



SPECTRUM SF 5

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ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the fifth issue of SPECTRUM SF and our first anniversary issue!

First off, let me apologise (once again) for the tardy arrival of an issue. I could trot out a long and genuine list of reasons for this, but I doubt whether any of you would be interested. Perhaps we should all just be grateful that the first of the year's four issues appears in the first quarter of the year?

Next, the results of Competition #4. An eagle-eyed subscriber quickly pointed out that my question was in error. Although I asked which *two* magazines Keith Roberts' 'Anita' stories were first published in, he correctly informed me that they actually appeared in *three*: SCIENCE FANTASY, SF IMPULSE and F&SF. This is a less heinous error than you might at first think. The magazine SCIENCE FANTASY changed its name for 5 issues to IMPULSE and for the 7 issues thereafter to SF IMPULSE. Most people would consider all three the same magazine as little else changed apart from the title (and that it grew from 128 pp. to 160 pp. – those who might feel inclined to mention the addition of internal art in the later issues of SF IMPULSE should remember that Keith Roberts contributed an illustration to one of his earlier SCIENCE FANTASY stories.)

However, being more correct than the editor deserves a special award of a copy of the book. Well done, Stephen Thomas in Cornwall. The two copies which Owlswick Press kindly donated were won (with any two of the three correct answers above) by Svend Kreiner in Frederiksberg, Denmark, and Stewart Lloyd in Lincolnshire. I know that all three of you will enjoy Keith Roberts' ANITA very much indeed.

Finally, this issue has quite a lot of fiction in it so THE ARCHIVE has been somewhat truncated. I hope to catch up next time around. Issue #6 will also have a LETTERS column as several of you have sent comments along with your subscription renewals. See you then.

Paul Fraser, Editor.

P.S. Please note the new contact details on the page opposite.

Michael Coney started writing SF in the late sixties and went on to publish some 20 or so novels and numerous pieces of short fiction. He was at his most prolific in the seventies, during which he won a BSFA Award for his novel HELLO SUMMER, GOODBYE.

Some of his best shorter work is set in a locale known as 'The Peninsula', an exotic coastal setting, and features two main characters: Joe Sagar, a livestock-farmer who breeds slithes for their emotion-sensitive skins, and Carioca Jones, an ageing and manipulative ex-3V star.

The series consists of: THE GIRL WITH A SYMPHONY IN HER FINGERS; THE HOOK, THE EYE AND THE WHIP (GALAXY, January & March 1974); BARTHOLOMEW & SON (AND THE FISH GIRL) (NEW WRITINGS IN SF #27, 1975); THOSE GOOD OLD DAYS OF LIQUID FUEL; THE CINDERELLA MACHINE; CATAPULT TO THE STARS; SPARKLEBUGS, HOLLY AND LOVE (F&SF, January & August 1976, April & December 1977); PENNY ON A SKYHORSE (GALILEO #11/12, 1979) and DIE, LORELEI (F&SF, May 1993). Some of the earlier stories were fixed-up into a novel, THE GIRL WITH A SYMPHONY IN HER FINGERS. (Elmfield Press, 1975), also published as THE JAWS THAT BITE, THE CLAWS THAT CATCH, (DAW, 1975).

I'm delighted to present the tenth story in the series herewith.

POPPY DAY

MICHAEL CONEY

Driving a ground-effect car in gusty wind is difficult, which is why I didn't at first notice the commotion in the bushes.

Moreover, while my hands were trying to keep the vehicle reasonably near the track, my mind was struggling with the nonsense of tomorrow's Poppy Day celebrations.

I'd just come away from a difficult discussion in Carioca Jones's aerial house – which had been firmly rooted to the ground due to the weather conditions. Carioca and Miranda Marjoribanks had been arguing about rights of way.

"It used to be well marked," Miranda had said. "A public footpath from just there," she indicated the place on the large-scale map, "past the dolmen and across to the sea – beyond the fish pens of that dreadful

man Westaway. And Theodore Rabin closed it off to grow his latest poppies there. I believe you were on the Council at the time, Carioca. You could have prevented it. The Council is becoming a mere pawn of the Hetherington Organisation and their wretched Research Station. Really, those poppy fields are spreading across the Peninsula like a fungus!”

“Actually, darling, the poppies help prevent the dolmen from being overused.”

“Overused? How can you overuse a pile of rocks, pray?”

“The Council has listed the dolmen as an ancient monument, darling. We must preserve our heritage.”

“Well really, Carioca! Your so-called dolmen is merely a cheap imitation of a Celtic burial chamber thrown up as a school project less than a century ago. And what about people who want to walk their pets to the beach, and give them a little swim? I tell you, Carioca, I’ve a good mind to mobilise the Foes of Bondage and *force* our way through!”

My blood had run cold at the mention of the Foes: a militant group which has long forgotten its original purpose and now lies dormant, but ready to rise like an awakened crocodile at any suggestion of a cause with which to identify.

“No, not the Foes, darling,” Carioca said firmly. “I’m not saying I don’t agree with you, but it’s best not to push Dr Rabin too far. It would be all too easy for that dreadful little man to disrupt Poppy Day simply by delaying his harvest until our celebrations are over.”

I drove on, wondering about my own involvement. Why did Carioca always rope me into her quarrels? Was I really needed as a mediator between two women of opposing views? Did I have any interest at all in the ridiculous Poppy Day celebrations?

Was that a naked girl in the bushes?

I cut the power abruptly and the car dropped to the ground with a teeth-clashing thump. Visibility was poor, and the wind and rain were whipping the bushes violently. Had I been mistaken?

Again I glimpsed a pallid flash of skin as a head and bare shoulders rose from the undergrowth. A mouth opened wide in a scream I could hear even through the soundproofing of my car. I threw up the door and jumped out. Joe Sagar rides to the rescue with no time to wonder if it’s any of his business – a screaming girl is a screaming girl, when all

is said and done. She struggled towards me and I saw blood streaming from scratches on her shoulders and breasts, smudged pink by the rain. Then she fell, disappearing into the undergrowth as I plunged forward to grapple with her unseen attacker.

Then my courage failed me, just for a moment.

A huge land-shark lay at her feet, its jaws clamping her leg while a cold eye swivelled back to register my presence. Blood seeped through the girl's filtron jeans. She screamed again and I threw myself at the monster. It thrashed under me with incredible strength as I wrapped an arm around it, with some vague notion of immobilizing it while I groped for a rock with the other hand. It threw me off with ease; just a flick of its tail and I was a couple of metres away with the breath knocked out of me. As I struggled to my feet I caught a glimpse of torn clothing lying nearby as the girl, clawing at the undergrowth, tried to jerk her leg away from the brute's grip.

In the sea a shark would have rolled and twisted, taking her leg off in seconds. But sharks are insecure onshore. Even land-sharks, adapted as pets for people with weird tastes. Out of their element, they don't like to be thrown off balance. This hammerhead intended to hold onto the girl quite passively until she fainted from loss of blood, and then...

I stumbled towards the shark, fell across its head and plunged my hand into the cold roughness of a gill slit.

In a moment I'd located the oxygenator: a metal cylinder about ten centimetres long and five wide. A small miracle of technology, originally developed to allow humans to live on water worlds by extracting oxygen from the sea; here converted, or perverted, to feed oxygen from the air into the bloodstream of a pet fish. I got my fingers around the cylinder, dislodged a few connections and wrenched it out.

The shark gave an almighty thrash and threw me off. Its jaws gaped wide. The girl fell free and began to crawl away.

"Are you all right?" I gasped. Silly question. She was nowhere near all right. She collapsed a couple of metres away and lay still, face down. I knelt beside her. She was bleeding freely from her wounds. She wore nothing but her jeans, with the tattered remains of a pair of yellow waterproof trousers around her ankles. I had to get hold of the ambulopter, quickly.

I ran for the car, fumbled a box open and pulled out a slitheskin robe – a very expensive slitheskin robe, destined for Carioca Jones, ex 3V star and my best client. This was no time for cash considerations;

slitheskin is an almost perfect insulator. I wrapped it around the girl, carried her to the car and laid her across the rear seats. Then I called the ambulopter.

While I waited, something was puzzling me. I returned to the shark, to find it already dead. Now that was a funny thing. Usually, when a land-shark is deprived of its oxygenator it takes a long time to die, anything up to half an hour – just as a normal shark will live on for a while after being taken from the sea. But this shark had died within a couple of minutes. I stood looking at the brute for a moment, and noticed a sour smell, like cider.

Shuddering, I returned to the car. The girl was moving sluggishly under the slitheskin, in shock. I wished the ambulopter would hurry up.

Then I noticed another oddity. Slitheskin will normally change colour to reflect the emotions of the wearer. It's taken me generations of breeding the little reptiles to achieve that effect. I'd have expected the robe I'd wrapped around the girl to reflect her emotions: fear, pain, bewilderment perhaps. But it remained a neutral beige colour. Didn't the girl *feel* anything?

My thoughts were interrupted by a blast from a horn. A car swerved off the track and dropped to a halt beside me.

"Joe, that you?" It was Daniel Westaway, a local fish-farmer.

This was not the ideal time for Westaway to show up. His conversation can be tedious and searching, and I needed time to think about the current situation. "I've got an injured woman here, Dan. I'm waiting for the ambulopter."

"Injured?" He was beside me in a flash, plucking at the slitheskin robe.

"Steady, Dan." He was brushing away the lank brown hair which curtained her face. Her eyes were shut, her skin very pale, even to the lips. It was the first time I'd really looked at her; up to now I'd had greater priorities. He drew the robe downwards to examine her wounds. "Leave her a bit of dignity. That brute tore most of the clothes off her."

"Don't be stupid, man," he said sharply, "it's Diane."

I can get angry when a man says something totally unbelievable; I don't like being taken for a fool. I knocked his hand away roughly and stared down at the beautiful face. The girl bore a striking similarity to his daughter, certainly; but his daughter was light years away, working with a planetary exploration team.

"How the hell can it be Diane?"

"She's come home." He stared at me almost challengingly. We heard the whine of the ambulopter.

"What do you mean, come home? She was on a long-term contract. When did she arrive, for God's sake?"

"Her contract was cancelled," he said flatly, and I began to believe him. I looked again at the familiar face, now so pale and streaked with blood. Yes, it was Diane all right. As the ambulopter settled into the undergrowth nearby, I slipped my hand under the robe and held hers. I needed reassurance. I still couldn't quite believe it.

Diane was back.

An hour or so later we were sitting in the living room of Westaway's tumbledown shack. The paramedics had cleaned Diane up, dressed her wounds, and reluctantly released her into her father's custody. Now she sat opposite me, Carioca's robe still wrapped around her body, pale-faced and quiet. Diane is twenty-two years old, young enough to be my daughter. She is heart-wrenchingly beautiful, with huge blue eyes in an oval face.

Daniel looks on me as an old friend, possibly his only friend, because I often drop by in the evenings to talk and drink. What he doesn't know is that there's been nothing to interest me here since Diane joined the Hetherington Organisation and left Earth. I still drop by as a kind of alibi, a guilty cover for my true feelings. Hi-ho.

"Why didn't you tell me Diane's back?"

He gave me his customary scowl. "It hardly concerns you, does it?"

"Well, Christ, we're friends, aren't we?" I addressed Diane. "When did you get back, Diane?"

She gave no indication of having heard me. She was staring out of the window at the nearby trees, which cut out half the light and gave the cabin its gloomy ambience, so suited to Daniel's personality. And the robe showed no emotions at all. It remained a dull beige. That was far from normal.

"Listen," Daniel said suddenly, "I'm bloody grateful to you, Joe. Don't think I'm not. Sorry if I've seemed a bit short. But we have a few problems here, you understand? I... didn't want to tell you she's back because she's... not herself, eh?"

"She's in shock," I said automatically. Daniel had a shifty look. "How long has she been here?"

"Er, a week or so," he muttered.

"I was here last week. And a few days before that. I didn't see her."

"She was probably in bed. She hasn't been well." He looked hunted.

"Exactly how long has she been cooped up in this bloody house, Daniel?"

Reluctantly he admitted, "Maybe six weeks."

"Six weeks!"

"You've got to understand, Joe. She's not fit to go out. Damn it, you saw what happened today."

"All right. So what's wrong with her?" It wasn't right, talking about Diane as though she wasn't there.

He took a sip of scotch, psyching himself up, giving me a level look from under his heavy brows. The situation was obvious to us both. He didn't want to talk about Diane. I did. He knew me; I wasn't going away.

"All right. This is what Theo Rabin told me – in confidence, Joe. About a month before her ship docked at Sol Station, Diane came out of deepsleep automatically. Her job was simple enough. She had to carry out a few medical checks on the rest of the crew, then bring them round with shots of Restoral. It was a cargo ship, *Hetherington Pegasus*. There were no passengers, just eight crew. It's always best to give people a check-up before waking them from deepsleep because there are certain dangers involved, so I'm told. So only the medical officer is woken up with an automatic shot of Restoral."

"The stimulant they make from the poppies Theo Rabin grows here?"

"The very same." His tone was bitter. "After that, all I could gather was that something went wrong. By the time the ship docked a month later, all the crew were dead."

"Dead? All of them?"

"Except Diane."

"I didn't see anything about it on the news."

"They've hushed it up, pending investigation. Even Rabin can't tell me anything more. Diane can't tell me herself, you can see that. She hasn't spoken since she got back, except in her sleep, and that's mostly screaming. The Organisation is hinting at negligence on Diane's part. They say she must have given them all a massive overdose. She can't defend herself. She's not... well."

"You could call it a breakdown," he explained reluctantly. "The Hetherington Organisation is monitoring her – I had a hell of a job

getting her out of their hands. Rabin drops by daily. He's a good guy, and I think he has his hands full with his bosses on the mainland. He says it's a just matter of waiting. But she's not safe to go out, not with all those bloody fish out there."

I was fairly sure Daniel was, in his narrow-minded fashion, *ashamed* of Diane's illness. Some people are like that about mental problems.

"Does Rabin give you any kind of overall time-frame?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" He was on his feet. The robe had fallen open, exposing Diane's breasts. She made no attempt to cover them up. A year ago this would have had an earth-moving effect on me. But today I felt only pity. Daniel adjusted the robe with a tenderness I'd never noticed in him before. "Sorry, Joe," he mumbled, sitting down again.

He went on, "It's been a nightmare running the farm without her. Half the time the dolphins do as they bloody well please, and I'm lucky to get any kind of a catch in the pens."

Diane has a remarkable affinity for animals. She'd been instrumental in training the dolphins which herded fish into Daniel's pens. It was amazing to watch; the creatures would obey her mental commands as a sheepdog obeys a shepherd's whistling.

Daniel was talking, almost to himself. "That's why I moved into tumps. You can control tumps just like cattle. And for half the year they live off the land anyway. I only drove the herd back into the water last week. But they can get out of control too, and wander off into deep water and get themselves killed. They have no sense of pain, you see. So they have no sense of danger. Stupid great lumps of meat. But profitable, Joe. Tump steaks are big in the restaurants."

"Yes. Well, that's good," I said vaguely, conscious of a subtle change in the room.

"The dolphins are getting old. I need Diane to train the next generation."

I felt my face flush with anger. "Bugger the dolphins! Think about Diane's health, for God's sake, you selfish old bastard!"

"I do, Joe. Believe me, I do. I've had six weeks of thinking about her health. But I have to make a living." His tone was mild. "And remember, Diane's my problem, not yours."

I looked at her and my heart jolted. The slitheskin robe had taken on a pink blush. She was looking directly at me. She shook her head slightly and raised a finger to her lips.

“Listen to me, Rabin. When I say that shark smelled of poppymist I know what I’m talking about. And its movements were quick and jerky, just like those fools at the Poppy Day festival. Christ, man, it could have killed Diane Westaway. If your poppy fields are seeding ahead of time you’d better do something about it, and fast. There are plenty of stray sharks around the Peninsula. If they’re affected by the poppies nobody will be safe, and the Hetherington Organisation will be responsible.”

He heard me out, I’ll grant him that. He sat at his keyboard with his head cocked my way, a squat, bearded figure, and his fingers had ceased to move over the keys. But he hadn’t stood to greet me. When his receptionist had announced me he’d remained at the computer. I’d resisted the urge to haul him to his feet by the scruff of his neck. Westaway might think him a good guy, but for my money he was a cocky little bastard.

“The plants are *not* seeding,” he said flatly.

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“Of course not. You saw what you saw, and you made a mistaken assumption. So that fish must have got into the fields somehow. I must check the fences. It could have done a lot of damage. Yes.” His fingers danced over the keys. Stylised images of the force-fence rolled past. The scrolling paused. “Yes, there we are. A small irregularity. I’ll have it seen to immediately. Yes.”

He seemed satisfied with the situation. “Is that all you have to say?” I asked.

“The Organisation will offer its condolences to Miss Westaway, certainly. I shall convey them myself, on my next visit. It’s a dangerous situation, that the Peninsula should be infested with savage creatures, but it’s not the Organisation’s doing, Mr Sagar. We must lay the blame for that at the feet of Miranda Marjoribanks.” As always, he spoke with a curious preciseness, as though unused to social contact. He was a cold fish, but he sensed my growing outrage and continued mildly, “It would be a catastrophe if the Organisation’s research were interrupted by an ill-informed witch-hunt.”

“Is growing poppies that important?”

“Our production of Restoral is vital to space travel, but that is only one aspect of our work here. We carry out evolutionary studies on animals as well as plants.”

His fingers were dancing again. The display had changed, showing

strange, twisted shapes. He'd forgotten me. His eyes gleamed as he keyed in some hypothetical danger to some hypothetical species. He'd got a whole little universe of his own in that computer. He looked like the archetypal mad scientist. He frightened me.

The next day dawned fine and cheerful. I was out and strolling the coast quite early, clearing my head. I'd wanted to see Diane again to find out what kind of game she was playing with her father, but I decided to respect her wishes. It was nothing to do with me. I wondered if he'd noticed that subtle change in the colour of her robe. Pink in a slitheskin denotes friendliness in its wearer. Verging on something a little more. I didn't know whether to feel embarrassed or flattered, so I'd decided to confront Miranda Marjoribanks about the escaped shark; a dispute with someone less intelligent than Rabin might do me good after yesterday's unpleasantness.

I paused at Westaway's pens and watched his dolphins riding herd on the tumps, keeping them in shallow water among the kelp, watching for sharks and other underwater predators. Every so often a dolphin would pop his head out of the water and revolve slowly, scanning the surface for pirate ships or whatever. The tumps, huge adapted hippos, grazed on mindlessly, only their rounded backs breaking the glittering surface of the morning sea.

"Sagar!"

It was Westaway, pounding toward me in wellington boots. He'd used my surname; that was a bad sign.

"Fine day for the Poppy celebrations, Dan."

He wasn't in the mood for pleasantries. "Diane's gone again. Her bed's not been slept in." He gave me one of his heavy-eyebrowed looks. "You wouldn't know anything about it, would you?"

"What the hell do you mean, Westaway?"

"Nothing. Nothing." He wiped the sweat from his brow and moderated his tone. "I'm worried sick. Don't know what I'm saying. For six weeks she's been happy enough to stay in the house, and now twice she's wandered off."

"It could be a sign she's getting better. Maybe that shark attack triggered something."

"Could it? Maybe it could. But it's dangerous out here, Joe. And I don't think she's wearing much under that robe you lent her."

"Slitheskin's a great insulator."

"She's not in her right mind."

I wasn't going to comment on that. "Why don't we go along to Carioca's house and get her to crank it up aloft? With an aerial view and a pair of her binoculars we should be able to spot Diane soon enough."

"Will she be up yet?" he asked doubtfully. "I phoned her last week about this time and she was like a wild animal, spitting and swearing and screaming about it being the middle of the night."

"It's Poppy Day today," I reminded him. "She's opening the celebrations. She'll have been up since dawn trying on her costume."

Carioca's house was grounded when we arrived.

"Joe *darling!*" she greeted us, "and Mr Westaway." She was dressed as a poppy. Floppy crimson petals radiated from around a face that looked even paler and more skull-like than usual. I've heard people describe Carioca Jones as beautiful but I think that's a kind of mob reaction, emperor's clothes, people seeing what they think everybody else sees. Certainly she was passable in her youth, from what I've seen of her old 3V movies, but definitely not my type. Too much of the skinny Latin ballerina look. And that was over forty years ago, at a conservative estimate.

"We need your help, Carioca," I said.

"Well of course! *Anything* for you, Joe. I take it you've got my new robe in that buggy of yours. Let me see it, Joe. I'm all *agog!*"

"Er, there's been a slight mishap with your robe, Carioca."

Her face hardened in that instant way it could. "I'm not interested in mishaps. I need that robe in perfect condition for the closing ceremonies tonight. That was our deal. I'll pretend I didn't hear what you said, and expect the robe at 1700 hours precisely. Do I make myself clear, Joe?" And just as quickly the lower half of her face split into a brilliant smile. "So let's forget that nonsense and all have a little drink. Dear Miranda is here—" in the background I could see another poppy, this one yellow and holding a glass of wine "—and is *dying* to see you."

I doubted that. Daniel and I entered. Miranda Marjoribanks greeted us with little warmth.

I explained the situation to Carioca.

"Well of *course* you may use my house as an observation post. How exciting! And you say she's already been savaged by some ghastly animal?"

"One of Pacific Kennel's escaped land-sharks. A hammerhead."

Miranda jumped in. "Land-sharks do not escape from my kennels, Mr Sagar. I'd like to make it clear that they escape from uncaring owners who should know better."

"It's quite *dreadful* how carelessly some people treat their darling pets," said Carioca, bending to pat her appalling sawfish, who rewarded her affection by taking a swipe at her dangling petals with his weapon. "I would be *devastated* if anything happened to dear Cholmondeley."

"Do we *have* to take your house aloft, Carioca?" said Miranda. "You know how it makes me sick. Can't Mr Westaway rent a copter?"

"Absolutely not!" Did I detect a vindictive gleam in Carioca's eyes? She threw the switch and the house began to rise, powered by an antigravity unit and tethered by a hundred-metre cable. She and Miranda Marjoribanks have always had a love-hate relationship. "And you may borrow my infrared binoculars, Joe. I find them so useful. You can see almost everything that happens on the Peninsula."

Miranda gave a loud sniff and muttered something disapproving. I began to scan the ground below. The binoculars were amazingly powerful and gyro-stabilised. Heat sources were shaded red. I started homing in on these areas, picking up stray animals and humans. Land fish didn't show up, of course. Little groups of people were beginning to gather around the Poppy Day stage. I examined them closely. Rabin suddenly appeared from among the stark white buildings of the Station, made his way to the gate through to the poppy fields and began to tinker with the aerial harvesters. Through the fields ran the disputed footpath, almost obliterated by the tall, mutant poppies. No red glow there. Beyond lay the sea and the northern extent of Westaway's territory. The backs of fifty or so tumps glowed red above the surface.

"See anything?" Westaway asked.

"Not yet. You have a try." I handed him the binoculars. I'd had a frightening thought.

Carioca, insensitive as ever, put my thought into words. "The infrared won't show anything if she's dead, of course."

Fortunately Miranda remounted her current hobbyhorse as Carioca spoke, so I don't think Dan heard. "Rabin's put up no-entry signs," Miranda was saying. "And he's closed off the way through the force-fence. He has no right. There's a public right of way across those poppy fields. You must have seen what he's done, Carioca."

"Really, darling, I have better things to do than tramp around muddy fields in wellies. I leave that kind of behaviour to farm labourers."

"The Rambling Club includes among its members the most influential people on the Peninsula."

"Well it can't, because I'm not a member. Neither am I likely to be."

The verbal fencing continued until eventually Carioca said gaily, "Well we can't stand around gossiping all day, people!" She removed the binoculars firmly from Daniel's hands. "I'm winding down the house now. Poppy Day beckons and the crowds are gathering."

Daniel looked stricken. "For Christ's sake, woman, don't you care?"

"Of course I care, my dear man. I've co-operated to the best of my ability, but life must go on. When all's said and done, she's your daughter, not mine." She threw the switch and the house began to descend. "Come, Miranda, I must meet my audience. And Joe, you won't forget to bring my robe tonight, will you?"

As we drove to the fish pens I worried about Diane. What was she playing at, wandering off like this? Had she relapsed?

Once at the pens, Daniel set his dolphins searching the coastline. "I can't control them like Diane did," he admitted as we watched the animals swim off in an unruly group. "I've got no telepathic empathy, so they don't always know what they're supposed to be doing. And now they're gone, the tumps will all bugger off and it'll take days to round them up."

We spent the next couple of hours driving the Peninsula byways, pausing every so often to blow the horn and shout, but without success. Finally we returned to the Poppy Day celebrations with a vague hope that Diane may have been drawn there, and mingled with the crowds.

People were dancing with frantic abandon, some of them waving coloured cloths, others dressed in costumes with a poppy theme. Some people, anxious to get the full effect of the poppymist, danced naked. Music blared, the beat so fast that the individual notes ran into one blurred roar of sound. Food stands dotted the area and people gathered around them, bolting hot dogs down before returning to the dancing. It was a weird and manic sight; so much so that I could imagine a kind of barely suppressed violence, and I thought of the fast-moving shark that had attacked Diane. People alighting from their cars actually broke into a run, eager to join the mob.

In the background, behind the invisible force-fence, harvesting was in progress. A row of flat, turtle-shaped machines, each about ten

metres long and five across, moved steadily above the poppies in line abreast. Antigravity units held them aloft, and the roar of their suction devices could be heard even above the din of the celebrations. The plants were elongated by the suction and the seedpods broke off, to fly up into the base of the turtles for crushing into crude Restoral.

Theodore Rabin was controlling all this. In a way, he was controlling the dancers too, because the stimulant for their energy came from the excess poppymist drifting on the wind. I could smell the sour, cidery stink.

Westaway asked impatiently, "Are we going in there or not?"

"I don't think she's there. You go if you like."

"What's the matter with you, man?" he demanded angrily, preparing to get out. "Frightened of a bit of poppymist?"

I'd half a mind to let him know Diane had shown signs of recovery, but something sinister had occurred to me. "Listen to me, Daniel. We checked this area with the infrared binoculars and we didn't find her. Why not? My guess is, she's indoors. Now, she wasn't at your house or mine, or Carioca's. What's the only other building nearby?"

"The Station," he said thoughtfully.

"She's the only witness to what happened on that ship, Daniel. All those deaths. Just suppose they've found out what happened was *their* fault, and not hers. Just suppose this might come up in the independent enquiry. They wouldn't want her to appear as a witness, would they? Much better if she was out of the way."

It was a measure of our mistrust of the Hetherington Organisation that as soon as I'd formulated the notion, it became horribly credible to us both. "Oh, my God," Westaway muttered, "Theo Rabin wouldn't go along with anything like that – would he?"

"If his job depended on it. And he's a dedicated man."

We drove fast to the Station buildings, less than half a kilometre away. We found Rabin sitting at his monitor, which was displaying an aerial view of the poppy fields. The harvesters crept slowly across the screen, dark turtle-shaped blobs.

"Where the hell is my daughter?" Westaway shouted.

Rabin looked angry, and something more. "Get out of here, both of you. Can't you see I'm harvesting? This is a delicate operation."

"Answer my bloody question, Rabin!"

"I have no idea where your daughter is." The man looked positively haunted. His eyes darted from the screen to Westaway and back. His

lips trembled. "Get out!" he shouted, and it came out more like a scream.

Westaway was regarding him with mounting suspicion. "Not until we've searched the premises."

"Searched the premises? What the hell are you talking about, man? I'm calling the guards." He reached for a microphone.

It was an unwise move, because it was the last straw for Daniel. With a roar of rage he picked up a chair and in one movement swung it down on Rabin's head as if he were splitting wood. Rabin slumped forward with a sigh, then toppled to the floor unconscious.

"What the hell was the point of that, Dan?" I yelled, aghast.

"Stay with him, Joe. I'm going to find Diane!" Westaway ran from the room.

Events had moved too fast for me. Armed guards might arrive any minute and find me standing over the unconscious body of their employer. They wouldn't take kindly to that.

Then I had an even more alarming thought.

I examined the screen. The shape of the poppy fields showed up clearly; the harvested area in brown and the rest in green. Ten blobs moved inexorably across the fields, powerful machines sucking up everything in their path. Each machine about four metres off the ground.

Heading directly for the edge of the field, beyond which the Poppy Day crowds were celebrating.

I punched the keys. It made no difference. I fetched a jug of water from the next room and threw it over Rabin, but he didn't stir. I ran from room to room, shouting for the Station staff, but got no reply. They were all at the celebrations.

I ran for my car.

I saw Carioca immediately, dancing with frantic abandon, her petals flailing about her head as she spun. She'd trained as a dancer during her days of stardom and it showed, despite her age. A crowd of admirers cavorted around her. I shouted at her but the music drowned my voice. I forced my way through the crowd and seized her by the arm. She stared at me angrily, uncomprehending.

"Look over there, for God's sake!" I yelled, pointing at the harvesters. I could smell the poppymist drifting over us, and struggled to retain a sense of priorities as I felt a sudden surge of exhilaration.

“So?” She jiggled on, despite my grip on her.

“They’re coming straight for us!” I reckoned we had two minutes at the most.

“Don’t be *idiotic*, Joe! They’ll turn away when they reach the force-fence. What on earth has got into you? Now unhand me, if you please.”

I looked around desperately. “The harvesters are out of control!” I yelled. “Get away from here, now! Get out of their path!” Nobody was paying any attention to me. They pranced on, unheeding. I ran for the stage where a disc jockey jogged about with eyes closed, surrendering to music and poppymist. I crawled around the rear of the stage, pulling the plugs on his speakers one by one. A weird silence followed as I got to my feet. But the people were still dancing.

I grabbed the DJ’s mike. “I have an important announcement to make,” I said, trying to make it sound official.

“What the hell are you playing at?” The DJ was beside me, grabbing for his mike. I punched him on the nose. Blood spurted. He reeled away, squealing. Now I’d got the attention of some of the crowd.

“Those harvesters are out of control!” I snapped, pointing. “They’re not going to stop at the edge of the field. They’re coming overhead. They’re very powerful. You must all get out of their way or risk serious injury, or worse. Move! Now!”

Somebody shouted, “Who is that nut?”

And from someone else, “Put the music back on!”

I watched the harvesters pass over the force-fence markers. On they came, and litter rose from the ground as though caught by a tornado. Next went the refreshment tent. The fabric ballooned, then flew up into the maw of a harvester. Bottles and cans followed amid a cacophony of smashing and crunching.

And people began to run.

The harvesters, in formation, covered a swathe about a hundred metres wide. They moved quite slowly, about walking pace. There was plenty of time for people to get out of the way, if only they’d behaved sensibly. But some didn’t. Stupid on poppymist, they’d run for a few metres, then stop and turn and look up, only to see the harvesters still coming. So they’d run again, and stop, and turn, and look. Some of them began to scream, terrified by the inexorability of it all. The harvesters themselves made very little noise, which somehow added to the horror.

“Run to the side!” I yelled into the mike. “Run—” And I realised

the equipment was dead. Looking around, I saw the heavy cables to the generator rising and whipping like angry snakes. The generator rocked as a harvester passed overhead, but it was big enough to resist the suction. I jumped down from the stage as it began to disintegrate behind me. Planks and ropes flew about as I ran. I felt my clothing tugging, and my hair rose. I put on a frantic spurt and ran diagonally until I was clear of the harvesters' path.

I found myself standing next to Carioca. She clutched my arm. "Isn't it just *awful*, Joe?" she wailed in the shrill and rapid tones of one affected by poppymist. "What's the matter with the dreadful things?"

There was nothing we could do. Most of the crowd had seen sense by now and moved aside, but a hard core of fools kept retreating in the harvesters' path. The first casualty was a small black-and-white terrier. It stood its ground, barking defiance at an approaching harvester. Then its hair stood on end. Yelping in fear and bewilderment, it rose from the ground, hovered for an instant, then rocketed up and hit the mesh covering the underside of the harvester with an audible thump. The yelping stopped instantly. Sensing the presence of an item too large to digest, the harvester cut suction momentarily and the dog fell to the ground, lifeless. The harvester moved on, suction resuming.

This was proof enough of the danger, and a wordless moan arose from the crowd, and isolated shouts. "Why doesn't somebody do something?" a woman screamed nearby. "Those people are going to be killed!"

The people she referred to numbered about thirty, some of whom were children, some elderly. They seemed to be mesmerised by the approaching harvesters and unable to get out of the way. They would hurry away for a few metres, only to turn and regard the advancing harvesters with horror. I judged that most of the adults would escape with nothing more than a fright, being too big for the harvesters to lift. But the children....

There was another factor. They were on rising ground, at the summit of which stood Carioca's house. Antigravity units are usually calibrated by reference to mean sea level. As the harvesters approached the rise, they would move closer to the ground. They would be less than a couple of metres overhead. The suction would toss those people about like puppets.

I ran for the car, jumped in and overtook the harvesters, reaching a point opposite Carioca's house and fifty metres away from it.

"Over here!" I shouted. "You'll be okay over here!"

Either they didn't hear me, or the civilised presence of the house reassured them that all would be well – somehow or other. They stood outside the picket fence, watching the harvesters coming.

I changed my approach. "Get indoors!" I yelled. They paid no attention. I drove for the house, smashed through the picket fence, cut the lift and jumped out. The front door was open, but the appalling sawfish Cholmondeley lay on the threshold, his many-toothed weapon swinging to and fro as he balefully eyed the crowd.

This was no time for niceties. I leaped over the brute, and as he wheeled around in anger I booted him outside. "Come on in!" I shouted.

A small boy came first. With a backward glance at the sky he ran for the door, giving the outraged Cholmondeley a wide berth. Next came a woman I took to be his mother, and soon the whole mob of them were streaming inside. Once the walls and ceiling were around them, they broke into an excited babble.

I shut the door and we all moved into the living room. I stationed myself at the window and watched the harvesters pass overhead. The house trembled slightly, but nothing more. Cholmondeley rose past the window, thrashing helplessly. We watched from the opposite window as the harvesters moved on down the Peninsula.

Then abruptly they fell from the sky, crashed among the bushes and lay motionless.

Someone had finally cut the power.

The rest of the day was wasted in police questioning. A babble of accusations from the Poppy Day celebrants had sent Warren Rennie, our police chief, to the Research Station where Theodore Rabin was found lying unconscious among the broken remains of a chair. Nobody admitted responsibility, least of all Westaway or me. There were no witnesses; the Station staff had all been at the Poppy Day celebrations. The ambulopter removed Rabin to the hospital at Louise. The celebrants went home; the party over. Carioca retired sulking to her house and took it aloft. The question of her new robe did not arise.

Daniel and I spent the evening searching the area for Diane with flashlights, assisted by Warren Rennie and three of his men. We didn't find her.

By now Westaway was beside himself with worry, and so was I. I slept on a chair in his living room to ensure he didn't get up and start wandering outside during the night. From time to time I would wake up and hear him moving about in the next room, where he kept his electronic equipment. He couldn't have slept a wink.

The following morning we extended our search further south, but by the time we reached the suburbs of Louise we were forced to agree that we were wasting out time in that direction. As we drove back to Westaway's house for further discussion we saw the ambulopter pass overhead, flying north.

"That'll be Rabin released from hospital," I guessed.

"I want a few words with him," said Westaway grimly. He'd been even more silent than usual during the search. I'd assumed it was fear for Diane's safety that had caused this, but now something in his tone alerted me.

"I imagine he'll want a word with *you*," I said. I still hadn't come to terms with his insane attack on Rabin. "It may involve the police as well."

"Not when he hears what I have to say," he replied cryptically.

We hadn't been in his house more than five minutes when there came a pounding at the door. Rabin stood there, accompanied by two assistants and almost speechless with rage. The Organisation copter purred softly behind them.

"You!" he shouted at Westaway. "You're responsible for this! Well, you're finished, Westaway! By the time the Organisation's through with you, you won't have a pot to piss in!"

"You can fix those harvesters inside a day," Daniel snapped. "Now bugger off, and take your goons with you. We've got our own problems."

"Nothing to the problems you've got coming up. You and those bloody animals of yours. Years of development work down the drain! Vandalism, pure and simple!"

It seemed to me that Rabin had gone a bit over the top. And what had the animals to do with anything?

Westaway said blankly, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"You don't? Well, you soon will. Get in the copter, both of you."

"You've interrupted a private discussion," Westaway began, but the lab assistants were unusually large and brutal-looking for their trade, and seemed to be flexing their muscles. We climbed into the copter and flew north for a couple of minutes.

"Now, take a look at that!" Rabin shouted. "And you say you don't know what I'm talking about? Whose animals are those, Westaway?"

The poppy fields were bare; hectares of brown soil. All the plants were gone. The ground had a ploughed look; clearly the roots had been grubbed up as well. The disputed right-of-way was visible as a gravelled track slanting to the coast near the fish pens, and the large flat rock of the dolmen stood out white and gleaming. Miranda Marjoribanks would have applauded.

The animals Rabin referred to were the tumps, a great black herd of them motionless in line abreast against the force-fence. Having eaten everything in the poppy fields they could progress no further.

"They couldn't have eaten all that overnight." I couldn't believe it.

"Given the circumstances," said Westaway evenly, "they could have done it all right."

"Well, obviously they bloody well *have* done it!" Rabin shouted. "And it's going to cost you every penny you can lay your hands on, Westaway. Six years we've had those plants growing there. We've spent six years exposing some of them to radiation, others to controlled fertilisation, cross-grafting, you name it, we've done it. There were seventy-odd different crops here, perennials. Not to mention the production area. Priceless. Your bloody tumps went through it all as though it was so much rough pasture. And after all the help we gave you getting those brutes started in life. Take this copter down," he said to the pilot. "I can't stand the sight of this mess any more. And you two," he twisted around, glowering at Westaway and me in the back seats, "you two can come with us and wait for the police."

"With pleasure," said Daniel. "I've got a few things to say to the police myself."

"It won't do you a bit of good."

We entered the Station, escorted by the two goons. My instincts were to call their bluff and head for home, but Westaway seemed happy enough where he was. I decided to move onto the attack.

"Rabin, I should tell you that people have the impression you're responsible for the harvesters getting out of control. There were a number of injuries. There'll be a few lawsuits, I don't doubt."

He seemed to have calmed down a little. "The truth will come out, believe me."

"It's a question of how well you can get it across," I pointed out. "Because you'll be up against the Carioca Jones version. And we all know how she can manipulate the media."

"She won't be able to manipulate *this*." And he nodded to one of the goons, who did something on a console. An array of security monitors came to life, flickered for a moment, then steadied. Images appeared, and one of them showed Rabin sitting at his desk. Westaway and I were standing nearby, and Rabin was speaking.

"—the hell are you talking about, man? I'm calling the guards." Rabin reached for a microphone. Then he fell forward as the chair smashed down on his head.

I winced. Rabin was lucky to be alive.

"Conclusive, I think," he said. "And now we'll call the police."

"Give it a moment or two," said Westaway, still with that peculiar calm. "While we're showing pictures, there's something I'd like you to see. I found it in your desk yesterday, Rabin. And in case you think of doing anything foolish, I should tell you I ran off a copy last night." And he handed Rabin a videoflat. "Have your man plug it in, will you?"

Rabin examined the little disk and flushed. "You want to add theft to the list of your crimes, Westaway? I don't have to run this. It's confidential."

"It will be confidential no more unless you run it here and now, because I'll send my copy to the media if you don't. But for now, I'd like Joe and your employees to see it. And afterwards, we'll talk to the police, if that's what you still want."

Rabin's discomfiture was obvious. Finally he shrugged his shoulders and handed the flat to one of his men. "Go ahead. Show it in the big alcove. And if this gets any further than these four walls you're fired, you two. As for you, Sagar, I have to trust you, unfortunately. The Organisation has a problem and we're working on it. All right? There's no need for the whole bloody world to know."

And so I saw the final horrifying month of the voyage of the cargo ship *Hetherington Pegasus*, life-size in the Station's big 3V alcove.

It was edited, of course; short segments from the ship's continuous closed-circuit 3V. Initially it showed Diane stirring, waking and going through a normal early morning routine just as if she'd had a

night's sleep at home. And, of course, to her it was exactly like that. There's no sense of time passing, in deepsleep. Diane, dressed in a blue coverall, examined the other crew members physically, and checked the instruments that kept track of the vital signs during deepsleep. After each examination she turned to the camera and said, 'All indications OK.' Finally she appeared at another panel and said, 'Wakeup procedure commenced.'

We saw the crew awaken, one by one. Everything looked all right, so far as I could judge.

The cameras then followed the crews through their daily duties. It was all rather boring except for the glimpses of Diane, and I wondered what the big deal was. The days passed. The crew seemed to be dashing here and there as though there was some kind of emergency, but we were given no clue as to what the problem was. And Diane seemed to be taking it very calmly. Perversely, I began to look forward to the bit when they died. The suddenly something caught my attention. A woman was apparently checking the cargo manifest, pulling herself rapidly along a handrail toward the camera. A harsh light fell on her face.

And I hardly recognised her. She looked... Sick. Haggard.

"What's gone wrong?" I asked. "I don't get it."

"That's Janie Masters," said Rabin. "She was the oldest. She died first."

"But what's the emergency they're all so fired up about?" A figure raced past, carrying what appeared to be a toolbox.

"*There is no emergency, Joe,*" said Westaway quietly. The scene switched to Diane sitting on her bed, in tears. The door slid open and an old man entered.

"Who the hell is that?" I asked. This was giving me the creeps. "I thought they didn't have any passengers." The old fellow hobbled across to Diane and sat beside her. She got up, opened a cupboard and took out a syringe. She gave him a shot in his skinny left arm. He smiled a toothless smile and laid a hand on her shoulder. Then he rolled off the bed and fell to the floor. Diane regarded him for a moment then put her head in her hands.

Rabin said dully, "They edited out the sound after a while. I think it was too much."

A horrifying realisation dawned on me. That old man had once been a crew member! Now I could see that all the crew were ageing dramatically, day by day as I watched. And yet they moved so briskly,

wizened little people like monkeys in a cage, darting here and there, carrying out their duties, dying by the minute. All except Diane, who moved among them in almost stately fashion.

One of the crew tumbled to the deck and lay still. Diane picked him up; his suit hung on him loose and baggy. She carried him out of sight. The rest of the crew were dead within minutes, except Diane. We caught a glimpse of her lying on her bunk, eyes closed, then a number of uniformed Space Station personnel arrived.

"They've docked," Westaway told me. "They made it. Just. That's right?" he said to Rabin.

"They were brave people." Rabin sighed. "There was nothing your daughter could have done, Westaway." All his anger at the destruction of the poppy fields seemed to have drained out of him. "We know now, the fault was in the batch of Restoral the crew received during the automatic wakeup procedures. Your daughter was very lucky. She got a shot of an earlier batch. She lived."

I said, "I thought Restoral was just a stimulant to snap people out of deepsleep."

"It's not so simple as that, Sagar. Deepsleep is the result of lowering the metabolism almost to zero. Restoral raises the metabolism back to normal."

"Except the faulty batch the crew got," said Westaway. "Their metabolism continued to rise far beyond normal. They burned up the rest of their lives in a few weeks of frantic activity. And that Restoral was produced here, Rabin. You're responsible for the whole bloody mess. And you tried to put the blame on Diane, you bastard!"

"Not me. Headquarters. I found out the truth only yesterday when I got this video." Rabin looked tired; all the fight had gone out of him. "They kept it quiet while they examined the tapes and analysed the Restoral. Perhaps they intended to keep it quiet forever. How the hell should I know? I'm just a cog in the machine."

"My tumps did you a favour by destroying the fields," Westaway pointed out.

"It was only the production crop that was faulty. The research crops were fine." He raised his hands in resignation. "I'm not spending six years getting back to where I was yesterday. To hell with it all. I don't give a damn."

"You should give a damn about the crew of the *Hetherington Pegasus*," Westaway snapped. "It was your stuff that killed them."

"Well, thanks for reminding me, Daniel."

He walked away into the depths of the Station.

I don't think we ever saw him again, but I'm not totally sure.

As Westaway and I left the station, I said, "What about the Poppy Day crowds?"

"Sure, they get enough to give them a high for a few hours but there's no significant lasting effect. The harvesters are pretty damned efficient, and the minor leakage tends to be diluted by the wind anyway." He grimaced. "But if you want to tell Carioca Jones that she's aged a week or so for every Poppy Day, you're welcome."

The force-fence was turned off; it wasn't needed any more. We reached the first of the long line of tumps. Its black hide was wrinkled and slack. Westaway prodded it. "It's dead," he said heavily. "They're all dead. I was afraid of this. Eating their way across the fields, they were getting massive doses of crude Restoral. That's why they cleared the ground so quickly."

"I don't understand how they got into the fields in the first place."

"Neither do I. There's no force-fence on the water side, of course. And the dolphins had gone searching for Diane. They had no reason to drive the tumps ashore. Unless..."

"Unless Diane commanded them," I said. Suddenly the sun seemed to be shining.

There was a knot of people at the end of the line of tumps. Miranda Marjoribanks was addressing them.

"We shall *reassert* our right to walk our darling pets along this public footpath at any time of the day or night without hindrance or harassment. The wretched poppies are gone." She prodded the nearby tump with her knobbed stick. "These dear great animals *sacrificed their lives* that others may walk free. So come, pet lovers, let us walk!"

"We all have our own priorities," Westaway observed. It was easy to overtake the group, who could only walk as fast as the slowest land-shark flopping along at their heels. We hurried on. The granite of the dolmen glittered ahead. "She wouldn't show up on the infrared, not under all that rock," he said. We broke into a trot. We ran.

"Diane!" I shouted at the entrance to the cavern. I plunged inside. The ceiling was rock, the walls were rock, and there was just enough room to stand but very little width. I was forced to squeeze along sideways. I heard Westaway gasping further back. There was little light

at first, but then the tunnel opened out and a tiny shaft of sunlight from a gap in the ceiling afforded some visibility.

"Diane?" It was an earthen chamber, a metre or so across. I could make out an indistinct shape at the far end. As my eyes became accustomed to the dim light I thought I saw it move. I knelt and gathered Diane into my arms. Her face felt warm. She was still wrapped in the insulating slitheskin robe. It was a neutral beige, but when she opened her eyes the colour began to change, slowly but steadily, to a definite pink.

A couple of weeks later Diane and I made a sentimental pilgrimage to the dolmen. It was a fine day of early winter with a decided nip in the air.

She answered the question I hadn't dared to ask. "I've decided to stay," she said. "Dad needs help with the dolphins. Now he's lost all the tumps he's getting back into fish farming. And anyway, I've lost faith in the Organization. I wouldn't put it past them to continue using that faulty batch of Restoral until they've developed something else. In a reduced dosage maybe, but that doesn't alter the fact that the stuff's lethal, for God's sake!" She shrugged. "Maybe I'm wrong about them; maybe I'm prejudiced. But I couldn't trust the Organization to destroy the fields themselves. So I had to do it for them."

"You could have told me."

"And have you go through official channels? I think not." Her eyes were sad. "I can't forget the rest of the crew, Joe. They all knew they were going to die, and they devoted the last weeks of their life to saving me. You know why I had my breakdown? I think it was guilt, more than anything. I can hardly remember a thing after that, until the evening after the shark attack, with you and Dad talking. Then I remembered what happened on the ship, and I knew what I had to do. But it wasn't easy to command those stupid tumps. They're not a bit like the dolphins. I was exhausted by the time I got them moving. I must have slept the clock round afterwards."

"Your dad and I were very worried about you."

"Dear Joe." She took my hand. "I'm lucky to have a friend like you."

And that's the way it would always be, I guess. We leaned against the dolmen watching an old man approaching. He was a spry old devil for a man who looked to be in his eighties, moving briskly, swinging his stick. He nodded to us as he passed, and strode on.

I said, "You want to know what frightened me most?"

"That you'd find my skeleton somewhere in the bush, picked clean by land-sharks?" she chuckled.

"No. That I'd find you alive here in the dolmen, but as ancient as the guy that just went past."

She laughed. "On the other hand, you might have found me just about your age. How would that have suited you, Joe? No, I walked though the fields very carefully, believe me. Life moves quickly enough for me as it is, thanks very much."

I watched the old fellow striding towards the sea, and wondered about the rogue batch of Restoral. Suppose a man had had enough of living, he could use it to speed up the rest of his life and get it over in a pleasant whirl like a permanent Poppy dance.

There had been something very familiar about that spry old fellow. ●

BACK ISSUES

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SPECTRUM SF #1

DREK YARMAN – KEITH ROBERTS (part I). GREAT WALL OF MARS – ALASTAIR REYNOLDS, BEAR TRAP – CHARLES STROSS. MIND'S EYE – KEITH BROOKE & ERIC BROWN, BONSAI TIGER – GARRY KILWORTH. Plus NON-FICTION.

SPECTRUM SF #2

DREK YARMAN – KEITH ROBERTS (part II). DESTINY ON TARTARUS – ERIC BROWN. THE GENTLE MEN GO BY – JACK DEIGHTON, GREEN-EYED MONSTER – STEPHEN BAXTER & ERIC BROWN, .ZIPPED – KEITH BROOKE, DR VANCHOVY'S FINAL CASE – STEPHEN PALMER and THE SKY TOWER – B. J. BAYLEY. Plus the usual NON-FICTION.

This is Eric's sixth appearance in these pages. Two have been collaborations: MIND'S EYE, with Keith Brooke, in SPECTRUM SF #1; and GREEN-EYED MONSTER, with Stephen Baxter, in SPECTRUM SF #2. The others have been solo efforts: DESTINY ON TARTARUS, THE MIRACLE OF KALLITHEA and THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE, in SPECTRUM SF #2, #3 and #4 respectively. His most recent published work is a collection, DEEP FUTURE, from Cosmos Books and a novelette, WINTER'S CHILDREN, in INTERZONE #163 (January, 2001). Upcoming is the paperback edition of his latest novel, NEW YORK NIGHTS, out from Gollancz in April, and a novella, A WRITER'S LIFE (reckoned by his agent and Peter Crowther to be his best work yet), due later in the year from PS Publishing. Eric's website is at www.ericbrown.co.uk

THE ANGELS OF LIFE AND DEATH

ERIC BROWN

In December 2002 I was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The year had started well. In January I was informed by my agent that a gallery in London was interested in exhibiting a retrospective of my work. In the summer I fell in love with a wonderful woman. For three months I knew what it was to love and be loved, to have the trust of another human being. In August she returned to her previous lover, and remained with him, even though she claimed to love me still. She was bound by ties of loyalty and tradition that no passion could possibly break. I understood that, but the knowledge did not ease my devastation. I wonder if it was during this period of mental and physical low ebb that the cancer saw its opportunity and took hold, clutching onto my liver with the tenacious and implacable pincers of the crab after which it is named.

We are doomed to die: only when our spans are foreshortened by the sentence of terminal illness are we forced to reassess what remains.

I passed through the phases of anger and fear, and arrived at a calm acceptance of my end. I was given two years to live, which seemed to me like a stay of execution: I could accomplish much in two years. True, I would rather have lived a further ten, but two years seemed

sufficient after my initial fears that I would be dead in three months or less.

I could cope with the fact that I was dying; what concerned me more was the reaction of my family and friends to the news. Over the weeks following the diagnosis, I considered many means of breaking the news: whether it would be best to tell my closest friends first, and allow them to inform the others, or make the rounds and impart the tidings to all at once; or whether I should tell no one at all for the time being – perhaps in the vain hope of a miracle cure or remission. Only briefly did I contemplate suicide; but this seemed to me a particularly cowardly and vile way to go. It is our duty to come to terms with our mortality in our own way, but it is as much a duty to allow our loved ones also to come to some acceptance of our fate.

In the end, before I could impart the news to my father and two sisters, the arrival of the Kallani intervened.

I was in my studio, painting, when the starship arrived over Paris. Mahler's Fifth was cut short by the staid tones of a Radio Three announcer. "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a newsflash..."

An unidentified vessel, the announcer said, had appeared over the French capital one hour ago. So far, attempts to establish contact with its crew had proved unsuccessful. A reporter on the scene then described the ship in full and startling detail.

I hurried into the house and switched on the television. The BBC had a crew on the scene, and I stared in wonder at the starship – for it was obvious, at first glance, that the so-called 'vessel' was not of this Earth, was extraterrestrial.

It was colossal, a bull-nosed behemoth perhaps a kilometre long, its silver tegument running with an iridescent sheen in the light of the winter sun.

All the BBC's scheduled programmes were cancelled. A host of scientific experts were wheeled on to give their opinions, as absolutely nothing proceeded to happen. For a full day the vessel remained incommunicado.

Then, twenty-four hours after the arrival of the starship, the Secretary General of the United Nations addressed the world, to announce that there would follow a short broadcast from a spokesperson of the Kallani people.

I watched the broadcast on my portable TV, alone. As I waited in anticipation for the sight of the first alien visitor to planet Earth, it came to me for the first time since the diagnosis that I had temporarily forgotten about my illness. The advent of the Kallani was of far greater significance than my impending death.

And then, suddenly, the being appeared on the screen.

The Kallani were humanoid, if that term can be used to describe beings so familiar and yet so strange. They were human in shape – like the archetypal human form as seen in anatomy books – but they were, too, beings of light. Though manlike, their forms seemed to contain and circumscribe a dizzy dance of brightness, a dazzling skein of filaments that was at once breathtaking and eerie to behold.

The being, who never introduced itself, then spoke in a hiss like breath passing through wire wool. Having reassured the world that the Kallani had come in peace, the spokesperson then announced *why* its people had made contact.

“We have come to Earth,” it said, “to take away your terminally ill.”

Thus was the task of imparting my dire news made easier. To my loved ones I could temper the fact of my death with the consolation of a tour of the universe.

I had arranged a small party of family and friends, a week before Christmas, to celebrate the success of my London exhibition

I was called upon, in the course of the night, to say a few words. When I had the floor, drink in hand but sober still, I looked around at the smiling faces of friends and loved ones. I had known most of these people all my life. They were expecting a humorous little speech, an anecdote or two, after which they would applaud and raise their glasses to my success.

The pain chose that moment to bite deeper. I tried not to react; I broke into a cold sweat, and said, “Two weeks ago I discovered that I was ill.”

I stared around the gathered faces. Silence. My throat ran dry as I fought the pain. My younger sister stared, her eyes huge. “Ben?” she began.

The pain passed, temporarily. “I was given two years. Then, of course, the aliens arrived – the Angels, as our crass media have christened them.”

“Good God!” my father said. “Are you...?”

“In a little under one month,” I told him, “I leave with the first batch of the terminally ill.”

A hundred questions followed, all of which I had asked myself over the course of the past few days. The day before, after applying for the right to leave at one of the many centres set up around the country, I had received the answer to a few: no, the aliens did not have a cure for our various conditions, though we would be given palliatives and pain-killers while we were away; and no, they had not said what they wanted with the terminally ill of Earth. After six months on the home planet of the Kallani and many other worlds of the galaxy, we would be returned to Earth.

Many of the dying, of course, wanted nothing to do with the aliens’ cryptic offer. Conversely, many perfectly fit and healthy human beings were eager to take up this chance of a lifetime, some going to the extreme of contracting incurable illnesses so as to be granted passage.

I told my family and friends that, as an artist and someone incorrigibly curious, it was my duty to find out why the Kallani wanted us.

I had never realised, until that night when my friends and family made it known, quite how beloved I had been.

The Departing, as we were called, were besieged by the newspapers and television, all wanting to buy exclusive rights to our stories: I spoke to no one and sold nothing. I did not want the unique experience of a lifetime traduced by the sensationalism of the tabloids. I left England without fanfare from Leeds-Bradford airport and arrived in Orly at midday. From Orly I took a cab to the reception station in the Bois de Boulogne, above which the Kallani ship hung motionless, the latest of the city’s tourist attractions, beside which the Eiffel tower and the Arc de Triomphe paled into insignificance.

I entered the reception centre, a vast blue-and-white striped marquee erected especially for the purpose. A dozen UN soldiers and officials stood behind trestle tables. I stood in line with perhaps twenty people of various nationalities, and went through the bizarre and yet mundane formality of having my passport checked against a roster of names. Only then were we led from the centre by an armed guard, across the deserted park and into the eerie twilight created by the starship.

If I felt any fear at what lay ahead, it cannot have compared to my terror at being told that I was terminally ill. I can honestly say, however,

that fear did not cross my mind at that moment: curiosity, certainly, and anticipation, but not fear. Later I wondered how much the Kallani were effecting our responses, even at that early stage.

The UN soldier paused and looked up, then said something in French which I did not catch. At that instant I was bathed in a warm golden light – as cloying and strangely restricting as honey – and I seemed to be falling.

When the light diminished, I found myself standing in a small chamber, bathed in a soft red glow. The chamber contained a narrow couch, and a unit in one corner which I took to be a shower.

There seemed to be no means of entry or exit, no doorway or hatch.

Seconds after my arrival, the being who was to be my constant companion throughout the next six months simply stepped through the wall and stood before me.

If the sight of the Kallani had been magnificent as witnessed on the dulling medium of television, the splendour of this alien in reality was ineffable.

There and then I fell in love with the creature. I was in no doubt, even then, that it was an effect engineered by the Kallani, but even so I could neither deny my feelings, nor cease to marvel at the sensation.

The alien stood before me, its human outline circumscribing an interior play of multicoloured light.

“Please, be seated.”

I sat down on the couch, and stared.

“I am Tallibeth,” said this creature of light, this Angel. “I am your Guide.”

I have been in love, genuinely in love, only once in my life. I knew, then, a selflessness and devotion, a reciprocated trust. I had felt unique and blessed. Now I was experiencing the same heady sensations towards this strange being.

I took refuge from the inexplicable in the banal. “When do we leave Earth?” I asked.

In reply, the being gestured towards the walls and floor. They became translucent, and through the floor I saw the city of Paris diminish rapidly beneath me. In seconds, planet Earth was falling away beneath us like a dropped ball, scintillating against the depths of space. Later, I read reports that numerous bolts of light had been seen departing the Kallani ship shortly following an influx of the Departing.

The walls were still translucent. I stared around at the stars, the

moon, the primitive in me afraid. "Where's the ship?" I asked. "How are we travelling?"

I made out the approximation of features on the face of my Kallani guide. The semblance of lips gave a tolerant smile. "We do not need the ship," Tallibeth said. "We travel through space..." it seemed to search for the right word, "that we have... *reduced*. We will arrive in two of your days."

"Arrive," I repeated, "at your home planet?"

It inclined its head.

"And then?" I asked.

"And then I will commence my duty as your Guide. I will show you my planet, and many others, and the many races of the universe."

My mind reeled. I was taken by the urge to reach out and draw Tallibeth to me. It was a feeling I knew so well from my previous love.

"But why?" I asked. "Why us? Why the terminally ill?" I paused, staring into the illuminated face of the Angel, and went on, "What do you want from us, in return?"

Tallibeth said, with the sibilance of silk drawn over steel, "That need not concern you." And it was a measure of the control which the Kallani exerted over us that I did not even question the alien's dismissal of my intense curiosity.

"You must be tired," it said. "Please, lie down and sleep."

The idea was as absurd as much of the meeting: it was only mid-afternoon, and I had awoken late. And yet, upon the very suggestion, I did indeed feel tired. I lay down, staring up at the Angel called Tallibeth, my Guide, who stood watch as sleep claimed me.

Some time later I half woke to find myself lying paralysed, staring around at the ceiling and walls, no longer transparent but returned to a soft red glow.

Tallibeth was sitting on the couch beside me, the very matter of its lower back impinging, indeed melding with, my thigh. As I stared, incredulous, the Angel positioned itself further onto the couch, its midriff commingling with my own, and then pivoted so as to swing itself and lie down on the couch that I occupied. Unable to scream, I watched the creature's lighted spine lower itself towards me, the back of its head approach my face.

Seconds later its form submerged itself within my body, and my vision filled with light, and my head with a sensation of such ineffable

union that no human love, not even the moment of ultimate union at the height of passion, could match.

Hours seemed to pass. I was strung out on an extended vector of ecstasy. I wished that it would never end; it came to me that this was what existence was all about, that I had been born to participate in this very experience.

Without warning, an untold time later, Tallibeth sat up on the couch, vacating me, diminishing the ecstasy but leaving an after-echo for me to savour. I watched its lambent form part company with me, and it floated, first in a sitting position, and then in a tight foetal ball, through the air, turning like a gymnast in slow motion. As it rolled, its face was revealed to me, and I was shocked at its expression.

The Angel's lips described a tortured rictus of agony.

And, from that moment forward, the pain of my illness was diminished.

We came then to the homeworld of the Kallani, a planet without a name, for the aliens had outgrown the need for categorisation and labels many millennia ago.

As befits creatures of light, of pure energy, their world was not as I had expected: a technological wonderland of slick futuristic cities, domed and arching architecture, fabulous modes of locomotion. It was an unspoilt Eden, apparently without city or road, with few defining features that might have signalled it as a world belonging to a civilised race. Its geography was beauteous and varied: vast valleys and towering pinnacles, seas like crushed amethyst sluggishly obeying a gravity stronger than that of Earth. Only here and there were signs that beings of flesh and blood had once made their mark upon the face of the world.

Tallibeth escorted me through sites of antiquity, the outlines of ruined cities which nature had worked over hundreds of thousands of years to erode.

"Once," the Angel explained, as we rested on the bank of a twisting, quicksilver stream beside the ruins of a once-vast metropolis, "we were creatures of flesh and blood like you. We built and expanded and covered the planet with our kind, and then we colonised the closer stars."

"And then?" I asked, biting into a succulent fruit Tallibeth had plucked from a nearby bush.

"Over millions of years we evolved. We became beings of energy."

"So the ship, back on Earth," I said, "and even your...?" I gestured at its body.

The Angel inclined its head. "Forms," it said, "no more. Shapes we adopt to put you at your ease."

"But what are you, in essence?"

"In essence?" it repeated, and suddenly lost its form and shot into the air, a coruscating ball of light, a will-o'-the-wisp dancing high into the stratosphere.

It reappeared by my side, as if by magic.

So the Angel showed me its planet, and more. At night I slept in the open, on soft grass, beneath the stars, and every night Tallibeth came to me, laid its shining shape upon and within my failing, mechanical body of flesh and blood, and we conjoined.

Curiously, we never in all our time upon the Kallani homeplanet came across another Angel or dying human. It was as if we had the planet to ourselves. That was only one among the many mysteries about which I failed to question Tallibeth.

One day, as we stood upon a bluff above a vast, sun-baked plain, watching a great herd of two-legged beasts like lizards swarm below us, I turned to Tallibeth with a question. The ecstasy of our union still tingled within me, and I thought I was beginning to understand.

"Tallibeth," I said, "are you immortal?"

The Angel turned to me. "We live for so long," it said, "that to all intents, yes, we are immortal."

I moved away from the alien, as if to communicate my unease.

I turned. "Then our union..." I said. "That is what you want from us, am I right? You want the experience of our mortality, and how better to gain that experience than from a member of a poor, benighted, flesh-and-blood race who is dying a slow and painful death?"

"In return for the experience of your psychological state," it said, "we bequeath you ecstasy."

"What is it like," I shouted, "to enter my head? What's it like to experience my pain, to know that it's something you will never have to undergo?"

Tallibeth approached me, halted. Something in its calm regard spoke of infinite reserves of pity. The Angel reached out, the energy of its hand passing into my chest, and I knew ecstasy once again.

"What is it like," it asked, "to experience my rapture?"

We left the Kallani homeplanet and travelled across the universe, traversing light-years in days, visiting star after star around which orbited planets fabulous beyond my dreams.

We beheld primordial life in the hot seas of worlds like Earth in its infancy; we watched the barbarous wars fought between races less evolved than humans, and other conflicts between peoples more advanced. We toured two dozen planets and looked upon as many varied forms of life.

The diversity of life abroad in the universe seemed infinite, yet the Kallani appeared to be the one race to have evolved past the stage of physical, flesh-and-blood beings.

"Evolution," I mused one day as we sat in a desert oasis beneath a fulminating red giant in a galaxy far from Earth. "You seem to have reached as advanced a stage as it's possible to go." I watched Tallibeth, the light of the red giant glowing deep within its body. "What next?"

It turned on me a silent gaze, and I sensed, more than saw, some unspoken sadness.

"When I told you we were immortal..."

I waited. I was aware of wanting to reach out, to effect our union, just as, seemingly millennia ago, I had been as eager to delight in the pleasures of the flesh with my lover. "Yes?"

"Immortality is an impossibility," said the Angel,

I thought about it. "All matter must have some beginning, some end. Even creatures of energy..." I went on, "Entropy. You cannot escape the law of entropy."

Its lips described a smile, for my benefit. "We live for perhaps a million of your years," Tallibeth said. "And then we fade, we fall to the tyranny of entropy, the heat death of all matter and energy."

I opened my mouth to ask a question that had occurred to me often since my meeting with Tallibeth. At last I said, "You know so much..."

"Yes?"

"After life," I said, "what then? Do we simply... die? Does all we are just dissipate, fade into oblivion?"

"Ben," it said, using my name for the first time, "I'm sorry. There is no afterlife, for any of us. We all live, and die, and cease to exist." It paused, then continued, "So you see, my friend, we are very much alike, you and me."

I stared, appalled, sudden understanding coming to me. "Then the joining, why do you...?"

Tallibeth was shaking its head. "We live for so long," it said, "that from time to time we need to remind ourselves of the fact of our own mortality."

I gestured, feebly. "But to live so long, and to know that one day it must end..." The thought was too vast and devastating to fully comprehend.

"But knowledge is preferable to ignorance," Tallibeth said. "And to experience the prospect of death allows us a greater appreciation of being alive." The Angel reached out to me. "For this, my friend, I thank you."

Six months passed in a seeming instant, and then I found myself approaching the time of my return to Earth, the life which, compared to what I had experienced in the company of Tallibeth, seemed like a dream: my return to Earth, and my death.

We were on the silver sands of a beach, on a planet mere light-years away from Earth. We had basked for days in the pink light of the primary, discussing everything there was to discuss, the history of the universe, art, life and death... We were no closer to establishing any universal truths; there are no absolutes.

The only certainty was the fact of death.

When it was time to leave this paradise, and return to Earth, Tallibeth approached me and said, "My friend, there is something which I have not told you, which I will now disclose: I can help you."

I stared at this resplendent being, the Angel I loved. "You can?"

"Ben, it is within my power to effect a remission of your condition. You will then enjoy the lifespan more in keeping with your kind."

"And you?" I asked.

Tallibeth smiled. "There is nothing that even the Kallani can do to cheat the law of entropy."

"I meant," I said, "if I took up your offer of a cure, would we be able to join in future?"

Tallibeth gestured. "My period as Guide is almost over," it said. "I will soon pass from this tenure... to other modes of being which I cannot begin to describe."

I smiled. "I understand," I said. How could I have presumed that a being of pure energy might find in my company anything like that which I found in its own, other than the terrible reminder of its own mortality?

"Tell me when you have come to some decision," the Angel said, and walked away to leave me to my thoughts.

That night we joined for the very last time, and the following day we left for Earth.

I returned home, and resumed my life, and resisted all offers to tell my story – other than through my art. How better to report on my experiences than via the medium I have taken a lifetime to master?

I live and work on the edge of the West Yorkshire moors, in the village where I was born and where I will no doubt die, and I contemplate the many wonders I beheld in the company of Tallibeth.

I often dwell on his offer to save my life, and on my decision.

I contemplate the absolute oblivion to which we are all heading, and the fine irony of having travelled the universe to arrive at the understanding which, six months ago, I was on the verge of discovering for myself: that we are all, ultimately, alone, that the past is irretrievable and the future imponderable, that death is the only certainty and all that is important – and from which we can derive some degree of inner peace – is the miracle of the moment. As daily the cancer grows, gnawing at me with its relentless claws, I know this to be a wonderful truth. ●

BACK ISSUES

Back issues are available singly (price £3.99), or as part of a subscription. Please see page 2 for ordering details.

SPECTRUM SF #3

DREK YARMAN – KEITH ROBERTS (part III). A COLDER WAR – CHARLES STROSS, THE MIRACLE OF KALLITHEA – ERIC BROWN. SHIFT – JACK DEIGHTON.

SPECTRUM SF #4

BAD DREAM – JOHN CHRISTOPHER (part I). VIRTUAL REALITY – KEITH ROBERTS, THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE – ERIC BROWN. PAUSE TIME – MARY SOON LEE.

The serialisation of the novel below in SPECTRUM SF seems to have happily coincided with several other publishing events. The March INTERZONE is a 'John Christopher Special Issue' and a relatively recent novelette, A JOURNEY SOUTH, has just been posted on Keith Brooke's INFINITY PLUS website (www.infinityplus.co.uk). Further, several titles are to be reprinted by Cosmos Books, a new part of the print-on-demand publisher Wildside Press. As well as these older works, there may be a new volume collecting his shorter fiction – a project I sincerely hope comes to fruition.

This is the second part of his new novel about a European Union twenty years from now – one which is suffering from the strains of British nationalism... If you require part one of this novel, please consult the ordering information on page two.

BAD DREAM

JOHN CHRISTOPHER

V

The Frohsteig building was not in fact so named: its title, in spindly neo-Deco lettering over the main entrance, was Thatcher House. It formed part of the Tottenham Court Road redevelopment of the early years of the century, the last major London office-building programme; it had been Euro-funded and was regarded by anti-Europeans as a monstrous bribe for the British government's final surrender to qualified majority voting. The name given to this, the centre-piece, had been seen as a contemptuous insult added to the injury.

Clad in innovatory rose-pink plastic, with antique-futurist towers at each corner looking into a piazza equipped with Fritz Lang fountains and abstract statuary, it had won not only the first Euro-Design Award, but major architectural awards throughout the world, including the United States and Greater Iraq. Time, though, had uttered a corrective verdict, and even more rapidly than usual. It had not helped that the cladding, like some earlier technological breakthroughs, had failed to match expectations, pitting badly under the gales of winters worse than

anticipated, and randomly discolouring. The patchwork result gave the towers a mottled and irretrievably scruffy look.

This individual falling short was compounded by the economic disaster of the rest of the development, which even before it was completed had succumbed to the impact of an economic recession, and had now spent some years as one of the prime central-London slums. This did not trouble Dieter, who explained that the price had been right, the position excellent, and the views over the surrounding squalor towards Buckingham Palace or the Hampstead heights were breathtaking – on a good day.

That was undeniably true from Dieter's own office at the top of the west tower, and the opposite window looked down into a piazza which had been renovated with Teutonic care. As Michael watched, ant-like figures crawled about their never-ending tasks of planting and tidying. Dieter finished his call, and Michael's attention returned to the man behind the Saarinen desk.

"I am sorry over that," Dieter said. "I said to Marilyn to hold calls, but she shows initiative. She knows you are here, and the call concerned you. I think maybe I promote her to central office."

"Would she go?"

"Alas, probably not. Also, she speaks very little German. It is a charm for me, the British reluctance to speak foreign tongues, but commercially it presents a disadvantage."

"The call concerned me, you say?"

"Yes. Earlier I have spoken with Rosbaud." Michael nodded: Llewellyn Rosbaud, whose maternal grandfather had played a couple of times for Wales, was President of the *Grossdeutsche Rugby Verein*. "He thinks a series of three games against an England XV is good – in Danzig, Bremen and Nuernberg. This can be in late summer, before your season begins. With good media coverage, it will be a stimulus to making a permanent German national team. So things will be easier for you."

"I'm still thinking about it."

"Good! But I hope you will not require too long to say yes. The moment is right for an announcement. Already you are a figure known in Germany. The Bruton piece – did you know it is reprinted in *Stern*? And the photograph of you making the last try was on the cover of *Spiegel*. It was very impressive."

"It was an impressive effort by the camera-man. He was really in

close, right up against the corner flag in fact. Getting between him and the Frenchman was like going through Scylla and Charybdis."

The door had opened while he was speaking. He turned to see Hildy. She was wearing a deceptively modest black outfit, minimally trimmed with silver. It was high at the neck and below knee length, but the skirt had its usual split, providing a glimpse of silky golden thigh, and the silver trimming drew attention to an engaging thrust of breasts.

"You must sack Marilyn, Dieter. She tried to tell me you were too busy to see your little niece. *Mikey-Schatz* – what is it concerning whirlpools? Is that something improper for a young girl to know?"

Michael kissed her. Dieter smiled benignly. "I thought you were busy filming through the day."

"And miss a chance of seeing Michael? Especially when Onkel-Dieter is going to take us both out for a seriously gross *Mitagessen*."

Dieter shook his head. "No."

"Really sumptuous." She went and leaned over his desk, putting her arms round his neck and giving him a long sensuous hug. "If not the Trefoil, the Dorchester. Five courses, at least." As far as she was concerned, Michael knew, it would be steak or lobster with salad, no dressing: she was a food disciplinarian.

"I shall be dining with Lufthansa," Dieter told her. "Not so good, but it cannot be avoided. I have a six o'clock appointment in Nuernberg. But I can spare you Michael."

"Also your *Diamantkart*, which I hope is valid for either of them. We will not keep you from important business. Have you organized it for Anna yet?"

"Not yet. But it progresses."

"Organized what for Anna?" Michael asked.

Dieter showed surprise. "Did she not tell you?"

"No. Perhaps you'd better."

"She comes to Germany, for Total. To the Brosser Clinic. It is an independent medical centre, but they work close with our research people."

Michael was taken aback, and slightly confused. He remembered Johann saying that Total was essential for long-term treatment, and that long-term treatment was advisable where there were indications that depression might be endogenous rather than contingent, but he had not realized this was so serious or imminent a possibility. It was one thing seeing her helmet-and-gloved, quite another to envisage her

in a cocoon, wired and intubated, her remoteness become absolute separation.

"Is that really necessary?" he asked.

"It is, if we wish her to become truly well. Michael, the Brosser is the best place that we have, I promise you. It is in the Steigerwald, a mountain behind it and a lake before. You will see no place more beautiful."

"Does the landscape matter, to someone in a cocoon?"

"But you will see them when you visit, as I am sure you will wish."

Dieter spoke patiently, earnestly, above all rationally. Michael wondered if his own surprise had resulted from simply blanking out a prospect which so deeply repelled him. Anna was the one who mattered. "Let me get this right," he pressed, "you've discussed it with her?"

"Johann has. He called her yesterday, in the afternoon. They talked a long time."

Michael had stayed the night in London, and not seen Anna since the previous morning. "And she agreed?"

"Most willingly, happily."

It was not something Michael could seriously doubt. He had seen the look in her eyes as she prepared to put on the helmet – an anticipation not just of joy, but of salvation – and the sad bewilderment when she took it off. It had been an unnecessary question. And much as he loathed what it involved, it was necessary to consider the alternative: that grinding agony from which there was no relief.

"Do they get complete cures – without residual addiction?" he asked.

"Did Johann not tell you that?"

"Yes. He did."

Hildy put an arm round him. "You will get her back, Mikey, and healed of this wound. And meanwhile her shadow-life will be all of beauty, with her beloved Adam. That is so much better than those tainted fantasies in which your little half-sister plays her part. Come, we will go and spend Dieter's money."

She turned back to Dieter, put a slow questing hand inside his jacket and came out with his wallet. She fingered through to find the plastic card she wanted. He sat smiling as she took it and with equal deliberation returned the wallet, then rewarded him by kissing her fingers and pressing them against his lips. She smiled herself, with seductive assurance. "*Kuesse dich. Danke schoen, Onkel-liebling.*"

The organization of the demonstration at Adam's funeral had been, as Michael had suspected, an exception reinforcing a rule: BA's uprising came at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and at half cock. It followed a statement in the Commons by the Prime Minister, Jim Palin, that an Order in Council had been issued making reasonable suspicion of membership of Britain Awake! sufficient ground for arrest and detention, and was coupled with temporary suspension of Habeas Corpus. The next day, Palin addressed a meeting of the Southwest Development Board in Bath: the assault was on the Assembly Rooms, where he was speaking. After a brief struggle, the military detachment responsible for his security was overpowered. The local police, as at the burning of the Christmas Pudding, stood by. Bath was generally regarded as being somewhat anti-Federal, but that was probably a special fix. The flag of St George was raised in the centre of the city, and 'Land of Hope and Glory' raggedly sung to celebrate the victory.

What they had not reckoned with was the speed with which the squadron of helicopter gunships and a second wave of troop-carriers moved in from Melksham. They recaptured the Assembly Rooms and recovered the Prime Minister, shaken but safe. The soldiers put down the rest of the rebellion within a couple of hours. Casualties were light, and almost entirely confined to BA activists.

Succeeding disturbances in Leeds and the East end of London, and sporadic demonstrations elsewhere, were dealt with just as firmly. Press and television voiced outrage and contempt. The *Times* leader was headlined: 'A Wretched Little Business'.

The following Saturday was DD's eighty-eighth birthday. In recent years he had made a show of ignoring the occasion, but this year changed his mind; he told Michael he wanted to have a party.

"I remember my eighteenth," he said. "Worst bit of the war – winter before Alamein. I got a weekend pass, and my mother baked a birthday cake out of carrots. T. might have made something of it – T. could make something of anything – but my mother couldn't brew tea without burning the water. Now I'm eighteen years into injury time, so I'll have a party. Nothing fussy, Michael, but no carrots."

The guest list he provided was inevitably small, since most of his contemporaries had long since been buried in the cemetery on Sheaf Hill. One name surprised Michael.

"Julian Souter?"

"Yes, I think so. A twat in some ways, but he seems to mean well. He's given me one or two market tips which haven't done badly."

Souter was the youngest partner in the long-established firm of Barnes, Dickson & Turnbull, Solicitors, who had handled DD's legal affairs for more than fifty years. He was short and red-faced and had a puffed-out look, vaguely reminiscent of a pouter pigeon. Since he chattered a great deal in a rasping voice and frequently wore a green pullover, Anna had nicknamed him The Budgie.

His wife was a tall, coldly smiling woman, who dominated him. They lived, childless on the outskirts of the town, in a mercilessly neat and clean modern house from which he could be seen emerging in the morning in stockinged feet, taking shoes from a plastic bag to put on in the porch. Their cleaner had regaled the social grapevine with the information that the hall featured a notice board, on which wifely instructions for his household chores were pinned daily.

Souter had taken over DD's affairs the previous year, when Jim Dickson retired, and had first visited the house to see him after Granny T.'s death. Two things had surprised Michael: that he had addressed his grandfather as DD without being offered or seeking permission; and that DD had appeared not to resent it. With Dickson – senior partner in the firm and twenty-five years older – it had always been a scrupulous 'Mr Dorigny'.

Michael's father arrived from Frohsteig with Johann, and Hildy came down from London. He brought presents from Dieter and Maria-Mercedes: a jeroboam of '97 Branntwein, and a blue and crimson silk smoking jacket at which DD snorted derisively. Michael produced for Anna a box of the cigars she had invariably given him; she wept when he handed her the gift tag to write.

"I'm hopeless, aren't I? Can't get anything right any more."

He held her for a moment. "It'll pass, love. You're going to be better."

She shook her head, but said: "Do you think Johann will have a date yet – for the Clinic?"

The day was fine, a burst of spring, and they had opened the conservatory doors to let people spill out onto the terrace and lawn. DD tackled his presents with small-boy enthusiasm. That even extended to the bedroom slippers Michael had found – his current set gaped to reveal bony yellow big-toes – but Michael was under no illusion that they would replace the old ones. His champagne flute held

in a twitching hand, DD said: "Extreme old age isn't as bad as I expected. All that stuff about it only being better than the alternative... I must say, I'm enjoying this more than the one seventy years ago, when we wound up down the bloody shelter." He surveyed his guests with satisfaction. "Very kind of you all, very kind. But at my age one can be frank, rude even. The best present is one I've given myself. I'll go and get it."

He set off unsteadily across the lawn towards the pottery. He'd been there on and off during the past several days, and yesterday Michael had been astonished to see the kiln smoking for the first time in years. He'd wondered if he should comment, but decided against it. When DD returned, he was proudly brandishing an object.

"What do you think of it?"

It was a pottery mug, a bit misshapen but not bad for an old man with Parkinson's. The base colour was matt black, and the painted image on the side stood out boldly. The pale flabby face was also somewhat shakily painted but, despite two striking additions, unmistakable as that of Joachim Mischendorf, the current German Chancellor. The embellishments were a Hitler lock of hair and a Hitler moustache.

A moment's embarrassed silence was broken by Johann laughing: "Very good, DD. Spot on in every way!"

Mischendorf had given an interview on the Euro television network following the Bath incident, in which he had not only excoriated BA terrorists, but hinted at identifying them with the British generally. He talked of a national arrogance which had outlived any possible justification: the English in particular should realize they were no longer imperial masters but merely a sulking and trivial minority in the European Federation. They must learn this lesson, or expect to have it taught.

"Not bad, is it?" DD asked fondly. "Not bad for eighty-eight."

Except for Anna, the family made a late night of it. Even DD stayed up until near midnight, when he retired even more unsteadily than he had entered, but still under his own steam. When the doorbell rang just before eight the following morning, Michael answered it in his dressing gown. A sergeant and police officer stood there.

"Hello, Parsons," Michael greeted the sergeant. "We're all late starters today, I'm afraid. What can I do for you?"

Parsons was thick-set and grizzled, close to retirement. He looked Michael in the eye, but the effort was plain. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll have to

ask you to let us come in." He tapped his chest. "I do have a warrant, if you'd like to see it."

"A warrant for what? What are you talking about?"

"Well... it's to search this property, for materials relating to a prohibited organization."

It must be a belated follow-through on Adam, presumably a consequence of Britain Awake! being proscribed. Michael was confident there was nothing to find: he'd checked Adam's room thoroughly. His concern was for Anna. "My sister's not been well, and still isn't..." he said.

Parsons raised an apologetic hand. "I don't think we'll need to upset Miss Frodsham, sir."

The two of them made straight for the garden room, and Parsons stumped across to the fireplace. DD's birthday present to himself stood where he had tenderly placed it, in the centre of the mantel-shelf. Parsons lifted it.

"I'll have to take this, sir." He nodded to his constable. "Check the pottery for any more, or anything similar."

Michael asked: "But why? This is ridiculous."

"Instructions. I'm sorry, sir." He hesitated. "I think I ought to warn you. There may be a charge against Mr Dorigny."

"What charge?"

"Aiding and abetting an illegal organization. It's covered under the Order."

Johann was coming down as the police were leaving. Still scarcely believing it himself, Michael told him what had happened. In silence, Johann put the kettle on the Aga and measured out coffee. Taking mugs from the rack, Michael said: "It must be connected with Adam. Some bureaucratic lunacy..."

"I'm not sure."

"It has to be."

"They didn't search the house, did they?" The kettle whistled and he filled the coffee pot. "You said the sergeant went straight to the fireplace and took the mug. And then sent his constable to the pottery – checking in case DD had done more than one, I suppose. They knew what they were looking for."

Michael was beginning to think more clearly. "Are you saying DD was informed on – by someone at the party?"

"It looks like that. Unless he's been going round Sheaf, boasting about it."

Michael shook his head. "He wouldn't have done that. It was his surprise; remember how pleased he was with his little joke? And he's not been out of the house since."

His father appeared while Johann was pouring coffee. He was agitated by the news.

"Oh, God! That's awful. I didn't like it at the time, but..."

"It's surely not serious," Michael said. "A technical offence. They can't do worse than caution him."

His father shook his head. "I wish I could believe that. We had a farmer near Nuremberg last year who put an American flag up over his barn. He was obviously mad, but they sent him to prison for three months. He was younger than DD, but not that much."

Michael suppressed an impulse to say: 'But this is England!' Instead he said: "Anyway, I don't think there's any point in mentioning it to him at this stage."

His father said: "Perhaps he can be talked into staying in bed. I'll take him coffee up."

When he'd gone, Johann said: "It might be a help if we could work out who did the informing. Do you know of anyone at the party with an official tie-up? Or semi-official – or ex? What about the old chap with the side-whiskers... Awkright?"

He had been the only guest within a decade of DD's own age; a widower, crippled by arthritis, who had been Chief Constable of the county before the office was abolished by a Euro-ruling.

"It's not possible. Not Bill Awkright."

"Mike, we need to keep... our minds open."

"Awkright's more anti-Europe than DD himself!"

"Appearances can be deceptive."

The comment struck home unexpectedly. That was true, he realized, even in the context of family. Johann was the least Teutonic of the German branch, but he was still the son of Maria-Mercedes, who from time to time displayed a distinctly Valkyrian aspect. Anger flickered among the embers of shocked disbelief. He thought again of his father's ready acceptance of DD being faced with a prison sentence. Living over there had inured him to authoritarianism.

He remembered a visit to Germany when he was about twenty, and being struck, as he crossed a park in Baden on his way to the casino,

by the freshness and charm of a young mother, pushing a pram along an adjacent path. Their glances had met, and he'd felt strangely pleased that her beauty was safeguarded by her maternity: that all her thoughts were concentrated on the child – her first, he felt sure.

Then she had raised a hand from the pram handle to gesture towards the grass on which he was walking and said, in a harsh accent: "*Das ist verboten. Strengst verboten!*"

National characteristics survived internationalism, much as one disliked the idea... He thought of Canny Yates, who'd taught Modern History at school, quoting a comment on the British infantry of the first World War – that they were lions led by donkeys – and saying: "At any rate, better than the Huns: donkeys led by hyenas." He'd laughed with the rest – Canny was respected, and somewhat feared – but had been shocked.

"It might be a help to know who it was," Johann repeated. That was when Hildy appeared, seeking an explanation. She looked very attractive in a swirling yellow housecoat, but her expression, as she listened, turned grim.

"It was a stupid thing to do. I am very fond of DD, but he should know better, at his age." The prank seemed to bother her more than the treachery which might render it serious. "If *Grossvater* did something like that, against the British Prime Minister, we would call it rude – *ungebildet*."

Use of the German expression underlined her resentment. Could the hostility run so deep that she herself could have turned informer? He told himself it was impossible – monstrous even to imagine she could be capable of such a thing.

But the suspicion, even though immediately rejected, would not go away. It had been Johann, he remembered, who had broken the embarrassed silence after DD produced the mug, but his laugh, even at the time, had seemed forced. 'Appearances can be deceptive.' And it had been Johann who'd proposed poor old Awkright as a candidate.

Michael's father came back into the kitchen. "I've got him to stay in bed. I took him his *Telegraph*. He's feeling a bit under the weather after last night, anyway."

Hildy, her smile back in place, said: "Poor old DD. It was the port, I think."

"I feel it might be a good idea to get on to Dieter," Johann said, "he might have some useful advice."

Hildy came and pressed herself against Michael. "Don't look so bothered, *liebchen*. It will be all right. Is there still coffee?"

Michael shook his head. He felt ashamed of himself; the moral line between treachery, and unjustifiably imputing it to others, was a thin and wavering one.

"I'll make some fresh."

It was a further indication of Anna's retreat from life that this morning, as with so many of late, she stayed in her room, engrossed in the pretence of Adam. Michael brought in logs and set and lit the fire, a chore she had previously jealously guarded for herself. DD had got up, but only to go to his study, out of which drifted the massive masculine beat of Gregorian chant. Michael was fixing Martinis when Johann came into the garden room. He looked happier.

"I think we're in the clear."

"Are you sure?" John Frodsham asked, "What did Dieter say?"

"He called me back, just now. He got onto Paul-Ernst." He explained to Michael: "*Ober-Kommandant* Paul-Ernst Leipziger, who owes him a favour or two. He's with the *Sicherheitspolizei*, and carries weight. A bit of a pain in the arse, but efficient. The case is being filed under Trivia. No action to be taken."

"You mean he can fix things like that – from Germany?" Michael enquired.

"Apparently. I'm afraid DD doesn't get his mug back. The Sheaf police have been told to break it up and dispose of it."

"I'll tell him I knocked it off when I was making the fire."

Hildy asked: "And if he wishes to see the pieces?"

"He won't. He's always had a horror of broken pottery."

"Or decides he will make another? Several others, maybe?"

"I doubt that too, with his present attention span. But I'll sabotage the kiln to be on the safe side." He lifted the pitcher of Martini towards Johann. "Thanks, Jo'. Ready for a drink?"

"More than ready. One other thing: Dieter agreed it might be a notion to find out who did the informing, if only as a precaution for the future." He took the glass Michael handed him. "Apparently, it was Souter."

Michael was surprised. They had talked, after he had gone, about the man's gratuitous affability. "The Budgie?"

"A somewhat larger bird, I feel: one that might easily take off an

incautious finger. A parrot, at least, maybe a vulture. I gather he's set himself up as an information source for the security forces. His position as a solicitor lends itself to that." He sipped his Martini. "*Das schmeckt!*"

The plane was half-empty, and Michael found himself the sole occupant of a row. After the usual, minimally edible meal had been served, there was an option of film or Virtual. The former gave a choice of a thriller or a tear-jerker based on the life of Princess Grace of Monaco; the latter offered safari, off-piste skiing or tropical cruising. He decided on a book instead, but had read only a few pages when a tall uniformed figure came down the aisle and stopped beside him. The gold bands on his sleeve identified him as the skipper.

"Mr Frodsham? Rory Kay. Am I interrupting you?"

Although it was an American airline, his accent was British. Michael shook his head, closing the book. "Not a bit."

Kay looked to be in his middle fifties, greying but handsome; his body-language projected laid-back amiability but also authority. "Mind if I sit down? I noticed your name on the passenger list, but until I saw you I couldn't be sure it wasn't another Michael Frodsham. I thought you'd be in luxe."

Michael shrugged. "My Civil Service ranking doesn't rate luxe."

"I think we could manage an upgrade. I have discretion."

"Thanks, but I'm fine here."

"I saw the video of the France game. Great stuff."

"Thanks again. But I'm surprised it was shown in the States. Or did you catch it on one of your London turn-rounds?"

Kay smiled. "I've a contact in England who picks up things he thinks I'll like. Such as that. I also take the *Telegraph* and the *Spectator*, and a couple of others."

"How long have you been living in America?"

"I haven't totted it up lately. More than twenty-five years."

"You haven't lost your accent."

"That happens in the first year, if it's going to happen. Otherwise you stick with British. I remember before I left England someone talking about a buddy of his who'd been twenty years in Manhattan. He said: 'And whenever he ties one on, he stands in the middle of the room reciting Rupert Brooke – and his four kids lie around with their fingers in their ears groaning "Aw, pop...!"' At least, I don't recite Rupert Brooke."

"And when...?"

"When I retire?" Kay grinned. "It's not a sensitive subject. I have some flexibility, but it's due within the next few years."

"You'll keep the British connection?"

"We're coming back."

"Your wife's British, as well?"

"No. She's the reason I went over in the first place. But we have a deal, and part of it is retiring to England. The kids will make up their own minds about what they do: they have both passports so it's no problem."

"There have been a few changes in a quarter of a century."

Kay nodded. "I've noticed. We get over on holidays."

"We probably weren't in Europe, when you left."

"No, I don't think we were."

"And at the moment things aren't looking too bright."

"I've noticed that, too. Even from Virginia. The business in Bath got full coverage in the States."

"But you're still planning to come back?"

There was a pause while coffee was offered and declined. Kay finally said: "Some things don't change: a pint of beer in a pub, the smell of wood smoke on an autumn evening, or wet grass in May. OK, so they can put up what looks like an English pub in Virginia, and even serve the beer warm if you ask them nicely, but even when your eye and tongue can't tell the difference you know it's veneer. And you can smell wood smoke in Vermont, and sometimes the weather in Washington State could be mistaken for English. But they're just not the real thing. It's the difference between Virtual and living."

"I gather there's a lot of opposition to Virtual in the States. Aren't they talking about banning it?"

"Yes. And on that I'm American. Don't misunderstand me. After twenty-five years, I know they're right on quite a few things. But I'm still coming home when my contract expires."

Lucy met him at the airport, and they took a taxi to her apartment. She'd not said much about it, and he'd envisaged an anonymous pad in some large block, but it proved to be the first floor of an elegant colonial house in Georgetown, looking onto a garden of neat lawns and magnolias in blossom. Michael made appropriately admiring noises.

"Not bad for an uppity black broad, though I say it myself. I can't afford it, of course, and I guess I was a fool to take it on. If Aron loses in November, I'm going to have to hope I find some Republican sucker to take it off my hands."

"Do you think he might lose?"

"He ought not. They're going to find it hard to pull off a right flanking move, with him making like Teddy Roosevelt. What I am going to do right now is pour us a couple of scotches, and then I guess you may want to freshen up. Tonight I'm taking you out to dinner at a little place I know."

"Zodiacal?"

She smiled. "No. Not when you're the guest. French. If a Brit can stand a demonstration of French superiority."

"So long as they confine it to cooking." He checked his watch. "Even if I take two showers, that seems to offer a few hours before we eat."

"You could rest up, if you're tired from the flight."

He put his hand against the fullness of her breasts. "I don't think I've ever felt less tired."

At the end of the evening, in bed again, she said: "I've been worried about you."

"Why? Things are going well. Dieter waving bags of Euros under my nose. And I'm quite enjoying the minor celebrity role. I owe this trip to it. It's a routine liaison with opposite numbers in Federal Health Administration, but I've jumped a queue. My boss thinks she may be able to use me in some of her own manoeuvres, and wants to keep me sweet."

Lucy reached across him for her drink. "It wasn't your career I was thinking about. It's what's happening in England I don't like."

"Some of it I don't much like myself."

He told her about the aftermath to DD's birthday party. It had not seemed wise to refer to it on the phone, though as recently as a few weeks ago the notion of surveillance wouldn't have crossed his mind. After he had finished, she said, "That's what I mean. It's not a good situation."

"Things will settle down."

"I hope so, but that's not how the local scuttlebutt figures it. There are whispers of a really big crackdown coming."

He didn't want to talk politics. "Do you know what makes me feel

bad?" Her hair brushed his face as she shook her head. "My own reaction, at the time. We didn't know who it was who'd informed on DD. And my first impulse was to blame them."

"Them?"

"Johann – Hildy."

She thought about it. "I can't imagine any way I'd suspect family of two-timing over something like that, not so long as anyone else was living on the planet. But we're black. My parents, when they were young, may have been fooled for a while by the Martin Luther King and White Liberal combo, but this is a different generation. We've settled for reality. Maybe my father would have joked about being 'an uppity damn nigra', but he wouldn't have meant it seriously. We've learned to accept it's a tough world out there, and one that's not going to change this year or this decade – maybe not this century. It's something the Jews managed to live with for a couple of thousand years, and we can if they could. Maybe one day we'll find a homeland, and a chunk of planet to be boss-man in, but considering what came before that for them, it's not exactly something to look forward to."

"At that, we're doing better than those heavy feminists of twenty, thirty years back. We're acceptable, some of us, and if we make it we live well. Some of our black brothers – well, most of them – may be stuck in fenced-off ghettos with trigger-happy guards making sure they stay right there, but that's economic, not racial. So we're told. And the Jews in old Europe had ghettos too, didn't they? Not with armed guards – just a pogrom now and then."

"So OK, we're disadvantaged, but what's special about that? And what we have in return is what the Jews always had: loyalty. Not the big stuff MLK promoted, but small-scale, and all the stronger for it. We're cynical about plenty of things, but not about kinsfolk."

Michael took the glass from her hand and put it on the bedside table, a good reproduction of a serpentine gilt console. He touched her without urgency. Temporary satiation, but with renewal of appetite guaranteed: a good feeling. He said: "I see what you mean, but it doesn't make me feel any better."

"And I guess I can see how it might be different, if stuff like race got in the way. Or is that nationalism? I can't myself figure races among white skins, but maybe that's down to insensitivity."

"I doubt if it's anything so fundamental," Michael said. "Anna and I were thrown together when our mother died; we'd always been close,

but we got closer. Father was away a lot, which was all right. I remember defending him once, to Anna. I said it might be worse for him than for us, her dying. Profound thinking, for a six-year-old. I remember thinking something like that while I was saying it, and feeling proud of myself."

She smiled, fingering his biceps. "Self-satisfied, even then."

"Sure. Priggishness is buried deep in the English psyche. But that meant there weren't any excuses when he re-married. Anna was more openly resentful, but I was pretty bad about it too. And that extended to our half-siblings when they started arriving. I thought I'd adjusted to it. I really like them both, Johann especially."

He enjoyed the feel of her hair, as she nodded. "A boy with charm."

"And yet, twenty years later, I'm prepared to think the worst of them, on no evidence. That's nothing to do with nationalism – nothing so excusable even as Adam's anti-Germanism. Just old-fashioned jealousy. Pretty demeaning, wouldn't you say?"

"Not if you're willing to take an honest look at it. How is Anna, incidentally? When...?"

"They'll have a bed for her next week. She's due to go in the day after I get back. She resented Germany even more than I did when we were little, and now she can't wait to get there. One of the minor ironies."

Lucy snuggled close. "That's life, massa."

After Michael had got through business – officially an exchange of views on the economies of hospital administration, unofficially the furtherance of a brief from Helen Rackham to sound-out the latest US position on Virtual – Lucy showed him the sights: the White House, the Capitol, the Air & Space Museum. They had salad lunches in a small cafe which had a stream running through to a pool with a white marble fountain, before going on to Arlington. The Vietnam Memorial, and more marble – what looked like an infinity of it – but sombre black. He touched one of the names, the hard edge of the lettering softened by generations of questioning fingers.

"An impressive monument to America's last major war."

"Last, or maybe just latest."

"That's only electioneering, surely."

"Sure, it's electioneering. Aron senses a national mood – frustration with years of economic stagnation, combined with amnesia over body

bags. America flexing its mighty muscles again. And something to take our minds off the Hispanic administrations in California and New Mexico; from those agitations for independence. But it's not just that. You know he has cousins in England?"

"I'd heard."

"His family split when they left Poland during the Hitler years, but they've kept a strong link going. Did you ever read the book he wrote as a junior Congressman? *Strategic Error*?"

"No."

"His thesis was that the biggest mistake the US made in the twentieth century was pushing Britain towards the European union. We threw away that unsinkable aircraft carrier for a trade advantage that didn't work. I'm not sure he doesn't see himself as the man who could win it back."

Michael turned his back on the mind-numbing lines of names. "I've heard Adam talk that way, now and then – about the possibility of our long-lost cousins riding to the rescue. What Aron needs to realize is that the overwhelming majority of us don't want rescuing, even without a war – a war that would be fought on our patch of ground, not America's. The US may have been cheering us on from the sidelines, but we gave up that aircraft carrier status voluntarily, and with no regrets."

Michael was booked for a mid-evening flight the following day, and after lunch Lucy took him to see the ghetto barrier: he had expressed an interest when she was in England, but hadn't expected her to remember. The high metal fence circumscribing Washington's slum area was punctuated by watch-towers equipped with searchlights, infra-red and laser monitors, and at intervals by check-points where vehicles were examined by bored and hostile-looking guards in riot gear. They stood near one of these; it was a chilling sight.

"I'm glad you brought me," he said. "At least, we don't have anything like this."

"You could add 'yet' to that. This is America, the land of the best and the worst. And also of the future."

It happened very fast. At one moment there was just a truck standing at the check-point, with guards desultorily inspecting its contents; then an eruption of figures from around it – bursting out, spilling forward, brushing the guards aside before they could reach their

weapons. The black men, in ragged jeans, mostly shirtless, were yelling indistinguishably as they headed towards them. He tried to reach Lucy's arm, but by the time he made contact the mob was swarming over them.

VI

The Army captain looking after him seemed young for his rank – still in his middle twenties, Michael guessed. He was conventionally handsome in a heavy-jawed fashion, and his uniform looked as if it had been ironed onto him. He had a southern accent, Texan possibly, and was economical with words, answering questions briefly, and volunteering no unnecessary information. When Michael sought it, he was laconically told explanations could wait for his official debriefing. He was sirred punctiliously.

They took a lift to the top floor, where he was escorted about fifty metres along a corridor to a room labelled Specops G2. It was on the outside of the building, and the view of city lights against a black sky reminded him of time elapsed. The room was pleasantly furnished – desk and executive chair, but also two easy chairs, a red leather sofa, and a coffee table with a drinks tray. Moreover, the man who came from the desk to greet him was in marked contrast to the other, who saluted, and smartly withdrew. He was late fifties, with grey hair closer to civilian than standard military length, an amiable, slightly squashy face, and bushy eyebrows that were still black. He grasped Michael's hand strongly.

"Ike Haddon. Glad to meet you, Mr Frodsham. I'm sorry it has to be an occasion such as this." He indicated an armchair, and took the facing one. "Can I offer you a drink? Scotch?"

"Thank you." He watched Haddon pour large measures into heavy crystal glasses, accepted water and refused ice. "There's nothing to apologize for."

Haddon shook his head. "It calls for an apology when a guest in our country gets roughed up by a mob."

"The response to that was impressive. I imagine it's a standard drill, but I couldn't believe how fast your chaps came out of that helicopter."

Haddon grinned. "We do our best."

"In fact, they didn't have time to damage us. The medical check-up wasn't necessary."

"They weren't planning on damaging you. The procedure is to drag you into the ghetto, strip you of anything of value, and then look for a ransom. Theoretically we have a police presence inside, but in practical terms we're limited to punitive reaction. It wouldn't be easy to recover an individual. As far as the check-up is concerned, you are a foreign national; we needed to establish you were presently in good shape, if only to make sure we don't get hit by a civil suit later on."

"And Miss Jones?"

"Sure, she's fine too. Not a foreign national, but we still take care."

The scotch was good, a single malt. Looking at the night sky, Michael said: "I've missed my plane."

"Unfortunately, that is so. Something else we regret. We've booked you on the same flight tomorrow – will that be in order? And tonight we're putting you up at the Grand Hyatt, unless..."

"That won't be necessary. But thanks."

Haddon checked his watch. "I'd like at least to give you and Miss Jones dinner. She's accepted, as long as it's OK with you. She had something to attend to, but we're scheduled to meet with her in about an hour. Does that suit?"

They chatted; he was an easy man to talk to. He came of an Army family, Michael learned: his grandfather had fought in Normandy and Korea, his father in Vietnam. He had two younger brothers serving, and a son at West Point. His wife's family had been Army too. His home was in Manassas, with a view of a Civil War battlefield, two daughters at high school, a couple of horses and three Labrador dogs. His wife bred and judged that breed.

He went on to talk more openly than Michael would have expected about local problems. The ghettos were a scandal, and something needed to be done: the difficulty lay in working out just what. The virtual alienation of Spanish-speaking Americans in California and New Mexico added to the pressure. He suggested, frankly, that the proposed Amendment banning Virtual could have a political purpose in echoing the Pope's denunciation of spying: neo-Catholicism was rife in both states, and this was a useful sop to Hispanic sensibilities.

Eventually the subject of conversation switched to Michael. Haddon put questions but only in a general way. He asked about his work, but accepted hospital administration as an answer without pressing for details. He also asked where he lived, and observed warmly: "You're a lucky man. That is a truly beautiful township."

"You know it?"

"My wife and I visited, not long after we married. We stayed in the Neptune." He chuckled. "I like that notice on the wall: 'Rebuilt 1380'. And that bar with the fireplace you could roast an ox in. We holidayed in England quite a bit in the early years. I guess we both fell in love with your country. Then the children came along, and enforced different priorities. Maybe when the girls are in college, we'll get back again." He paused. "If the situation permits."

"Things are a bit tricky at the moment," Michael said, "but it'll pass."

"You think so? I hope you're right. Foreign troops on English soil – that bothers me."

"Fellow European troops. Not exactly foreign."

"Is that how the majority of English people see it?"

It was Michael's turn to hesitate. "There's some resentment, in some quarters." The question made him uneasy, but Haddon's affable manner seemed innocent enough. "It isn't easy to work out how serious it is."

Haddon nodded. "It's even harder for us, as Americans – getting a fix on something that's three thousand miles away and under increasingly heavy censorship. And it's going to be more difficult still, from now on. The latest word is that all Americans may be banned – no new visas issued, current visas cancelled."

Michael was startled. "I hadn't heard that."

"May I ask you not to mention it? It's classified."

"No, of course," Michael promised, privately exempting Lucy from the undertaking. "This would apply just to Britain – not Europe generally?"

"That is our understanding."

So they could meet in Germany, or France; more difficult, but not insuperable. Haddon topped up the glasses, and sipped his appreciatively.

"Beats bourbon or rye. Those English beers were even better, but even supposing I could get them they'd be a no-no these days. You need to watch your gut, if you want to stay in the Army. Do you mind if I call you Michael?"

"Of course not. Go ahead."

"Michael, there's something I'd like to put to you. It's the sort of thing that could be awkward with some people, but I read you as a man who takes a laid-back view of situations. We're increasingly limited on information from the UK, as I've said, and denial of information

is hard on the military mind. It would be helpful for us to have a source keeping us posted on the local situation. Very helpful."

Michael took his time about responding while Haddon waited with no sign of impatience. He said finally: "I don't think you told me what your present job is. The sign on the door – Specops. Would that be Special Operations?"

"Sure." Haddon leaned back, hands clasped behind his head. "Branch of military intelligence. Routine stuff."

"Which makes this a routine proposition to me to act as a US agent. I'm not interested."

"It depends what you mean by agent. We're not looking for anything heavy: no microphotography, site surveillance, analysis of troop movements – nothing like that. Nothing more, in fact, than reports on the scene in the street by a man in the street. Local colour, local reactions. It wouldn't be much from you, but it would mean a lot to us. And it's worth money to us. Payments into a Washington account. And we can fix it you get access to the account by arranging for you to make regular visits here."

Despite himself, he was intrigued. "How would you do that?"

Haddon grinned, the grin of a conspiratorial schoolboy. "Too easy. You came over this time for a meeting on hospital administration, but my guess – my informed guess – is that you had an undisclosed agenda. Your department deals with Virtual, and everyone wants to know what the other side is up to. We can give you something to take back that will whet the appetite. You won't need to ask for a repeat trip: you'll be sent."

"The answer's no."

"Time to consider?"

"I've considered."

Haddon got up from his chair and went to his desk. He wrote on a notepad, tore off the top sheet, and handed it to Michael. It was a London telephone number.

"You can throw it away," Haddon said, "or you can put it in your organizer. It's a safe contact – in reverse order the number can go down under Books: that's a bookshop in Chelsea." He consulted the time again. "We ought to be moving. There's a realtor's convention in town, and that sonofabitch maitre d' could let our table go."

His flight was delayed, but only by an hour. He thought of Captain Kay, and speculated on the possibility of him skipping this flight too: possible, but unlikely. And even more unlikely in the future if Americans were to be banned from entry to Britain. There would be a ban on American airlines too, presumably. Kay would have to do without his warm beer, and pink roast beef at Simpson's.

The lounge where they were sitting had been decorated as a lunar landscape. That was pure nostalgia – how long was it since NASA had been wound up? Ten years... fifteen? Untwinkling stars, authentically positioned, dotted the ceiling dome, and a blue-and-white earth was full in the east wall.

Lucy said: "I'll miss you."

"Yes. I'll miss you too."

There was a silence, which she broke. "What is it? Something's wrong."

He fiddled with his glass. "That was a good dinner last night. Generous of the US Army to lay it on. And I like Haddon."

"He's OK. Tell me what's wrong."

"Before we joined you, he made me a proposition."

She did her best to make a joke of it. "I wouldn't have figured him for a fag. Or you as a probable target."

"He made it sound like nothing much, but basically he was trying to recruit me: as an agent."

She paused. "You sure?"

"The offer was concrete. Money payable into a dollar account. He also said he could arrange further trips like this. I believed him."

She put a hand on his. "What did you say, Mike?"

He looked at her, and she looked levelly back. Her beauty seared him. "It's not my kind of thing. Not even for the sake of further trips like this." She said nothing. "How are you feeling? No ill effects from yesterday afternoon?"

"No. I'm fine." She smiled. "I wouldn't have thought you'd need ask."

"It could have been coincidental. The report of a foreign tourist being attacked might have been put through to Haddon as a routine item. The rest could have followed naturally: him doing his apology and reassurance stuff, and then the offer arising spontaneously out of a pleasant chat over a couple of large scotches, and our getting on so well together.

"But the more I thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed. That rescue was too prompt, too good. The chopper hovering right overhead, troops at battle alert swarming out to get us... And the ghetto boys were kid-gloved. It was nothing like the manhandling you get in an everyday maul on the rugby field. I'd guess they were acting under instructions too. Wouldn't you?"

Lucy didn't answer. He took his hand away. "Just as you were: to put me in the right spot at the right time. I didn't work that out till this morning. *Post coitum veritas*, maybe. Of course, I didn't want to believe it. I tried to tell myself the whole thing was too crazy: setting up something so elaborate in the hope of recruiting a low-level civil servant in hospital management. It doesn't make sense, does it? But if someone had told them about my German connection, it begins to look more reasonable. After all, *Frohsteig Wissenschaftliches Verkehrs* are the biggest producers and researchers into Virtual in Europe – in the world, probably."

"Did he ask you about them?"

"No. It's not the way it works, is it? Softly, softly, catchee flunky. 'Oh, by the way, Mike, there's a small extra item on the agenda. Something we'd like you to do for us the next time you visit with your father. We're confident you'll feel happy about this. No need to mention the account with Riggs Bank, or the possibility of details being leaked to the right quarter in London. No need at all, because it's staring you in the face.'"

In a low voice that fuelled his anger, and at the same time devastated him with a sense of irretrievable loss, she said: "I've known Ike a long time. I think I know him better than any white guy, except for one. He promised me there would be no pressure, and there would be total back-up and protection. As good as my own, or better."

"We'd be in this together, you mean? Frequent fucking, courtesy of Specops, and expensive dinners laid on to keep the libido from flagging. Good wines – if not French, top-quality Californian. Something to laugh about in our Darby and Joan years. And meanwhile you were prepared to go along with the play-the-sucker line. I ought to tell you he didn't blow your cover. He even gave me a London contact number, to throw me off the scent."

The cross he had given her at Christmas rested against the darker cleft of her breasts, the yellow stones flickering with her breathing in the lounge's pseudo-lunar light. Her hand caressed it, let it go, moved

forward... and he wondered if she would touch him again, and what he might do if she did. But she let it fall to the table. In a frozen voice, she said: "That's not the way it looked."

"I'm sure it isn't. Viewpoints are the problem, aren't they? They're a lot more important than screwing. Item one: as you told me, twenty-first century American life can be tough on coloureds. Even when you make it, against the odds, you can't rest easy. You need to keep both eyes open, like the Jews. And, like the Jews, group loyalty is your main defence. In which respect, Whitey doesn't qualify any more than the Gentiles did.

"Then there's item two: you're an American black. DD talked to me once about a girl he knew before Granny T. She was from a Jewish refugee family, living in Hampstead just after the war. That was soon after the news of what the Germans had been up to became official. They'd had cousins, uncles, aunts murdered: the girl's own grandfather stayed behind and wound up in Auschwitz. They hated Hitler with an intensity DD couldn't begin to comprehend.

"All the same, they ate German, dressed German, thought German. What eventually fixed him was something as trivial as a radio programme. The family had the German passion for *Kultur*, and were avid listeners to the BBC Third Programme. The BBC were making a big thing of a new translation of *Faust* they were broadcasting, and she was wild with enthusiasm. This, she told him, would at last teach the English to appreciate Goethe. DD got up and left, took the tube back from Belsize Park, and picked up Granny T. in a queue for the Salad Bar at Lyons' Coventry Street Corner House. They were married within three months.

"Hildy was quite right: Americans don't take little countries like England seriously. They're OK for a vacation, but not the sort of place where real people live."

"I'm sorry. I'll never be able to tell you how sorry." She stood up, moving with that bodily grace which would always take his breath away. "Have a good trip, Mike. A good life."

He had a day with Anna: Johann had arranged a twenty-four hour delay on admission to match Michael's American hold-up. Given an edited account of the attempted kidnap, he shrugged his shoulders.

"People herded into a ghetto, with armed guards keeping them

behind fences... whenever I get pissed off with Europe, I must remind myself to think of America. What about Lucy? She wasn't hurt?"

"No, she's fine."

It was a bright day, but cold. Anna was looking no better physically, but seemed strangely wrapped in calm. She said she would like to go to the cemetery, but refused his offer to drive her there. They walked, taking the short cut past the school, where the gardens of the hillside houses were brightening with crocuses and daffodils and flowering currant. At the top of the steps in the field leading up to the cemetery gate, she stopped. He thought she might be tired and offered an arm, but she was looking at the paddock below the cemetery. There were sheep in it.

"Do you remember Prince?"

Michael nodded. Prince had been an ancient horse, retired from a local riding school and provided with this patch of ground for his old age: a chestnut with a white star on his chest and one white foot. They had come up here as children to stroke and marvel at the velvet of his nose, and to bring him treats. He had been particularly fond of bread and jam.

"What happened to him?"

"He died," she said, "in the first winter you were away at school. Heart, I think. He was over forty, people said."

That was the winter after Mummy died, the winter before Maria-Mercedes met his father. He said: "I never asked, did I?"

She shook her head. "And I never told you. I was sorry when he died, but glad in a way. I used to hate thinking of him up here when there was frost and snow and gales."

"He had a sort of shelter. That shed with the galvanized iron roof."

"He would never use it. He used to stand out in all weathers." She pointed. "Look." At the far end of the paddock, two tiny lambs huddled close to a ewe. "The first I've seen this year."

Adam's grave was raw still. Anna's retreat from life had not stopped her ordering the stone, but the earth had not yet settled enough for it to be laid. She took dying daffodils from the jar, and replaced them with sprigs of mimosa. At the foot of the grave lay another floral tribute: a red-and-white wreath which had been regularly but anonymously renewed. It bore no message, but to Michael's eye it had BA stamped all over it.

Anna looked from the grave towards the paddock. "I used to lie

awake at night, and think of Prince out in the cold and rain. And then I pictured being old myself – not out in a field, but sick, maybe poor. And alone. I thought I could imagine what it might be like. But we never can, can we?”

But she smiled. “I’m glad I saw the lambs. And he’s not here, I know that. This isn’t real.”

He knew, sadly, what she meant. Reality waited for her in another country, inside a steel-and-plastic cocoon.

Michael had a brief call from Helen Rackham, telling him she wanted him at her place that evening. She put it as baldly as that, with no sop about coming round for a drink. Since she’d recently launched a new crack-down on expenses, with particular reference to unnecessary use of taxis, he started to ask directions from the Docklands tube station, but she cut him short. The office car would be outside the main entrance at five thirty.

Her house was as characterless as he would have expected: a yellow brick box with reflector windows. Security was represented by the police car parked opposite. A Pakistani girl with a Birmingham accent showed him through a hall chilled by several prints of Utrillo snow scenes into a room where the Deputy Minister was busy at a desk. She let him stand for two or three seconds before glancing up and nodding towards a chair. It was reproduction William & Mary, and more comfortable than it looked.

He knew she would have been given an explanation for his absence from the office the previous day, but she made no reference to Anna. She put questions about his American trip, pertinently and precisely. At the end, she said: “So you didn’t pick up much. Did you get an impression they might be holding back?”

“I wouldn’t know. If they were being reticent, it might be because they still don’t know whether there’s going to be a ban on Virtual. But the probability of that is high. Aronheimer’s committed to campaigning for prohibition, and I get the impression the Republicans are uneasy about the mileage he’s getting out of it. I would think they’ll go along.”

“You don’t think their Virtual Producers’ Association lobby can hold the line?”

“Frankly, no. It’s the same puritan surge that made alcohol illegal, nearly a century ago. The opposition’s running scared. They may get

over that before the amendment gets ratification at State level, but I think it will go through Congress.”

She said, restlessly: “All in all, a bit of a wasted trip.”

Wasted was an irony. He reflected how different things would have been if he had taken Haddon’s proposition, and come back with information which would have kept Helen happy. He reflected also that this evening he had passed the point of no return as far as making an official report on the incident was concerned. Why hadn’t he? He had nothing to gain from not doing so – no hope, or desire, of seeing Lucy again.

There would, on the other hand, have been a lot to gain the other way round. He could visualize the delight in Helen Rackham’s face, contemplating what she might do with a situation like that. And, of course, he had very much more to lose here. The story, it occurred to him, could be as easily leaked from the other end – either through the British Embassy in Washington, or the bigger and more important Euro Embassy. He felt a tingling of cold sweat at the thought. Even if he denied everything, suspicion would stick.

Nor was it possible to rule out actual evidence, from hidden cameras and recorders. Telling himself Ike Haddon wouldn’t do that sort of thing was a non-starter. Ruthlessness went with the job. The only hope there was that Haddon would be hoping he might still change his mind and take the bait.

Helen Rackham shrugged. “Well, that’s it. I’ve a feeling our trans-Atlantic contacts may be fairly sharply wound down in the future anyway.”

Remembering Haddon’s remarks about a possible ban on Americans, he ventured cautiously: “Any particular reason for that?”

“None I can pass on,” she told him crisply. “Personally, I wouldn’t have many regrets. I can’t stand their moralizing, especially about things like Virtual. All this nonsense about it being morally degrading. It’s far less pathogenic than drugs – or alcohol. If in fact it’s pathogenic at all. I often use it before I go to bed.”

He was surprised, both by the fact and by her admission of something it was fashionable to snigger at, but made no comment.

“Sailing,” she said. “I grew up in a boat family. You can get some good sailing out of Perth: we took a few long-distance trips to Indonesia. It offers the best combination of discipline and pleasure I know. I’m too old for it now, and the English Channel’s not the same

— and I don't have the time. But the glove-and-helmet take me back." She looked at him with a slightly contemptuous smile. "It's a much better relaxant than whisky, Michael. Or even rugby."

He hadn't really been expecting to be offered a drink. As she stood up to give him his dismissal, he said: "Yes, Minister. I'm sure it is."

Hildy remained London-based, and it had become usual for them to meet for lunch once a week in a wine bar close to Leicester Square, convenient both for the studio and the Ministry. They drank white wine, and she devoured undressed salad with cold meat. On their meeting following his return from America, she chattered volubly about a number of things, chiefly the fascinatingly bitchy aspects of her profession. He was content to listen, conscious of her prettiness and vitality.

He himself was eating the house ham-and-cheese pie; famous, if the proclamation on the blackboard was to be believed, for forty-one years.

She paused to look critically at his plate. "More calories there than leaves in Vallombrosa. It will be necessary to diet before next season, Mikey."

"If there is one. I may hang up my boots."

"Even if you do that, I do not wish a fat *Stiefbruder*. We all have a duty of discipline — to not offend others, especially our nearest and dearest, with grossness. How is Lucy?"

"She's fine."

"You gave her my love?"

"Yes. She sent you hers."

"When does she visit London again?"

"I'm not sure. With the American election hotting up, it isn't easy for her to get away."

She took a sip of wine and a draught of Malvern water. "Something is wrong. Tell me."

He thought of Lucy, in the airport lounge. He said, sharply: "Nothing's wrong. What are you on about?"

"You are only just back from Washington, from Lucy. To say nothing about it means something is wrong."

Michael laughed. "I've not had a chance to get a word in edgewise since I sat down."

Hildy pouted attractively. "I have been talking too much maybe, but because I observe the hunch of your shoulders when I come in.

The body language of men is written in capital letters. But OK, then. Talk, and I'll listen. Tell me about Washington. Tell me about Lucy."

He did his best to do so, concentrating on topography. It wasn't all that difficult, but he was aware of being dull and wooden, and of Hildy appraising this. She cut him short on the Air & Space Museum.

"I cannot bear such places. To fly in a machine is so boring, when one can fly in the mind. I am glad you had a good trip, and that Lucy is well. Listen, this next weekend I am free. I thought I may come down to Sheaf. Will that be all right?"

He said warmly: "Of course it will! There's only me and DD in the house now, rattling about like a couple of shrivelled nuts. We'll be delighted."

"Age has shrivelled DD quite nicely. You are not shrivelled at all."

The *Evening Standard* headline proclaimed: IRISH BOMBSHELL
Underneath: PADDY PUTS THE BOOT IN.

The rotating presidency of Europe had come recently to the Irish Union, where for some time political power had lain with Belfast, though Dublin remained the capital. The president, Paddy McGuire, was himself an Ulsterman, who had entered politics after making a fortune in the Euro-funded reconstruction and development which had followed the unification of North and South, and Northern Ireland's consequent secession from the United Kingdom.

This was McGuire's first speech in the Euro Council, and he made great play with the benefits which had flowed from the Irish experience. It might be worth while considering extending them. Ireland was at peace, after long travail, and looked with compassion across the Irish Sea to where Scotland and Wales lay once more under an ancient yoke after the failed experiments of devolution. Freedom mattered to them too: freedom within the security of pan-European harmony. What the English seemed to mean by freedom, on the other hand, was the maintenance of an out-dated colonial dominance: they resented the notion of merely equal status with their European neighbours. Their even closer neighbours on the island of Britain had a right to be protected from this intransigence. It was an obvious case for invoking the subsidiarity principle. He would be proposing to the Council that Scotland and Wales should be admitted as separate and independent members of the Federal Union.

Peter Graveny tapped Michael on the shoulder. "I'll have a scotch,

while we're still part of the same country. What do you think of that load of pig-shit?"

"Do you think we're meant to take it seriously?"

Graveny watched carefully as the barman double-pressed the optic; it was the boy Adam had abused over the half-litre glasses. "One thing I learned early in life was never to trust the Irish – man or woman, North or South, drunk or sober. Nor the Scotch, except when they're distilling. And the Welsh even less. We'd be better off without the lot of them, except it won't keep the buggers out."

"He'd never get it through, surely."

"Why not? We're not liked by anyone. The French, Germans, Italians would all love to see us screwed. And there are enough Welsh and Scotch nationalist Euro MPs to make it look good even as far as Britain itself is concerned. Odds on, I would say."

"But nationalists are only a small minority at Westminster, and the United Kingdom can't be dissolved without the consent of Parliament."

"How old were you when Maastricht was pushed through? A schoolboy anyway, so you're excused. I was of mature years, and all I did was fume and rant and get drunker than usual. I was very clear-headed about it, if I say so myself. I could see what was in it for the businessmen, and the civil servants, and the politicians: that lovely gravy train steaming down the hill towards them. I knew them for the shits they were, and nourished a fine contempt for their greed and self-interest. But I didn't do anything about it. I wasn't an Adam. And it's too late for the Adams now, too bloody late altogether. Do you really think consent of Parliament means anything, or has done for twenty years? Drink up, and have another North British."

On Saturday morning in Sheaf, Johann called him.

"Mike, I got your message. Sorry I was missing. One of those bloody company dinners. Anna's fine. I spoke to Stern yesterday afternoon."

Julius Stern was Medical Director of the Brosser Clinic.

"Has she been cocooned yet?"

"Yesterday morning. All's well."

"I thought I might try to get over."

"I'd be delighted. So would Pa. But you realize it won't be a very rewarding visit as far as making contact is concerned? She stays under completely for the first two weeks."

“Yes...”

He told himself the sense of loss was irrational – that what mattered was Anna being free, for the time being at least, of the misery he had found it so hard to witness. His unease, and restlessness, probably stemmed from that other loss which he had tried, with no great success, to put out of his mind. He was tired of imagined dialogues in which everything improbably came right; and of petty emotional victories in which anger boosted self-esteem. He was even more weary of his own weakness in surrendering to such pointless indulgences.

Johann's image was starting to break up: the local connection had been intermittently on the blink for more than a week. He said: “I'll think about it. Give my love to Father.”

As he switched off, he heard the whine of a vacuum cleaner upstairs. Janice had been more than willing to give him an extra hour preparing a room for Hildy. She had been thrilled when she learned Hildy was an actress in Virtual, and Michael suspected had gone hot-footed to spread the news through the council estate. But she had confided to Anna that she had subsequently vetoed the programmes she allowed her husband and son to esp in that respect. Soft porn was permitted the former and probably blind-eyed as far as the latter was concerned, but embracing Anna's half-sister in her undies was off limits for both.

DD was equally excited by the prospect of her visit. He had been a great man for female grand-children – Michael had noted the difference without minding it, Granny T.'s affection being the more valuable – and Hildy's early appearances at Sheaf, as a toddler, had coincided with Anna's withdrawal into her passion for Marcus Reddaby. He had made much more of Hildy than Johann or, subsequently, of Adam – though lingering resentment against Reddaby might have played a part there.

At any rate, he now recalled an early-teen passion of Hildy's for shell-on prawns, and was determined they must have some for her. He was prepared to go and get them from the fishermen's co-operative on the bank of the Trug, but Michael said firmly he would go himself. DD was increasingly uncertain on his feet, and the expedition involved treacherously steep steps down to the Flats. Actually, the suggestion suited him. They had found an obliging widow to take over the cooking from Anna, but Michael preferred to handle it when he was down. Prawns, apart from conforming to Hildy's calorie-counting, would provide an easy starter to their meal.

Winter, as was becoming commonplace, had reoccupied the citadel

of spring. He returned from the fish shop against a wind whipping hard across the Flats, bearing more snow than sleet, and at the top of Cerdic's Cliff, with his Barbour hood up, found himself bumping into a figure coming the opposite way. His apology was pre-empted by a lengthier one from the other party.

It was the first time he had encountered Souter since DD's birthday. The Budgie must have been made aware that his calculated leak had produced no result, and perhaps been warned about tangling with an influential family. Michael was not surprised to find him more effusive than ever, especially in his inquiries about DD: a man, as he said, of the old school.

The awning of Sheaf's high-quality ironmonger's shop offered a protection from the elements which was also conducive to prolonging conversation. Souter spoke of the new European president's suggestion of splitting up the United Kingdom, which had clearly ruffled his feathers in the right direction. It would never happen, of course, but the threat of it might be beneficial in damping down anti-European sentiments.

His chubby face contorted improbably into an intimate smile. "One doesn't blame the young for being misled, any more than one should blame the old for clinging to outdated prejudices. The responsibility lies with our generation, doesn't it? We're the ones who must do what we can to keep things moving forward. I've been paid a great honour, Michael, in that respect: I've been asked to form a local branch of the Carolingians."

The *Sodalitas Carolingiana* had spread rapidly through the Federation over the past ten years from its birthplace in Vienna, but until recently had made little headway north of the Channel. Its present rapid expansion was seen as a middle-class reaction to the excesses of Britain Awake! Souter's own references to the misled young and the outdated old were plainly deliberate, a combination of defiance and warning. He was not, Michael realized, someone whose contemptibility should lead one to disregard an underlying boldness.

He laid his hand lightly – weakly even, but with positive effect – on the dripping sleeve of Michael's Barbour. "I think you could be a very useful member, Michael. Quite apart from your fame on the rugby field, you're the kind of person we need."

"I don't think I spend enough time in Sheaf to get involved in local activities."

"Commitment is more important than activity. Think about it." He peered up earnestly into Michael's face. "I shall ask you again."

It was a good evening. Hildy was at her liveliest, and DD burst into senile blossom, roaring with laughter at her jokes and drinking more wine than usual. His tremor seemed less in evidence. When Michael brought coffee to the sitting room, he discovered his grandfather bringing a tray from the sideboard. It held three crystal thistle glasses, the Waterford jug, and a dusty bottle with a peeling label. He thrust the jug imperiously at Michael.

"We haven't any Highlands water, so the tap will have to do. Let it run at least half a minute."

When he next got back, the pair were giggling. DD said: "And your audience – all those masturbating males?"

"Why not, darling? I perform a service, but I am not touched."

"No, I suppose you're not." He chuckled, and beckoned to Michael for the jug. "Power without responsibility... as Baldwin said, the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages. Or was that Kipling? So my youngest grandchild is a virginal harlot – a *demi-vierge*!"

"Yes, it is power. Shall I tell you something, Grandfather? I enjoy the knowing that I have it. In fact, it's quite exciting."

They were both half-drunk, as was Michael himself. DD's interest diverted to the dusty bottle.

"A Deveron from Speyside. Must be five years since I last sampled this. No more mature, of course, but it was more than twenty years old when it came out of the cask. Taste it by itself, to get the pungency. Then water, half and half."

He poured measures into the glasses, and watched Hildy as she sipped the undiluted malt.

She smacked her lips. "Heaven!"

DD nodded approval. "Better than Virtual, eh?"

"Much, much better."

He launched into a panegyric on whiskies past, and went from that to more general reminiscence, hinting of devilry sixty or seventy years gone. It was long after his normal bedtime, but he seemed tireless. Michael was conscious of the drag of fatigue – the previous night's sleep, like many recently, had been badly broken – and wondered if he might leave them to it. But he realized that was out of the question, and shook himself awake. Not long after, DD abruptly stood up.

"That's enough. I know when I'm boring people."

"Beloved DD, you couldn't. Not ever."

"When I find I'm dead-beat from talking, I must be." She rose from her chair and kissed him. "Hildy, you've done me more good than you will be able to imagine until you too are very old. I shall sleep well, and all the better for hoping to be spared another few hours to see you at the breakfast table."

She smiled at Michael, as his footsteps retreated down the corridor. "He is so sweet, but talks so much. When I wanted you to myself. And that terrible malt whisky, tasting of furniture polish. I think maybe I am a great actress, after all."

"You must be tired."

She fixed him with a direct stare. "No. But I think you are."

He looked at his watch. "It's after midnight."

"So, your carriage has turned into a pumpkin. But fortunately your bed is near. First, I want to show you something. I will be quick. Sit down, and have a proper whisky."

He assumed she had gone to fetch something from her bedroom, but she was away longer than he had expected. She returned very quietly; he looked up to see her standing in the doorway. She was wearing a costume whose pale blue colour might have served, in a more conventional dress, to proclaim the innocence of her blonde beauty.

The styling, though, was the reverse of conventional. Beneath her breasts, cupped and tantalizingly lifted by the flimsy silk, flesh was exposed to display not only her midriff but most of her stomach. Thin vertical bands which accentuated the slimness of her waist narrowed from their divergent curve towards a junction only just supra-pubic, while lower down the dress frilled high against the luscious cream of her thighs.

She smiled. "Well?"

"Incredible."

"It is the costume from my latest epic. I am a barbaric princess, on a far planet. The customer is a space captain with a mission to civilize the natives. He tries to be severe, but I come, and look into his eyes, and sway a little forward to brush his chest with mine... and against his will his hands find the simple knot that unties the halter from my breasts, and touches them – gently, then fiercely – and they go on seeking, lower, lower, until he, the brave space captain, falls to his knees..."

She walked forward slowly in little silver slippers, and he felt the shivering anxious joy of lust rise and possess him. In reality, in flesh, she presented the script she had just outlined, and he followed it; to the letter and beyond. Past the scent she was wearing, her smell was sweet and pungent.

With fingers in his hair, she whispered: "This! I have wanted it always. My sweet, sweet half-brother... Always. Since being a child in pigtails. Forbidden, but I knew I must have it."

Her fingers twisted and pulled, pain accentuating desire. He was sick and lost, out of control in a way he had never been before. He stood up, and felt her mouth open wetly to his, her tongue probing deep. His hand went down to rip the gossamer shield from her thighs.

He could not believe it when she sharply pulled away from him.

"Nein, *Stiefbruder*. Forbidden. No more." When he tried to seize her, the body which had clung to him was rigid in rejection. "No. No!"

"Hildy, please..."

"Poor Mikey. Sad for you now, but maybe later you will be glad." She drew away, and he could see her eyes again; she was smiling, fondly, cruelly. "*Demi-vierge*, DD called me. Such an old-fashioned word, but true perhaps. Maria-Mercedes once called me that."

She touched his face gently, impersonally. "You are tired. Go to bed. I will forgive you for destroying my little costume."

She held its tatters carelessly against her as she walked away from him.

VII

Stern was short, nearer one metre six than one seven, and squat. He had thick black hair which had receded conspicuously, a pallid skin and large, brown eyes. His right hand seemed to be permanently fixed in his trouser pocket. He spoke English well, but volubly.

"As you will appreciate, Mr Frodsham, your sister's admission for treatment was not merely voluntary, but actively sought by her. The treatment itself would normally be preceded by an in-depth psychological and psychiatric evaluation, which would occupy several weeks. In view of the degree of her depression and the self-evident nature of the onset precipitation factor, I agreed to waive that stage."

Heinrich had driven Michael and Dieter up from Frohsteig in the Mercedes: Johann was away at the Warsaw office. They had come

through pelting rain, which had eased as they got into the hills. By the time they reached the sign indicating *Klinik Brosner – Virtualisches Heilverfahren*, the grey of a clearing sky was yielding glimpses of pale yellow, and his first sight of the Clinic showed it framed by blue lake, snow-topped mountain and the dense green of the pines through which they had been driving for ten minutes or more. An arch of deeper blue hung over all.

Their approach, from the side, revealed the extent and depth of the complex. The front, facing the lake, though obviously of recent construction, was architecturally archaic in the classic Bavarian style: viewed head-on it could have been a typical though over-sized hunting lodge, wooden-built, deep-gabled, with carved and painted ornamentation. At the rear a large area, roofed and walled in plexiglass, connected with three single-storey extensions, the two on either side much longer than the central one. Between and surrounding these extensions there were lawns, ornamental flowerbeds (many already rich with colour), clumps of evergreens, and water in varying manifestations of stream and fall and fountain.

Stern had been waiting for them in the hall, presumably alerted by the call Michael had noticed Heinrich make as they entered the approach road. He approached them smiling, through a not unpleasant gloom: the hall was high and heavily beamed; the paintings on the walls were mountain views and waterscapes, interspersed with several stuffed eagles. At the foot of a wide sweep of stairs, a stuffed bear stood with its head to one side, its pose quizzical, but deferential.

They were served coffee and cake in the area between the house and the extensions. One side of this was largely occupied by a swimming pool; the other, where they were sitting, had been laid out as an orangery. Fruits gleamed gold and green and yellow among glossy leaves, separating smaller spaces holding rustic chairs and tables. It looked as if the roof over the pool had been designed to open, and there were sun-blinds, presently furled. At the moment the pool was covered, and no-one else was present.

The coffee was excellent, the cake a sticky, over-rich confection of biscuits and chocolate. Pressing this on Michael, Stern introduced it as: "An indulgence of mine. It is from a recipe of my grandmother, who used to make it for me as a small boy. That was in Israel. She went there, having survived Belsen, and here I am, in Germany. Things change. Good cake, do you agree?"

He nodded. "Very good, indeed."

"As I have said, it is customary to make a preliminary evaluation. That is not, however, important from a medical risk standpoint. We are not talking about a procedure which involves risk. Virtual Total—" he pronounced it as German, softening the V and emphasizing the final syllable of 'Total' "—has been scrupulously investigated, over many years, and been shown to be, under proper administration, entirely non-injurious."

Michael said: "I gather some Americans have reservations about long-term use."

Stern nodded. "I suspect the real reservation of the Americans is related to Total itself, basically an objection to Virtual; and is not so much scientific as emotional. But I would agree with them, as far as long-term use is concerned — not that it is necessarily or even probably damaging to health, but that it has not been sufficiently tested. Although, as you know, some institutions have used it long-term and no contra-indications have emerged, except in a few isolated cases where the physical maintenance system was almost certainly at fault." He shook his head decisively. "There could be no question of that here."

"We run no programmes longer than for three weeks at a time. After that, the patient is returned to a pleasant and active life—" he spread his hands to embrace the pool, and the gardens and woods beyond the plexiglass "—which includes expert counselling. As far as traumatic depression is concerned, it is not uncommon, even at that early point, to get a remission which justifies discharge. If not, a week or two later the patient takes a second course. Sometimes a third. We have not yet found it necessary to authorize a fourth."

Stern's right hand had gone back into his pocket. With the other, he waved towards the table. "Would you like more cake? Or coffee? Then I propose we first show you a little of our technical side."

A door opened into a corridor with three more doors, and Stern electronically keyed open the middle one. That led to a second corridor, where he opened a door on the right, disclosing a room where two young men, one scarcely more than a boy, and a woman of about thirty, sat at desks equipped with keyboards and VDU-systems. Each was wearing a Virtual helmet, and had a glove available.

"Material from Frohsteig is tailored here to the individual before

going back to Frohsteig for final checking,” Stern explained. “It represents quite a late stage in dream-making.”

“You do call it dream-making? I would have thought you might have a more technical term.”

Stern shrugged. “It serves. The process is not identical with dreaming, but closely related. One observes some rapid eye movement, but far less than in true dreaming – presumably because R.E.M. is linked with mental creativity, and this is a more passive operation.”

What was appearing on the screens seemed haphazard, certainly lacking any obvious inter-connection. Michael tried to follow the set-up behind the desk nearest to him. A pre-technology farming scene with figures in nineteenth-century costume, long-horned cattle, a glowing autumn sky... birds in flight over a long level stretch of water... a small room with people talking in front of a massive ceramic stove... a face in close-up, a woman with dark auburn curls, warmly smiling... yellow-winged butterflies spiralling up between broken marble columns... water again, under moonlight this time... a soaring swallow...

Stern had been watching him. “Flight is considered to be an important factor in therapy.”

Dieter commented: “I have wondered about the eagles in the hall.”

“That is window-dressing, but yes. The bear guarding the stairs also: it signifies the bringing together of human and animal in a non-threatening way. A bear in the wild can be very threatening indeed, but here we deal with myth. Bears are valuably used in our dream making. Water, in many aspects, is an important therapeutic tool also. We are not exactly post-Jungian, but regard him as the most useful of the early twentieth-century subconscious-mind theorists.”

“My sister...” Stern regarded him sympathetically. “Water, birds and butterflies, bears – I’m sure you’re right about the therapeutic value, but that wasn’t what she was promised. It was her son’s death that was destroying her. She asked to be admitted here in the hope of getting him back – of having that illusion, anyway.”

“And we give her that; as well as the birds and bears. They are only part of the background, he is the foreground.”

“How?”

Stern pointed to the younger male. “One of our apprentices. Not quite as young as he seems – he has been with us more than a year. And he is still only in the foothills of Alps which he must climb to be

a programmer. If you had the time to spare, Mr Frodsham, I could explain, but not here and now, not in this day or a hundred such. Basically, what our technique depends on is the readiness of the individual to be fooled – to fool himself, herself. The human mind looks continuously for significance and recognition. A child sees itself as the centre of the universe, an illusion which commonly returns in old age, invariably with senility.

“When I was very small, I was taken to a dog-show in Tel Aviv. I escaped my parents and they had to hunt for me. They found me embracing a dog whose pen carried a sign: ‘Dangerous! Do not approach!’ It did not much resemble our family dog, but it represented dog for me. And perhaps having that illusion, therefore having no fear, made me safe in that situation.

“As far as your sister is concerned, we have data relating to her son: still photographs and videos, records of dress, minor possessions. The videos register characteristic bodily movements and gestures: the style of walking, for instance, which scarcely changes throughout life. We have voice samples, from which speech can be synthesized into dialogue of our choice, into which she will enter because that is her heart-felt wish. You understand that in Total, unlike Virtual, there is a direct cortical input. Using that, we have the ability to fuse the imaginative talents of our practitioners with her need. It is an effective combination. Come, you will wish to see she is well cared-for.”

Her room was in the west ward. In the long extensions, access corridors ran adjacent to the central wing, so the rooms all looked outwards – towards gardens, the forest, a sweep of mountainside. The room itself was small, but by no means cramped; as well as the bed there were a couple of armchairs, a shower and toilet cubicle, and a table and chair additional to the bed-side table which formed a base for nursing care. A nurse stood by this, in crisp black and white uniform; she bowed to Stern, who smiled acknowledgement.

The walls had a number of pictures – seagulls above a quiet harbour, a skein of geese over marshland, salmon leaping – and there were fresh flowers in hanging vases. A window looked out over the carefully tended gardens.

Michael said: “It’s very nice. But...”

“What?”

“I was wondering why all this is necessary, for unconscious patients.”

"They go to sleep here, and wake up here."

"Fresh flowers...?"

"It might be required to bring a dreamer back early. It has never happened, but we think it best to be prepared, just in case." He smiled. "I am Jew and German. Thoroughness is important to both." His look deferred to Dieter. "The Clinic owes much to *Frohsteig Verkehrrs*, who not only provide basic research but have funded nursing care most generously. That, to be frank, accounts for your sister being admitted without reference to our waiting list, which is very long. But her treatment thereafter is not special. All our patients are treated equally – with the greatest care."

Michael had not yet looked properly at Anna. He overcame his reluctance and went to the bedside. A ripple mattress vibrated gently underneath her, and a single sheet was drawn up to her shoulders. She was breathing easily and steadily, and that part of her face not obscured by the helmet seemed calm and untroubled. The end of a feeding tube protruded from a corner of her mouth, but even that did not look especially ugly. He would have bent and kissed her, except that the translucent plastic of the cocoon prevented it. He noted it was shaded faintly green.

Again, Stern seemed to read his mind. "The window receives much sunshine. Normally, curtains are kept drawn, but the nurse has opened them for your visit. The cocoon's plastic has protection built in against the remote possibility of a curtain being accidentally left open, involving risk of sunburn. We take every precaution, Mr Frodsham."

"I'm glad you decided to come over," Johann said. "Whatever I could tell you about the Clinic, seeing is believing. Anna's peace of mind is being taken care of, but there's yours also. How did you get on with Julius?"

"It was reassuring. He seemed to know what he was about, and to take it seriously."

Johann laughed. "Seriously is right. Jew and German, and thoroughness is important to both. He has his little catch-phrases. Anyway, I'm glad I got back in time to see you. Apart from Warsaw being a bore, as usual."

"What were you there for?"

"Oddly enough, an enterprise somewhat similar to yours: checking out a Total set-up. But in no way resembling the Brosner Clinic. No

individual rooms, with picture windows and paintings on the walls. This has cocoons in underground dormitories, rows of hundreds, like sardines in a can."

"Would there be any connection with something my boss mentioned, a while back?" Michael asked.

"Your Rackham lady. I'm not sure. What did she say?"

"She was talking about purpose-built clinics for Total addicts. She didn't say anything about cocoons wall to wall."

"Well..." Johann hesitated. "That is coming up, too. But this particular effort comes under Economics rather than Health."

He said incredulously: "Not the hibernating workers?"

"Then you've heard of the project?"

"Rumours of rumours. We dismissed it as American black propaganda."

"It's classified *Geheim 2A*. Not to be disclosed without senior authority. Don't tell Dieter we've been discussing it."

"If you think—"

Johann deftly secured fresh glasses from a maid passing with a tray. "He takes things too seriously. Maybe not the *Ding an sich*, but the prejudices of the civil servants who've done the commissioning. One sees his point: they are the paymasters. But any security requirement that may have existed has just about run out. I gather there'll be an official announcement over the next month or two."

"Let me get this right. We are talking about the same thing? Redundant workers being put into Total hibernation, as a means of dealing with the unemployment problem?"

"Roughly speaking, that would be about right."

"But it would be impossible, from any standpoint. Unthinkable. For one thing, the Federal Commission on Human Rights wouldn't stand for it. Slave sleep, even with pleasant dreams laid on, is fundamentally no better than slave labour."

"Where does slavery come in? You weren't thinking in terms of compulsion, were you? The FCHR have been kept informed, but since the whole business is voluntary and Total clinics are absolutely legal, they wouldn't need to take it into consideration anyway. It's a matter of personal choice. If someone opts for a winter of sweet content, for himself and his family, rather than rough it out in the cold hard world, surely he's entitled to do that? Virtual addicts do already, and no-one makes an issue of it."

"But this would be creating addicts."

"Not according to experts who've been consulted, including the top people in Virtual psychology. Addiction is a special characteristic. These will pass six blissful months in the cocoons, and gallop out raring for spring. Meanwhile, they're well cared for. The notion of sardine rows may seem horrifying, but that's in the eye of the beholder. Apart from optimum nourishment – the food intake's been precisely calculated for maximum health maintenance – the new series cocoons have built-in muscle exercisers. Everything's being taken into account: oral hygiene, hair cutting, nail paring. They'll come out healthier than they went in."

"And what about those who don't fancy the prospect, despite the propaganda and promotion which I'm sure will also be laid on?"

Another girl appeared, tempting them with canapés. Foie gras, Michael realized. Johann waited till she had moved away.

"As I say, it's voluntary. No pressure, no reduction of normal benefits; nothing like that. They can enjoy an ordinary freezing winter on the bread line, if that's what they prefer. But I don't think many will."

"You may be surprised. I can see why Anna thought she needed this, and I hope Stern's right about its value in relieving depression, but nothing would get me into one of them."

"My dear Mike, you're suffering from a not uncommon extension of the pathetic fallacy – attributing sensitivities to the insensitive. The try-out will be in Poland, and they've done extensive field research on the prospects. The usual Gadarene swine factor is projected to apply. With less than thirty per cent take-up in the first couple of months, it would be likely to fail. But once that critical point is reached, social pressure will push acceptances close to ninety five per cent. And initial soundings suggest a probability of forty plus per cent within a week of launch."

"It sounds crazy."

"Certainly not that. I've also seen the projection for cost benefits to the Federal economy over the first five years, and, believe me, they're impressive."

Maria-Mercedes bore down on them like a battleship on errant frigates, faultless in lines and trim and bearing. After scolding her son in rapid German, she turned her commanding, empty smile on Michael. He wondered what his father had ever seen in her, apart from physical beauty: maybe that had been enough. It was the reverse

consideration, in any case, which should inspire speculation. It had been she who, for her private inscrutable reasons, had picked out the humble English widower with two children.

"The von Grenzendorfs will like to meet you, Michael. They are a distinguished family – from the Almanac, you understand? Their money is in land. A million hectares, perhaps."

She delivered him to a couple in their fifties, a nervous, expensively dowdy woman and a small wrinkled cockerel of a man, who democratically elected to be addressed as Beate and Friedrich. Friedrich had, he explained, learned about the game of rugby during an exchange year in Oxford. He had watched occasional matches in Germany; the nearest town to their principal estate had a team. He was delighted to learn that Michael was to take on the task of creating a German national side.

"It hasn't been decided yet."

"But you have been asked, yes? And I am sure you will not refuse the challenge. The English always accept challenge. As we do: there is cousinhood in this."

Beate contributed, in a clear, bird-like voice: "It angers us that so many people do not understand the English. This proposal to take away your territories in Wales and Scotland—"

"They're not English territories. We're all part of the United Kingdom, a much earlier union than the Federation. And I don't think the proposal needs to be taken very seriously."

She put a hand on his sleeve; it, too, was bird-like, faintly clawing. "Perhaps you are better without them. Excellence can sometimes be pulled down by the inferior – racial excellence above all. How Germany has suffered!"

Her husband nodded agreement. "Italians, Slavs, Turks, French – with the freedom to come and go as they choose, to soil our land. From the beginning, there is trouble from them, but it becomes continually worse. We are no longer safe in our beds. When you make this team for us, you must choose only Germans – *echt deutsch*."

Maria-Mercedes rescued him in due course; but not, he realized, out of any thought that rescue might be required. She replaced him with a young married couple, who looked suitably deferential to the million hectare plus estates. Michael saw his father unattended, and went to him. He had seen him briefly on arrival at Frohsteig, but not since visiting the Clinic. His father asked how he had found Anna, and he told him.

His father nodded. "Johann said it was excellent. And anyway, anything Dieter is behind must be sound. The company have put a lot of money into it, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"He's taking me up there when she comes out of treatment." He hesitated. "I feel bad about this."

"What could you possibly have done to prevent it? You couldn't put a limit on her love for Adam. Even less could you have prevented him turning assassin."

"Parental guilt isn't rational." His father smiled painfully. "Especially when you know it has a rational basis."

It was not a subject they had discussed, or ever could without pointless embarrassment. Most if not all the No Entry signs in a relationship were presumably there for a reason. He switched to talking about golf, for which he knew his father had developed a late passion.

"You never played at Sheaf, did you? It's not my game, but the course is meant to be very good. As you know, it offers a good view at least, if that counts. Sand dunes and Sheaf Bay, and a glimpse of France on an exceptionally clear day."

"I must bring my clubs over, and try it out."

"DD and I would be delighted if you did. It's lonely, with just the two of us now."

"Hildy told me she'd been down."

"Yes."

"I'd be glad if you could keep an eye on her, Mike. I worry about her a bit. One does, about girls. This stuff she does – I know it's not as bad as it sounds, and I know about the generation gap. I remember my father getting steamed up over television programmes I took for granted as a teenager. But one can't help worrying."

Michael said, more sharply than he'd intended: "Did you worry the same way about Anna?"

"She was never involved in anything like that."

"About her and Marcus."

"I didn't like it – didn't like the man. But... Hildy's the baby of the family. I never saw Anna in that light. From when she was very little, she seemed responsible. After you were born she looked after you almost as much as... as your mother."

"I know. I remember her being pretty good with your second batch too, when we visited."

It had gone bad again. His father said: "It's difficult to explain – I suppose anything is, that matters. We're bound to look at things differently. Georgian House, for instance: it's been your home from birth, the only one you've known. I came to it as an adult, and an outsider. I was there for several years, some of them very good years. Then afterwards... I was an outsider once more. Granny T. did her best to get past that, to make me feel at home, but I always felt DD was disapproving." He hesitated. "I still do."

It was probably never possible to accept that the person who had been in the truest sense a towering figure, a giant who lifted and carried and knew the secrets of the universe, could be riddled with doubts and uncertainties.

"But you will come to Sheaf, and play a round or two?"

"Yes." The tone carried no conviction. "I look forward to that."

Michael had mentioned the impending interview to Helen Rackham prior to the meeting, and she had nodded consent. He had presumed she would be irritated, and expected either disapproving silence or sarcasm when it was time for him to withdraw. But she anticipated the moment, interrupting a discourse by Sylvia Perenaïke on new guidelines for drug dispensing to look at her watch.

"Time you were off, Michael." She had switched, whole-heartedly as usual, into smile mode. Looking along the table, she added: "The department's star is due to shine again this evening. And on Bert Benedict, no less. We'll get through the rest of the agenda fast, so we can all go home and watch."

Beside him, Peter Graveny muttered: "I doubt they'll be showing Bert Benedict at the *Eagle & Lamb*, but best of luck, mate."

Although it was less than ten minutes' walk, the television company had sent a car for him, a long luxurious AudiPlus, driven by a girl in eye-catching, skin-tight black uniform with the company's logo on her trousered thighs and even more prominently displayed across her breasts. She did not attempt conversation during the brief ride, which was nevertheless a noisy one: the AudiPlus had an executive bray-hooter and she used it to the full. Drawing up outside Twenty First Century Tower, formerly Centre Point, she darted round smartly to let him out.

"Reception will clue you, Mr Frodsham."

Within a couple of minutes of presenting himself at the desk, a lift

door pinged open and another girl high-heeled across the echoing pseudo-marble floor towards him.

“Wonderful to see you, Mr Frodsham. I’m Millie. We’ll go right up.”

Millie’s voice was thin but musical, with a rising inflection on end words. She herself was tiny, scarcely above a metre fifty, and delicately proportioned in a neat, navy blue dress. All Benedict’s assistants, Michael had heard, were of much the same physical specification, and the soberness of their outfits was presumably also meant to contrast with the great man. Unlike the chauffeuse, she chattered her way up to the seventeenth floor; about nothing in particular, but amiably.

The BB Show, she explained, took up the whole of this floor, and had extensions above and below. She led him to the hospitality room, which provided a view up Oxford Street. She offered a wide range of alcoholic drinks and when he excused himself on account of the early hour, reeled off an alternative list of specialized mineral waters, soft drinks, teas and coffees. He told her coffee would be fine, and she spoke briefly into her phone.

To Michael, she confided: “We always offer drinks on arrival, but you are so right. Much better wait till you’re nearly due on. BB has a hawk’s eye for excess alcohol. He won’t let anyone on camera who might possibly be under the influence. Did you know he breathalysed a junior cabinet minister once?” Michael did, but showed appropriate surprise and admiration. “It’s the one thing he has a strict rule about. Apart from that, he’s a pussy-cat, most of the time.”

He appreciated the final qualification. Benedict’s reputation in interviewing celebrities was as a man who could draw out the best in his subject without ever falling into dullness or letting them do so – someone whose percipience and wit could spice up insipid virtue. He could do it with no need of the snide factor: an early nickname had been the Hello Man, derived from the feel-good colour magazine of the turn of the century. On rare occasions, though, he took against an interviewee and inflicted mental and emotional mayhem with equal precision. The ever-present possibility of this happening was said to account for a good percentage of his enormous viewing figures.

With this in mind, Michael had made up his mind to back out if he detected signs of antagonism in the run-through. It had been done before, and Benedict had accepted the withdrawals without malice. He always had a standby interview on tape, and the news of someonefunking confrontation was regarded as another badge of merit.

When he was taken through to Benedict's private lounge though, he found the atmosphere totally affable. Switching off a monitor screen, Benedict said: "Michael! Great to see you." He chuckled richly. "You'll forgive my not getting up."

The chair in which he sat bore a close resemblance to the amply proportioned leather throne he used on camera, and Benedict in the flesh looked even vaster than in his screen persona. His weight was popularly said to be in the two-hundred kilo region, and Michael was prepared to believe it. Flesh bulged and swelled under the red silk trousers and gold shirt. He was tall with it: standing, he would comfortably top two metres. An enormous hand grasped Michael's with surprising firmness.

"Sit, laddie. Have a drink and a peanut."

The gin-and-tonic Michael had eventually requested was waiting on a small table beside the chair facing Benedict's, in a tall frosted glass capped with a split half-lime. Next to it was a plate of canapés. Benedict's chair nestled close to a larger table, with a jug and crystal glass of iced lemonade, and a much bigger plate of titbits. Releasing Michael's, his hand went blindly to the plate and scooped up several items indiscriminately. Chewing, he reached as automatically for the glass, and drained it.

"I love having athletes on the show. Any athletes, but sprint runners especially. You know I once wanted to be a sprinter?" He laughed uproariously. "I was only seven or eight, but it was comic even then. Fatboy, boy and man! I've not lain down to sleep for five years, but they tell me that's not a long-term problem. I go to the best physicians, and the very best gives me three years, at the outside."

Millie had sketched an outline for the interview, which Benedict followed closely in the run-through. He was easy and good-humoured, needle-sharp at picking up nuances. While he talked and listened, he chewed and drank unceasingly; both plate and jug were replaced with fresh ones at regular intervals. Once the macabre initial impression his bulk created had subsided, Michael found himself warming to the man.

Finally, Benedict said: "OK. Gonna be good. I have the gut to have the feeling. So we go our separate ways to make-up, and meet again—" he glanced up at a shadow clock taking up most of the ceiling "—in just over half an hour. Take a shower, if you like. I always do. I'll show you my shower-room some time. It goes to the Elephant House at the Zoo, in my will."

The actual interview picked up the atmosphere of camaraderie and deepened it. He solicited a couple of rugby anecdotes which Michael had told before, but never, he was sure, as effectively: both Benedict's lead-in and his well-timed interjections helped point them up. He made a joke about Michael possibly abandoning England to give aid and comfort in *Mittel-Europa*, but converted it into an inoffensive jibe at the Germans: would they be able to scrum down in ledherhosen without splitting their pants and exposing their limitations? They had passed the commercial break and Michael was feeling completely relaxed when, without change of expression or intonation, Benedict said: "And Adam Frodsham, who shot the High Commissioner, was your nephew, I believe. A prominent member of the illegal organization, Britain Awake! Do you have any sympathy with his views?"

Adam had been mentioned during the run-through, but briefly and sympathetically, and the subject quickly dismissed. Michael felt shock, the outrage of betrayal, but with it a determination to stay cool, not to be intimidated. He said: "I was very fond of my nephew, but I didn't share his views."

"As far as you know, he was the only member of your family who had contacts with BA?"

"I'm certain of it. He was very young, and the enthusiasm of the young can lead them astray."

Benedict smiled hugely into the camera zooming for close-up. "Nothing and no-one ever led me astray, but I can't claim too much credit for that. It's one of the few benefits of gross immobility. The only one, in your family, you say? What about you yourself, Michael? Are you saying you've never had any contact with BA?"

Michael recognized the classic cross-examination prelude to a knock-out: putting the question to which you already had a damning answer. He could guess where the information came from, too: the source had to be Maggie Bruton, and her eavesdropping at Georgian House. He had the sense neither to lie nor prevaricate and did his best to keep a level voice, but he felt himself flushing.

"I made no contact with them. They contacted me, after Adam died."

"After your nephew was shot dead, that would be, right? After he'd murdered the Federal High Commissioner. Would you describe the contact?"

"They phoned me, and asked me to see one of their representatives."

"At your home?"

"No, in London."

"And you agreed?"

"Yes."

"Now, why would you agree to a request like that – from an illegal organization which, you've just told us, you blamed for leading Adam Frodsham astray?"

"Because I thought they might come down to Sheaf, if I didn't. There was that implication. And I wasn't prepared to risk further distress to my sister."

"So you accepted their invitation to go to them. What happened?"

"Nothing much. I was met at Charing Cross station, and taken to an address in south London. I met a man who asked if I would support BA. He didn't specify how, because I refused point-blank to have anything to do with them. He didn't argue, and had me taken back to the station."

"That was all?"

He controlled a tremor. "That was all."

Benedict's own right hand, as had happened several times during the broadcast, went to where the food bowl had been, hovered briefly, then lifted authoritatively. He said, very quietly: "And did you report this meeting to anyone – to the authorities?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"For the same reason that made me agree to it in the first place. I wanted my sister left alone." Benedict remained silent. "And there wasn't anything of significance to report. The man I saw told me nothing, except that the house where we met would be abandoned within minutes of my leaving. I saw no reason to doubt him."

The silence continued. Michael tried to anticipate the supplementary questions which, he now saw, cried out to be asked. For the moment, though, silence was Benedict's weapon. Michael saw the full-moon face staring at him, and had an almost overwhelming urge to talk... to explain, justify. He fought it, in a mute battle of wills. Then, with enormous relief, he became aware of the studio light winking for end of broadcast. Meticulous observance of timing schedules was another thing on which Benedict prided himself.

Benedict finally spoke, shaking his gigantic head. "That was a great game you played for England, Michael. Pity about the other stuff."

He turned in monumental dismissal to smile into the signing-off camera. "So, good night, folks."

Even before the studio director gave the cut signal, two trim girls in sober blue were hurrying forward with snacks and lemonade.

Reactions to the broadcast varied. DD referred to it only as something he'd missed: he'd forgotten the time, listening to Handel. Helen Rackham mentioned it in passing, with an air of studied neutrality. Peter Graveny said: "Bad luck, mate – what a bastard!" He looked as though he might have gone on, but Michael offered no encouragement. One of the girls in the office chattered innocently about watching the show with her family, and wasn't he *big*; and another, usually talkative, blushed and said nothing. On a routine visit to the Norman Hospital, Mary Dwyer made no comment, but poured him a stiffer shot of Irish.

Johann called him from Germany, where a dubbed version of the BB Show stood high in the ratings.

"He feeds the Germanic obsession with food and fatness: something even grosser than our own self-caricature. The gag about lederhosen went down well. *Amuesant, aber nicht ernsthaft*. Treacherous, though. Our Shakespeare got that one wrong: never trust the over-weight. But you handled him beautifully."

Hildy called too, from the London studio. Semi-nude figures in weird costumes came and went in the background, and there was a pervading tinkle of Twenties music. It was their first contact since her weekend visit to Sheaf, and she launched into commiseration. How could that fat swine do such a thing, to her beloved *Stiefbruder*? The degenerate pig! All those little girls dancing attendance, but it was well known in the business that in private life it was little boys who looked after him. Michael was not sure whether he detected, behind the loquacious sympathy, a note of excitement. *Schadenfreude* was also a good German word. She asked if he would like her to come down to Sheaf, and he said yes, but not just yet. He was busy at the moment.

Everything was filtered through self-dissatisfaction. He resented being tricked into the situation, but it was his stupidity in not anticipating it that weighed more heavily. As did his reaction to Benedict's query about not reporting the meeting with Porter. He still wasn't sure why he hadn't, but knew his attempt at justification had been feeble.

It was almost a relief when, six days after the broadcast, he was called in by Federal Security. The address was in Egerton Gardens, a set of three terraced houses converted into one. There was a single small lift which groaned up to the third floor, where an elegantly furnished room looked down across a high wall at an Elizabethan manor house, whose park must once have encompassed this expensively built-up area.

He was interrogated by two men – a thin dark cockney in a double-breasted blue suit and a small podgy man in tweeds with a more cultured accent. He speculated as to which was in charge: the latter did most of the talking, but the one in the blue suit gave a greater impression of authority.

The tweedy man, who introduced himself as Andrew Percy, repeated Benedict's question: why hadn't Michael reported his meeting with the BA representative to the authorities? His answer didn't, to his own ears, sound any more convincing than it had before, but he got through it. Percy nodded, and said: "All right. Take us along from the beginning. From Adam Frodsham's death."

A recorder had been pointedly switched on. They listened, with occasional requests for clarification – chiefly from Percy, but it was the other who pressed for details relating to Porter. He could get no idea how he was doing. They were courteous, but his hands were sweating.

There was a pause when he finished. Percy looked at his companion, then back to Michael.

"You committed a major technical offence, Mr Frodsham, as I'm sure you realize. We for our part realize you were under considerable stress at the time. And as you say, you were not withholding valuable information. Valuable in your estimation, that is. It really would have been wiser to let the proper authorities be the judge. I hope we can rely on you to see it in that light in future?"

"It won't happen again."

"But if it should..."

"If they contact me again, I'll let you know."

"Good." He put an arm on Michael's shoulder as they stood up. "Thank you for coming in. I know you're a busy man. That was a great game, by the way. I'm looking forward to a repeat performance next year."

"I doubt if I shall be playing next year."

"I hope you're wrong there."

Both men were smiling. As they reached the door, the blue suit said: "You have an American friend, I believe? Lucy Jones – on Isak Aronheimer's staff?"

"Yes."

He realized he ought not to have been surprised; it would have emerged from any routine check-up.

"Do you plan to see her in the near future?"

The link with the earlier conversation was plain, as was the implication. He shook his head. "No. I have no plans for that."

In Sheaf the sun was shining, the magnolia bursting into white-cupped, near-Oriental beauty. He thought about Lucy, with resignation rather than either bitterness or desire. 'If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be?' The quotation evoked dust dancing in a sunbeam in a sweltering class-room, and bored, adolescent incomprehension concerning any aspect of sex beyond the maddeningly physical... The misery had grown less, he told himself, and the end, if not yet in sight, was imaginable.

Walking up from the Flats with a crab to dress for supper, he encountered Souter and was granted a dubious greeting. It didn't matter, though, what the Budgie thought or did: he was in the clear. He congratulated himself on that, negotiating the cobbles on Friars Hill, aware of self-doubt, even self-disgust, but refusing to let them surface.

DD came to him in the kitchen, while he was tackling the crab. He began: "While you were out..." His voice seemed very weak; he paused to draw gasping breath.

Michael took his arm. "What is it, DD? Are you all right? Let me..."

He shook his head. "They called, from Frohsteig. Johann did. It's Anna."

"What about Anna?"

"She's dead." He shuddered as Michael reached and held him. "Anna's dead, Michael."

VIII

Michael remembered Granny T.'s funeral, almost exactly a year ago, and the house brimming with people; this afternoon only family were present. Granny T., of course, had been a considerable figure in Sheaf, known and loved by generations younger than her own, while

Anna, even prior to Adam's death, had been reclusive. From Adam's birth, in fact. A few locals had attended the ceremony and might have expected to be bidden back, but Michael had no heart for it. The Frohsteig contingent was there in force, apart from Otto, now bedridden.

Numbness still covered Michael like snow, paralysing any will to act, turning voices without warning into meaningless echoes. The shock of her death had been as great as Adam's, but the loss was of a different order of bitterness: he mourned Adam again, and more sharply, in grieving for Anna. Beyond that, grief for Anna was grief for the childhood they had shared. There was a picture above the chimney piece in the sitting room which they had jointly pleaded with Granny T. not to put up. It had been painted by a friend of hers whose skill in portraiture was limited – the garden background was reasonably well done, but the two figures were awkwardly posed, with faces which, though recognizable, bore inhuman, mask-like expressions.

Anna had titled the picture 'The Aliens Have Landed', and for years after it had been the subject of their appeals to have it thrown out, or at least relegated to the obscurity of Granny T.'s bedroom. That might have been possible after she died, except that DD had made it plain he wanted no changes in his domestic surroundings. By that time too, old embarrassments had been outgrown and familiarity had engendered tolerance.

With a glass of whisky in his hand, Michael studied the scene for the first time in many years. Anna wore a white dress, embroidered with poppies, which she had insisted on having against Granny T.'s advice. She had quickly come to dislike, even hate it, but had stubbornly worn it through an entire summer rather than admit her misjudgement. He was in short grey flannels and a prep school blazer. He had not really been entitled to wear it because he was not yet enrolled at St Edward's, but they had bought it in Canterbury the previous week and Granny T. wanted him immortalized in it.

His face stared back at him as on that morning when, a window of sunshine having been seized in a day of scudding clouds and showers, it had gazed at the camera the artist was using as an aide-memoire. (Better at least, they had agreed, than the dreaded boredom of sittings.) He wondered, would a better painter have seen behind the stiffness of the smile, and registered some hint of the pain of the recent past, and the desperate fear of what lay ahead?

It had overwhelmed him the evening before, after Granny T. had read to him in bed. Daddy, so soon to become and forever remain Father, was away in Germany: a fact whose only significance then was one of distance, though that was bad enough. It seemed obscurely connected with being sent to boarding school, along with the bewildering misery of their mother's illness and death. She, who he was sure would not have let it happen, was no longer there to prevent it.

He had thought he was crying too quietly to be heard. Perhaps Anna had just looked in on him on her own way to bed. At any rate, she had hushed and hugged him. When he went on sobbing (in part out of fear she would leave him if he stopped), she had slipped into bed beside him. He had fallen asleep, and woken in the night to the sharpness of her knees against his back; she had been painfully thin at that age, too.

Johann, coming to stand beside him, said: "I used to dislike that picture."

"We loathed it."

"It was a sign of your really belonging – to Sheaf, to Georgian House – and that they belonged to you. I was jealous."

Michael said in surprise: "I never knew. After all..."

"We had Frohsteig, and the Schloss? True. But we didn't have Granny T., except on visits – as guests – and we didn't live in our father's home."

"He never thought of it as that."

"Didn't he? It was very obvious he didn't think of Frohsteig as his home. He doesn't now. Poor Papa. And I didn't have Anna, either. She was wonderful to me, but I was always conscious of the short-term basis. What I had was my beautiful indifferent mother, and a father lost between two worlds." He laughed. "Amazing I turned out the balanced responsible person I am, wouldn't you say?"

"You had Eton, of course."

"Did you mind? That was Mama's doing. Her English connection had to be the biggest and best – well, the dearest and snobbiest."

Michael shook his head. "No, I never minded that. I've always felt a bit sorry for Etonians. They remind me of Sir Walter Elliot's obsession with the Baronetage. The inferior Old Etonian lets you know he went to what he calls that little grammar school at Windsor in the first five minutes of conversation; the better types wait for half an hour. I must say, you're an exception proving the rule."

"Maybe because I'm a foreigner. Or because Maria-Mercedes does more advertising on my behalf than I could conceivably want."

Michael looked at the picture again. The spray of apple blossom Anna was holding had been painted in afterwards, which perhaps accounted for the particularly unconvincing angle of her elbow. As if the poppies on the dress weren't enough. He said: "I still don't understand. She never had a serious illness – not until Adam was killed at least, and then it wasn't physical. A heart attack – at her age, and with no history of heart trouble? Even if one believed in people dying of a broken heart, it doesn't fit. She was in the cocoon, under Total, reunited with her beloved. At peace. A phoney peace possibly, but real to her."

"Dieter said the p.m. revealed an aneurysm of long standing. It wouldn't produce symptoms, and with a good health record there was no occasion for the sort of check-up that might have revealed it. She went to the Brosser with a clean bill of health from her doctor here. Physical processes are slowed down during Total, but the clock goes on ticking."

An obsolete phrase, though the wall clock by the door was ticking right now, staccato and sombre – as it had ticked on the morning of the photograph for the picture, and through a couple of hundred years before that. He turned away.

Johann said: "It would have popped whatever she was doing, wherever she was. What we need to remember is that she was at peace. As you said, it was real to her. She died in the middle of a joyous dream. There's not much chance of either of us getting so lucky."

The rest stayed overnight, but Hildy went back that evening. They had scarcely spoken to one another during the day. She came to say goodbye.

"I am sorry."

"Thank you," he said automatically. "We'll all miss her."

"About Anna, of course – but also about you. *Ich bin ein schlimmes Maedchen, aber...* It was not fair."

"No, I don't think it was." He looked at her, fetching in black, with just one piece of jewellery: a diamond-studded arrow pinned to the curve of her left breast. "But at a guess I would think you'd done it before."

"*La séduction demi-vierge?* Yes. It is an indulgence, like a drug. But one should not involve a friend."

"I wasn't a friend though, was I? Something rather closer – and wasn't that precisely the point?"

"Mikey darling, you cannot shame me more than I shame myself. Not just that, but also knowing it was bad with you and Lucy. I hope perhaps that part is better now." He turned away from her. "Since she sent flowers for Anna."

"What?"

"Didn't you see them? The yellow tulips."

"I didn't look at any of the cards."

She checked the time. "My train is in ten minutes, and tonight I have a working dinner. Will you have lunch again, sometime? To show you forgive your shameful little half-sister?"

"Some time." He accepted the kiss on his cheek. "I don't know when."

The others left the following morning. Janice came in to do the beds and clear up, and after that there were only himself and DD in an otherwise conspicuously empty house. Michael fixed lunch – pate and bread and cheese – and afterwards DD retired for his nap. When he got up, it would be to go to his room and his music.

He thought of going up to the cemetery and finding Lucy's tulips, but could not bring himself to do it. Any message she might have sent, written in a stranger's hand, would be more painful than he felt like bearing. Presumably Interflora still operated, even though the long-expected ban on Americans in Britain had come into force the previous week. There had been exceptions for Americans of long residence and, as a cultural concession, for staff and pupils of the American University in Liverpool, but all other visas had been cancelled. He had not tried to work out how he felt about that: numb came closest.

Instead, he wandered through the house. He had no specific purpose but came eventually to the little room beneath the eaves which had been Anna's. She had moved into it after yielding her previous, larger one to Adam, on his fourteenth birthday. This was part of the earlier Tudor house, with a ceiling crossed by crooked beams. It was as she had always kept it, neat and almost bare. The one adornment to the white walls was a set of Chinese paintings on rice paper, depicting scenes of mysterious ceremony. They had spent an afternoon once, arguing their significance – a feast, a wedding, an enthronement, a scene of birth and a scene of death, and two more obscure occasions – and their probable sequence. Those were the only pictures she had kept after giving up painting herself.

Her desk stood under the window looking out to the hills north of

Sheaf, and beside it was the Edwardian bureau where she had kept her few private possessions. A subconscious realization that the task of going through them was one only he could properly tackle was probably what had brought him here. The drawers too would be tidy and in good order. If it must be done, there was no point in delay. He was nerving himself to start when he heard the distant ring of the doorbell. It couldn't be anyone that mattered, he thought, and ignored it. After a few moments, it rang again, and for longer. Reluctantly he went downstairs.

At first all he noticed was the bulky hooded duffel coat, a badge the itinerant young had recently resurrected from more than half a century ago. A student begging, probably, braving the local ordinances against that activity which were rigorously enforced within the citadel of Sheaf. He was fishing in his pocket for money when she spoke from under the hood.

"Do I rate a cup of tea, Mike? It's been a long trip."

"English tea," Lucy said. "Eventually hypocrisy pays off. I've genuinely been missing it."

They were in the garden room, and he had put on the standard lamp against an afternoon that had turned sombre. She sat in the Queen Anne chair in a pool of light, darkly beautiful against the yellow upholstery and no less lovely for being dressed in a faded blue sweater, tattered jeans and scuffed trainers. Looking at her was enough, but questions hammered up through his contentment.

"I don't understand. How did you get here?"

"It's not that hard. The ban only applies to Britain. And it's only strictly enforced at English ports and airports. People have got in through Edinburgh. I decided not to take a chance on that and went for Paris, which is a whole lot nearer anyway. There's no ban on Americans in mainland Europe, at least not yet. All I needed after that was to keep a low profile at the Tunnel. That was easy too. I've always known there was life after Gucci." She sipped from her mug. "Easier maybe than life after English tea."

"But once you were on this side of the Channel... you're illegal now."

"Sure." She smiled. "I took a chance you wouldn't turn me in."

He thought of Souter. "Someone else might."

"So what can they do, except deport me?"

He said, slowly: "I don't know. Things are changing, and some things

are being concealed. I've been told horror stories I didn't believe. I still don't want to, but I'm not as confident they're all lies as I used to be."

Lucy nodded. "Things are changing, all right. I made sure there were people back home who knew where I was heading, and could be relied on to make a noise if I didn't surface at the right time."

"Ike Haddon?"

"Among others." She paused. "We can talk about Ike later. I want to say how bad I feel about Anna. You know me, and family. I don't see how I could bear it, losing one of mine. And I do know between you and Anna it was more than just special."

"How did you know – that she was dead?"

"From Johann. He worries about you."

"Does he know you're here now?"

"No. As I say, me they could only deport. It didn't seem a good idea to have a Euro citizen involved, though." She looked at him. "Except you. I was ready to take a risk on your account."

The invisible bridge joining their eyes was more real than the room about them, and more demanding. He held the contact as he walked across the Persian carpet to where she sat, though it seemed more that the contact was holding him. She rose as he reached her, into his arms.

It was Lucy who eventually broke away. He tried to hold her, and she shook her head against his face. "I have to talk. And not like this, not yet. Sit down, my love. Please."

He found himself doing a strangely childish thing. He sat on the floor, beside her chair. Her hand was on his head, strong fingers in his hair. He thought of Hildy's fingers, teasing, tormenting, and turned that thought away. Lucy said: "I'd like you to meet my mother some time, before we all die. I don't know if you'd like her, but I guarantee you will be impressed. One thing you have to understand is that black people can be very different, even if we all look alike. My father's side, they came up early. Keep the lighting real low and his grandfather would have passed for middle-class, even before World War II. Poppa was second generation college-educated. He could probably have made Ivy League, but his father had gone to NYU, and he stayed loyal. That's where they got together. Momma's family came from Harlem, and not rich Harlem either. When they met, she was slinging hash in a greasy spoon."

"Least, that's what she says. Really, she was waiting on table at the college refectory; she never believes in spoiling a story for want of a

little embroidery. Thing is, she was very unsuitable, and when he took her home his folks made that plain. You English with all that middle-class snobbery have got nothing on your average middle-class American black. Far as I can tell – and quite a bit of it comes out of what used to be the enemy camp – they used every trick in the book to save their precious boy from this sassy bitch from the big city.

“They ought to have won. Poppa’s a great guy, but he was a good son. Like, obedient? Had my mother been the littlest bit unsure of what she wanted, for the both of them, she would have been eased out, and he’d have married the one they had in mind, eldest daughter of the attorney who handled Granpop’s business affairs. But she decided she knew best, and went for it the simplest way by getting pregnant. That turned out to be brother Joshua, who’s just gotten an award for the Pentagon replacement building. Both maternal grandparents are dead, but the other two bust with pride every time he gets a notice in the *Washington Post*.”

Her fingers tugged, not roughly but with authority. “I’m the youngest, but I guess I take most after her. What I’m trying to do is say sorry, but I need to explain things first. I know what’s best for me, which is sharing with you till the Lord blows the whistle. And I’m arrogant enough to think it’s best for you, as well.”

He heard himself making a sound – sigh, groan – of consent. She said: “OK, I ought not to have set you up with Ike. But I do know Ike. I wouldn’t trust him with your life if I didn’t trust him with mine. There would have been some risk, sure, but we’d have been in it together. And I was winning you over to travel my way, just like Momma did.”

He turned his head to look at the curve of her knee in the ragged jeans. “You didn’t get pregnant.”

“No.” Her leg moved against his head as she laughed. “Not that I didn’t consider that. Or don’t still have it in mind. Can I say sorry now?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Everything you said at the airport that night was right. You whupped me good, and I had to take my whupping. But I guess my mother’s blood runs too strong. I still knew what was best for us, even if I’d figured a wrong way for making it happen. When Johann called me, about Anna, I knew nothing was going to stop me coming to you.”

He did not speak immediately, at ease in the security of physical contact. At last, he said: “How long can you stay?”

"Till tomorrow. I reckon I've earned the night."

"Longer than that. Please."

"You said it: I'm illegal."

"No-one saw you arrive. No-one would know you're here, in a house as rambling as this. DD needn't know, even. I could smuggle you up to the top floor before he wakes from his nap."

"And, as I said, I took precautions. If I don't make contact with Ike tomorrow, he's liable to start hunting for me. That could get embarrassing."

"Call him from here."

He felt the shake of her head. "Not secure. Nothing in England is secure now, and there are other people to consider. I may take chances with us, but I can't with them."

"You're really going back tomorrow? You came all this way, to tell me that?"

Getting out of the chair, she helped him up too and stood before him, eyes intent on his. "Come back with me."

"I wish I could, but even though the ban's one-way still, visas are definitely out for the ordinary citizen, and scarce as gold bricks for anyone else. My boss has decided there's no future in American connections. I could try working on her, but I can't see any way she would buy it. Or I might put on my other hat, and go to Dieter. But I can't see even Dieter getting me an American visa in aid of promoting rugby. And if he could we'd be talking months, if not years."

She put her hands on his waist. "I'm not talking months, or years – I'm talking now. And I'm not talking visits. I'm talking US residence. All you have to do is marry me. The US government insists on that one, and so do I."

He thought she was joking, but her look had no jest in it. He said: "That's not possible. You know it's not."

"I don't think it would have been, while Anna was alive. But it is now."

"There's DD."

"He doesn't need you. The person that mattered to him died a year ago. He's happy enough wrapping a blanket of music round him. But if it matters to you, bring him too. Ike will swing him a card, as dependent relative."

"He couldn't leave Sheaf. He's an old dog."

"It's a younger one I'm concerned about. Mike, I hear things. There's

trouble enough now, but it's going to get worse. The Atlantic link is flimsy, but for the moment it's still there. It may not be for long."

"There are always rumours."

She looked as if she were about to say something, but checked herself. "You're right. They may just be rumours. But I believe them. What it is – I want you, and I don't think we have too much time to play with. I'm not allowed to live here, so I want you to come to me. Simple stuff."

There was the sound of a door opening upstairs. DD would be looking for a cup of tea.

"The simple stuff's always the best," he said. "Most of me, the me that's looking at you now, wants that more than anything in the world. Yet if it got what it wanted, it couldn't live with itself. You're right about the difference with Anna being dead, and you could even be right about DD. But I couldn't leave Sheaf, either."

Michael wanted to drive Lucy to Folkestone, but she vetoed it. Federal troops were a heavy presence round the Tunnel mouth; if they picked her up they could do no more than expedite her return to the United States, but things might be more difficult for him. She stretched against him, yawning. Neither had slept more than a fitful hour or two.

"I still haven't abandoned hope of your changing your mind." He shook his head; there was light at the window, a hint of early sun behind the bulk of the old monastery. "Yeah, I know. But let me dream. And I'd sooner leave you here, in Sheaf, than walk away from you into that Tunnel."

"I can't believe you're going."

She smiled. "You didn't believe I was coming, either. It's an unpredictable universe, thank God."

DD, who had been delighted to see her, was up early and breakfasted with them; his understanding was simply that she had planned to come for Anna's funeral but been held up by a flight delay. If he'd heard about the ban on Americans he obviously dismissed it as just another confusing triviality of modern life. Michael was pleased to see him happy, but could have done without his chatter.

Lucy let him walk her to the station, through the cattle market which, since this was Tuesday, held only empty stalls and ranks of parked cars. There were two or three people in the booking hall, but

no-one he knew. Unforgivably, the Sheaf Flyer was on time for once. She whispered: "Glad I came?"

"You know I am. I just wish—"

She stopped his mouth with a kiss. "I'm glad. I hate this part, but in that respect we're no worse off than we were two days ago. And in every other, we're so much better. Maybe it's Momma's blood talking again, but I feel confident. Political crises don't last forever. Maybe in a couple of months the two sides will back down and we can get on with normality. Believe just one thing, Mike, if you believe nothing else: the first Washington-London flight that's open to Yanks will have my name on the passenger list. You believe?"

"I believe, but it's not important. If it's OK for you to come here, it'll be OK for me to go to you. We won't argue who travels which way."

He walked back to the house in a confusion of both mood and thoughts. Even if he hadn't been light-headed from satisfied lust and lack of sleep, it would have been difficult to accept the reality of the past twenty-four hours. Wrenchingly bitter as it had been to watch her waving hand diminish and then be lost at the bend in the line beyond the level crossing, euphoria predominated. In an ugly world, something which had been wrong was triumphantly right again.

He heard DD's voice as he let himself in, raised and annoyed. Pursuing it to the garden room, he found him in front of the console phone. DD turned to him, almost accusingly. "These bloody things! I can't see why anyone needs to see who they're talking to, anyway. Some nut-case of a foreigner..."

"I'll see to it, DD." He took his place in front of the screen. "Can I help?"

"Mr Frodsham... it was you I wanted."

He looked balder on the screen than he had at the Clinic, and paler-skinned and fatter. Michael suppressed his antipathy: it was not his fault Anna was dead. He said: "How can I help you, Dr Stern?"

"I wanted to say..."

"Yes?"

"It is a terrible thing, terrible. But..."

Stern was struggling against incoherence. Michael thought of the man's bland assurance during his visit to the Clinic, that assumption of control which seemed to verge on mind-reading. He was not a man who would find it easy to accept failure, even if the failure was

something for which he was not responsible. This outburst, the evident collapse of his sense of authority, was surprising, but not really out of character. Even the fact of it coming more than a week after Anna's death fitted in. 'I am Jew and German: thoroughness is important.' The more rigid the personality, the more total the collapse. Michael could understand that, but it didn't make either Stern or his distress more palatable. Anna had been his patient, and Anna was dead. It was not something to hate him for, but distaste was not unreasonable.

Keeping his own voice controlled, he said: "Thank you for calling. I know it was nothing you could help. Dieter..."

"Will you come, Mr Frodsham?"

He was taken aback. "Come where?"

"Here. To the Clinic. I cannot talk to you—" he gestured wildly towards the screen "—like this."

His distress was clearly extreme. Michael reminded himself of the deference he had shown to Dieter, the fulsome acknowledgement of what he and the Clinic owed to Frohsteig. He had taken on the treatment of a close relative of Dieter, and the patient had died. He must have been sweating over it, to a point of near desperation. The reaction was almost pathological, but in the abstract one could feel sorry for him. One didn't live, though, in the abstract. Michael had a sudden, almost physical recollection of Lucy — her scent, taste, touch. But one could try to be charitable.

"If you want me to come and see you, yes, of course. The next time I visit Frohsteig."

He had no plans for visiting Frohsteig in the near future; by the time he did Stern would have made peace with his unhinged conscience.

"No! Soon... please. As soon as possible."

"I'll see."

"This is important." The man's face was distorted, possibly near weeping. "Please!"

It was becoming insupportable. Michael said: "I'll check my diary, and see what I can manage. I'm sorry, I must go now. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

He clicked off the call before Stern could respond.

On the Marsh the lambs were near full grown, both they and the ewes overdue for shearing. That did not matter much on a day like this, with an east wind sharp under a grey sky, but they would be

hot if the sun came out. Michael remembered a shearing contest on a farm near Nutarge, when he was about ten, and the bronzed figures of the Australians wrestling with the awkward, greyish, woolly creatures, clipping them with astonishing speed and precision into thin, white, pot-bellied beasts, and gulping down innumerable cans of Castlemaine. One of them had paid close attention to Anna, just sixteen and beginning to be noticed by the opposite sex. He had seen her respond and been jealous, and not sure of the object of his jealousy.

That was a long time ago. It must be more than ten years since the Australian shearers were banned. The shearers now were local, or from France or Spain, and they didn't go in for shearing contests or drinking lager by the gallon. This year, it seemed, they hadn't come at all.

Fields gave way to trafficless roads and empty plots, the skeletal remnants of the dream that had heralded Ashford as Europe's city of the future. The Sheaf Flyer drew into its humble side platform and shuddered to a halt. Michael opened the door of a carriage which had been old when he was young, and entered the echoing vault of the station, vaguely aware of something missing: there had been no announcement of arrival, or instructions about changing platforms for the main line trains. He realized something else – that the platform was empty apart from two men with Heckler-Kochs. Not in uniform, he noted, and then saw they were wearing white armbands with red lettering. Three letters: BLA.

Belatedly the speakers uttered, though not in the customary bored tones of Southeast Rail. A sharp, bossy cockney voice said: "This is an official announcement. This station has been taken over by the British Liberation Army. No-one is permitted to enter or leave the premises without authorization by the local BLA Commandant. Members of the public must not occupy the platforms, but go at once to the refreshment area. Stand by for further announcements. Britain Awake!"

The men with armbands marshalled them into the refreshment room, normally almost empty but crowded now. The people already there seemed to have settled into an uneasy acceptance of the situation. The buffet was doing a heavy trade, and he joined the queue for coffee. A ginger-bearded man in front of him was garrulous. He lived in Headcorn and worked in Canterbury, and had been here over half an hour.

"Neat stuff," he said. "You've got to hand it to them. Took the place over without firing a shot." He sounded excited. "Somebody doing something at last – taking action!"

Michael said: "I'm not sure what they think they're going to do with Ashford station, now they've got it."

"Last stop before the Tunnel, right? I was talking to that bloke." He indicated a BLA man. "They'll take over the next fast train from London, load up with explosives, and make the driver take it on through to the Tunnel entrance. They're going to time-fuse the explosives and abandon it. They reckon the blast will be big enough to put the Tunnel out of action for months, maybe permanently."

"And then what?"

"We'll be an island again, right? If the bastards want to come over here after that, they'll have to walk on the bleeding water."

"It sounds a large order," Michael said. "I hope their execution's better than their security."

"What's that mean?" The tone and the thrust of beard into Michael's face were hostile. "What you on about?"

"Someone seems to have been talking a bit."

"Well, it doesn't matter now, does it? Train's due any minute. They know what they're doing. They took over the station all right, didn't they?"

A whisper in the north turned slowly into the high-pitched rumble of an approaching express, and the rumble built into a roar. Michael waited for the change in pitch which would signal braking, but it didn't come. The roar continued to build, and as it reached a crescendo the shriek of a through-train whistle was added to the din. Then the pitch did change as it hurtled judderingly on southwards, at top speed.

It was still audible, fading in the distance, when a different roar grew in the sky. The helicopter gunships came in low, spraying the platforms with machine gun fire. Before he flung himself to the floor, Michael saw one of the men in armbands spin round and fall outwards onto the track.

Helen Rackham was unusually twitchy. Michael came in for questioning round the table because of his involvement in the Ashford incident, from Sylvia Perenaïke in particular. She hadn't been back to her home in Wolverhampton for several days, and communications with that region were down, but she'd heard there had been an uprising there too, and was worried about her family. There were rumours of civilian casualties.

Helen overrode her brusquely. There would be a government

announcement later in the day. Meanwhile, they had the latest drug-control implementation proposals, and their relationship to hospital management, to consider.

Coming out, Graveny predictably suggested the *Eagle & Lamb*, but Michael had a valid reason for turning it down.

"My German uncle is giving me lunch."

"And a German uncle is not a monkey's uncle, *ja?* *Schnell, schnell*, not what the hell. That was a right cock-up at Ashford, wasn't it?"

"Just about sums it up, I would say."

"Do you think they had any chance at all of pulling it off – blowing up the entrance to the Tunnel?"

"Not the slightest."

"So why try something on you can't possibly get away with?"

"I don't know. How do you figure nutcases?"

"I'm not so sure they are nutcases. What would you say the BA aim has been, all along? Yes, OK, to go back on every commitment over the past thirty years and take us out of Europe, but I'm talking ways and means. There's never been a worthwhile resistance movement that shied away from the prospect of reprisals. Provocation is its own justification. A bloodstained flag or two makes the point better than any number of street-corner rallies. You can win by losing."

Michael thought of the man with the ginger beard. He hadn't spoken to him again, but had seen him as the bodies of the BLA man, and of a woman civilian who'd also been killed, were stretchered away. His expression had lost its cockiness, but in its place there was anger.

"I didn't want to upset Sylvia," Graveny said, "but my information is that it's still going on in Birmingham. And in my own region, I've heard they actually came out on top. Liverpool's under BLA control."

"Temporarily, maybe."

"What isn't temporary?"

Central London at any rate seemed calm and unconcerned. His taxi driver said nothing about uprisings but, recognizing him, talked rugby all the way to the Frohsteig building. He found Dieter away from his desk, staring out at Hampstead. He seemed abstracted, but came over to embrace Michael.

"How are you, Michael? And how is DD?"

"He's fine. All well at Frohsteig?"

"At Frohsteig, things are well. Though we are in grief still, all of us. What else is possible?"

"I had a call from Stern the other day. He sounded disturbed."

"Disturbed, yes." From his height he looked down at Michael, frowning. "What has he said?"

"He told me he wanted to talk to me – wanted me to go to the Clinic. I said I would, but I don't know when I'll be able. He made it sound urgent."

Dieter shook his head. "No. It is not urgent."

"It might seem so, from his point of view. I got the impression of an extremely conscientious man, and with Anna dying... even though there was nothing he could have done..."

"Certainly," Dieter said. "A conscientious man. And with that Jewish conscience. I think maybe he came back to Germany because he could not live in the Israeli empire, and that problem with the Arabs that goes on and on. But some things, when you run away, run with you. But it is not urgent for him now, not any more. Anna dying was not his fault, but guilt does not need a reason to come, and after it comes still does not reason well. He had drugs, and the knowledge to use them. He used them, yesterday, to kill himself."

Michael felt less shock than he would have expected. He remembered the face on the screen; agitated, pitiable but not likeable. There had been enough to mourn, without trying to wring out tears for a stranger. Instead he thought of Anna, with renewed desolation.

"A bad business," Dieter said. "These are bad times." He indicated the television screen incorporated in his desk. "Have you heard? There was a newflash, a little time before you got here."

"What about?"

"The British government has asked for full Federal support, after the attack on the Tunnel. England is placed under martial law."

Like Stern's suicide, it was a shock that did not really surprise.

Dieter surveyed him soberly. "I think perhaps we must abandon the rugby project, for the present."

He restrained an impulse to laugh at the incongruity of the remark, so typical of Dieter. "I think you're probably right about that."

Dieter gripped his arm. "We will go to lunch. Thank God there is always food, and also wine." ●

(To be concluded.)

This story, while complete in itself, is a sequel to another 'Conjoiner' novelette, GREAT WALL OF MARS (SPECTRUM SF #1, February 2000). Last year also saw the publication of Al's first novel, REVELATION SPACE (Gollancz 2000), to a number of good reviews. This is due in paperback from Gollancz in March and hot on its heels will be a second novel, CHASM CITY, in hardback from the same publisher in May. He will shortly start work on a third novel – which may well feature Nevil Clavain, the protagonist of the story you are about to read...

GLACIAL

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

Nevil Clavain picked his way across a mosaic of shattered ice. The field stretched away in all directions, gouged by sleek-sided crevasses. They had mapped the largest cracks before landing, but he was still wary of surprises; his breath caught every time his booted foot cracked through a layer of ice. He was aware of how dangerous it would be to wander from the red path which his implants were painting across the glacier field.

He only had to remind himself what had happened to Martin Setterholm.

They had found his body a month ago, shortly after their arrival on the planet. It had been near the main American base; a stroll from the perimeter of the huge, deserted complex of stilted domes and ice-walled caverns. Clavain's friends had found dozens of dead within the buildings, and most of them had been easily identified against the lists of base personnel which the expedition had pieced together. But Clavain had been troubled by the gaps, and had wondered if any further dead might be found in the surrounding ice fields. He had explored the warrens of the base until he found an air-lock which had never been closed, and though snowfalls had long since obliterated any footprints, there was little doubt in which direction a wanderer would have set off.

Long before the base had vanished over the horizon, Clavain had run into the edge of a deep, wide crevasse. And there at the bottom –

just visible if he leaned close to the edge – was a man's outstretched arm and hand. Clavain had gone back to the others and had them return with a winch to lower him into the depths, descending thirty or forty metres into a cathedral of stained and sculpted ice. The body had come into view: a figure in an old-fashioned atmospheric survival suit. The man's legs were bent in a horrible way, like those of a strangely articulated alien. Clavain knew it was a man because the fall had jolted his helmet from its neck-ring; the corpse's well-preserved face was pressed halfway into a pillow of ice. The helmet had ended up a few metres away.

No one died instantly on Diadem. The air was breathable for short periods, and the man had clearly had time to ponder his predicament. Even in his confused state of mind he must have known that he was going to die.

"Martin Setterholm," Clavain had said aloud, picking up the helmet and reading the nameplate on the crown. He felt sorry for him, but could not deny himself the small satisfaction of accounting for another of the dead. Setterholm had been among the missing, and though he had waited the better part of a century for it, he would at least receive a proper funeral now.

There was something else, but Clavain very nearly missed it. Setterholm had lived long enough to scratch out a message in the ice. Sheltered at the base of the glacier, the marks he had gouged were still legible. Three letters, it seemed to Clavain: an I, a V and an F.

IVF.

The message meant nothing to Clavain, and even a deep search of the Conjoiner collective memory threw up only a handful of vaguely plausible candidates. The least ridiculous was *in-vitro fertilisation*, but even that seemed to have no immediate connection with Setterholm. But then again, he had been a biologist, according to the base records. Did the message spell out the chilling truth about what had happened to the colony on Diadem: a biology lab experiment which had gone terribly wrong? Something to do with the worms, perhaps?

But after a while, overwhelmed by the sheer number of dead, Clavain had allowed the exact details of Setterholm's death to slip from his mind. He was hardly unique anyway: just one more example of the way most of them had died; not by suicide or violence but through carelessness, recklessness or just plain stupidity. Basic safety procedures – like not wandering into a crevasse zone without the right equipment

– had been forgotten or ignored. Machines had been used improperly. Drugs had been administered incorrectly. Sometimes the victim had taken only themselves to the grave, but in other cases the death-toll had been much higher. And it had all happened swiftly.

Galiana talked about it as if it was some kind of psychosis, while the other Conjoiners speculated about some kind of emergent neural condition, buried in the gene-pool of the entire colony, lurking for years until it was activated by an environmental trigger.

Clavain, while not discounting his friends' theories, could not help but think of the worms. They were everywhere, after all, and the Americans had certainly been interested in them – Setterholm especially. Clavain himself had pressed his faceplate against the ice and seen that the worms reached down to the depth where the man had died. Their fine burrowing trails scratched into the vertical ice walls like the branchings of a river delta; the dark nodes of breeding tangles at the intersections of the larger tunnels. The tiny black worms had infested the glacier completely, and this would only be one distinct colony out of the millions that existed all over Diadem's frozen regions. The worm biomass in this one colony must have been several dozen tonnes at the very least. Had the Americans' studies of the worms unleashed something which shattered the mind, turning them all into stumbling fools?

He sensed Galiana's quiet presence at the back of his thoughts, where she had not been a moment earlier.

"Nevil," she said. "We're ready to leave again."

"You're done with the ruin already?"

"It isn't very interesting – just a few equipment shacks. There are still some remains to the north we have to look over, and it'd be good to get there before nightfall."

"But I've only been gone half an hour or..."

"Two hours, Nevil."

He checked his wrist display unbelievably, but Galiana was right: he had been out alone on the glacier for all that time. Time away from the others always seemed to fly by, like sleep to an exhausted man. Perhaps the analogy was accurate, at that: sleep was when the mammalian brain took a rest from the business of processing the external universe, allowing the accumulated experience of the day to filter down into long-term memory; collating useful memories and discarding what did not need to be remembered. And for Clavain –

who still needed normal sleep – these periods away from the others were when his mind took a rest from the business of engaging in frantic neural communion with the other Conjoiners. He could almost feel his neurones breathing a vast collective groan of relief, now that all they had to do was process the thoughts of a single mind.

Two hours was nowhere near enough.

“I’ll be back shortly,” Clavain said. “I just want to pick up some more worm samples, then I’ll be on my way.”

“You’ve picked up hundreds of the damned things already, Nevil, and they’re all the same, give or take a few trivial differences.”

“I know. But it can’t hurt to indulge an old man’s irrational fancies, can it?”

As if to justify himself, he knelt down and began scooping surface ice into a small sample container. The leech-sized worms riddled the ice so thoroughly that he was bound to have picked up a few individuals in this sample, even though he would not know for sure until he got back to the shuttle’s lab. If he was lucky, the sample might even hold a breeding tangle; a knot of several dozen worms engaged in a slow, complicated orgy of cannibalism and sex. There, he would complete the same comprehensive scans he had run on all the other worms he had picked up, trying to guess just why the Americans had devoted so much effort to studying them. And doubtless he would get exactly the same results he had found previously. The worms never changed; there was no astonishing mutation buried in every hundredth or even thousandth specimen; no stunning biochemical trickery going on inside them. They secreted a few simple enzymes and they ate pollen grains and ice-bound algae and they wriggled their way through cracks in the ice, and when they met other worms they obeyed the brainless rules of life, death and procreation.

That was all they did.

Galiana, in other words, was right: the worms had simply become an excuse for him to spend time away from the rest of the Conjoiners.

At the beginning of the expedition, a month ago, it had been much easier to justify these excursions. Even some of the true Conjoined had been drawn by a primal human urge to walk out into the wilderness, surrounding themselves with kilometres of beautifully tinted, elegantly fractured, unthinking ice. It was good to be somewhere quiet and pristine, after the war-torn solar system that they had left behind.

Diadem was an earthlike planet orbiting the star Ross 248. It had

oceans, icecaps, plate tectonics and signs of reasonably advanced multicellular life. Plants had already invaded Diadem's land, and some animals – the equivalents of arthropods, molluscs and worms – had begun to follow in their wake. The largest land-based animals were still small by terrestrial standards, since nothing in the oceans had yet evolved an internal skeleton. There was nothing that showed any signs of intelligence, but that was only a minor disappointment. It would still take a lifetime's study just to explore the fantastic array of body-plans, metabolisms and survival strategies which Diadem life had blindly evolved.

Yet even before Galiana had sent down the first survey shuttles, a shattering truth had become apparent.

Someone had reached Diadem before them.

The signs were unmistakable; glints of refined metal on the surface, picked out by radar. Upon inspection from orbit they turned out to be ruined structures and equipment, obviously of human origin.

"It's not possible," Clavain had said. "We're the first. We have to be the first. No one else has ever built anything like the *Sandra Voi*; nothing capable of travelling this far."

"Somewhere in there," Galiana had answered, "I think there might be a mistaken assumption, don't you?"

Meekly, Clavain had nodded.

Now – later still than he had promised – Clavain made his way back to the waiting shuttle. The red carpet of safety led straight to the access ramp beneath the craft's belly. He climbed up and stepped through the transparent membrane which spanned the entrance door, most of his suit slithering away on contact with the membrane. By the time he was inside the ship he wore only a lightweight breather mask and a few communicational devices. He could have survived outside naked for many minutes – Diadem's atmosphere now had enough oxygen to support humans – but Galiana refused to allow any intermingling of micro-organisms.

He returned the equipment to a storage locker, placed the worm sample in a refrigeration rack, and clothed himself in a paper-thin black tunic and trousers, before moving into the aft compartment where Galiana was waiting.

She and Felka were sitting facing each other across the blank-walled, austere furnished room. They were staring into the space between

them without quite meeting each other's eyes. They looked like a mother and daughter locked in argumentative stalemate, but Clavain knew better.

He issued the mental command, well rehearsed now, which opened his mind to communion with the others. It was like opening a tiny aperture in the side of a dam; he was never adequately prepared for the force with which the flow of data hit him. The room changed; colour bleeding out of the walls, lacing itself into abstract structures which permeated the room's volume. Galiana and Felka, dressed dourly a moment earlier, were now veiled in light, and appeared superhumanly beautiful. He could feel their thoughts, as if he were overhearing a heated conversation in the room next door. Most of it was non-verbal; Galiana and Felka playing an intense, abstract game. The thing floating between them was a solid lattice of light, resembling the plumbing diagram of an insanely complex refinery. It was constantly adjusting itself, with coloured flows racing this way and that as the geometry changed. About half the volume was green; what remained was lilac, but now the former encroached dramatically on the latter.

Felka laughed; she was winning.

Galiana conceded and crashed back into her seat with a sigh of exhaustion, but she was smiling as well.

"Sorry. I appear to have distracted you," Clavain said.

"No; you just hastened the inevitable. I'm afraid Felka was always going to win."

The girl smiled again, still saying nothing, though Clavain sensed her victory; a hard-edged thing which for a moment outshone all other thoughts from her direction, eclipsing even Galiana's air of weary resignation.

Felka had been a failed Conjoiner experiment in the manipulation of foetal brain development; a child with a mind more machine than human. As Clavain had struggled to adjust to life as part of Galiana's commune, he had set himself the task of helping Felka to develop her latent humanity. She had begun to show signs of recognition in his presence, perhaps sensing on some level that they had a kinship; that they were both strangers stumbling toward a strange new light.

Galiana rose from her chair, carpets of light wrapping around her. "It was time to end the game, anyway. We've got work to do." She looked down at the girl, who was still staring at the lattice. "Sorry, Felka. Later, maybe."

Clavain said: "How's she doing?"

"She's laughing, Nevil. That has to be progress, doesn't it?"

"I'd say that depends what she's laughing about."

"She beat me. She thought it was funny. I'd say that was a fairly human reaction, wouldn't you?"

"I'd still be happier if I could convince myself she recognised my face, and not my smell, or the sound my footfalls make."

"You're the only one of us with a beard, Nevil. It doesn't take vast amounts of neural processing to spot *that*."

Clavain scratched his chin self-consciously as they stepped through into the shuttle's flight deck. He liked his beard, even though it was trimmed to little more than grey stubble so that he could slip a breather mask on without difficulty. It was as much a link to his past as his memories, or the wrinkles Galiana had studiously built into his remodelled body.

"You're right, of course. Sometimes I just have to remind myself how far we've come."

Galiana smiled – she was getting better at that, though there was still something a little forced about it – and pushed her long, grey-veined black hair behind her ears. "I tell myself the same things when I think about you, Nevil."

"Mm. But I have come some way, haven't I?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean you haven't got a considerable distance ahead of you. I could have put that thought into your head in a microsecond, if you allowed me to do so – but you still insist that we communicate by making noises in our throats, the way monkeys do."

"Well, it's good practice for you," Clavain said, hoping that his irritation was not too obvious.

They settled into adjacent seats while avionics displays slithered into take-off configuration. Clavain's implants allowed him to fly the machine without any manual inputs at all, but – old soldier that he was – he generally preferred tactile controls. So his implants obliged; hallucinating a joystick inset with buttons and levers, and when he reached out to grasp it his hands seemed to close around something solid. He shuddered to think how thoroughly his perceptions of the real world were being doctored to support this illusion; but once he had been flying for a few minutes he generally forgot about it, lost in the joy of piloting.

He got them airborne, then settled the shuttle into level flight

towards the fifth ruin that they would be visiting today. Kilometres of ice slid beneath them, only occasionally broken by a protruding ridge or a patch of dry, boulder-strewn ground.

"Just a few shacks, you said?"

Galiana nodded. "A waste of time, but we had to check it out."

"Any closer to understanding what happened to them?"

"They died, more or less overnight. Mostly through incidents related to the breakdown of normal thought – although one or two may have simply died; as if they had some greater susceptibility to a toxin than the others."

Clavain smiled, feeling that a small victory was his. "Now you're looking at a toxin, rather than a psychosis?"

"A toxin's difficult to explain, Nevil."

"From Martin Setterholm's worms, perhaps?"

"Not very likely. Their biohazard containment measures weren't as good as ours – but they were still adequate. We've analyzed those worms and we know they don't carry anything obviously hostile to us. And even if there was a neurotoxin, how would it affect everyone so quickly? Even if the lab workers had caught something, they'd have fallen ill before anyone else did, sending a warning to the others – but nothing like that happened." She paused, anticipating Clavain's next question. "And no; I don't think that what happened to them is necessarily anything we need worry about, though that doesn't mean I'm going to rule anything out. But even our oldest technology's a century ahead of anything they had – and we have the *Sandra Voi* to retreat to if we run into anything the medicines in our heads can't handle."

Clavain always did his best not to think too much about the swarms of sub-cellular machines lacing his brain – supplanting much of it, in fact – but there were times when it was unavoidable. He still had a squeamish reaction to the idea, though it was becoming milder. Now, though, he could not help but view the machines as his allies; as intimately a part of him as his immune system. Galiana was right: they would resist anything which tried to interfere with what now passed as the 'normal' functioning of his mind.

"Still," he said, not yet willing to drop his pet theory. "You've got to admit something: the Americans – Setterholm especially – were interested in the worms. Too interested, if you ask me."

"Look who's talking."

"Ah, but my interest is strictly forensic. And I can't help but put the

two things together. They were interested in the worms. And they went mad.”

What he said was an over-simplification, of course: it was clear enough that the worms had only preoccupied some of the Americans: those who were most interested in xeno-biology. According to the evidence the Conjoiners had so far gathered, the effort had been largely spearheaded by Setterholm, the man he had found dead at the bottom of the crevasse. Setterholm had travelled widely across Diadem’s snowy wastes, gathering a handful of allies to assist in his work. He had found worms in dozens of ice-fields, grouped into vast colonies. For the most part the other members of the expedition had let him get on with his activities, even as they struggled with the day-to-day business of staying alive in what was still a hostile, alien environment.

Even before they had all died things had been far from easy. The self-replicating robots which had brought them here in the first place had failed years before, leaving the delicate life-support systems of their shelters to slowly collapse; each malfunction a little harder to rectify than the last. Diadem was getting colder, too – sliding inexorably into a deep ice-age. It had been the Americans’ misfortune to arrive at the coming of a great, centuries-long winter. Now, Clavain thought, it was colder still; the polar ice-caps rushing toward each other like long-separated lovers.

“It must have been fast, whatever it was,” Clavain mused. “They’d already abandoned most of the outlying bases by then, huddling together back at the main settlement. By then they only had enough spare parts and technical know-how to run a single fusion power-plant.”

“Which failed.”

“Yes – but that doesn’t mean much. It couldn’t run itself, not by then – it needed constant tinkering. Eventually the people with the right know-how must have succumbed to the... whatever it was – and then the reactor stopped working and they all died of the cold. But they were in trouble long before the reactor failed.”

Galiana seemed on the point of saying something. Clavain could always tell when she was about to speak; it was if some leakage from her thoughts reached his brain even as she composed what she would say.

“Well?” he said, when the silence had stretched long enough.

“I was just thinking,” she said. “A reactor of that type – it doesn’t need any exotic isotopes, does it? No tritium, or deuterium?”

"No. Just plain old hydrogen. You could get all you needed from sea-water."

"Or ice," Galiana said.

They vectored in for the next landing site. Toadstools, Clavain thought: half a dozen black metal towers of varying height surmounted by domed black habitat modules, interlinked by a web of elevated, pressurised walkways. Each of the domes was thirty or forty metres wide, perched a hundred or more metres above the ice, festooned with narrow, armoured windows, sensors and communications antennae. A tongue-like extension from one of the tallest domes was clearly a landing pad. In fact, as he came closer, he saw that there was an aircraft parked on it; one of the blunt-winged machines that the Americans had used to get around in. It was dusted with ice, but it would probably still fly with a little persuasion.

He inched the shuttle down, one of its skids only just inside the edge of the pad. Clearly the landing pad had only really been intended for one aircraft at a time.

"Nevil..." Galiana said. "I'm not sure I like this."

He felt tension, but could not be sure if it was his own or Galiana's, leaking into his head.

"What don't you like?"

"There shouldn't be an aircraft here," Galiana said.

"Why not?"

She spoke softly, reminding him that the evacuation of the outlying settlements had been orderly, compared to the subsequent crisis. "This base should have been shut down and mothballed with all the others."

"Then someone stayed behind here," Clavain suggested.

Galiana nodded. "Or someone came back."

There was a third presence with them now; another hue of thought bleeding into his mind. Felka had come into the cockpit. He could taste her apprehension.

"You sense it, too," he said, wonderingly, looking into the face of the terribly damaged girl. "Our discomfort. And you don't like it any more than we do, do you?"

Galiana took the girl's hand. "It's all right, Felka."

She must have said that just for Clavain's benefit. Before her mouth had even opened Galiana would have planted reassuring thoughts in Felka's mind; attempting to still the disquiet with the subtlest of neural

adjustments. Clavain thought of an expert Ikebana artist minutely altering the placement of a single flower in the interests of harmony.

"Everything will be OK," Clavain said. "There's nothing here that can harm you."

Galiana took a moment, blank-eyed, to commune with the other Conjoiners in and around Diadem. Most of them were still in orbit, observing things from the ship. She told them about the aircraft and notified them that she and Clavain were going to enter the structure.

He saw Felka's hand tighten around Galiana's wrist.

"She wants to come as well," Galiana said.

"She'll be safer if she stays here."

"She doesn't want to be alone."

Clavain chose his words carefully. "I thought Conjoiners – I mean we – could never be truly alone, Galiana."

"There might be a communicational block inside the structure. It'll be better if she stays physically close to us."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No, of course not." For a moment he felt a sting of her anger, prickling his mind like sea-spray. "She's still human, Nevil – no matter what we've done to her mind. We can't erase a million years of evolution. She may not be very good at recognising faces, but she recognises the need for companionship."

He raised his hands. "I never doubted it."

"Then why are you arguing?"

Clavain smiled. He'd had this conversation so many times before, with so many women. He had been married to some of them. It was oddly comforting to be having it again, light-years from home, wearing a new body, his mind clotted with machines and confronting the matriarch of what should have been a feared and hated hive-mind. At the epicentre of so much strangeness, a tiff was almost to be welcomed.

"I just don't want anything to hurt her."

"Oh. And I do?"

"Never mind," he said, gritting his teeth. "Let's just get in and out, shall we?"

The base, like all the American structures, had been built for posterity. Not by people, however, but by swarms of diligent self-replicating robots. That was how the Americans had reached Diadem: they had been brought here as frozen fertilised cells in the armoured,

radiation-proofed bellies of star-crossing von Neumann robots. The robots had been launched toward several solar systems about a century before the *Sandra Voi* had left Mars. Upon arrival on Diadem they had set about breeding; making copies of themselves from local ores. When their numbers had reached some threshold they had turned over their energies to the construction of bases; luxurious accommodation for the human children which would then be grown in their wombs.

"The entrance door's intact," Galiana said, when they had crossed from the shuttle to the smooth black side of the dome, stooping against the wind. "And there's still some residual power in its circuits."

That was a Conjoiner trick which always faintly unnerved him. Like sharks, Conjoiners were sensitive to ambient electrical fields. Mapped into her vision, Galiana would see the energized circuits superimposed on the door like a ghostly neon maze. Now she extended her hand toward the lock, palm first.

"I'm accessing the opening mechanism. Interfacing with it now." Behind her mask, he saw her face scrunch in concentration. Galiana only ever frowned when having to think hard. With her hand outstretched she looked like a wizard attempting some particularly demanding enchantment.

"Hmm," she said. "Nice old software protocols. Nothing too difficult."

"Careful," Clavain said. "I wouldn't put it past them to have put some kind of trap here..."

"There's no trap," she said. "But there is – ah, yes – a verbal entry code. Well, here goes." She spoke louder, so that her voice could travel through the air to the door even above the howl of the wind. "*Open Sesame.*"

Lights flicked from red to green; dislodging a frosting of ice, the door slid ponderously aside to reveal a dimly lit interior chamber. The base must have been running on a trickle of emergency power for decades.

Felka and Clavain lingered while Galiana crossed the threshold. "Well?" she challenged, turning around. "Are you two sissies coming or not?"

Felka offered a hand. He took hers and the two of them – the old soldier and the girl who could barely grasp the difference between two human faces – took a series of tentative steps inside.

“What you just did; that business with your hand and the password...” Clavain paused. “That *was* a joke, wasn’t it?”

Galiana looked at him blank-faced. “How could it have been? Everyone knows we haven’t got anything remotely resembling a sense of humour.”

Clavain nodded gravely. “That was my understanding, but I just wanted to be sure.”

There was no trace of the wind inside, but it would still have been too cold to remove their suits, even had they not been concerned about contamination. They worked their way along a series of winding corridors, of which some were dark and some were bathed in feeble, pea-green lighting. Now and then they passed the entrance to a room full of equipment, but nothing that looked like a laboratory or living quarters. Then they descended a series of stairs and found themselves crossing one of the sealed walkways between the toadstools. Clavain had seen a few other American settlements built like this one; they were designed to remain useful even as they sank slowly into the ice.

The bridge led to what was obviously the main habitation section. Now there were lounges, bedrooms, laboratories and kitchens – enough for a crew of perhaps fifty or sixty. But there were no signs of any bodies, and the place did not look as if it had been abandoned in a hurry. The equipment was neatly packed away and there were no half-eaten meals on the tables. There was frost everywhere, but that was just the moisture which had frozen out of the air when the base cooled down.

“They were expecting to come back,” Galiana said.

Clavain nodded. “They couldn’t have had much of an idea of what lay ahead of them.”

They moved on, crossing another bridge until they arrived in a toadstool which was almost entirely dedicated to bio-analysis laboratories. Galiana had to use her neural trick to get them inside again, the machines in her head sweet-talking the duller machines entombed in the doors. The low-ceilinged labs were bathed in green light, but Galiana found a wall panel which brought the lighting up a notch and even caused some bench equipment to wake up; pulsing stand-by lights.

Clavain looked around, recognising centrifuges, gene-sequencers, gas chromatographs and scanning-tunnelling microscopes. There were at least a dozen other hunks of gleaming machinery whose function eluded him. A wall-sized cabinet held dozens of pull-out drawers, each

of which contained hundreds of culture dishes, test-tubes and gel slides. Clavain glanced at the samples, reading the tiny labels. There were bacteria and single-cell cultures with unpronounceable code names, most of which were marked with Diadem map co-ordinates and a date. But there were also drawers full of samples with Latin names; comparison samples which must have come from Earth. The robots could easily have carried the tiny parent organisms from which these larger samples had been grown or cloned. Perhaps the Americans had been experimenting with the hardiness of Earth-born organisms, with a view to terraforming Diadem at some point in the future.

He closed the drawer silently and moved to a set of larger sample tubes racked on a desk. He picked one from the rack and raised it to the light, examining the smoky things inside. It was a sample of worms, indistinguishable from those he had collected on the glacier a few hours earlier. A breeding tangle, probably: harvested from the intersection point of two worm tunnels. Some of the worms in the tangle would be exchanging genes; others would be fighting; others would be allowing themselves to be digested by adults or newly-hatched young; all behaving according to rigidly deterministic laws of caste and sex. The tangle looked dead, but that meant nothing with the worms. Their metabolism was fantastically slow; each individual easily capable of living for thousands of years. It would take them months just to crawl along some of the longer cracks in the ice, let alone move between some of the larger tangles.

But the worms were really not all that alien. They had a close terrestrial analogue; the sun-avoiding ice-worms which had first been discovered in the Malaspina Glacier in Alaska toward the end of the nineteenth century. The Alaskan ice-worms were a lot smaller than their Diadem counterparts, but they also nourished themselves on the slim pickings that drifted onto the ice, or had been frozen into it years earlier. Like the Diadem worms, their most notable anatomical feature was a pore at the head end, just above the mouth. In the case of the terrestrial worms the pore served a single function; secreting a salty solution which helped the worms melt their way into ice when there was no tunnel already present – an escape strategy that helped them get beneath the ice before the sun dried them up. The Diadem worms had a similar structure, but according to Setterholm's notes they have evolved a second use for it; secreting a chemically rich 'scent trail' which helped other worms navigate through the tunnel system. The chemistry of

that scent-trail turned out to be very complex, with each worm capable of secreting not merely a unique signature but a variety of flavours. Conceivably, more complex message schemes were embedded in some of the other flavours: not just 'follow me' but 'follow me only if you are female—' the Diadem worms had at least three sexes '—and this is breeding season.' There were many other possibilities, which Setterholm seemed to have been attempting to decode and catalogue when the end had come.

It was interesting... up to a point. But even if the worms followed a complex set of rules dependent on the scent-trails they were picking up, and perhaps other environmental cues, it would still only be rigidly mechanistic behaviour.

"Nevil, come here."

That was Galiana's voice, but it was in a tone he had barely heard before. It was one that made him run, to where Felka and Galiana were waiting on the other side of the lab.

They were facing an array of lockers which occupied an entire wall. A small status panel was set into each locker, but only one locker — placed at chest height — showed any activity. Clavain looked back to the door they had come in through, but from here it was hidden by intervening lab equipment. They would not have seen this locker even if it had been illuminated before Galiana brought the room's power back on.

"It might have been on all along," he said.

"I know," Galiana agreed.

She reached a hand up to the panel, tapping the control keys with unnerving fluency. Machines to Galiana were like musical instruments to a prodigy. She could pick one up cold and play it like an old friend.

The array of status lights changed configuration abruptly, then there was a bustle of activity somewhere behind the locker's metal face — latches and servo-motors clicking after decades of stasis.

"Stand back," Galiana said.

A rime of frost shattered into a billion sugary pieces. The locker began to slide out of the wall, the unhurried motion giving them adequate time to digest what lay inside. He felt Felka grip his hand, and then noticed that her other hand was curled tightly around Galiana's wrist. For the first time, he began to wonder if it had really been such a good idea to allow the girl to join them.

The locker was two metres in length and half that in width and

height; just sufficient to contain a human body. It had probably been designed to hold animal specimens culled from Diadem's oceans, but it was equally capable of functioning as a mortuary tray. That the man inside the locker was dead was beyond question, but there was no sign of injury. His composure – flat on his back, his blue-grey face serenely blank, his eyes closed and his hands clasped neatly just below his ribcage – suggested to Clavain a saint lying in grace. His beard was neatly pointed and his hair long, frozen into a solid sculptural mass. He was still wearing several heavy layers of thermal clothing.

Clavain knelt closer and read the name-tag above the man's heart. "Andrew Iverson. Ring a bell?"

A moment while Galiana established a link to the rest of the Conjoiners, ferreting the name out of some database. "Yes. One of the missing. Seems he was a climatologist with an interest in terraforming techniques."

Clavain nodded shrewdly. "That figures, with all the micro-organisms I've seen in this place. Well: the trillion dollar question. How do you think he got in there?"

"I think he climbed in," Galiana said. And nodded at something which Clavain had missed, almost tucked away beneath the man's shoulder. Clavain reached into the gap, his finger brushing against the rock-hard fabric of Iverson's outfit. A catheter vanished into the man's forearm, where he had cut away a square of fabric. The catheter's black feed-line reached back into the cabinet, vanishing into a socket at the rear.

"You're saying he killed himself?"

"He must have put something in that which would stop his heart. Then he probably flushed out his blood and replaced it with glycerol, or something similar, to prevent ice-crystals forming in his cells. It would have taken some automation to make it work, but I'm sure everything he needed was here."

Clavain thought back to what he knew about the cryonic immersion techniques that had been around a century or so earlier. They left something to be desired now, but back then they had not been much of an advance over mummification.

"When he sank that catheter into himself, he can't have been certain we'd ever find him," Clavain remarked.

"Which would still have been preferable to suicide."

"Yes, but... the thoughts which must have gone through his head.

Knowing he had to kill himself first, to stand a chance of living again – and then hope someone else stumbled on Diadem.”

“You made a harder choice than that, once.”

“Yes. But at least I wasn’t alone when I made it.”

Iverson’s body was astonishingly well-preserved, Clavain thought. The skin tissue looked almost intact, even if it had a deathly, granite-like colour. The bones of his face had not ruptured under the strain of the temperature drop. Bacterial processes had stopped dead. All in all, things could have been a lot worse.

“We shouldn’t leave him like this,” Galiana said, pushing the locker so that it began to slide back into the wall.

“I don’t think he cares much about that now,” Clavain said.

“No. You don’t understand. He mustn’t warm – not even to the ambient temperature of the room. Otherwise we won’t be able to wake him up.”

It took five days to bring him back to consciousness.

The decision to reanimate had not been taken lightly; it had only been arrived at after intense discussion among the Conjoined, debates in which Clavain participated to the best of his ability. Iverson, they all agreed, could probably be resurrected with current Conjoiner methods. In-situ scans of his mind had revealed preserved synaptic structures which a scaffold of machines could coax back toward consciousness. However, since they had not yet identified the cause of the madness which had killed Iverson’s colleagues – and the evidence was pointing towards some kind of infectious agent – Iverson would be kept on the surface; reborn on the same world where he had died.

They had, however, moved him: shuttling him halfway across the world back to the main base. Clavain had travelled with the corpse, marvelling at the idea that this solid chunk of man-shaped ice – tainted, admittedly, with a few vital impurities – would soon be a breathing, thinking, human being with memories and feelings. To him it seemed astonishing that this was possible; that so much latent structure had been preserved across the decades. Even more astonishing that the infusions of tiny machines which the Conjoiners were brewing would be able to stitch together damaged cells and kick-start them back to life. And out of that inert loom of frozen brain structure – a thing that was at this moment nothing more than a fixed geometric entity, like a

finely eroded piece of rock – something as malleable as consciousness would emerge.

But the Conjoiners were blasé at the prospect, viewing Iverson the way expert picture-restorers might view a damaged old master. Yes, there would be difficulties ahead – work that would require great skill – but nothing to lose sleep over.

Except, Clavain reminded himself, none of them slept anyway.

While the others were working to bring Iverson back to life, Clavain wandered the outskirts of the base, trying to get a better feel for what it must have been like in the last days. The debilitating mental illness must have been terrifying, as it struck even those who might have stood some chance of developing some kind of counter-agent to it. Perhaps in the old days, when the base had been under the stewardship of the von Neumann machines, something might have been done... but in the end it must have been like trying to crack a particularly tricky algebra problem while growing steadily more drunk; losing first the ability to focus sharply, then to focus on the problem at all, and then to remember what was so important about it anyway. The labs in the main complex had an abandoned look to them; experiments half-finished; notes on the wall scrawled in ever more incoherent handwriting.

Down in the lower levels – the transport bays and storage areas – it was almost as if nothing had happened. Equipment was still neatly racked; surface vehicles neatly parked, and – with the base sub-systems back on – the place was bathed in light and not so cold as to require extra clothing. It was quite therapeutic, too: the Conjoiners had not extended their communicational fields into these regions, so Clavain's mind was mercifully isolated again; freed of the clamour of other voices. Despite that, he was still tempted by the idea of spending some time outdoors.

With that in mind he found an airlock; one that must have been added late in the base's history, as it was absent from the blueprints. There was no membrane stretched across this one; if he stepped through it he would be outside as soon as the doors cycled, with no more protection than the clothes he was wearing now. He considered going back into the base proper to find a membrane suit, but by the time he did that, the mood – the urge to go outside – would be gone.

Clavain noticed a locker. Inside, to his delight, was a rack of old-

style suits such as Setterholm had been wearing. They looked brand new, alloy neck-rings gleaming. Racked above each was a bulbous helmet. He experimented until he found a suit that fitted him, then struggled with the various latches and seals which coupled the suit parts together. Even when he thought he had donned the suit properly, the airlock detected that one of his gloves wasn't latched correctly. It refused to let him outside until he reversed the cycle and fixed the problem.

But then he was outside, and it was glorious.

He walked around the base until he found his bearings, and then – always ensuring that the base was in view and that his air-supply was adequate – he set off across the ice. Above, Diadem's sky was a deep enamelled blue, and the ice – though fundamentally white – seemed to contain in itself a billion nuances of pale turquoise, pale aquamarine; even hints of the palest of pinks. Beneath his feet he imagined the crack-like networks of the worms, threading down for hundreds of metres; and he imagined the worms themselves, wriggling through that network, responding to and secreting chemical scent trails. The worms themselves were biologically simple – almost dismayingly so – but that network was a vast, intricate thing. It hardly mattered that the traffic along it – the to-and-fro motions of the worms as they went about their lives – was so agonisingly slow. The worms, after all, had endured longer than human comprehension. They had seen people come and go in an eyeblink.

He walked on until he arrived at the crevasse where he had found Setterholm. They had long since removed Setterholm's body, of course, but the experience had imprinted itself deeply on Clavain's mind. He found it easy to relive the moment at the lip of the crevasse, when he had first seen the end of Setterholm's arm. At the time he had told himself that there must be worse places to die; surrounded by beauty that was so pristine; so utterly untouched by human influence. Now, the more that he thought about it, the more that Setterholm's death played on his mind – he wondered if there could be any worse place. It was undeniably beautiful, but it was also crushingly dead; crushingly oblivious to life. Setterholm must have felt himself draining away, soon to become as inanimate as the palace of ice that was to become his tomb.

Clavain thought about it for many more minutes, enjoying the silence and the solitude and the odd awkwardness of the suit. He thought back to the way Setterholm had been found, and his mind

niggled at something not quite right; a detail that had not seemed wrong at the time but which now troubled him.

It was Setterholm's helmet.

He remembered the way it had been lying away from the man's corpse, as if the impact had knocked it off. But now that Clavain had locked an identical helmet onto his own suit, that was harder to believe. The latches were sturdy, and he doubted that the drop into the crevasse would have been sufficient to break the mechanism. He considered the possibility that Setterholm had put his suit on hastily, but even that seemed unlikely now. The airlock had detected that Clavain's glove was badly attached; it – or any of the other locks – would have surely refused to allow Setterholm outside if his helmet had not been correctly latched.

Clavain wondered if Setterholm's death had been something other than an accident.

He thought about it, trying the idea on for size, then slowly shook his head. There were a myriad possibilities he had yet to rule out. Setterholm could have left the base with his suit intact and then – confused and disorientated – he could have fiddled with the latch, depriving himself of oxygen until he stumbled into the crevasse. Or perhaps the airlocks were not as foolproof as they seemed; the safety mechanism capable of being disabled by people in a hurry to get outside.

No. A man had died, but there was no need to assume it had been anything other than an accident. Clavain turned, and began to walk back to the base.

“**H**e's awake,” Galiana said, a day or so after the final wave of machines had swum into Iverson's mind. “I think it might be better if he spoke to you first, Nevil, don't you? Rather than one of us?” She bit her tongue. “I mean, rather than someone who's been Conjoined for as long as the rest of us?”

Clavain shrugged. “Then again, an attractive face might be preferable to a grizzled old relic like myself. But I take your point. Is it safe to go in now?”

“Perfectly. If Iverson was carrying anything infectious, the machines would have flagged it.”

“I hope you're right.”

“Well, look at the evidence. He was acting rationally up to the end. He did everything to ensure we'd have an excellent chance of reviving

him. His suicide was just a coldly calculated attempt to escape his then situation.”

“Coldly calculated,” Clavain echoed. “Yes, I suppose it would have been. Cold, I mean.”

Galiana said nothing, but gestured towards the door into Iverson’s room.

Clavain stepped through the opening. And it was as he crossed the threshold that a thought occurred to him. He could once again see, in his mind’s eye, Martin Setterholm’s body lying at the bottom of the crevasse, his fingers pointing to the letters IVF.

In-vitro fertilisation.

But suppose Setterholm had been trying to write IVERSON, but had died before finishing the word? If Setterholm had been murdered – pushed into the crevasse – he might have been trying to pass on a message about his murderer. Clavain imagined his pain, legs smashed; knowing with absolute certainty he was going to die alone and cold, but willing himself to write Iverson’s name...

But why would the climatologist have wanted to kill Setterholm? Setterholm’s fascination with the worms was perplexing but harmless. The information Clavain had collected pointed to Setterholm being a single-minded loner; the kind of man who would inspire pity or indifference in his colleagues, rather than hatred. And everyone was dying anyway – against such a background, a murder seemed almost irrelevant.

Maybe he was attributing too much to the six faint marks a dying man had scratched on the ice.

Forcing suspicion from his mind – for now – Clavain stepped into Iverson’s room. The room was spartan but serene, with a small blue holographic window set high in one white wall. Clavain was responsible for that. Left to the Conjoiners – who had taken over an area of the main American base and filled it with their own pressurised spaces – Iverson’s room would have been a grim, grey cube. That was fine for the Conjoiners – they moved through informational fields draped like an extra layer over reality. But though Iverson’s head was now drenched with their machines, they were only there to assist his normal patterns of thought; reinforcing weak synaptic signals and compensating for a far-from-equilibrium mix of neurotransmitters.

So Clavain had insisted on cheering the place up a bit; Iverson’s bedsheets and pillow were now the same pure white as the walls, so

that his head bobbed in a sea of whiteness. His hair had been trimmed, but Clavain had made sure that no one had done more than neaten Iverson's beard.

"Andrew?" he said. "I'm told you're awake now. I'm Nevil Clavain. How are you feeling?"

Iverson wet his lips before answering. "Better, I suspect, than I have any reason to feel."

"Ah." Clavain beamed, feeling that a large burden had just been lifted from his shoulders. "Then you've some recollection of what happened to you."

"I died, didn't I? Pumped myself full of anti-freeze and hoped for the best. Did it work, or is this just some weird-ass dream as I'm sliding toward brain-death?"

"No, it sure as hell worked. That was one weird-heck-ass of a risk..." Clavain halted, not entirely certain that he could emulate Iverson's century-old speech patterns. "That was quite some risk you took. But it did work, you'll be glad to hear."

Iverson lifted a hand from beneath the bedsheets, examining his palm and the pattern of veins and tendons on the rear. "This is the same body I went under with? You haven't stuck me in a robot, or cloned me, or hooked up my disembodied brain to a virtual-reality generator?"

"None of those things, no. Just mopped up some cell damage, fixed a few things here and there and – um – kick-started you back to the land of the living."

Iverson nodded, but Clavain could tell he was far from convinced. Which was unsurprising: Clavain, after all, had already told a small lie. "So how long was I under?"

"About a century, Andrew. We're an expedition from back home. We came by starship."

Iverson nodded again, as if this was mere, incidental detail. "We're aboard it now, right?"

"No... no. We're still on the planet. The ship's parked in orbit."

"And everyone else?"

No point sugaring the pill. "Dead, as far as we can make out. But you must have known that would happen."

"Yeah. But I didn't know for sure, even at the end."

"So what happened? How did you escape the infection, or whatever it was?"

"Sheer luck." Iverson asked for a drink. Clavain fetched him one, and at the same time had the room extrude a chair next to the bed.

"I didn't see much sign of luck," Clavain said.

"No; it was terrible. But I was the lucky one; that's all I meant. I don't know how much you know. We had to evacuate the outlying bases toward the end, when we couldn't keep more than one fusion reactor running." Iverson took a sip from the glass of water Clavain had brought him. "If we'd still had the machines to look after us..."

"Yes. That's something we never really understood." Clavain leant closer to the bed. "Those von Neumann machines were built to self-repair themselves, weren't they? We still don't see how they broke down."

Iverson eyed him. "They didn't. Break down, I mean."

"No? Then what happened?"

"We smashed them up. Like rebellious teenagers overthrowing parental control. The machines were nannying us, and we were sick of it. In hindsight, it wasn't such a good idea."

"Didn't the machines put up a fight?"

"Not exactly. I don't think the people that designed them ever thought they'd get trashed by the kids they'd lovingly cared for."

So, Clavain thought – whatever had happened here; whatever he went on to learn, it was clear that the Americans had been at least partially the authors of their own misfortunes. He still felt sympathy for them, but now it was cooler; tempered with something close to disgust. He wondered if that feeling of disappointed appraisal would have come so easily without Galiana's machines in his head. *It would be just a tiny step to go from feeling that way toward Iverson's people to feeling that way about the rest of humanity... and then I'd know that I'd truly attained Transenlightenment...*

Clavain snapped out of his morbid line of thinking. It was not Transenlightenment that engendered those feelings; just ancient, bone-deep cynicism.

"Well, there's no point dwelling on what was done years ago. But how did you survive?"

"After the evacuation, we realised that we'd left something behind – a spare component for the fusion reactor. So I went back for it, taking one of the planes. I landed just as a bad weather front was coming in, which kept me grounded there for two days. That was when the others began to get sick. It happened pretty quickly, and all I knew about it

was what I could figure out from the comm links back to the main base.”

“Tell me what you did figure out.”

“Not much,” Iverson said. “It was fast, and it seemed to attack the central nervous system. No one survived it. Those that didn’t die of it directly seemed to get themselves killed through accidents or sloppy procedure.”

“We noticed. Eventually someone died who was responsible for keeping the fusion reactor running properly. It didn’t blow up, did it?”

“No. Just spewed out a lot more neutrons than normal; too much for the shielding to contain. Then it went into emergency shutdown mode. Some people were killed by the radiation, but most died of the cold that came afterwards.”

“Hm. Except you.”

Iverson nodded. “If I hadn’t had to go back for that component, I’d have been one of them. Obviously, I couldn’t risk returning. Even if I could have got the reactor working again, there was still the problem of the contaminant.” He breathed in deeply, as if steeling himself to recollect what had happened next. “So I weighed my options, and decided dying – freezing myself – was my only hope. No one was going to come from Earth to help me, even if I could have kept myself alive. Not for decades, anyway. So I took a chance.”

“One that paid off.”

“Like I said, I was the lucky one.” Iverson took another sip from the glass Clavain had brought him. “Man, that tastes better than anything I’ve ever drunk in my life. What’s in this, by the way?”

“Just water. Glacial water. Purified, of course.”

Iverson nodded, slowly, and put the glass down next to his bed.

“Not thirsty now?”

“Quenched my thirst nicely, thank you.”

“Good.” Clavain stood up. “I’ll let you get some rest, Andrew. If there’s anything you need; anything we can do – just call out.”

“I’ll be sure to.”

Clavain smiled and walked to the door, observing Iverson’s obvious relief that the questioning session was over for now. But Iverson had said nothing incriminating, Clavain reminded himself, and his responses were entirely consistent with the fatigue and confusion anyone would feel after so long asleep – or dead, depending on how you defined Iverson’s period on ice. It was unfair to associate him with

Setterholm's death just because of a few indistinct marks gouged in ice, and the faint possibility that Setterholm had been murdered.

Still, Clavain paused before leaving the room. "One other thing, Andrew – just something that's been bothering me, and I wondered if you could help."

"Go ahead."

"Would the initials I, V and F mean anything to you?"

Iverson thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. "Sorry, Nevil. You've got me there."

"Well, it was just a shot in the dark," Clavain said.

Iverson was strong enough to walk around the next day. He insisted on exploring the rest of the base, not simply the parts of it which the Conjoiners had taken over. He wanted to see for himself the damage that he had heard about, and see the lists of the dead – and the manner in which they had died – which Clavain and his friends had assiduously compiled. Clavain kept a watchful eye on the man, aware of how emotionally traumatic the whole experience must be. He was bearing it well, but that could easily have been a front. Galiana's machines could tell a lot about how his brain was functioning, but they were unable to probe Iverson's state of mind at the resolution needed to map emotional wellbeing.

Clavain, meanwhile, strove as best he could to keep Iverson in the dark about the Conjoiners. He did not want to overwhelm Iverson with strangeness at this delicate time; did not want to shatter the man's illusion that he had been rescued by a group of 'normal' human beings. But it turned out to be easier than he had expected, as Iverson showed surprisingly little interest in the history he had missed. Clavain had gone as far as telling him that the *Sandra Voi* was technically a ship full of refugees, fleeing the aftermath of a war between various factions of solar-system humanity – but Iverson had done little more than nod, never probing Clavain for more details about the war. Once or twice Clavain had even alluded accidentally to the Transenlightenment – that shared consciousness state which the Conjoiners had reached – but Iverson had shown the same lack of interest. He was not even curious about the *Sandra Voi* herself; never once asking Clavain what the ship was like. It was not quite what Clavain had been expecting.

But there were rewards, too.

Iverson, it turned out, was fascinated by Felka, and Felka herself

seemed pleasantly amused by the newcomer. It was, perhaps, not all that surprising: Galiana and the others had been busy helping Felka grow the neural circuitry necessary for normal human interactions, adding new layers to supplant the functional regions which had never worked properly – but in all that time, they had never introduced her to another human being that she had not already met. And here was Iverson: not just a new voice but a new smell; a new face; a new way of walking – a deluge of new input for her starved mental routines. Clavain watched the way Felka latched onto Iverson when he entered a room; her attention snapping to him, her delight evident. And Iverson seemed perfectly happy to play the games that so wearied the others; the kinds of intricate challenge which Felka adored. For hours on end he watched the two of them lost in concentration; Iverson pulling mock faces of sorrow or – on the rare occasions when he beat her – extravagant joy. Felka responded in kind, her face more animated – more plausibly human – than Clavain had ever believed possible. She spoke more often in Iverson's presence than she had ever done in his, and the utterances she made more closely approximated well-formed, grammatically sound sentences than the disjointed shards of language Clavain had grown to recognise. It was like watching a difficult, backward child suddenly come alight in the presence of a skilled teacher. Clavain thought back to the time when he had rescued Felka from Mars, and how unlikely it had seemed then that she would ever grow into something resembling a normal adult human, as sensitised to others' feelings as she was to her own. Now, he could almost believe it would happen – yet half the distance she had come had been due to Iverson's influence, rather than his own.

Afterwards, when even Iverson had wearied of Felka's ceaseless demands for games, Clavain spoke to him quietly, away from the others.

"You're good with her, aren't you."

Iverson shrugged, as if the matter was of no great consequence to him. "Yeah. I like her. We both enjoy the same kinds of game. If there's a problem –"

He must have detected Clavain's irritation. "No – no problem at all." Clavain put a hand on his shoulder. "There's more to it than just games, though, you have to admit..."

"She's a pretty fascinating case, Nevil."

"I don't disagree. We value her highly." He flinched, aware of how

much the remark sounded like one of Galiana's typically flat statements. "But I'm puzzled. You've been revived after nearly a century asleep. We've come here by a ship that couldn't even have been considered a distant possibility in your own era. We've undergone massive social and technical upheavals in the last hundred years. There are things about us – things about me – I haven't told you yet. Things about *you* I haven't even told you yet."

"I'm just taking things one step at a time, that's all." Iverson shrugged and looked distantly past Clavain, through the window behind him. His gaze must have been skating across kilometres of ice toward Diadem's white horizon, unable to find a purchase. "I admit, I'm not really interested in technological innovations. I'm sure your ship's really nice, but... it's just applied physics. Just engineering. There may be some new quantum principles underlying your propulsion system, but if that's the case, it's probably just an elaborate curlicue on something that was already pretty baroque to begin with. You haven't smashed the light barrier, have you?" He read Clavain's expression accurately. "No – didn't think so. Maybe if you had..."

"So what exactly does interest you?"

Iverson seemed to hesitate before answering, but when he did speak Clavain had no doubt that he was telling the truth. There was a sudden, missionary fervour in his voice. "Emergence. Specifically, the emergence of complex, almost unpredictable, patterns from systems governed by a few, simple laws. Consciousness is an excellent example. A human mind's really just a web of simple neuronal cells wired together in a particular way. The laws governing the functioning of those individual cells aren't all that difficult to grasp – a cascade of well-studied electrical, chemical and enzymic processes. The tricky part is the wiring diagram. It certainly isn't encoded in DNA in any but the crudest sense. Otherwise why would a baby bother growing neural connections that are pruned down before birth? That'd be a real waste – if you had a perfect blueprint for the conscious mind, you'd only bother forming the connections you needed. No; the mind organises itself during growth, and that's why it needs so many more neurones than it'll eventually incorporate into functioning networks. It needs the raw material to work with, as it gropes its way toward a functioning consciousness. The pattern emerges, bootstrapping itself into existence, and the pathways that aren't used – or aren't as efficient as others – are discarded." Iverson paused. "But how this organisation happens really

isn't understood in any depth. Do you know how many neurones it takes to control the first part of a lobster's gut, Nevil? Have a guess, to the nearest hundred."

Clavain shrugged. "I don't know. Five hundred? A thousand?"

"No. Six. Not six hundred, just six. Six damned neurones. You can't get much simpler than that. But it took decades to understand how those six worked together, let alone how that particular network evolved. The problems aren't inseparable, either. You can't really hope to understand how ten billion neurones organise themselves into a functioning whole unless you understand how the whole actually functions. Oh, we've made some progress – we can tell you exactly which spinal neurones fire to make a lamprey swim, and how that firing pattern maps into muscle motion – but we're a long way from understanding how something as elusive as the concept of 'I' emerges in the developing human mind. Well, at least we were before I went under. You may be about to tell me you've achieved stunning progress in the last century, but something tells me you were too busy with social upheaval for that."

Clavain felt an urge to argue – angered by the man's tone – but suppressed it, willing himself into a state of serene acceptance. "You're probably right. We've made progress in the other direction – augmenting the mind as it is – but if we genuinely understood brain development, we wouldn't have ended up with a failure like Felka."

"Oh, I wouldn't call her a failure, Nevil."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Of course not." Now it was Iverson's turn to place a hand on Clavain's shoulder. "But you must see now why I find so Felka so fascinating. Her mind is damaged – you told me that yourself, and there's no need to go into the details – but despite that damage, despite the vast abysses in her head, she's beginning to self-assemble the kinds of higher-level neural routines we all take for granted. It's as if the patterns were always there as latent potentials, and it's only now that they're beginning to emerge. Isn't that fascinating? Isn't it something worthy of study?"

Delicately, Clavain removed the man's hand from his shoulder. "I suppose so. I had hoped, however, that there might be something more to it than study."

"I've offended you, and I apologize. My choice of phrase was poor. Of course I care for her."

Clavain felt suddenly awkward, as if he had misjudged a fundamentally decent man. "I understand. Look, ignore what I said."

"Yeah, of course. It – um – will be all right for me to see her again, won't it?"

Clavain nodded. "I'm sure she'd miss you if you weren't around."

Over the next few days Clavain left the two of them to their games, only rarely eavesdropping to see how things were going on. Iverson had asked permission to show Felka around some of the other areas of the base, and after some initial misgivings Clavain and Galiana had both agreed to his request. After that, long hours went by when the two of them were not to be found. Clavain had tracked them once, watching as Iverson led the girl into a disused lab and showed her intricate molecular models. They clearly delighted her; vast fuzzy holographic assemblages of atoms and chemical bonds which floated in the air like Chinese dragons. Wearing cumbersome gloves and goggles, Iverson and Felka were able to manipulate the mega-molecules; forcing them to fold into minimum-energy configurations which brute-force computation would have struggled to predict. As they gestured into the air and made the dragons contort and twist, Clavain watched for the inevitable moment when Felka would grow bored and demand something harder. But it never came. Afterwards – when she had returned to the fold, her face shining with wonder – it was as if Felka had undergone a spiritual experience. Iverson had shown her something which her mind could not instantly encompass; a problem too large and subtle to be stormed in a flash of intuitive insight.

Seeing that, Clavain again felt guilty about the way he had spoken to Iverson, and knew that he had not completely put aside his doubts about the message Setterholm had left in the ice. But – the riddle of the helmet aside – there was no reason to think that Iverson might be a murderer beyond those haphazard marks. Clavain had looked into Iverson's personnel records from the time before he was frozen, and the man's history was flawless. He had been a solid, professional member of the expedition, well-liked and trusted by the others. Granted, the records were patchy, and since they were stored digitally they could have been doctored to almost any extent. But then much the same story was told by the hand-written diary and verbal log entries of some of the other victims. Andrew Iverson's name came up again and again as a man regarded with affection by his fellows; most certainly

not someone capable of murder. Best, then, to discard the evidence of the marks and give him the benefit of the doubt.

Clavain spoke of his fears to Galiana, and while she listened to him, she only came back with exactly the same rational counter-arguments that he had already provided for himself.

"The problem is," Galiana said, "that the man you found in the crevasse could have been severely confused; perhaps even hallucinatory. That message he left – if it was a message, and not a set of random gouge marks he left while convulsing – could mean anything at all."

"We don't know that Setterholm was confused," Clavain protested.

"We don't? Then why didn't he make sure his helmet was on properly? It can't have been latched fully, or it wouldn't have rolled off him when he hit the bottom of the crevasse."

"Yes," Clavain said. "But I'm reasonably sure he wouldn't have been able to leave the base if his helmet hadn't been latched."

"In which case he must have undone it afterwards."

"Yes, but there's no reason for him to have done that, unless..."

Galiana gave him a thin-lipped smile. "Unless he was confused. Back to square one, Nevil."

"No," he said, conscious that he could almost see the shape of something; something that was close to the truth if not the truth itself.

"There's another possibility, one I hadn't thought of until now."

Galiana squinted at him, that rare frown appearing. "Which is?"

"That someone else removed his helmet for him."

They went down into the bowels of the base. In the dead space of the equipment bays Galiana became ill at ease. She was not used to being out of communicational range of her colleagues. Normally systems buried in the environment picked up neural signals from individuals, amplifying and re-broadcasting them to other people, but there were no such systems here. Clavain could hear Galiana's thoughts, but they came in weakly, like a voice from the sea almost drowned by the roar of surf.

"This had better be worth it," Galiana said.

"I want to show you the airlock," Clavain answered. "I'm sure Setterholm must have left here with his helmet properly attached."

"You still think he was murdered?"

"I think it's a remote possibility that we should be very careful not to discount."

"But why would anyone kill a man whose only interest was a lot of harmless ice worms?"

"That's been bothering me as well."

"And?"

"I think I have an answer. Half of one, anyway. What if his interest in the worms brought him into conflict with the others? I'm thinking about the reactor."

Galiana nodded. "They'd have needed to harvest ice for it."

"Which Setterholm might have seen as interfering with the worms' ecology. Maybe he made a nuisance of himself and someone decided to get rid of him."

"That would be a pretty extreme way of dealing with him."

"I know," Clavain said, stepping through a connecting door into the transport bay. "I said I had half an answer, not all of one."

As soon as he was through he knew something was amiss. The bay was not as it had been before, when he had come down here scouting for clues. He dropped his train of thought immediately, focussing only on the now.

The room was much, much colder than it should have been. And lighter. There was an oblong of chill blue daylight spilling across the floor, from the huge open door of one of the vehicle exit ramps. Clavain looked at it in mute disbelief, wanting it to be a temporary glitch in his vision. But Galiana was with him, and she had seen it too.

"Someone's left the base," she said.

Clavain looked out across the ice. He could see the wake which the vehicle had left in the snow, arcing out toward the horizon. For a long moment they stood at the top of the ramp, frozen into inaction. Clavain's mind screamed with the implications. He had never really liked the idea of Iverson taking Felka away with him elsewhere in the base, but he had never considered the possibility that he might take her into one of the blind zones. From here, Iverson must have known enough little tricks to open a surface door, start a rover and leave, without any of the Conjoiners realising.

"Nevil, listen to me," Galiana said. "He doesn't necessarily mean her any harm. He might just want to show her something."

He turned to her. "There isn't time to arrange a shuttle. That trick you did a few days ago – talking to the door? Do you think you can manage it again?"

"I don't need to. The door's already open."

Clavain nodded at one of the other rovers, hulking behind them. "It's not the door I'm thinking about."

Galiana was disappointed; it took her three minutes to convince the machine to start, rather than the few dozen seconds she said it should have taken. She was, she told Clavain, in serious danger of getting rusty at this sort of thing. Clavain just thanked the gods that there had been no mechanical sabotage to the rover; no amount of neural intervention could have fixed that.

"That's another thing that makes it look like this is just an innocent trip outside," Galiana said. "If he'd really wanted to abduct her, it wouldn't have taken much additional effort to stop us following him. If he'd closed the door, as well, we might not even have noticed he was gone."

"Haven't you ever heard of reverse psychology?" Clavain said.

"I still can't see Iverson as a murderer, Nevil." She checked his expression, her own face calm despite her driving the machine. Her hands were folded in her lap. She was less isolated now, having used the rover's comm systems to establish a link back to the other Conjoiners. "Setterholm, maybe. The obsessive loner and all that. Just a shame he's the dead one."

"Yes," Clavain said, uneasily.

The rover itself ran on six wheels; a squat, pressurised hull perched low between absurd-looking balloon tyres. Galiana gunned them hard down the ramp and across the ice, trusting the machine to glide harmlessly over the smaller crevasses. It seemed reckless, but if they followed the trail that Iverson had left, they were almost guaranteed not to hit any fatal obstacles.

"Did you get anywhere with the source of the sickness?" Clavain asked.

"No breakthroughs yet..."

"Then here's a suggestion. Can you read my visual memory accurately?" Clavain did not need an answer. "While you were finding Iverson's body, I was looking over the lab samples. There were a lot of terrestrial organisms there. Could one of those have been responsible?"

"You'd better replay the memory."

Clavain did; picturing himself looking over the rows of culture dishes, test-tubes and gel-slides; concentrating especially on those that had come from Earth rather than the locally-obtained samples. In his mind's eye the sample names refused to snap into clarity, but the

machines which Galiana had seeded through his mind would already be locating the eidetically-stored short-term memories and retrieving them with a clarity beyond the capabilities of Clavain's own brain.

"Now see if there's anything there which might do the job."

"A terrestrial organism?" Galiana sounded surprised. "Well, there might be something there, but I can't see how it could have spread beyond the laboratory unless someone wanted it to."

"I think that's exactly what happened."

"Sabotage?"

"Yes."

"Well, we'll know sooner or later. I've passed the information to the others. They'll get back to me if they find a candidate. But I still don't see why anyone would sabotage the entire base, even if it was possible. Overthrowing the von Neumann machines is one thing... mass suicide is another."

"I don't think it was mass suicide. Mass murder, maybe."

"And Iverson's your main suspect?"

"He survived, didn't he? And Setterholm scrawled a message in the ice just before he died. It must have been a warning about him." But even as he spoke, he knew there was a second possibility; one that he could not quite focus on.

Galiana swerved the rover to avoid a particularly deep and yawning chasm, shaded with vivid veins of turquoise blue.

"There's a small matter of missing motive."

Clavain looked ahead, wondering if the thing he saw glinting in the distance was a trick of the eye. "I'm working on that," he said.

Galiana halted them next to the other rover. The two machines were parked at the lip of a slope-sided depression in the ice. It was not really steep enough to call a crevasse, although it was at least thirty or forty metres deep. From the rover's cab it was not possible to see all the way into the powdery-blue depths, although Clavain could certainly see the fresh footprints which descended into them. Up on the surface marks like that would have been scoured away by the wind in days or hours, so these prints were very fresh. There were, he observed, two sets – someone heavy and confident and someone lighter, less sure of her footing.

Before they had taken the rover they had made sure that were two suits aboard it. They struggled into them, fiddling with the latches.

"If I'm right," Clavain said, "this kind of precaution isn't really necessary. Not for avoiding the sickness, anyway. But better safe than sorry."

"Excellent timing," Galiana said, snapping down her helmet and giving it a quarter twist to lock into place. "They've just pulled something from your memory, Nevil. There's a family of single-celled organisms called dinoflagellates, one of which was present in the lab where we found Iverson. Something called *pfiesteria piscicida*. Normally it's an ambush predator that attacks fish."

"Could it have been responsible for the madness?"

"It's at least a strong contender. It has a taste for mammalian tissue as well. If it gets into the human nervous system it produces memory loss, disorientation – as well as a host of physical effects. It could have been dispersed as a toxic aerosol; released into the base's air-system. Someone with access to the lab's facilities could have turned it from something merely nasty to something deadly, I think."

"We should have pin-pointed it, Galiana. Didn't we swab the air ducts?"

"Yes, but we weren't looking for something terrestrial. In fact we were excluding terrestrial organisms; only filtering for the basic biochemical building blocks of Diadem life. We just weren't thinking in criminal terms."

"More fool us," Clavain said.

Suited now, they stepped outside. Clavain began to regret his haste in leaving the base so quickly; at having to make do with these old suits and lacking any means of defence. Wanting something in his hand for moral support, he examined the equipment stowed around the outside of the rover until he found an ice-pick. It would not be much of a weapon, but he felt better for it.

"You won't need that," Galiana said.

"What if Iverson turns nasty?"

"You still won't need it."

But he kept it anyway – an ice-pick was an ice-pick, after all – and the two of them walked to the point where the icy ground began to curve over. Clavain examined the wrist of his suit, studying the cryptic and old-fashioned matrix of keypads which controlled the suit's functions. On a whim he pressed something promising and was gratified when he felt crampons spike from the soles of his boots, anchoring him to the ice.

“Iverson!” he shouted. “Felka!”

But sound carried poorly beyond his helmet, and the ceaseless, whipping wind would have snatched his words away from the crevasse. There was nothing for it but to make the difficult trek into the blue depths. He led the way, his heart pounding in his chest, the old suit awkward and top-heavy. He almost lost his footing once or twice, and had to stop to catch his breath once he reached the level bottom of the depression, sweat running into his eyes.

He looked around. The footprints led horizontally for ten or fifteen metres, weaving between fragile, curtain-like formations of opal ice. On some clinical level he acknowledged that the place had a sinister charm – he imagined the wind breathing through those curtains of ice, making ethereal music – but the need to find Felka eclipsed such considerations. He focused only on the low, dark blue hole of a tunnel in the ice ahead of them. The footprints vanished into the tunnel.

“If the bastard’s taken her...” Clavain said, tightening his grip on the pick. He switched on his helmet light and stooped into the tunnel, Galiana behind him. It was hard going; the tunnel wriggled, rose and descended for many tens of metres, and Clavain was unable to decide whether it was some weird natural feature – carved, perhaps, by a hot sub-glacial river – or whether it had been dug by hand, much more recently. The walls were veined by worm tracks; a marbling like an immense magnification of the human retina. Here and there Clavain saw the dark smudges of worms moving through cracks that were very close to the surface, though he knew it was necessary to stare at them for long seconds before any movement was discernible. He groaned, the stooping becoming painful, and then the tunnel widened out dramatically. He realised that he had emerged in a much larger space.

It was still underground, although the ceiling glowed with the blue translucence of filtered daylight. The covering of ice could not have been more than a metre or two thick; a thin shell stretched like a dome over tens of metres of yawning nothing. Nearly sheer walls of delicately patterned ice rose up from a level, footprint-dappled floor.

“Ah,” said Iverson, who was standing near one wall of the chamber. “You decided to join us.”

Clavain felt a stab of relief, seeing that Felka was standing not far from him, next to a piece of equipment Clavain failed to recognise. Felka seemed unharmed. She turned toward him, the peculiar play of

light and shade on her helmeted face making her seem older than she was.

"Nevil," he heard Felka say. "Hello."

He crossed the ice, fearful that the whole marvellous edifice was about to come crashing down on them all.

"Why did you bring her here, Iverson?"

"There's something I wanted to show her. Something I knew she'd like, even more than the other things." He turned to the smaller figure near him. "Isn't that right, Felka?"

"Yes."

"And do you like it?"

Her answer was matter of fact, but it was closer to conversation than anything Clavain had ever heard from her lips.

"Yes. I do like it."

Galiana stepped ahead of him and extended a hand to the girl. "Felka? I'm glad you like this place. I like it too. But now it's time to come back home."

Clavain steeled himself for an argument; some kind of show-down between the two women, but to his immense relief Felka walked casually toward Galiana.

"I'll take her back to the rover," Galiana said. "I want to make sure she hasn't had any problems breathing with that old suit on."

A transparent lie, but it would suffice.

Then she spoke to Clavain. It was a tiny thing, almost inconsequential, but she placed it directly in his head.

And he understood what he would have to do.

When they were alone, Clavain said: "You killed him."
"Setterholm?"

"No. You couldn't have killed Setterholm because you *are* Setterholm." Clavain looked up, the arc of his helmet light tracing the filamentary patterning until it became too tiny to resolve; blurring into an indistinct haze of detail that curved over into the ceiling itself. It was like admiring a staggeringly ornate fresco.

"Nevil – do me a favour? Check the settings on your suit, in case you're not getting enough oxygen?"

"There's nothing wrong with my suit." Clavain smiled, the irony of it all delicious. "In fact, it was the suit which really tipped me off. When you pushed Iverson into the crevasse, his helmet came off. That

couldn't have happened unless it wasn't fixed on properly in the first place – and *that* couldn't have happened unless someone had removed it after the two of you left the base.”

Setterholm – he was sure the man was Setterholm – snorted derisively, but Clavain continued speaking.

“Here's my stab at what happened, for what it's worth. You needed to swap identities with Iverson because Iverson had no obvious motive for murdering the others, whereas Setterholm certainly did.”

“And I don't suppose you have any idea what that motive might have been?”

“Give me time; I'll get there eventually. Let's just deal with the lone murder first. Changing the electronic records was easy enough – you could even swap Iverson's picture and medical data for your own – but that was only part of it. You also needed to get Iverson into your clothes and suit, so that we'd assume the body in the crevasse belonged to you, Setterholm. I don't know exactly how you did it.”

“Then perhaps...”

Clavain carried on. “But my guess is you let him catch a dose of the bug you let loose in the main base – *pfisteria*, wasn't it? – then followed him while he went walking outside. You jumped him, knocked him down on the ice and got him out of the suit and into yours. He was probably unconscious by then, I suppose. But then he must have started coming round, or you panicked for another reason. You jammed the helmet on and pushed him into the crevasse. Maybe if all that had happened was his helmet coming off, I wouldn't have dwelled on it. But he wasn't dead, and he lived long enough to scratch a message in the ice. I thought it concerned his murderer, but I was wrong. He was trying to tell me who he was. Not Setterholm, but Iverson.”

“Nice theory.” Setterholm glanced down at a display screen in the back of the machine which squatted next to him. Mounted on a tripod, it resembled a huge pair of binoculars, pointed with a slight elevation toward one wall of the chamber.

“Sometimes, a theory's all you need. That's quite a toy you've got there, by the way. What is it, some kind of ground-penetrating radar?”

Setterholm brushed aside the question. “If I was him – why would I have done it? Just because I was interested in the ice-worms?”

“It's simple,” Clavain said, hoping the uncertainty he felt was not apparent in his voice. “The others weren't as convinced as you were of the worms' significance. Only you saw them for what they were.” He

was treading carefully here; masking his ignorance of Setterholm's deeper motives by playing on the man's vanity.

"Clever of me if I did."

"Oh, yes. I wouldn't doubt that at all. And it must have driven you to distraction, that you could see what the others couldn't. Naturally, you wanted to protect the worms, when you saw them under threat."

"Sorry, Nevil, but you're going to have to try a lot harder than that." He paused and patted the machine's matt-silver casing, clearly unable to pretend that he did not know what it was. "It's radar, yes. It can probe the interior of the glacier with sub-centimetre resolution, to a depth of several tens of metres."

"Which would be rather useful if you wanted to study the worms."

Setterholm shrugged. "I suppose so. A climatologist interested in glacial flow might also have use for the information."

"Like Iverson?" Clavain took a step closer to Setterholm and the radar equipment. He could see the display more clearly now: a fibrous tangle of mainly green lines slowly spinning in space, with a denser structure traced out in red near its heart. "Like the man you killed?"

"I told you, I'm Iverson."

Clavain stepped toward him with the ice-pick held double-handed, but when he was a few metres from the man he veered past and made his way to the wall. Setterholm had flinched, but he had not seemed unduly worried that Clavain was about to try and hurt him.

"I'll be frank with you," Clavain said, raising the pick. "I don't really understand what it is about the worms."

"What are you going to do?"

"This."

Clavain smashed the pick against the wall as hard as he was able. It was enough: a layer of ice fractured noisily away, sliding down like a miniature avalanche to land in pieces at his feet; each fist-sized shard veined with worm trails.

"Stop," Setterholm said.

"Why? What do you care, if you're not interested in the worms?"

Clavain smashed the ice again, dislodging another layer.

"You..." Setterholm paused. "You could bring the whole place down on us if you're not careful."

Clavain raised the pick again, letting out a groan of effort as he swung. This time he put all his weight behind the swing; all his fury, and a chunk the size of his upper body calved noisily from the wall.

"I'll take that risk," Clavain said.

"No. You've got to stop."

"Why? It's only ice."

"No!"

Setterholm rushed him, knocking him to his feet. The ice-pick spun from his hand and the two of them crashed into the ground, Setterholm landing on his chest. He pressed his faceplate close to Clavain's, every bead of sweat on his forehead gleaming like a precise little jewel.

"I told you to stop."

Clavain found it hard to speak with the pressure on his chest, but forced out the words with effort. "I think we can dispense with the charade that you're Iverson now, can't we?"

"You shouldn't have harmed it."

"No... and neither should the others, eh? But they needed that ice very badly."

Now Setterholm's voice held a tone of dull resignation. "The reactor, you mean?"

"Yes. The fusion plant." Clavain allowed himself to feel some small satisfaction, before adding: "Actually, it was Galiana who made the connection, not me. That the reactor ran on ice, I mean. And after all the outlying bases had been evacuated, they had to keep everyone alive back at the main one. And that meant more load on the reactor. Which meant it needed more ice, of which there was hardly a shortage in the immediate vicinity."

"But they couldn't be allowed to harvest the ice. Not after what I'd discovered."

Clavain nodded, observing that the reversion from Iverson to Setterholm was now complete.

"No. The ice was precious, wasn't it. Infinitely more so than anyone else realised. Without that ice the worms would have died..."

"You don't understand either, do you?"

Clavain swallowed. "I think I understand more than the others, Setterholm. You realised that the worms—"

"It wasn't the damned worms!" He had shouted – Setterholm had turned on a loudspeaker function in his suit which Clavain had not located yet – and for a moment the words crashed around the great ice chamber, threatening to start the tiny chain reaction of fractures which would collapse the whole. But when silence had returned – disturbed only by the rasp of Clavain's breathing – nothing had changed.

"It wasn't the worms?"

"No." Setterholm was calmer now, as if the point had been made. "No – not really. They were important, yes – but as low-level elements in a much more complex system. Don't you understand?"

Clavain strove for honesty. "I never really understood what it was that fascinated you about them. They seemed quite simple to me."

Setterholm removed his weight from Clavain and rose up on to his feet again. "That's because they are. A child could grasp the biology of a single ice worm in an afternoon. Felka did, in fact. Oh, she's wonderful, Nevil." Setterholm's teeth flashed a smile that chilled Clavain. "The things she could unravel... she isn't a failure; not at all. I think she's something miraculous we barely comprehend."

"Unlike the worms."

"Yes. They're like clockwork toys; programmed with a few simple rules." Setterholm stooped down and grabbed the ice-pick for himself. "They always respond in exactly the same way to the same input stimulus. And the kinds of stimuli they respond to are simple in the extreme: a few gradations of temperature; a few biochemical cues picked up from the ice itself. But the emergent properties..."

Clavain forced himself to a sitting position. "There's that word again."

"It's the network, Nevil. The system of tunnels the worms dig through the ice. Don't you understand? That's where the real complexity lies. That's what I was always more interested in. Of course, it took me years to see it for what it was..."

"Which was?"

"A self-evolving network. One that has the capacity to adapt; to learn."

"It's just a series of channels bored through ice, Setterholm."

"No. It's infinitely more than that." The man craned his neck as far as the architecture of his suit would allow, revelling in the palatial beauty of the chamber. "There are two essential elements in any neural network, Nevil. Connections and nodes are necessary, but not enough. The connections must be capable of being weighted; adjusted in strength according to usefulness. And the nodes must be capable of processing the inputs from the connections in a deterministic manner, like logic gates." He gestured around the chamber. "Here, there is no absolutely sharp distinction between the connections and the nodes, but the essences remain. The worms lay down secretions when they

travel, and those secretions determine how other worms make use of the same channels; whether they utilise one route or another. There are many determining factors – the sexes of the worms, the seasons; others I won't bore you with. But the point is simple. The secretions – and the effect they have on the worms – mean that the topology of the network is governed by subtle emergent principles. And the breeding tangles function as logic gates; processing the inputs from their connecting nodes according to the rules of worm sex, caste and hierarchy. It's messy, slow and biological – but the end result is that the worm colony as a whole functions as a neural network. It's a program that the worms themselves are running, even though any given worm hasn't a clue that it's a part of a larger whole."

Clavain absorbed all that and thought carefully before asking the question that occurred to him. "How does it change?"

"Slowly," Setterholm said. "Sometimes routes fall into disuse because the secretions inhibit other worms from using them. Gradually, the glacier seals them shut. At the same time other cracks open by chance – the glacier's own fracturing imposes a constant chaotic background on the network – or the worms bore new holes. Seen in slow-motion – our time frame – almost nothing ever seems to happen, let alone change. But imagine speeding things up, Nevil. Imagine if we could see the way the network has changed over the last century, or the last thousand years... imagine what we might find. A constantly evolving loom of connections; shifting and changing eternally. Now. Does that remind you of anything?"

Clavain answered in the only way that he knew would satisfy Setterholm. "A mind, I suppose. A newborn one, still forging neural connections."

"Yes. Oh, you'd doubtless like to point out that the network is isolated, so it can't be responding to stimuli beyond itself – but we can't know that for certain. A season is like a heartbeat here, Nevil! What we think of as geologically slow processes – a glacier cracking; two glaciers colliding – those events could be as forceful as caresses and sounds to a blind child." He paused and glanced at the screen in the back of the imaging radar. "That's what I wanted to find out. A century ago, I was able to study the network for a handful of decades. And I found something that astonished me. The colony moves; reshapes itself constantly, as the glacier shifts and breaks up. But no matter how radically the network changes its periphery; no matter how thoroughly

the loom evolves, there are deep structures inside the network that are always preserved.” Setterholm’s finger traced the red mass at the heart of the green tunnel map. “In the language of network topology, the tunnel system is scale-free rather than exponential. It’s the hallmark of a highly organised network with a few rather specialised processing centres – hubs, if you like. This is one. I believe its function is to cause the whole network to move away from a widening fracture in the glacier. It would take me much more than a century to know for sure, although everything I’ve seen here confirms what I thought originally. I mapped other structures in other colonies, too. They can be huge; spread across cubic kilometres of ice. But they always persist. Don’t you see what that means? The network has begun to develop specialised areas of function. It’s begun to process information, Nevil. It’s begun to creep its way toward thought.”

Clavain looked around him once more, trying to see the chamber in the new light that Setterholm had revealed. Think not of the worms as entities in their own right, he thought, but as electrical signals, ghosting along synaptic pathways in a neural network made of solid ice...

He shivered. It was the only appropriate response.

“Even if the network processes information...there’s no reason to think it could ever become conscious.”

“Why, Nevil? What’s the fundamental difference between perceiving the universe via electrical signals transmitted along nerve tissue, and via fracture patterns moving through a vast block of ice?”

“I suppose you have a point.”

“I had to save them, Nevil. Not just the worms, but the network they were a part of. We couldn’t come all this way and just wipe out the first thinking thing we’d ever encountered in the universe, just because it didn’t fit into our neat little preconceived notions of what alien thought would actually be like.”

“But saving the worms meant killing everyone else.”

“You think I didn’t realise that? You think it didn’t agonise me to do what I had to do? I’m a human being, Nevil – not a monster. I knew exactly what I was doing and I knew exactly what it would make me look like to anyone who came here afterwards.”

“But you still did it.”

“Put yourself in my shoes. How would you have acted?”

Clavain opened his mouth, expecting an answer to spring to mind. But nothing came; not for several seconds. He was thinking about

Setterholm's question, more thoroughly than he had done so far. Until then he had satisfied himself with the quiet, unquestioned assumption that he would not have acted the way Setterholm had done. But could he really be so sure? Setterholm, after all, had truly believed that the network formed a sentient whole; a thinking being. Possessing that knowledge must have made him feel divinely chosen; sanctioned to commit any act to preserve the fabulously rare thing he had found. And he had, after all, been right.

"You haven't answered me."

"That's because I thought the question warranted something more than a flippant answer, Setterholm. I like to think I wouldn't have acted the way you did, but I don't suppose I can ever be sure of that."

Clavain stood up, inspecting his suit for damage; relieved that the scuffle had not injured him.

"You'll never know."

"No. I never will. But one thing's clear enough. I've heard you talk; heard the fire in your words. You believe in your network, and yet you still couldn't make the others see it. I doubt I'd have been able to do much better, and I doubt that I'd have thought of a better way to preserve what you'd found."

"Then you'd have killed everyone, just like I did?"

The realisation of it was like a hard burden someone had just placed on his shoulders. It was so much easier to feel incapable of such acts. But Clavain had been a soldier. He had killed more people than he could remember, even though those days had been a long time ago. It was really a lot less difficult to do, when you had a cause to believe in.

And Setterholm had definitely had a cause.

"Perhaps," Clavain said. "Perhaps I might have, yes."

He heard Setterholm sigh. "I'm glad. For a moment there..."

"For a moment what?"

"When you showed up with that pick, I thought you were planning to kill me." Setterholm hefted the pick, much as Clavain had done earlier. "You wouldn't have done that, would you? I don't deny that what I did was regrettable, but I had to do it."

"I understand."

"But what happens to me now? I can stay with you all, can't I?"

"We probably won't be staying on Diadem, I'm afraid. And I don't think you'd really want to come with us; not if you knew what we're really like."

"You can't leave me alone here, not again."

"Why not? You'll have your worms. And you can always kill yourself again and see who shows up next." Clavain turned to leave.

"No. You can't go now."

"I'll leave your rover on the surface. Maybe there are some supplies in it. Just don't come anywhere near the base again. You won't find a welcome there."

"I'll die out here," Setterholm said.

"Start getting used to it."

He heard Setterholm's feet scuffing across the ice; a walk breaking into a run. Clavain turned around calmly, unsurprised to see Setterholm coming towards him with the pick raised high, as a weapon.

Clavain sighed.

He reached into Setterholm's skull; addressing the webs of machines which still floated in the man's head, and instructed them to execute their host in a sudden, painless orgy of neural deconstruction. It was not a trick he could have done an hour ago, but after Galiana had planted the method in his mind, it was easy as sneezing. For a moment he understood what it must feel like to be a god.

And in that same moment Setterholm dropped the ice-pick, and stumbled, falling forward onto one end of the pick's blade. It pierced his faceplate, but by then he was dead anyway.

"What I said was the truth," Clavain said. "I might have killed them as well, just like I said. I don't like to think so, but I can't say it isn't in me. No; I don't blame you for that; not at all."

With his boot he began to kick a dusting of frost over the dead man's body. It would be too much bother to remove Setterholm from this place, and the machines inside him would sterilise his body, ensuring that none of his cells ever contaminated the glacier. And, as Clavain had told himself only a few days earlier, there were worse places to die than here. Or worse places to be left for dead, anyway.

When he was done; when what remained of Setterholm was just an ice-covered mound in the middle of cavern, Clavain addressed him for one final time.

"But that doesn't make it right, either. It was still murder, Setterholm." He kicked a final divot of ice over the corpse. "Someone had to pay for it." ●

THE ARCHIVE

INTRODUCTION

These pages list information and material of interest to SF readers. Please send items to mail@spectrumpublishing.com or to Spectrum Publishing, 53 Waverley Park, Kirkintilloch, Glasgow, G66 2BL, UK.

BOOKS

Mark Anthony - The Keep of Fire

(Earthlight; 2000; A-pbk; 442 pp.; ISBN 0-671-02884-7; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Book two of 'The Last Rune'.

Tom Arden - Sisterhood of the Blue Storm

(Gollancz; 2000; Hdbk; 558 pp.; ISBN 0-575-06373-4; £17.99)

Fantasy novel. 'Fourth Book of The Orokon'.

Tom Arden - Sultan and the Moon and Stars

(Millennium; 2000; A-pbk; 681 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-988-0; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. 'Third Book of The Orokon'.

Steve Aylett - Atom

(Phoenix House; 2000; Hdbk; 137 pp.; ISBN 1-861591-24-1; £9.99)

This short novel has positive quotes from Michael Moorcock – 'This is toon-noir... as on the button as tomorrow's news' – so I gave it a go. And gave up half way through. This reads like a private-eye and gangsters comic book converted into text – and not a very interesting one at that. Lightweight in content but style-heavy.

Stephen Baxter - Deep Future

(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 215 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07195-8; £18.00)

Collection of science essays.

Carol Berg - Transformation

(Orbit; 2001; C-pbk; 506 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-075-X; £9.99)

Fantasy novel. Book one of 'The Rai-Kirah'.

James Bibby - Shapestone

(Millennium; 2000; A-pbk; 214 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-930-9; £5.99)

Humorous Fantasy novel.

Terry Bisson - The X Files #16 - Miracle Man

(HarperCollins; 2000; A-pbk; 124 pp.; ISBN 0-00-648355-0; £3.99)

Spin off novella based on an episode from the popular TV series.

I'm not sure that novelising teleplays is a good idea, however. I mean, who is it aimed at? People too lazy to watch TV? There is an economic factor to consider too: at £3.99 an episode wouldn't it be cheaper for fans to buy the video or DVD box sets and own the actual show itself?

Getting beyond this, I'm also not sold on one of the genre's talented short story writers (*Macs*) wasting his time on this kind of thing. I know writers have to eat but can they not do something slightly less distasteful, such as selling their organs? More seriously, and having read through the first couple of chapters, there is none of his talent on show here: the writing style is sparse, staccato – telegraphic, even. One to miss.

Ray Bradbury - The Machineries of Joy

(Earthlight; 2000; A-pbk; 255 pp.; ISBN 0-671-03771-4; £5.99)

Twenty-one stories from 1949 to 1964. Acknowledgements for around two-thirds. What about the others?

Chris Bunch - The Empire Stone

(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 359 pp.; ISBN 0-84149-033-4; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. 'Stand-alone fantasy epic'.

Octavia Butler - Wild Seed

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 248 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07145-1; £9.99)

1980 Collectors' Edition novel. Book one of the 'Patternist' series.

Orson Scott Card - Alvin Journeyman

(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 400 pp.; ISBN 0-84149-029-6; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Book 4 of 'The Tales of Alvin Maker'. I read most of what this writer produced up until the second 'Ender' novel and then drifted away for some reason. Strange, as Card is a gifted and capable writer. A pity this is volume four – if it were volume one I would have definitely made the effort to get reacquainted.

Mark Chadbourn - Darkest Hour

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 467 pp.; ISBN 0-575-06903-1; £10.99)

Fantasy novel. Book 2 of 'The Age of Misrule'.

Arthur C. Clarke - The Collected Stories

(Gollancz; 2000; Hdbk; 966 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07065-X; £20.00)

An omnibus volume that assembles seven previous collections and a number of uncollected works. I don't usually have a good memory for short stories but a number of the titles bought instant recognition: *History Lesson*, *The Nine Billion Names of God*, *The Star*, *A Meeting With Medusa*, etc. Definitely one for putting at your bedside and dipping into over time. A must for any SF fan's library.

Arthur C. Clarke - Profiles of the Future

(Indigo; 2000; B-pbk; 213pp.; ISBN 0-575-40277-6; £7.99)

Collection of revised science essays first published in 1962.

John Crowley - Beasts

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 184 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07143-5; £9.99)

Collectors' Edition novel from 1976.

Andrew Darlington - Euroshima Mon Amour

(Hilltop Press; Saddle Bound; 48 pgs; ISBN 0905262-27-1; £3.99)

SF Poetry isn't usually my cup of tea but, for those of you who are interested, here is a chapbook containing 32 of them. What struck me as interesting is the number of times they have each been reprinted (11 times for *After the Raid!*) Available from: Hilltop Press, 4 Nowell Place, Almonbury, Huddersfield, W. Yorks, HD5 8PB.

L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt - The Compleat Enchanter

(Millennium; 2000; B-pbk; 532 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-757-8; £6.99)

#10 in the Fantasy Masterworks series is a collection of the five 'Harold Shea' stories that first appeared in *Unknown* in the 1940s. Having enjoyed Marvin Kaye's 'The Incredible Umbrella' stories in the late seventies' *Fantastic*, I subsequently tried the first of this series (*The Roaring Trumpet*) but found it of middling quality. As this book is considered a classic by many, I shall have to give it another go.

Samuel R. Delany - Nova

(Millennium; 2000; B-pbk; 224 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-742-X; £6.99)

#37 in the SF Masterworks series is a 1968 novel that was the last one from the early period of Delany's career. Next up would be the 1975 epic *Dhalgren*...

Philip K. Dick - Now Wait For Last Year

(Millennium; 2000; B-pbk; 225 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-701-2; £6.99)

#36 in the SF Masterworks series. 1975 revision of 1966 novel?

Sara Douglas - Crusader

(Voyager; 2000; A-pbk; 584 pp.; ISBN 0-00-648619-3; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Book three of 'The Wayfarer Redemption'.

David Drake - Servant of the Dragoth

(Millennium; 2000; A-pbk; 612 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-950-3; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Third book of 'Lord of the Isles' series.

Raymond E. Feist - Krondor: Tear of the Gods

(Gollancz; 2000; Hdbk; 372 pp.; ISBN 0-00-224680-5; £17.99)

Fantasy novel. Third book in 'The Riftwar Legacy'.

Shug Hanlan - Hi Bonnybrig and other Greetings
(11:9; 2000; C-pbk; 176 pp.; ISBN 1-903238-16-1; £9.99)

Collection from a new Scottish publisher (11:9, Suite 303a, The Pentagon Centre, 36 Washington Suite, Glasgow, G3 8AZ) that contains the title novella (about half the book) and other shorter pieces. Apparently set in a satirical version of Bonnybridge, the novella contains SFnal touches (such as occasional UFO sightings).

Robin Hobb - The Liveship Traders
(Voyager; A-pbk; 903 pp., ISBN 0-00-649887-6; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. 'Ship of Destiny' Book 3.

Cecelia Holland - Floating Worlds
(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 542 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07142-7; £12.99)

Collectors' Edition novel from 1975. This is a long novel from a time when they were quite a rarity. It would seem to be a Space Opera à la early Le Guin.

K. W. Jeter - Bladerunner 4: Eye and Talon
(Gollancz; 2000; Hdbk; 236 pp.; ISBN 0-575-06865-5; £16.99)

Fourth in the 'Bladerunner' series of books and the third from Jeter (the first being, I presume, Phil Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*).

Diana Wynne Jones - Year of the Griffin
(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 218 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07047-1; £9.99)

Sequel to *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*. This is blurbed to make it sound like a 'Discworld' wannabe.

Graham Joyce & James Lovegrove - Binary Star #1
(Millennium; 2000; A-pbk; 61 + 69 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-759-4; £4.99)

The Ace Double lives! For those of you who are not familiar with the latter, this book features two novellas (*Leningrad Nights* and *How the Other Half Live*) back to back and upside down to each other. Both have their own front cover. It will be interesting to see if this gimmick and the associated keen pricing work out, or whether it would have been better to release this volume and the second (see below) as the original *Foursight* anthology (see *Spectrum SF* #3).

Whatever, it is good to see Orion trying all these different publishing ideas rather than just putting out yet another 400-500 page slab of fantasy.

Henry Kuttner - Fury
(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 208 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07141-9; £9.99)

Collectors' Edition novel from 1947 (first serialised in *Astounding*).

I don't think this is as good as some other critics suggest but it's an OK Van Vogtian superman novel. Sam Reed, a malformed immortal, leads humankind from the Venusian seas...

Mercedes Lackey The Black Swan

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 376 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07197-4); £9.99)

Fantasy novel. Reworking of 'Swan Lake'?

Stephen Lawhead - The Black Road

(Voyager; 2001; A-pbk; 518 pp.; ISBN 0-00-648322-4; £5.99)

Fantasy novel. Book 2 of 'The Celtic Crusades'.

Valery Leith - The Riddled Night

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 516 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07075-7; £10.99)

Fantasy novel. 'Everien: Book Two'.

Wil McCarthy

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 325 pp.; ISBN 0-575-06893-0; £10.99)

SF novel. This sounds like a unusual mix of style and matter. From the cover blurb: 'Combines rigorous hard science with the lyrical beauty of Moorcock's 'Dancers at the End of Time'.' Lyrical? I always thought the latter was a fairly straightforwardly-written comedy.

Ashley McConnell - Stargate SG1: The Morpheus Factor

(Channel 4 Books; 2001; 2001; 297 pp.; ISBN 0-7522-7198-9; £5.99)

Spin-off novel from a Channel 4 SF series, *Stargate*, which I have never settled down to watch. I think what put me off was the character with the tin-lid (or whatever it is) on his forehead. Not an encouraging image...

Judith Marillier - Daughter of the Forest

(Voyager; 2001; A-pbk; 538 pp.; ISBN 0-00-648398-4; £6.99)

Celtic fantasy novel.

George R. R. Martin - Fevre Dream

(Millennium; 2000; B-pbk; 350 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-331-9; £6.99)

#13 in the Fantasy Masterworks series heralds the start of a feast for George R. R. Martin fans with the first of two strong reprints. This one is a vampire novel set on a Mississippi steamboat and shows Martin's usual strengths: a good prose style, convincing characterisation, tight plotting and a great atmosphere. This vivid novel would make a great movie in the right hands. For now though, make sure to grab the book.

George R. R. Martin & Lisa Tuttle - Windhaven

(Millennium; 2000; A-pbk; 315 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-940-6; £6.99)

Reissue of an excellent novel which is a fix-up of the 1975 Hugo-

winning novella *Storms of Windhaven* (*Analog*, May 1975) and the short novels *One-Wing* (*Analog*, January & February 1980) and *The Fall*. Set on a windswept planet inhabited by the survivors of a starship crash, this tells of a society of flyers that link the many storm-bound islands. As above, this is well written, characterised, plotted – in short, very readable. Don't miss it! Lobby for a sequel!

Hope Mirrlees - Lud in the Mist

(Millennium; 2000; B-pbk; 273 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-767-5; £6.99)

#11 in the Fantasy Masterworks series, and a 1926 novel that has recently appeared in the 'Curiosities' column at the back of *F&SF* – a column that recommends out of the way, but noteworthy, books. A plague of Faerie influences hits a rural town...

Michael Moorcock - The Dreamthief's Daughter

(Earthlight; 2001; Hdbk; 342 pp.; ISBN 0-684-86131-3)

Uncorrected proof of this new 'Elric' novel received. I gave up at page 231. Disappointing.

Kim Newman & Michael Marshall Smith - Binary Star #2

(Millennium; 2000; A-pbk; 94 + 72 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-760-8; £4.99)

Second in the Orion Ace Double-lookalike series (see above). This contains two good novellas: Newman's *Andy Warhol's Dracula*, part of his 'Anno Dracula' series and an amusing and very readable UFO story from Smith, *The Vaccinator*. You'll be sorry if you miss the latter...

Stan Nicholls - Warriors of the Tempest

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 280 pp.; ISBN 0-57507-069-2; £9.99)

Fantasy novel. Book 3 of the 'Orcs: First Blood' series.

Terry Pratchett - Guards! Guards!

(Gollancz; 2000; Large-pbk; 122 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07071-4; £9.99)

Comic book of the Discworld novel, adapted by Stephen Briggs and illustrated by Graham Higgins. Having disliked both of these gentlemen's work last issue (in the *Discworld Calendar* and the *Yearbook*), I'm pleased to say that this is much better. Those of you interested in a comicbook/graphic version of the original novel should check this out.

Mickey Zucker Reichert - The Last of the Renshai

(Millennium; 2000; A-pbk; 533 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-152-9; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. A 'Renshai' novel. Small type.

Mickey Zucker Reichert - Flightless Falcon

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 323 pp.; ISBN 0-57507-077-3; £9.99)

Fantasy novel. Funnily enough, this has huge type that is widely

spaced – obviously laid out for the forthcoming A-format paperback, but not particularly apt for a volume this size. Go please the world...

Keith Roberts - Pavane

(Millennium; 2000; B-pbk; 279 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-937-6; £6.99)

Reissue of a title that is probably the best alternate-world work ever, and easily deserving of the sobriquet 'classic'. The novel is set in a world where Queen Elizabeth I was killed by an assassin's bullet and the Western world fell under the sway of a repressive Catholic church. The novel unfolds against the backdrop of an elegiac, technologically-repressed England bound together by rail-less, steam-driven locomotives and a Signaller's guild that communicates by giant semaphore stations.

Pavane's structure is one often used by Roberts: a fix-up of several shorter stories to produce a powerful mosaic effect. This construction technique can also be found in *The Chalk Giants* and *Kiteworld*. At one point he had tentatively planned to do a further novel using a novelette, *Weinachtabend*, as a starting point. This would have been another alternate-world novel, although this time the setting would have been that of a Britain where the Nazis had invaded and conquered. However, worries about being able to sell the stories and a subsequent book prevented him from writing them, although he had tentatively planned a number. Read any of the three of his novels mentioned above and then *Weinachtabend* and mourn for a great novel that never was. You can console yourself with *Pavane*. Save it for a wet weekend when you won't be disturbed and lose yourself in this marvellously realised world. A must-read.

James H. Schmitz - The Witches of Karres

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 344 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07144-3; £10.99)

Collectors' Edition novel from 1966.

Bob Shaw - A Wreath of Stars

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 189 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07147-8; £9.99)

Collectors' Edition novel from 1976. The mid-seventies was a good period for Shaw, and this novel about the discovery of an anti-neutrino Earth inside ours, a shadow world if you will, is worth getting.

Robert Silverberg - Thorns

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 222 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07146-X £9.99)

Collectors' Edition novel from 1967 and one that I've been meaning to get around to for years. This novel – about a futuristic media-mogul and his presentation of the relationship that develops between two

damaged individuals – heralded a major burst of creativity in this writer that would run until the mid-seventies.

John Sladek - Tik-Tok

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 184 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07235-0; £9.99)

Promising looking 1983 Collectors' Series satirical novel about a robot whose 'Asimov circuits' seem to have gone wrong.

Ellen Steiber - The X-Files #15: Haunted

(HarperCollins; 2000; A-pbk; 128 pp.; ISBN 0-00-648354-2; £3.99)

Novella length novelisation of X-Files teleplay. The first chapter of this one reads a lot better than the Bisson (see above). Steiber would seem to have spent more time fleshing out the bare bones of the script.

William Tenn - Of Men and Monsters

(Gollancz; 2000; C-pbk; 251 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07234-2; £10.99)

Collectors' Series novel from 1968. This satire about an Earth invaded by aliens and the surviving humans is Tenn's only novel.

Matthew Thomas - Terror Firma

(Voyager; 2000; A-pbk; 437 pp.; ISBN 0-00-710022-1; £5.99)

Looks like a humorous UFO novel.

John Whitbourn - Downs-Lord Day

(Earthlight; 2000; A-pbk; 404 pp.; ISBN 0-671-03301-8; £5.99)

Fantasy novel. 'Panel Two of the Downs-Lord Triptych'. Off the back of reading his recent short story in *F&SF*, I'll have to dig out the first of these and see what they are like.

Jack Womack - Going Going Gone

(Voyager; 2000; A-pbk; 218 pp.; ISBN 0-00-651105-8; £6.99)

SF Novel. Original paperback.

MAGAZINES

Fantastic #19 - Spring 2000

(Short A4; 56 pp.; ISSN 1073-7758; \$5.95, 4 issue UK subscription \$26 (~£18); DNA Publications, PO Box 2988, Radford, VA 24143-2988, USA; single copies available from Andromeda (£4.99 + p&p); 0121 643 1999)

Pirate Writings has changed its title to *Fantastic* with this issue, and is dropping mystery fiction in the process. For those of you who haven't seen it in either incarnation it is a short-A4 size publication (similar to *Interzone*) with, in this case, a rather flat-looking, full-colour cover. It has no connection with the digest magazine that was *Amazing Stories*.

sister magazine; the editor and publisher wanted a more marketable name.

There are eight short stories from Chris Bunch, Ralph Gamelli, Gary Jonas, Andrew Burt, Christopher Stires, Ralph Gamelli, David Bischoff and Allen Steele. The best of these is *Death Threat for a Hitman* by Gary Jonas, which is an enjoyable, offbeat black comedy about a hitman working at a supermarket refunds desk. There is also a 'Short-Short' section with *another* eight short-short stories of, and I hate to speak like this about a fellow SF&F magazine, a uniformly dreadful standard. These should have been left in the slushpile.

Three poems and a couple of essays from Kevin M. Carr (UFO stuff) and Steve Sawicki (Book Reviews).

On Spec #41 - Summer 2000

(Large digest; 112 pp.; ISSN 0843-476X; \$C5.95, 4 issue UK subscription \$25 (~£18); On Spec, PO Box 4727, Edmonton, Alberta T6E 5G6, Canada; single copies/standing order (£3.50 inc. p&p) available from BBR distribution, PO Box 625, Sheffield, SG1 3GY, UK; 01246 271662; www.bbr-online.com)

For those of you who haven't seen it this magazine is a smart looking large digest with a full colour cover. It has two stories of note this issue. The first, *Ice Crimes* by Vol Ranger, is a fast-paced, verisimilar story about paramedics in the future who cryogenically freeze their trauma cases. Second up is Holly Phillip's *No Such Thing as an Ex-con*. The storyline of this one concerns a detective trying to solve a series of child-murders contacting an ex-con who he believes can help him. It materialises that the latter can see the ghosts of dead people. Good, atmospheric read. However, I was lucky in that I read this before seeing the film *Sixth Sense*. It might not work so well for people who have already seen the latter.

Other stories by L. E. Modesitt Jr., Edo van Belkom, A. M. De Giorgio, James Keenan, Melissa Hardy, Joy Hewitt Mann, Terry Hayman, John Craig and Catherine MacLeod. Some editorial matter. ●

NEXT ISSUE

The next issue will be dated May 2001.

We'll have the final part of John Christopher's new novel and an expanded ARCHIVE to bring us up to date with what's been published. As well as this there'll be LETTERS and as much short fiction as I can cram in.

Don't miss the next issue!

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SPECTRUM SF 6

MAY 2001

SPECTRUM SF #5 contains two new novelettes: one from ALASTAIR REYNOLDS (a new 'Conjoiner' story from the author of REVELATION SPACE) and one from MICHAEL CONEY (a new 'Peninsula' story from the author of the BSFA Award-winning novel HELLO SUMMER, GOODBYE). It also has a short story from ERIC BROWN, author of NEW YORK NIGHTS, and continues BAD DREAM, a new novel by JOHN CHRISTOPHER, author of the classic DEATH OF GRASS.

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