

PANTECHNICON

Science fiction, fantasy, horror



BUMPER FICTION-ONLY ISSUE

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Editorial - Pantehnicon #9 March 2009

Well, it's been a tough few months at Pantehnicon Towers, primarily with the utter deconstruction of the Pantehnicon website by unscrupulous hackers who evidently have little better to do with their time. Needless to say, we've set Cthulhu's hordes on them and expect to hear their shrieking pleas for mercy any minute now.

You folks have been kind enough to stick with us during our brief hiatus, but the delayed first issue of 2009 comes replete with fresh fiction from the world's best new, and established, talent. This is a special bumper, fiction-only issue, filled with as much nerve-jangling horror, mind-blowing fantasy, and spectacular science fiction as possible!

We do hope you enjoy – please join in and give us your best and worst on the Pantehnicon forum.

We're still here, and wishing you all the very best for 2009!

The Pantehnicon Editorial Team
March 2009

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Baby In The Snow

Written by Teresa Howard

With a spit in the dirt, they mutter “Evil manipulating witch” at the mention of the DaWakanda name. Never when they think we can hear, mind you, and they never refuse our gifts of healing. Most Outlanders claim that the Nelari meddle in the affairs of others like a spider weaves a web to catch flies. The truth is they often entangle us in their calamities. If, once ensnared in their folly, we use the wisdom of the Stones for the good of all, so be it. To those who claim the DaWakanda secretly controls the High Priest of Shamar, I say emphatically that it is not so. I admit only to a small mercy years ago that bore exceptional fruit.

I was very young, little more than a child myself, but Stone-chosen. My mother died young and the Stones skipped over my elder sisters and chose me, a girl of fourteen. I had only borne the Stone a year when unsettling dreams began. I dreamed of lying in the snow and ice. I woke up in a panic. There are no cold places in Nelari.

“Not to worry,” said my old nurse, Padra, “everyone gets nervous about their first mating contract.”

“That’s two years off,” I countered. “This is something *now*.”

“But you just signed the mating papers, Nelandra.” She reached out and stroked my hair. She wasn’t alone in thinking me too young to bear the Stone or in treating me like a child. I was far from taking charge of the council.

After a third night of the same dream, I woke with the Stone on my chest warm and its color harsh. I knew that the dream was telling me to go north. It commanded me to leave the homeland. I dressed in my best gown and put on my mother’s cloak, the one she had worn when she stood before the council.

As I entered the council hall, eyes turned and Councilmen nodded, then bowed formally. I could hear the flurries of mindspeak rippling the air.

“Greetings Councilmen.” I took my place at the front of the great hall.

“Greetings DaWakanda, Bearer of the Stone.”

The palms of my hands were damp and twists of pain pulled my stomach. “Make ready provisions for a journey; I travel.”

“Perhaps later, Nelandra DaWakanda, we have much work to do.”

Councilman Rhyde interrupted. “The DaWakanda is young; it is right that she should travel the homeland and meet the people.”

“The time is not right. Spring will be soon enough”

I stepped back, shocked by the fervor of the discussion my instruction had caused. The council would have learned to control me if I had not exerted my authority. “Silence! I travel out.”

No DaWakanda had ventured outside the homeland for 200 years or more. Their shocked disapproving faces spoke beyond any words of the folly I pursued. I summoned all the strength I could from the Stone I wore. I ordered horses and supplies for a party of ten.

I was shaking with frustration and anger before the meeting ended. Stones, how had Mother dealt with these people?

Councilman Rhyde approached. There was something kin to respect in his eyes. "Take this with you. Its power is said to extend beyond the homeland." He slipped an amulet of protection around my neck. Its small green stone felt small and weak next to the Stone I bore as DaWakanda.

That night the Stones tormented my dreams until I got up and paced my chamber. What if this was nothing more than a dream? What if I failed the first test the Stones set before me?

I was not able to escape without Councilwoman Teala and my sister Ledina in the traveling party. Stones I thought we would never get out of Rishal.

We traveled simply but it was impossible to keep our identity secret. I was the DaWakanda, high priestess of the Nelari. My people wanted to see me.

After four days the captain of our escort confronted me. "We can go no further. This is the Shamaru Homeland and we must have permission from one of the Noble Houses to enter."

The mountainous land was getting colder and I had wrapped a heavy cloak about me. "We must go on."

"We could send a message to Rallon, to request passage. That will take a week, perhaps two. We must turn back to the village for shelter and wait, or return home." He was a brave man, or foolish, for none but he dare speak to their DaWakanda in such a manner.

With trembling hands I pulled the Stone from beneath the cloak. "I stand DaWakanda. The Stones send us north. We go where they lead."

No one dared argue with that.

Snow blanketed the mountainside. It was cold and the way was steep. I called a halt for the day. I was almost ready to admit that we were lost. Several times I sought the Stone's direction and we followed whichever path they indicated. The longer we traveled the more desperate I became. No one, least of all a group of Nelari, could travel in this weather. We should start back. As we sat around the fire that night I allowed that if there was no sign from the Stones the next day we would return to the Homeland.

A pitiful mewling woke me with a start. As I sat up the sound did not fade. I slipped on my boots and left my tent. I nodded to the guard and indicated that I was going to relieve myself beyond the clutch of scrawny trees that grew so high up on the mountain. I kept walking following the sound, still unsure if I heard it with my ears or mind.

I tripped over the tiny body and let out a scream as I fell. Scrambling around I frantically brushed snow from the form to uncover the face and tiny arms. She was so small and so cold. I clutched the infant to me tears streaming down my face. *She lives* – the Stone soothed my fears and I felt a tiny spark of life, faint but there.

I stumbled into our camp carrying my precious bundle. Ledina has a great skill at healing so I handed her the half frozen form, careful not to crush the delicate wings.

“A Shamaru child?” she asked with more than a little concern.

“Yes, but chosen by the Stones for some purpose.” My words sounded sure. I was not. There seemed little hope for the tiny thing in Ledina’s care. The sad shake of her head echoed my fears.

What I did next only Ledina saw, and she kept my secret to her own death. I took the Stone from my neck and laid it on the child. The separation left me numb and dazed, but the Stone glowed true on her tiny breast. Life and warmth returned to our little winged one. She began to cry.

Ledina removed the Stone and placed it back around my neck, as I wrapped the baby in the folds of my cape.

“You can’t keep her,” Ledina said, reading my heart.

I touched the pale feathers and ran my fingers through the fine hair. Shamaru loved their children. This one’s parents would welcome her return.

Now that I had found my little bird we no longer avoided the open roads. We hadn’t gone far toward the nearest Shamaru Hold when we were met by a group of tall warriors. I admired their muscular frames and large battle wings. A little Shamaru blood might be good for the Nelari homeland. I put that kind of thinking away, blushing at such lascivious ideas. A mating contract with a Shamaru would be impossible. They wed for life and were reportedly never unfaithful. The thought of such sacrilege made me shiver.

“Shamaru think we are witches. They may kill us.” Ledina’s mindspeak was jittery. If I hadn’t been nervous before I was now.

I answered with as much confidence as I could. “They will be overjoyed to have the baby returned safe.”

As we entered the city I marveled at the beauty of the buildings. They were carved into the mountain itself. Intricate stone work facades opened into huge living caves. There was plenty of open area for flying but the ground path was difficult. The little baby slept nestled on my shoulder.

Lord Hathar, a tall silver winged-warrior, stepped forward. Blood sang and I knew at once he was the child’s father.

“I bring good news, Lord. We have brought back your lost child.” I offered my precious gift but he stepped back.

A tall hard faced Shamaru woman stepped beside him, his wife but not this child’s mother.

Padina’s mindspeak cautioned me, “Something is wrong. Watch what you say; she hates the child.”

I nodded my understanding. Could we leave the child in such danger? Could I take her back to Nellar now that they knew we had her? I was struggling with my emotions when another Shamaru, a warrior by the look of him, but supporting his weight with a cane, came hurrying up with tears in his eyes. This was the father I had expected.

“Willina, my baby.” He took the child and fell to his knees. “Thank you! My heart thanks you, Lady.”

I felt blood sing as a beautiful Shamaru woman came stumbling forward as if afraid to believe her eyes. Willina’s mother joined her husband, tears coursing down her cheeks.

“Get up woman, take your child and have greater care of her in the future.” Lady Hathar’s voice was harsh to rudeness.

The young mother bowed her head. I bit back an angry retort. How could Lady Hathar be so cruel? My sweet Stone advised me then. I took the stone of protection, a powerful amulet in itself, and placed it around Willina’s tiny neck. “This will protect the child from danger.”

The grateful parents bowed to their Lord and Lady and left overjoyed with their child.

As I straightened up, Lord Hathar saw the Stone of Power I had hidden. His surprise was quickly hidden as he bowed. “The DaWakanda honors us with her presence.”

“Why are Nelari in the Shamaru Homeland?” Lady Hathar had none of the diplomacy of her husband. Several Shamaru warriors mumbled agreement. She was trying to push Lord Hathar into some action.

Padina, bless her, stepped forward and saved the situation with a lie. She addressed Lord Hathar, but the words were meant for his wife. “The DaWakanda comes to honor the future Lord of Hathar with a Speaking.”

Lady Hathar gasped and placed her hands on her still flat stomach. To be honored with a Nelari’s Speaking was fortuitous. For the DaWakanda herself to speak the birth was of historic portent.

Trapped and with mild disgust I placed a hand on Lady Hathar and summoned the Power to touch the child she carried. It was uncommon but not impossible to Speak a child at such a young stage. Yes, there he was. Thank the ancestors she felt little of his mother’s spirit in him. “The son of Lord Hathar will be a mighty warrior with his father’s heart for the people. The first of three sons he will lead his brothers in honor and wealth. His name will be remembered by all Shamaru.”

The ecstatic Lady Hathar smiled, and it softened her face to almost beauty. What I had spoken was true, mostly. I regretfully declined a feast in our honor and we returned to Nellar, by a shorter route.

I would miss my little Wallina. Our lives would touch over the years, but briefly. Her life would not be easy but she grew to be more beautiful than her mother and three times richer and more powerful than Lady Hathar. Rich enough, some say, to buy her a young priest as a husband and put him on the throne. I say Adomi was meant to be High Priest and gossips should hold their tongues. Without him there

would be no Council of Unity and no peace; however fragile they stand in these trouble times.

Captain Bleak's Parrot

Written by Ian Whates

Bleak chafed at the bit, itching to get going. Despite the tang of musket smoke in the air and the sounds of battle all around, he held himself back as Davy led the first boarders across. He was looking to see how many marines responded to the attack, and felt a surge of triumphant glee, not to mention relief, as more blue-coated figures erupted from the cabin – far more than any ordinary merchantman ought to boast.

“Caw, told you so,” said a high-pitched voice right by his ear. The parrot tightened its grip on his shoulder as if to emphasise the point.

“Clever bird,” he said, distractedly, watching as Calico’s ship, a little slower than his own *Revenge*, made fast to the merchant’s other side.

All was chaos, but it was a chaos guaranteed to stir the blood and free the spirit. The roar of his men and the clipped, shouted commands of the marine officers were soon intermingled with the screams of the wounded and the dying, the sharp discharge of muskets, and the ever-present groan as timber strained against timber. Only at such times did Bleak feel truly alive.

He could sense the growing frustration in Peck and Gunny to his left. They were as impatient to join the action as he was.

“Right, lads, come on!” he yelled, lifting his cutlass high before seizing a rope and leaping across.

Parrot left his shoulder and took to the air as he moved – a blue and scarlet dart that soared low over the besieged vessel, screeching obscenities and defecating on a pair of marines.

Beside him, as ever, Peck and Gunny led the second wave of boarders, and now the first of Calico’s crew were finally putting in an appearance. The marines were effectively wedged between a rock and a hard place.

Bleak came down on the swaying deck, nearly losing his balance and barely raising his cutlass in time to block the thrust of a waiting marine’s blade. A blur of vibrant colour shot between them, talons extended to leave a pair of raking scratches on the man’s face. It bought Bleak the precious second he needed to regain his footing and cut his opponent down.

The battle was brief. Outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, the surviving marines soon threw down their weapons. A dejected knot of them stood huddled together on the main deck, shepherded by some of the meanest and largest from among the two pirate crews. Having been the first to engage, Bleak’s crew had borne the brunt of the fighting and so suffered the heaviest losses. Not that this was a huge concern. It meant that he would get the pick and the majority of those marines and sailors who chose to defect and join them.

Now came the moment of truth. If Bleak’s information was correct, the so-called treasure fleet with its heavy naval escort that lay just beyond the horizon was a decoy. The real prize was here. So while half a dozen of the swiftest black sails shadowed that fleet, showing just enough interest to convince the navy that they’d fallen for the

ploy, he and Calico had swooped on this lone merchantman which sat suspiciously low in the water. If his information were wrong, then the fragile alliance that he had spent so long building would crumble before it had properly begun.

A man swaggered towards him: Calico Black – Calico for the white linen shirts he invariably favoured and black for the disposition of his soul.

“Shall we?”

Bleak nodded and ushered the other ahead of him into the cabin. After a brief hesitation, Calico gave a laugh and went gaily through. Just as well; Bleak had no intention of allowing Calico to be at *his* back.

“Well Brad, that went smoothly enough,” said a voice from the dark.

“That’s Captain Bleak to you,” he said as he lit the lantern.

Bleak focused on Parrot, who perched on the back of his favourite chair, talons digging gouges in the ornate hand-carved scrolls that decorated it.

“Hey, chill out,” the bird advised, in a voice now completely devoid of the avian squawk it hid behind in public. “We’re alone here.”

Which was more than likely true. After a sip or two of bumboo and much toasting and crashing together of black-jacks, Bleak had left his crew to their celebrations.

Ribald songs, drunken dancing and the barrels of grog that were bound to be the inspiration for both would sustain the men long into the night, but this was a critical time and Bleak could afford nothing less than a clear head. The merchantman had been carrying more gold and jewels than he could possibly have hoped for, just as Parrot had promised.

“You never know who might be listening,” was all Bleak actually said.

“Actually, I do. Trust me, nobody’s listening.”

The Captain shook his head and poured himself a generous measure of brandy from an exquisite crystal decanter discovered in the cabin of a lord’s ship on his first raid and treasured ever since. In doing so, he deliberately kept his gaze away from the parrot. He still felt vaguely absurd holding a conversation with a bird, but Parrot had proven himself to be a great deal more than he seemed, providing the intelligence that had enabled Bleak to forge alliances and gather together a force of pirate ships such as the world had never seen before.

Even so, a lot had hinged on this latest venture. Allowing an obvious treasure fleet to pass unchallenged while attacking a small, lone merchantman of no apparent appeal was guaranteed to either make or break fragile alliances.

Finally, he returned his attention to Parrot. “Your information was accurate, as ever.”

“You mean you doubted me?”

Bleak allowed himself a tight smile. “Of course not, but the further we take this the higher the stakes become, and the more vital it is that everything you tell me can be relied on.”

“We’re well aware of that.”

And that was the catch, of course – the ‘we’ that this Parrot claimed to represent. A ‘we’ that might just be capable of delivering on promises made, and so enable him to realise his wildest dreams.

“Good.” Bleak found that he was smiling.

In the dead of the night, unseen by any onboard, Parrot slipped off the ship. At first he flew casually, skimming just above the waves, until the *Revenge* was lost to sight. Only then did he start to accelerate, rapidly building up momentum until he punched through the sound barrier, parting the waters beneath as he roared past and laughing at startled seabirds that took to the wing in panic.

“Stop that,” said a voice in his head.

He had been expecting something of the sort. “Come on, Moni, lighten up.” In order to interact effectively with the pirates, Parrot had been allowed a certain leeway, resulting in far more ‘personality’ than the Monitor AI, orbiting high above, approved of. “I’m stuck in the shape of a friggin’ Parrot for cryin’ out loud. This is about as much fun as I can get!” Whether he referred to flying at speed or baiting the Monitor was left deliberately ambiguous.

“You are not there to have ‘fun’ but to do a job. If you’re seen, the whole mission could be jeopardised.”

The Monitor would know that he was constantly scanning ahead with radar, infrared and everything else in his formidable sensor array. It would also know even better than he did that there was nobody in the immediate vicinity.

“Oh come on, the only things that are gonna see me are these dumb seabirds I keep waking up and scaring out of the water.”

“Nonetheless, without your presence I’m blind to what might be happening onboard the *Revenge*.” An exaggeration, but Parrot was certainly the Monitor’s primary source of information. “Return immediately.”

“Will do,” Parrot acknowledged, before cutting the communication and accelerating. The addendum of ‘soon’ was something he kept very much to himself.

Forty-six ships sailed behind the *Revenge*, carrying the best part of 3,000 men – the largest force of pirates ever assembled.

Such a fleet was unlikely to go unnoticed, but Bleak was confident that his move was so bold and so unexpected that no one would have the opportunity to make an effective move against them. The occasional sail, spotted on the horizon, was ignored.

This was it; the blow that could tear apart an empire. From the resultant chaos, Bleak would emerge as ruler, supported by his Captains and the mysterious ‘we’ that stood behind Parrot: beings from the stars who desired an alliance with this world,

this region, but who felt its current rulers unsuited to such an association. So Parrot had come to him with promises and plans.

Bleak was no fool. He realised that for this ‘Community’ – as these star people apparently styled themselves – to go to such lengths, there had to be something here that they wanted very badly. Once he was in power, he would soon discover precisely what. He had no intention of being a junior partner in the envisaged arrangement.

Parrot had provided a constant stream of information and suggestions that led to ever-greater triumphs, a burgeoning reputation and the forging of allegiances. All had been building towards this moment: his most spectacular move yet. Bleak was on his way to raid a landlocked city, its nearest coast a good day’s march away. He was going after Paloma, the renowned Treasure City, and the financial heart of an empire.

“In addition to cementing alliances by binding the other Captains and their crews even tighter to you, taking that merchant ship has dealt the Empire a crushing blow,” Parrot explained. “Unable to pay soldiers in the provinces because you keep intercepting the ships, their control of the furthest reaches of their realm is faltering. They’re growing desperate, and now is the time to strike.”

When Bleak presented the scheme to the Captains, there was little dissent. He refrained from actually asking them to commit to the venture; he didn’t need to. He simply explained that this was what he was going to do, and that anyone who wished to take part need only join him. Anyone who chose to stay behind and so miss out on the greatest raid in history was welcome to do so. The answering roar of enthusiasm shook the rafters of the meeting hall.

The fleet set sail the following morning.

When they made landfall, deployment was swift and efficient, having been discussed and agreed in advance. The ships anchored in a shallow bay, shedding small boats like a pack of dogs shaking off fleas as the men were ferried ashore. Two, each with skeleton crew, then weighed anchor and patrolled the mouth of the bay.

A hundred and twenty men were left to guard the ships and the landing point. Bleak split the remainder of his forces in two.

Calico took 1,000 men or more and started northwards, directly towards Paloma, whilst Bleak led the balance, a little over 1,500, to the northwest.

After two hour’s march through dense vegetation, they arrived at a river. Here they were forced to wait, much to Bleak’s anger and frustration. The column of men had become strung out during the march, and it took an age for them all to gather again. Only then did Bleak allow them to continue, taking to the water in the fleet of canoes they had brought with them.

Never one to shirk his duty, Bleak led by example, taking his turn at one of the paddles with the rest of them. He paddled like a demon, anxious to make up the time lost on the riverbank. He had no intention of allowing Calico Black and his thousand to arrive at the city before him. Despite Parrot’s assurance that this would not happen, he fretted over the possibility more than he worried about the actual taking of the city.

Parrot spent most of the time on the wing – as he had done since they first made landfall – flying off over the forest and disappearing for long periods but always returning. Bleak knew that he would be deprived of the bird’s council during the time

spent in the canoes. Parrot would not risk giving himself away by speaking to him when others were at such close quarters. As far as anyone else was aware, Parrot was no more than an exotic pet who could imitate a few words of human speech. He dreaded to think how his companions might react should they realise they were here largely due to the advice and planning of a bird. Probably by tossing him over the side of the canoe.

Their passage did not go entirely unnoticed. The river was bordered on both sides by dense jungle. From time to time haunting cries could be heard, ranging out across the water and made all the more eerie because the creature making them could never be seen. Long-legged cranes and herons took flight as they passed, some feathered in pure white and others dappled grey and brown, as if to camouflage them against the light and shadow at the river's margins. Brightly coloured birds, rivalling Parrot in the magnificence of their plumage, could occasionally be spotted in the forest's canopy, and a great deer scampered out of the river at one point, startled by their passage. Water cascaded from its coat as it disappeared into the undergrowth, giving the impression that the river was reluctant to let it go.

For a while Bleak was aware of a vast crocodilian form that shadowed his canoe, keeping pace with apparent ease. He never caught proper sight of the beast, only fleeting glimpses in the depths, but it looked to be at least as long as the canoe itself. He found himself peering over the side, searching for it, long after the creature had evidently lost interest and gone elsewhere.

After some two hours of paddling they passed a village, whose inhabitants all came out to line the riverbank and stare at this strange cavalcade that swept past their homes.

Perhaps an hour after that, Parrot signalled it was time to land. The river's course carried them nearly two thirds of the way towards their target, before snaking away to the west. Already Bleak had been noticing signs of cultivation and could see that the forest was thinning out. He knew that they were now just a few hours' march from Paloma and from glory.

He stood to one side as the armada of canoes continued to come to ground, each one being pulled ashore when empty to allow those behind to discharge their human cargo. It was time to catch up on Parrot's news. The bird alighted on his shoulder, sidled along until its beak was close to his ear, then proceeded with the report.

"All goes to plan. Calico Black and his men are a few hours behind us. They have looted a small community, burning it to the ground as anticipated. Word of this has reached Paloma and even now the city's garrison is setting out in force to confront them. This leaves the city only lightly guarded, and I can lead you in with little difficulty."

"Excellent," Bleak replied quietly, anxious that none should overhear and think him mad.

The slight delay whilst the force assembled did not bother him on this occasion, not now he knew they were so far ahead of Calico. Besides, it would give the soldiers from Paloma a chance to put distance between themselves and the city.

Finally they were ready to move out.

"The men are ready Cap'n," Peck, his Lieutenant and self-appointed bodyguard informed him. "They be itchin' for a fight."

Two canoes had failed to arrive. One was known to have capsized, its crew seen making for the shore. No one admitted any knowledge of what had happened to the second. Bleak remembered that crocodilian shadow and wondered. Not that it mattered. He had more than enough men for the job.

Parrot took to the air again, scouting ahead. The trees were definitely growing sparser and Bleak knew that the city would soon be in sight. He strained to see through the forest's thinning screen, anxious to set eyes on his prize.

Suddenly Parrot came hurtling back towards him, squawking two notes as he landed, which to Bleak's ears sounded distinctly like "Patrol!"

Even as he grasped the meaning, a volley of shots ripped from the trees ahead, the smoke from their discharge puffing out like the short-lived breath of some hidden dragon. Beside him, Peck staggered and fell, as did some half dozen others.

Bleak felt a flicker of annoyance that Parrot had not given them more warning, then wondered if perhaps he was coming to rely on the bird a little too much. He reached for his sword, the air around him already ringing with the sound of steel on steel as hundreds of cutlasses were drawn.

"At 'em me hearties!" he yelled, as the pirates poured forward, smashing into the line of trees without any more shots opposing them. It proved to be no more than a screen of trees, beyond which was an open meadow. A dozen green-jacketed figures could be seen high-tailing it across the grass as fast as they could run. Several muskets barked beside him and the rearmost trooper fell before the others vanished into the trees on the meadow's far side.

The pirates started to surge after them.

"No, wait!" Bleak commanded. His attention had been caught by what stood suddenly revealed beyond those trees. Paloma, in all its magnificence: tall, imposing walls and jutting towers; the sun reflecting from one turret as if it were forged from gold. It looked magnificent, and far closer than he had imagined.

"Gunny, take fifty men and flush those vermin out. The rest of you, with me – to glory and to victory!"

His cry was answered by a thousand voices.

Bleak led his men forward, with adrenalin and confidence surging through his veins. From somewhere in the column behind him, a song started up: a sea-shanty sung at an unaccustomed tempo, matching the rhythm of the march. Others took up the words as they recognised the tune and soon it sounded as if the whole lot of them were singing along. The very ground seemed to thrum in time to the beat of feet and voices.

Not just that, he realised as the vibration grew – there was something else. Others must have sensed it too. The voices faltered and the marching feet slowed and stopped, yet still came that rumbling vibration through the air and in the ground, like the drumming of a thousand hooves.

Parrot dropped from the air like a stone, braking to land on his shoulder.

"Stampede," he squawked, no longer so shy about being overheard.

"What?"

"Bulls, hundreds of them."

Bleak ignored the startled looks from those closest to him. He squinted ahead and could now see a rolling wall of dust fronted by black forms coming their way. Could musket fire turn such a tidal wave of horn and muscle? Not something he'd care to stake his life on.

"Follow me." Parrot took to the air again.

"This way, lads." Bleak started running, following the bird's disappearing form. Behind him, his army of would-be conquerors did likewise. Parrot turned and came back, to swoop past his ear.

"Faster!"

Then the bird was ahead of them again – a streak of colour flying low over the grass. He led them into a steep-walled valley, trees bordering the slopes to either side. The ground was steadily climbing and Bleak felt himself start to tire, more accustomed to treading the boards of a ship's deck than to running across the land. He wondered what Parrot had in mind, but then saw that there were more trees ahead and guessed this must be where the bird was leading them. Presumably he had seen from the air that it was a sufficiently large stand of trees to provide them all with cover until the stampede had passed.

Was that movement among the trees ahead? He was just pondering the implications of that when the first shots rang out, quickly developing into a barrage from the trees all around. On every side, his men began to fall.

Parrot shot into the air, banked and hovered, reviewing the carnage below with critical eye. The valley was not quite large enough to accommodate all the pirates, especially since they had become so strung out by the sprint to safety, but the vast majority of them had entered the killing field before the trap was sprung. Of those, nearly forty percent had fallen in the first volley, and more were dropping all the time.

The bulls were dealing with the hindmost of the stragglers, trampling and goring as they ran, and the mounted men driving them would soon be on hand to seal the trap.

Unfortunately, Bleak was still standing. With a near-human sigh, the AI sub-mind currently inhabiting the avian drone decided it needed to intervene. Parrot dropped back down for a more hands-on experience. Or perhaps that should be more talons-on. The razor-sharp tips of his feet raked across one pirate's face. The venom he injected in the process would kill the man in seconds. Then he was facing Bleak.

"Parrot!" the Captain yelled, his face contorted in hatred and rage.

"Sorry, Brad." With that he fired the only other weapon this small drone was equipped with – a disruptor built into the bird's head and directed through its eyes. The beam struck Bleak in the face, literally blowing it apart, wrenching particle from neighbouring particle.

Parrot was instantly aloft once more, watching with satisfaction as the cavalry arrived and herded the remaining pirates into the valley and to their inevitable death or capture. Then he was away, shooting over the forest to where Calico Black and his men were already being decimated in the jaws of a similar trap.

As he flew, Monitor berated him. “Did you have to use the disruptor? You know its use is only sanctioned in the direst of circumstances.”

He ignored the rebuke and sped on, pausing briefly to ensure that Calico and the other significant Captains with him were amongst the fallen or the captured, before continuing to the coast.

Here he found a dozen Imperial men-o-wars blockading the bay and systematically sinking the anchored pirate fleet with cannon. One of the two ships left to guard the bay had already been sunk, but he saw that the other, the *Ranger* – one of the lightest and fastest in the fleet – was making a run for it. Two galleons were in pursuit, but by hugging the coast, *Ranger* had obviously slipped the net and might just make it. Parrot admired the crew’s spirit and decided to let it go.

The small garrison left on shore had already been overcome and the survivors rounded up, which covered just about everything as far as he could see.

“All done here, Monitor.”

“Indeed. Proceed to the capital.”

It took him scant minutes to get there, travelling at speeds that the Monitor would never previously have permitted without strong complaint.

There were nine men waiting for him; men who between them governed an empire and three allied states.

Parrot flew into the room, where he circled once to make sure he had their attention before landing on the table at its centre. He then proceeded to strut down the middle of the table, gesticulating with his wings as he spoke.

“You set us a task to prove our intent and our worth,” he began. “You challenged us to rid the seas of the pirates that have been plaguing your ships and sapping your wealth. Despite your naval might, ferreting them out from amongst the myriad of islands that decorate the ocean has proved beyond you.

“Gentlemen, I am pleased to announce that this very hour, the following Pirate Captains and their crews have been either killed or captured, with their ships sunk: Captains Brad C. Bleak, Calico Black, Hil Gordon, Jan Ohnsell, One Eyed Jack...” and so he continued, reciting a full list of the fallen.

As he spoke, the faces around him slowly relaxed and some of them even smiled and nodded. The Emperor himself, at the head of the table, was positively beaming by the end.

But Parrot had not yet finished. “The islands were said to harbour the crews of a hundred pirate ships. I can tell you that the actual figure was either a little more than that or a little less, depending on whether you choose to include those elements of your own navies that prey on each other from time to time under cover of the Jolly Roger.”

There were a few uncomfortable glances around the room at this, but Parrot ignored them and continued. “Forgetting those elements, when we started this operation there were in fact a total of eighty three vessels pirating on a full time basis. In recent weeks you’ve managed to reduce that figure down to seventy three, with my help.” It never hurt to remind them of that detail. “In this single action, we have taken out a

further forty six, leaving just twenty seven pirate ships afloat, and one of those, the *Ranger*, is severely undermanned, having lost most of its crew in the recent action.

“There is only one sizeable force among the remainder – the four ships commanded by Captain Robbett Holesmarrow – and I can ensure that you take his trivial fleet within the week.” Parrot held his wings out in much the same way a human might his hands. “Have we, the Community, proved our worth and the sincerity of our intentions?”

Looks were exchanged between various individuals, followed by a general nodding of heads. Finally, the Emperor himself spoke. “You have indeed. It seems that we can do business. Let us hope that the relationship proves a profitable one for all concerned.”

“Excellent!” said a voice in Parrot’s head. “A job well done, and without the Community needing to use force or commit significant resources.”

Being the resource in question, Parrot felt a little miffed about being described as insignificant, but let it pass without comment.

Both he and Monitor knew what was to come – they had seen it often enough before. Worlds such as this would soon become dependent on the goods that the Community could provide. Conquest by trade: not as dramatic as the more violent alternative, but at least as effective and a great deal cheaper.

Parrot also noted the praise that Monitor had just lavished upon him. He had no idea how much slack he might be able to cut himself as a result, but during whatever time remained to him on this world, he had every intention of finding out.

Tulpa

Written by David Brookes

The man opened his eyes from a deep sleep. Rubbing his face, he surveyed his surroundings without much enthusiasm: a quiet room, furnished like the private office of a department store manager or a head teacher. He was sitting in a chair that had been pulled away from the oaken desk in front of him. His legs were stretched out with his ankles crossed, his heels resting in the thick shag pile that covered the floor of the room. He uncrossed them and flexed all his limbs. He was aching all over.

A sudden noise made him jump. There was a phone on the desk, curved and black like the shell of a beetle. It trilled persistently until he picked up the receiver.

‘Hello?’

‘Just confirming that you were awake. Be down in a minute.’

‘...Okay,’ the man said.

He patted down the pockets of his jacket. There was something that felt like a wallet and something that felt like a box of cigarettes. He placed the objects on the table: he’d been right about the wallet. The smaller object was actually a memory stub for a computer, although it was surprisingly large. A printed tag on it said: Karlson Enterprises – 2TB. Two terabytes of information. He could only think of a few uses for so much computer memory. At least the stylish logo recalled his identity for him. He was Michael Hudd-Karlson, a Director of Karlson Enterprises. He remembered everything at once, all of it returning in a cool, comforting wave.

There were 200 or so individuals who had adopted the name Karlson, working in the highest echelons of the vast corporation. Each of them had been trusted with unique specialised equipment and a tiny portion of the original Karlson’s brain tissue. That portion of tissue had been grafted into Michael’s own brain five years previously, when he had been initiated into the Directorship.

He checked his head for his unique equipment. His headset was still there, a discreet pattern of thin copper that fit his skull beneath his dark hair. In fact everything seemed to be in order but for his shoes, which for some reason were muddy.

Before he had a chance to check his wallet – he’d always had the sneaky suspicion that medical staff in hospitals pilfered a patient’s cash when he was admitted unconscious – the door to the office opened and two strangers stepped inside.

One was a man about forty, five years older than Michael was himself. He had a greying moustache and fashionably-untidy hair. The other was a woman who looked much younger, dressed in a close-fitting suit that made Karlson think guiltily of his wife.

‘Hi,’ the man said, approaching and pulling two chairs closer to the side of the desk opposite Karlson. ‘We would have been here when you finally woke up, but it’s been a few hours and we don’t have the staff to post a guard...’

‘Where are we?’ asked Karlson.

‘The Mission Control Centre, Global Space Program, beneath the Rocky Mountain range in Colorado. You’re from the States, aren’t you?’

‘Born in Maryland,’ he confirmed.

‘Right. Well, you’re here because your shuttle crash-landed nearby and we were tasked with checking for survivors. You are Michael Hudd-Karlson, is that correct?’

Michael looked into the expressionless faces of the man and the woman.

‘That’s right,’ he said.

‘We took some blood while you were unconscious. We’re sending the sample to Karlson Headquarters to confirm your identity. You’ll need to sign a waiver to say that you agree with that testing, retrospectively.’

‘I might sign it,’ Michael replied guardedly. ‘What about other survivors? Who else made it?’

The man took a sheet of paper out of his inside jacket pocket and unfolded it. Michael caught his nametag: it said “Britling”. He’d not heard the name before.

‘You came all the way from the moon,’ the man read, ‘right? You and a team were tasked with constructing that Farside lab there. That’s some kind of big parabolic dish, right?’

‘Something like that.’

‘You weren’t scheduled to come back for a few weeks yet. What happened?’

‘We ran into some problems,’ said Karlson.

He explained further, but he didn’t go into too much detail. He and three others were on the surface of the moon to build a radar and its accompanying laboratory for astrological and meteorological purposes, but that hadn’t gone entirely to plan. A lot of strange things had happened that Michael couldn’t rightly explain. One man, Theo Callas, had been killed. Michael and the two other survivors, Maria and James Aylesworth, had taken off in a small craft, docked with the shuttle in orbit, and blasted homewards just as soon as they were able. And, if what this man Britling was saying could be believed, that shuttle had crashed after re-entry.

After giving a few answers, Michael began to ask some questions of his own.

‘The others. Did they survive the crash?’

The female agent’s tag said “Smitheson”. She spoke for the first time, in a low, even voice. ‘We found a body, which has been positively identified as James Aylesworth.’

‘What about Maria?’

‘Aside from yourself, Mr Karlson, there was nobody else aboard the shuttle.’

‘She was there. She was the pilot, for Christ’s sake. You’re saying she walked away from the crash?’

‘No,’ Smitheson said. She looked distracted. ‘The shuttle was wrecked, but mostly sealed. Not airtight, but there was no way anyone could have crawled out of there. Mara Aylesworth was nowhere on the craft and definitely didn’t walk away from it. Her brother was burnt to a crisp; the re-entry was too shallow.’

‘So she disappeared,’ said Michael.

‘You don’t sound like you find that unlikely,’ said Britling.

‘No.’

‘You were encased in stone when we found you. Apparently tests came back saying that it was basalt. You hatched out of the thing like an egg. Care to explain that?’

Michael looked at his shoes. The carpet under his chair was stained dirty grey. At least that explained the mud.

‘Well?’ Britling pushed. ‘That some kind of new nanite defence Karlson Enterprises hasn’t released to the public yet?’

‘I can’t discuss that,’ Michael lied. The truth was, he couldn’t fully explain it either. And, until he felt comfortable, he wouldn’t be discussing his theories with anybody.

There was a knock on the door. Smitheson moved quietly to speak with the person on the other side, but she was pushed back. A young woman spoke urgently to Britling.

‘I’m sorry, Administrator, but he wouldn’t wait...’

Another visitor beckoned the young lady aside and entered the room. He was a man, smartly dressed, with black and grey hair combed back from his smooth face. He said, ‘Administrator Britling,’ and then turned directly to face Michael.

‘Mr Hudd-Karlson,’ he said.

Michael recognised him immediately. He was another Karlson Director; he could sense it like a kind of telepathy.

The Director handed Britling a slip of paper sealed with the Karlson *KE* logo. ‘Take this. I’m taking my man out of here.’

Then he turned back to Michael and smiled.

‘Let’s go,’ he said.

*

Karlson Enterprises had a branch just on the other side of the Colorado–Wyoming border, but the other Director seemed reluctant to head there. He gave the impression that he wanted Michael to stay nearby, to the Mission Control Centre and the shuttle crash-site, and as such had the expensive car drop them off at a five-star hotel just a few minutes away.

The lobby gleamed with reflective floor-tile and flickering chandeliers. Michael could see his reflection in the check-in desk – the other Director did the talking – and saw that he looked positively haggard. He wasn’t surprised; it felt as though only a few hours had passed since Maria had announced the re-entry.

The two Directors took the elevator to the fourteenth floor, tapping their feet in time to the music that tinkled in the concealed speaker, and remained silent as they made their way to what the hotel was calling the Privileged Suite.

The moment the door was closed and locked, Michael spoke:

‘You’re Richard Karlson. The second.’

The other Director nodded. He’d already removed his jacket, and was in the process of relaxing the tiny bolts on the side of his copper headset. They weren’t designed to be removed, but could be loosened to make the influx of subspace messages that passed between every Director a little quieter.

He smiled widely as he rolled up the cuffs of his white shirt. ‘That’s right. Welcome home, brother.’

The two men embraced. It was Michael who broke away first, not wanting to push things. This was Richard Karlson II, the “true” Karlson. He was the CEO of Karlson Enterprises, the man who had founded the corporation and made it what it was today: a vast conglomerate enterprise. It had a controlling interest in most prominent companies, including ones that made weaponry and technologies, ones that promoted scientific endeavour (morally-restrained or otherwise), ones that produced everything from artificial flowers to automobiles.

I have a piece of this man’s brain in my head, Michael thought. His cloned brain. I have received his thoughts, in the form of orders, every day for the last five years.

He’d only met the CEO once, and Michael had been five years younger then. Every Director, all 220-odd of them, had met him once on the day of their acceptance into Directorship. Richard met every one of them personally as a matter of principle; they were, after all, accepting a part of him into themselves. They would all undergo the grey matter transplant and various genetic and chemical therapies, to encourage the “bonding” process that allowed thoughts to be sent and received between individuals of the same ilk. The CEO had developed that technology himself, with his own home PC, as part of a new tech that would be so successful it would fund the initial corporate expansion of Karlson Enterprises.

‘Good to see you again,’ Richard said generously.

Michael nodded. ‘Thank you, sir. I have to say, I’m very surprised that you rescued me in person.’

‘Actually,’ he said, ‘I’m here more as a debrief, although that sounds very formal for what I have in mind.’

Richard approached a desk that looked like it was carved out of a single piece of solid slate. Out of one of its drawers he removed a heavy crystal decanter and two glasses, and poured them each a measure of whiskey.

Michael took his glass and sipped it. He was actually quite thirsty and would have preferred water, but he wasn’t going to say that in front of the CEO.

‘I checked over your reports from the lunar visit personally,’ Richard said, replacing the stopper in the crystal decanter. ‘You were stationed just beside the Daedalus crater, correct?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘On the exact opposite side of the moon. Radio signals wouldn’t normally be received from there – that was the whole point of the Farside project, to build an antenna that would be exempt from Earth’s radio pollution. Did the dish and antenna get completed in the end?’

‘Not entirely, sir. I’m sorry the report wasn’t as complete as it could have been. There were some difficulties.’

‘I’m happy the subspace transmissions arrived at all, but then they were designed without the need for satellite relays, weren’t they?’

Does he want me to fawn over his genius? Michael thought. *He’s fishing for praise.*

But then, geniuses should be allowed to expect compliments; they were there to change the world for the better, after all.

‘Tell me about these difficulties,’ Richard said.

As Michael began, the CEO strode over to the bed and hopped onto it, kicking his feet up onto the silk sheets. He didn’t remove his shoes.

‘A form of vaporous cloud appeared over the crater. It affected the nanite flow of the developing dish, and later caused some other physical phenomenon that I can’t explain. I can’t even describe exactly what happened. The Uncommon Materials Officer, Theo Callas—’

‘Use real names please,’ Richard interrupted. ‘No nicknames.’

‘Right. Of course, sir. *Nils* Callas, the Uncommon Materials Officer. He suffered some form of delusion and died, just a few minutes before we escaped. I ... remember a report that was redirected from Washington HQ. It said that the phenomenon we experienced up there was known to KE. Is that correct?’

Richard nodded. He’d finished his drink and glanced at the decanter on the desk, but made no effort to get up from the luxurious bed. ‘That’s right. Are you aware of the aquaforming project that was taking place on Europa?’

‘Not just heard of. I applied for it. The changeover is every ten years and I wanted to be the next to go up there to oversee things.’

‘Yes, your personnel file says that you’ve applied for all the field positions, or least the best ones. The plantations in central Africa, the solar station that was completed last year, and of course Europa.’

‘I feel that I’ve done my share of office-sitting,’ Michael said, a little uncomfortably.

‘Well, thank yourself lucky that you never got the Europa position,’ Richard replied brightly, putting his hands behind his head. ‘The Director there died, along with everybody else. Europa broke into pieces barely a week ago.’

‘You’re kidding!’

‘Not in the slightest. It seemed to just shake itself to pieces. And, simultaneously, Jupiter began to spin itself free of its own atmosphere, or at least its upper layers. There are streamers of the stuff spread out between Jupiter and Earth, like it washed its giant hands and all the dirty water’s running right towards the sun.’

Michael felt light-headed. ‘Any explanations?’

‘Not much. Some people have put forward a few notions about how it’s been building up to it for decades, centuries, but we don’t really have any proven ideas yet. It’s too early. However, we had an observation post in orbit around Jupiter, and the two operatives there saw it all happen.’

‘There was a Director with them?’

‘No, the station couldn’t support more than a few people, and frankly we’re spread a little thinly as it is. But the two scientists are on their way back with hard data as we speak, and are expected any minute.’

Michael decided that he could do with the rest of that whiskey after all, and emptied his glass. He coughed into his hand at the heat in his throat, and then asked, ‘D’you have any images?’

‘Try this.’

Richard projected a vague representation of the Jupiter discharge into Michael’s mind: it was a satellite photograph, and it described a long, multi-stranded arc of gaseous material, orange-brown in colour but shot through with streamers of red and gold. It was exactly the same as the vapour that had descended upon the Daedalus crater on the moon, causing the inexplicable phenomenon that had led to their evacuation of the lab and the moon’s surface altogether.

‘It’s all connected,’ Michael breathed. ‘With Jupiter as the source. What explanations are our experts offering?’

Richard swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up.

‘Nothing satisfactory,’ he said.

*

The car pulled up outside a grudgingly majestic mountain. The mountain was shallow, but massively tall. Its dark edges and blunt tip made Michael Hudd-Karlson think less of a mountain and more of a pile of grit, or photographs he’d seen of Victorian-era coal heaps.

The driver turned around in the front seat to speak to him. ‘The CEO asks that you remember your confidentiality agreements when advising the military.’

‘I will do that. I’m not about to give these guys any secrets. They just asked me back as a consultant, nothing more.’ He peered out of the blacked-out window at the entrance to the Mission Control Centre. ‘I don’t think I’ll be here long.’

‘Right you are, sir.’

Michael vacated the car and stood in the dust it kicked up as the driver accelerated away. There was a cool wind blowing that smelled of pine trees and fresh water. It was relaxing, but the entrance to the MCC was anything but. It was a concrete mouth leading into the bowels of the mountain.

The guard at the high-security gate met him with a rifle in his hands.

‘Director Karlson?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Follow me, sir. We’ll be going six storeys down, so you might find that your ... ah ... communication gear won’t work effectively.’

He gestured towards Michael’s headset. Michael nodded and beckoned for the guard to lead the way.

An elevator took them deep beneath the mountain, and deposited them in a wide corridor adjoined by several electronic doors. They had plastic seals around the edges to protect against harmful grit or germs carried down from the surface. The guard went back up in the elevator; another met Michael and took him to the operations room.

Administrator Britling, who had conducted Michael’s fruitless interrogation the previous afternoon, met Michael at the top of a shallow flight of steps that led to a wide area filled with computer consoles and weary-looking technicians. This time, he shook Michael’s hand.

‘Director Karlson,’ he said. He had a minor scar from a harelip operation, and his mouth navigated the name a little clumsily. It seemed to Michael that the Administrator had adopted the habit of growing red-brown stubble to conceal the scar and his slightly jowly jaw, which in all respects was unsuccessful. Michael had trouble respecting a man who took measures to hide such insignificancies; perhaps Michael had spent too long surrounded by the comfortable padding of subspace thought-transmissions to care about that kind of thing.

‘Sir,’ he said. ‘You had something to show me?’

‘Yes. Well, the officers discussed the possibility of drawing you in on a little problem we’ve been monitoring and, seeing as you have some small experience of the matter...’

‘The situation with Jupiter?’

‘More specifically the cast off material that occupies the space between us and the source.’

You don’t know anything about it, do you? Michael thought. You don’t even know what to call it.

‘This way please, Director,’ the Administrator said.

Michael followed him down the steps into the wider area occupied by the white-coated staff. Two other officers were present, in crisp dark uniforms, but both looked haggard and frustrated by what they and the technicians were analysing.

One of the officers was the woman who had spoken to Michael alongside the Administrator. He remembered that her name was Smitheson. Now able to see her badge clearly, he saw that she was a government agent rather than a GSP officer.

‘Hello again, Director.’

‘What’s this on the screen?’

He pointed to a curved screen that had been pinned to a partition behind the technician’s desk. On it was a bright image with the same colour scheme as the one that Richard Karlson has transmitted to Michael in the hotel suite. Shapes moved about amidst the coils of vapour, but they were too vague to be properly made-out. They were moving as though they were aware of the cameraman’s presence.

‘This is footage taken by a GSP staff scientist who has been working on the Jovian Satellite Station *Summanus*,’ Agent Smitheson said. ‘He was submerged in the upper hydrogen layers of Jupiter when this was filmed, protected by a sealed exoskeletal suit.’

‘That station was built by my corporation,’ Michael said. ‘The two scientists were WTO-backed. Ashley and Sinda Havers, am I right?’

‘The footage you are seeing here was taken by Ashley Havers. He and his wife were due back planetside late yesterday, but much like your own re-entry, we’ve lost contact with them.’

‘Hardware problem?’

‘We haven’t come across it before. But that’s our problem, not yours,’ she told him firmly. ‘We want you to tell us if you recognise anything in these images from your time by the Daedalus crater on the moon.’

‘It’s a similar phenomenon,’ said Michael. ‘You’re saying that the emissions I saw, the vapour cloud over the Daedalus crater, were portions of Jupiter’s atmosphere?’

One of the technicians interrupted. ‘Sorry sir, ma’am ... We have the audio report cleaned up. Shall I play it again for the Director’s benefit?’

‘Please do,’ Smitheson said. Then, to Michael, she said, ‘This is the more relevant part of a report that Ashley Havers transmitted to us a few weeks ago, during the return trip. Obviously before we lost contact.’

Michael nodded. ‘Go ahead and play it.’

The technician did as he was told, and opened an audio file on the computer. The sound played over the top of the incoherent, colourful footage of Ashley Havers’ descent in the Jovian atmosphere:

‘Listen. Jupiter radiates more heat than it receives from the Sun, a curiosity that no-one has ever really figured out. Most theories rely on the Kelvin-Helmholtz mechanism: the surface is cooling and the pressure’s dropping, meaning that the entire planet is compressing, okay? This causes the core to heat up. It also means that Jupiter is shrinking by a few centimetres each year, or at least it was. In the last twenty years or so this process has accelerated. Nobody could say why, but it was obviously leading up to this.’

‘He sounds worked up,’ Michael commented.

The Administrator stepped into the space between Michael and Agent Smitheson. He had a stack of loose papers in his hand that he was trying to organise, swapping individual sheets from front to back.

‘This was the last time we heard from him,’ he said. ‘It’s a recording he transmitted to us. It got through and we stored it, listened to it. By the time we’d prepared a message to acknowledge receipt of the report, we found that there was an area of radio silence around the craft. It hadn’t been due to enter our atmosphere for days. It was like they’d both just fallen asleep.’

‘Or were dead.’

‘Director, people don’t just die on shuttles. If there’s a problem, the minor-class AI would report it and transmit as par of course. It wouldn’t be able to intervene, but it would tell us if there was some sort of medical emergency on board. Or it would at

least inform us if there was a problem. Those kinds of transmissions are thrown out every couple of hours.'

'Only the AI was silent too,' Smitheson added. 'We can't explain it.'

Michael rubbed his temples. 'And what does the report have to do with what we're watching?'

'Look closely,' said Britling, pointing to the screen. 'See those things there?'

'Shapes...' said Michael. 'The *impressions* of things caused by the movement of gases. At that depth, the gas would be almost liquid, and at the juncture there would be some weird effects.'

'These aren't illusions, Director,' Britling told him flatly. 'These are what we call "atmospheric beasts". Creatures, living things, that have evolved or were engineered to exist for sustained periods within the upper regions of gas-giant planets, however dense or pressurised.'

'You sound like you've been reading up.'

'This is the predominant theory at the moment,' Agent Smitheson put in, clasping her hands together. 'We've *all* been reading up. This sort of extremophile has been theorized about, but obviously we've never come across anything like it. Similar things have been seen in the oceans, the Mariana Trench maybe ... weird things, but nothing off-world. But we suspect ... Well, we were considering asking you if—'

The Administrator had grown impatient. Evidently he wasn't a fan of science-talk and was used to getting to the heart of the matter, and quickly. Michael had seen as much during his interrogation. He interrupted the agent.

'What she's getting at, Karlson, is have you seen anything like what we're discussing here? Around or above the Farside lunar lab while you were there?'

Michael knew exactly what they were getting at. Both Maria and James Aylesworth had nearly been killed by such bizarre creatures, when the vapour cloud had first appeared above the still-developing antennae dish. They said that creatures like huge flukes, sort of giant, fat worms, had fallen like hailstones all around them, punching holes into the dusty lunar landscape. They had fallen directly from the vapour cloud.

Before he had made up his mind whether or not to answer the Administrator's question truthfully, the lights in the room dimmed almost to darkness and then glowed deep red. A soft but persistent siren began to throb through the centre. All at once people were standing up at their stations and shouting orders into microphones. The security detail looked alert but fed-up, as though this happened far too often.

'What's going on?' the Administrator snapped at the technician.

'It's the same as yesterday, sir. A report's come through that an unidentified spacecraft has entered the atmosphere ... but it's hours old. Just reported ... by the Peruvian government.'

'It came down in *Peru*?'

'Yes, sir. They gave us the craft number. It's Ashley and Sinda Havers. They're already on their way here, sir, according to the Peruvians.'

Administrator Britling turned sharply to Michael and put his hand on his shoulder. 'Bad luck, Director. We have guests, and you don't have clearance. You'll be restricted to staff quarters for a few hours.'

'Like hell I will!'

'Sorry Director. No choice.'

The Administrator's grip on Michael's shoulder was quite firm.

*

The room he was locked into was meant to serve as living quarters for one of the Centre's live-in staff. It had a desk, a bed, and a small *en suite* with a shower.

Michael tapped his earpiece. The node was fixed into his ear like a hearing aid, constructed of minute crystal circuitry and foamed plastic so that it didn't affect his hearing. It also acted as the hub for his communications visor, which unfolded when he gave the instruction. A translucent screen unrolled across his right eye. Tapping the node again, Michael attempted to dial out to contact other Directors nearby, but there was no radio signal. Of course, he was several storeys underground and wouldn't be able to phone out. Stupid!

Instead he felt with his fingers under his hair, until his fingertips came into contact with the copper grid that laced his outer skull. Faint electric tingles danced up the inside of his perspiring fingers to his palms. Concentrating, he began to thump messages into subspace with his thoughts, transmitting a brief signal to any other Karlson Directors. Perhaps, if Richard Karlson II himself was still in the near vicinity, the CEO might be the first to respond to his call for assistance.

Michael remembered how, on the surface of the moon, his broadcasted thoughts had taken on a visual presence. They had lit up the air around him like dazzling strokes of luminescent paint on an invisible canvas. Back then, he'd known that the vapour cloud was responsible. He now knew a little more: that mystifying and dangerous phenomenon had come from Jupiter, and in fact was a substantial percentage of Jupiter's gaseous atmosphere itself.

With his message sent, Michael decided that while he waited he might as well have a shower. The underground centre had only average air conditioning, most of that energy used merely to recycle the air rather than introduce fresh oxygen from outside. The whole place was stifling, and the unusual sense of impending trouble he'd had whilst viewing the footage from Jupiter's atmosphere had compounded the feeling of pressure and suffocation.

He took his shower, and waited for a response. The subspace reply came not from the CEO, as he had hoped, but from another Director who had been visiting family in Colorado and was just as close as any of the others:

Sorry for delay. Can help with access codes for MCC. Details follow—

Excellent. Michael rubbed the shampoo out of his hair and got dressed again, resentful of being forced to don the same shirt and pants he'd been wearing before instead of clean garments. He wondered what his father would say about his picky attitude and wastefulness.

By the time he'd tied the laces on his shoes, the access codes embedded in the subspace transmission had settled firmly into Michael's short-term memory. He made an effort to remember them properly, unlocking the door to the room as he did so.

The corridor outside was empty. A map of the Control Centre had also been downloaded into his mind via the headset, and so Michael knew exactly where to go to eavesdrop on whatever interrogations were taking place with the MCC's latest visitors.

He glanced through a plastic window in a door at the end of the long corridor. Past the door was an office. There were two chairs behind the desk, one seating a young man and the other a young woman: they were Ashley and Sinda Havers, the scientists who had been funded by both the Global Treaty Organisation and the World Space Program to monitor Jupiter's unusual behaviour.

Administrator Britling and Agent Smitheson were in attendance, along with a doctor who was busily examining the returned scientists.

The door was soundproof, as any interrogation room should be. Michael entered the room next door, a small janitor's closet, and quietly unclipped a small vent from the wall. He felt with his hand in the dark hole behind the vent until he felt the wool-like soundproofing, and then tore pieces away until he could hear the conversation taking place in the adjacent room. Through the net of torn sheets, he could just about see the two scientists.

'We understand that you're unsettled and probably exhausted,' Agent Smitheson was saying calmly, 'but we need your full and immediate co-operation. We may be facing some form of a crisis here.'

'I'm not interested in what you're "facing",' Ashley Havers said venomously. He was sweating inside the atmospheric suit he still wore. The helmet had been removed and was placed on the desk in front of him. The doctor now picked this up and began taking swab samples from the inside of its visor.

'And tell him to get away from me! We're not sick!'

'We don't think you're sick, Mr Havers,' Smitheson said. 'Otherwise you'd be in quarantine. We just need to make records of every aspect of your return here. Just as we need to know about every minute you experienced on the *Summanus* and in Jupiter's atmosphere.'

'What else do you want to know? You got our report, didn't you? We descended into the first and second layers of the planet. We encountered moving shapes that may or may not have been living extremophiles. We made it back to the station before the magnetosphere broke and the planet's atmosphere began to be spun away. That's it.'

'What is left of Jupiter now?'

'Scans showed a very small metallic core surrounded by a few hundred kilometres of liquid hydrogen. That's it.'

'No gaseous atmosphere?'

'None at all.'

'What about the life-forms?' General Britling said. 'Did they communicate?'

'If they *were* life forms, they're almost certainly dead now. They acted more like mindless cells in a Petri dish than anything I know of. They swarmed around me like antibodies attacking an invading germ. That's what they made me feel like. A germ.'

'Did they touch you?'

'No,' Ashley said. 'They didn't.'

'What about Sinda?'

Administrator Britling now stepped into view, approaching the desk. The doctor obligingly moved out of his way; he had been checking Sinda Havers' pupils with a small penlight.

'She appears to be in a state of shock,' the Administrator commented coarsely. 'That right, doctor?'

'Totally unresponsive,' the doctor replied.

Ashley reacted violently, even going as far as getting out of his chair. In his weak state, however, he didn't look like he could do much else.

'Get away from her! She's not a pet, she's my *wife*!'

'Sit down. Please,' Agent Smitheson said kindly. She was still out of Michael's point of view, but she hadn't sounded like she'd moved at all.

Ashley obliged, and sat in his chair. He tugged uncomfortably at the neck of his suit, and then removed both his gloves and threw them onto the table beside the helmet.

Smitheson continued to speak. 'Sinda went down into the atmosphere of the planet just like you, didn't she? If that's right, why did she emerge in so different a condition?'

Ashley crossed his arms.

'This is serious, Mr Havers. You're being petulant when we need you to be very specific. We're not your enemy, we're your government. The GSP hired and funded you and your wife to help the scientific community and, by extension, the whole race. And now you cross your arms and fall silent?'

Ashley seemed to receive Smitheson's reproof in the way that it had been intended. He realised that he really had nothing to lose by telling the truth. Ashley took a deep breath and then ran his hand through his ragged head of hair.

'Alright. We decided that we needed to take another dive to confirm some readings we found. It was perfectly safe; we used the right suits, the exoskeleton that would protect us from the pressure and the winds, and the normal energy shields. Everything was in place.'

'You both descended at the same time?'

'No. Sinda went first, and I watched from the station. She said that everything looked normal. The gases were thicker than we were used to, but then she'd gone a lot deeper than we'd needed to in the past. She descended to about twenty thousand kilometres. There was atmospheric lightning, but again that's normal. The wind was moving at extreme speeds but that's normal too.'

'And then she saw the shapes?'

‘Yes. She said that they were moving around her and that they were touching her through the suit. Then she ... I thought she’d died. It sounded like she’d been torn apart by the winds, as though the energy fields had failed. So I made to descend too. I got as far as she got, and then further. I saw the shapes but they only brushed against me, like they were thoughtless but just testing to see if I was dangerous. You know how those anemones in the deep sea have fronds that touch fish? And if the fish moves in the right way, they grab it instinctively? There’s no thought or intent at all, just reflex. They moved like that, like thoughtless shapes, like cells. Then the winds picked up, and the liquescent gases started rushing away, upwards away from the core. I got caught up in it, but made it back to the station. And Sinda was with me when I got there.’

The Administrator looked at him incredulously. There was a period of silence. Michael still couldn’t see Smitheson, but he saw the uncomfortable look on the face of the doctor, who must have been government staff and had probably not heard anything like that at all in his life. He was looking from Ashley, to Britling, to Smitheson, his old lips slightly parted, waiting for somebody to speak.

‘So...’ the Administrator began, hesitantly. ‘So how the hell did you make it back to the station? You were conscious, I take it?’

‘Not that I remember,’ Ashley said, shaking his head. ‘I must have been in a daze, or maybe I blocked it out.’

‘And Sinda – the Sinda Havers sitting here, your wife – she had just materialised on the station as well?’

Ashley’s wife hadn’t moved or spoken the whole time. She was like a doll, or an animatronic storefront mannequins waiting for a routine to be programmed into her.

Ashley nodded at the Administrator.

‘She just appeared, as perfect as ever. I don’t know what to tell you.’

*

Things begin to add up, thought Michael. He climbed down from the unsteady shelf he’d been using to get a good view through the vent. *It’s starting to make sense...*

After refastening the vent, Michael left the janitor’s room and began to make his way back to the little apartment he’d been locked in. He didn’t use the map; he thought that he could remember the way easily enough.

He knew exactly what had happened to the Havers couple. He knew what had happened by the Daedalus crater on the moon. Michael now understood what had happened to Maria Aylesworth who, before Michael had been mysteriously encased in basalt, had been piloting the shuttle that had taken them all home. The GSP was saying that she had never been on the craft; Michael knew better. She’d been there alright. And then she’d disappeared.

It boiled down into the simplest explanation. It was all about manifestations: objects brought into being through thoughts, and then – just as quickly – snatched out of existence again.

In the Lunar Farside Lab, after things had begun to get weird, Maria Aylesworth had *fallen through* a solid wall. She hadn't been protected by her energy shield. Her body fell through the wall, which had been weakened by a mere thought, that power unknowingly granted by the phenomenon to everybody there. She had emerged into total vacuum, a place where no human could survive for more than a few seconds. But then, according to her brother James, she had been found soaking wet and confused on the floor in one of the lab's other rooms. Magically transported from a lethally hostile environment into a place of safety, just as Sinda Havers had been.

Both women had been reborn, and both had re-entered the world exhibiting strange behaviour. Maria not so much – she'd been blunt and offhand for as long as Michael had been acquainted with her – but Sinda definitely. She'd come back mute and unresponsive. The difference came not from the way that the phenomenon had manifested itself, but from the sources of the girls' rebirth. James had resurrected Maria, a sister that he depended upon and knew inside and out. Ashley had resurrected Sinda, his wife, only his unconscious attempt to bring her back, through the power of the Jupiter vapour cloud, had been either flawed or interrupted. She wasn't all there.

Both women were just figments, pure manifestations. When James Aylesworth had been killed in the shuttle crash, Maria had disappeared. She no longer had a psychic bank of information to anchor her to physicality. She'd vanished instantly. Similarly, having suspected that such manifestations were the cause of the chaos that had taken place in the lab, Michael Hudd-Karlson had unknowingly protected himself from the impact. He'd constructed a stone shield around his body, which had safeguarded him until the danger had passed. And then, as Administrator Britling had put it, he'd "hatched like an egg".

'Unbelievable,' Michael said to himself, shaking his head. He was feeling suddenly exhausted.

Believing that he'd found the door to the office he was supposed to be locked in, he entered the next room. He stopped, realising his mistake. He was in a cramped communications room, where two men sat at a bulky computer terminal deciphering communication bursts. From the looks of things, they also had a video link to one of Earth's geo-synchronous satellites: one of the screens was displaying a blindingly bright image of the Jupiter vapour cloud, clearly reproduced on-screen in twists of orange-brown and dirty red.

The two men had headsets on, and they hadn't noticed Michael's intrusion. They continued to talk frantically amongst themselves, jabbing buttons on the consoles. Something was blipping on one of the other screens.

'Christ,' one of the men said. 'No way.'

The other man opened up a communications line to somewhere else in the centre. It was Administrator Britling that answered.

'Yes?'

'Sir, there's been a significant development with the Kelvin-Helmholtz model.'

Britling sighed. 'I'm passing you over to Agent Smitheson.'

There was a pause, then Smitheson spoke through the radio.

'What is it?'

‘Ma’am, new readings from the probes indicate further changes to the new structure of Jupiter.’

‘What kind of changes?’

‘It’s ... pulsing. And the dislocated atmosphere that was previously suspended above the far side of the moon is now moving more definitely. The whole nebula is sifting towards the sun.’

‘Is that a problem?’

The other man slapped his colleague on the arm with the back of his hand, and then redirected the microphone so that he could speak into it.

‘Ma’am, it isn’t conclusive that the dislocated atmosphere is heading towards the sun.’

Smitheson sounded irritated. ‘Well is it, or isn’t it?’

‘The moon is currently in Earth’s shadow. It means we’re directly between it and the sun. It’s possible that the nebula is actually heading towards *us*. Either way, it’s going to make contact with our own atmosphere very shortly ... Two hours, if it continues to accelerate.’

Michael backed out of the room and steadied himself against the wall of the corridor. He found himself out of breath, the skin of his face clammy. Was he nervous? Was he *afraid*? He’d seen Maria Aylesworth fall through an apparently solid wall to her death. He’d seen Theo Callas, their Uncommon Materials Officer, go insane and sprout wings, then soar impossibly through the vacuum until his wings broke and he toppled headfirst into a white landscape of liquid rock. He might still be there, frozen in the now-solidified stone. His body would rot away, leaving a man-shaped hollow. His bones would rattle around in there, probably forever, until they turned to dust. *Yes*, Michael admitted to himself, *this must be fear. I am afraid.*

He sent a transmission.

Jupiter phenomenon approaching our atmosphere. Please advise. Recommend any and all immediate prevention methods available.

He had barely got back to the right room when the response came, as clear as day:

No prevention. Probable enterprise opportunity. Don’t do anything, brother. Await further instruction.

Had he heard that right? There were no two ways about it: the message had been embedded in his mind as though he’d conjured the thought himself. *Probable enterprise opportunity.* This couldn’t be the CEO’s choice, not after Michael – a Director, no less! – had been nearly killed! *No prevention?* What did they expect him to do? Allow a deadly threat to approach Earth? If the phenomenon manifested itself in the greater population, there would be pandemonium. The world would turn into a nightmare place, where every stray thought became a horrific reality. People would be killed, or would kill themselves unwittingly as Theo Callas had. The planet would be overrun by ghostly replicas of loved ones or imagined beings, just like Maria Aylesbury and Sinda Havers.

There was no choice. Michael strode past the door to the room he had been confined to and up a steep ramp leading to the operations room. Administrators heading in every direction knocked shoulders with him, spilling papers and

apologising breathlessly. The report that the phenomenon was reaching towards Earth's atmosphere, like the grasping hand of a diseased stranger, had been transmitted to the ops room. It seemed as though people were as concerned as Michael.

Pushing himself further into the centre of the surging confusion, he spoke directly to the Administrator.

'Sir, have you contacted the military yet? And Washington?'

Britling scowled, a little pink in the face. 'What? Aren't you supposed to be confined? No, I haven't contacted Washington! There's no evidence to suggest that this is anything more than an odd weather formation.'

Michael looked disbelievingly at the Administrator, and then pointedly examined the huge curved screen that took up most of the front wall of the operations centre. It displayed an out-of-atmosphere camera feed, showing the curve of the blue planet and its white waves and skeins of cloud. Just beyond, illuminating the darkness of space like burning branches, the wispy tendrils of vapour approached.

He turned back to Britling.

'With respect, Administrator Britling, you have a scientist in there who says he can't explain it—' He pointed back the way he had come, towards the corridor and its adjoining rooms. '—and you have a Karlson Director in *here* who's saying that he's witnessed absolute chaos first hand as a result of this phenomenon. And, since sixty-four percent of the GSP is funded by Karlson Enterprises, I expect you to at least take my advice into consideration.'

'My only consideration is this operation right here,' Britling said, pulling back his shoulders.

What a child he looks, Michael thought. *What a juvenile.*

'Don't be confused by my title, Karlson. I'm the most senior person at this MCC, I will do whatever I can to make sure that this is dealt with properly,' Britling continued. 'But right now I don't have time for pissant little businessmen who think they understand GSP ops just because they've been to the moon and back.'

Michael turned suddenly as somebody touched his arm. It was Agent Smitheson.

'Besides which,' she added softly, 'we've already consulted your superior on the matter. He has advised us to take no hostile action, merely prepare counter measures should it appear that the vapour might survive dissemination into our atmosphere. Prepare but not deploy. Our calculations also say that the vapour, which is mostly hydrogen and helium, which burn up or disassemble as soon as it makes contact. So there's nothing to worry about, Director.'

Michael felt his incisors pinch the inside of his bottom lip with anger. He unclenched his fists but made no other effort to hide his disapproval and the offence he had taken at being spoken to in such a manner.

'And you won't be taking into account Ashley Havers' statement of events, which is so full of questions, holes and unknown variables as to cause myself and the other Directors great concern, despite the orders the CEO has relayed to you?'

'What would *you* know about Havers' testimony?' the Administrator said abruptly.

Smitheson interceded. 'Director, you're free to leave if you wish, seeing as you're out of your temporary quarters already. But please don't expect us to waste more time speaking to a Director when his superior, at the highest level, has requested that we proceed.'

She was quite softly spoken, despite her blunt manner. Michael, even in his mounting frustration, could find no real fault with what she was saying.

'Fine,' he said.

As much as he disliked her, and as much as he would quite like to invert the Administrator's cheekbone with his fist, Michael decided that it would be wise to leave. Neither of the two individuals in front of him invoked as much rage as the thought of having his authority there countermanded by Richard Karlson II.

*

It took him a few hours by aircraft to arrive at the nearest KE HQ, on the Colorado border. Michael was certain that the CEO would be there. He arrived and stood on the forecourt in front of the forty-storey building, which was constructed of white ribs of concrete around huge plates of plasti-plex curving to a Corinthian dome. The design was similar but not identical to the headquarters all across the country, and every one of them sported a dome as a fundamental part of the structure. Michael remembered that the architects had been coerced into signing confidentiality agreements about certain aspects of the buildings' design.

Michael offered his skin cells to a small device mounted on the front gate. The gate swung open, glinting bronze in the low sunlight. Beyond a second gate, inside the main lobby, he introduced himself to a mechanical guard that whirred its chrome limbs, logging his arrival on both digital files and paper ones.

'Is the CEO currently staying here?' he asked it.

'Yes. The Wyoming Director is on leave until Wednesday and allowed the CEO to reside here temporarily. Would you like me to alert him to your arrival?'

'No, thank you,' Michael said, smiling thinly at the intelligent machine. 'I'll make my own way up.'

'Yes, Director.'

He took the elevator. A dozen storeys swept by in a few moments, and the elevator cab then admitted him to the penthouse office. Michael was a roving Director and has such hadn't been assigned an HQ to preside over, and so the luxury of the office both surprised and disgusted him. It was worse than the hotel suite. The furniture was faux-antique, and the view out of the long windows reminded him how crass this architectural style was when applied to a building so tall and narrow. He half expected a massive chandelier dripping with crystal. Instead there were indiscreet rows of strip lighting all the way up the ridged copper interior of the dome, culminating in the glass peak that allowed the evening sunshine to pierce the room in rays.

Richard Karlson II was standing behind his desk, selecting a paper book from a rich oaken bookcase situated between a pair of the larger copper girders. The CEO was

half-turned, surprised at the silent and unannounced access to his temporary office, with the book in his hand.

‘Michael?’ he uttered, caught a little off guard.

Michael nodded. ‘Yes, sir. Sorry to arrive without notice.’

Richard smiled and gestured to a long leather couch that ran along the left side of the office, beneath the broad windows. ‘Nonsense, it’s always a pleasure. Would you like a drink?’

Michael shook his head. It seemed the CEO was always drinking. There was another bottle of whiskey, evidently his favourite tippie, opened and a quarter empty on his desk beside a Rolodex.

Richard sat on the edge of the desk. His jacket was on the back of his chair, but he kept his cigarettes in his waistcoat pocket. Removing one from its unlabelled foil packet, he took out a matchbook and then gestured that Michael should take one.

‘No thank you, sir.’

‘You aren’t worried about the legal implications? The Europeans haven’t imposed their ridiculous impositions here yet; they’re quite lawful in one’s own premises.’

‘I’ve never had the inclination, sir,’ Michael said.

Richard lit his cigarette. The match he flicked into a metal bin by his feet. He said nothing, and was guarded; Michael guessed that the CEO must have realised he was there to dispute his orders.

Michael decided that he would have to be the one to turn the conversation to business.

‘I thought that I was in charge of the lunar opportunities,’ he said slowly. ‘Even now that I’m back on-world.’

‘Yes,’ Richard replied laconically.

‘You countermanded me. I understand that it’s not my place to argue against your wishes when it comes to KE matters, but I find myself undermined.’

‘I got the impression from our last encounter that you weren’t too thrilled with the notion of the Jovian discharge approaching Earth. I sensed that you intended to stop or divert it, if you could. Presumably as a result of your experiences on the moon.’

Smoke curled around his face, thick and grey-blue.

‘Your impression was on the mark,’ Michael replied.

He stood under the pretence of fetching himself a drink, something he guessed the CEO wouldn’t deny him considering his own growing list of vices. Richard didn’t move as Michael filled up the glass on the table with whiskey. He didn’t mind using an unclean glass; despite being spread across the globe and even off-planet, all Karlson Directors shared exactly the same germs.

He continued. ‘I feel that to allow the phenomenon to enter our atmosphere would be unadvised. In fact, it would result in utter anarchy. We must do everything that we can to prevent it, sir, in our own best interests if not humanity’s.’

‘Our interests lie in business enterprise,’ Richard replied. ‘I feel that the unique properties of the discharged Jovian atmosphere – properties that you have helped to

identify with your reports – would more than reassure the aggressive consumers we have to satisfy with a range of new products.’

‘And that would include military applications, I suppose.’

‘You’ve never voiced a concern over such applications before, Director Hudd-Karlson.’

‘I’ve never seen a weapon that could harness such potent and unpredictable energy. I don’t wish to ever see one that could.’

‘Not even if you were the only person who stood to profit from it?’ Richard asked lightly.

‘Not even a little.’

‘Nor if you had complete control over its design, development, its production, its distribution ... If you had the authority to say who could wield it and who could not?’

Richard was smiling now, but that wasn’t what had drawn Michael’s gaze. Intermingling with the smoke from Richard’s burning cigarette were strands of colour, rising like steam from his head. As Michael watched, words spelled in the Roman alphabet began to draw themselves into existence, each one flickering in and out of hazy images that hung suspended in the air.

Michael matched the CEO’s smile, and put down the glass.

‘You’re transmitting,’ he said. ‘Stop it.’

Richard followed Michael’s gaze and looked up. He was astonished to see his own thoughts manifested visually in the still air above him. He had no way of knowing that this is what Michael had seen when transmitting from the lunar laboratory: his thoughts made real by the vapour cloud.

‘What is...?’

‘The Jovian discharge has reached our atmosphere,’ Michael said flatly. ‘It has the power to affect our thoughts. I believe that it’s drawn to them, and to the objects that hold the imprint of man’s thoughts and designs. It was attracted directly to the parabolic antenna that had just been constructed in the Daedalus crater. From there it moved straight to the laboratory, where the group and I were working. It was drawn to our thoughts and made them physical, just like your transmission is being recreated physically now.’

Richard was far too smart to let something distract him, not when Michael’s diatribe held the tone that it did. His gaze snapped down towards his subordinate and he stood straight against the desk, his cigarette still burning between his lips.

‘Stay where you are, brother.’

‘You were warned,’ Michael said, and as he spoke he raised his hand.

Coloured mist coiled out of his fingertips. Colour and shadow bled into the room, rolling from Michael’s tacky palms and dripping from his fingers. Shapes began to develop within the misty streams, some almost too small to recognise, others no bigger than lizards. They jumped and slithered through the air, which was beginning to froth with unidentifiable outlines.

Richard’s transmission died before it hit the inner surface of the dome. The room was designed to amplify mental subspace transmissions. The copper struts and

girders, in most other buildings a lightning hazard, had been constructed to carry the subspace transmissions into clear airspace. This time they acted as they would have any other time: as electric conducts, now crackling with the energy that was being poured into the room from Michael's own mind.

'You were never right for the position,' the CEO spat, trying to shield his eyes from the brightening light. The fuzzy-edged shapes scrambled all over him. 'You always acting like people thought a Director should, cold and profit driven. But that never sat right with you, did it? What was it, your family? Your father who disapproved from the beginning? It's all on file, brother, I've examined every minute of your life...'

'I won't take any more of your insults,' Michael said calmly. 'I'll be assuming the role of Chief Director.'

The creatures of the mist writhed over the CEO, biting and clawing at his clothes and flesh, nipping through the skin with sharp teeth. They were agile yet formless, shifting from long-legged to winged, scaled to furred. Each of them had jaws and talons that they used to tear Richard to pieces. He was being devoured, at least as much as the semi-corporeal manifestations could manage. They tore skin away in strips, aggressive little voices crying out as they did so. The outer layers of Richard Karlson II were mostly consumed within the space of sixty seconds. Then, fighting his own nausea at the revolting remains, Michael lowered his hands and summoned the monstrosities back, satisfied that his aggressive little consumers had dispatched his superior in the most suitable way.

Before he sent the signal to the entire roster of Karlson Directors around the globe, telling them that he had forcefully but necessarily taken control of the corporation, he threw up against the closest wall. He hadn't the murderous nature that Richard must have been born with, but he had spent the whole journey thinking how best to displace the CEO, and violence was the only permanent, risk-free solution. He'd meant to forcefully but temporarily subdue Richard, but the manifestations had gotten away from him.

He'd had no time to waste, not when so many lives were at stake. He imagined the power of the manifestations infecting every unconscious mind in the country. It could destroy everything.

He threw up again, this time having to step back as he did so to avoid being splattered by the spreading pool of vomit. His left eye could see the pool reaching the closest of Richard's bloody limbs. Let him soak in it: the man deserved no less.

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Not all of the two hundred Karlson Directors agreed with Michael's methods or explanations. Many were actively appalled and shocked at the event, and that someone who had passed all the psych exams to reach Directorship had been capable of killing the man who they were all essentially part of.

Michael noticed that a portion of his brain seemed to shut down upon Richard's death. The tiny chunk of cloned grey matter was dead now, unusable. The thought of a piece of the man inside his skull made him feel ill, but he held his stomach this time. The other Directors, via subspace, were complaining of the same problem, and of

course held Michael accountable. Who else? He gave up justifying his actions after an hour.

There were times when he wished that he could remove the headset completely and throw the thing down, segregate himself from the thoughts of the other Directors completely. That was how he had lived as a child, and as a young adult before his Directorship. Happily cut off from the thoughts and orders of profit-driven individuals – were they individual? Or echoes of the man he had just accidentally killed? Michael had never wanted anything but to be successful, to make something of himself in the way that his parents had never expected or encouraged, and develop into somebody worthy of respect. A large part of him knew that he had been more than successful in that regard.

That wouldn't last for long. He would most likely be ousted the moment the other Directors could decide on a rightful replacement for the CEO. He had only a short time to protect everybody from the unanticipated danger that was even now integrating itself with the minds it touched. Michael's only request to his brothers was that as many of them as possible meet him at the Mission Control Centre ASAP.

The guard at the concrete entrance to the MCC at first tried to stop him from entering. Michael altered the streaming information from primary Karlson HQ to all the subsidiary partners, which included the KE-sponsored Global Space Program. Michael granted himself the proper security clearance owed to the Chief Director.

The guard tipped his cap to scratch his head. 'Not a problem now sir, it looks like the information was out of date. I'll escort you inside.'

They took the elevator as before, travelling down the operations room. As they descended Michael connected again via subspace, altering records and details to suit his purpose, connecting with individuals with access to computer and NewNet servers to further entrench his authority within the corporation. They were temporary fixes, patch jobs at best, but he wouldn't need full authority for long.

Administrator Britling, who Michael now acerbically considered something of an old friend, met him amidst a flurry of activity. Groups of people were dashing from one side of the operations room to the other, talking rapidly in pairs, or frantically bickering down the phone to somebody who didn't seem to understand the problem.

'Having a little trouble getting things organised, are you?'

'It's chaos, not that it has anything to do with you,' Britling said sharply. 'And you'll have to forgive my frankness, but I don't have time for conversation.'

Michael saw a series of images arrayed in a line across the largest of the main screens. They were images of a type of aircraft – or a sleek, streamlined spacecraft designed to be flown by only two people. He accessed the aeronautics division of the corporation to see if they'd had any hand in designing such things. There was a match: a craft designed to fly in low orbit through the Earth's thermosphere and exosphere. Michael didn't even know what that meant, but knew that they weren't intended for deep space travel and definitely wouldn't be up to the task that the Administrator probably had planned for them.

'You're sending craft to intercept? The Jovian atmosphere won't be communicated with, or be susceptible to damage. Not with conventional weapons.'

‘We’re still acting on orders from your superior,’ Birtling replied. He turned to yell at the room in general. ‘Smitheson! Get over here.’

Agent Smitheson arrived. She looked pale-faced and tired, but this didn’t affect her direct attitude.

‘Director Hudd-Karlson, we’re overworked here. I’d ask you to keep interference to a minimum. I mean this with all due respect.’

‘The both of you may check the datastream from Karlson Enterprises. It will have updated now to include new command orders.’

The agent of course had a node; she touched the spot of metal that protruded from the small lump behind her ear. The implant connected her, presumably, to the MCC computers.

The Administrator, who didn’t have the benefit of a node implant, spoke irritatingly. ‘What’s he talking about?’

Agent Smitheson opened her eyes. She ignored Britling completely. ‘How can we help you, Chief Director Karlson?’

‘Firstly you can detain Administrator Britling, under the Sponsorship Arrangement’s second codex.’

The Administrator visibly bristled, not just at the insulting tone Michael had given the request, but also at being spoken about, rather than spoken *to*.

‘Son,’ he said, ‘I understand that you’re a big shot in the business world, but in reality you’re really just—’

‘The codex was printed in paper and ink and signed by your superior at the highest level, Mr Britling. It says that if the Chief Director even suspects that you aren’t acting in the best interest of the GSP *or* Karlson Enterprises, or any of the partners or subsidiaries of such, then I’m granted the power to displace you for a period of up to six hours, pending investigation.’

He turned to Agent Smitheson, who remained impassive, and said, ‘The room that I was held in should be fine.’

She nodded. ‘As you wish.’

The Administrator allowed himself, surprisingly, to be quietly led away. The clause of the second Sponsorship Arrangement codex was one he remembered and had actually never forgotten, because it was the only thing that weakened his otherwise absolute power. He was fully aware that if the Director hadn’t established a firm case against him, then the Director himself could face charges.

Michael knew this, and watched grimly as Administrator Britling was escorted to his holding cell. He was a difficulty that he would have to tackle when the time came. For now:

‘Agent Smitheson, I’d like to address the centre’s staff.’

She nodded and approached a console. It blipped the alert siren for a second, drawing the attention of everyone present.

‘There’s a mic at this console, sir.’

He approached it and flipped a switch. When he spoke, his words were amplified around the operations room and the rest of the centre.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he began, feeling a touch embarrassed at being the centre of attention. ‘We are in a unique situation. The vaporous discharge that is approaching the planet will have unprecedented effects on the population, and will likely strike our region first. Any unusual experiences, including visions, the discovery of unfamiliar objects, or physical changes of any kind are to be reported to me immediately. Any efforts currently in place to prep and launch any atmospheric craft must be stopped immediately and diverted to finding a way to safely disperse the vapour cloud. That’s all for now. Thank you.’

He stepped away from the microphone and turned to receive Smitheson’s hard stare.

‘Way to scare the shit out of everybody, Director,’ she said.

‘There’s no way around it. Strange things will happen and they need to be forewarned.’

‘An explanation might not have been amiss, sir.’

‘You want to hear my explanation?’

‘If you have one, sir. Things are already pretty odd around here, anything worse would just be a disaster. The more answers we have, the better chance we have of ignoring those “strange things” of yours.’

He examined her quietly. Perhaps it was time that government employees from whatever branch Smitheson was attached to played a larger part in controlling and protecting Karlson assets.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘You’ve been briefed on everything that I have, but you don’t know the facts about what happened on the lunar surface. The Jovian discharge touched down immediately above the parabolic dish we had just constructed. It killed the live nanites that were building it and turned them to dead metal. It was drawn, in my opinion, to the residual consciousness that lingers around every man-made object.’

‘Far-fetched,’ she said simply.

‘True. It then moved towards the laboratory. It turned the rock to liquid. It built a wall out of nothing around the lab, and that wall curved and formed a solid dome. The dome began to rain, filling the space within it. The rain was partially liquid and partially gas, and the gas often formed shapes and faces, and whispering noises. I discovered that it all correlated to a private, shared experience held only in the memories of the other members of my group.’

‘You’re saying these manifestations were drawn from their minds?’

‘Yes. I also found that my mental subspace transmissions manifested physically in the air above me, and, upon trying to escape, I used that knowledge to puncture a hole in the stone dome just by thinking about it. I also unconsciously protected myself with the shell of stone when the shuttle crashed.’

Smitheson shifted her weight uncomfortably. She no doubt had the same worries that Michael had, that unrestricted access to one’s unconscious – magnified by the number of people on the planet, over six billion – would destroy everything that

humanity had spent millennia working to achieve. The human mind had multiple rooms and caverns, many with dark or dirty secrets locked inside, and to unlock those spaces and loose them on the world would be disastrous.

Fiction had analysed such possibilities numerous times, assessing the risks and benefits of new realities formed from the will of one or more human individuals. Usually such stories ended badly. Michael sensed that Agent Smitheson agreed with him on the only important point: that they had to prevent such a thing coming pass, to nip apocalypse in the bud.

‘It’s a lot to swallow, sir.’

‘Believe me, I know. But we have two other people to corroborate the story. I’d like to see them now. Would you take care of things in here, make sure these folk don’t spin themselves into a froth?’

Oddly, Smitheson gave him a brief salute. ‘As you wish, sir.’

*

He went straight to the room where Ashley and Sinda Havers were detained. He found that, in his absence, they had been confined to a military standard holding cell, sealed and further protected by shimmering energy fields. Michael had to deactivate the shield before he could access the door controls, and it fizzed out of existence as he entered the correct security code.

Almost at the same time he heard muffled screams from behind the door. Without thinking of his own safety, he entered the digital code on the number pad by the door and pressed his thumb against the plate to confirm his clearance.

A red light blinked on the number pad. He’d been denied access.

The yelling continued, hoarse and insistent, but the door wouldn’t open for him. Michael accessed the server again, and as quickly as he could ran over all of the changes and security amendments he’d made upon his ascension to Chief Director. Forcing himself to focus despite the terrible noises from behind the door, he ran over every trail he’d followed to make those changes and—

There. He’d missed something, a single order that would give him unrestricted access to this corridor and two others that adjoined it. He corrected his oversight and immediately yanked open the metal door to the holding cell.

He saw Ashley Havers pressed up against the wall on his backside, pushing himself away with his legs from a dark figure that didn’t immediately register with Michael’s eyes. Ashley saw him and yelled, ‘*Help me!*’

The black shape, hunched like an ape, turned in the thick shadow. Forelimbs, hung from bulky spined shoulders, steadied the creature against the wall as it swivelled, moving uncertainly as though it had only just learned to walk. Michael saw a large, blue maw and small bright eyes glinting in the shadow of the cell, then the impression of bristling spines and hair.

The creature opened its mouth to roar soundlessly, thumped its massive clawed hands against the wall as it rushed to divert its rage to Michael. Mid-flight, it vanished into a surging twist of black smoke. Michael staggered back with the

surprise of it, but regained his composure straight away. As calmly as he could manage, he offered his hand to Ashley. A sharp, gassy odour lingered in the air.

‘Are you alright?’

‘That thing...’ Ashley said.

‘Where is your wife?’

Ashley had half risen to his feet, but now slumped back. Michael had to catch him under his arms to stop him from crumpling to the floor again.

‘Where is she?’ Michael pressed.

‘She’s gone.’

‘Where?’

‘She’s gone.’

‘Turned to smoke, like that monster?’

Ashley nodded slowly. Then his face creased in the purest form of grief that Michael had ever seen. Unashamed tears rolled down his face and off his chin as he pushed the heels of his hands against his eyes, blocking out the world.

‘You knew that she wasn’t right,’ Michael said, as tenderly as he could manage. He was surprised to find himself unembarrassed by the weeping man in front of him. ‘You *knew*. You heard my announcement, right?’

Ashley didn’t respond.

‘I found hundreds of references online to beliefs involving things like Sinda. They’re often called “tulpas”, or “thoughtforms”. Sinda was a tulpa. From the moment she fell into Jupiter’s winds, the real Sinda was destroyed. Only your survival and interaction with the atmospheric phenomenon allowed her to be recreated.’

‘It felt like a miracle.’

‘In a sense,’ Michael said, ‘I suppose it was. The real miracle is that you survived your own descent at all, but life is funny that way. Sinda was a thoughtform created from your own memories and emotions. That is why she didn’t speak or react the way you expected. That’s why she was like a doll. It’s not your fault.’

Ashley sniffed and dried his eyes. ‘How do we stop it happening to somebody else...?’

‘It’s already happening. The monster you just created. You recognised it, right?’

Ashley nodded shakily. ‘Yeah ... From a storybook when I was a kid. The book was called “Mister Lee”, about a friendly monster who had a speech impediment. He was really called “Mystery”, but he just couldn’t say it right. And he had a monster nemesis he called “Evily Day”. That ... *thing* just then was Evily Day, but not like how he was in the book ... It was...’

‘It was how he was in your imagination,’ Michael finished.

‘Yeah. That thing made me feel how Evily Day made me feel when I was four years old.’

It seemed that his fear had temporarily overcome his grief, and he now looked merely shaken. Michael knew that he'd been right about Ashley already knowing that the Sinda he had returned with was not the real Sinda. If there was any higher power at all, he would have spent that time of semi-delusion unconsciously mourning for his wife, so that now the spell was broken he could move on.

Michael stepped back, and Ashley stood under his own weight. He looked wretched, but his eyes were already developing the stony, defensive look that Michael had seen in others. The first time had been his father's eyes after his mother had finally given up a long struggle against bowel cancer. After that, every instance had seemed more like the normal way of dealing with things: close oneself up, shut oneself away, and turn to stone.

He guided Ashley by the shoulder out of the cell, making sure to not move too quickly. Ashley was unsteady on his feet; it looked like he hadn't been fed since his arrival. He followed quietly, allowing himself to be supported, but halted as they turned right into the corridor.

In front of them was a security desk adjoined to the corridor. A woman in air force uniform had been assigned to guard the secure area – Michael had passed her on the way in – and she had a particularly dour look on her face.

'You opened the cell door, you must have clearance...' Ashley said.

They needn't have worried. The expression that Michael had mistaken for seriousness turned out to be a form of shock; the guard barely even registered that there were two men in front of her until Michael reached out and touched her cold hand.

'Are you okay?'

The guard looked up. She had her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail, but many of the strands had slipped loose about her face. She was stocky and very pale, her jaw set slightly to one side as though her state of shock had left her without control over her own body.

'I saw her,' she said. She had a low voice that, over the phone, could have sounded either male or female. It had a throaty quality that Michael again attributed to shock.

'Saw who? A family member?'

The guard nodded, then she shook her head slowly. It turned into a slow diagonal zigzagging that didn't help either way.

'Rosie,' she said, barely moving her lips. 'She was knocked down a few years ago. She was alive but the vet had to put her down.'

'A dog?' Ashley offered.

The guard nodded. 'But she was just here. I saw her, I swear ... But she didn't look ... at all well ... and she ran away before I could catch her.'

'It was just a figment,' Michael said firmly. 'Do you understand? You heard my announcement? You might witness strange things, but they aren't *real* okay? Don't worry. Rosie's right where she belongs. Okay?'

The guard nodded. She released a long breath of air that she probably hadn't realised she was holding. Shakily she said, 'Yeah, yeah I guess you're right,' and rubbed at her face like she was washing it.

Michael turned to Ashley. 'Come on.'

The operations room still had a sense of urgency and trepidation, though now it seemed utterly focused on the large screen that curved around the front of the room.

The images of the small spacecraft and curved edge of the blue planet were no longer displayed. Instead there was real-time footage of the Rocky mountain range, dark and sharp-edged against the afternoon sky. The foot of the valley was in view, brown scree rolling under a ridge of richly green grass and pine trees. It was the landscape that Michael had crashed into, his last memory before the collision, before the darkness had swamped him.

Above the peak of the mountain, pushing invisibly through the upper atmosphere from the cold emptiness beyond, was a growing construct of light. Pus-yellow, tan like the hide of a lion, creamy white; these were the colours the light was made of, the colours of the Jovian atmosphere. The twists of light, which glittered with the refracted glow of the fine vapour, moved in rings and belts as though locked in the routines of the planet they were once part of.

As the cloud rolled forward like a storm bank, ammonium crystals glittered and melted, depositing a fine rain upon the mountain. It was a brief, heavy downpour that darkened the stone and scree. Then the rain stopped, and the vapour thickened and surged down the mountainside like Tibetan fog.

'Oh my god.'

'Is that on us? Is that where we are?'

'I didn't see the entrance,' Michael said. 'It moved in too fast. It didn't move like that on the moon.'

'The moon's almost total vacuum,' Agent Smitheson said, joining them. She put a cold-looking mug of coffee onto the nearest desk.

'I know.'

The cloud was already beginning to settle at the base of the mountain range like soup, filling in the valleys between the peaks. Everybody watched on the screens as the cloud descended further, compacting into a dense tower of crackling fog.

'Oh.'

Agent Smitheson, who Michael had seen only as a sort of moving statue up until that moment, put her hand to her forehead and went slack. Her skirt was of a style that restricted her above the knees and she couldn't steady herself by widening her stance; she bent and half-crouched, her eyes scrunched shut beneath her fists. Suddenly the agent looked human to Michael, who moved immediately to her side.

'Are you okay?'

'Can't you feel it...?'

Michael did feel something; it had been building since the moment he had seen Ashley's monster explode into smoke. It began as a kind of uneasiness and quickly developed into an unpleasant tingling under his skin, as though his bones were vibrating. He'd dismissed it as unease – things were happening much faster than he'd anticipated, and he didn't yet feel comfortable in his all-powerful role of Chief Director – but the sensation hadn't left him, and there had been no time to think on the matter.

‘I feel it,’ Ashley said. He was already comforting Smitheson in a way that Michael didn’t think he himself would ever have been able to do. What did that mean? Had his time with the firm detached him that much?

Michael nodded. The centre wasn’t exactly shaking, but it seemed to tremble – *no*, Michael thought, *resonate* – in a way that made everything seem mildly blurry.

The first inbound subspace transmission thumped into the air around Michael’s head. The others sensed it as a kind of pressure in the ears, but unlike Michael they couldn’t hear the content of the message.

Michael stood straight wearily. ‘The other Directors are on their final approach. Two aircraft expected in the next five minutes, one a few minutes later.’

Ashley helped Smitheson to stand. He was being unusually protective over a person who was a total stranger to him. Michael attributed that to his recent loss, and let it go.

‘What are they going to do?’ Ashley asked him. ‘They can’t get in here.’

‘They don’t need to. I’m going out, and I think you should come with me.’

‘I get the feeling that walking into that cloud wouldn’t be good for my health.’

‘Your experience of the phenomenon has lent you a sensitivity to it,’ Michael said, ‘and, for my sake and everybody else’s, an immunity to its harmful effects that should help you sculpt the phenomenon it creates. You, me, and maybe a few other individuals who are naturally sensitive to it. And of course, the other Directors.’

‘Your headsets?’

‘It’s partially down to that, yes. It may also have something to do with the shared tissue we have, and the genetic therapy we undergo regularly. If one of us is sensitive, then all will be.’

‘So, what? We all stand out in that glowing fog, hold hands and wish it away?’ Ashley laughed.

Michael flexed the fingers of his right hand. The odd vibrations were getting to his joints.

‘I’ll go first,’ he said.

*

The tunnel that led from the interior of the mountain into the valley outside was sealed by energy barriers and several inches of plasti-plex. The material was transparent, showing a stony, cavernous throat leading away from the sixth sub-basement beneath the Mission Control Centre.

‘And this leads directly outside?’ Michael asked, peering through the plasti-plex. ‘How long is the tunnel?’

‘A few hundred feet,’ Smitheson said. Ashley stood to her right, uninterested by his surroundings.

Of course he is, Michael thought. He's a scientist – an astrophysicist. And he's been further than the moon: he's been past Mars, around Jupiter. He was in orbit around the thing before it decided to unravel. An underground tunnel must be boring by comparison.

He knew that he was kidding himself, though. Ashley Havers was as terrified as he was.

'That's the airlock,' Smitheson said. 'Never had cause to use it before. You'll have to go in one at a time. Open the first door, get in, wait for the light. The second door will open for you.'

'Okay.'

Michael approached the airlock first. The door was cylindrical, fixed and sealed into the centre of the transparent wall. The cylinder itself was opaque, the strong translucent material infused with blue colouring that only showed an impression of what was inside, cast in shade and light.

He pushed the button to open the airlock. There was a hiss as it opened, releasing air that had probably been trapped in there since the base's construction. It still tasted fresh, but warm.

Michael stepped inside without hesitation. His presence within the wide cylinder activated a mechanism that closed the door automatically behind him. He then heard the whir and hiss of machines scrubbing the air clean, making him sanitary. At least he didn't require a chemical shower, like people entering the base.

As the process continued, he checked his belt. There was a small box fixed there that contained a micro generator that would wrap him up in concentric magnetic fields, and then fill them with burnt ions. The thick semi-liquid would act as a perfect barrier from anything up to, but not including, a speeding bullet. The personal energy shield would be more than enough for any vapour, provided the said vapour didn't course a mountain to collapse on top of him.

Satisfied, he looked up. The air scrubbing process should have been completed by now. He checked the light: still pinkish-red.

'Agent Smitheson,' he said into the radio mic fixed into his node.

There was no reply, not even static. He turned and tried to see through the opaque inner curve of the airlock, back to where he knew Smitheson would still be standing. He couldn't see anything, not even an outline. The interior lights of the cylinder meant that even vague shadows were being cast away from the airlock, rather than against it.

Sighing, he turned to face the blinking pink-red light that he was still waiting to turn blue. He locked eyes with a man, six feet tall, who was standing immediately in front of him.

'Jesus!'

The man remained motionless, his square-set shoulders looking out of place in the round airlock. He wore a brown cap that perfectly matched his ruffled head of short hair, and what looked like an old-style life preserver. It was in fact reasonably high-tech; it had various features built in, including powdered pharmaceuticals, a radio, and a small filter to strain the salt out of seawater, making it safe to drink. His boots

looked huge compared to Michael's own. Michael stared down at the boots. He had bought them as a present five years ago, when he had first started making real money.

'Dad?'

'Your mom had *tits*, so I guess I'm your dad,' the man in the boots replied gruffly. He had stormy blue eyes that held little joy – hadn't done, in fact, for as long as Michael could remember.

'That,' the man finished, 'and your mom's been crab bait for half a decade.'

Michael looked at the man in disbelief. It was his father, down to the last detail. But, being as he was trapped in an airlock, it couldn't be. His father was back at the family home in Laurel, Maryland, or at his retreat in Baltimore, probably chewing stale No-bacco or fixing his lobster traps.

'I take it back. I'm not going to call you dad.'

'Ya, you'll call me Henry like every other day since you was nineteen! Always thought that made you sound grown up, didn't you, calling a man by his given name?'

Michael watched the old man crease his already wrinkled face, leathery from being held against the East Coast wind for so long. Henry Hudd had spent more time throwing traps from his boat than he had sitting in his own living room drinking, like the fathers of all Michael's old friends. Henry Hudd threw himself into his work, which made talking to him all the harder.

'You never talk to me,' Michael told him once, 'because you aren't even used to my company.'

He saw that the emotion in the face of man before him was genuine. He just didn't believe the man *himself* was genuine. He was a fraud, whipped up from his own mind and memories. No wonder he seemed like a caricature of what the man had really been like.

'I'm not going to waste time talking to a figment,' Michael said out loud.

'Look at you, in your suit,' his father rumbled. He slapped his knuckles against Michael's chest. 'Think you're all *that* now, do ya? A made man?'

'I've never called myself that. Go away.'

'Too good to be a fisherman's son, ey?'

'You ran your business into the ground, Henry. There was nothing left to fish for back home. Nineteen out of twenty traps came back empty. And the lobsters you did catch, you had to throw back because they were protected.'

'It was *an honest job!*'

'You're right. It was. And then you couldn't afford to clothe me, so you didn't bother. So *I* got a job. A paying one. And I got a degree and eventually got to Karlson Enterprises where I could show off my skills.' Michael looked at his watch. 'If we could wrap this up quickly, I'd appreciate it. I know we're probably waiting for some psychological release here so that I can move on, so let's not waste time.'

The old man grit his yellow teeth. He clomped forward half a step with that big boot of his. '*You forgot your proper name. You're not a Karlson, you're a Hudd!*'

'I'm both.'

‘You’re my *son!*’

‘You’re not even real, sir.’

‘More real than the “money” you have in that bank account of yours. Just ones and zeroes sitting in a machine somewhere! I got *paid*, in *metal and paper*, and *that* was a real job.’

‘Until there was nothing to be paid for,’ Michael replied tiredly. ‘Then you were broke. They offered you the job, that good job, at the fish farm, but you were too proud to take it. So I left and made my own way. I’ve not forgotten your name. I’m Michael Hudd-Karlson. I’m both now.’

‘I’m alone,’ the figment said.

‘I know.’

‘I’m dying!’

‘You’re just getting old,’ Michael said, ‘as we all are.’

He adjusted his headset, taking comfort from the feel of cold metal against his fingers. The metal was always cold, even though copper was one of the best conductors around. It came from having its physical substance rubbed against subspace almost constantly; the space beneath space sucked energy into it like a black hole.

Concentrating, Michael forced the manifestation of his father’s memory to disappear. There was no twist of vapour this time, not like Ashley’s storybook monster. Henry Hudd was there one second and gone the next. The instant this happened, the seal on the airlock door released with a hiss, and Michael stepped into the cave tunnel.

‘Alright,’ he sighed into his mic. ‘I’m through.’

‘There was a delay – everything okay?’ Smitheson radioed back.

‘Nothing unexpected. Tell Havers to catch up, I’m heading off now. We don’t have a lot of time.’

‘Yes, Director.’

*

Ashley Havers caught up with him a few minutes into the tunnel. He was out of breath, but still managed to expel a string of questions, theories and undeveloped trains of thought.

‘The energy shields we’re wearing might protect us against the vapour physically, but if it stimulates *cognitive* notions into physical manifestations, then it’s likely the shields won’t protect us. We have no idea what we’re walking in to, Director – we don’t even know if this cloud’s not going to eat us alive, having been catalysed by our atmosphere?’

‘Ash, are you an astrophysicist or a chemist?’

‘Just because I specialise in one field doesn’t mean I’m not well read in another,’ he replied. His hand was resting on his belt, as though he was worried the energy field might short out at any time. If it did, he probably wouldn’t have enough time to register the fact, let alone do anything about it.

Michael fought hard not to break out into a run. The other Directors were still a few minutes away from landing, and according to Smitheson the tunnel would take he and Ashley right to the secondary base on surface level, where the landing pad was situated.

‘I’m talking about widening your perspective,’ said Michael. ‘I’m talking about focusing on your specialist topic. You were drafted into WTO partly as a consultant, right? So you must know a lot more about Jupiter than I do.’

‘Right, right ...’ He sounded like he’d forgotten that Jupiter, that massive, gravitationally-hungry monster, was responsible for the chaos here and on the moon, and for the death of Sinda Havers,.

‘Well,’ Ashley began, ‘Jupiter’s a gas giant. It began to contract as per the Kelvin-Helmholtz model. The layers of gas that the planet is made of moved at different speeds, causing instability, which in turn caused the planet to shrink, or rather contract. Somehow something triggered the explosive release of the compacted gas and vapour.’

‘And in astrological terms, what could cause that?’

‘Well, combustion could, but theories of a combustible core to Jupiter were abandoned ages ago for theories of a dense liquid core. They were true: that’s all that’s left. It’s basically a dead water planet now.’

‘And its moons?’

‘Well, the gravity yield of the planet was reduced so significantly that all the moons were flung out into space. Jupiter couldn’t hold onto them anymore. Though, some of them had already broken apart prior to the final stage of the contraction, like Europa and Callisto.’

‘And the pieces were drawn into the planet, I presume?’

‘That’s right. If you’re suggesting the pieces of the moons triggered that final stage, then it’s possible but highly unlikely. Europa was miles of ice around a watery core. Callisto was about fifty percent ice and fifty percent rock. There was nothing to suggest, even from your own European aquaforming team, that there was anything unusual with the moons.’

‘I have evidence to the contrary,’ said Michael. ‘The Director we had placed on Europa was killed, but he sent a transmission before he died. They had found a strange life form there that lived in the ice. It was like a fluke, he said.’

‘That’s a kind of leech, am I right?’

‘A parasitic worm. They were destructive towards the machinery and the team on Europa, but otherwise seemed to need no sustenance. It was like they were there to defend the ice against invaders.’

Ashley stopped. He grabbed Michael’s sleeve and stared hard at his faint smile. The vapour coloured the air between them; they were close to outside.

‘You’re saying like antibodies.’

‘I wasn’t saying as such, but I was thinking it. They were my Director’s thoughts exactly. Why do you react like this?’

‘Because I’d half considered the destruction of the moon to be a kind of heuristic churning. Like how a stomach breaks up food for digestion. Jupiter wrenched its largest moons apart, and absorbed the pieces.’

Michael nodded solemnly. ‘A frightening thought, isn’t it?’

‘You think the planet has some sort of consciousness.’

‘Maybe not consciousness. Maybe a reactive behavioural pattern, like how a fly just reacts mindlessly when you swipe at it. No thoughts; no goals. It just is, like a huge body. It has a stomach. It has antibodies. It even has a huge red eye,’ he added, smiling childishly.

‘And, what? It’s invading?’

‘No. It seems to be drawn to human thought patterns and human creations. The flukes were destructive on Europa, and they fell out of the vapour cloud above the moon as well, but they were kind of defending the displaced Jovian atmosphere. I don’t think the atmosphere itself meant us harm. But by natural or supernatural means, it could make our thoughts manifest physically.’

Ashley laughed nervously. ‘You’re nuts.’

‘The theory’s nuts; I just came up with it.’

‘So how do we stop it?’

Michael began to move towards the exit of the tunnel again, and gestured that they should hurry.

‘There’s only you and me. But luckily there are about thirty other “me”s on their way right now.’

Sixty seconds later, they stepped out into mist-softened sunlight.

*

The rough-cut tunnel opened up at the foot of the mountain, on a shallow slope where the rocks were taller than the two men who walked between them. There was a kind of kissing gate built into a chain-link fence, which surrounded the surface base. Michael entered the base first, and Ashley second.

Red mist rolled across the flat tarmac. Domed barracks loomed out of the coloured fog. Michael knew that all the barracks were empty; the surface base had once been in use, but had been decommissioned a generation ago when the country stepped down permanently from international terror alert. The threat of terrorism had been believed ended, so the temporary bases were left to rust. As it had turned out, more trouble was brewing in Europe that meant these unused structures might once again be filled with grunts and army technicians.

Ashley checked his energy shield nervously, running his fingers over it. However, his fingers and his chest were covered by the barely visible plasma barrier, and they never touched. He felt a little numb, but he also felt confident that the roiling waves

of vapour couldn't touch him. He wouldn't have to breath the stuff in. It looked positively toxic.

Through the fog, swathes of clean air rotated from behind one of the closer buildings. Turning the corner, Ashley and Michael saw the helipad and the helicopter that had landed on it. Its rotors still spun at full speed, cutting through the vapour. Out of the rear hatch stepped six suited men, two at a time. They joined a complement of two dozen other individuals, all but two of them male.

'Jesus,' Ashley said. 'They all look like you.'

'It's the gene therapy,' Michael replied. 'Mainly superficial, but I suppose we all share a resemblance. We are siblings, after all.'

'We were,' one of them said, stepping forward and shaking Michael's hand. 'You killed our father though, didn't you? But I suppose I can't blame you, brother. Had we known, I think some of us might have done the same.'

'It *was* an accident,' Michael tried to reassure him, over the noise of the rotor.

The other Director nodded. To Ashley, the two men did look like brothers: both dark haired, almost the same height, both with large hands and identical suits. Every one of them had the glint of the copper Karlson headset through their hair. Some of them had chosen to shave their heads, to display the elite device more proudly. Of all the people there, the thirty or so gathered, Ashley couldn't spot one who he could envision playing with his dog in the park, or enjoying a movie at the cinema with friends, or cheering with a beer in front of the TV set. They all looked like *businessmen*. Every one of them was a Karlson Director, through and through.

The tarmac beneath Ashley's feet was vibrating ever so slightly, just as the underground centre had been. It hadn't let up, but now he was feeling something of the light-headedness that had caused Agent Smitheson to collapse. A headache began to push against the back of his skull. He also began to feel a form of *throbbing* in the air, like somebody punching Morse code directly into his mind.

He'd never felt the sensation before, but he understood what it was. The Directors were communicating with each other, using the headsets.

Shimmering pictures developed in the space above his head. They looked like photographs held under running water. Mostly they were colourless, or painted with the hues of the thickening vapour around them. Watching, Ashley saw that they were the pieces of the story that Michael had pieced together, some of them involving Ashley himself, others including snatches of Sinda and the *Summanus* satellite station. The story played out like a badly edited film, and then duplicated itself, each reproduction siphoning into the air around each of the Directors' headsets.

Distracted by winking lights up where he assumed the peak of the mountain would be, Ashley peered into the turgid yellow-brown mists. The winking lights flickered in a higher concentration. They were like stars. They shot overhead, glittering, and then slowed almost to a crawl. They were sparkling droplets of ammonium rain, which fell harmlessly amongst the crowd of Directors, spotting the tarmac. The droplets left dark rings around dusty white smudges, like chalk or dried bird droppings.

Distracted by the beauty of it, Ashley didn't notice the rise in wind speed. It was only when his energy shield began to react with the rushing gases that he realised, and when he did he gaped at the vast shapes formulating amongst the vapour. They were

wide and diamond shaped, like giant stingrays. Others snaked through the air in evanescent ripples, making him think of the Arctic Northern Lights.

‘Director...’ he said slowly. ‘Ah, Directors ... whatever you’re doing, unless it’s strictly necessary...’

Michael turned to face the mountainside. The other Directors also peered upwards, some shielding their eyes against the falling ammonium. More shapes swept through the vapour, but most hung around the mountain’s peak as though afraid to come down, or perhaps unwilling to leave something behind.

‘They’re what I saw when I took the dive,’ Ashley said, becoming breathless. ‘Extremophiles; living entities.’

‘Can they cause physical harm?’ Michael asked.

‘I have no idea.’

Surges of bile-coloured mist began to thicken within the upper layers of fog. It rose in an arc away from the mountain peak, becoming an almost solid shape. A central capsule shape rounded and fattened in the centre; far-reaching limbs grew rapidly out of the sides.

Both Michael and Ashley saw the developing monster in the same way. At one moment it appeared to be a gargantuan winged *thing*, gaping jaws attached to a head that lolled at the end of a long ropey neck. The next moment it was a flickering image, familiar to everybody that looked at it: a sort of hulking man-shape, a giant formed from the swirling gases, its bulging cranium sheltering twin pits that could have been eyes. The protruding waves of vapour that might have been wings where then more akin to arms, flat but long, splitting into clumsy fingers at the ends.

It lurched, steadying itself with a powerful limb. It ducked slowly as the much smaller forms spiralled around it and swatted the insect-like extremophiles away. Thrumming sound, as much vibration as it was actual noise, radiated from the giant in waves.

Grey-blue objects began to plummet towards the disused military compound. They were the flukes, alive but useful to the giant only as projectiles. They crashed into the split tarmac like unexploded bombs. The Directors scattered. Michael yanked Ashley aside and ducked behind the nearest half-barrel structure.

‘I had no idea...’ Ashley began.

‘Stop it. Whatever it is, we can figure it out later.’

‘But the planet ... It must *always* have been this, *alive* all this time, a single organism...’

‘I’m not sure it’s alive, *or* an organism. I think it’s taking on whatever form it can glean from us.’

‘It looks quite real to me.’

The extremophiles were not the only smaller shapes developing within the currents of vapour folding over the tarmac. Out of the thicker areas lumbered stranger things, sometimes recognisable and sometimes not. Ashley saw a cluster of cats trotting away from the disturbance, their tails pointing arrow-straight towards the sky. Something large – maybe a horse, although the noise that came out of its heavy-set throat didn’t sound much like a horse – galloped right into a group of Directors only

to veer away at the last second, and disappear. Some scattered in surprise; one Director was torn in two by a huge fluke lurching out of the mist, its sphincter and mouth gouging all the meat between his hips and his ribs.

‘The thought-forms,’ Michael panted. ‘Ignore them...’

‘I can ignore cats, but the other things...’

He watched as the barracks they were sheltering behind sagged like a lump of flesh, and then began to ooze brown fluid like liquidised liver.

‘We’ve got to get together.’

‘We’re trying,’ Michael snapped.

They stumbled towards the nearest group of Directors. The others were hidden by the fog, which in places was as thick as storm clouds. Together the gathering made twenty. Michael hoped that would be enough.

‘*Concentrate,*’ he yelled over the noise of the giant’s rumble. ‘*Make your own thought-forms ... Use them against the giant.*’

The air next to Ashley’s ears thumped. The Directors were communicating again, though this time it was not with each other. They were communicating with the displaced Jovian atmosphere, forcing it to adopt the shape *they* wanted. Their tulpas co-ordinated like a swarm, each bird, bug, reptile, beast, relative, friend, corpse, keepsake and talisman co-operating with its neighbour. The Directors managed their unconscious thoughts with a degree that a normal person could never achieve without years of meditation. The headsets acted as filter and funnel, roping each manifestation to the next to create a weapon, pseudo-conscious and semi-alive, which rushed towards the gaping giant.

The giant acted like a child plagued by winged ants. It swept a massive hand at the collected tulpas, but did little damage. Once manifested, the thought-forms were easily maintained by the Directors and their apparatus. Piece by piece the vast entity was dismantled, its arms – or was it now a wing, striated and vast, pushing all the air and vapour before it like the leathery appendage of a monstrous bat? – flailing ineffectually.

‘*Keep going!*’ one of the Directors screamed. ‘*Don’t let up!*’

A furious spiral of bird-like thought-forms tore through a cluster of Directors, knocking two of their feet and carrying another two up into the air, spasming in the hurricane of tiny mouths. Tatters of their clothing twisted through the air.

Despite their small victories, the defences of the giant were unorganised. The Jovian extremophiles were not an invasion force, but lost fauna from an unravelled planet. They scattered around and through the gas giant as it roared at the heavens. The fog thinned; it was sucking in the displaced atmosphere to reconstruct itself, even as it was torn apart.

Ashley could do little to assist with the onslaught. All he could think of his Sinda, his deceased wife, and all that he saw before him was her face painted in the colours of Jupiter. She held out a hand, maybe beckoning, maybe motioning for him to come no further. She was swept up in a red gale that was forming around the disfigured forehead of the multi-form giant. The gale swirled on a central axis, circular and increasing in size, until it eclipsed the head of the giant. It drank up the vapour, the

thought-forms, the extremophiles, the black twists of sinuous flesh that were the immune system of the vaporous entity. All was sucked into the spinning red mouth, which was at the same time a steadily closing eye, and then – as the vision of Sinda disappeared into the retreating mists – the redness was only a split circle without edges, and then nothing.

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The air was clear. The sky filtered pale sunlight through its blue layers from the vacuum beyond. A soft wind curled around the feet of the exhausted Directors, scattering fragments of broken chain-link fencing and shards of metal wrenched from the upturned military vehicles that littered the compound.

Finding Michael in just a few seconds, Ashley collapsed beside him, lying face-up on the ground. The Chief Director smiled and sat next to him, picking at the tattered edges of his shirtsleeves. His clothes had been torn ragged by the winds, which had reached dangerous speeds during the conflict.

‘Tough win,’ he said.

Ashley only nodded. He was staring at the sky.

A few of the other Directors were close enough to hear. They gathered around Michael naturally, as though the network of Karlson Directors had their Chief as a central point of gravity towards which they were all drawn.

‘I can’t see any remnants, sir,’ one said. His bald head was dripping with sweat, and his strained headset was crumpled like tin foil around his skull.

‘If there are any, they’re widely dispersed and won’t be coming back. We defeated it quite thoroughly,’ Michael promised.

The others agreed. Ashley knew that, a few hours previously, the Directors had sensed the approaching entity. Now they could sense its absence. There was nothing left of the displaced Jovian atmosphere, and not a sign of the giant. It hadn’t crumbled or collapsed, but evaporated completely. It had existed for four and a half billion years as a planet, and lived – if alive it had been – for only a duration of days. Whatever it had been, it was gone now, so many broken particles of gas. If a few wisps had survived, then they were dead wisps, spreading and thinned out by the Earth’s winds.

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London Stone

Written by Jennifer Williams

It was my Nan who first told me about the London Stone. When she was teaching me to pick pockets and cut purses, we would sometimes go walking through the cemetery, because, she said to me, “Aggie, we must walk like proper ladies or we’ll get noticed. If we get noticed, we get caught, and then it’s the clink. Proper ladies spend all their time learning to walk. It’s all they do. That and sewin’.”

One day we was walking through the gravestones and I was fiddling with a silk we had lifted that morning, and Nan said to me, “Look there Aggie, do you know what that is?”

Nan had long, tapered, skilled hands. I never saw anyone with a faster grab than my Nan. And she was pointing her bony finger at a long grey stone laying in the grass. It was about as long as a man, and about twice as wide. It was the same colour as the sky was that day; flat dead grey.

I rolled my eyes at her.

“’s a gravestone Nanna. We’re in a *graveyard*.”

She cuffed me about the ear’ole.

“Don’t be smart with me, child. And you’re wrong anyway. That is the London Stone, that is.”

I asked what that was. Nan told me it was the oldest stone in all of the city. That it had been there longer than any other thing, and that it was here before even the oldest buildings. I snorted.

“What about the Tower? What about the Bridge?”

“The Stone was here before ‘em. Before all of ‘em. There hasn’t always been a city here, Aggie my love. Once it was a town, and once it was a village. And before that...” Nanna shrugged. “Fields, trees. Maybe some people still lived here. But the Stone was always here. “

“Oh.” I said, not that sure I was interested. My Nanna was a clever woman, who knew all sorts of things. She could even read, and had taught me the few letters I had. Sometimes she would go off on these wild stories, and normally they were good ones, and I liked to hear them. This story didn’t take my fancy.

“This is a very important stone Aggie. This is the heart of the city.”

She bent and touched it with her fingertips, almost fondly, but then as she rose she wiped her hand on her skirts as if she had brushed against something filthy.

“Hundreds of years ago, people worshipped at this stone...”

“What’s that mean?”

“Like what you’re supposed to do in church, child. Give prayers up to the Lord, ask him for things, show humility.” Nanna snorted. She was not fond of church.

“These people, these old people of London looked up to other gods though, Aggie. Gods with names and horns. Gods of the earth and the trees. They brought gifts for

them, and left them on the stone, so that their crops would grow or their illnesses be cured. Sometimes, they would even make sacrifices.”

I frowned. I didn't really know what that meant either. At that moment a tall gentlemen in a black hat walked through the gate and bent to place some flowers on a grave. Nanna lowered her voice.

“They would take a chicken, or a lamb, or a goat, and a sharp knife, and while they held it down on this stone they would slit its throat. Blood everywhere. And they'd ask the Stone for what they wanted.”

“Did that work Nanna?”

“Maybe,” she said, and her voice sounded for a moment like it was far away, like she wasn't listening to me at all really “if they wanted it hard enough, if they was desperate. There's always a price though Aggie. Blood always needs to be spilt when you're dealing with gods.”

Nanna was quiet for a moment, looking hard at the blank stone. The seconds dragged on and I shivered in the cold. Then from above the church roof a bird called, a raven I think it was, and she came back to me then, and her voice sounded like mischief again.

“Now let's see you have that chap's hanky. If it's silk you can keep it.”

A few years later Nanna died. I lost my taste for thievery after a spell in the clink, and took to emptying men's pockets in a different way. At fifteen years old my skin was still smooth and I still had my teeth, meaning I could earn more than most of the rotten old whores who stood on the corners and in the alleys, with their titties sagging in their dirty old clothes. It weren't nice work, and the men was mostly smelly and rough, with chapped fingers and underclothes so dirty I would have to look away when they lowered their trousers. But the coppers were more lenient to us whores than the cutpurses, and it was good to be earning my own bit of money. I got friendly with some of the other girls and we put our pennies together to rent a room, where we would take turns sleeping in the bed and keeping the fire going for the next girl.

I even got a couple of regular chaps. One of them was a proper gentlemen, Mister Smith he said his name was (although I don't think that was exactly true). He had a house in Kensington and a wife and children, and was an important law man of some sort. He had a taste for me I think 'cause I was young and my arse was still round like an apple, and my tits didn't hang down like his good woman's did. He paid me well and even brought me presents sometimes; fruits, perfumed water, even a small leather purse of my own. He called me his “sweetie”, and I didn't mind him that much 'cause he washed and kept his beard trim. He didn't hit me either, and if he left bruises sometimes when he was taking his fill, well, it weren't as bad as some I've had.

After a couple of years of this, things started to go wrong for me. I'd taken to tobacco and drink, as it was cold on the streets of London most nights, and the slow burn of gin in your throat would help keep you warm. Finding the customers started to get harder as my skin began to bloat and my teeth got yellower. Then one day my bleeding stopped and my belly started to get bigger, and I knew I was in real trouble. There are some men who will sleep with a pregnant whore, but not enough of them to

live on. I began to rely on my friends to keep a roof over my head, and although they was kind at first, they did eventually sour, and began telling me I should go and see Mother Mara, the old woman on Kings Street who would sort out this kind of trouble. I couldn't do it though; I had heard the stories, like we all had, of the blood on her back step and what got thrown out with the offal. I was scared of her and her instruments, and so I watched my belly and ankles swell.

That was a hard winter for me.

The baby came, a boy, in the arse end of March, on a day that rained and rained and rained. A couple of the older ladies had seen more births than they could count and they helped me, heating up the water, and giving me gin to drink when it was too much. When I saw him, I knew he couldn't live; he was so tiny and scrawny and his little heartbeat was so faint. The women looked at each other with hard eyes and busied themselves with tidying the mess my child had brought with him into the world. Sickly, said one of the old women. Weak.

I nursed him as best I could, never leaving his side, but he remained small and pale, the blue lines under his skin making him look dead already, and the other women looked at him and shook their heads. I cried; he was mine, all I had, but he was too weak to even cry properly when he was hungry. I was so convinced I would lose him that I couldn't even bear to name him.

When he was only a few weeks old he started to run a fever- he was so hot you could hardly touch him, yet still there was no flush in his cheeks, none at all. I fussed over him but he just got worse, his little heartbeat got quieter and quieter until I had to press my ear right up against his wheezing chest to hear it. I was desperate. I was frightened.

None of the girls wanted to look after my baby 'cause they didn't want to be the one who was with him when he died, but one night I managed to convince Judy to watch over him for a couple of hours at least. I got out all my powder and rouge, I washed and combed my hair, and I found what clothes I could. I prettied myself up like the tart I once was, and I went out looking for Mister Smith.

Now I didn't know for sure if Mister Smith was my baby's father (how could I be?) but I thought, with one thing and another, that it was quite likely. Perhaps I thought that if I told about the boy he might be moved to help somehow. I was such a stupid girl.

I found him on his way to one of his favourite haunts, The King's Arms, and I could see from the curl of his lip that he was not best pleased to see me.

"Aggie, what do you want?"

He was furtive at first, caught out in public like he was, and I could tell that my cunny wasn't quite the attraction it was before, but he came around in the end. Men are like that; no better argument than the memory of a firm tit and a tight fuck.

I told him I had somewhere special to go this time, somewhere we had never been before. I don't know what I was thinking then, my mind was full of my boy and how I had to help him, but how this could help, I didn't know. I led him into the cemetery

and I swear, I swear to you now I had no plan in mind, no thought of what to do next. I swear.

I laid him down on that stone, on the London Stone, and it didn't take him long to start enjoying himself. I was thinking of other things though. For some reason I thought of my Nanna, when I was very small. How sometimes she would sit in the evenings by the open fire, just staring into the flames, for hours sometimes. Her cheeks would turn red and her brow would sweat, but her eyes were so far away. This is what I was thinking of when I took the knife from my purse, and when I stuck it in under his ribs, and when I shoved my hanky in his suddenly screaming mouth. Christ, but he was noisy.

I tore the knife across, and then down, suddenly not sure I was doing enough, that perhaps I'd just leave him wounded and angry, and I started to murmur under my breath, "For my boy. Life for my son. A real life, a better one."

Mr Smith squealed and struggled but I held him with my weight (I shouldn't have been able to, I know, but I could) and I said it louder.

"Life for my son! Make him well. Heal him!"

It was a clear night and Mr Smith's blood ran black under the moonlight, pooling on the London Stone like the pavement outside a slaughterhouse. I could smell it, sharp like pennies, and I said it again harsh, whispered it almost.

"Don't let me son die. Give him life!"

Mr Smith wriggled under me one last time, the muffled noises quieter. And then he died. Just, too much blood had run out of him and he *died*. I saw then the blood soaking into my skirts and drying sticky on my hands and I was suddenly so frightened I couldn't hardly breath. I got up too quickly and half fell off the stone, my legs all shaky. I thought of money then (perhaps that was what I'd been thinking all along) and I pulled the long leather wallet from Mr Smith's belt. I could buy my son medicines with this, all the medicines he could need. He'd be alright. I stood up and ran from the cemetery, not looking back at what I'd left behind.

When I got back to the shared room with it's small but merry fire, Judy was pacing, anxious to leave and start making her own money for the night. Course, once she caught a look at my bloodied petticoats, and, no doubt, the look on my face, she turned away from me and walked right out the door without another glance. I never saw Judy again.

I didn't care though. I barely heard her go. I had spotted my boy, swaddled in his blanket, snug against the thin cotton pillow on the bed. He was pink. His little arm, curled outside his covers was fleshy and dimpled, and his cheeks were a healthy rose pink.

Everything else about that night fell away as I picked up my son. He was warm in my arms, and gurgled and wriggled just like a baby should. I don't think I've ever been as happy. I named him Jack then, and sat with him on the bed all night, the wallet next to me and the blood on my skirts forgotten.

And my baby grew into a boy, and then into a young man. He was a darling boy; clever and bright as a button, and as he got older, he became tall and broad and handsome. He took to reading like a duck to water, and had various jobs where he earned a decent wage. An honest wage, too. He had his moods of course, as boys do, and he could fly into terrible rages. Worse were the days where he went quiet, and wouldn't speak to me or anyone. Jack would drink and stare at the fire, angry at something I could not see or understand. But I forgave him his moods. I'm his mother, see? I have to forgive him. Mothers forgive their sons.

He studied enough to go to a real school, and eventually, when I was so proud I could burst, he became a doctor, and then a surgeon. My son! A surgeon.

He's a man now, and making his own way in the world. I don't see him so much anymore. In fact I don't see him hardly at all. I don't ask where he goes. Not that I go out so much anymore myself; this is a bad time to be a woman in Whitechapel, and if you have any sense, they say, you'll stay indoors and away from the shadows. London is darker at night than I remember, and colder.

I know in my heart I have lost my boy now. I may be an old whore, but I'm not stupid. I asked for my son to be saved, and he was. I wanted him to have a real life, and he did. Now I think that something has finally come to take what it is owed, something older than the Tower, older than the City walls, perhaps even older than the Thames itself.

There's always a price, Nanna said. And the price is usually blood.

N381 (Detour)

Written by **Benedict J Jones**

Sergeant Torrance stood in the drizzle and stared at the double decker bus that had been badly parked beneath a railway arch, its bulk completely blocking the road which passed beneath the railway line. It had once been the famous red of other London buses, but was now smothered in grime and looked as though it had been dredged from the Thames.

Only in south London, thought Torrance as he turned to the two Community Support Officers who had found the wayward bus.

“Well?”

Scullion, the taller of the two CSOs, shrugged and then replied.

“We were on our morning rounds and, well, it was just here. Do you reckon this is that night bus that disappeared last month?”

“Who knows? I don’t suppose there was anyone on board?”

“No, but we found this.”

Scullion passed a bundle of papers to Torrance. Each scrap was covered in handwriting, the bundle comprising several sheets of notepaper, part of a paper ticket reel and what looked like the fly-leaf of a book. Across the street a group of youths, hoods up as usual, had begun to congregate and watch the officers.

“You two go and tell that lot to clear off. But check if they know anything about this first.”

Torrance leaned against the wall of the arch, out of the rain, lit up a cigarette and began to read.

The journey back to SE16 was a familiar one; one that I’d taken for years. After many nights in the bars and clubs around Leicester Square, the N381 had been my chariot home. We rolled along at speed now that the daytime traffic had vacated the roads. I closed my eyes and rested my head on the cool glass of the window. When I opened them we were on the bridge, and I saw the familiar lump of St Thomas’ Hospital on the south side. I felt a twinge in my gut. My father had passed on inside that place.

I had a strange feeling of uneasiness. Something in the very air which I breathed seemed to have changed. That wrongness you get when unseen eyes crawl over your skin. The hospital looked grubbier and more ill-lit than ever. I suddenly felt very, very sober. Looking at the walls of the hospital it seemed as though there were carved faces in the pale walls, angular twenty-first century gargoyles. Earlier in the evening the sky had displayed that cast of light you only see over major cities. Now it had taken on a deep red colouring and the clouds appeared thicker, as if hiding something.

The moon seemed lower and more bulbous, hanging over London and watching like the single milky eye of some gargantuan Cyclops. To me, the other passengers seemed oblivious to these less-than-subtle changes.

Suddenly, an Oriental girl near the front of the bus screamed. It did not sound like a scream of shock or even terror but one torn from somewhere deeper; a place deep in her psyche. The girl's scream did not cease or even change pitch as her friends gathered round. The horrible wail continued, causing my skin to turn to goose flesh. It continued until she abruptly stopped and slumped, glassy-eyed, into the arms of her friends.

As the bus began to slow to a halt, murmurs broke out amongst the other passengers. They had begun to notice the dirty red sky, and the way that the normally brown river seemed vermilion in the light thrown from the unnatural, sickly orb which hung above us. With jerky steps, I made my way to the stairs. Others had the same idea. At the bottom of the stairs, I almost ran into a tall student in dirty trainers and a heavily-built, muscular boy who were both heading toward the driver's compartment. The doors hissed open.

There were six or seven young men clustered at the bus stop. Like so many of their tribe they hid their features within the shadows of caps and hooded sports tops. As they half stepped onto the bus, I thought I saw the reflective flash of feline eyes in those shadowy hoods. The student in the dirty trainers seemed to see the same thing more clearly. He recoiled from the youths. Hard white grins spread in the shadows and they grabbed at him, pushing and pulling at the same time. Muscle-boy stepped in and pushed three of the strange young men back off the bus. I saw the glint of the blade a moment before it punched into muscle. The student was dragged from the bus as the stabbed youth slumped against the luggage rack, leaking red. One of the youths remained staring at me with those grossly inhuman eyes. He slid a slim mobile phone from his pocket and held it out before him:

“Smile for the Blind Piper, fassy-hole!”

I heard the “snikkt” of the mobile phone camera capturing a snap shot, then he was gone, pushing through the doors as they closed. Angry shouts came from the driver's sealed compartment, his face contorted into a mask of fear and rage. He pressed his foot down and the bus moved off once again, forward into the night.

Dennis, as we discovered muscle-boy was called, had managed to drag himself up onto a seat. The wound in his side was deep but, to the passengers who ran to help him, it did not seem to be imminently life threatening. He let out short shallow breaths as he sat there staring at the small puncture wound in his otherwise flawless physique. Looking up at faces marked with concern, Dennis managed a thin smile:

“It's not *that* bad”.

There were a few nervous rustles of laughter which were interrupted by the driver, who we later discovered was called Anthony.

“I can’t raise anyone at base. I’m going to pull the alarm; get the Police and an ambulance down here for him”

I nodded and pulled out my phone. “The hospital’s just back there”, I added. “Has anyone got reception?”

No signal. People withdrew phones from pockets and handbags. Out of the twenty or so people downstairs there wasn't a sign of a signal. In this modern world where everything and everyone is a phonecall away, I felt stranded and slightly helpless. Anthony stuck his head out of his cabin and tried to reassure his charges.

“I’ve set off the alarm. They’ll be here within ten minutes”

He climbed out with a green First Aid kit tucked underneath his arm.

“Don’t worry mate. Let’s see what we can do till the ambulance gets here”

Time passed. Wind moaned passed the bus; a sorrowful sound that further dampened our mood. Above the wind there were other sounds; higher, keener, sharper. Then we heard the crunch of glass breaking upstairs.

“Those little bastards!” exclaimed Anthony, convinced that the youths had come back now that the bus had stopped. The sound of more glass shattering came from overhead. Then we heard what sounded like an awful flapping and fluttering, which brought to mind the image of colossal leathery wings. I stood frozen, unable to blink, let alone move. Anthony’s face dropped like a dead sparrow from the sky. We all stayed like that, flesh and bone statues unable to move. Even the creases of pain in Dennis’s face seemed to have been ironed out.

I’d like to tell you that I was the first to dash up the stairs, but I was not. That dubious honour went to a young man whose name we still don’t know. He’s sitting near me now but hasn’t said a word since he climbed those stairs two at a time. His hair has turned to the colour of frost. When he reached the top of the stairs he stopped dead and I, unseeing, bounded into his back. He did not move; his body was a dead weight rooted to the spot. I believe that his unmoving self, obscuring my view for those precious seconds, probably saved my sanity, for the moment at least. The top deck was a nocturnal butcher's shop. The normally harsh lightstrips were dark and dead. Here and there were the remains of the passengers I had left behind when I made my move downstairs. An index finger here, an ear there, a mish-mash of broken flesh barely hidden by torn seats and grey shadows. I just stared. My hands were locked tight to the young man’s shoulders. I thought of my beautiful Naomi, I thought of my home, I thought of my mum. Tears welled in my eyes as I headed back down the stairs.

There was a commotion at the bottom of the stairs. Some of the passengers, now done with this madness, attempted to alight from the bus. Anthony was remonstrating with them loudly in an attempt to keep them in the perceived safety of his vehicle.

“..Nah, I really don't think you want to be going out there. I've activated the alarm. The Police will be here soon”.

A pair of young men, who appeared to be Italian or maybe Spanish, tried to force their way off the bus. Anthony shook his head, stepped back, and let the passengers make their own choice. Once they were gone there were only nine of us left. I shall record everyone's names here so that, hope against hope, our loved ones will know that we did not abandon them for selfish reasons. We are: myself – Brian Jaegar, Anthony Nuga, Dennis Christian, Reiko Horie, Makako Yamaguchi, A J Shah, Michelle McDonald, Alexandra Simonev, and the semi-comatosed guy whose name we do not know.

Watching the other two passengers walk away into that unnatural night I knew that I would never see them again. I felt a profound sense of loss as they disappeared into the dark. Whatever happened next I knew that I had to stay on this bus and not attempt to flee into the too-warm night beyond its doors. Even as I watched, the very shadows cast by that bulbous moon seemed to twitch before me. There were things in those shadows beyond my comprehension. Anthony seemed to see them too, and gave me a startled look before heading back to his cab. Outside, something thumped against the side panels of the bus. With a jump our carriage started up once more and lurched forward as the engine leapt to life. As the bus swung around into the arc of a U-turn I saw, through the window, the youths standing and staring. One sat in an algae-encrusted shopping trolley whilst another rocked it up into the air. Behind them, the walls were covered in graffiti and tags that I could not quite read; words without vowels in the correct places. I was very glad that we were once again on the move.

We were roaring back towards Westminster Bridge when suddenly the airbrakes hissed again, dragging us to a stop.

“What's happening?”, I called over the ticking over of the engine.

As one, we pressed forward to crowd around the large front window. Anthony said nothing; he had halted the bus on the bridge's approach. The golden tower of Big Ben, not as tall as you think, stood shattered and twisted - a great, fat tendril wrapped around it like some oversized vine. Our eyes tried to follow the tendril to its source but, wherever it was, it lay hidden behind the other buildings. We continued to stare.

“Turn the bus around”, muttered A J.

Reiko clutched her Louis Vuitton handbag to her chest and nodded vigorously. Anthony looked at us once before he began to manoeuvre the bus back round and head deeper into South London.

I talked to the others before I started to write this. Anthony has told us that he reckons we have around two hours of fuel left, maximum. So far, it seems we will remain unmolested as long as we keep moving. There are rumbles in the sky and flashes of green here and there. All I can think about is the eyes of those youths and the simple fact that I saw nothing in them. No hatred, no fear, no emotion, nothing. The paper, along with the diesel, is almost gone now so I shall finish. Please don't forget us.

Brian Jeagar (24/03/07)

Torrance finished reading as he stubbed out his third cigarette. He let the smoke out in a long jet and shook his head. This had to be some kind of publicity stunt. He looked around for the two Community Support Officers but they were nowhere to be seen. The rain had stopped but the sky looked darker. The youths were still there, watching. One of them grinned at Torrance and spun a cap around and around on his finger. It looked like the cap of a CSO. Torrance looked closer, and the boy's face seemed to twist, the skin flexing as though something moved beneath it. As the hooded figures stood up as one, Torrance reached for his baton.

On The Fringes

Written by J Kaval

When did the Devil enter me? How did he get inside? I've no idea. He started meddling with my daily life. He was an ardent preacher. He became a nuisance. I wanted to get rid of him at any cost before he could convert me to his religion. So I went to the Lord God.

At the entrance God said to me "I created you without your consent, but I cannot recreate you without your consent. You're in bad shape. You certainly need me to cast away the Devil in you. I need your full co-operation to do the job. Will you consent?"

"Certainly, Sir, I'll consent. Two Devils cannot live under the same roof. Let us throw him out."

"Well, I warn you, there's a deep gulf and a wide gap between us. The distance is in light years. You can't cross over to me. You would be in the dark and alone in the hollow. I'm going to cloud your vision. You can't see me, but you can hear and feel me. I can listen to you and even to your heartbeat. Are you afraid?"

"No, Sir."

God then cupped a mask over my nose and connected it to the spirit of eternal life. He arranged for glucose to flow into my veins. He armored my chest with a heart-protecting vest. He straightened my head and placed it on a plastic plank. Then he clouded my vision. I descended into the abyss of darkness.

He plastered my shaven head with *divine soma*. He pricked the sides of my head. Within seconds I felt cool and soft all over. I said to God "Sir, I feel very comfortable, as if I was in an air-conditioned room. You're doing a great job and I'm sure you'll succeed."

"Thank you, son. Listen to me carefully. I'm going to cut the outer skin of your head on four sides with a scalpel. You'll have a little pain. Will you be able to cope with it?"

By the time I heard the last word I felt the blade had done its job, moving swiftly and quickly.

"Son, hear me. I want to see where the Devil is hiding. I have to make some holes in your skull. Are you scared?"

"Oh my God, are you going to break the very same skull you made for me? OK...OK...It's thou who maketh and unmaketh at thy will. So why should I be afraid? Am I not in thy hands? Dear Lord, go ahead."

"Wonderful, son. On this table I have seen many, but not one like you. You're special. Let me introduce you to Angel Noorjahan. She is beautiful, alert, expert and adept; a wonderful lady. She plays with surgical toys. She assists me. Angel Guard too is an all-rounder and well experienced. He is at my side. We're going to corner the Devil and kick him out."

While my ears were tuned to God's words, my mind was worrying about having bullet holes in my head. What would happen to my thoughts and feelings? How could

I keep the secrets stored in the inner chambers away from God's eyes? All of them were classified.

"Son, I'm going to drill six holes in your skull. May I?"

"Oh Jesus! Why should you have six holes? Isn't one enough?" I pleaded with Him.

"The bloody Demon inside you has now grown enormously. It is larger and taller. It seems that it has ten heads like *Ravana*. Perhaps there might be a legion of Devils. We don't want to take the risk. We intend to make a combined and concerted attack from all sides. We'll have to pull and push them out through not one hole but all the holes at the same time. Do you understand?"

I am a poor mortal. What could I do? I had no choice but to submit to the divine command. I heard and felt the commotion of drilling, pulling, pushing, plumbing, cleaning, again and again. I was sure God and his Angels must be evicting the Demons. They were working with haste, though I could see neither God's team nor the Devil's gang.

I was a little worried that God might find a lot of alcohol in my head and accuse me of alliance with another mundane Devil. It might create an embarrassing situation for both of us. So I very gently said: "Sir, please check my pulse and blood. The Demons might switch them off before they leave me."

God then laughed and whispered in my ear "I know you from the day you were in the womb, so don't worry about that. I am your pulse. Don't you know that I'm in your blood? A drink a day is to live for another day."

I felt as if I'd been kicked on the ass. I was really flattened by him. It was a preemptive strike. I heard the Angels giggling.

"Son, you are past sixty-five years. Your brain has started to shrink. The veins are getting weak. Empty spaces have appeared in your skull. The number of shock absorbers in your skull is fewer. Even mild shocks might disrupt your computer system. There is even a chance of a complete crash. So be alert mentally, physically and even sexually. Begin a second youth. By the way, what are you by profession?"

"I'm a wordsmith. I write stories and novels."

"Really? That's great. Can I read some of your stories? You must be paid very good money for your work."

"No, Sir. Your every second is money, but not mine. We get little. Unless you are a celebrated author, your income from writing is negligible. A weekly magazine serialised my novel for twenty weeks. I received a big 'thank you'. Sometimes a hard written story may not even bring you the price of a cup of tea."

I couldn't say more. For several minutes it was monastic silence.

"Son, do not lose heart. One day you will become a great author, and your grandchildren will enjoy the fruits of your labor."

"Thank you, Sir. I am going to write a story about our encounter."

"That would be nice of you. Once it is written, would you show it to me?"

"Of course I will."

“Thank you. I would love to read it. Now, Angel Noorjahan just left on an emergency call but Angel Mary has arrived in time. She’ll sponge your seat of wisdom with *Sanjeevani* before I pull down the shutters. She is highly experienced and serious. She is a little angry with me for chatting with you.’

I felt sad and politely asked “Sister, are you angry with God? Don’t you know we talk because we are humans, not beasts nor machines nor robots? What would happen if the Gods were dumb?”

“Dear brother, I’m not angry. God was simply joking. We enjoyed your verbosity. Your mouth’s beatings were very interesting. Tell us, how do you feel now?”

Honestly, I enjoyed the feather touch of Mary’s fingers over my battered head. I confessed “Sister, I feel like a child sleeping on its mother’s lap during the winter. I wish not to be awakened for years.”

“That sounds like music to our ears. Doesn’t it, God?”

There was a tinkling of bells everywhere. I could hear God’s soft laughter. I was overwhelmed.

“Son, listen. I’ve exorcised the Demon. He has gone down the drain in a million pieces, never to return. I’ve made two outlets to drain the polluted wastes of the Demon. I’ve closed all other exits, so there’s no entry for him from any quarter. Mary has purified your alcove. She has blanketed your skull with heavenly balm. Now, would you be able to cope with a few mild pricks? I’m going to stitch your outer skin. Ready?”

Before I could say ‘yes’ God had finished his job. His hands were swifter than light and faster than the wind. He acts first and then talks sweetly. I was sure he had downed the shutters and bolted them. Now, not even Angels could enter my head.

While Mary was bandaging my head I asked: “Why should God get annoyed if the Angels flirt with the mortals?”

“Because men believe that they have made God after their image.”

I heard again the bells ringing and singing aloud. The godly laughter echoed from a distant corner like soft music. I felt it coming closer and closer to me. In the end it became a sweet command: “Let there be light.”

Suddenly the deep and wide hollow was filled up, the distance disappeared, the cloud evaporated, the darkness ceased. There was light enough to see everything with my naked eyes. I saw the theatre, the machines, the surgical apparatus, the nurses, and the young energetic doctor near me smiling. All of them appeared relaxed and happy. The doctor whispered to me:

“Hi, Joe, how do you feel now? Are you comfortable? Ninety percent of your blood clot has been taken out. Don’t worry about the remainder and don’t bother about it. See that your head doesn’t take a knock for a week. You will be alright within a couple of weeks. It’s all over and you are well, maybe due to your prayers! I noticed your lips moving now and then. Though physically thin, you are mentally very strong. I do admire you. Really you are special. You co-operated with us very well. Thank you.”

“Doctor *Saab*, how long did you take?”

“Almost three hours”, he replied.

“It was really a pleasant encounter. I enjoyed conversing with you.”

“Me? Talking to you? No. Why?...Why do you ask me? We keep our code of conduct.”

“Thank you Mr.Guard, thank you Sister Mary, and very special thanks to you Doctor Bushan. Convey my love and regards to Angel Noorjahan.”

I shook hands with everybody in the operating theatre. They were all wreathed in smiles. The attendant carefully pushed me out into the world. Whilst being conveyed toward the observation ward, I wondered. Had I talked to anyone? Did I answer the doctor? For how long? I’ve no idea. I was in between to-be and not-to-be; on the fringes of knowing and not-knowing.

The Amber Room

Written by Ian Sales

A reverent silence rolled like fog through the rooms and galleries of the Museum. As Tina stepped down into the vestibule, she felt her rage sucked from her. The slam of the door echoed in memory, but she heard now only the metronome click of her heels on the marble steps. She glanced back up the cochlea-curve of the staircase. On the landing above, the double doors to the apartment remained shut. The bastard. He'd probably gone straight back to his books. Thirty or more of them, splayed broken-backed the length of the twenty-foot dining-table. Glossy art books, history books; photographs, drawings, sketches.

Tina was certain he'd not even heard her as she thundered out.

It had been the old argument:

"Have you found it yet?"

"No, I haven't. It's been a long day. I just want to—"

"When are you going to find it, Chris? You promised me!"

"For God's sake, it's not an exact science. There's a lot of ground to cover. I can't find it just like that."

Of course he could. He'd found all these, the contents of the Museum, "just like that".

She turned left, onto the gallery fronting the Museum. The windows to her right painted great rectangles of sunlight on the floor. As she passed through them she perceived them as their converse, the gaps between windows as bars of shadow laid across a bright floor. She was not in the right frame of mind to appreciate great art, and yet... she needed its solace, its assurances that she and her problems counted for little in the grand scheme of things. She needed perspective.

Her steps slowed. Here was *David*. A bronze of a nude male. It was not quite the "perspective" she had been seeking. The thought made her smile. Tina preferred the bronze to the marble version in Florence. This one's proportions were truer. He was a victor, too: he posed with one foot on his defeated enemy's head. Tina envied him his triumph. *David* was Chris's triumph too: the bronze had been lost since the French Revolution.

Until Chris found it.

Lost art. Missing masterpieces. Titian's portrait of Suleiman the Magnificent. Rembrandt's Circumcision. Michelangelo again: *The Battle of Cascina*. Chris had found them all. Every painting, every rare manuscript, every *objet d'art*. Without him, there'd be no Museum.

Tina's route had led her to the Museum's centrepiece. She entered the display room, slowed, and stopped. She hadn't planned to come here. She never did. Yet it drew her.

Buttery light filled the room, reflecting from three walls and the ceiling. An overabundance of detail assaulted the eye and overwhelmed the senses. Pilasters and framed mirrors, engravings and chiselled rods, leaves and royal crowns, tiny cherubs and coats-of-arms. All carved exactingly.

The Amber Room. Created in Prussia, in the first decade of the Eighteenth Century. In 1716, Prince Friedrich Wilhelm I had gifted it to Tsar Peter the Great. The Room had remained in Russia until the Second World War. Nazis had looted it then. By the end of the war it was lost, believed destroyed.

But Chris had found it.

The Room occupied three-quarters of a chamber. Visitors viewed it from behind a rope in the remaining quarter. Tina never crossed the rope. To her, living in the Museum was a privilege and she would not abuse it. Much as she longed to view each of the Room's wall-panels from a distance of mere inches, she refused to do so. And the four Florentine mosaics allegorically representing the five senses – how she wanted to lean close and scrutinise their richness and detail...

There was “sound”: four men using hearing pipes to converse, against a backdrop of ruins and a pyramid. And “sight” – another group among ruins, one holding a telescope to his eye, while another read a book and a young woman regarded her reflection in a lake. “Taste” depicted a group of people picnicking among ruins; one young man with a jug to his mouth, and before the table a dog licking a plate. The fourth mosaic conflated two of the senses, “touch” and “smell”, using a pair of lovers, one smelling a flower brought by a young man, while a second pair gently caressed each other.

Large representations of the mosaics were provided on display boards on the visitors' side of the rope. It was not, Tina felt, the same. There was no sense of age from the copies. Whenever in the Room, she felt a desire to run her fingers over the mosaics' tessellae, to touch their amber frames, to map the lines and curlicues with her fingertips.

Benches were provided beside the display boards, and on one of these she slowly sat. She began to relax – still holding herself stiffly, almost primly, knees together, hands on lap, the tight weave of her cotton skirt smooth beneath her palms. Her spiky emotional state began to soften and smoothly flatten. The Room soothed her, calmed her. It *smelled* of history, of great art. She found the fragrance calming.

Sometimes, hours would pass in the blink of an eye. She would come to, with no memory of the intervening time. Yet she would feel cheered all the same, as if she had spent her period of fugue sublimely happy.

The Amber Room meant many things to her, but chiefly it was a testament to Chris's perseverance. It had taken him over a year to fetch it piece by piece.

And his patience; although she had witnessed that much earlier during their courtship. The term was old-fashioned, but Chris's pursuit of her had felt old-fashioned. She remembered one of their first dates. He had taken her to an Italian restaurant. Red-checkered tablecloths, knobby candles rammed into straw-covered Chianti bottles, the smell of hot wax, rich tomato sauces, garlic, frying oil... There'd been a steady stream of Italian, sounding anything but romantic, from the kitchen.

They both picked the same dish on the menu. That made them laugh. Chris chose a wine, a red, and it was the nicest wine she'd ever tasted. She was no oenophile, but the wine tasted unnaturally full-bodied and rich to her. Perhaps it was the company.

Tina smiled at the memory.

Tina ignored the rustle of paper opposite her, the muttered imprecations, the hissed profanities. Chris was reading the newspaper. Even opinions he shared with the journalists and correspondents resulted in grumbling. Tina had long since given up asking him what was wrong. He had seen so many variations on forms of government and society, he considered himself an expert. No one ever "got it right".

This time, however: "The bastard!"

Then: "Look at this!"

A thud, and the newspaper landed beside Tina on the sofa. It had been folded to show one article uppermost, but fell open with a papery hiss as it hit the cushion. She put down her book. Chris had her reading assorted "alternate history" science fiction. It would help her understand, he'd told her. *The Man in the High Castle*, Philip K Dick; *Aztec Century*, Christopher Evans; *Fatherland*, Robert Harris; 'The Lucky Strike', Kim Stanley Robinson; 'The Amber Room', Ian Sales; 'Weihnachtsabend', Keith Roberts; *The Hemingway Hoax*, Joe Haldeman; *The Two Georges*, Harry Turtledove and Richard Dreyfuss...

"What is it?" she asked, reaching for the newspaper.

"Read it," he said, voice clipped from suppressed anger.

She found the piece, carefully folded the paper to make it easier to hold, and read. It was about Chris.

The article opened with a simple introduction to the Many Worlds Interpretation. Chris had explained this to her before. Many times. She skimmed through it, seeing nothing that might have upset him.

Ah. Here it was. She glanced up, over the top of the paper. Chris glowered at her, although his ire was aimed at the paper she held.

The writer of the article had concluded that discovery didn't necessarily confer ownership. Chris had recovered numerous lost artworks, but that didn't give him the right to display them in the Museum. He should have instead returned them to their original owners. In fact, declared the writer, Chris's deliberate mislabelling of his activities made his transgressions worse.

"It's about the government," Tina said.

It seemed plain to her. The true target of the piece was the party in power. Through their support of Chris, their creation and continuing endorsement of the Museum, they had tacitly condoned his thievery. Confidence was low among the chattering classes, and the newspapers were looking for angles to sell more copies. This was merely another one.

"I know that," he snapped. "But it's me they're slagging off!"

She folded up the paper and laid it down beside her. "It won't stop people from visiting the Museum."

“It’s free,” Chris replied, dismissively. “They’d come even if all I brought back were lumps of rock.”

“What a horrible thing to say.” Sometimes, Tina found Chris’s cynicism hard to stomach.

“I go to a lot of trouble,” he continued. “I don’t want to be made to feel like a common thief.”

There was nothing “common” about Chris. Tina dropped her hand to her side, and encountered the stiff tissue-like folds of the newspaper. Sliding sideways, her hand came upon her book. She trailed her fingers across its smoothly-finished card, felt the rounded bumps of the author’s name embossed on the cover. She wanted to finish it. But Chris was in one of his moods.

“Ignore them,” she soothed. “You know no one believes what they write in the papers.” She sympathised: she had such moods herself.

Chris laughed, a harsh jagged sound. “You’d be surprised.”

Tina rose to her feet, smoothed her skirt down where it had ridden up. She crossed to Chris, perched beside him on the armchair and draped her arms about his neck. Bending forwards, she pecked him on the crown of the head. Feathery hairs tickled her nose and scents invaded her nostrils – the hospital-like sharpness of Chris’s shampoo, the musky peppery smell that was the aftershave they both preferred above all others. She breathed deep, and the odours prompted a memory...

It was the aftershave she had noticed first. He’d splashed it on with abandon by the smell of it. But she didn’t mind – the fragrance appealed to her. It was almost pheromonal. She wondered if he tasted as good as he smelled. By the end of the night, she’d found out.

In the dark doorway of her block of flats, he had fastened his arms about her and fastened his mouth on hers. He’d been chewing a mint, she could taste its freshness. The booze, too. A sweet tinge of Southern Comfort. And something deeper, more profound, fundamental to his being; ambrosia to her yearning taste-buds. She had eaten her fill, and possessed him—

No. She had allowed him to possess her.

In a manner of speaking, none of the objects in the Museum was “found”. They had been lost, *were* lost, yes. And so they remained. The silence of visitors was as much a product of wonder as it was of appreciation, wonder that these pieces of art should be *here*. Those who rented audio-guides heard how each item had gone missing ... And yet there it hung or sat; it *existed* in front of them.

Another day, and just another visitor. Chris was a celebrity, but Tina stayed in the background. She shared with Chris a contempt of gossip magazines, *Chat* and *Hello!* and *OK!*. Happily, cameras were banned within the Museum, and so she could wander free from paparazzi. She was just another visitor.

Today, she strolled about the Museum, secure in her anonymity. A small group had gathered before *Portrait of Dr Gachet* by van Gogh. Someone explained in a whisper that it was the most expensive painting in the world – or rather, the version of it owned by a Japanese businessman was the most expensive painting in the world.

The one hanging before them was not a copy.

Tina continued her amble about the galleries. She passed others standing in front of Leonardo da Vinci's *Leda* and Michelangelo's *Leda*. Both had been destroyed by prudish owners. At length, she reached the main foyer. Children ran underfoot twittering with laughter. Parents at coffee-shop tables billed and cooed at them.

She entered the gift shop, and bought another alternate history novel from the many titles it carried. Penny at the till said hello as she scanned the book's barcode. "Busy today," she added.

"It always is," Tina replied, with a smile.

Penny slid the book into a paper bag. "Are these any good?"

"Some of them are." Tina could not work up much enthusiasm. She did enjoy the books, even though reading them felt a chore because Chris wanted her to read them.

"I suppose I should try one," Penny continued with a laugh, "seeing as I work here."

Picking up her purchase, Tina gave a wan farewell and left the shop. Across from her, bright colourful display boards explained the science to which the Museum owed its existence. On a whim, Tina crossed the foyer.

Paintings, Chris often told her, were created to be *seen*. And that's what he did: recovered paintings so they could be seen once again.

But only by people in *this* world.

In simple language and with bright colourful diagrams, the boards explained how, every moment of every day, something happened which could have more than one outcome. And for each outcome, a parallel world came into existence. The events didn't have to be of global importance, like the assassination of President Kennedy or the invasion of Iraq. They could be trivial, banal, utterly personal. Like in those two films – different futures dependent upon whether or not a train was caught.

This was the Many Worlds Interpretation.

Tina did not understand half of the vocabulary used on the display – *wave function collapse*, *quantum decoherence*... When she'd first seen the board depicting the Schrödinger's Cat experiment, she'd thought only: *poor creature*. Intellectually, she accepted the existence of many worlds, of parallel realities. Every article in the Museum was proof of their existence. As was she herself.

Chris could visit these parallel realities. He didn't know how he did it. He was in his mid-twenties before he even discovered that he *could* do it. Throughout his childhood, friends would vanish as if they'd never existed; total strangers would act as though they'd been friends for years. He'd get lost on a regular basis — streets never quite where, or how, he remembered them. He did poorly at school: neglecting his homework, or handing in work which had not been requested. Teachers didn't know what to do with him. He dropped out early.

Tina could not imagine how that might have felt. To live in a world so mutable, so unpredictable. She reached out a hand and touched a photograph of Chris on the display board. She put her fingers against his mouth.

Once, drunk, he'd admitted he didn't even know if this world was the one in which he was born. Since no other version of him had ever surfaced here, he suspected it was.

She abruptly recalled the rest of that conversation. The remains of two chicken kiev's sat on plates before them, an aroma of hot garlic still redolent. As Tina lifted her wineglass to her mouth, she smelled its bouquet, and Chris's bright-eyed grin seemed entirely fitting. She continued to hold her drink to her nose as he described the stranger worlds he had visited. A Europe under the fascist boot; a Europe under a communist yoke. A global Ottoman Empire. A world without the Bible...

She'd sipped her wine, felt the rich fruity liquid slide down her throat, and listened smiling as a warm glow spread within her.

A series of quick sharp raps on the landing outside drew Tina's attention to the apartment doors. They flew open with a bang, and the Prime Minister strode in. A chattering of assistants swept in after him, the arrhythmic drumming of their footsteps abruptly silenced by the carpet. The PM stopped, put his hands to his hips, and grinned broadly.

Tina, always self-conscious in the presence of authority, rose slowly to her feet. This visit was unexpected. She wondered how much milk was left in the fridge. Were there any biscuits in the cupboards? Should she put the kettle on?

She decided the best course of action was to do nothing.

Chris remained seated. He was too arrogant to show deference. The PM didn't seem to mind. He was a "man of the people".

"Have you seen the crap they're printing in the papers about me?" demanded Chris.

Tina slowly sat, and saw the grin wiped from the PM's face. Chris had just set the tone of the visit.

The assistants settled into susurrant huddle. One closed the doors with an apologetic smile, carefully enough to make only a gentle snick. Two others bridled at Chris's complaint.

There was a moment of silence.

A smile reappeared on the PM's face. He gestured vaguely. "So," he said heartily, "anything new to show me?"

Tina bent her gaze back to her book. The words on the page, however, blurred. She could make no sense of them. Glancing up, she watched the PM follow Chris across to the bureau against the wall. Chris pulled open a drawer and, from it, he took a yellowed scroll.

"What's this, then?" the PM asked, as Chris handed the item to him. The PM unrolled it and peered at the writing within.

"Aeschylus. One of his missing plays, called *Phineus*."

"Yes, well," said the PM. "Not one of ours, though, is he?"

"Neither was Michelangelo," pointed out Chris. "Or Rembrandt." He took back the scroll. "And that book of Hemingway's lost stories and poems we published last year was a best-seller."

“Yes, but Hemingway.” The PM gave one of his famously self-deprecating smiles. “He’s a classic author.”

“Aeschylus is a classic Greek playwright,” returned Chris.

“Don’t be facetious. I went to Cambridge. I know who Aeschylus was. You walk into any bookshop, and you’ll find books by Hemingway. But you won’t find ancient Greek tragedies playing in your local theatre.”

The PM crossed to the sofa on which Tina sat. She smiled warily at him as he lowered himself beside her. She did not like the way his eyes flickered over her whenever they met.

He leaned close. “How are you?” he asked, projecting sincerity. He put a hand on her thigh and gave a friendly squeeze.

Tina did not like that either. Happily, she was wearing jeans and so could feel only the pressure of his greeting against her skin. She gave a weak smile. “I’ll make some coffee,” she said.

“Good idea.” The PM nodded approvingly. He reached out to pat her—

But she had already risen to her feet. In the kitchen, she spooned ground coffee into a cafetière, and breathed in deeply of the rich aroma. She added hot water from the just-boiled kettle. Turning about, she stood, rear parked against the edge of the counter, and waited for the grounds to steep. From somewhere, a memory of the PM’s cologne, a fruity floral fragrance she despised as much as she despised the man, tickled her nose. She twisted about, and breathed deeply of coffee-scented steam to rid herself of it.

In the living room, Tina dished out cups of coffee and chocolate biscuits to Chris and the guests. Rather than return to her seat beside the PM, she sat on a ladder-back chair beside the bureau. She sipped her coffee, relished its bitterness, and listened to the PM say:

“We need to do something. I won’t have my gift to the people of this country—” He threw out a hand, taking in the Museum – “thrown back in my face. After all I’ve done for them.”

“I did it,” snapped Chris. “Tina says all you did was legitimise my thievery.”

“She does, does she?” The PM looked back over his shoulder at her.

She smiled at him, took another sip of her coffee, and let his opinion of her sink away unmourned into the dark and pungent and earthy liquid that filled her mouth.

Chris was heading for the door, backpack slung from one shoulder, when Tina said:

“Weren’t you going to say anything?”

The soft shuffle of his boots faltered, and stopped. Into the silence fell the faint scrape of the latch withdrawing from the mortice in the doorframe.

Tina waited, but Chris did not speak.

“You’re never around anymore,” she complained. “You’re gone when I get up, and you don’t get back until after I’ve gone to bed.”

“I’ve been busy,” he replied. He released the door handle; it snapped up. “I *am* busy.”

“The least you can do is turn around when you’re talking to me.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“You don’t have time for *me!*”

A booted foot came down hard, the door pulled open to thud against the stop.

Eyes stinging, Tina looked up from her glass of red wine to see the door close. She blinked, momentarily confused by a faint green circle superimposed on her vision. It was nothing more than an after-image of her wine, at which she had been staring.

She turned to the window and gazed out at the city, grey and brooding beneath a louring sky. Even now, years after arriving here, she could see enough to tell her this was not her home. That bridge there, for example, had been sold decades before. How strange to see it back in place. And the great skyscraper that dominated the skyline of her city was here absent. The low uniformity of the horizon seemed almost oppressive to her. Nothing reaching for the sky, nothing interrupting those miles upon miles of grey rooftops.

Drops of rain hit the glass, trails of tiny distorting lenses rippling her view. She hoped Chris wouldn’t get wet. But perhaps it wasn’t raining where he was going.

She lifted her glass of red wine. They had drunk the very same label during that first meal in the Italian place. She had stayed loyal. Although not to the restaurant. The wine she now bought from a vintner; the eatery she and Chris had never revisited.

That first dinner date ... The evening had been wonderful. The food was superb, deserving of praise in any self-respecting newspaper column. The décor and ambience conspired to heighten the romance, as though a painting by Jean-Honoré Fragonard had come to life ... Her friends had been so envious, they insisted on trying the place themselves. They couldn’t find a listing in the phone book, so they took a cab direct to the restaurant—

Only for Tina – tearful, bewildered – to find herself standing before a charity shop. Where had the restaurant gone? It had been *here*. She was so sure of it. Her friends shook their heads. Despite searching nearby streets, she failed to find the place. It was as if it had never existed.

She knew its location now. And she had found the wine on sale throughout the city. Throughout *this* city.

Her gaze drifted across to the bureau. A book lay on its top, spine directed to the wall. She knew its title; she had been reading it earlier. Although non-fiction, she found its contents hard to take as fact. After all, the Amber Room occupied a chamber downstairs, in the Museum. It was not, as the book’s convincingly presented research explained, forever lost – destroyed shortly after World War II by a fire in the Bavarian castle where it had been stored for safe-keeping.

Except, it *was* lost.

The Amber Room in the Museum was not the Amber Room of the book.

And Tina herself was not—

No, there had never been a Tina in this world.

Behind the book, two framed photographs looked out into the room. On the right, a young man and his parents; on the left, a young woman and her parents. The settings of the photographs were not the same – one taken at a cousin’s wedding, the other on the patio of a holiday villa in Spain. The outfits too differed: suit and tie, best frock and hat; T-shirt and jeans, summer dress and sunglasses.

But the parents were identical in each photograph.

Tina hugged herself and shivered, feeling unaccountably cold. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with this city, but she would always feel a visitor in it. She wanted to go home, to see her parents again. In the flesh, not just in an old photograph. She yearned for their presence, longed to sink into her mother’s embrace, to catch on the air the sandalwood-scented cologne her father always wore. Chris’s parents were no substitute. It wasn’t their fault, but she could not feel comfortable around them. The lack of a shared history, which should exist, which her senses insisted did exist, disconcerted her.

She sipped her wine. But the argument, Chris’s abrupt departure, her unrequited homesickness, all had soured her mood, and the wine sour in her mouth.

The Devil in Chains, Part Two

Written by Adam Christopher

PART TWO

A Shocking Discovery

The man claiming to be Lambert stood in the kitchen, and stiffly proffered a hand. I stood, mind reeling at the situation. As far as I knew, Lambert had died, shot square in the back with a solar rifle. John and Margaret looked pleased to see him, but noted with worry my shocked expression. Margaret spoke first.

“Dr. Clarke, this is Mr. Lambert, from the *Examiner*,” she began uncertainly, repeating the introduction as her eyes searched my face in confusion. “Mr. Lambert? He invited you to the island – you were going to write about our story in the national press?” Behind her, John smiled, nodding in encouragement.

I ignored Lambert’s request for a handshake. His expression remained in a frozen grin, waiting for a response. Gef chirruped, causing Lambert to flinch.

“Yes, Mr. Lambert, how do you do? I’m pleased to meet you,” I said politely, going through the motions of greeting, all the while studying the figure before me. Aside from strange manner, Lambert appeared to be healthy and intact.

“Dr. Clarke, how do you do.” The hand was automatically retracted. “I’m so pleased you are here. There is much you can help me with. I have lots to talk about. Do you like light and colour?”

Not Lambert, Gef had said. The *thing*, then, sat at the table, still smiling. His voice was almost monotonous, and the words almost rehearsed, as if the speaker was asked to repeat a statement in a language which he did not himself understand. I then felt a tickle on the back of my neck that sent a shiver down my spine – the sensation of light fur brushing my skin. Gef was on my back, out of sight of Lambert, with his tiny furred face just touching the back of my neck. As he whispered, I could sense the jaw moving, and a slight breath. If I had had any doubts as to the physical reality of the Dalby Spook, these were now firmly out of my mind.

“I apologise for my earlier rudeness, but I am affected by the mind of Valerie. Our materialisation in your world is dependent upon harnessing the energy, and indeed personality, of a spirit already here. Valerie is young and her mind unfuddled with politeness and protocol, and she has a picture book about mongooses. Well, it was that or the cobra. But your mind is logical and ordered, and very refreshing.

“That is not Lambert. It is one of us, in a way. As I am an avatar of a, shall we say, ‘lighter’ force, that is one of the opposite mode, forced into being by the foul presence which slowly awakens under the nearby stones. You need to leave. Go down to the base and you’ll find some answers. I’ll get rid of this creature and look after the family until you get back. The world is in terrible danger. We must work together, Clarke!”

It seemed this whisper was not audible by the others in the room, although a quick glance over my shoulder revealed that Valerie, at least, knew that Gef was clinging to my jacket. Mr. and Mrs. Irvine stood near Mr. Lambert, uncertain of what to do.

Outside, the village mob got ever louder.

Suddenly, with incredible speed, Lambert – whatever it was that had taken Lambert’s shape – leapt from the chair and flew across the table with a terrible screech, hands held aloft like talons, and face still set in rictus grin. Adrenaline flooded my body, such was the fright, but as I raised my arms to instinctively protect myself I was spun forcefully around to face away from my attacker. From my back, Gef launched himself at the Lambert thing, transforming in mid-air to a much larger, fiercer animal, somewhere between the innocuous mongoose form and a muscular brown bear. Roaring, the Gef-bear collided with Lambert over the kitchen table and the two tumbled to the floor, locked in terrible combat. Mr. and Mrs. Irvine leapt out of the way, while Valerie just sat and watched, eyes fixed on Gef’s writhing form. I recovered my feet and turned to watch the horrid battle, but no sooner had I regained my composure than Gef clamped a terrible jaw around the Lambert-thing’s neck, and the impostor dissolved into a peculiar red mist. Gef’s bear shape lay alone on the flagstones for a moment, before transforming between the blink of an eye back into the small mongoose shape and scuttling into Valerie’s arms. The girl purred at Gef, and ensuring the small creature was uninjured, gave me a clear directive.

“Go to the base and find what is there. Gef wants you to go! Go, out the back! Now!”

Although the safety of the family was top of my mind as the gaggle outside bore down on the house, I knew that not only did Mr. Irvine have much experience in barricading the farmhouse, but that Gef was possessed of some remarkable powers and I had no doubt he was prepared to defend the family with some ferocity.

Gef’s instruction was clear – a clue was held in the military base. At once, Mr. Irvine sprang into action, righting the toppled kitchen chairs and ushering me through another doorway. “Follow me, I’ll show you the quickest way down the hill.”

We left via the scullery and out into the large yard behind the house. To the front, some of the villagers were now running the last short distance to the house’s main door, so I quickly wished the farmer very good luck and allowed him to return to his family and brace for tonight’s inrush of unwelcome guests. At least the immediate and most dangerous threat – the Lambert-thing – had been disposed of.

Skirting around one of the outbuildings, I saw I was directly in line with the military base, the lights of which I could see in the distance, and at a point opposite the gathering crowd. Preoccupied as they were, I had no difficulty traversing the field without any notice being taken, and within fifteen minutes of half-running, half-sliding down the hillside, found myself within yards of the base’s perimeter at the darkened rear of the complex. From just outside the barricade, the black, dead windows of the rear of the building confirmed that this part was indeed unoccupied, all activity having been removed to the seaward side of the establishment.

Despite local hubbub, important visitors and a top secret accident, I was surprised at the decided lack of security. For a few minutes I was able to traverse down either side of the empty block from the far corner towards the base’s lighted area and docking yard, and found the fairly unimposing fence the only apparent obstacle to my entry. The soldiers patrolling the docking yard were, in fact, mostly motionless and silent, and I could trace no obvious surveillance system that would monitor areas outside of their patrol. Although the isle was becoming of increasing strategic importance in the growing tensions with the Northern Republic, the situation was not

yet dire enough for the base to have been transformed from a sleepy coastal watchpost to a defensive fortress.

The fence was well maintained but not impassable, as the slope of the hill I had just semi-tumbled down provided an excellent platform from which to launch first my jacket, to protect from barbs, and then myself into the upper portion of the fence. From this somewhat precarious position, I was able to swing both legs over and drop into the base proper.

The windows were in fact barred across the inside surface, so my only point of ingress was a door, relatively insubstantial but still secured with a formidable lock. With no tools at my disposal and no particular skill with lock-picking, I was momentarily at a loss when I remembered the heavy weight in my jacket's inside pocket – the spare solar battery for my torch. The battery itself was long, rectangular and narrow, and tapered at one end to a flat wedge which would in any other circumstances slot neatly in the torch's handgrip. It was also composed of a most dense and inflexible alloy, required to house the solar cell within with any safety, and made an admirable crowbar with which I was able to slowly jimmy between the door and the frame and break the lock. I paused for any alarm, but there was none. Inside, all was quiet.

I had entered a featureless corridor lined with numbered doors – the whole design was plain and very probably prefabricated, the whole base shipped to the island in standard segments and affixed together. There was no particular indication as to what lay behind each door, but I decided it would be best to explore to the left, being a direction that would take me away from the occupied section of the building.

I spent several minutes pacing identical corridors – the building itself was not large at all, and with solar torch switched off I suspected I had travelled along the same passageways more than once without realising. Eventually I found a noticeboard and a larger set of double doors, both indicating I had reached the Mess, the focal point of the earlier ghost stories.

The Mess itself was a single large room, filled with comfortable furniture and tables both small and large. Along one side ran a countertop and beyond a small kitchenette. A large circular television was installed on the wall opposite, and various stacked magazines indicated sport was a popular entertainment for the men to watch on the screen. The men, I assumed, whose bodies I now stood over.

Every flat surface – floor, tables, sofas – was stacked with corpses, some lying individually, others piled neatly on top of each other as space had begun to run out. All the bodies, some two or three dozen, were of young men in uniform, soldiers stationed at the base. I reacted quickly and knelt beside the nearest, but the skin was cold and slightly damp, and the body was entirely devoid of life. It was the same for as many more as I could reach by carefully stepping over others. The entire room was filled with death.

To my left there was a sudden hard thud, as though a book were dropped on one of the large tables. Startled, I could see nothing, but then the tale of the army poltergeist entered my mind. Was this room genuinely occupied by a noisy spirit, or, as Gef intimated a 'dark avatar'? I waited momentarily, but the sound did not repeat, and the room remained silent. Until:

“You there!”

To my right this time, the opposite side of the room. A soldier had appeared, uniformed but unarmed. “What are you doing?”

The tone was firm but polite, hardly what one would expect when discovered sneaking around a secure military establishment. Unsure of what to say, Gef’s oblique description of how ‘his kind’ functioned came to mind. Horrified, I looked down at the first body I had checked when I entered the room. The lifeless cadaver remained unmoved. And yet, the soldier confronting me from across the room was the very same man. It – whatever had claimed this room as a residence – was using my own mind to fashion the form and personality of the soldier before me. I turned and fled, and heard the man-thing stumbling over bodies in pursuit.

There was no need to disguise my presence in the base any longer – the creature behind me began to shout, and I adjusted my solar torch to provide a full spread of light before me as I hurtled back to the forced door. From far in front, towards the occupied part of the building, I began to hear answering calls and the sound of many men in heavy army boots running. By luck I traced a fast route through the twisting corridors and reached the external door within moments, unimpeded, just as the soldier-man-thing behind appeared around the last corner. I flung the door open and out, hopefully, to escape.

Alas, I had miscalculated. The shouts and running had come from *outside* the building, not from within. Waiting outside the door was a full patrol of men, led by a staff-sergeant – the very same who had shot Lambert in Dalby earlier that day. The pursuing soldier finally caught up with me behind.

The staff-sergeant’s faced transformed into a fixed grin, instantly recognisable as the inhuman leer performed by the Lambert-thing at the farmhouse. As one, the troop raised their solar rifles and, at near point blank range, took aim.

A Blazing Light

I was sure at that point that the science desk of the *Gazetteer* would be advertising for a new correspondent in the not too distant future, and closing my eyes I made what I felt was my final journalistic deduction. There was no mutiny. The army on the isle had been infiltrated by a horrific alien intelligence, using the bodies of the dead to replicate a workforce to carry out whatever foul plans of domination the evil master force – sequestered at the accident site and disturbed, it seemed, by the government scientists – required.

The sergeant barked the command to fire, and my eyelids were lit with a brilliant white-orange glow. However brave I considered my posture to be, I was unable to avoid an instinctive flinch, assuming the blazing light to be the microsecond prequel to instant death by solar ray. But instead, all in the space of one or two seconds, there were more shouts and I found myself knocked to the ground by a push of bodies. I opened my eyes to find our group caught in an intense spotlight, the soldier-creatures milling in confusion. There instantly followed a tremendous rush of air and howl of engines as a rigid dirigible airship descended swiftly towards us. Dazzled by the

searchlight, I was unable to make out any features apart from a great ovoid black shape which marked out the dimensions of the craft. The distinctive size, together with powerful lamp, spoke of another military craft, similar to the one docked around at the base yard. This was confirmed by the ear-popping rapport of solar rifles being fired, not by the soldiers on the ground up toward the new arrival, but from the silhouettes of men dangling over the sides of the rigid; a dozen crack sharpshooters picking off the ground troops with remarkable efficiency. Seeing I was in the line of fire, I immediately rolled towards the darkened walls of the base, losing my glasses – which were quickly trampled by a booted foot – in the process. As I spun on the ground back towards the men, I saw airbourne troops descend from the airship on ropes, leaping down upon the remaining soldiers and quickly dispatching them with bayonet and black dagger.

It was then that the odd smell reached me, at once both acidic and carbonised, but possessed of a peculiar, almost spiced nature. I realised with a jolt that as each dead soldier-thing fell to the ground, the body collapsed in on itself in a puff of acrid and luminescent pink smoke – entirely as the Lambert creature at the farmhouse had when Gef launched his own frenzied attack. I was right – the entire base staff had been interloped by the alien force which meant, presumably, that the sky-raiders were the genuine military affecting a reclamation of their barracks.

The battle – loud and bright – was short, and within minutes all that remained were the landed troops, scuffing their polished, knee-high boots in the patches of pink dust that lay in the grass. The airship itself was motionless, the engines quietly purring as it maintained its level. I must have been suffering momentarily from shock, for the next thing I recall I was being lifted to my feet by two men and marched under gunpoint towards the illuminated patch of ground.

The soldiers that escorted me were dressed entirely differently to the island-based regiment. From the high boots, double-breasted tunics and tall shakos, I recognised them as Lancers, although I was unable to identify their affiliation any further. As they were not island-based troops, they must, logically, have been the special detachment sent from the mainland to investigate the incident. One Lancer, of a higher rank than the others, indicated by a different stripe along the trouser line and white ostrich feather atop his hat, began directing others as a broad metal staircase was lowered from a hatch on the underside of the airship. As tentative touchdown was made on the pink-stained grass, a prod in the small of my back gave me every indication that I was to ascend into the craft.

In the airship's main holding bay, I was seated and strapped in between more Lancers as the troops from the ground filed inside and installed themselves back into their allocated positions. As the airship lifted slightly to achieve a safer cruising altitude, not one of the men spoke – their lack of conversation, smoking, or otherwise relaxing told me that the sortie was far from over. This was no ordinary squadron of soldiers, but a somewhat more trained and specialised force, where discipline and focus was much more refined.

No sooner had the airship set off than it slowed again. I felt the craft turn heavily at approximately ninety degrees, before coming to a halt. To my left came a whistle, the squadron commander taking up the speaking tube and blowing into it before placing it to his ear. He listened for a moment, murmured a single word of “Sir” back into the tube, before replacing it and unstrapping both himself and, to my surprise, me. He silently indicated I should stand and walk towards the front compartment of the ship;

as I obliged, I noticed he had drawn a service revolver to train on my back as he followed.

The bridge of the airship was lit by a dull red light, serving the dual purpose of indicating they were at battle stations and allowing, in the dark of night, the flight crew to clearly see out of the curved expanse of glass that formed the entire forward wall of the room, extending in a complete half-circle to meet the bulkhead behind. The control panels and main wheel stood centrally; in front was a large open observation space, where the windows arced not only horizontally around but vertically down, so the troops stationed here with field glasses had an unimpeded view that reached directly beneath their feet.

Two such observers were in place, one scanning ahead, the other downwards. The ship had indeed come to a stop, and the area below us was once again illuminated by the vast solar searchlight, manned by an able seaman sitting in a sunken, glassed pit on the left side of the observation area. As the searchlight panned the ground below, I saw the ship's captain, silhouetted in the dark light, move forward and crouch on one knee to witness the scene below. I followed his gaze, and momentarily ignoring my armed guard was instantly drawn forward by the amazing sight below to kneel beside the captain. The captain did not register my presence, transfixed as he was by what lay on the fields under his craft. He whispered a simple exclamation.

“Good Lord...”

We were hovering above the fields that surrounded the Irvine farmstead. The house itself was still lit, the family – hopefully – safely barricaded inside. In front stood the massed ranks of the villagers, in regular rows, all motionless and silent. A single figure was at their head. Even from our height, the leader looked different to the rest. It was a second Lambert copy.

But as the searchlight played over the neighbouring ground, it revealed a sight terrible to behold. Equal in number to the standing villagers were mounds of bodies. They were haphazardly lying upon the grass, some individually, but mostly in piles of a dozen or more. From our modest altitude, it was possible to discern clothing and other distinguishing features of the bodies that were matched by the people – the impostors – standing outside the farmhouse. The entire village had been eliminated and duplicated. It remained to be seen what their intentions were at the farm, for in the last minute not one figure had moved an inch. The craft in which we knelt was now near silent, but our approach and descent to a height of no more than twenty feet would have been clearly noticeable. But the creatures in the field creatures showed no sign that the arrival of the airship had been noticed.

The captain got to his feet, and strode swiftly around to the control panel, the bold feather in his cap throwing shadows around the bridge as he moved. I watched the actions of the crew from my kneeling position.

“Hold this position. We shall secure this hill with the Escapement. Subaltern, prepare for barn-door landing. Captain-Lieutenant, ready your men for secondary assault. And remove this civilian. Our interview will have to wait.”

With that, the ship's commander strode off the deck as his men busied themselves on the bridge, shouting instructions and information to each other. The soldier with the revolver – the Captain-Lieutenant – grasped me beneath the arm and hauled me to my feet, waving the gun back towards the bridge doors. In the red light it was impossible to discern any facial detail of the crew, but I knew my own countenance

must have been as white as freshly laundered linen.

The Escapement. These soldiers were going to attack the creatures below with the Escapement. I didn't know how many tickers the airship could hold – probably only four at the most – but I hoped, prayed even, that once the mobile, intelligent steam-machines of the Escapement had been deployed, the family and farmstead survived the coming assault.

An Introduction is Made

The airship hung peacefully above the farmhouse fields. We had reversed fractionally so as not to be directly above either the silent ranks of impostor-villagers nor near to the mangled piles of bodies that lay on each side. Once again I was strapped into my webbing in the troop hold, this time under the watchful eye of a regular soldier as the Captain-Lieutenant prepared his men for their second mission of the night. From elsewhere in the craft, booted feet and barked orders could be heard, but soon these drew into silence, and the men in my own compartment aligned into ranks and fell quiet too. Seconds passed, then a new sound arose. It was a rhythm – a hiss, a clockwork tick, and the clank of metal on metal. The Escapement had been activated. At their signature sound, I'm certain a few of the Lancers awaiting orders in our hold shifted in their boots.

The bay doors opened to the night as the airship almost imperceptibly descended to a proper ground landing. Elsewhere, a second bay door could be heard to open, together with a noticeable increase in the pace of the Escapement's 'heartbeat' – the tick that gave them their nickname. The ground offensive was imminent.

The squadron of Lancers snapped to attention as one, and at the drawing of the Captain-Lieutenant's sabre, ran down the slight slope of the airship troop bay and out onto the field, disappearing out of my line of sight as they left-wheeled around the craft. I was left in the bay with my single guard, and could do nothing but close my eyes and listen to the horrid battle outside.

The troops had stopped, various orders now being shouted about holding a line and taking aim. The *tickers* were to attack first, with the human troops holding back as a secondary wave if needed. In my experience of the Escapement, they seldom were.

The use of the Escapement seemed, on the face of it, to be excessive force to the point of gross brutality on the part of the airship's commander. I had first-hand experience of these steam-powered infantry units myself, having seen their terrible power unleashed during my time on the subcontinent. The image of their huge red iron frames marching ceaselessly towards the enemy, enveloped in clouds of smoke and steam and always accompanied by the unerring tick-tock of their geared hearts, is a memory I have long tried to forget. Alas, the realisation that I was soon to bear witness to their use again was almost too much, and I fought down the urge to retch as I considered the fate that was about to befall a round hundred of villagers armed with nothing more than empty drink bottles and a few crudely lashed together 'ceremonial' implements.

But, of course, these were not the villagers. Such a large body of impostors may

indeed have posed a considerable force to be reckoned with if each possessed the ability, as demonstrated by Gef, to transform into a large, powerful, otherworldly monster. I had no idea what the Lancers had been doing on the island – or really how long they had been there – but the dispatch of the Escapement suggested that they had some experience of dealing with these creatures and the sheer firepower required.

My fears were confirmed presently when a terrible series of howls arose from outside the airship, followed quickly not only by the crack of solar rifles, but the *whoosh* of the Escapement opening fire. Although I had estimated only four at most of the machines were out on the field, the sound of their destructive power drowned out the inhuman screeching that also filled the air. I could only imagine that, faced with four large, mechanical soldiers, the villager-aliens had finally taken notice and transmogrified as one into a veritable army of darkness. As the Escapement continued to deliver their payload, the Captain-Lieutenant could be heard giving quick, precise orders, and soon the crack of solar rifles began to be heard among the cacophony of death. If the farmhouse was so important to both good and evil, I simply had to trust that the airbourne army had the family's welfare at heart.

Soon, the monstrous screaming and roaring began to quieten in volume while the whoosh of the Escapement fire continued unabated, and eventually with a series of heavy mechanical clicks, even the sound of their cannons ceased and their constant tick became audible again. In the distance, someone was banging on the farmhouse door.

My solitary guard was joined by two others, who unhitched me from the flight seat to which I was still strapped and, after cuffing me in heavy iron manacles, again used rifle point as a direction and motioned for me to leave the craft and head to the house. Ahead I could see Mr. Irvine and his wife at the door, standing to one side as several troops filed in, followed at the rear by the airship commander. Several more set up a patrol around the farmhouse perimeter, with the remainder standing at point flanking the main door and other key positions. Of the villager-things, there was no sign, just a thick red coating of sticky dust on the damp grass.

As I was walked towards the farmhouse door I heard the airship's powerful motors gun slightly as the craft tilted with the weight of the four Escapement machines returning to their bay. Looking over my shoulder, I caught a glimpse of square metal shoulders through a haze of steam, lit by multiple smaller lights now shining from around the edge of the airship.

The house appeared to have escaped any major damage, the only apparent repair needed being to the front door which had splintered at some central impact. I gestured to Mr. and Mrs. Irvine, and they returned with a wave but before we were within speaking distance of each other, they were led into a different part of the house by a Lancer. I was marched down the hallway and into the kitchen, and ordered to sit at the table where I was, thankfully, uncuffed. Of Valerie and Gef there was no sign. A pair of Lancers stood to attention by the door, and another behind me.

And then the airship commander strode into the room to the salutes of his three men. Colonel-Commandant Alexander Bellamy.

A Cosmic Secret Revealed

“And that,” I said, finishing the last of my army tea, “Is a full and proper account of my activities on the island, since my arrival not...” I hefted my pocket-watch in one hand. “...eighteen hours ago, to my arrest by your men.”

I concluded my statement, exhausted. All throughout, Bellamy’s eyes had been fixed on my face. Occasionally he would nod, and thoughtfully twist an end of his precisely waxed moustache. Not once did he show any sign of surprise or disbelief, but instead gave the constant expression of absorbing my tale from beginning to end, from top to bottom. It was now approaching three in the morning. All during our interview, the house and its surrounds had remained silent. Mr. Irvine had sent his wife and daughter to bed, and was himself attempting to catch a few fleeting moments of sleep in the adjoining parlour, ready should his services be required. Having dispatched the villager-monsters so forcefully with the Escapement, the house had not been assaulted a second time by whatever diabolical and alien forces were gathering in the pitch black outside.

Finally Bellamy spoke. Sitting back, he smoothed down his hair.

“A fascinating tale, Dr. Clarke, and one that fills quite some gaps in the puzzle I have been building in my own mind since my squadron arrived by airship three – no, four – days ago. I think the mystery is becoming ever-clearer, thanks to your valuable data.

“We were, of course, expecting your arrival on the island, as one of the functions of the military establishment here is to monitor all civilian communication. It was most fortuitous from our perspective, as I have in my own collection of paranormal researches a number of articles and pamphlets by your good self. I had hoped – rightly, it seems – that your investigative nature would be of benefit to my mission.”

I muttered a thanks, heartened to hear that not only had my theories of the supernatural been more widely received than I had hoped, they had also been of some professional use to whom I now assumed was a full-time investigator of the esoteric.

“You will forgive the theatricality of your arrest and the threat of a charge. We were unable to offer you direct protection on the island so I had to trust to your own judgement and experience that you would carry out an independent investigation of your own before we were able to meet in person. But it looks like we reached you just in time, for things on this island have taken a turn for the worse far earlier than I had anticipated.”

Bellamy paused to bark for more tea, and extracted a brilliant silver cigarette case from inside his tunic. Inside was a neat row of black cigarillos. I declined his offer, but he lit one for himself.

“My squadron is a quasi-independent investigative team, similar in many ways to a military police force, who have authority to move about army and naval operations without question. As you know, Prince Albert himself has taken a particular interest in the magical sciences, which while furthering the progress of the Empire, has had some untoward effects. You are familiar with the situation on the Continent?”

At the mention of Europe I feel I blanched a little. Indeed, the ‘situation’ there was widely known, but the particular details of the devastation were generally kept from

public knowledge. But at the very least, most Britons were aware of the devastation that befell the Continent and the rise of the old and strange black dynasties that now ruled the majority of the land mass. I acknowledged Bellamy, who continued to smoke as he updated me with his own movements on the island.

“Our job is therefore one of security and investigation into matters related to the supernatural, magical and occult. As many enemy agents and disestablishmentarians now attempt to wield such powers against the crown, so it is prudent to employ these same techniques in its defence. That is our purpose.

“We arrived ostensibly to investigate an accident which had befallen an expedition of three scientists from the Royal Geographical Society. This group were sent to prepare groundwork for an excavation at a stone circle not one mile from the military base. It was said that Albert had heard local tales of fairies and wanted them investigated should, of course, the mythology have some basis in fact which may have been of material value to the crown.

“The expedition was conducted with the cooperation of the local military officials, and proceeded on schedule for nearly a week before two of the geologists vanished into thin air, the third returning to the base in a state of mindless delirium. By all accounts the base personnel took good care of the poor chap, at which point we were called in. I myself had heard some island tales many years ago as part of my reading, and was eager to sift through the data on behalf of the Prince.”

Bellamy took a long draw on his cigarillo and savoured the rich aroma of the smoke for a full ten seconds before slowly, gently exhaling it in a series of short puffs. As the fresh army tea arrived, he thanked his adjunct and set about refilling both our mugs. I urged him to continue.

“Upon arrival we secured the circle and set a guard about the marquee. You can probably see it from this very hill. But events took a peculiar course when after a day the local forces ceased instantly any cooperation they had once offered to us, and denied us access to the geologist now resident in their infirmary.

“This was coincidental with a flare-up in the activities here at the farmhouse – although the local rabble had been troubling the Irvines for some time, the reports relayed as part of standard island observations indicated that whatever supernatural shenanigans were taking place only served to add local colour and had no other impact on island life. Indeed, it was suggested that it may have been a headline-grabbing hoax constructed by the family itself. But when the geologists had their accident, so the mysterious entity in the house became significantly more active and began relaying details of events taking place elsewhere on the island elsewhere, including details of movements at the military base, which is when our attention to the situation became ever more acute. Unfortunately we then had to handle the apparent mutiny of the army base personnel so were unable to investigate further before you arrived, but as I had indicated I did hope you would carry out this part of the investigation quite independently.”

I wasn't sure whether to be flattered that my skills were held in such high regard, or abused that I had, completely without my knowledge, been utilised as a mere intelligence-gathering tool for the military establishment. Bellamy's cigarillo was now extinguished and his otherwise set face broke into a broad, if unhappy, grin.

“What became of your friend from the local newspaper, Lambert, we don't know, although we did ascertain that he had been up to the circle. I suspect the same fate

befell him as did the two geologists who have likewise vanished. Indeed, the appearance of his doppelganger as you so describe confirms he fell under the malign influence here present.”

Bellamy stiffened. From outside the silence of the night was broken by a distant murmur, drifting in around the shuttered kitchen windows. My own hearing was not so acute but after an initial start at the officer’s change in expression, I too heard the unmistakable sound of a crowd approaching.

“What on Earth is that? A secondary assault on the hilltop? Surely the enemy doppelgangers have been overcome by your forces, Bellamy – the machine soldiers you have stored in the *Defiant*?”

Bellamy held a hand up, requesting a moment’s more silence before answering. The three Lancers in the room each glanced at their commanding officer. The sound from without slowly increased in volume. A large group of people moving across the field on grass, but not speaking.

Bellamy stood, as if to hear better, then leaning across the table to me.

“Well, we know that the destruction of one interloper does not necessarily mean the evil is vanished. Look at the Lambert creature. If they still possess the original, as it were, another duplicate can be created. Lancer, open the shutter.”

The indicated soldier shouldered his rifle and clambered over the kitchen benchtop, removing the makeshift wooden bar from across the two large windows above the Belfast sink and folded the shutters back. It was dark outside with no moon, but if pressed up against the glass an angled view across the front of the farmhouse was just visible.

It was the villagers. To the right, several piles of broken bodies could be seen. To the left, approaching the house, was a massed rank of figures, marching in slow unison towards us, just as we had seen upon our arrival by air. In front of the house the patrolling Lancers from Bellamy’s airship had moved to a forward position and, kneeling for stability, were taking aim, awaiting the order to defend the house and occupants. It seemed the resources of the enemy were limitless, and the siege apparently repeatable until one side – us, most likely – was overcome. There was only one inhabitant of the house that knew anything about the situation. The mongoose-spirit, Gef.

As if answering my unspoken call, Valerie appeared at the door, dressed in nightshirt. In her arms before her, huddled against her frame, was the curled form of her familiar. The creature sniffed the air and regarded Bellamy and the three Lancers. The whiskers twitched and the creature chirruped, as any normal small mammal might. But then it spoke. I could see Bellamy was fascinated, for this was his first meeting with the Dalby Sensation.

“Lambert is back I see. Oaf. Oh, and he’s brought his friends. They’ll keep at it, you know. Wave after wave after wave. So long as the real men and women are alive and held in limbo, the template can be used again and again and again. The best thing to do is burn the bodies in the field outside. What’s the end of one village compared to the end of the world. Although it would mean the butcher will stay closed tomorrow. Inconvenient, if there was any villager left to go shopping.”

Valerie giggled but this seemed to agitate Gef. I wondered if his frivolous commentary was again too influenced by the young mind of the girl. I motioned to

Bellamy.

“Bellamy, Gef is the perhaps the only creature on this island – well, on this island and apparently on our side – that had any idea of the nature of the horror that has been unleashed by the geologists. Gef has some connection with the girl which is clouding his intellect – take him yourself and we may get a military appraisal.”

The officer looked blankly at me, and I realised a full explanation of Gef’s nature would take far too long in such dire circumstances. Apologising for my rudeness, I grabbed Gef away from Valerie and unceremoniously planted him in Bellamy’s arms. Valerie instinctively reached for the creature, but the hands of her father appeared from the doorway behind and he gently held her back. Mr. Irvine, ruffled from uncomfortable sleep, nodded at myself and Bellamy, clearly understanding my motives.

Gef struggled briefly in Bellamy’s grasp but quickly ceased and, suddenly, jumped up his arm and to his shoulder. Bellamy started slightly but then relaxed. Gef’s high voice became lower, and his language instantly more succinct. The spirit-creature was now linked to the soldier’s mind.

“We have not much time and it appears we three are now allied against the evil under the hill. There is no-one else to call on.

“Beneath the hill a *Loa* – a devil from a sideways world – was imprisoned in aeons past. It, and I, do not belong to this world. The cell should have remained undisturbed forever after.

“But your geologists disturbed the power conduit that kept the *Loa* in chains – the stones, man, the stones! Foolish curiosity and childish digging led them to change the alignment, allowing the power field to ebb away and awakening the creature beneath. To ensure the balance is preserved, the *Loa* has two avatars – I am one, the thing that pretends to be Lambert is the other. We have slept on the island for generations, but I was awoken in part by the girl, Valerie. Such an unusual mind. But when the *Loa* itself was brought to life, I sensed the change in the stone’s energy and took this form so beloved by Valerie. She loved the mongooses that Jack Cain released last year to control rabbits.” Valerie smiled at the memory of the neighbouring farmer’s recent attempt at pest control. That, and Valerie’s book, was the root of Gef’s manifested form.

“But the enemy does not borrow, it steals! Lambert was key, tumbling into the tomb, providing the source. With his intelligence and curiosity the dark power could spread. The soldiers at the base had disciplined minds easy to shape and were the first, falling one by one to its influence. As each mind was wrenched from the body, so the power grew until the entire village was under sway, with the Lambert-form the perfect leader.

“They’re outside now, power growing with every step. The *Loa* doesn’t even need to leave the hill, the web can spread one village, one town, one island at a time. Man will be gone by dawn. Then Britain. Then the world.”

Gef’s voice increased in pitch and eventually broke into an animal twittering. Bellamy may have stood steady as a rock, but his breathing had increased. His stress at learning of apparently insurmountable odds was affecting Gef. I myself concentrated to detach our situation from danger and replace it with scientific curiosity. I felt my heart rate slow, and lifted Gef from Bellamy’s shoulder and placed

him on my own. Again the mongoose-spirit's demeanour changed as he drew this time on my own mind.

"Thank you, sir! What the geologists did can be undone. If we can escape the house, we can realign the stones and seal the Loa back in his tomb again. Clarke, I can read your knowledge of the esoteric, and you, Bellamy, have equal and complementary experience. Can your men protect Valerie and her family? We must get to the stones, we must!"

What the Lancers made of the story I did not know, but as part of Bellamy's squadron assembled to defend Prince and country against the forces of darkness, I presumed each was absorbing the data provided and applying their military experience to the matter. Bellamy called them to attention and began issuing orders.

"Captain-Lieutenant, you will establish a forward position at the front of the house and defend the family and property with terminal force. Remember, those are not the local villagers outside, we are dealing with a far more sinister enemy force. While the perimeter is held, the *Prince Albert Defiant* will disembark the Escapement to the west side. All enemy forces are to be destroyed. Dismissed."

Bellamy's adjunct snapped a salute and ran out of the kitchen, followed by his two men. Soon, the sound of commands issued came from outside, while the eerie hushed march of the villagers stopped. Bellamy and I both looked to the windows to assess the situation. From his position on my shoulder, Gef strained to see through the glass.

"As before," he chirped. "They've stopped. I suspect our friend the Loa is also assessing the situation through the senses of those he controls. That will give time for the *tickers* to arrive in position. Come, we should go now! The Loa will be distracted by the battle ahead. Our opposition will be lessened if we can get to the stones at once!"

Bellamy and I needed no further encouragement. Mr. Irvine knelt to embrace his daughter. I wished them well as he wished us luck. I grasped Bellamy by the arm.

"This way," I whispered, leading the soldier to the back door.

A Discussion of Tactics

We ran across the paddock, thankfully, to silence. The villager-creatures had not moved, giving the Lancers time to establish ideal positions at the front of the house, and for Bellamy's airship to make necessary manoeuvres to allow a second deployment of the terrifying steam machines held in its second bay.

The military base lay ahead, between our party and the final destination, so we checked our speed as we approached in order to observe movements and evade the perimeter if required. The base was, from all outward appearances, as we had left it some hours ago when I had the good fortune of being snatched from instant death by Bellamy's crew. The rear was in darkness, the front and yard lit, with the base's boat still moored to the airship mast. Where soldiers once patrolled, however, no movement could be seen. Bellamy stopped just ahead of myself and Gef and fell into

a crouch, motioning me to do the same.

“No-one home I think. That means we can cut across the yard there, saving us some time.” Bellamy unholstered his service revolver, just in case.

I strained to detect any shadow of activity at the base. It was deserted. “Your troop only destroyed a dozen of the creatures, Bellamy, and even so the doppelgangers can be replaced. Would that not mean they should be redoubling their guard, or even engaging in our pursuit?”

Bellamy turned and in the dark I could see his face crease into a frown. Gef twittered on my shoulder to get attention.

“It has bigger fish to fry,” he squeaked. “Your men are creating a focus for the Loa up on the hill, blotting his view of the rest of the island. A perfect diversion. Look!”

Bellamy and I turned quickly, and saw in the base yard a few soldiers appear from behind a stack of boxes. They appeared to be on regular patrol. Perhaps there were more that we hadn’t seen. Bellamy cursed under his breath.

“We must go around.”

“Not around, across!” Gef’s annoyance was clear. “What did I just say, soldier boy? We’re not the problem anymore.”

And with that, the spirit-mongoose leapt from my shoulder and disappeared into the long grass. A few moments later his tail could be seen held aloft as he raced directly towards the base and yard. I suddenly saw his point, and slapped Bellamy’s shoulder.

“Come on!”

Ahead, Gef slipped through a tiny gap in the perimeter fence and shot across the yard, directly in the path of the patrol. The soldiers did not even pause, instead maintaining their route. As we reached the fence, I overtook Bellamy and veered to the left, aiming for the main gates which stood open. I heard Bellamy stop behind me, before his footsteps swished in the dirt and followed my lead.

Gef was right. Whatever power we were about to face at the stone circle, it was focussing all attention on the farmhouse. The patrolling soldiers – duplicates of soldiers – were operating on an automatic principle. I ran across the yard and into their path, stopping only to check their blank expressions. Bellamy arrived at my side, understood, and gave me a grin before taking off after our spirit guide. I followed, heading for a gate opposite; behind us, the oblivious soldiers about-faced and resumed their march.

A quarter-hour later the hill rose before us, the ancient earthworks cut into the side providing an excellent, if meandering, staircase to the summit. The marquee stood predominantly intact, with one side blown off its metal frame, probably by the high winds which must occasionally attack the hill. Standing on-site, I could see that the marquee did not actually encompass the entire hilltop. Instead, it bisected the stone circle, enclosing just five out of perhaps fifteen of the sarsens within the white canvas walls. One of the exposed megaliths stood to the left of the marquee entrance, and my archaeological instinct was immediately sparked. As I thoughtfully ran my hand over its surface, I noticed a certain... vibration. It was subtle, and most peculiar, and reminded me of the electrical energy I had encountered while investigating mediumistic manifestations in Manchester a year before. These were no ordinary stones.

I turned to inform my companions, and only then noticed Bellamy examining a huddled form on the ground, then a second shape a few yards away. His face was grim as he looked up – these were the bodies of two of his men left to guard the site. More fodder for the Loa’s doppelganger army.

“Time is pressing, gentlemen.” Gef sat raised on his haunches, sniffing the entrance to the tent. “The dig has moved the channelling stones out of alignment, allowing the Loa to divert the energy used to shackle him and resorb it. Bellamy, I believe you have in the inside left pocket of your tunic a zinc and silver foldable frame, which when connected to a solar battery becomes charged in either a positive or negative manner, so generating a field of magnetism within the spokes once assembled. Correct?”

If Bellamy was surprised, he didn’t show it. Gef’s connection with whomever he was closest to allowed him easy access to short term memory. The officer replaced his revolver in its thigh holster and extracted a sizeable metallic object from inside his tunic. It consisted of flat metal spokes, interlocked like a cat’s cradle, and hinged with rivets at various crossing points. A small bale of thin wire was wrapped to one side, and intermixed within the spokes I saw the glossy ovoids of miniature vacuum tubes. Partially unwrapping the wire, Bellamy flicked his wrist and the device opened into an instantly recognisable occult symbol – a metallic five-pointed star, some twelve inches across at the widest diameter.

“You have described the principles of the electric pentacle succinctly, little chap. Unfortunately this is a small device I have been working on merely to test certain theories. To subject the stone circle to the pentacle’s field would require my full-sized apparatus, which by necessity is stored in my laboratory in London. Besides which, even if this portable device was of some use, we have no source of power. There are solar batteries aplenty on board the *Defiant*, but none about my person.”

“Bellamy, I believe I may be of assistance!” I then took from my own jacket pocket the spare solar battery from my torch. The wedge end was slightly marked from my forced entry into the military base, but the weighty object was otherwise intact. In the half-light I saw Bellamy’s waxed moustache rise above his smile.

From the ground, Gef shimmied up my trouser leg and along my arm to get a better view of Bellamy’s remarkable device. The creature appeared to cough delicately.

“I trust you would not mind if this thing was used up? An admirable test of its potential I would say, which would encourage construction of a second? There will be enough power in a single solar battery to reverse the circle’s field if this star can convert it all before going ‘poof’!”

“Certainly I intend to continue developing the device. This is just a prototype; by all means if it must perish in our endeavours tonight then it is for a worthy cause. How shall we proceed?”

Gef dropped to the ground and darted around the circle, stopping momentarily at each stone. He then returned to a position on my left shoulder.

“Being so tiny, we shall need to use the pentacle on the Loa’s very head. Once placed, his electric crown will push the energy back into the stones. The more he tries to fight, the quicker he’ll be sucked dry. Ideal. Come.”

And with that, he ducked into the marquee and was gone. Bellamy and I each knew that Gef was the only one of our trio who had any idea of the terror that we were

about to face in the bowels of the hill beneath our feet. With some resolution, we followed.

A Final Confrontation

The night outside was reasonably bright; the interior of the marquee was pitch black. Neither Bellamy nor I had a solar lamp with us, and I collided into the officer's back immediately. Any further travel forwards was unwise, given that the ground between the stones here had, I assumed, become a relatively deep earthwork.

Suddenly a brilliant light illuminated us, a curious and unnatural meld of white and green. Bellamy held the electric pentacle in one hand, the solar battery in the other, and between finger and thumb pressed the bare wire ends that trailed from the star frame to the terminal end of the solar battery. The tiny vacuum tubes pulsed slowly with light of astonishing brightness, and cast Bellamy's face in shadow as he looked over shoulder at me.

"It occurs to me that the pentacle needs to be warmed anyway, and we need some light. I am at this point assuming the battery is fully charged?"

I nodded. "Just as well you had the inspiration. Our progress would have been very much slower otherwise." I gestured to the earthworks ahead.

Five tall sarsens marked the perimeter, the marquee's sides stretched around their backs. In the centre of the tented area the ground had been cut away in careful layers as part of an exploratory excavation. Moving forward, the base of the pit was visible just a few feet down. The top of an ancient stone arch, the portal free of soil, was visible. It was just large enough, perhaps, for a man to crawl through on all fours. Gef appeared through it from the other side.

"This way, gentlemen."

Bellamy handed me the pentacle carefully, ensuring that the battery remained connected, before lowering himself into the pit and then through the arch. Once in, his arms reached out and I, lying across the lip of the pit, lowered our light source down to him before joining him beyond the doorway.

We were in a tunnel that sloped downwards and curved away leftwards ahead. The pentacle's light had now calmed as the tubes heated evenly, providing a warm yellow-green glow. Although the device was held by Bellamy some two feet from my own person, I could now feel the heat coming from it. Bellamy constantly adjusted his hold as the star increased uncomfortably in temperature.

Gef had paused just at the bend, and appeared to be listening intently. Bellamy and I looked at each other, and then noticed the same brittle sound.

It was a crisp rustle, like a fresh newspaper crumpled, and very unusual to hear. But it had another, almost wet quality, a bakelite scraping. I thought I recognised it from my time surveying ancient, infested temples on the subcontinent twenty years ago.

"Insects?" I asked. Bellamy was deep in thought and said nothing. Gef squeaked in

agreement.

“Lambert, the amateur etymologist. Valerie chose a mongoose. What, I wonder, did the Loa take from the reporter’s mind?”

Even as the mongoose spoke, there came a colossal rush and the light of the pentacle was obscured by an appalling swam of flying insects that swept out of the tunnel ahead. Bellamy cried out, raising the glowing device to protect his head and illuminating a hideous black cloud of arthropods orbiting our party. The sound had intensified immensely into an almost deafening rattle.

“Cicadas! Good lord, a plague of cicadas! These aren’t native to the British Isles at all!” I swatted the cloud from head, panic rising slightly as I felt the not insubstantial creatures settling in my hair and on my neck.

Bellamy had to shout above the swell of cicada song. “Neither, I believe, is the mongoose, yet here we are with one that talks! This manifestation must be intended to delay our progress. Gef, the pentacle is still drawing from our single battery – if we are to provide our evil friend inside a new hat, we must do it soon.”

At ground level, Gef seemed to nod, although it was difficult to see through the swirling mass of flying forms. The rhythm of the cicada call made concentration exceedingly difficult. No doubt the intention.

Gef shot around the tunnel bend, with Bellamy and I close behind. As we continued at some speed down the sloping, curving tunnel, the cicadas continued to flow from whatever chamber lay below. Then the tunnel ended and all at once we tumbled headlong into a low rectangular chamber, identifiable perhaps as a long barrow of some description. The walls were damp-eaten stone, and although thrown with dirt, the room was free of obstruction.

All of this was the subject of but a momentary snapshot view, as Bellamy, cursing, tripped to the ground and lost hold of the pentacle’s power connection, plunging us into a complete darkness. There came faint crack, and Bellamy swore again, loudly this time, as one of the pentacle’s vacuum tubes connected with a stony outcrop of the wall and was shattered. Gef could be heard chattering to himself as Bellamy fumbled with the wiring in his hands in an effort to relight the electric star.

It occurred to me then that the insectoid cacophony had abated, and was replaced instead by the sound of deep laborious breaths and a slow, slate-like scraping, from the far end of the chamber. I resisted the urge to hurry Bellamy along, knowing full well that he was attempting a difficult repair in total darkness.

“Clarke. We meet at last.”

On my knees, I turned at the rasping voice. The accent was English, but possessed of an inorganic quality that chilled my blood.

“Aha!” This was Bellamy, suddenly illuminated by the semi-functional pentacle, revealing a muddied face with slight red gash to the forehead. He raised himself up, holding the star above his head. Two of the five points were dead, with tubes on only three now alight, and the broken tubes fizzing slightly in the damp air. Bellamy’s triumphant expression, eerie lit by the pentacle, soon turned to an expression of terrible wonder, his smiling face slackened and drained of all colour. I turned back in the direction of the rasping voice.

On a raised dais heaved a monstrosity. At the bottom half, human legs lay twisted

awkwardly, clad in high-quality walking boots and tweed trousers. The legs terminated in an amorphous, almost shapeless torso, to which clung the remainder of the tweed suit, split by large chitinous plates. The plates pulsed with a heartbeat, the gaps between widening at rhythmic intervals to reveal a venous membraned skin beneath.

My eyes were drawn to the foul creature's head, large and cuboid, consisting on the left side of arthropod mandible, compound eye, and series of ever-waving antennae, and on the right, adjoined by a creeping green border, the head of a man, one eye staring and a half-mouth twisted in a parody of a smile. Despite what little remained, he was recognisable as the shell of Richard Lambert, reporter for the *Isle of Man Examiner*.

The half-insect, half-human body was wrapped in gigantic chains of apparently great age, their entire surface red-black with centuries of oxidation. At the shoulder and sides, the chain cut directly into the flesh of the monster, as if the imprisoned subject had once been smaller. I suspected it indeed had been, but now fused with Lambert's cadaver it had grown as the energy from the stones above was channelled into its regeneration.

Gef sprung between Bellamy and I, every attention affixed on the terrible beast before us. As we watched, the mongoose to grew in size and transmographed once again into the fearsome bear-like form I had witnessed briefly in the farmhouse, his light, airy chitter-chatter laugh turning into a guttural growl.

"The Loa Buggane. So the devil in chains finds a host. Poor Lambert, he never knew what terror from beyond lay just beneath his feet. The reporter's curiosity led to his own downfall. Although, Bellamy, your Prince and his cronies have a lot to answer for, poking their nose into no-one's business."

Gef approached the Lambert-Loa, circling the platform. The human eye rolled in its socket to follow. Despite horrific appearance, the creature appeared to pose no physical threat, the majority of its power now focussed on the farmhouse which was, I sincerely hoped, being stoutly defended against attack by Bellamy's crack squadron even as we confronted the true enemy here in his underground tomb.

"An intelligent, high-grade personality was exactly what the Loa needed to come alive," Gef continued to circle the monster, gradually decreasing the distance of every pass. His now large claws pawed the dirt absently. "The geologists may have broken the circle and released you – and me – but their minds were a dry plain. Nothing for you there but rock and catalogues. But Lambert, what a prize! Searching, yearning, a mind of science and a breadth of knowledge far beyond the average. How he loved butterflies. The insect. A perfect form for a new body – endlessly adaptable, resilient. So Lambert was absorbed as fuel for both mind and body. Once more, the Loa takes all in the endless pursuit of self-survival. You despicable creature."

Gef stopped before the Loa, which began to shake with a half-human laugh. An insectoid feeler reached out to smell Gef's bear-mongoose form.

"You, Gef, the Arkan Sonney fairy of the isles. Your weakness is my strength," the creature spat, the human voice impeded by arthropod mouthparts that could do nothing but clack together. "You could not destroy me, so I was trapped. Imprisoned forever, giving me time to find an escape. Now the stones are broken and the time is near. Soon every living cell on this island will be dead. And then the sea around. And then the land beyond. The world shall be a black shell spinning around a dead star."

This universe, this time-space has so much energy to feast on. Then only the dark will remain.”

Bellamy and I could only observe this exchange between two creatures from another world, beings that existed at the opposite ends of a universe of which we knew nothing. This Loa – Buggane, as Gef had called it – was the ultimate evil. Nothing short of total extinction was the desired aim. I glanced at Bellamy, who caught my eye and nodded. The electric pentacle continued to glow, but the light thrown from the remaining tubes seemed imperceptible fainter. The battery could not last much longer, and I only prayed that the device was functional enough to act as the energy exchanger as we had hoped.

All the while, Gef and Buggane continued to regard each other, talking of events, places, and other creatures beyond our knowledge. Occasionally, Gef seemed to throw a look at us, as if indicating that our single action, such as it was, was almost due.

“Buggane, Loa of the darkness, you shall be entombed once more. The light shall prevail. Bellamy, if you would be so kind, I will give the signal.”

The Loa twisted to see us, as if remembering we were there. It snarled, insect arms flailing, and a sound of tearing linen filled the room. Gef launched himself bodily on the creature as its torso exploded in a massive cloud of insect life. The sound came as a terrible ripping, as unnaturally large, buzzing hornet-like fliers erupted in a seemingly endless stream from the bloated body of the Loa. Bellamy fell back to his knees, pentacle raised above his head and he tried to block the hurricane of noise. I too found myself on the ground, pummelled by a thousand heavy insects rebounding from my body.

On the platform, Gef had locked his claws into the head of the Loa. The compound eye had been pierced, and oozed a heavy blue syrup. Blotting out by the noise of the hornets, the Lambert-mouth was open in a scream.

Bellamy stumbled into me, hands bleeding from fending off insect attacks. The pentacle was still lit, but the hook-like legs of many insects tugged at the metal struts as they flew past at tremendous speed. Voice communication was impossible; instead I nodded briskly as did Bellamy, and I grasped the dysfunctional side of the star. Bellamy mouthed a countdown from five as we struggled to our haunches and both estimated the distance from our position to the Loa’s head.

On five, we both sprung into the air, pushing physically against the swirling mass of insects that flew around the room. We had both, fortunately, judged accurately, and in one exact movement managed to land on top of the Loa’s burst body, forcing the electric pentacle onto its swollen head. With a pop another vacuum tube broke as the star was embedded in the creature’s mutated cranium.

The Loa roared and threw Gef off, but the bear-spirit transformed in mid-air to the small familiar form of the mongoose and landed gracefully against one side of the tomb. As the Loa twisted and turned, Bellamy and I clung on for dear life. Above us, the insect swarm gathered into a single noisy ball before hurtling downwards to protect their master.

But Gef had been right. The more the monster struggled, the quicker the pentacle channelled its energy away and into the stones above. The insect ball hit us square a second later, but most of the flying monstrosities dissolved into a red powder at the collision. The cacophonous roar stopped, replaced by a weak rasping from the Loa

creature, the body of which began to collapse upon itself on the platform. Soon, Bellamy and I were lying face down in a red scum, both of us clasping strongly to the glowing electric pentacle. I felt Gef leap onto my back. The mongoose let out a long, high wail. I raised myself up, and dared to let go of the pentacle with one hand. Success! Tremendous success!

“We did it! Against all the odds, against a power unknown, your pentacle worked, Bellamy, it worked! You are a man of formidable talents!”

Bellamy lay in the red mulch, both arms outstretched to the pentacle. His slow breathing quickened into a chuckle, before turning into a most hearty laugh. He rolled onto his side, propping his head up on an elbow.

“I dare say the pentacle could use some refinement to make it altogether less fragile, but a successful field test I would say.” He flicked slime from his moustache and gave it a hesitant sniff before wipe it on his tunic. “I could use a rather stiff drink I think.”

Gef did not seem to share our pleasure. His agitated form flitted here and there amongst the mess on the dais.

“You and your pentacle. Moron! *Imbecile!*”

Bellamy had missed the signs of Gef’s annoyance. “We have destroyed the monster, Gef! The island is free of its control!”

Gef’s tiny, furred face was pressed against my own. I could feel the wet of his black nose as the mongoose looked with both eyes into one of mine.

“The creature cannot be destroyed, cannot! The pentacle was broken! So the fields were realigned and the stones recharged, but too much! Buggane’s revolting embodiment may have been destroyed, but that has only served to free the Loa within. Imprisonment is the only method available to stop its evil. If the physical form is destroyed, the Loa is free.”

Bellamy’s light-headed chuckling stopped. I regarded the rapidly fading pentacle and the slowly desiccating red ichor in which we lay. We had failed?

“Then the island – the world – is in even greater danger? What can we do? If the Loa was imprisoned by your people in the first place, can it be done again? Tell us how we can assist?”

Gef growled a little. “It will take a long time for the Loa to find this world again. Years perhaps. I suppose we may at least be satisfied that it is lost elsewhere for the moment. Maybe when it returns the pentacle will actually work, Bellamy.”

I wasn’t sure whether Bellamy was disappointed with Gef’s assessment of his device. He didn’t say, anyway. I attempted to turn this to the positive.

“So the Loa is banished? That gives us ample time, I imagine, to prepare for his recapture? And the island is free, anyway. Those poor villagers, and the soldiers too.” As I sat up, Gef jumped onto my lap.

“Freed? Not at all. Those whose minds the Loa tapped to create copied forms will be dead, as the power has been sucked clean out. If the power had been drawn enough to imprison again, then the connection would be broken. But as it is, with Buggane banished to the corner of space, the strain would be too much. They’re all dead, Clarke.”

The realisation that our efforts may have extinguished an entire village hit us horribly. Our triumph – though real, while the Loa was banished – was tempered by the terrible price paid.

“The farmhouse!” Bellamy made immediately for the tunnel exit. Gef climbed to my shoulder and I followed.

An Invitation to Dinner

The clouds finally broke a day later, as Bellamy’s Lancers completed the grim task of transferring one hundred corpses from the farmer’s field into bay two of the airship, which hung reluctantly an inch above the ground, the rigid held firm by tethered steel cables. A similar scene was taking place down at the military base, with a second detachment of special Lancers making their way through the now deserted buildings, lifting carcasses out and into the base yard. As with the *Defiant*, the base’s boat was being loaded with a sombre cargo. Word was the *Prince Albert Victorious* was on the way from Douglas.

The resourcefulness of Mr. Irvine and his family was something to behold. I said as much, as we sat around the kitchen table. Mr. Irvine and Bellamy each cradled a generous measure of scotch, while I and the farmer’s wife were satisfied with tea – not, I was pleased to observe, delivered in tin mugs from an army thermos, but from the homely brown kettle that sat in the centre of the table. Hot, and once again sweet.

Having established a cordon, the Lancers had been able to defend the farmhouse during our confrontation with Buggane in the barrow. The villager-doppelgangers had been clumsy in their attack, perhaps as their remote coordination was distracted by Gef’s wrestle with the master in the tomb. Thankfully, the Escapement had not been needed a second time. The Irvines had even taken part in the battle, barricading Valerie in the cellar while Mr. Irvine and his wife took an improvised sniper position from the upstairs bedroom, Mrs. Irvine feeding shells as her husband covered the ground below with an alarming elephant gun.

Although the family had survived, the village of Dalby was another question. Not all inhabitants had fallen under the sway of Buggane, although all of the local military force had. It was unlikely that the village would be repopulated – Bellamy had earlier made some intimation that the remaining villagers may be relocated to the larger town of Peel. Despite the tragic losses, the Irvines were not, however, interested.

“Oh no, Mr. Bellamy, my family fought tooth and claw to protect what’s ours. We’re not going anywhere – and Dalby will come back, don’t worry about that. We’ve lost a lot but there are good folk about, don’t worry about that.”

The kettle rattled. Gef appeared on the table, and Valerie at the kitchen door. Bellamy reached out to tickle the animal apparition under the chin.

“And what of you, my magic mongoose?” he asked. “If the barrow is empty, how can you still exist to protect it?”

Valerie took a seat and poured herself a mug of tea. Gef curled against her arm.

“Fiddle to the barrow, soldier-boy.” Gef was back to his original playful – if irritating – self, reflecting the mind of his companion. “The Loa will be back one day, so it makes sense for the circle to be watched. Someone has to do it. And a mongoose is a very useful thing for spying. Besides which,” he said as he nipped to Valerie’s shoulder, “A girl needs a friend. What better than an extra, extra clever mongoose?”

Bellamy finished his tea. “And you, Dr. Clarke? What are you going to write for your *Gazetteer*?”

I laughed into my mug, almost involuntarily, then regretted instantly my light-heartedness in the face of so much death. “Much to Pemberton’s annoyance, a pleasant tale of an island holiday, I dare say. I doubt the great British public is ready to read of anything that took place over the last two days. I suppose you will have devised a suitable cover story by the time I return to my desk? But I think it is a job well done – the mystery of the ‘Dalby Sensation’ has been solved, and the Irvines can get back to normal life. Well, free of harassment at any rate. The rebuilding of the village is an admirable task.”

Bellamy nodded, tweaking his moustache absently as I had come to recognise in a sign of careful thought.

“Quite right, Dr. Clarke, quite right. You are also subject to the Official Secrets Act in this instance. However, his Royal Highness will require a full account of this island adventure. I suggest we combine our knowledge of occult science in the preparation of this report. What say you, Clarke?”

The matter of the devil in chains did, I felt, need to be recorded in its entirety for the historical record of the land, regardless of whose eyes ultimately saw it. I accepted his offer, and we shook hands firmly. From his silver cigarette case, Bellamy extracted a small calling card and offered it to me. There was nothing on the white rectangle save a single line address on The Mall, London.

“Dinner at my club, a week hence. White tie, I’m afraid. In the meantime, I feel I shall be occupied on the island for some days. The business of the base must be re-established as a matter of urgency, should the Northern Republic hear the island is unmanned, as it were. As such I must get back to duty. Good-bye Dr. Clarke, and thank-you for everything. Until next week.”

Bellamy stood and warmly shook my hand. As I turned his card over in my hands, he made his farewells to the Irvines and left the kitchen to take charge of the operation outside.

Dinner at the club. What intriguing circles our Colonel-Commandant Bellamy moved in.

Valerie giggled as the Dalby Sensation danced around the table. Mrs. Irvine was at my side.

“More tea, Dr. Clarke?”

FIN

This Place Sucks

Written by Steven Poore

Reskell's fingers twitched. Servo motors whined gently and his chair swivelled: first to the left, then back to the right. Left again, and right again. A short pause, and then the chair elevated a little.

Left. And then right. Up a tad more, then back down. After a moment more, Reskell started to hum tunelessly along with the servos.

"Oh for god's sake, will you shut up?" Cord said at last, shaking his head in despair. "Between you and the damned horizon, you're driving me mad."

Reskell grinned to himself. He had wondered how long Cord would hold out this time. Not very long at all, it seemed. The job was finally getting to their illustrious leader too.

Not that Reskell had nothing to do. Far from it – there was plenty to do, all day long. The dredging scoops had to be monitored and regulated, to make sure the flow of raw material was constant; the conversion engines had checklists and tolerances of their own, all to be ticked and signed off every fifteen minutes; the great bitumen-extrusion devices on the underside of their vehicle needed to be unclogged every few hours, necessitating a halt and temporary power-down; and after that, the start-up procedures were so deeply etched on his mind that they could almost be religious rituals.

No, there was more than enough to occupy his time. But the routines were just that: tediously routine, unchanging, predictable. Eight hours downtime, followed by sixteen monitoring the machinery, checking and double-checking, authorising self-repair systems, and staring out at the endless, orange-brown landscape around them.

Reskell itched. It wasn't an itch he could scratch – not here, cooped up with Cord and Yannick for another three months.

Two lights on his top panel began to flash. Reskell leaned forward, tapped the dials underneath them, and noted the readings on his clipboard before flicking the reset switches to kill the lights. He passed the board to Cord, who noted the readings on his own sheet and entered them on the master plot.

"I hope it's not cabin fever," Cord said, arching an eyebrow at him.

Reskell shrugged and sat back again, his fingers hovering over the chair controls once more. "It'd be nice to get out for a bit," he admitted.

Cord snorted. "Don't be daft. I can't stop this thing just because you want to stretch your legs. Tell you what, why don't we all make up some sandwiches and go have a picnic over by that lake? Feed the ducks!"

"What bloody ducks?" Reskell muttered. The chair spun left and right again, the servos whirring sympathetically. "What bloody lake?"

One day, there might be a lake here. But Reskell and Cord would be long gone by then, and their rumbling old road-layer would have been dismantled and transported on to another remote world in a different sector. Somebody else would have to spend six whole months of their life ticking boxes and wiping dirt from extruder nozzles.

Six months Reskell would never get back, he had thought ruefully more than once.

Eight hours with Yannick, eight with Cord, eight on his own in the small nest of cabins at the other end of the passage behind the road-layer's cockpit. And then around again. And again, and again, *ad nauseum*. It really was a wonder none of them had cracked yet, though both of the others had been doing this so long they were pretty much self-contained. Reskell had heard tales of crews that had spent too long together: misunderstandings, awkward silences, pent-up aggression, strange and unexplained accidents ... He had thought that they were exaggerated, but now he wasn't so certain.

The road-layer rumbled relentlessly forward at little more than a walking pace, following a course set months in advance by the corporation's urban planning directorate. Everything on Burbage IV had been planned and laid out in minute detail; nothing would be left to chance. Every major road, every street corner of every perfectly modelled town – all decided months or even years ahead of schedule. Reskell had seen some of the more advanced models, and knew how each street would look after the buildings, trees and demographically-researched public art had been slotted into place.

It wasn't the kind of place he wanted to live in, he thought. Soulless, inorganic, squeezed and pruned into shape like one of those ridiculous little trees Yannick was trying to grow. Reskell couldn't see the point in them.

Cord's panel beeped at him and he reached over to tap in the "wait" command. He counted to five then hit the switch again, and initialled his own clipboard.

"Be a pioneer," Reskell grunted, reciting from the advert that had drawn him in. "Don't just visit new worlds – create them! Be a part of the future!"

"You shouldn't believe everything you read," Cord said. "You know, this place might look pretty good when they finally develop some clouds."

Reskell groaned and sank deeper into his seat.

Everything vibrated. It was a fact of life now: Reskell was coming to believe that when his contract was finished he wouldn't be able to cope without the continuous hums, whirrs and rattles that the road-layer made. He would be like the old wet-navy sailors who walked with a habitual roll to compensate for the movement of the sea.

He lay on one of the spare couches, one elbow propped under his head, and stared across the cabin to the tray that held Yannick's miniature trees. Yannick had glued the high-sided tray to the table to prevent it from falling off if the road-layer juddered too much. It took up more than half of the table, but with the rotating shifts there was rarely more than one person in the cabin at any time.

Yannick had brought the trees onto the road-layer with him at the start of their contract. They hadn't grown much since then as far as Reskell could see, although the short Slav had spent countless hours training and pruning them with his little kit of stainless steel tools. The three trees intrigued and infuriated Reskell in equal amounts: they reminded him of just how constrained and delineated his own work was, but at the same time he could see that Yannick was clearly devoted to them.

He rolled onto his back with a sigh. Yannick had his trees. Cord drew intricately detailed fractal sketches in his spare moments. Reskell had brought half a dozen books with him, and had read them all several times over.

He needed something to do.

Even in power-down mode the road-layer made a tremendous noise. Although he couldn't venture out onto the surface without breathing apparatus, Burbage IV had enough of an atmosphere for the grating and growling of the massive engines to half-deafen Reskell.

"Well?" Yannick's voice crackled over the headset.

"Hold on," Reskell replied, raising his voice to be heard. He ducked carefully under the painted safety rail and crawled under the road-layer, dragging the tool kit with one hand.

It wasn't entirely fair, he thought again. Nearly every time the extruders got blocked, he was the one who had to go and unblock them. He understood that he was the junior member of the team – both Cord and Yannick had run the road-layers before on different worlds, and Cord had two years seniority over Yannick – but he didn't like the way that meant he got all the dirty jobs.

Technically he shouldn't even have come under the road-layer while the main drives were still running, but shutting the beast down completely would take hours off its serviceable life and restarting from cold might take days. At least the extruders were switched off – he wouldn't be accidentally fused to the new road surface.

"Two alpha jets blocked this time," he told Yannick. "It'll be ten minutes, I think."

The corporation could have used self-replicating nano-tech to maintain the extruders, he thought. The technology was fairly widespread these days. But, if they had done that, another part of his mind whispered, they would have used AI to control these road-layers, and you wouldn't have a job.

Wedged uncomfortably under the alpha extrusion nozzles, scraping half-solidified resin from them with chipped tools that kept slipping from his grasp, Reskell wasn't sure how he felt about that.

At last he dragged himself from under the road-layer and spent a moment stretching to unkink his muscles. Burbage IV's long day had slid slowly into night, the starlit sky crisp and clear above him. The world rolled away from the road-layer in all directions, soil and rocks baked and compacted over millions of years. Virgin plains, untouched by mankind: a new frontier. All except for the thick, straight line of the freshly-laid road that now scarred the land, tying the road-layer like an umbilical cord to the groundside facilities far behind them. A long road that didn't go anywhere. Yet.

As brave new worlds went, it wasn't much to look at, Reskell thought. He bent, impulsively, and used one of the scrapers to scrawl a ragged message in the gelatinous surface of the new road.

This place sucks.

"Come on, kid," Yannick barked into his ear. "We ain't got all day."

Reskell grinned at the absurdity and turned back to the road-layer.

He sat at the table and absently spooned stew into his mouth, wincing at the over-familiar wet-dog taste. Supply runs would have upped the overheads too much, he guessed, so the road-layer had been sent out with enough tinned food to last them six months. Most of it conformed to a rough approximation of Irish stew.

That much food ate alarmingly into the available storage space: it was just as well that most of the cabins were unused, since they had been commandeered as extra storage space. Condensed or dried food would have been better, but then they would have needed a larger water supply too. The recycler system was enough – barely – for the three of them.

Cord, in one of his reflective moods, had told him of the halcyon days when the road-layers had full six-man crews and the work shifts could be more varied. He made it sound like half a century in the past, rather than just a handful of years.

Yannick had been fiddling with his bonsai again: one he called a *crassula ovata* sat on the table in front of Reskell now, the clusters of rich jade leaves at odds with the rest of the cabin. An empty plastic watering bottle sat nearby – from the supply that Yannick had brought with him as a large portion of his weight allowance; his roll of tweezers and tiny knives lay open on the far side of the table.

Reskell rested his head on his hands and stared at the plant. The branches twisted up and around in exactly the way that Yannick wanted them to grow, scarred where he had trimmed back unnecessary growth. Despite his scorn for what he thought of as Yannick's crazy hobby, he found himself reaching out to turn the pot gently so that the pattern of the branches changed. Now, he thought, they resembled roads, forking and diverging away from the major city at the root of the plant. Crossing behind each other as though they were junctions.

Just like the roads of Burbage IV, he realised. Minor routes branched away from the major highways, forking once again into local clusters. Everything planned down to the last meter.

Reskell stood up and crossed to the cabin's terminal, hunting for the files that held the plans and grid-maps for the planet's road network, his head ticking with an idea born of ennui. *Bonsai*, he thought to himself with amusement. *There might be something in it after all.*

Two lights flashed on. Reskell was expecting them: he reached over and flicked the metering switch under the first light, resetting that panel's monitoring cycle, and initialled the clipboard that sat in his lap. Then he tapped the second light with one knuckle and it too blinked off.

"That one wants looking at," Yannick observed, not for the first time. "I'll take the panel off when I go off-shift."

Reskell nodded agreement, though he knew it wouldn't happen: it never did, no matter how many times Yannick mentioned it. It was just another part of the endless routine. His hand dropped to the chair's servo controls almost automatically and he glanced quickly at Yannick to see if he had noticed. The large man was far less tolerant of his fidgeting than Cord was, so Reskell had learned to keep his hands

under control during these shifts. It kept the tension down, but it also made eight hours drag into a full week.

Yannick was leafing absently through a tattered magazine he had brought onto the road-layer with him. He had been reading the same magazine for the past three months, yet he never seemed bored of it. Once again, it was a part of the routine. Every few minutes, he would stick out his hand to tap authorisations, flick switches, move sliders up or down – all without looking up at them. The ritual movements of the day were engrained that deeply into him. It was a level of comfort that Reskell knew he would never be able to achieve – not, he added to himself, that he wanted to be that comfortable in the first place.

There could be a steep crevasse in the ground ahead of them, he thought, and Yannick would not even look up to see it. As long as all the right lights flashed at all the right times, they could even be rolling around in a great circle, layers of extruded road building up and up and up...

That made him pause. A refill indicator over his head buzzed for attention and he dealt with it hurriedly, trying to hide the smile that threatened to break across his face.

The corporation had been ambitious from the start: not content to let the colony form and grow outwards organically, the project managers had thrown a fair amount of capital into designing an extensive planetary infrastructure, reasoning – Reskell thought as he studied the printed grid maps that now covered the table – that firm and visible foundations would attract a better class of investor. He supposed the theory was sound enough, but the downside was that even the corporation's resources were finite – every other department had suffered from budget cuts and efficiency savings. And that included the dirtside teams.

So that's why we mooch across this bleak rock at walking pace in a road-layer that should've been scrapped fifty years ago, he thought. And that's why the software and communication uplinks are ten years behind current technology. My little sister could have hacked the codes on these things.

The software codes certainly hadn't posed a problem to Reskell. He would have majored in electronics if he hadn't dropped out of college in the second year, his magpie mind distracted by the siren call of glittering new worlds.

While Yannick and Cord took their shift, tapping, flicking, switching and recording in their comfortable, conditioned silences, Reskell looked at the pre-programmed routes of every road-layer on Burbage IV's surface. How they fanned out from the centre; how and where they crossed as the grid became ever more complex.

He glanced up for a moment at the *crassula ovata*, vibrating gently in its bowl, then picked up his pen and bowed his head over the printed sheets.

The pen was a tool: a cutter, of sorts. With it he would prune, snip, and curb the flow of roads across the planet's surface. But not viciously, nor without reason. Instead, he would use the pen to mould and to shape, to bend straight lines and redirect curves. Subtle interventions, in every case, nothing jarring or obviously wrong. Each change a small part of the whole.

"Don't just visit new worlds..." he muttered under his breath.

Somewhere deep below them, the pitch of the road-layer's eternal rumbling changed, becoming a discordant counterpart to the usual whirring and humming. Half a second later a bank of lights lit up red and a warning buzzer added its own atonal bleating to the infernal racket that always set Reskell on edge.

Cord sighed and reached up to disable the alarm, hauling hard on the braking levers with his other hand. Reskell leaned over to run the diagnostic programs, trying hard to appear nonchalant but certain he could not meet Cord's eyes without somehow giving the game away.

"Your turn or mine?" he asked lightly. It was the first time he had even dared to suggest that it might not be his turn – again – to unblock the extruders and he wasn't sure how Cord would react to a change in the routine.

The older man paused and frowned at him. "Yours, of course," he said, as if surprised that he had even been asked.

Reskell pulled a face. "Just once? It's my birthday," he pouted.

Cord shook his head in exasperation. "Kids. Got no work ethic at all. Amazing we ever got off Earth in the first place, with attitudes like that. Okay, my treat. Watch and learn, birthday boy – I'll have this lot unsnarled in three minutes flat."

"Yes, *sensei*," Reskell grinned.

He watched with studied calm as Cord clambered from his seat and made his way down the access ladder to the airlock. As soon as he heard the inner hatch seal, he slid across into the other seat and reached for the main terminal, tapping quickly to bring up the files he had stored on the terminal down in the main cabin. He counted them twice, forcing himself not to go too quickly – a mistake would only ruin what he had planned.

A glance at one of the camera monitors showed him Cord's breath-suited figure crawling awkwardly under the road-layer – there was more than enough time yet. The next step was to dial into the satellites that the corporation had seeded in orbit over Burbage IV and convince them that he had some sort of command authority. He had practiced this part, using a hand-coded parasite bug to copy somebody else's ID. Technically, that could see him locked up for several years, especially if the corporation went for the espionage angle, but since Burbage IV didn't have a prison yet Reskell figured at least he wouldn't have to do hard time on *this* damned rock.

No more than I am already, he thought to himself.

The files uploaded, one by one, disappearing from the road-layer's terminal. Half a minute later the navigation panel chimed gently as it acknowledged a downloaded course correction.

Reskell cleared the terminal and returned to his chair with a grin. Of course there was a chance that somebody on one of the other road-layers would question the updates. But if their crews were anything like Yannick and Cord – and here he was betting that they were – they'd probably just shrug it off and return to the routine of their checklists.

Now, just like Yannick and his miniature trees, he merely had to be patient.

Cord climbed back up a few minutes later. “Right,” he said briskly, reaching for his panels without even looking at them. “Start-up sequence. Further on down the road, eh?”

Reskell nodded. “Oh yes,” he said.

Ludovico Osburn stirred his coffee energetically as he spoke. “Intra-system traffic’s picking up by around fifteen per cent every month now. Once the groundside terminals are fully functional, I can see that increasing to something like thirty per cent. The HR budget’s starting to look pretty unrealistic, Juhan.”

His companion nodded, his attention diverted elsewhere as he gazed out beyond the transparent viewing ring. Pod-loaded cargo shuttles clung to the open-framed surface of the orbital control station, technicians in protective suits crawling over them to affix new loads or check their drive plates and hull shields. Burbage IV loomed large over the activity, the planet’s red ochre surface now bearing the fresh scars of human occupation.

“The budget was set rather too low to begin with,” Juhan Cerny said. “I did point out at the time, if you recall, that if you don’t want to increase the headcount you need to invest in a higher degree of automation.”

Osburn shrugged. “That doesn’t necessarily follow,” he argued. “And even if we did go for AI-led systems there would have been a massive start-up cost and we’d still need to pay over the odds for specialist technicians to troubleshoot them.”

Cerny appeared to be amused by something. “I still say you’ve cut your margins too fine here, Ludo. Long shifts, undermanning, low morale... I think you may have let the problems grow under your feet, so to speak.”

Osburn crumpled the empty sachets of sugar into a tight ball and flicked it off the table. A nearby dust-mech stared impassively at it for a moment and then swivelled about with a jerking motion and began to crawl towards it. Osburn hoped Cerny had not noticed the machine’s delayed reaction and made a mental note to have the service schedules regraded.

“I haven’t had any complaints,” he said.

Cerny grinned and jerked a thumb at the slowly revolving view of the new colony. Osburn lifted his head, his brow furrowing as he spied the lattice of roads on the surface below. Roads that sprung out of the grid to form words.

“Oh yes you have,” Cerny smiled.