework hidden beneath his dark head of hair allowed such communication, picking up his thoughts right through his skull and transmitting them to his boss.

Satisfactory, he reported, and exciting. The centre of the dish will soon be developed enough to begin installing the antennae and the computer elements.

Once completed, the dish would be massive. The Arecibo Radio Telescope in South America was the biggest on Earth but this dish, when completed, would be fully 200 times as large. It would be able to not only detect radio signals from sources other than Earth, but it could be used for meteorology and radio astronomy, tracking the movements of distant stars and their growth or decline.

Content that the development of the parabolic

antenna was going smoothly, Karlson climbed down the metal rungs of the ladder until he was at the bottom of the tower, where the small surface buggy was stored. With the tip of his boot he nudged the white dust, not quite believing that he was there on the surface of the moon. He was not even wearing a suit. The thermal webbing kept his body temperature up and created oxygen for him to breathe, so long as he let it air in the facility every few hours, and the invisible energy field painted over his entire body prevented him from being wrenched inside out by the vacuum. It was a strange experience, but he'd better be sure not to transmit those feelings home. He wouldn't want his colleagues thinking that he wasn't up to the job.

When Director Karlson entered the facility, Maria, James and Theo were already preparing to leave.

'Where are you three off to?' he asked, closing the air lock behind him.

'We're going to monitor the process,' Theo explained.

He was fidgeting and clearly uncomfortable in his webbing, which clung tightly to his skin like rubber. Its veins and valves stood out on his sleeves and neck, the only parts visible beneath his casual clothes. The liquid crystal compound that was constantly undergoing chemical reaction within the suit was gradually raising his external body temperature.

'Be sure to be back before noon US time. You have data to process.'

'We'll be back before then,' Theo assured him, and ushered his colleagues into the air lock and sealed it shut.

Safely inside the small chamber and out of Karlson's hearing, Theo and James began to mutter to themselves.

'They're all the same, every one of the Directors.'

'Yeah. He's just like the one we had—'

Maria noted how James looked guilty about what he had almost said: Just like the one we had on the

abyssal plain.

Five years ago, when the Karlson Enterprises conglomerate first contracted the team for work, they'd been asked to construct a safety dome over a drowned Karlson submarine. Over two thousand feet below the continental shelf, the dome had been constructed but their Director at the time, Sam French-Karlson, had refused to risk his life by travelling so deep, away from the safety of his psycho-neural network that his metal headset connected him to. Although the three team-members had all been there, James now held his tongue for one reason only, and that was Theo. Theo had been the closest to the disaster that had happened there below the continental shelf.

'Hmn,' Theo said, nodding once.

He rarely responded to mentions of the incident, and this time was no different. He turned and looked out of the exterior door of the airlock and clucked his tongue, no doubt preparing one of the didactic speeches he often gave during long journeys. His love of mythology and theology had given Theo his nickname – nobody ever called him Nils, as his mother did – and Maria had long grown used to his lessons filling in the uncomfortable silences, such as the ones travelling from the facility to the edge of the Daedalus crater.

The airlock opened, and they began to travel towards the nearest tower by the crater's edge.

'Daedalus,' Theo began almost immediately, 'named for the artificer of ancient Greece, father of the famous Icarus. Builder of the labyrinth in which the Minotaur lived. Creator of the wings which carried he and Icarus from King Minos' tower. The inventor of carpentry. Daedalus was one of the earliest geniuses.'

'Never heard of him,' James said, and laughed at the face Theo pulled at him.

Maria was about to slap her brother on the arm for winding Theo up when both James and Theo stopped. A moment later she halted as well and looked between them at the floor, where their attention was focused.

'What is this?'

'I have no idea.'

James crouched and scuffed the dark line on the floor with his energy-field-sheathed hand. White powder came away from it in small puffs, but the gritty black stripe remained solid between the grains.

'Is it stone?' Theo asked, reaching out to touch it with his fingers.

'That or metal. I can't tell through the energy field. Could it be basalt?'

'I don't think so.'

'The line circles all the way back, right around the facility.'

Maria followed James' gestures. Now that she knew what she was looking for, she could just make out the thick black line arcing out back in the direction they had come. She couldn't see if the two edges actually met behind the dark, squat shape of the facility, but she bet that they did judging from the curvature of the line.

'This is new,' she said quietly. 'We would have seen it before. We've walked by here fifty times.'

James straightened up and went to brush his hand through his hair. The energy field stopped him doing so and his palm just squeaked over his head. Looking faintly ridiculous, he crossed his arms and sighed.

'Do you think it could have something to do with the nanites?'

'We've used them before,' Maria pointed out.

'They didn't exactly perform perfectly the first time,' James said.

'That was nothing to do with the nanites,' Theo muttered. 'That was us.'

Moira brushed down the shield around her lower leg, removing the dust that had gathered there. Motes, dust and sand alike sometimes got caught between the heated ions of the shield and the magnetic cushions that held them in place.

Stretching, she said, 'I think we'd better get to the dish.'

'I'm going to wait here,' Theo said quietly, and sat down by the black line. 'This needs to be studied.'

When Maria and James arrived at the edge of the crater, they saw nothing wrong. The moving tide of the nanite flow was still heading towards the edge of the crater, the dish now over two-thirds completed. In the centre of the still-widening circle the nanites had already shut down and become dead metal, solidified into the shape dictated to them by the programming. It was a quick and easy way to build a parabolic antenna, organising millions of microscopic machines to self-replicate until they had achieved the objectives of their in-built programming.

'The von Neumann process is working fine,' James said, accessing the shielded computer at the base of the tower. 'That line in the rock we found has nothing to do with the nanites.'

'What about the shield? Is it operating correctly?'

The dish, during the construction phase, was protected by a layer of superheated ions that used the same technology as the energy fields that protected the team whilst in airless atmosphere. It was necessary to protect the fine machinery against the lunar grit until more permanent measures could be taken.

James spent a moment flicking through the various screens on the computer. 'It's all fine. There's nothing wrong with the nanites or the shield. Whatever that line is, it's nothing to do with what we're doing here.'

Maria grunted. 'I can't stand it when there's no explanation.'

'I know,' he said absently, staring at the screen readouts. He'd long since gotten used to his sister's idiosyncrasies.

'So are we ready to install the antennae?' she asked, trying to rub her own arms through her personal shield.

Beside the tower there was a large flat trolley, deactivated weeks ago with its huge, disassembled

cargo covered in a tarp and a low-maintenance, long-term energy field. It was the pointed centre-segment of the telescope, ready to be winched into place now that the nanites had assumed their static position. She looked at it now, hunkering beneath its dark covering.

'Depending on what our illustrious Director says,' James sighed, 'I would imagine that we could start work tomorrow, as soon as the edge of the nanite flow solidifies. We won't be able to get it in place so long as the von Neumann process is still—'

'I know,' Maria said. She knew, James knew, and above all Theo knew about the dangers of self-replicating machines. But, of course, they didn't talk about it. Guilt rose like bile. It always astonished her how old feelings often felt more potent than fresh ones. But, of course, this was not just her guilt; it was a guilt that they all shared.

She shook her head self-deprecatingly, and began to apologise to her brother for snapping. Before she could there was a sharp spitting noise from the left, which distracted her enough to pause.

'Did you see that?'

James looked up. 'What?'

'Look over there.'

She pointed down the long, sweeping curve of the crater towards the slowly-approaching edge of the nanite flow. The edge became brighter the further away from the centre it travelled, the machines on the boundary of the ring still active and reflecting light as they moved. In the centre of the crater it was dark and still, but in the area where Maria pointed there was a patch of similarly dull metal, motionless as a stone, where the nanites should have been alive and active.

James hummed and checked the screens again. 'It doesn't say there's a malfunction. It must be a local problem, maybe something in the stone ...'

'I don't think it's that. Look.'

Although it was the lunar daytime, there was no atmosphere to obscure the stars. The pair looked up past the glare of the sun and towards the heavy band of speckled light that was the Milky Way. It

was not unusual to see variations in colour reaching across the spacescape, but what Maria was pointing at were not shades of blue in a black ocean but the ghostly shimmer of a sort of cloud, almost entirely transparent, wavering high above the surface like heat-glare on a desert road.

‘I’ve never seen gas particles like that outside of atmosphere,’ James said, looking interested. ‘Is that how gas is when it occupies a vacuum?’

‘Looks like it,’ Maria replied. She was disappointed when the glow faded, leaving the vaporous tendrils barely visible in the night’s sky. ‘I don’t suppose we’d know, having never been in space before,’ she added, laughing.

‘Where it’s touched the crater, that’s where the mark is,’ James muttered to himself.

He brought up a magnified image on the screen, but it offered no answers, only a clearer view of one smooth arm curling away from the cloud, like an incandescent snake extending its body from a burning tree. Its tip had brushed against the nanite-coated crater and caused the programming to either complete its the process early, or shut down completely. The effect was the same: a dull, flat disc of metal amidst the glinting edge of the nanite-layer.

‘Want me to get a sample?’ Maria offered.

James shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t bother. It’ll pass – it’s probably perfectly normal, but we should go and see Theo to be sure. He knows about this sort of thing.’

-

On the return journey, they saw that Theo was not where they had left him. Assuming that he had returned to the facility to make a report on the black line on the ground, Maria and James hurried to get back as soon as possible.

Halfway across the flat lunar landscape, Maria tripped. She landed on her face, kicking up a cloud of fine dust that stuck to her energy field. James hurried to help her to her feet, but she managed by herself before James could step across the object Maria had tripped over.

The black line had become a black wall. It was only an inch high, and partially obscured by the omnipresent white dust. In just half an hour it had risen out of the ground, apparently of its own accord. James dusted away the chalk-like covering, hardly believing his eyes.

‘This is nuts. And it’s not even anything to do with the nanites – this is rock, solid rock.’

‘There’s no tectonic movement here,’ Maria murmured, nursing her knees. ‘No continents, and no lava flow; there’s been no earthquake.’

‘Moonquake,’ James corrected, forcing a weak smile. ‘But this wasn’t caused by any tectonic movement. Look at it – it’s far too neat for that. And it’s a completely different stone to what it’s grown out of.’

‘You’re saying it’s cut stone?’

‘I don’t know what I’m saying,’ he mumbled. ‘We need to get back to Theo. And to Karlson.’

‘Wonderful,’ she said. ‘Well let’s go.’

They found Theo in the store room. It was where they kept the tinned food and the equipment that would later become the long-term resources of the permanent Radio Laboratory. The room was the only place where there were even work surfaces and the tools for examining the object that Theo held in his gloved hand. The UMISO – Uncommon Materials Science Officer – looked perfectly at home with his microscope and assortment of minute implements.

He held up the Petri dish. ‘Scrapings from our mysterious line in the ground.’

‘Have you looked at the line during the last few minutes?’ Maria asked.

He nodded. ‘Yes. I had the screens focus on the area so that I could make a vid recording. I’ve noted the developments.’

‘It’s stone. Stone isn’t meant to grow,’ James said.

‘It’s basalt, just like the dark areas on the other side of the moon. At least that makes it moderately less strange, but it’s still weird. The reason the maria are all on the front side is due to the pull

of our gravity from Earth, drawing the less-dense minerals to the surface. To have basalt rise out of the ground in this way, and on the far side, is doubly unusual.'

'What's unexpected is that it looks like a wall. I mean, with sharp, straight edges. This isn't a natural occurrence, it's—'

'We don't know what it is.'

Director Karlson entered the small, cluttered room from behind them, and moved so that he could stand where he could look into the suddenly-guarded faces of Theo, Maria and James. He had his hands in his pockets, as if attempting to appear casual or unconcerned by what must be a palpably hostile audience.

'I'll be making my own reports, as you know,' he said levelly. 'Until then, I'd like everything you find to go through Theo. Theo will make sure I'm up to date on every development. Until we understand what's going on here, I don't want you making any transmissions that might be intercepted.'

'We always maintain client confidentiality,' James said. 'We don't send unprotected transmissions.'

'That's good,' Karlson said, smiling widely. 'Because as your client I'm insisting that you allow my own enterprise to analyse the situation before we make any kind of public announcement.'

James gritted his teeth, making Maria flinch. Karlson was not the type to pass up a chance to put someone in his place when he showed even minor signs of objection. Unexpectedly, Karlson said nothing and left the room, satisfied that the message had been received.

'What didn't you tell Karlson?' James asked Theo.

'It isn't like I had any choice but to keep him informed,' Theo replied flatly. Like any man who considers himself an intellectual, he didn't like to be criticized for his actions. 'But no, I didn't tell him everything.'

'So what's new?'

'The line – or the wall, I suppose we should call it now. Firstly, it was never a line. It's a ring, unbroken

and all the way around the facility. Secondly, it's all but stopped growing. Whatever phenomenon this is, it's burned itself out and we have plenty of time to study it more fully.'

'Will you stay on it?' Maria asked him, and he nodded.

'Of course.'

'What do you know about the vapour above the dish?'

'I'd noticed that,' Theo said, scratching the back of his neck as he spun the chair around.

Pressing his fingers against the screen on the opposite desk, he brought up some screenshots of Daedalus. They had been taken earlier in the day. Maria knew this because she and her brother were in the shot, looking up at the translucent cloud. The stars were bright above the white horizon, dulled by the distorting swirl of vapour.

'Without a sample, I couldn't tell you what kind of gas it is,' he told them. 'But considering the speed with which it approached, it will probably already be gone.'

'Can you take a look now?'

'The cams are recording the basalt deposits for stock footage, that's why we're having to make do with the screenshot. As soon as I can I'll take a look. Probably by then, though, you'll have already set off to mount the antennae. Do you want me to come with you?'

'James is the technician,' Maria replied, 'and I can help. Karlson would probably want you to stay here anyway, and find out if there's any way to make money out of this.'

Theo nodded in agreement, leaning back in his chair and sighing tiredly. 'I suppose you're right. But I suppose we owe him some thanks. Without him, we would never have had the chance to come here at all.'

Maria rolled over beneath the sheets of her bed. The bedroom was sparsely furnished, the walls still

exactly as they had come: unpapered and unpainted, just plain moulded hardplastic. There was a gap for a window – no frame, just a hole – reinforced with more clear plastic and an energy shield. Through it she could see the black expanse of the galaxy.

There is no sky on the moon, only space, she thought.

Without an atmosphere Maria couldn't wake up to a blue sky, and she couldn't see fluffy cumulous or looming, grey clouds. She felt dislocated, and a little sick. The mornings were just not the same. She was wondering how long it would be before she would not be able to deal with it any more.

Even though it was about seven o'clock at home, it was still very dark on the centre of the far side of the moon. Soon the satellite would swing around the planet and be fully illuminated by the sun. By that time, Maria hoped to be installing the antennae into the dish.

Listening to her own breathing for a while, she thought about getting up as she drowned in a terrible feeling of loneliness. When she was a teenager she or James would climb into the other's bed during the night for company. Of course after a certain age that arrangement suddenly became undesirable to both parties, although secretly Maria missed it.

She heaved herself out of bed and began to shower in the lukewarm water of the cubicle adjoining her room. All the strange events of the day before came to her at once, and in hindsight they seemed suddenly normal, and at the same time too bizarre to be true. She'd gotten used to the odd behaviour of her cold, airless environment.

She decided to save her water allotment for later, and have a bath then instead of a shower now. She dried herself with the biggest towel she could find. It was new but cheap, rough on both sides. Her outfit consisted of the thermal webbing stretched beneath jeans; most days she didn't bother with a blouse or T-shirt, just the webbing covering her like a long-sleeved swimsuit.

She found James running an inventory of his tools in what they had come to think of as the lounge.

'Did you sleep in here again?' she asked him.

He looked up blearily and nodded. His hands continued moving, mechanically sorting out his array of tools, each one specifically designed for one obscure task or another, along with the usual screwdrivers and pliers.

'Why aren't you using the apartment?'

'The beds are lumpy as shit.'

He looked like a liar. He looked like he was frightened, avoiding her gaze for as long as she held the silence which followed. Maria almost asked, Did you see something? What did you see? But she couldn't construct a sentence in which those words didn't sound stupid, and so she said nothing at all until James looked up again. He clipped his toolbox closed with a snap.

'All set,' he said quietly. 'Let's go.'

Something was wrong.

The black basalt wall was still there, looking maybe the same height or a few centimetres higher. Neither sibling could tell, but neither was in a mood to talk. They stepped over it, being careful not to slip on the energy shields that now encompassed their entire bodies. Maria tried to shrug off the feeling of claustrophobia that came from the low oxygen intake; if she breathed too fast or too deeply, the object clipped to her belt couldn't keep up its supply. And, if it broke, the shield would dissipate and the issue of oxygen would become moot; she would explode in the vacuum.

It was a long, quiet walk to the Daedalus site. Just as Maria began to wonder if she'd done anything wrong, James said, 'I don't feel too good this morning.'

'Didn't sleep well?'

'I didn't sleep. I'm worried about what's happening here, and I'm worried about our binding agreement with the Director and his associates. If something serious happens-'

'We aren't the first people to do work here,' Maria

pointed out. 'There've been other construction crews, research teams, miners. There'll always be accidents but I don't think anything serious will-'

'Just don't forget about the abyssal plain.'

Said as though she would ever be capable of forgetting.

James was already accessing the computer console to bring the antennae out of its storage position. Pulleys and electrically-powered wheels drew the tarp from the dish's centrepiece; another set began to lift it, first vertically so that its pointed tip was aimed at the stars like an accusatory finger, and then up into the air to be carried at least partway towards the midpoint of the dish.

The derrick raised and then rotated around the tower's scaffold, the heavy spike of the antennae swinging sedately in the zero-G. Once it had rotated 180 degrees, the derrick's arm began to extend until it looked as though it was about to topple, then James lowered the arm and made sure that the magnetic cushions were in place beneath the antennae. They would allow he and Maria to push the heavy apparatus all the way to the centre of the colossal disc, a distance of fully forty kilometres. Luckily the transport system was motorised, and the magnetic fields would do most of the work for them, pushing and pulling with invisible limbs so that it moved itself in the correct direction.

'Now comes the hard part,' James said, scowling. 'The manual labour.'

'We'll have a quiet day, take it easy. Karlson won't be able to complain so long as we get this thing in place. Let's go and prep the buggy - I don't fancy walking all the way.'

An unexpected flare of light forced her to shield her eyes. She hadn't seen any sign of the gaseous vapour they'd seen the day before, but now the waving tentacles of gas were becoming visible again, moving sinuously through the air from high, high above, toward the surface of the dish. The tentacles were not attracted solely to the disc, but also to the tower and, Maria saw, were stretching towards the facility.

Directly above them, a dual helix of translucent tendrils were spiralling slowly above the place where

Maria and James stood. From the centre of the vast clouds were sparks of bright light, the cause of the flares that had nearly blinded them. As if the vapour were liquid petroleum, the gaseous cloud ignited from within. Shifting, coalescing strands of red-orange light looped and knotted around themselves like a tangle of evanescent cotton. Each strand pulsed in and out of sight, sometimes gleaming bronze and sometimes the smouldering red of coals. Warmly coloured threads wove them all together, the strands of the cloud somehow neither coalescing nor clotting. They did not become tangled, but moved as if alive, filling the space above the four kilometre depression of the crater.

'Jesus Christ,' James muttered.

He moved back instinctively, perhaps like Maria concerned that the bright vapour would burn them. As it was, they were caught up within the cloud's circumference and perfectly unharmed.

'I don't care what you think,' he said, 'that's not normal.'

'We can't continue with the installation,' Maria said, running her hands through the streams of light. She thought that she could see familiar shapes - the contours of a face, the striae of a leaf's skeleton, and other organic formations - but was unable to affect their movement in any way. It was beautiful but terrifying. 'This could be damaging the machinery.'

'I'll get it re-covered,' James said, and set to work immediately on the tarpaulin.

Even as he spoke, something altered within the luminescent depths of the vapour. Maria was suddenly aware of just how large the cloud was, and how far its trail reached, stretching up and away from the moon, curving away from the sun towards the far end of the solar system like the distended tail of a comet. It reminded her of a trail of bubbles stretching through the darkness of an ocean, fragile amidst crushing obscurity.

The flash of light was accentuated by an ear-splitting sound like a train colliding with a cliffside, and then something streaked out of the vapour on a vein of smoking light. The object crashed into the face of the crater, kicking up a huge plume of pale dust and debris. Spinning pieces of shattered grey

metal spun past Maria, threatening the seal of her energy shield. Drifting sheets of particles lifted in agitated paths towards the heavens.

James crouched behind the console, screaming 'Fuck,' at the top of his voice. Maria, entranced by the fading light that had shone moments before the impact, hadn't had time to duck and cover. She stared in disbelief at the pit in the side of Daedalus.

'I can't believe this,' she muttered, but her first thought was, *What the hell are we supposed to do here?*

'I'm calling Karlson,' she said, and tapped into the mic that allowed she and James to communicate. Eventually, Karlson answered. The line was full of static interference.

'Yes?'

'We have a problem here. Is Theo watching that vaporous disturbance above Daedalus?'

'We're both here now with updated images,' Karlson replied. 'Is anybody hurt?'

'We're fine. I can't speak for the equipment though – and our big new dish has a big new hole in it.'

'Come back to the lab for now.'

'What about the impact?'

'Leave it.'

She hung up. James was looking at her expectantly. He said, 'The impact site is on the outer curve. We go right past it back to the facility.'

Maria smiled when he nodded sideways as the sleeping two-seater buggy, which was parked between the legs of the construction tower.

'Alright,' she said, 'a little trip.'

-

The buggy jerked and bounced over the uneven landscape. Some of the numerous smaller craters were the size of manhole covers; others were as huge as Daedalus, which would take two hours

to cross in the little surface buggy. Others were even bigger. Without an atmosphere to help burn up smaller meteoroids – there is no such thing as a meteor on the moon – and everything from a pebble to a mountain would make a hole in the moon's battered farside surface.

It took fifteen minutes to drive around the outer rim of Daedalus to the area of the perimeter which lay directly next to the new impact crater. From the very edge they could see the hole: it was about twice the size of the buggy, and there were cracks and fissures through the metal of the dish for a further hundred feet each way. Whatever had struck the dish hadn't been very large, but it had been travelling at some speed.

'Should we go in there?' James asked tentatively. 'It's so close.'

Maria was looking warily at the bright, shifting vapours that were suspended in the space above the crater. They were not exactly like the corona of a sun, but they bore similarities, namely the brightness and colours. Most strands were golden with threads of vivid jaffa-orange, but there were others that were sandy brown, and through the centre of it was a heavy frayed rope of vibrant red.

'I think it's safe for now,' she said. 'Let's go and take a look.'

The hole was big enough to fit the whole buggy, and equally deep. Even through the solid metal, which was three inches thick, the object had punched a hole deep enough to be an elephant's grave. It was not the hole itself that Maria and James were staring at however, but the object that had created it.

It was not burnt as they had expected, but it was dry; although it looked organic there were no fluids leaking from the broken form, and no disgorged tissue. It was just a long, grey, muscular thing, dead if it was ever alive. At one end was what could have been a tail; at the other something that might once have functioned as a mouth. There were no sensory organs or limbs. It looked like a seven-foot fluke.

'Is that an animal?' Maria asked slowly. 'A life form?'

'If it is, it must have come from the planet,' James

replied. 'Look at it. Are you kidding? There's no way that developed autonomously from Earth.'

'I'm not too worried about that right now, actually. It's too big to move, we'll just have to leave it for now. None of us are biologists. Let's just get back and let Karlson deal with what to do next.'

They hadn't even stepped out of the buggy. As James started it up, something else struck the satellite dish, not thirty feet away. Almost fully deafened, both of them were thrown forward over the unprotected bar of the buggy's front, tumbling from the vehicle as it bucked. White dust fell over them like plaster, coating their fizzing energy shields. They did not choke, as the shields protected them, but they were partially blind and struggled to get up. Maria reached out so that she could get to her feet, and saw that there was a shard of metal embedded in the side of her right arm, where it had been exposed from the offside of the buggy. It had not punctured the flesh, but was sitting firmly in the energy field like a bullet embedded in a Kevlar vest.

'James,' she yelled, but he couldn't hear her. The mics were thick with static, and there was a solid wall of white dust between them. Her breathing thinned noticeably; her shield was leaking air. Only infinitesimal amounts, but it was leaking the air that she needed to breathe, that she would die without, and if the metal moved or if the gap widened she would be exposed to the vacuum and burst like a swollen tomato.

Her brother took her hand and they were running away from the second impact site. Something else had crashed into the disc, the second in a series of bombardments that was continuing all around them, crash after crash. They did not just land in the dish, but everywhere beneath the vapour cloud. Maria saw one of the sinuous flukes, twisting through the air in front of them, creating yet another pit on the rutted landscape. More dust rose silently into the air, the only noise carried by the vibrations running through their feet as they half-ran, half-jumped.

It was not a full quarter-mile to the facility, but it was close, and by the time it was in sight they were exhausted. They were still being bombarded, but it did not seem like an intelligent bombardment; the things were falling sporadically, some still back at

the construction tower and others further ahead, nearer to the Farside Lab.

They could barely see the building. It was blocked by a tall black structure: the basalt line had risen out of the ground like a wide, curved tooth, and it was still rising, already beyond four feet high.

'Run,' Maria yelled, but there was only static in her ears, furious white noise blocking communications and adding her thoughts. 'Run.'

They reached the wall, crashing against it like waves. One of the falling flukes smashed into the side of it twenty feet away, but the wall remained undamaged. The flaccid grey body just hung over it like a wet sock.

The wall was not so high that Maria couldn't hoist herself up, but there was a throbbing in her arm above where the piece of shrapnel had hit her energy shield, and it made her arm weak. Moving desperately, James helped to pull her over. She could feel the wall rising beneath her, a slow reef-like growth.

On the other side they landed in dust. More of the falling creatures slammed against the wall. It was now acting as a shield for them, guarding against the onslaught.

James was hammering on her arm. He was frantically trying to turn her attention to the ground, where they were kneeling. He was screaming behind his energy shield and jabbing with his finger at the ground.

There was a thin layer of water over the rock, mixed in with the chalky surface dust of the moon to form a milky liquid. At first Maria thought that she was witnessing yet another miracle that she'd never expected to see – rainfall on the moon – but she was wrong. The ground was not wet, but becoming liquid itself; the whole area was turning sludgy. The rock was turning to liquid beneath them.

Move, she thought, standing and making a break for the lab. Move, move move move!

James was behind her, having let go of her hand now so that she could run freely. He, like her, was up to his calves in sloppy fluid. It was like running

through liquid cement, or sea-drenched sand; Maria struggled to drag her feet through the deepening mire. Further impacts happened all around her. She began to shed tears in her desperation, urging herself forward, fearful for her life on what should have been a perfectly safe job.

The air within her energy shield was getting thinner and thinner; she was asphyxiating and all the while she could only think, it's an ocean, it's an ocean, and having delusions in which she sank further and further into the ground until she was submerged, then swallowed, and then caught in a thick, gritty undercurrent until she was eventually crushed by the little moon's liquid core ...

The front airlock of the facility was open, and standing in the doorway was Theo with his arm outstretched, beckoning frantically. He was trying to speak into his radio, but the words were not being transmitted.

Climbing to the top of the cloying sludge beneath her feet, Maria forced her thighs to power long jumps, employing the low gravity, and was soon within reach of Theo. James was right behind her, white liquid dripping from his boots. Theo grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her inside; James fell in beside them, and Theo closed the outer door shut and activated the energy shield, sealing them safely inside the facility.

'I think we're under-qualified,' Theo said, looking out of the window.

The energy field swam as he pressed his hand against it, the powerful magnetic fields cool and pliant. Beyond its barely visible distortions was the transformed surface between the lab and the crater. It was no longer a gouged uneven surface, but a flat expanse of thick grey-white liquid. It might have stretched as far as Daedalus itself, but Theo could not see. The black basalt wall had grown rapidly since the first impact that Maria and James had witnessed, and its growth hadn't slowed or stopped. The circular wall had taken ten minutes to rise, curling inwards as it went, until the entire facility was encased in an unyielding black dome. It had closed directly above them, leaving them in almost total darkness.

James was by the window, discussing the problem with Theo. Maria sat on the uncomfortable sofa, picking at its plasticity cover as she listened.

'This must have been pre-arranged,' James was saying quietly. 'This is obviously not a natural occurrence. It must be connected to the work, somebody who wants Daedalus for something else.'

'You're talking about sabotage,' Theo said.

James nodded.

'On the moon?'

James puffed out a lungful of air, out of ideas. For a full hour they'd debated the possibilities over hot drinks, but now those drinks were consumed or abandoned, Maria's stone cold on the table by the sofa. She could still taste the tang of unwanted coffee on her upper lip. She knew that she couldn't stomach even a mouthful of the stuff.

'What's Karlson's opinion?' she asked quietly.

When Karlson had heard the story Maria had been in her apartment seeing to the bruise on her arm from the shrapnel, which thankfully hadn't broken the skin. Although it had been lodged in the energy shield and was releasing air, the shield had repaired itself once she'd reset it. The power box for it now sat on her bed; she felt that she needed some time away from it.

'He said what he said before,' Theo replied. 'We don't send any transmissions. He said it wasn't even worth conjecturing about; he'll sort it, he said.'

'Course he will,' James said sourly. 'Don't the Karlsons sort everything?'

'The dome,' Maria said. 'Do you want to know what I think?'

'No,' Theo said. He and James already knew what was coming.

'We know, Maria. We talked about it when you were in your room.'

'We never talk about it.'

'There's nothing to talk about,' Theo said.

'It's odd that the dome looks exactly like the shell we constructed on the abyssal plain, don't you think? And after what happened-'

'We agreed that nothing happened,' Theo snapped. He yanked his hand away from the window and it retained the shape of his palm and fingers for a moment. The imprint then slipped away like a memory.

'Maria...' James said softly. 'We don't need-'

'So who else knows?' she pushed, sitting up straight. Her arm throbbed as her blood pulsed harder throughout her body. 'Nobody. Only Martin. Not even the Karlson who was with us knows what really happened. Not how it happened.'

'Maria,' Theo warned lowly.

'And now we're here,' she continued, regardless. 'The three of us. And there's a shell trapping us here that's exactly like the shell we built. The shell that broke. And, what? We wait for Karlson to tell us what's happening? James said it. It's sabotage. And the only one who could possibly-'

'That's enough,' James said firmly, sensing the anger building up within Theo just a few feet away. Maria noticed it as well, but she didn't care. She was tired of keeping things hidden, but of course James was right. That was enough.

She dreamed through the night, one of those dreams that lasts an eternity in the mind of the sleeper. At ten o'clock US time her head touched the pillow. A little over two hours later her imagination conjured images of the pale lunar vistas turning to pulp in all directions, beneath a purple sky shot through with icy blue meteorites. The black wall undulated between her and the laboratory, cutting her off. On the other side, the white rock was now a kind of shallow lagoon, the milky waters semi-translucent. The rippling waves smoothed to show what they contained: a miniature submarine resting on the sandy seabed just a few feet down.

There were creatures like miniature aquatic monkeys swimming around it, barely visible. There were four of them, circling like birds around the

crippled sub. They were building a wall out of material too fine to see properly. After a moment, the material began to build itself, and became a growing black shell. The hole in its centre shrank and shrank, obscuring the sunken submarine. Three of the little sea monkeys swam out. One of them hesitated. The shell began to solidify at its roots, turning from living liquid to solid dead metal. The fourth monkey was caught in the flow of the closing shell. It washed over the monkey like tar. Then it began to harden. The air was crushed from the tiny ape's lungs. Its body followed, mangled like damp paper. Life fled the microscopic creature; Maria saw it like thin orange vapour, curling upwards through the water. Then the water rippled, and the scene was lost, and the dream ended.

She woke at 12:15, cold and drenched with sweat.

At the time Maria began to dream, Director Karlson was hard at work. He hadn't slept since he woke at six o'clock US time that morning, eighteen hours earlier, and he didn't anticipate rest any time soon.

For ten minutes he'd been waiting for a response to his initial report, which he had sent via subspace back to the primary headquarters. The headset did half of the work and the intuitive, scientifically-unexplainable connection between every executive in the Karlson conglomerate did the rest.

Michael Hudd-Karlson wondered if the cloned brain tissue that had been expertly stitched to his own grey matter really connected him to the others. Could science work that way? Or was it more than science – something innate to life, the genetic link that is often demonstrated by identical twins and close relatives? It could reach back much further than humanity, through the ages to when man's ancestors inhabited the trees, and to before that when their limbs were webbed and oily, and prior to even that. Multi-cellular cohesion, back to when life had a single undivided source. If that was true, everybody was connected in a fundamental way.

He rubbed his eyes. What strange thinking. It was probably attributed to his lack of sleep, but he often wondered less about the extra brain tissue than he did about the bit that had been cut out to make room for it.

There was a thrumming sensation behind his eyes now, as though he had a throbbing headache. He often suffered from headaches and migraines, but this was different. A curious sensation, but one that he had long grown used to: pseudo-psychically-transmitted thoughts pulsing through the space behind space. Earth had a transmitter, so his colleagues' response was strong and clear as it developed in his mind:

Primary report received. Possible enterprise opportunity. Personal safety priority – take care.

As Karlson allowed these foreign thoughts to materialise in his consciousness like shapes appearing in clouds, he looked out of the window. It was dark, because the dome eclipsed them all. The fire-coloured vapours were still suspended just off the ground, hovering like some huge floating sea anemone. He couldn't see either edge; they were fingering all around the facility as though drawn to it. He guessed that parts of it were still outside the dome, stretched towards Daedalus.

Carefully he prepared the second part of his report. He needed to inform his colleagues of what had happened since his preliminary transmission: the closing of the black wall over the top of the facility, and the way that the ground outside the front doors appeared to be liquid now, putting an end to any notion of trying to break through the dome. They couldn't even approach the wall, let alone heave equipment out there to knock it down.

Before he could transmit, there was a second inbound burst of information from HQ. Karlson reeled from the strength and unexpectedness of it.

Phenomenon known. Source is outer regions of solar system, possibly Jupiter.

Karlson balked at that. The fact that the Directorship was familiar with the vaporous cloud, and that he hadn't known about it, concerned him deeply. Of course, it was possible that the reason he hadn't been kept informed was that he'd been on the moon and was a touch out of range for the usual broadcasts. If this was a recent development, he would probably be out of the loop until he returned home. When he did, the frequent broadcasts meant to synchronise each of the Directors would fill him in.

Still – Jupiter?

He began his return transmission, including a request for further details to be sent if possible. The headsets were capable of storing reasonably large amounts of information on them, and so data packets could be transmitted that Karlson could access via a computer at leisure.

Report receipt acknowledged, he began. He was about to close his eyes to help him concentrate, but a spark of light close to the ceiling caught his attention.

It looked like a firefly, pulsing with electric blue luminescence. The more Karlson looked at it, the harder it became to identify its shape. It beat like a tiny heart, in and out of existence as though there was a grey veil across reality that Karlson had only just learned to see through.

More lights unwound like ribbons from a hidden source. These were all colours, but they were on the blue end of the spectrum, anything from forest green to the warmest shade of violet. The ribbons streamed out of the air. As Karlson turned, he couldn't see their source; then he realised that they were streaming from him, as though his mind were a tap. Ocean blue, sky blue, blue like forget-me-nots. Seaweed green, lime green. Threads of green-yellow, like fresh leaves at the turn of autumn, wove actively through the effervescent flow. Amongst them were characters of the alphabet, some generating a faded tapestry and some strongly-formed in the foreground. There were words there, sentences reeled from his conscious and – now that he was distracted – subconscious mind.

The Director raised his hands and grinned as the lights played through and around his fingers. The room flooded with colourful light, as though he were in the centre of an intangible fireworks display. His grin parted to release a full bodied laugh, and the laughter was mirrored in the incandescent spume.

‘Say that again’, Maria said, sitting up.

They were in the lounge, she and James and Theo. Theo turned from the window and repeated

himself.

‘It’s raining,’ he said. He was quite pale. ‘Come and take a look for yourself.’

Maria and her brother joined Theo by the wide, glassless window. They didn’t touch the energy field for fear of distorting the view – and what a view it was; that miracle Maria had never expected to see. It was raining outside. Heavy droplets were falling vertically from the dark inner ceiling of the dome. They splashed into the liquid stone that had once been crater-riddled ground. Ripples began to form, syrupy and slow.

‘I’m cracking up,’ James muttered. He shook his head and then tried to support it in one hand, as though his neck had given out. ‘I’m going nuts. This is it.’

‘I want a sample,’ Maria said. ‘Theo ...’

‘We don’t know what it is. And unless you want to swim out from under the lab’s awnings, nobody’s not going out there.’

‘What do you want a sample for, anyway?’

‘I want Theo to analyse it,’ Maria said. ‘Compare it to the basalt rock. Maybe the substance of the dome is breaking down.’

‘I’ve already made a decision, and now would be a good time to bring it up,’ Theo announced. ‘If the dome isn’t breaking down, if we really are trapped in here, then I’m going to send a message back to the planet. We’re working under Karlson but he doesn’t own us. This isn’t like a workshop at home when the power’s out. This is serious.’

‘I’ll back that,’ James said.

‘That’s fine,’ Maria said testily, ‘but it won’t help us now, will it?’

‘Actually,’ James replied, ‘I have an idea.’

When Maria and James returned to Theo’s office with the sample, he could barely believe that James’ plan had worked. He leaned back in his chair, which adjusted itself to the new pressure, and put his

hands behind his head.

‘I was convinced you’d fall head-first into that sludge outside,’ he said. ‘Did you really hang out of the window with a cup?’

‘You should have seen me,’ James said, which Theo knew was his sarcastic way of saying, ‘Thanks for the help.’

Theo had left James and his sister to work out the particulars for themselves. Upon returning to what he called his office – the tiny space of the storeroom and all of its resident clutter – he’d had the fourth in a series of dizzy spells. For three hours he’d struggled to keep awake, despite having had a full night’s sleep, and he’d nearly fallen down once. Throughout the morning he’d had to steady himself against a wall or railing while his head swam, for ten seconds at a time. During those moments his vision went completely grey, blotting out everything but his thoughts and memories, the lonely horror of which was massively magnified.

Although he’d come back to his cramped little personal space to rest, James evidently thought that Theo just hadn’t been bothered. Theo was surprised that James had brought him the sample; Theo obviously seemed apathetic to the others, although nothing could have been further from the truth.

Maria handed him the cup. It was a red mug with the Karlson Enterprises logo printed in yellow on one side: a slanted KE represented by dozens of tiny, interlocking cubes. The logo had always reminded Theo of the two hundred Karlsons around the world, stitched together by those headsets and their shared cerebral tissue.

‘This is all you got?’

‘I was leaning out the window on my knees,’ James reminded him. ‘If Maria had let me go, I’d have fallen in. I didn’t want to be hanging there any longer than necessary.’

‘Okay.’

Theo didn’t want to add the apology that came to him reflexively. In an evidently hostile environment, James had gone beyond the call of duty asked of him by his position as a technical

supervisor; asking for more would be totally unappreciative of the trouble he had already gone to.

Inside the cup was a viscous black fluid. It had a high surface tension and was very reflective. When Theo jabbed it with a sterile temperature probe, it sagged thickly beneath the pressure.

‘Well, it obviously has a different state of matter, and probably a different phase... You know, I’m not a geologist. Or a physicist. You know that, right?’

‘Of course we know it, Theo,’ Maria said, visibly troubled. ‘Just tell us what you can. Even if it can’t help us get out of here or finish the job, it could lead to other advanced technologies, right? Isn’t that what we’re all about?’

‘Maybe you and the Director should get married,’ James joked, but Maria wasn’t in the mood.

‘We just need to know everything we can about what’s going on. I don’t want to be here. Do you? I can’t be trapped in this place. I can’t-’

She never finished. Theo watched as she backed herself against the outer wall, becoming more agitated. Then, with the full weight of her back pressed against the wall, she vanished. The wall and the shelves attached to it rippled momentarily as she passed through, like water when a stone is thrown into it. James moved forward before Theo understood what was happening. Her brother’s hands pressed against the wall – very solid – and he frantically called out to her via the mics.

‘Maria! Maria!’

‘She doesn’t have her radio with her,’ Theo said quietly. ‘She didn’t have her shield battery.’

And she was outside. Theo felt himself rise from his seat without actually willing it so. A strange sensation blanketed his body, numbing his thoughts and senses. Fuzzy borders slid around the edges of his vision, narrowing his field of view. He saw James checking that his energy shield was in order and running to the door, intending to exit the laboratory to find his sister, who was now undoubtedly dead. He didn’t get far; the very fabric of the room was altering, and the thick reams of cables that ran around the corners of the room

rippled into life. They lashed his arms and back, repelled by the energy shield but sending him into a stumble with the sheer force. Theo tried to blink light back into his vision but he felt as though he was receding into his own flesh. He was conscious just long enough to see cables winding around James’ arms and yanking him bodily into the air, and heard the pop of bones being dislodged from their sockets.

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As Maria fell through the wall, she felt coldness and then a sudden pressure inside her, pushing outwards. Her organs shifted like eels inside the barrel her ribs. It was a disturbing sensation, but although she was breathless and all at once in pain, her mind was thoroughly detached from her body.

She was falling backwards, and she could see the exterior of the facility looming up in front of her, and above that the thick darkness of the dome. She could see no stars, no celestial light at all. The only illumination was generated by the laboratory and the long tendrils of red-orange vapour that had managed to permeate the black wall. The impossible black rain fell vertically towards her.

And then she hit the ground, and it was like porridge, and she was sinking and she couldn’t move. The liquid stone took her into itself, folding around her supine body. The darkness of the dome disappeared; the glare of the lab’s external lights was shut out. She was submerged.

She drew in air. The pressure eased, although there was now tremendous pain in her ears, as though her eardrums had burst. It was possible – more than that, likely. She was lucky to be alive.

Maria struggled to understand her situation: falling through thick liquid rock that, despite the darkness, still glowed white around her. Breathing air where there was no air. Alive when she should be dead.

Instinctively her hand reached for the box that would initiate her energy shield. She was used to having the small device, which could generate strong magnetic fields and pump the plasma between them to protect her from the vacuum, but now it wasn’t there.

Voices began to resonate in her head, frightening her. There were echoes of memories, snatches of songs that she thought she'd forgotten, and numerous fragments of recent conversations:

Traps are ready, hope you're all watching-

Mike Hudd-Karlson on your back every step of the way, like a damn monkey-

When have I ever talked about it? If I'm not over the worst of it after a year, I never will be-

Just don't forget about the abyssal plain-

-And then she could feel large hands groping at her from all angles, pulling and pushing in every direction. The substance that she inhabited became foamy, like rushing water, and she sank faster. Now she could no longer tell in which direction she was being pulled. Her body span through the white froth, and in each little pocket of air she thought that she could see dark faces peering at her, wide-eyed – every eye was bright red and surrounded by vapour, and rotating slowly like the body of a great storm.

Breath was not coming easily now. She struggled to pull air into her lungs, which felt as though they were expanding again. A dense ball of pressure was building within her, threatening to rupture her. And then, just like that, she was back in the laboratory, her clothing sopping wet and her skin freeze-burned and scathed. But she was alive.

-

James found her lying very still in one of the corridors, her back pressed against the cold wall. Her clothes were shredded, as though she'd been attacked by huge cats. There were abrasions on her face and arms. Her hair was a gloopy, unsightly mess twisted into a wet point behind her.

'Maria...'

He staggered towards her. He wasn't in such a fine state himself. Eventually he'd been able to wrench one arm free from their grasping coils, yank the scalpel Theo had been using earlier from his untidy desk, and stab at the rubber coating of the wires that were slowly constricting around his left arm and chest. He hadn't been able to cut through them

– the blade of the scalpel was ineffectual against the filigrees of metal beneath the rubber – but they had recoiled like worms from its sharp steel blade. Once free, he'd turned briefly to call upon Theo, but the man was gone. James hadn't stopped to call for him.

His intention had been to run around the outside of the building, but he hadn't needed to go that far. Now he was kneeling beside Maria saying, 'Little sister? Little sister?' and getting no reply.

He thought she was dead. He had no idea how to perform CPR or any other resuscitation manoeuvre, and so when she moved unexpectedly as though surfacing from a deep sleep he was both astonished and relieved.

'Thank God,' he said, and hugged her tightly. 'Are you alright?'

'I guess so,' she said dopyly, rubbing her eyes. Dry flakes of blood came off against her hand from the tiny cuts across every curve of her face.

'How did you get back inside?'

'I don't know. Where's Theo and Karlson?'

'I don't know.'

He hugged her tightly and said, 'Come on. We need to find them. I think it's about time we got the lander ready for relaunch, don't you?'

'My eyes hurt.'

'They're a little red. Come on, I'll help you stand.'

'There's no point in trying to ready the lander,' she told him, leaning against his shoulder while he put his arm around her. 'We're trapped inside the dome. What happened to you?'

'I'm okay, it's nothing. Have you seen Theo?'

She shook her head. Her hair was stuck together in clumps, and it dripped with milky water when she moved.

'I'm going to prep the lander anyway,' James told her. 'The moment this dome falls, I want to be ready to get us out of here.'

‘What makes you think the dome will fall?’

‘I don’t really, but it bears more than a slight resemblance to the shell we built on the abyssal plain, don’t you think? And you remember how that one held up.’

‘Just... don’t talk about it,’ she said.

‘We’ve spent twelve months not talking about it!’

‘Forget it then,’ she grunted, feeling bruises develop all across her back. She wondered if her passage through the incorporeal wall had damaged her body in some hidden way, on the cellular level maybe. ‘Karlson can’t know about that, or we’ll go out of business. Theo won’t hear any of it.’

‘Theo needs to let Martin go and have done with it.’

‘He did,’ she said. ‘That’s the problem.’

They came to a portion of the corridor that had widened to join with the lounge area. Warm light streamed through the window to their left, the glow from the vapours. A shadow passed back and forth through the rays, drawing their attention.

‘What the hell is that?’

Maria shielded her eyes against the light, and the silhouette that flew in front of it. ‘I don’t know.’

The dark shape had huge wings that beat powerfully against the vacuum. Although any flying device of that sort would be useless without an atmosphere, these appendages carried their owner as though they inhabited the clearest of skies. The animal was large, at least man-sized, but apart from that they could make out no other details until a few moments later, when the flying shape passed from in front of the lights to within them.

The luminescent vapour brought out the colouring and details of the figure: it was a man, arms outstretched, and the legs bent beneath the abdomen. He looked like he was trying to keep his legs straight out behind him, but they were too heavy. The rain pelted his head and back, and streaked down the glossy feathers of his wings as they beat against each other, all the way up and all

the way down, clapping each time like the wings of a pigeon.

‘Who is that?’ Maria asked, in awe.

‘No idea, but he won’t get very far until the shell breaks. He’s flying round in circles.’

‘I always wanted to fly like that. It looks like an angel.’

‘Clumsy for an angel. Do you think it’s Theo?’

Maria rubbed some congealed fluid out of her eyes. What she really wanted was a shower, but she could still remember the feeling of having her throat clogged with lumpy syrup and couldn’t bear the thought of more water.

She said, ‘We could use the cams on the construction towers to get a close-up, maybe.’

‘If we want to go back to the tech room, we’ll need to turn around. And frankly I want to see what our good Director has to say on the matter.’

‘You’re the boss, big brother.’

‘Let’s find you somewhere to lie down.’

The lounge area was cold, although the radiators were too hot to touch. It was as though the movement of air had stopped entirely within the facility, and all that was left was a block of immobile molecules refusing to pass on the warmth.

Maria placed herself in one of the sofas, which she’d spent more time in during the previous 48 hours than she had in the three weeks since they’d arrived. She felt that she’d needed more rest, much more, since the moment the gaseous, almost-invisible cloud had appeared above the site of the parabolic antennae. It was as though every inexplicable experience was costing her an increasing amount of energy and now she was burnt out, like the scorched dead areas in the metal of the colossal dish.

From the sofa she could see out of the window. The flying man was still there, looping around and around the facility. He came around every twenty seconds or so, going from left to right each time. He had his left arm stretched out to touch the dark

inner wall of the dome, as if feeling for weaknesses. The rain fell heavily against his white feathers. His right hand caught the droplets every now and again, and he brought them close to his face. Was he tasting them, or talking to them?

The more Maria watched, the more she believed that the soaring figure was Theo, granted the power of flight via some obscure magic. However he had earned his wings, she knew that the glowing cloud was the source of his newfound abilities – somehow, it was the cause of all of this.

When Karlson answered James' radio summons, he said that he wouldn't be able to discuss the problems in person. He was occupied in the tech room, sitting in the chair that still held Theo's shape, documenting the feeds from the cameras stationed outside the dome.

'We're both injured,' James told him. 'We need to talk about this.'

'We are talking, aren't we?' Karlson's voice replied.

'The situation won't fix itself!'

'I don't suppose it will,' Karlson said, and cut the line.

Fuming, James slammed his fist against the wall and screamed through his teeth. 'I'm going to see him.'

'Don't bother,' Maria said tiredly, 'he'll only feed you more bullshit.'

'He needs to realise that it's our lives-'

'He already knows! You know what the Karlsons are like – all of them. Every one of them is the same as the next. It was a Director that gave us that order on the abyssal shelf, and it's a Director that will ruin our lives a second time.'

'You know as well as I do that it wasn't the Director's order that killed Martin, Little Sister.'

'Just leave Karlson be, he'll only make things worse.'

James was adamant that he would talk to the representative of the company that was funding the job, who had hired their services and was now trapping them in a situation that was genuinely life-threatening. He was about to march out the lounge towards the tech room when Maria stopped him, and directed his attention towards the window.

'Look,' she said.

The rain shower had developed into a storm, filling the vacuous dome with sheets of wide, dark droplets. There was no pooling on the ground; the chalky liquid drew the thrashing rain into itself, making it disappear. Rivers of moisture were running down the curved interior of the dome, wide and voluminous enough to be seen as far away as the laboratory.

'The dome is melting,' James said quietly.

'I think it just looks that way.'

'Where else is the rain coming from? We're completely enclosed.'

'A lot of impossible things have been happening here.'

'It's Theo,' he said, and they moved closer to the window.

He must have been thinking the same as Maria, that the flying stranger was indeed their Uncommon Materials Officer. Theo was beating his impossible wings hard, flying upwards in an ever shrinking circle as the top of the dome approached. His fingers were stretched out to their fullest, scraping against the side of the smooth stone wall. The torrential rainfall battered him from above, drenching his white feathers with black oil. His clothes were soaked and pressed against his body. In the vacuum, his whitening hair drifted in all directions about his strained face.

'Isn't there anything we can do?' Maria begged of James, but he only shook his head.

'I tried getting through on his radio, but it isn't receiving calls. He must have it switched off, or it's been damaged.'

'What does he think he's doing?'

James didn't answer. He could only watch as the pale light between the facility and the wall dimmed with the worsening rain. The space was thick with falling water and Theo was almost completely obscured, merely a pale shape darting between the blankets of rain.

Maria's eyes were drawn to the floor between her feet. A small, round black mark had appeared there, like an ink stain. She looked up, and saw similar discolouration spreading across the ceiling.

'James!'

The rain was coming through the ceiling. There were layers of insulation and sensitive technologies between the outer roof and the inner ceiling, but they were never intended to protect against anything other than vacuum and condensation. The perfect seal must have broken, and now the cloudy liquid was leaking into the facility.

'Come on.'

James took her hand and led her away from the creeping damp. Beads of water were running towards its centre and then dripping onto the floor. It quickly became a trickle, then a stream, pattering onto the floor with faint clouds of steam.

He swore. 'What the fuck do we do now?'

'Get your energy shield on.'

'It's on.'

'James – Theo...'

Outside, Theo was making another pass. He could barely be seen through the storm, but it was clear that he was losing height. His hands were over his ears, as if trying to block out sounds. His wings beat erratically and he spiralled towards the ground. Maria cried out and rushed towards the window in time to see Theo plunge into the rippling surface of the landscape. There was a series of sluggish concentric rings and some spinning droplets, and Theo was gone.

He broke the surface only once, gasping for breath in an airless space, and then submerged completely.

They were not granted time to grieve; although Maria harboured the hope that, just as she had, Theo would materialise somewhere safe, she knew that James did not share her views. When a man choked on liquid stone and then went under, he was dead, and that was that. She guessed that James' primary concern was for his sister; she still felt exhausted from her own ordeal, and could barely keep up as James led her through the short, many-cornered corridors of the facility.

The murky water was dripping through in every room and passageway. As it hit the ground around them it hissed, as though each droplet were corrosive. With their energy shields active, neither sibling felt the touch of the black rain, but they did see the shapes that shimmered between each puff of steam: faces, tiny bodies, and words formed visually in the vapour. Every face was identical, and every word was the same name: Martin, Martin, Martin, the deceased; Martin Callas, Theo's son; Martin Callas, who had been there on that other job in which the then-experimental nanite-flow had moved more quickly than Theo had anticipated, engulfing the young man in a tide of tiny, unthinking machines as they constructed their shell beneath the water.

Maria's dream rushed back to her: the tiny monkey-men swimming around the sunken submarine, her subconscious mishmash of memory and random information. She saw Martin being crushed to death as the nanite-flow solidified around him, half his body encased in the dead metal. Theo'd had Martin by the hand as the flow had solidified, attempting to pull him free, but fear of being consumed had made him pull back and hesitate. And then, as the shell broke, Maria saw his body being lost in the backwash of the ocean.

She and the others had said nothing; not she or James, not Theo, who was now a childless father and – in his mind – a killer. The Karlson Director who had accompanied them had been in a separate craft, safer and closer to the surface, and hadn't witnessed the accident and knew nothing about it.

Maria stumbled and covered her face with her hands, moaning. James spoke quietly in her ear: 'Come on, little sister, don't worry. We're going to find a way out.'

'No,' she murmured, 'no we won't...'

'We will. Come on, we will. I'll get us out of here.'

'It's Martin, it's-'

'I know, I know.'

'Theo-'

He took her elbow again and ploughed on, heading towards the tech room where Karlson was probably still sitting. Maria imagined the Director sitting straight in his chair, watching everything on the monitors, making silent observations and beaming them back to Earth with that headset of his.

They burst into the tech room. There was no water falling there; the room seemed protected, at least for now. The chair was turned, facing the computer consoles. Maria was struck by the memory of her speaking to Theo in this room two nights ago, when he had complained about the operations manuals. Today, the chair was empty. Karlson wasn't in the room.

'Director,' James said into his radio, with remarkable patience. There was no reply.

'Director,' he said again.

The line remained silent.

James began checking the box that held the power supply for his energy shield. Maria saw him checking the connections.

'We can't leave the facility,' she said. Her voice sounded weak in her ears. 'There's nowhere to go.'

'We'll have to try.' He seemed desperate, his shaky fingers checking each tiny switch and dial on the box. 'If we're not quick then the water will get in, and this place will fill up like a well. We'll drown.'

'James, it's no use.'

'The nanites; we'll use them to form a bridge, and they can deconstruct the dome.'

'We don't have any more nanites. We brought all

that we needed, and then we used them. They're all gone.'

'I'm prepping the lander,' he said resolutely.

The small craft was connected to the southern wall of the facility via an umbilicus. The tunnel was narrow, and within its thin cylinder both of them were very cold. Just an inch to either side was pure vacuum, and the bright feelers of the vapour cloud that was continuing to fill the dome. With their shields active, they walked through the cylinder. Where it would normally have been supported by the stone outside, the umbilicus now sagged alarmingly in the viscous fluid, as though they were using a rubber dinghy as a bridge. Somewhere below them was Theo's body, his lungs packed full. Maria tried not to think about it.

The lander had been cramped when it seated four. It had felt like a road trip on the journey from Earth, with Maria piloting and Karlson beside her, Theo and James in the back seats playing travel games. Now it felt like a flimsy, empty box. There were dark stains on the roof and sides, but no moisture had yet leaked in. The displays said that it was fully sealed; they were also giving a proximity warning, showing a CG image of the obstruction. It showed not as a dome, but a sphere, all around them. It cut through the liquefied lunar landscape below, and there were no gaps or holes.

'Karlson,' James was saying into his mic. 'We're leaving. I'm going to see just how solid this wall is. You have five minutes of prep time to get here.'

They hadn't expected a reply, but there was a crackle of static and Karlson's voice sounded in their ears: 'I'll be right there. Two minutes.'

The line was cut from Karlson's end.

The roof of the lander was almost fully grey, and continued to darken.

'He'd better get here quick,' James said needlessly.

Maria increased the O₂ supply on her power box; she was feeling faint. 'How do you expect to get through the wall?'

'I'm going to try to break through,' James replied. 'I'll push forward until something breaks – the wall,

or us.'

She nodded. There was no choice about the matter. Either they forced their way out, or they stayed and drowned in the inexplicable black rain. The dome would not open for them, and the rain would not stop – in fact, it was getting worse. Elongated droplets blew at angles in wind that could not be there. All they could see through the front screen of the small craft was a flurry of rain.

'I'm in the tunnel,' Karlson said, and entered the lander craft a few seconds later. He sealed it closed behind him, and disengaged the umbilicus locks. 'Are we ready to ditch this dive, or what?'

'Fearing for your life, Mr Director?'

'New orders from home,' he said. 'Fly.'

'The rain is getting in!' Maria said suddenly, straining to lean away from a black trickle of fluid that had leaked from a wall-mounted control interface.

'Almost ready,' James called. He had to move his hands quickly; droplets were falling in front of him and he didn't want to touch them.

A bright light flared in front of them. The vapour cloud looked like it was undergoing a second ignition, but there was no flame or further bursts of colour. The cloud just seemed to thicken, like blood thickens as it collects around a wound, and some vapour trails extended as others were drawn inwards. The vapour pulsed twice, and a twist of deep red-orange appeared in the centre, a colour so vivid and rich that it was sickening. It formed a circular vortex in the centre that spun around itself, giving the illusion of physical depth. The red spot curled around the outer edge of the cloud, a seeking eye. Behind it was a thick twist of almost solid light.

'Ready!' James almost shouted. The static had returned to their earpieces, interfering with the radios. 'Maria...'

She repositioned herself in her seat, took control of the yoke, and felt her flight training return to her. Even though she was weak in her limbs, she drew from a reserve of private strength that she hadn't known she'd been saving. The craft wrenched itself out of the white mire where it had been

partially submerged. More black droplets of rain hissed through the hull and dissipated against her energy shield as it lifted upwards on powerful jets.

The readouts were still giving off proximity warnings. James called out, 'The cloud's reading as a solid object!'

'More objects within the cloud,' Maria said. 'It could be more of the things that fell from above the dish.'

'I don't care what the readings are,' Karlson snapped. 'Get flying!'

'The cloud's expanding,' James warned. 'Maria, don't-'

She didn't hear his warning. There was a shriek of white noise in her ear, and then a confused babble that sounded like a poorly-tuned commercial radio. There were words hidden beneath the noise; she felt Karlson slump forwards into the back of her seat, crying out with his hands against his head, fingernails nipping around the thin metal ring of his headset.

'What's it doing to him?' she cried out.

'Nothing! He's transmitting – I think I can hear it!'

'Karlson... What are you- Karlson!'

The red glare outside continued to throb, releasing waves of subspace pressure that were theoretically intangible, but resonated with something at the base of Maria's spine, uncomfortably insistent. Again she was subjected to thoughts and images, words and snatches of distant song. Perhaps these were crossed wires, some rare instance of the subspace communication interfering with others. Maybe it was the phenomenon that she suspected, that she knew was the cause of all this, speaking to her in an arcane language her body and brain were not equipped to decipher: the cloud itself.

The face of Martin Callas stitched itself into the forefront of her mind, a living screaming face at the front of, or perhaps behind of, everything that she saw. Her wide eyes and the visualisation of thoughts in her mind were interlaced, confused by sensations she didn't understand, and then she saw that poor Martin was in the vapour, constructed by it but not

part of it, and that same phantom was connected to his father Theo, who in turn had been sewn into the ethereal non-substance of the red-orange cloud, a ghost.

Then there was an arrow, blindingly bright like a sliver of steel. It lanced through all of it, through every confusing and distracting image and sound, through Maria's mind and the vapour both. It sliced through the material of the dome, the outlandish growth of basalt from the lunar maria, the dark and disturbed oceans on the opposite side of the moon. Those oceans had been drawn inwards and expelled to form the shell, and now the shell was cracking. She saw Martin and Theo together again, woven into the light that was now parting to let them pass, splitting like a wound. She saw herself with them, her face like she'd never seen it before in any mirror: it was restful, perfectly serene, for the first time ever.

Karlson grunted in the back of the lander. Maria was too dazed to allow herself the added distraction of turning around to look. She concentrated on moving the craft forward, surging through the vapour and the red spot in its centre. The lander burst through it, the light blinding Maria. Everybody grunted as the little craft caught against the new crack in the basalt wall, shaken like seeds in a half-empty tin can. Then they were free of the dome completely, soaring through the outer edge of the vapour cloud, and then-

Darkness. Stars blinked way back in the night-time, like embedded diamonds. The light of the vapour was behind them now, as was the reflected sunlight that glanced off the lunar surface. All Moira could see was the darkness of space, and it was magnificent.

Everything was quieter now. The eerie sounds had vacated their heads. Moira hadn't realised until then just how much background noise that bright phenomenon had been making.

'The shuttle's on the nearside,' James was saying.

'I know.'

'Thank God. Thank God. Once we're aboard we can open comms with home...'

'I know.'

Karlson grunted. He was rubbing his face like a sleeper that had just awoken. He released a long groan and said, 'Jesus Christ, I hope there's some aspirin on that shuttle.'

'There is,' Maria said. She was planning on taking some herself. 'And the second we've docked you can begin explaining what happened just now.'

Behind them, the light was receding. The vapour cloud was still there, but it was mostly obscured by the dome. The drifting tendrils waved out of the crack like seaweed under water. Maria was taking them further around the moon, towards the smoother, more familiar nearside. The red-orange glow flared like a sunset just as it hit the horizon, and then it was gone. The lander swept smoothly towards the area of space where their ride home awaited.

'When I get back to corporate HQ, I'll be able to give you some answers,' Karlson said groggily. 'I know as much about all of that as you do.'

'That was you who split the dome,' James said. Maria thought his tone sounded accusatory, but she was just glad that they were away from it, whatever it was.

'Yes,' Karlson replied tiredly. He was very pale. 'Maybe... I don't have a lot to say right now. It might have had something to do with my headset. I think all of the impossible things that happened, I think we made them happen.'

'We did? You're full of shit, Karlson.'

'I'm serious. You think I couldn't hear you, when you were talking amongst yourselves? Your faces, when you saw that the wall was becoming a dome? Theo had the most insight. Perhaps something to do with his deceased son? Those disasters were special orders, weren't they? Tailored just for you people, and your dirty little secrets.'

'You'd better shut your mouth,' Maria warned lowly. She didn't take her eyes off the viewscreen. 'You don't have the right to talk about that. You never will. And if you hadn't guessed, you can forget about us ever going back there to finish the job. And we'll be keeping your advance.'

The Director only laughed. 'You do that, with my blessing. Just be prepared for an appointment at our headquarters in a few days. We'll be wanting some answers of our own.'

The white moon seemed to rotate beneath them. The landscape of crowded craters began to smooth out, levelling off just as Earth came into view. It was blue and cloud-washed, its atmosphere seeming to glow. It rose into the sky; they were passing over the nearside of the moon now, where there were no more basalt maria. The darkness of the oceans were gone, the shadows lifted from them like a spell. Everything felt much lighter.

Seeing the Light

I've always had a fascination for light bulbs. Even as a child I would lie upon my bed, staring at the light above my head. I lost myself in the depths of it; as a moth to a candle flame, it pulled me in. Many hours passed drifting through the golden light, until looking away my eyes swam with white specks. I was chastised as a child... Don't stare at the light! You'll hurt your eyes! They never understood; not one of them.

My arm aches and I move the best I can. They've fastened my hands to the metal bed. It was for my own protection they said, as they pulled the straps tight. They call me mad yet never once have I inflicted pain. It is ironic that I have torture by the hands of people classed as curing the insane. Without complaint I have accepted it all. I am not dangerous. As long as the light is there I can endure. I move sideways slightly. The mattress is not comfortable; it has been flattened and contorted during many years of use. It doesn't matter. I have the lampshade high above my head. Painted metal, stark white. The filament glows within, a twisted lifeline transmitting messages to my soul.

I have no craving of time. I do not know whether it is day or it is night. It is all the same. The lodestar high above my head is all I see – all I need, all I ever wanted to have. They are blind for they have no concept of it. Every cable has a distinctive whisper of its own. They cannot hear it; nobody can. The light takes me in – a language I can feel as clear as a lighthouse beacon, an insight into their thoughts and everything they have spoken – this belongs to me; to my own world.

The grey metal doors bang, reverberating tremors along the corridors as they close them. My door is never open. I am never allowed to venture down the corridors or sit in the dining hall at the end. There are battered tables and damaged chairs. I have not requested nor have I a desire to go – Soon it will be lights out! I follow the progress, switch after switch, door after door until the procession of voices becomes louder, until the nurses are standing outside my door. I have been here forever, and they know, once they have gone, I will turn my light back on. It is an easy trick I learnt a long time ago. I enjoy

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their confusion. They really don't want to believe. They really don't want to know.

I can hear them walking down the corridor - laughing. They are fools! They are afraid, I can tell. They are afraid of me. From within my enclosed space I follow the conversations in the staff rooms beyond; I give it back to them word for word, and watch their faces. I can feel. I can see - I observe.

Their eyes show the fear. Their eyes ask the questions. They can't see the things I see; not one of them. They ask where I go when I am vacant from this place. I know where I go, when I am away from here. I am there, I am here as a phosphorous spark; as one and at the same time. I am the brilliance – I am within.

The thick cable running from the light goes along the false ceiling and into the roof. It follows the direction of every corridor along the barren white washed route and into every cell along the way. I monitor. I see everything within these walls. I can follow their every move. You see - I know what they are going to do. At the moment the light bulb illuminates my room. I can feel the heat, touching tungsten, following the path beyond. They haven't taken that from me. Not as yet. But I know that very soon they will. I am not dangerous. They treat me as mad and yet they are the ones afflicted, the ones that cannot see the truth. I will show them the truth and everything they have asked of me.

The rough blindfold is too tight and the hood pulled over my head makes it difficult to breath. It is to shield my eyes from the constant contact with light; this is how they explained it to me. I'm not a fool! I know it is for their benefit not mine. The nurses can't work in darkness. They are cutting off my oxygen supply - suffocating me in the darkness of my room.

I heard the discussion in the doctor's office, late last night. I listened to every tiny detail of their plan. They are such idiots! I am prepared. And it wasn't hard to complete. The movement of cables,

touching cables, adding metal where metal was never meant to be – it won't be long now; the lights will come on soon. The whole building will be live.

It will only take someone to flick the switch in the main hall, and there will be the initial spark. In sequence, one after the other, the circuit switches will follow a planned route along the ceiling and through the corridor. There will be light in abundance. A display – a show... I will take them from their own minds, into a brilliant illustration of illumination. They cannot get out. I have planned it well; I have planned it right. I will not accept my execution for I can be an executioner as well. I have been asked many times what I see when I vanish from this place. They have goaded me over and over again to explain.

I was never dangerous; I resisted all provocation thrown my way. But they wanted to know and soon my demonstration will take place. And I have so very badly wanted to show them before today - the things I can see.