

A.K.C.T.

issue one

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Michael & Julia In the *New Story* A love story told in a series of urban vignettes. Originally featured in Sheets Project.

Hardface *New Story* Post-apocalypse Buddhist action with No-Number Zen, World Compassion, Lager Bastards, and Antichrist Church. These initial chapters featured in Sheets Project.

Nightmare, Sleepwalk, Remix *New Story* Need an exorcist? Or your tarot cards read? Why not retain the services of Gerard Z., freelance occultist? But better wait until he's solved this magickal murder mystery. And hope he survives.

The Last DJ *New Story* Cops and drugs in a fast moving trip to the place where Semantic Data Beats music comes from. Opening section distributed as Autotranscend Report one.

Café Ultimate *Short stories* A few routines from the place that's open twenty-four hours serving coffee, tea, soft drinks and a range of hot snacks in a traditional environment. All major credit cards accepted.

Michael & Julia In the New Story

In the shower

"OK that's it. Thank you very much." Julia finished the aerobics class and switched off her ghetto blaster. The ten girls who comprised the class dispersed, chatting, to the edges of the gymnasium, picked up their various bags and clothes and began to drift out of the room. Julia followed them carrying her own clothes and bag, and of course her cassette player. The people who had been waiting outside started to drift in, awaiting the start of their own class (karate). Looks were exchanged between the fit men in white suits and sweaty girls in leotards and leg warmers.

Julia was vaguely chatting with one of the girls on their way to the changing rooms when she noticed the tall man leaning against the wall. He started walking towards them, smiling at Julia. She smiled a big smile back at him.

"Hi" she stopped walking.

"Hi" he replied.

Julia turned to the girl she had been talking to "See you downstairs."

The girl carried on walking, but grinned over her shoulder as she paused to open the door to the stairwell. The man had walked up to Julia, not stopping until they were very close. The girl just had time to see Julia brushing the man's left arm with her right hand as she walked through the doorway and down the stairs.

"I thought I was going to see you downstairs" Julia said, after brushing the man's arm.

"I thought I'd see you upstairs" he replied. "Would you care to join me for the next shower?" he asked, cocking his head and raising his eyebrows questioningly.

Julia felt a tingling sensation growing between her legs, and realised it had been there since she had first noticed Michael leaning against the wall. He had this effect on her. She felt herself blushing slightly as she blinked slowly in reply to his offer.

They linked arms and walked down the stairs. Michael had not offered to carry any of her stuff, but Julia needed no help - she could manage the cassette player and her bag in her strong left hand. A problem from reality penetrated her suddenly dreaming state of consciousness.

"Where can we take a shower?"

"The men's should be empty now."

"Oh. I thought you were going to perform in front of my class!" She giggled at the arch expression he turned to her. They descended one flight of stairs and walked to the door of the men's changing

room. Michael went inside to check, then came out and led her in. Julia was slightly worried that one of her class might have seen her going in.

Julia took off her shoes and socks, peeled off the bikini and lycra pieces that she wore for her class, picked up her shampoo and walked around the partition that separated the showers from the rest of the changing room.

"They have curtains in the women's." Michael did not reply: he was still undressing.

The showers were newly installed hi-tech and reached a usable temperature almost immediately. Julia flicked her head into a forward lean, carrying her long hair to hang down in front of her. She moved towards the shower slightly, until she could feel the full force on the back of her head, finding herself thinking about Michael and her previous lovers. Julia was a member of the AIDS generation and did not wish to have very many boyfriends. Julia counted three and snorted with her eyes closed, her hair becoming heavy with water, as she considered a fourth. Whether he counted or not depended on what constituted a full boyfriend. Michael was something of an enigma to her. After four weeks, they had had sex and slept together six times, usually at her place, but once at his. Julia lathered her hair, remembering with a placid smile. Michael was interesting in bed, and good. He had learnt his basics from an older woman, as he had told her when she had asked him after their second session. Out of bed, he was charming, witty, even amusing, yet somehow empty. Today she would find out if there was anything there. The vision of a professional, emotionless, machine human made her shiver as she rinsed her hair.

Julia began to wash her body, looking at herself with pride. Aerobicide she called it, but it did the job. Fitting herself to a stereotype? See me in the shower and die fat you cow. I heart my shape. She had finished and was wondering about Michael just as he walked across the white tiles towards her. He held his erect penis in his right hand to stop it waving about painfully as he walked. Julia noticed that the condom covering his penis was quite thick.

Michael took the shampoo container from Julia and squirted a blob onto his right hand. He stood to the right of her, so that she had to twist to reach his mouth with hers. As their tongues and lips kissed he rubbed her breasts with his right hand. Julia passed her right arm around his waist, resting her hand on his left buttock as he started to kiss her neck and his hand moved lower. She had begun to hold and stroke his right forearm as he played with her vagina, when she felt his left hand soaping her anus.

A finger on Michael's right hand started flicking and rubbing her soapy clitoris as a finger on his left hand slowly worked into her anal canal. Julia gripped his left buttock with her right hand spasmodically and held his right hand between her legs with her left hand, when she turned her open mouth towards him his open mouth covered it. Once he had pushed the middle finger of his left hand fully into her anus Michael began to move it in a circle, whilst gradually increasing the speed of his right finger. After a few rotations Michael pulled away from the kiss and removed his left finger, Julia knew what was next.

Without removing his right hand from her vagina Michael moved behind Julia. She moved her legs just a little wider and leaned forwards, her right hand reaching for support on the tiled wall. Julia felt Michael's finger as he located her anus, then put the tip of his penis there. With his hand Michael guided the head of his penis into Julia, who hoped that the sound of her gasp was covered by the noise of the shower. As he began thrusting and withdrawing, each thrust going a little deeper, he forgot his right hand. Julia pressed the fingers to her vagina to remind him, and they started circling dextrously.

As Michael established his penis deep in Julia's anus he no longer guided it with his left hand, preferring to grip her left hip for purchase. His right hand too changed position, instead of circling he inserted one finger into Julia's vagina, cleverly rubbing her clitoris with another. Julia found she could balance without her hand on the wall and grabbed at Michael's right buttock, leaving her left hand pressing on his right hand. Julia arched her neck back to allow the water falling from the shower to stimulate her neck and breasts, and rocked her hips to push herself against his right hand. The soap in her anus lubricated Julia well and Michael's penis was still pumping into her vigorously as she had her first orgasm.

She came once more before Michael's climax, which was signalled by a change in his breathing and a quickening of pace. Julia twisted her head around and they made a long kiss, causing Michael another spasm which excited her, before he parted her buttocks and withdrew his penis. Michael removed the intact condom and tied a knot in the end then turned the shower off. They walked out of the shower holding each other. He went to the toilet cubicles and dropped the condom into the pan, then Julia heard Michael urinate loudly as she pulled her towel out of her bag and began to dry herself.

She heard the lavatory flush and turned to the door smiling, but Michael came out without looking at her. He walked over to where his clothes lay on the floor and stood flicking water off his shivering limbs. Julia felt like asking him what was so interesting about his clothes that he had to stand and stare down at them like that. Instead she took

two steps to him, quietly, and wrapped the towel around his chest and back with her arms. Julia held the towel on him, rubbing and drying, whilst she moved around in front of Michael to kiss him on the lips. After a quick peck she let the towel fall, put her arms around his neck, and opened her mouth to kiss him properly. Julia pressed her body against Michael's as they kissed. Michael returned the kiss, but not the passion. He held her body but did not hug her.

Julia released his mouth, opened her eyes and looked into Michael's face. He seemed nervous, uncertain. Gone was the bravado of the invitation upstairs, spent?

"We ought to be going you know." he said quietly, as though regretting having to allow practical matters to intrude.

"Mmmm." Julia moved her body against his. "But you have this effect on me."

Michael turned his head to hide his smile at the compliment. "Come on." he mumbled.

"Okay." Julia stepped back, her arms raised in a gesture of surrender which also released him physically. She made a wan smile and turned her back to pull her knickers on.

In the bus

They walked to the Underground, only to find that a security alert had closed their destination station. A helpful member of staff at the station directed them to a bus stop, where they waited with other frustrated passengers. Michael seemed annoyed.

"I hate the bus." he muttered. "It's so intimate."

Julia squeezed his hand to comfort him. His grumpiness seemed genuine, but Julia was speculating it was just another of his entertaining routines. He had so many routines, and witticisms and well articulated arguments, all useful social tools, that Julia had wondered if there was anything else to Michael. So far they had not spent enough time awake together for his supply to be exhausted. To find out Julia had proposed that they should spend more time together. That had been last night and she could remember the conversation.

They had just finished a second session of lovemaking. Michael lay on his back staring into space, his left arm encircling Julia's shoulders. She lay on her right side, her left arm and left leg thrown across Michael's chest and loins. It was warm and her duvet was left on the floor where it had tumbled some time ago.

"Another week." Julia said, apparently to Michael's left nipple.

Michael turned his head to look at the crown of her head. "Mmmm?"

Julia twisted to look into his face. "We fuck once a week." She said it without smiling. "That's all we do."

Michael made a joke. "We get drunk too." A weak joke. "It's a very important part of our relationship."

Julia stared into his eyes, let his smile finish. "Every time." Michael blinked to hide his eyes, but she continued "You always do this." after he opened his eyes again. "Always make a joke or tell a story or something. Never make an answer. Let's spend some time together."

"Did you know that The Rolling Stones had to change the chorus of 'Let's spend the night together' to 'Let's spend some time together' for the US market?"

"Were we talking about The Rolling Stones?"

Michael looked away from her then, his body seemed to shrink from her, becoming cold. He was silent. Julia kissed his chest and moved her left leg against him. "What are you doing tomorrow?" she asked, stroking him with her left hand.

"Not much." he said, still distant.

Julia eased her weight against him more. This had no effect so she climbed on top of him and started playing with his mouth. He kissed back quickly, but Julia insisted on something slower, and longer. She squirmed against him until Michael held her with both arms. They were back together in a naked place.

"Tomorrow. I want to go with you," she said, "I mean it." Their eyes were black mirrors.

"Okay." They made love again and were barely able to pull the duvet back over themselves before falling asleep.

The next morning Michael had mentioned something about some films and a club as he was leaving after swallowing a few glasses of water for breakfast. The arrival of the small bus interrupted her reverie.

She had been standing silently and so had Michael. As they queued onto the bus Julia realised that she had not felt it necessary to smile at Michael after their long silence. Already she felt she was learning about him.

Michael and Julia both had travelcards, they sat down together half way down the bus. As she expected Michael made no move to put his arm around her, or hold her hand or touch her any more than was necessary.

"Fifteen seated six standing." Michael read a statutory notice quietly. "It's not a bus it's a car." he muttered. "It's like being in a car with a bunch of people you don't know. There's all this shallow friendship, just because we're crammed in so tight and all facing the same way." Their shoulders touched as Michael spoke in Julia's ear, his hands made small expressive gestures. "Someone's going to sit in this seat right in front of us and start up

with one of those fucking games consoles in a minute."

The last passenger had boarded, it was an old lady carrying shopping. She greeted a similar friend of hers, already seated. "Ooh hello." "Hello." "Been shopping?" "Yes. Get it all in for the week - Oh!" The lady made a surprised noise as she sat down heavily next to her friend as the bus moved off. The two of them both laughed at her sudden loss of balance. Julia noticed that Michael had watched the exchange without pleasure.

Michael was shifting his weight uncomfortably. Julia felt it was just for her benefit. Would he have done this had he been alone? A routine of discomfort. She ignored him and looked out of the window.

At the next stop a shabbily dressed man, obviously drunk, put one foot on the bus, as if boarding and asked the driver a question.

"Are you going to Stoke Newington?"

"Where?"

"Stoke Newington."

"No mate. You want a number ... Stoke Newington? Let's see now ..." The driver began thinking, routing, but the drunk stopped him.

"Where are you going now? Where are you going?" He stressed the word you.

"Russell Square mate."

The drunk made a dismissal with his right arm. "Good enough for me mate." He climbed aboard and began fishing change from his pockets.

"Sixty please."

The drunk paid, took his ticket and turned to sit down at the front of the bus. A man seated in the second row of seats looked at him with unconcealed disapproval.

"I've got a ticket I've got just as much right to ride the bus as you." he said, waving the scrap of paper in the grimacing face. "It's not just for you and your pretty girlfriend." He waved the paper briefly at the man's companion, who looked away. "I've got a proper ticket not a travelcard thing." He turned his back on them. The bus started just as he was sitting, but the noise did not quite cover the sound of the drunk breaking a little wind. The disapproving man might have made a scene, but his girlfriend restrained him, anticipating great embarrassment. She could not completely restrain him however, and half the bus heard him saying "But he ... farted at me!" in an indignant hiss.

Julia had been resting her chin in the palm of her left hand, with her left elbow leaning against the bottom of her window. Now she shifted her hand to cover her mouth hiding her smile which was about to become a laugh. From the corner of her eye she could see Michael. He was looking down towards the front of the bus, past the drunk and the seething man, now in furious whispered conversation with his partner. Michael was trying

to maintain a casual, cool expression. The only parts of his face not in keeping were his nose and his eyes. Julia found herself watching every twitch and wrinkle with the same interest a sports fan watches a boxing match. Then Michael caught her looking. That finished him. He had to choke back his laughter, cover his face, look anywhere except at Julia. His restrained laughter was infectious and soon Julia was doing the same. After two minutes she felt she was back in control, she looked at Michael, who felt the same way. They both collapsed again. This went on for several stops. Julia stopped laughing when she noticed what was taking place on the seat in front of them. Michael noticed too.

A young woman with a plastic carrier bag full of shopping was sitting next to the window. Next to her was a young man. The man was being charming, he had asked about her shopping. The woman was feeling intimidated - a complete stranger had sat next to her and started talking to her - but also guilty - he was being polite, after all and had not said anything threatening - also trapped next to the window.

"It's not very interesting, it's just shopping." she said, trying to put him off without being rude.

"Of course it's interesting. The shopping bag is the soul of the consumer." The phrase was not his own, he had read it in a book. He had used it a few times with some success.

"This is disinfectant." She drew out a white box with pale red writing. He held it, allowing his fingers to touch hers, and pretended to read the writing, whilst looking at her legs. "And this is neutraliser." White box, blue writing, more touching. "It's for my contact lenses."

"Oh are they those tinted ones? Let me see." He leaned over her and moved his head around, peering into her eyes. She avoided his gaze and he took her chin in his right hand. She twisted away, now scared and angry. She decided to get off the bus early, at the next stop. She stood up, not looking at the man, although he was looking at her, all of her, up and down. He moved his legs only a little. She hated the feeling of brushing against him as she was forced to squeeze past. Michael, but not Julia or the man, noticed that she was holding her bag in her left hand, whilst her right hand was inside the bag, fumbling, as she walked down the aisle towards the front of the bus.

"Oh are you getting off here? Me too." The man stood and followed her.

As she was turning to leave the bus the woman suddenly drew her hand from her bag and pointed it at the man's face. After a moment he turned away, screaming, his hands and arms tensed in pain. The woman was already running. She had squirted a small quantity of disinfectant straight into his eyes.

Julia closed her eyes and looked away, then opened her eyes. She was looking at Michael's face. There was a slight grimace of pain there, but he had no trouble watching the scene as the driver, his own face twisted in sympathetic pain, left his seat to approach the injured man.

"Are you alright?" The driver knew it was a stupid thing to say.

"Jesus. Fucking Shit." was the only reply, then more gasps of pain.

The man sitting behind the drunk looked at the floor. He was unsure of the appropriate reaction. He had heard the conversation. He liked to think of himself as a nineties' man, he was careful never to be racist or sexist, although he laughed at the Politically Correct. What should his response be? Was the woman's violence justified? He was scared of violence and hated not knowing what he should be feeling. He dared not look at his companion. Her thoughts were very much the same, although he could not know this. Their morality had not equipped them to function in a hostile environment. They were not to speak until she said to him "This is our stop." some time later, although later that evening they did recount the story to some friends after dinner. Their friends could not react in the same way that they could not.

Fortunately for all concerned, the drunk took care of the man with disinfectant in his eyes, comforting him by saying: "She was asking for it." and leading him off the bus.

To Julia it appeared that the incident had washed over Michael. Her own feelings could be summed up in three words: "Right on, sister".

In the cinema

Julia slipped her right hand around Michael's left arm as they walked from the bus. Michael pulled her a little closer, and they walked to the cinema arm in arm. In silence.

There was a short queue for tickets when they arrived at the cinema. One man wearing a suit stood out from the crust of ten people, mostly men, in faded, painted combats. Michael outlined his schedule for the rest of the day.

"We'll leave after the second one; the third one's shit anyway. We'll go back to my place, you can dump your stuff," he pointed at the bag and stereo by Julia's foot, "then we can go to the pub before heading over to Club Venice."

Faced with the imposition of such a total plan Julia had a sudden urge to disagree, to find fault. She reminded herself that she had insisted on coming with him. "Okay." she said.

One of the crusties was arguing with the cashier. "We have to buy separate tickets for each film?" His voice was loud and indignant. "It didn't say

that in the adverts. How were we supposed to know?"

The cashier's response was not as loud and Julia could not discern the exact words, however the tone was professional, restrained, reasonable yet insistent.

"All right just give me my money back then."

The crusty accepted the refund crossly and turned to leave, pausing only to protest to the rest of the queue "You have to pay separately for each film."

There was a slight patter of press-studs being opened. Pound coins were counted and two more crusties left the queue. Michael and Julia moved forwards. Michael leaned his head towards Julia's right ear. "I bet they'll end up getting a few ciders in in some local hostelry."

Julia turned a slightly puzzled expression towards Michael. He was smiling, looking at Julia to see if she would smile too. She was not about to smile, she had not quite understood his joke, but she had detected a slightly snide tone in his voice. She looked away.

After a short wait they reached the front of the queue. Julia had to insist on paying for her own tickets. Michael noted that the film was not due to start for ten minutes and they both went to buy coffee in the cinema bar. The man in the suit was just ahead of them, talking to the person serving at the bar.

"What kind of coffee is it?" he was inquiring politely.

The server looked a little confused. "It's just normal coffee I think." Then recovered slightly with "Would you like to see the sachet?"

"No no. I was just wondering why it costs so much. How much are sandwiches please?"

"Sandwiches? Sorry we don't sell sandwiches."

The man in the suit nodded. "I'll just have coffee then please."

The coffee was poured and purchased. As the man turned to find a seat Michael noticed, and recognised his face. The man turned his head to avoid catching Michael's eye.

Julia bought their coffees. They sat at a small table. Michael leaned toward Julia and spoke quietly to her. "I recognise him from The Scala." Michael's eyes scanned left and right. "And a few other people too."

Julia followed his movement and looked at the people. The patrons were a motley collection. Two twenty-few-year-olds were standing to trade middle class witlessisms whilst their girlfriends sat in audience. Three male students made the best of their poverty at the high ticket prices by sharing a single can of beer and laughing loudly a lot. The man in the suit leaned against the wall sipping his coffee and reading a book about international terrorism. Then there were the groups of arty types, variously complaining about their office jobs

or talking loudly about reviews in unknown magazines whilst looking with distaste at the large number of pre-Goths, post-Goths, proto-Goths, full-Goths and Crusties who made up the bulk of the inhabitants of the bar area. Julia, as she expected, recognised none of them.

"It's a shame it closed you know." Michael mused. "Perhaps I'll go and talk to him."

Julia saw that he meant the man in the suit, but only secondarily. Her primary attention was on Michael definitely not doing a routine. Julia prompted him, after a pause to look at his face, "About what?"

"Oh I don't know." Michael gazed absently at a cigarette end on the floor.

Julia was convinced Michael's uncertainty was genuine. What would he do next? Unfortunately for her the moment was disrupted by the imminent start of the film. People started to file out of the bar, and into the auditorium. Julia stood up and moved toward the auditorium straight away. Michael sat and watched idly for a few seconds then stood up to join Julia. She was disappointed. He had played another routine - not rushing to be at the front, which would have been macho-competitive and dorkish, but waiting for Julia to make the move then following her, at the same time demonstrating that he was a new man and that he was cool. He was even wearing a slight, off-centre smile pointing out what he had just done. Julia read irony but also smugness before they shuffled into the darkness of the larger room.

They sat towards the front of the cinema, in adjacent seats, but without touching. Michael got into the first film. A portion of the audience, evenly distributed around the seats, were enjoying the film noisily; cheering and laughing had broken out even in the first five minutes. A few others in the audience were trying to shush the noisy elements, without success, but with increasing insistence. The matter rose to a head when somebody shouted, in chorus with a character on the screen, "I am a supercharged suicide machine!".

A loud, fatherly voice tried to make itself heard "Would you..." but was drowned in the short burst of whooping following the projection of the word "INTERCEPT".

The voice resumed, a little louder, and this time was heard to say "Excuse me. Some of us are trying to watch the film. *Could* you be quiet please." A few scattered claps greeted this request.

The student who had shouted earlier said "I am watching." which garnered a little more applause. Then Julia noticed the man in the suit. He was standing up just a few seats to her right, and one row nearer the screen. He turned to face the audience and spoke.

"Yeah we are watching, so shut up you old cunt. This is a cinema not a church."

The foul language delivered in a passionate, but educated tone, shocked the cinema into momentary silence, but the man sat down to cheers from all around the auditorium. The remainder of the film passed noisily.

As the closing credits scrolled up the screen Michael leaned over and said "Fancy a coffee?" in Julia's ear. They picked up their stuff and headed back to the bar. Julia sat at a table against the wall and watched Michael walk across the room to buy. As his coffees were made the queue started. Julia looked away, seeing if she could spot the Ladies. Michael paid and walked over.

Michael leaned over her to put two cups on the table, and say "The guy who said 'Could you be quiet' during the film was behind me in the queue. He started complaining so she's called the manager." He nodded towards the woman at the bar who was just replacing a telephone receiver. Julia looked over and saw an arty man and two or three silent companions waiting at one end of the short bar, frowning at the queue, most of whom were smiling, and chatting. Then she noticed the door to the Ladies.

"I'm just going to the loo." she said and stood up. Michael nodded slightly and blew on his coffee, but his eyes were looking sidelong. As she crossed the room Julia considered Michael's distracted expression. As she opened the door it dawned on her that Michael was actually interested in the complaining man.

Unusually, there was no queue and Julia found a vacant cubicle straight away. She bolted the door behind her, undid her jeans, pulled them and her knickers down to her knees with one movement and sat back on the toilet. Julia relaxed and considered Michael as she waited for her urine to trickle out. His interest in the complaint - he had been almost excited - was not exactly genuine, but not a pretence either. Julia considered Michael's reactions to past arguments. Whether involved as a principal or not Michael seemed to view conflict as a game. It was a game he would play, and with skill, but not with involvement or commitment. There was a quiet tinkling sound as a small amount of urine dribbled into the pan. Julia decided her analysis was perhaps unfair, certainly not quite accurate. Michael did argue with commitment and did get involved, but only as much as one might with any game. Michael did not let arguments touch him.

Julia remained seated for a little while longer. Her bowels were resettling after her bugging in the shower earlier, and the lavatory was the least embarrassing place for her to make the accompanying gassy squelching noises. There was only slight pain, which did not trouble Julia. She felt her soreness as a fond memory and smiled.

Julia wiped herself, discarded the toilet paper and stood up. She looked at the deep yellow urine as she pulled her jeans up and reflected that she

should have had some water or a can of something to drink to replenish herself after her class. Julia unbolted the door and went to the sink to wash her hands.

The first thing she noticed, on coming back into the bar, was that the manager had been summoned and was now talking with the complainer and his crew. She walked around the bar back to the table where Michael was sitting. Michael, whilst apparently ignoring the discussion, was in fact listening very carefully, and had been since it had begun, as evidenced by the summary he now gave Julia. He waited until she was sitting and spoke in a low voice.

"He started by just complaining, outraged he was. She wasn't interested. What she wants to do is get them out of this room. He won't hear of it, he wants an apology, wants all his money back, wants these jobs thrown own. Oh wait a minute."

Michael had noticed something and was looking unobtrusively. Julia took a sip of her coffee. She looked at the wallpaper, the slightly rough painted wooden surface of their small table, the coffee with milk in polystyrene cups, at Michael's concentration, but not at the centre of the room. Consequently, when Michael turned his attention back to her and whispered "Did you see that?" with an amused air, Julia just shook her head.

"They're breaking ranks. The manager offered to refund their money, but only for the films they haven't seen yet. Some of them are taking it." Michael whispered excitedly.

Julia sipped her coffee again. She did not understand how Michael could find the argument so absorbing. Julia looked at his face. He was concentrating totally on catching every detail. Her examination was interrupted by a raised voice from the discussion.

The arty man was addressing his remarks to the main complainer, bringing in the manager's offer and explanation with a gesture each. "Why aren't you listening Derek? She explained why the tickets can't be refunded. She doesn't have to offer us the money back for any of it but she is. It's a reasonable offer now let's go."

The two other complainers moved away from the arguing men, but further from Derek. The manager stepped back, making sure not to catch anybody's eye. Derek stuttered a little as he refocussed his attention. "Simon, I've been insulted. We've been insulted. I want -"

"Oh grow up. If you were so insulted why didn't you walk out? I said let's walk you out but oh no, you had to stay. If we'd walked out we could've got our money back." He gestured to the manager again.

"Simon why won't you see my point of view? You never see my point of view. Why don't you back me up on anything?". The tone of Derek's voice was hurt. People who had been looking, since the

voices were raised, now became embarrassed as the discussion became personal.

Simon looked as though he might say something, then made an impatient gesture and stalked off to get his refund. The other two followed him without looking back, leaving Derek and the manager. In his isolation Derek became angry.

"That doesn't change my feelings."

"I didn't think it would." the manager muttered under her breath.

"I've been insulted. I've paid good money and my film's been ruined-

"How much did you pay for your tickets?" The man in the suit was standing nearby, drawing out his wallet as he spoke.

Derek turned and looked in violent disbelief.

"Same as everyone else right? Here you go. Now fuck off home, miserable git." He held out a note towards Derek, who snatched, missed, then snatched successfully. He pocketed the note with a shaking hand.

He mumbled as he turned to leave "I'll take that as an apology."

The man in the suit heard him and laughed. Derek reddened, but kept on walking. The manager, who had been looking at her watch, made an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to take your seats, the second film is commencing." There was a murmur of activity as people started to comply. As she left by the same door by which she had entered she said "And thank you to the people who provided today's intermission entertainment." The audience was smiling and laughing as they returned to the auditorium.

Julia and Michael returned to the seats they had sat in before, as did the man in the suit. As the lights went down Michael waved to attract his attention, then stood, took a step towards him, and reached out his right hand. The man raised himself from his seat a little, shook Michael's hand, then sat down. Michael returned to his seat.

As Michael sat he let his left hand come to rest on Julia's leg. Julia assumed it was a mistake, but the hand stayed, just above her right knee. Julia looked at Michael's profile. He was completely still,

apparently watching the film. First placing her right hand on his left to restrain him from moving it, she twisted her weight and crossed her left leg over her right, trapping his hand between her thighs. Julia checked Michael's profile, which remained motionless, again then turned to watch the film.

Julia changed her position a few times during the film, but Michael's hand stayed on her throughout. Julia felt he was steadying himself.

The second film passed just as noisily as the first. Nevertheless, Julia was feeling somewhat bored and was glad not to have to watch another. She and Michael walked back through the bar, and out of the cinema. It was dusk. They walked to the Underground station.

They were in the station, at the bottom of the stairs about to turn left to the Northbound platform when Michael noticed the man in the suit waiting on the Southbound platform.

"I see you don't like the third one either." Michael called to him.

The man turned to them. "No I don't." he said, smiling. He walked towards them, stopped at an easy distance for speech, then seemed unsure of what to say.

"Oh err by the way, I'm Michael, this is Julia."

"Robert." he answered, he smiled and nodded at Julia, then returned his attention to Michael as he said "Look I'm kind of my way somewhere, but maybe next time I see you in the cinema we can go for a drink or something?"

"Sure." Michael replied. He was thinking of something for a moment, then spoke again. "They're showing *The Fountainhead* there next week. Were you going to go and see that?" (He flicked his head in a direction on the word there).

Robert paused for thought then began nodding. "Yeah. Yeah why not."

"OK I'll see you there."

"Next week." Robert raised his hand, then returned to the spot he had been standing in before.

Michael and Julia went to their platform just as a train pulled in and stopped. They sat next to each other, Michael's hand again rested on Julia's right leg, just above the knee.

Hardface

New Story

chapter one

The Capital was a magnet for evil. It was a place where most life was low. It was a place of much pain and misery. If you considered the world after Collapse as a sick person, the Capital was a sick head.

World Compassion did indeed consider the world sick. And considered themselves medics. To treat the world's disorders they had to be able to observe and minister to the head, or Capital. Hence Central Temple. Sited right in the middle of the Capital, Central Temple was a fortified care and relief centre, operated by monks. World

Compassion was an organisation of monks. Buddhists.

When Central Temple telephones stopped being answered, they became worried. What did they do? They were monks. They held a general congress and they prayed.

And their prayers were heard.

Who hears prayers? Psychics, celestials, deifics, supernaturals, angels, devils, all kinds of people. Including *bhoddhisatvas*. The enlightened who have elected to remain within *samsarra*, the cycle of death and rebirth, out of compassion, to help others. Are they separate entities, or simply different aspects of the Buddha Nature? Is there a difference? Such questions, though interesting, were unimportant to the prayer congress. What was important was that World Compassion did not require an entity, or aspect, primarily concerned with Expounding The Way. Or one primarily concerned with Preserving the Innocence of Children. Oh no. World Compassion needed somebody to go into the Capital, find out what was wrong at Central Temple and then mend it. There would be bullets to be dodged, bottlings to be avoided and faces to be smashed in. There would be violence. But the Buddha Nature is everywhere and in all things, even in violence. In the broken finger, in the kicked-in head, in the kneecapping. Its name is No-number Zen, and it hears prayers.

No-number Zen appeared in the midst of the prayer congress seated in a quarter lotus on an empty chair. Had he been standing the crown of his head would have been some six feet and ten inches from the ground. The dark hair on his head had been cropped very close. No comb had been attached to the clippers used for that job. What is generally referred to as a no-number crop.

Across his forehead was tattooed, or rather scratched, in faded dark blue "The Buddha". Below this, between average eyebrows, was scratched the sacred heart of Buddha卐.

His brows were heavy and his eyes glaring. His face was long. He had high cheek bones, cheeks not sunken, but taut, tough. It was a face which smiled but little. No-number Zen had a heart full of compassion, and the world was a troubled place. His chin was stubbled, his neck strong, but not thick.

He was wearing a vinyl jacket, light green with orange quilted lining and a plain white cotton T-shirt. Underneath, his torso was muscular, but without too much bulk. A fighter's body, but with shoulders wide for carrying the world's pain.

His large hands had pronounced knuckles. On the knuckles of the left hand were scratched the letters F, O, R, M. Across the right V, O, I, D.

The braces he wore were an accessory, not required to hold up the denims. No-number had long legs. Kicker's legs. They reach a long way. All the way to your head maybe. His kicks were powerful and he always wore heavy DM boots.

Overall he looked hard, definitely not a wanker. Not the sort you'd try to spare change. Although perhaps you should. One thing about No-number Zen - he's got a heart of gold. But knuckles of steel.

Upon his arrival Zen became aware of the situation immediately, since he knows the thoughts of others in his presence, entering a room full of people with only one thing on their minds makes this obvious to him. Nevertheless he allowed them to explain the situation in case it helped them on the path to enlightenment.

Zen was a formidable warrior but decided to gather still more manpower. Some heroes he decided.

"It's going to be a big bastard of a row." he told the assembly. "I'll get some lads together."

"Any of us is glad to help, to come with you. Some of us have attained some ability." The abbot leapt in. "For example, Facet of Infinity, my own student has the power to-"

"Shut it!" Zen showed annoyance to create humility in the foolish abbot. "Fucking pineapple chunks and a slice of lemon floating in the creamy head of a pint of warm bitter."

Zen was saying that the abbot's eagerness and desire was incorrect. Possibly even his encouraging his student to acquire magical abilities was being called into question. Some of the monks looked confused, some annoyed, one monk laughed and this pleased No-number Zen.

"Right I'm fucking off." He rose from his quarter lotus. Some of the monks rose to leave also but Zen turned and shouted "Fucking stay here and pray right? Homage to the Buddha." They chorused this last phrase back and he bowed before leaving.

Outside the prayer congress, No-number Zen found himself in the suburbs. The suburbs weren't as bad as the Capital. Nowhere near. Normal people still lived and worked in houses in the suburbs. There was still public transport in the suburbs. It was fully automatic and didn't run into the Capital but then you can't have everything.

No-number Zen took an automatic Overground rail train to find his first hero, Witch Carter. Physical journeys are good for the soul.

The Overground rail trains had been made using Extreme Power Efficiency Technology, which is one reason they still ran. They were actually economic on ticket sales. Also they were fully automatic. Also they were designed to be maintained by contractors. When something wore out an automatic problem report was generated and a contract written out. The Overground

company didn't pay for maintenance itself because the computer (the only remaining member of staff) had calculated that this was uneconomic. And unnecessary, since on popular routes the passengers clubbed together to pick up maintenance bills. Unpopular routes didn't run.

A train would only leave a station when enough tickets along its route had been purchased to cover its power cost. It was possible, when a train was on its way to pick up passengers, for a train to be nearly empty, although the train would only stop at stations where at least one passenger was embarking or disembarking.

So it was that No-number Zen found himself in a carriage occupied by only himself and two others.

Zen looked at the two skinhead boys, pale imitations of himself in appearance. Their thoughts were of hate. No-number could see their crimes plainly: hate, intentional ignorance and stupidity, acceptance of the herd instinct. They walked towards him, trying to look tough. They sat down opposite, still trying to look tough. No-number thought they might be brothers. The one he guessed was older (about sixteen) spoke to him.

"All right?"

"Yeah. All right?" Zen made the formal reply.

"Yeah." The boy completed the sequence, paused, then continued. "There's usually darkies on this train. Were going to beat them up but none got on. Some might get on later. 'S the only reason we're staying on."

"What d'you beat 'em up for?" asked Zen aggressively, to plumb the depth of their sin.

The skinhead boy looked perplexed.

"Cos they're black and they fucking stink." He replied angrily. His brother tittered as he continued. "What are you? Some kind of darkie lover?"

"I love everything and everybody." No-number broke in forcefully, leaning forward in his seat, pointing and glaring at the boy. The aggressive confrontation had started certain chemical releases in the boy's brain. Therefore the boy was now in what Attack theory calls the "open state". No-number had hoped to implant the phrase "love everything and everybody" whilst the brain was in this receptive state. Further, he had hoped that his obvious superiority would prevent the boy from starting a fight.

"He's a fucking queer."

"A queer with a crop."

No-number Zen consoled himself that it had been a long shot anyway. At their age, as was typical, their crimes were not developed beyond the reach of normal reincarnation, now Zen's only option.

The older boy combined a standing up move with launching a kick aimed to stamp No-number's groin into his seat. Knowing the thoughts of others gave Zen a definite combat edge. Before the boy's

foot could gather momentum, Zen had half risen and grabbed the heel and toes with his hands. He lifted and twisted, throwing the boy off balance. The boy fell in front of his brother, also standing by then. The elder tried to rise as the younger stumbled into him. No-number, risen fully, had enough space to kick, a fast solid one to the elder boys guts made him collapse back to the floor.

The younger boy backed away, Zen followed him, stepping over his brother, glaring and said "Form is void.", his tone suggesting that the younger boy should repeat the phrase. The boy backed into the end of the carriage, No-number advanced, again saying "Form is void." In reply, the boy shouted and rushed at Zen who responded with a very fast, and perfectly timed back-thrust kick. It caught the boy on the sternum, stopping him in his tracks.

"Form is void." No-number insisted.

"Fuck you" the boy coughed, blood on his lips, clutching his chest and crouching in pain.

No-number turned to kick the elder boy, who was attempting to rise. The upper arm this time, which went dead but did not break.

The younger boy took the opportunity to launch himself, desperately, at No-number's back. No-number turned and struck with straight fingers into the boy's windpipe. The boy fell, gasping and clawing for air, then died.

Zen returned his attention to the older boy. Sitting on the boy's back, Zen leaned his right fore-arm heavily on the boy's shoulders and reached around for the boy's chin with his left hand. He turned the boy's gurgling head and looked into its left eye.

"Form is void."

"Form is void." the boy repeated. Zen snapped his neck with a twist as the last syllable finished.

"and void is form. Homage to the Buddha." Zen intoned, sad because the younger boy had turned out to be the more evil.

Witch Carter's suburban house was all locked up and shuttered when No-number Zen arrived, but he rang the entry phone anyway. It was early afternoon and Witch Carter was ready for him.

Would anything less be expected of a novo-tarot magician? The novo-tarot deck was similar to the traditional, but with Polaroid's instead of printed cards. Witch Carter had shot the photographs making up her own deck herself. The best way. A few days before Zen came calling, she had dealt herself, in a daily spread amongst other cards, the six of swords (A motorbike is cruising down a tree-lined motorway. The stocks or barrels of six sub-machine guns protrude from the panniers.) and the knight of cups (A pensive man's face and it's reflection in the surface of the dark beer in a half empty plastic pint skiff.) which meant, to her, a journey with another person, probably a man. In a supplementary small spread, for more specific

details, she had dealt the seven of wands (A person dressed in ragged and dusty clothes, face covered by goggles and a scarf, is standing in a fighting crouch on a low pile of rubble, holding a pick-axe handle in one hand. The other arm is held out for balance. Around the rubble are ranged six figures, dressed in pale red uniforms, similarly posed, wielding clubs and plastic shields.), the High Priestess (In the middle of a room full of injured people, some leaning, some supine, a nurse standing on a chair is changing a light bulb.), the knight of swords (Looking down into a street, an armoured vehicle can be seen advancing. An overexposed flash obscures the muzzle of its turret mounted light cannon. It appears slightly blurred by its forward motion.) and the Hermit (In a cardboard lean-to, at night, an old tramp sits cross legged, meditating. The only illumination is from a small camping stove next to him.), a strange and contradictory deal indeed! The presence of two trumps indicated some kind of myth-superstar, Witch knew she was expecting somebody important. There were still plenty of telecommunications and news services in existence, so Witch had heard of No-number Zen and recognised him from the spread.

Witch was much in demand as a seer by those in the know, but her deck had only recently been completed and her other magical powers were not widely known.

When No-number arrived, Witch was ready to leave. She was dressed for travelling, which is to say she was wearing a thick black pullover and a black leather jacket as well as her normal clothing - a long black skirt, small black button boots and a long-sleeved grey blouse. Her clothing sounds drab, but was so festooned with ruffles and tassels and so extremely accessorised - mostly silver, with occasional pieces in pale bright blue and mat black - as to appear almost gaudy.

Witch confidently buzzed the entry phone to open the door to Zen without even speaking to him. He entered to find her in the kitchen with a steaming cup of white coffee on the table, for herself. Witch had determined that Zen did not drink coffee, or anything else, neither did he eat.

"No-number Zen, I presume." she said smiling, offering a hand with six rings on the fingers and countless bangles at the wrist. Zen shook her hand and sat down, while she returned to stacking her novo-tarot deck neatly, clearing up a spread on the kitchen table.

"I've been expecting you. When do we leave?" Carter asked.

"The two of us aren't going to the Capital. I want at least one more." No-number replied.

"Anyone in particular in mind?"

No-number reached out and tapped the pile of Polaroids in Witch's hands and said "Find Mister Sunrise."

"The mysterious Mister Sunrise. I haven't heard of him for years. Is he still alive?" Witch mused, looking through her deck. Zen shrugged.

"I worked with him once before. He's good."

Witch Carter picked out a significator for Mister Sunrise and placed it on the table. Then she shuffled the remainder and dealt a line.

"He's alive, but he's very ill. He's being imprisoned. By whom?" She started a new line.

"It's a corporation, but there's not many people at the place where he's held. It's a big corporation. Looks like mining." She paused before dealing the next photograph.

"Is it RTZ?" She placed the photograph, it was dignified, which is to say the right way up. "Yes." Witch began a new line.

"Where?" Before dealing each card she would speak a question. After each card she stated the reply out loud.

"Is it in this country? Yes."

"Is it north of here? No."

"Is it east of here? Yes."

With the aid of several maps and street plans, downloaded from a dial-up information service, she then proceeded to divide up the country and locate the town, then the street, finally the house number of Mister Sunrise's prison.

No-number Zen seemed happy with her reading, but Witch Carter was uncertain.

"Mister Sunrise was very strong." she said, then hurried to add "when I last heard about him that is. I don't see how they can keep him down with only a few people. Blackmail maybe?"

"Nah. All his power's from the sun. He has to see the sun every day. He's hard as a bastard but if they get him and stop him seeing sunrise he's fucked. I reckon they went in with a whole fucking army, stopped him seeing sunrise, then just kept him down with a few lads somewhere. They're tight gits, corporates. Won't use no more than they have to. I bet they watch him fucking close at sunrise though. How can I get him?" No-number started thinking out loud.

"If I could get to him at sunrise OK, but they'll be ready for that. I don't want to just kill them all. If I get him out any other time they'll be straight after us. If I can get him out for sunrise they'll just think 'Fuck it'. They know how he works. Once he's seen sunrise they need an army again." As he was talking/thinking, No-number had taken something from his pocket and fiddled with it, absently.

"What's that?"

No-number put a small round tub on the table. Witch picked it up and noticed writing on the side. "Elastic mirror wraparounds" she read, puzzled.

"I'm none the wiser really." She said, replacing the tub on the table.

"He always wore them. They're like sunglasses." No-number explained, his voice vague and distracted.

"I think I can help." Witch had an idea and picked a card from her deck. She turned over a photograph.

The sun, seen as a glaring reflection in the side of a towering, mirror windowed office block.

"In tarot this is called 'The Sun'. Perhaps you could use it as a simulacrum?"

No-number looked at the card and felt its magic. His mind raced, and finished. "I can go in any fucking time I want!" he exclaimed excitedly, standing up.

"I'll get some Green Warriors. They're always ready to scrap with mining corpo's, especially cunts like RTZ. Diversion, I jump in, buzz up Sunrise and Bob's your knob." He flicked the wraparounds into the air, caught them and pocketed them with a big smile on his face.

No-number Zen placed a quick telephone call to some local Green Warriors he knew. He arranged to make contact on the train he would be taking to get to Mister Sunrise. Picking up a printout of the last map downloaded he was again on his way.

Meanwhile, Witch Carter had laid out all the trumps from her deck in a wide circle in her living room. All except The Sun, of course, which No-number had with him in his pocket. She sat in its place in the circle in a trance.

chapter two

The Green Warriors appeared on schedule, five of them getting on the train at once, three women, two men. They were wearing painted combat boots with fluorescent laces, patched khaki combat trousers, jackets with slogans written on them and an assortment of army surplus vests and sleeved shirts. Each of them had at least one facial piercing: nostril, septum, lower lip and/or eyebrow. All of them had long hair, in dreadlocks.

They sat down together, a little way from No-number Zen, then one of them approached him.

"No-number Zen?"

"Yeah."

"Just call me Catherine. We're not Buddhists, why d'you call us?"

"You fuck with RTZ?"

Catherine smiled. "Of course."

"They've got a mate of mine. I want him out."

"OK we'll help." Catherine paused deliberately, "If it's true." She beckoned the other Greens over and explained the situation. They voiced similar concerns over the veracity of No-number's

information and intentions. Some of them were quite experienced and wise to tricks that might be played.

"How exactly do you know the location?" One asked.

No-number unfolded the street plan. Pointing to one of the roads, which had been marked with a highlighter pen, he said "Number eighteen."

The Green looked pleased. "RTZ have a standing order that all covert contacts their control at eighteen thirty hours every day. I know the frequency. We won't be able to understand the message, but we will be able to detect it."

"Sounds like a result. When can we hit them? I want to go in soon."

Catherine smiled. "How about eighteen thirty-five hours today?"

This suited No-number Zen very well, but he was aware that Catherine's plan arose from a lack of trust - she didn't want to give him time to tip off the RTZers. Him being present when they attack was also demanded as further insurance, which was his plan too.

They all alighted at the next station. Three cars were waiting for them by the station, occupied by more Green Warriors, of similar appearance. The cars were old, but not antique. New enough to run on batteries. The car No-number Zen got into had extra radio equipment fitted. From the thoughts of the Greens he could tell that one of the functions of the extra equipment was to detect transmissions from within the car, presumably in case he had been carrying a bug of some kind.

The cars drove down the street of the RTZ house and onto a nearby patch of wasteland, which had been a park before Collapse. There the Greens and No-number Zen planned their attack on the house, which had not been fortified in order not to attract local interest.

A decisive attack on the house was not necessary. Instead the plan was for an attack from the front, by most of the Greens, acting as a diversion to allow No-number and one of the them to enter from the rear. If at 18:30hrs there was no transmission, then a simpler plan would be followed. The Greens would capture whoever was posing as No-number Zen. The capture would be easy since the impersonator was unarmed, and the Greens all had guns.

At 18:25hrs the cars moved into place. No-number was in a car with a driver and one other warrior, which was parked in the street "behind" the house. The other cars were parked around the corner from the house.

At 18:29hrs the other cars started driving. They passed the house at 18:30hrs.

The radio in No-number's car was switched to speaker. A static hiss filled the vehicle.

At 18:30hrs words came out of the radio "Rising! Rising! Rising! Rising!". The warriors responded immediately "Right! Go!" The passenger pulled on a gas mask and rushed out of the car. No-number followed, also wearing a gas mask. Their gas masks had a symbol on them for identification ⊕.

No-number and the warrior ran around the side of the house whose garden backed onto the RTZ house, stopping at a flimsy slatted fence at the bottom of the garden.

They could hear breaking glass as the warriors at the front launched riot gas grenades into the house. Next came the automatic gunfire. They listened for a short while, hoping the RTZers would allocate all staff to defending the front of the house from the assault. No-number Zen took a couple of steps back and took a running kick at the fence. A section of the fence sagged and they ran across it into the RTZers back garden.

There was little cover in the back garden. No-number and the warrior zigzagged across it to the house. The gamble on the house being short-staffed seemed to have paid off.

No-number Zen kicked the door, which rattled without giving way. The Green gestured him clear, fired a short burst into the door, then kicked it in successfully. An alarm sounded in the house. They rushed in, finding themselves crossing the kitchen.

The warrior crouched by the kitchen door, opened it a crack to look. Outside was a short corridor and the staircase. From the top of the staircase a man in an unmarked gas mask opened fire. The Green jumped back in from the still open door, unhurt. He stood close to No-number Zen to talk to him.

"Looks like they're all upstairs."

"What about the fucking cellar?"

"There was a door under the stairs." The warrior shrugged.

"Worth a try. Which way is it?"

"About three metres that way from the door, but you won't reach it. There's a guy at the top of the stairs. Wait a second." The warrior pulled a length of string from one of his pockets. One end was tied in a loop. He quietly approached the kitchen door, placed the loop over the handle and stepped back, paying out a little of the string.

"Ready?"

No-number nodded his reply.

"Go when I start firing."

The warrior pulled the door open. Immediately, a burst of shots was fired through the doorway. After the burst the warrior stepped over and fired back, standing against the door jamb for cover. No-number bent down and ran out of the kitchen.

The door under the stairs was locked so he put his shoulder to it. It gave way. Behind it was a dark staircase leading down. "Bingo." Zen muttered

under his breath. He went to the first step and found a light switch. Hoping he was right about Mister Sunrise being in the cellar he descended. Behind him he heard the warrior, identified by his thoughts (Doing it, we're actually doing it. And this time I'm right in the middle!), close the door and stop at the top of the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs was a small, smelly cellar. The smell came from a Sanilav in a corner. An ill looking man was sitting on the floor, chained to the wall. His hands were cuffed together and he was holding them clamped over his eyes. No-number Zen choked back tears as he passed the elastic mirror wraparounds to the man he recognised from his thoughts as Mister Sunrise.

"It's me mate, No-number Zen. Put these on."

Mister Sunrise took the wraparounds in one hand, leaving the other across his eyes. Feeling for the front of the sunglasses he slid them under his hand, and shuffled them into place. He seemed to relax slightly as he pulled the cord back around his head. He looked at his surroundings, apparently for the first time, and then at No-number Zen.

"It is you. Thank God."

No-number Zen didn't have time to correct him. Instead he just handed him Witch Carter's tarot Polaroid. Sunrise looked at the photograph for a moment, his expression almost a smile, then he stood and turned his back on No-number Zen.

All Zen could see was Sunrise holding the Polaroid in one hand, necessarily close to his face since his other cuffed hand was lifting the shades from his eyes. The Polaroid suddenly became a glowing square, the glow becoming very intense after just a few seconds. A shadow of Mister Sunrise, surrounded by yellow light, was cast on the floor. Sunrise gave a sharp cry of pain and shivered violently. No-number could no longer see the Polaroid. A moment later the Polaroid was gone and Sunrise was clawing his shades back into place whilst doubled over, clutching his abdomen and vomiting copiously on the floor.

Witch Carter came out of her trance and looked down to see the card in her hands. She left the circle, placing the Polaroid in its place with a ritual gesture.

Sunrise stopped retching and took a few deep breaths. He and No-number Zen became aware of the world around them again.

The Green was wounded but still alive, firing single shots from the cellar door. Above him the stairs creaked as the RTZers tried to fight their way down. They had been ordered to kill their prisoner if his escape became inevitable. Their commander gave a hand signal and they charged down the steps, firing. The Green stepped out of the door, fired a long burst, then stepped back in. He stumbled, gasping in pain and switched off the lights. He quickly took up a braced position on the cellar stairs facing the door through which he

expected the RTZers to burst at any moment. The pain must have affected his hearing.

"Fuckers are going to shoot through the floor." No-number Zen could hear the RTZers in the room directly above the cellar.

In the darkness Zen heard Sunrise snort derisively. There was a sound of breaking metal, followed by more alarms as Sunrise removed the handcuffs and chain, followed by a splintering crash as he leaped upwards, punching through the wooden ceiling and floor boards. Dust, plaster, light, pieces of smashed beams and floor boards and a little riot gas entered the cellar through the large hole. Followed by confused shouting, cries of pain and coughing and gasping noises.

No-number Zen jumped up and scrambled through the hole, but Sunrise needed no help. He was fully restored. It had been a few seconds since he had entered the room. Three RTZers were already disarmed and staggering around coughing and gasping - their gas masks having been removed. Sunrise was grappling with a fourth, holding his gun up in one hand whilst tearing at his gas mask with the other. The remaining RTZer was shouting "Get clear get clear. I am about to fire." Before he could do so Sunrise hurled the disarmed man into him, then leapt on him, disarming and de-masking him also. Sunrise looked around the room smiling.

The RTZers thoughts, behind their immediate discomfort and disorientation, were grey twisted masses of Good Practise and Corporate Style. They were soldiers, some of whom had seen and done much, but it had not touched them. No-number Zen could see that each of their minds needed to be given some spare time to notice itself. Before going beyond itself. This might well happen, if they were given time to recover from their gassing. Mister Sunrise was just glad to be back.

"I didn't kill them. I could have." Sunrise said and thought.

Zen nodded briefly.

The gun battle was continuing upstairs. Zen had what he came for. He called through the hole "out the back".

"I can't walk." the injured Green answered.

"Shit. Don't move we're coming round."

Zen beckoned Sunrise, who was lightly subduing the RTZers, out of the room towards the back of the house.

No-number left the room first. A wounded RTZer turned on the floor, Zen kicked his rifle away and ran past him to the cellar door. He returned down the corridor, helping the wounded Green Warrior who had one arm across his shoulders. Sunrise was standing in the corridor looking around. Seeing Zen, he rushed over and took his place supporting the warrior. Zen lead them out through the kitchen and garden to the waiting car. The warrior driving took them past the front of the

house, where the other cars were still engaging the RTZers. They disengaged and retreated in good order.

Mister Sunrise fell asleep in the car.

The Green Warriors woke him when they were abandoning the vehicles some distance from town. Clearly he was not fully restored; although he did have power it had tired him to use it. No-number Zen wanted to get him back to Witch Carter's place, but the Greens insisted on debriefing him first.

They made a deal: the Greens would provide transport for No-Number and Sunrise, in return for questioning Sunrise about RTZ on the way. Catherine used the car's radio to call a van from their base, then produced a cassette recorder and began the debriefing. Meanwhile some of the warriors set about removing the radio equipment from the cars.

It turned out that Mister Sunrise could tell the Greens little that they did not already know. They were not interested in details specific to his capture or imprisonment.

By the time the van arrived, and had taken them to an Overground train station, it was late. No-Number Zen and Mister Sunrise finally said good-bye to the Green Warriors at 20:30hrs. No-number wanted to talk to Sunrise about his experiences but Sunrise was tired and slept on the train.

Witch was awake to let them in, having determined their time of arrival in advance and set her alarm. After letting them in she returned to bed. Sunrise made himself comfortable in the living room and was soon asleep again. Zen did not exactly sleep, that night or any night. Some nights he would stay simply awake all night. Some nights he would meditate. Some nights he would make astral journeys.

Sunrise awoke before dawn and went outside. After watching the sun rise he did not go back to bed, which is to say the living room floor. Instead he took a quick look around Witch's house. He found No-Number Zen in the kitchen, fully normally awake and ready to talk. They sat at the kitchen table.

"They found out that I have to see dawn. It was about a year ago. I've never seen so much military equipment in one place. Not just their own troops, you know RTZ Warfare, but merc's as well. I couldn't take it and they got me. They told me their plans. Bastards. They were going to keep me from the sun for two years, just to make sure I was going to be compliant, then take me to a laboratory, study my metabolism and create some artificial power source. One they could control, of course. Then I'd be working for them, probably forever. Oh and they said that if they didn't succeed in creating a power source in one year

they'd kill me. Just to give me some motivation to co-operate in their experiments." He paused and turned to look No-Number straight in the eyes. "I probably would have done it. Gone along with them I mean. Now I've seen dawn I'm OK, but then ... I felt so weak, and full of hate ... I had to eat food and everything. It was disgusting, torture. And they'd have given me another year of it too. I don't know. Thanks for getting me out mate." Sunrise held out his right hand.

Zen did not take it. He raised his own hand in a "stop" gesture. "Don't thank me."

"No?" Sunrise withdrew his hand.

"I'm being a cunt. I didn't help you. Go home mate. I'm a cunt." Zen's sudden apprehension of the lack of compassion in his actions was hitting him hard. He had not been concerned about Sunrise, only about his mission to the temple.

"I haven't got a home. Besides I thought we could, you know, maybe work together for a bit." Sunrise extended his hand again.

"Thanks." This time No-Number did shake his hand.

"Thanks?" Sunrise finally noticed something odd, he grew suspicious, his eyes narrowed in thought for a second or two then he smiled. "You're already on a job aren't you?"

"Yeah" No-number replied sullenly, that being the whole problem.

"I hope you're not worrying about compassionate intent."

No-Number shrugged. He was avoiding Sunrise's eyes.

"Come on. There's a lot of people who really need your compassion. Not me. I just need to be working. If you've got something for me to do now, that's great. And if you didn't waste time worrying about me when I was captive, but spent it helping people that's more great." Mister Sunrise had stood and stepped to No-Number Zen's side of the table. No-Number stood too and they hugged. The time for shaking hands was passed.

Witch Carter had been listening to their conversation from her bed. She smiled, thinking that the Mysterious Mister Sunrise seemed like a nice chap, then turned over and went back to sleep.

When Witch woke up properly, a few hours later, Sunrise and No-number were planning the journey to the Capital. Witch took a shower. As she dressed, travelling clothes again, she remembered her "failed" reading of a journey the day before. A typical trap for the seer - she had read that she would be going on a journey with a person, then read the time that person would arrive, and had then assumed that she would go on a journey at that time. She smiled, realising that it was not an important error, and joined No-number and Sunrise in the kitchen.

Witch filled the kettle and switched it on, then, remembering her duty of hospitality, she turned and asked "Would anybody like some coff-" then she thought. "Sorry, stupid question." She turned back to the kettle, blushing a little.

Sunrise looked at Witch's back as she made her coffee and picked some small cakes for her breakfast, then turned his attention back to the notepaper on the table. On the paper was written a list of names and telephone numbers. No-number was adding a new name and number at the bottom.

"Who are they?" Witch asked, joining them at the table to eat her breakfast.

"Caravan guards Zen knows." Sunrise explained.

"All of these people'll take us along. All of them can get work easy as piss." No-number expanded, still frowning in thought.

"Oh. I get a bit of work from caravan leaders, myself. From time to time. Readings and so on."

The caravans were the only practical physical infrastructure connecting the country to the Capital. And there was plenty of stuff consumed in the Capital that was made out in the country. Why? History and inertia mostly.

chapter three

Before the wars and Collapse the Capital had been a major financial and commercial centre. There had been excellent road, rail, sea and air connections. There had been office accommodation of all kinds. There had been outstanding telecommunications availability. After the wars and Collapse there was mostly just wreckage, debris and ruins. Did that drive business away? Did the companies re-establishing themselves choose nice places in the country to build their headquarters? No. They chose the Capital. After all, they all knew where it was, and where they were talking about when they discussed it. Perhaps they considered that resuscitating remains would be easier than starting anew. Perhaps they found some real value in the Capital's geographical location. Or perhaps they felt some kind of affection for the place. Or perhaps the Capital itself exerted some strange kind of fascination. Whatever the reason, real or stated, work went on there. Much less than before, but then there were far fewer people after Collapse, so much less was to be expected. Similarly, things that took up space, like farms, factories and mines, and had tended not to be done in the Capital, were still not done in the capital.

Hence the caravans; merchants taking what was grown or manufactured by the people in the country to be eaten or worn-out by the people in the Capital. And hence the caravan guards, whose job it was to keep the cargo out of the hands of the other people in the capital. Whereas the people were generally described as employees, the other

people were generally described as raiders, bandits or brigands; gangs usually, but sometimes tribes or families. There was little difference between the people and the other people, a matter of degree really; there were no "law-abiding citizens" or "law breakers" because there was no law. That didn't mean that there was no business, just that things were done in a certain way.

Lack of public transport made commuting problematic, and people didn't want to travel a long way in the Capital, in case they met some of the other people, so they tended to live close to the office. Very close. Frequently in the same building in fact. This made life easier for the security staff, whose job it was to protect employees, and other company resources. This included operating the purely defensive weaponry mounted on the fortified office buildings.

Utility companies, providing water, gas and electricity through fixed links (pipes or cables) still existed, but only outside the Capital. They found the Capital's no-holds-barred business climate a bit too challenging. Imagine having to defend all that piping and cabling from companies wishing to "cut off" their competitors. Not to mention other utility companies. The typical Estates department had, therefore, to adopt a flexible and resilient approach to the provision of such facilities. For example, drinking water could come from the ground, be transported into the Capital, or could come from a canal, or river; a good Estates manager would have contingency plans for use of all three. The exception was electricity, which could be broadcast, thanks to a few technological leaps during the wars before Collapse. With a PowerCast account, and the right kind of aerial, a building could have all the power it needed. Problems arose if somebody's purely defensive weaponry should happen to damage your aerial. Such problems could usually be resolved.

Telecommunications was another area. There was a lot of left over equipment, no longer owned by anybody, but still in place and functioning. Left over exchanges in the Capital's war rubble, left over cables in tunnels and sewers underneath the Capital, and left over satellites in geostationary orbit above the Capital. So you had your cable jockeys and you had your sat hackers. Both had the same two objectives: to get your calls through, and to get your competitors wrong numbers. Your cable jockeys ran around the sewers finding and connecting any cables that might be lying around, and getting into the occasional fire fight with your competitors' cable jockeys (conducting prejudicial maintenance involving pre-emptive defensive action). Your sat hackers used special telemetry and tracking dishes on the roof to send signals to satellites, to login, to route your calls through the satellite, and to try to lock out your competitors (assuming authority for unilateral resource administration).

Other resources ran in much the same way: You didn't own a thing unless you defended it. The whole situation was a deregulated free-for-all.

Of course many companies couldn't operate under those conditions. They went to the country or went to the wall. The successful modern business people of the day didn't mind one bit. The radical decrease in the amount of rules after Collapse (decreased to none) had given rise to a certain commercial culture and had fostered a certain kind of business person. The kind of person who said "Who the fuck wanted those wimps around in the first place?". Absolutely. "No wimp companies, and no wimp people." was their motto. And "Warlord" was the word they used to describe themselves.

The warlord, and the term was applied to men and to women, operated internally within a company much as the company operated externally. Warlords were quite happy to use lines of management, channels of communication, policy positions, job descriptions, manuals of procedure, and any other official systems and structures that the company might provide but they did not restrict themselves to them only. Truth is they did not restrict themselves at all. They had their official staff, but would also have contacts throughout their company, and perhaps in other companies, and some people outside any company. All these people could be asked for information or resources, and all had their method of payment. A good warlord understood his or her business, understood people and understood information. But a really successful warlord, such as you might have found on the board, also understood power, besides which, as a wise man once said, everything else is illusion.

Nightmare, Sleepwalk, Remix

New Story

chapter one

I wake up to the sound of my alarm clock, oh eight oh one like always. I reach out my left hand, pick up the clock and silence it. It's a cold morning and my hand withdraws quickly. It's also Monday so I have to get up. I notice the pen on top of my dream diary. Usually it's by the side, if it's on top it means I had a dream and wrote it down sometime in the night. I take the diary to the bathroom with me, flip through the pages whilst the shower warms up. It's only a short entry:

03:24hrs 25 Nov 1992

"I don't see why Nightmare should have bothered with Sleepwalk personally."

"Seems he planned something special. I don't know any details but I think it's called Remix or something."

The above transcribed from the radio. The radio was switched off at the time. Perhaps I have a Client?

I re-read it, then step into the shower. I rub the soap over my body and consider my move. Cryptic voices over a dead radio certainly seems like a Client. It could just be a set-up. Or my radio picking up the local minicab service, again. I step out of the shower and towel a little. I clean my teeth and decide to go and see RadioMan. He's Connected and owes me a favour. RadioMan operates out of a high class serviced office in the City - which means I have to shave.

"You cut yourself."

I take my mail from Susan, and wonder if there's even a trace of concern in her voice. After a brief look at her sparsely made-up face I decide not. A pity, Susan is quite pretty, in an officery sort of way, and she's not attached at present. Susan is the receptionist/secretary at the office resource centre I use as a business address - this is usually our only contact but we always make chat.

"Couldn't you try something a little more conventional? like 'Good morning'?"

"I was startled by your neat appearance OK? In surprising but not altogether unpleasant contrast to the half-yeti usually standing around at this time of day making the lobby look untidy." She stresses altogether.

"Anyway, what's the parcel?"

"It's an item of personal mail addressed to me." I say, affecting disapproval, but unwrapping the brown paper anyway.

"Oh pardon me for breathing. Are you always this grumpy when you shave? I just need to know to be careful next time. Then again there might not be a next time might there? After all there wasn't a last time. Or should that be there isn't a last time? Tenses are difficult at this time of the morning - Ooh tarot cards."

Apart from being generally useful in my line of work, tarot cards provide my bread and butter. Exorcism jobs are scarce so I make up the gaps by doing paid readings. Occasionally they provide useful information too - like the fact that Susan is unattached. Normally I keep a Waite deck and a Thoth deck handy, but some of my Waite deck had been consumed by infernal fire. I shuffle the replacement, then riffle it on Susan's desk. I cut the cards and check I show The High Priestess. There she is. I try a line on Susan.

"First reading on a new deck is free. It's traditional, you interested?" A telephone rings.

"I never let men mess with my future." Susan presses the lit button on her telephone panel. "Good morning Glassbury's."

I decide to read the rest of my mail on the underground to The City.

Twenty percent into the journey I finish one hundred percent of my mail, I meditate the rest of the way.

Like most City serviced office buildings Bennet house is impressive on the outside, three quarters empty on the inside. Like most of the people who work there. I stand outside the one-room office on the fifth floor noticing the name plate. The building owners are ready for RadioMan to go out of business in two weeks, just like everybody else. An obviously removable slot-in piece reads "Raymond D. O. Mann". Cute. When I go in "Ray" is buying over the telephone, he looks up and notices me without smiling. I pull up an office chair and sit down without waiting to be offered. RadioMan is sitting behind a desk with his feet up. I have a perfect view of the slightly scuffed soles of his handmade shoes. Eventually RadioMan gets off the 'phone, making it plain that he's not hurrying on my account. You have to listen to the Connected very carefully, they like to use very few words and saturate each one with meaning. Will RadioMan say "Good morning" or "Hello"? Will he say my name? No, he just stares at me for two

seconds then blinks. I remind myself that I didn't come here for a conversation and tell him what I want. "This morning, three twenty-four, my radio." RadioMan looks at the surface of his desk, concentrating. Then the ceiling. Then he looks out of the window at the traffic. As if realising something he turns quickly from the window and looks at a different part of his desk. He follows the grain of the wood with his finger. He kneels down and scrutinises some scratches on the paintwork on the metal legs. He stands up and looks at me, gathering his memories. "Nightmare plus Sleepwalk will be Remix. Remix minus Sleepwalk was Ashtaroth." He nods to himself then returns to his chair. That's it and I get up to leave. Just as my hand reaches the door handle RadioMan calls me. "Zus. We're even." I nod in reply.

Two stops along the underground realisation hits me. Ashtaroth. Also known as Legion. There are only four devils definitely more powerful. Shit. Even an Enlightened mortal couldn't hope to take him on. I draw three deep breaths and tell myself to stop panicking and start thinking.

I don't know who my Client is but they obviously know me. They wouldn't call me for a job I couldn't do. I relax a little, I'm not being asked to go a few rounds with a diabolic sub-prince after all. Unless it's a set up. But who could set that up? RadioMan would have told me if the voices were faked. So the voices were genuine. Genuine what I don't know, but maybe I'm onto something.

If the voices were genuine then so was their conversation. I heard a genuine conversation about somebody named Nightmare. So what? So plenty. Interpreted as simple algebra RadioMan's equations mean that Nightmare is Ashtaroth. So I have heard, or been allowed to hear, two voices discuss the plans of Ashtaroth. Now I'm getting somewhere.

I consider the lines of conversation again. On reflection they seem less like planning than gossip, diabolic gossip. Some people say there's no other kind. The picture I have seems complete but I feel that there's something missing. I look out of the window for a moment. I'm half way through my return journey and I've deduced that early this morning I was patched in to some idle chatter between two devils. Not bad for a Monday, but hey, I am a son of man.

My mind wanders through memories of other conversations with devils. Any practitioner of magic, and especially an exorcist, has some experience. Usually it's fairly one sided: "Obey me!", "As you command master." type of thing. Who's obeying and who's commanding depends entirely on the skill of the magician. I've talked to devils, I've been talked to by devils, I've heard a possessing devil argue with its victim - but I've never heard a devil talk to another devil. Instincts

tell me this is important, but why? Suddenly I get it.

Devils don't talk to each other because devils are outside time. They only talk to communicate into time. Like with humans and other temporal beings. So it's not possible for me to hear two devils talking. Except I did. How? Simple.

The conversation was played to me by an extra-temporal being. That means an angel. Or a fallen angel. I have found the missing piece. I get the warm feeling of satisfaction, quickly replaced by the dizzying chill of realisation.

Either my Client is an angel, or I'm being set up by a devil. This is a big one, I'm sitting at the adults' table and eating with the grown ups - If I forget my manners I'll end up dead, damned and Darkened. I look out of the window again, I'm five minutes from my station. I allow myself to stop thinking and get back to panic for those five minutes.

As I alight from the train I start thinking again. The whole thing could have been set up by RadioMan. I chew this over as I walk home. It seems unlikely. Of course RadioMan could have predicted that I would go to him for an explanation, and could easily have faked the radio noise. But basically, I trust him.

Although the Enlightened and the Connected can never be friends we are playing for the same team. After all we are the good guys.

chapter two

Taking the bus would get me home quicker but I need time to think so I walk. A job like this demands care. A devil can only get me if I walk into the trap. Accent on walk. There have to be clues. It's called the Law of Mortal Free Will. A devil breaks the law? That's when an angel pulls my fat out of the fire, I hope.

Most people take the easy path: they follow the first clue and don't get involved in magick at all. Some people get interested and dip a toe in the water. Or fool around in the paddling pool. Then there's people who think they're smart enough to work out all the clues and swim out to sea on their own. My case books are full of them so I know better. I never play the Great Game without Help.

For this case the only Help that can make a difference is an angel. It's a corollary of the Law of Mortal Free Will that once a devil moves against you an angel can help you out. Of course you have to ask. In my case that means an invocation. That's easy and difficult.

There's no complex formula. Just get pure and get on your knees because you are definitely not worthy. I did the Big Purity years ago, I've got it in background, which is enough for most of my work. This isn't most. This is forget meat and the

five-knuckle shuffle and hit the mineral water. It starts now and doesn't end until I'm told. The first thing an angel says is stop. Stop whipping yourself, when the blood starts flowing. Stop confessing, after eight hours. Stop fasting, when your stomach's about to eat itself. The devils want you to blame the angels. But angels don't make the rules. Angels are the rules.

A pillar of fire attracts a lot of attention so nowadays a sign is more subtle. Like a notice in a convenience shop window. Sixteen bottles of still Convent Spring for the price of eight. I go in and buy a box of sixteen bottles. It's all I'll be eating for the next few days. I'm only half way home - carrying the box is my first penance.

So I won't be talking to an angel for a few days, but there're still preparations. Cancel all social engagements - that won't take long. Clear up outstanding business - two tarot readings tomorrow. Then some preparatory workings. Like recharging some tools. Like conjuring a familiar. Like opening my temple.

I get home and decide to start straight away. Upstairs I unlock the outer door to my "back bedroom". The cargo shackles securing the inner door are still intact. I walk out of my front door, around the corner and down the road to a plant-hire shop. I hire some light bolt cutters. Light, sure. I make it home without a heart attack. Lucky I didn't pick heavy duty.

I take a cold shower, dry myself and don't get dressed. I collect the bolt cutters and a strong torch and go back to the inner door. I cut the shackles then put down the bolt cutters. I switch on the torch, and use it to knock the broken shackles to the floor. I pull the door open and enter the room, playing the torch across the floor and walls.

There is no ventilation and the old smell of incense and wax hangs in the air. I close the door behind me, paint it with torch light. Then I do the rest of the room. The electric light is for Banishing so I have to cover every surface, and get in all the corners.

The walls get the treatment first. I go about widdershins and don't read the words which cover them. There's no need, I wrote them all up there anyway.

Next is the ceiling. Broad strokes left to right light up a background of plain white with an entropic of variously sized black dots. And a few smoke stains.

I cover the floor in a gradual inward spiral, deosil this time. My feet pick up small pieces of ash, dust and the occasional dead insect. Then I reach the circle.

I don't think how many times it's been cast. I can remember. I walk astride it for a complete revolution. The centre of the torch beam points straight down and follows a wide line. It's not

paint, not chalk, not string, not wax, not paper shreds, not wire, but an accumulation.

I step inside the circle. At the centre is a mound covered by a sky blue silk sheet. That comes off in the next stage. For now I just do the small area of floor around it. A spiral, then a grid, finally a pentacle. That's all for this part. More later. I turn my back, turn off the torch, and walk straight out, closing the door behind me.

Downstairs I wash my feet, get dressed and prepare stage two. I need something to cast the circle. There's a big packet of rice in the kitchen. I won't be eating for a few days and the rice is organic so it'll go off. Also I've never used rice. The packet is covered in writing so I pour the rice into a blank paper bag. I've got five white candles left in a box. I find a matchbox, take three matches out and tear the strike off. The candles, matches and bag of rice make a small pile against the temple door. I undress, hang my clothes neatly and take another cold shower.

It's awkward picking up the stuff. Last time I thought about making some magickal robes, with pockets. Then a close friend died. Too easy to forget what's in your pockets.

I clumsily open the door, step in then close it. I bend down, put the stuff on the floor, except for a match and the strike. I fold the strike around the match head, pinch with my right and pull with my left. The only way to light a match first time, every time. I light a candle in my right hand, shake out the match, pick up the stuff and walk to just inside the old circle.

I place the candle on the circle, everything else on the floor. I walk backwards, widdershins pouring rice from the bag. It empties exactly back where I started. I light the other four candles and set them at irregular intervals in the rice.

I walk over to the mound, lean over and bundle up the silk quickly. I know what's underneath.

The table is three feet across and circular. The tabletop is supported one foot off the ground by six legs. There's enough room to store the silk underneath. At the centre of the tabletop sixteen silver rods are laid side by side. They're identical, about as wide and long as a biro, hexagonal cross-sectioned like a biro too, but flat at both ends.

I take a rod in both hands, kiss it and place it at the opposite edge of the table. The next goes on the near edge. Then the right-hand edge. Then left. When all sixteen are placed I step up onto the table. It's time for Calling the Kingdom.

I use a simple method. Like everyone who's up to it. People who aren't up to simple have to use ceremonies. I relax my body from the feet. As soon as I feel my face go I start visualisation.

Warm water puddling against my toes and heels. The level rises gradually. Ankles. Shins. Knees. Thighs. Fingers. Palms. Penis. Wrists. Balls. No air bubbles in my pubic hair. Hips. Forearms. Navel.

Elbows. Chest. Upper arms. Nipples. Shoulders. Neck, slow on the neck. Chin. Jaw. Mouth. Nose. Ears. Eyelids. Forehead. Crown of the head. The level fills higher and I begin to float. I knew my destination before I began, now my mind is clear. In five minutes I will have a sensation.

I arrive and surface quickly. It's completely dark and I am completely dry. After a minute I hear a small rustling. It approaches, then recedes. When it returns it multiplies. The rustlings do not approach closely. They move around at a safe distance. Gradually their number increases. And multiplies further. As they increase in number the sound becomes less distinct. A wall of rustling, buzzing, crackling noise. I wait. Timing is everything. When I feel them about to close in I submerge myself fast and float off.

Off course they follow me. When I get back I torpedo myself out of the water, open my eyes and clap my hands once. I step backwards off the table and kneel on the floor.

Moving opposite pairs of rods I form an octagon around the centre of the table. Picking up pairs of rods I place one upright at each of the octagon's corners. The Cage.

I exhale and relax. Everything went smoothly but I still have to check. I rap my fist in the centre of the table. I don't have to wait long for the responding knock. My temple is open for business. Game on.

I put the matches and strike in the empty bag and step outside the circle. I sit and relax. After five minutes nothing has happened so I extinguish the candles, and leave.

The bag goes in the bin. I get dressed, casual this time. The kitchen clock reads lunch-time, reminding me how hungry I am. I pour myself a glass of Convent Spring.

chapter three

More candles, more matches, my wallet's in my suit jacket. I take it to the corner shop. Red candles and matches from Eastern Europe. I'm about to pay with a five pound note when the Queen winks at me.

I almost don't notice. I almost dismiss it as a trick of the light. I almost pay with it anyway, but a small voice inside stops me. Or is it outside? The shopkeeper frowns as I withdraw the note then hand her a twenty. I smile back and keep the winker separate from my change.

I hurry home thinking. It always starts before I'm ready. My temple's just open, I'm days from angelic contact and I'm under attack. I must have missed a clue somewhere. All I have is the names Remix, Nightmare and Sleepwalk. And some equations from RadioMan, which I don't understand. Of course in this game you don't expect to be in control all the time. There's always

something unexpected and a good magician has to know how to improvise. Sometimes it's okay to make the whole thing up as you do it, but there are limits. Busking Ashtaroth on my own is past them. Well past. At the moment I don't even have a familiar. I stop panicking because that's it.

That's all it is. The wink is not an attack, it's a clue to a suitable familiar. It's my next working but it was going to be a few days yet. I'm being told to hurry up.

The candles and matches go in the kitchen. My front room has a table and chair in it. It's where I do tarot readings. I sit down with my eyes open. I close them and spread the winking note out flat. Using my fingers to locate the edges of the note I position my face directly above it, about twelve inches away. I gather. There's something important on that note. It's going to be the first thing I notice when I open my eyes.

I open my eyes, count to none and close them. The Queen pointing to the serial number. I put the note back in my pocket and open my eyes. The serial number?

The name of my familiar for this job is somehow linked to the serial number on the fiver. Must be cabalistic. Numbers always are.

In cabala every letter has a numeric attribution. Somehow the numbers corresponding to the letters of the devil's name can be combined to make the number on the bill. That's enough of a clue to get me a name, and that's enough. It means I'm safe to look at the note again. Handy since I can't remember the number.

There's a cupboard full of my magickal diaries in the room. I get the one from way back when I did the Big Purity. I'm looking for a specific part. The occasion when Leviathan was compelled to list "names for the summoning, instruction and dismissal of three hundred devils possibly of use to the mage as familiars or servitors". I flick the pages. The pages of perfectly formed Hebrew letters are easy to find. I leave the notebook on the table, open at the start of the list.

I can remember the Hebrew attributions pretty well but I get a book of tables to make sure. I bring that to the table and check the notebook is still open to the same page as when I left it.

Now comes the decision. How to combine the numbers. I look at the table and the names and the serial number. Addition is the usual method but that's not going to give me enough. I guess at multiplication. Five hours and three hundred transverse product calculations later it looks like I guessed right. Only one name matches.

A glass of Convent Spring dissipates the acid and stops the growling. It's been all day and now I need the lavatory. I get a few ideas for the summoning I'm about to work whilst I'm sitting.

This time I take a small knife with me to the temple. And the five pound note. I check The

Cage and set out the red candles in an irregular pattern. I sit by the table, take a deep breath and begin.

I take the upright rods in pairs and form a new pattern in the centre of the cage. An eight pointed asterisk. The Cage Door, also known as The Trap. I put the five pound note in the centre and on top. The Queen faces me and I can read the writing. I don't.

"Shimal is called." I address my speech to the centre of the asterisk. "Shimal is called a second time." That's it primed, now for the real one. "Shimal is called a third time." Sometimes they get tricky straight off, sometimes they wait a while.

"Who calls Shimal?" The faint voice emanates from the centre of the asterisk. He's getting tricky straight off. Rule one is never to answer an unbound devil's question. Also if I tell him to speak up he'll burst my eardrums. I've heard of it happening.

"The speaker will identify himself." If he doesn't it means he's not low rank. And that means it's not Shimal.

"Shimal speaks." Got him. "Shimal is your slave. What are your desires?" Maybe not. He wants me to send him forth before he's bound, but I'm no amateur.

"Shimal will reside, and be bound, in the object with his name written upon it to serve the magus as a familiar until such time as intentionally unbound by the magus." I mean the fiver.

"Shimal will not." Surprise surprise.

"Shimal is compelled."

"Shimal is compelled? How compelled? By you mortal?" There's a sound of laughter. Affronted by my orders he's forgotten to be devious. I almost feel sorry for him.

"Shimal is compelled by Him whom I will now name." Shimal knows what's coming and stops laughing. I begin to read from the walls of the temple. After two holy names he's pleading me to stop. I pause after each name. After two more he gives up and says:

"Shimal will reside, and be bound, in the object with his name written upon it to serve the magus as a familiar from now until such time as intentionally unbound by the magus."

I fold the note in half, widthways, twice, then tie a knot in it. I put it down on the table near me outside the octagon. I quickly reform the cage.

I take up the knife, kiss it, make a small horizontal cut in my left upper arm and wait for it to bleed a little. Using the knife as a pen I draw a pentacle on each side of the pentagonal knot. The blade doesn't hold much and I have to dip it into the cut quite a few times. When it's finished I blow on it to dry it. Shimal is now bound and sealed.

"Shimal?"

"Here master."

"You will speak when spoken to only and be heard by me alone. Understood?"

"Yes master."

I blow out the candles and leave the temple taking my knife and Shimal with me. I keep Shimal with me from now on.

I put a small piece of cotton wool on my cut and put on a dressing gown. I go back to the front room and tidy up. As I put away the old diary I take out the latest and untie the silk strip around it. I use a fountain pen for my magickal diary, and black ink. After writing up the day I sleep with Shimal under my pillow and don't have nightmares.

I wake up and it's Tuesday. I look at my dream diary expectantly but the pen is by the side. I get up and go to collect my mail.

"Only some junk mail and Office Equipment magazines for you." Susan smiles her nearly smile.

"Phone messages?"

"No. Are you expecting something?"

"Something big." I say but Susan is already answering the telephone.

"Good morning Glassbury's".

I return home, have water for breakfast, do a reading for a businessman from St Albans, have water for lunch, do a reading for a literary agent from Hampstead and have water for tea. Nothing happens and I'm worried.

I take what I wrote by hand at the readings to the office centre for Susan to type up. There are still no messages, but a few magazines arrived by second post. I take them home on the bus and worry.

I flick through the magazines but find no clues. I try reading them but can't. The worry is getting to me and it's time to act. Or at least time to decide. I can't talk to my Client yet so I'll just have to work it out myself.

A Client has to tell me what to do, like the Convent Spring and the five-pound note. Of course if I don't look hard enough it's my fault. I look hard. I read and re-read yesterday's magickal diary entry. I re-read today's tarot readings. Nothing.

If nothing happens for a while in a case like this it's usually a sign that you're on the wrong track. How long is a while? Until tomorrow. I relax and read the magazines. Then I read a book and doodle a little before going to bed.

Before I go to sleep I think. I can't help it. Clients always give you just enough time to do things and my Client knew I would be busy today. So the reason I had to bind a familiar yesterday can only be that it's all going to happen tomorrow. Or tonight. I sleep anyway.

Wednesday, I follow my routine but this time there is a message. I thank Susan and walk out reading the neat handwriting.

Detective Sergeant McDonald, Metropolitan Police, 'phoned.

Please meet him at 23 Colvestone Crescent, Dalston ASAP.

09:01hrs 27 Nov 1992

chapter four

Number twenty-three has three storeys and looks like a squat. I knock on the door and wait. I'm listening for footsteps, but don't hear any before the door opens suddenly and I get pulled inside. It's dark and there's a torch shining in my face.

"Don't move son I'm not going to hurt you. Now what's your name?" He sounds like he's from London and a big man.

"Gerard Zus. I had a 'phone call."

He moves the torch, pointing it at the ceiling, and apologises. "Sorry about the rough stuff. D S McDonald." I blink a few times. It's a big torch and, after a couple of seconds to adjust, my eyes see that he's holding out his right hand. I shake and find out that he's on the square. He very briefly shows me a very large identity card.

"I got your number from a friend." He turns, points the torch at a staircase then walks towards it. I follow. "Four A M a nine nine nine call was placed from a 'phone box down the road giving this address." As we ascend the staircase the damp, dirty squat smell is replaced by something else. "Said a murder was taking place here. A uniformed officer was sent to investigate." He pauses at the top of the stairs. "We thought it was probably a hoax." The other smell is vomit. "I hope you have a strong stomach mister Zus." The first floor landing is dark and I follow DS McDonald closely as he follows his torch beam to a door. "It's alright sir, the vomit's in that corner." (He must have noticed I was following him closely). He reaches for the door handle then pauses.

"I don't want to have to explain what's in this room. You'll notice there're no barriers up here. I'm having this treated as a hoax. A sick hoax I'll grant you. But ... well when you see it you'll see what I mean. Ready?" His hand is on the door handle. I nod and he opens the door.

There's a window and daylight in the room. It's quite a large room. In the centre of the room is something big and red.

As I look I see that there are specks of white and grey in the red. The red is blood, the other colours are bone, muscle and internal organs. By a piece of intestinal tubing I notice what looks like the surface of a mattress. I realise that under the layer

of blood, splinters and shreds is a bed. So this is a bedroom, not an anatomy laboratory.

It looks like a radical dissection. Done with a blunt cheese grater. I force myself to observe. The red spiky crust covers the bed and some of the floor around it. In places the edge seems to make a pattern, there're marks on the floor just next to it. Painted marks. A magickal protection? The policeman is speaking.

"I'll leave you to it then sir." He keeps talking as I follow him down the stairs "I won't be back. Like I say I'm treating this as a hoax. Since you didn't -" he stops suddenly, listening. There's a noise at the door. Approaching footsteps. The letter-box goes. "Just the postman" the policeman smiles. "Where was I?" I follow him downstairs. "Oh yes. Since you didn't gain entry unlawfully the house is yours to occupy. Look around the rest of the house, the previous occupants left in a hurry early this morning." He pauses to pick up the mail, snorts. "Looks like they'll be back though. Giros." He waves the brown windows at me briefly, places them on an occasional table and lets himself out.

I look at the door closed behind him briefly. What's upstairs is no hoax but the man doesn't have a choice. The police force doesn't employ the kind of talent needed for a case like this. Even if they did where would it lead? I don't see Ashtaroth holding the bible in his right hand promising to tell "nothing but" somehow.

I stumble back upstairs, go back in. I take Shimal from my jacket pocket and call him.

"Shimal."

"Here master."

"Is there a magickal protection here?"

"Yes master."

"A strong one?"

"Very strong master."

"Could you pass it?"

"No master. Nor could any of Us. One of The Highest might break it, master, but not pass it."

"How about a possession?"

"No master. Not without breaking it."

I put him back in my pocket without thanks. I turn to hang my jacket on the door knob to make sure I don't break the prot by carrying Shimal through it, and because that gives me an excuse not to look at the bed. I delay further by thinking.

It's possible that the mess on the bed was made by an unaided human, but that doesn't explain the blood splashing and dripping only up to the inside of the protection. Could the blood outside the prot have been cleaned away? No. There's a coat of dust and dirt on the floor around, and even inside, the prot. A devil wouldn't have been able to cross the protection, nor propel anything across, which would explain the pattern, and the dust. I'm wasting time, there's more to find out in this room.

I still don't want to look at the bed so I check out the rest of the room. No carpet, peeling walls and ceiling, a pile of junk and laundry covering a rickety table and chair. It looks like what's on the bed used to be female: the laundry is all girls' clothes, also there's tampons and contraceptive pills. It looks like she was an occultist: there's some well thumbed and annotated Crowleys, dream and magickal diaries and a pile of candles, also the clothes are mostly black. Here's a lead. A ticket to a gig.

The venue is a club in Islington, the date is the day after tomorrow and the band is "Chasing Satan + support". The word "COMPLIMENTARY" is stamped across the yellow ticket in red ink.

There's nothing else useful here. I check very thoroughly but there's nothing else to find before searching the bed.

I put the ticket in my trousers and go downstairs to find some rubber gloves. There's a pair in the kitchen. I put them on and clear the sink and draining board. I have to do the bed, but I don't have to remember it. Self-hypnosis.

There's a flicker and I'm washing the dried blood and sticky pieces of flesh and organs off the gloves and down the plug hole. On the draining board is a cigarette end and a flap of skin.

The flap is a rough square, three inches a side, with torn edges, tattooed with a pentacle. Another protection? I'll ask Shimal. I rinse the cigarette end under the tap and examine it. Camel. I don't remember seeing a packet in the room, which explains why I brought it downstairs. There was no ashtray or cigarette ash in the room either which suggests that the victim didn't smoke. So somebody else smoked it. Whilst in the bed.

I collect my jacket from the bedroom and sit on the stairs. I take Shimal from my jacket pocket and call him again.

"Shimal."

"Here master."

"Is there a magickal protection here?"

"Yes master."

"Can you read its intent?"

"Yes master."

"What is its intent?"

"To protect the body of the magician master."

Now I have to be careful. The Law of Mortal Free Will again. The flip side.

If a magician compels a devil to do an action that devil cannot do, like opposing a senior, or answering a paradox, the devil goes free. It's like when an employee gets fired but still has access to the office. Often they turn troublesome. Devils always do, or so I hear. If I ask Shimal a question he can't answer he's free. That's the deal.

In practical terms: I can't just ask him how come? If the magickal protection protects the body how come it now looks like a pile of tripe and about fifty heavy periods?

"Could a devil injure the body of the magician without breaking the protection?"

"No master."

"How about a possession?"

"No master. Not without breaking it."

I replace Shimal without thanks again. His answers bring me back to the unaided human I rejected earlier because of the constrained blood. I reject him again and settle for something simpler. A devil, which could not have been inside the protection, was in there and tore the living body into pieces, which did not injure the magician. It's funny and I laugh. Briefly. Then I'm shocked by my fast adaptation. The purification must be beginning at least.

The Last DJ

New Story

view one

"We were right on his tail." the policeman snarled in the interview room. "We saw you set off the charges Paul." The policeman let the words sink in.

The interviewee mumbled, but the policeman cut him off:

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"You didn't say that you weren't the one then?"

"No." the interviewee sighed.

"You didn't say that you weren't the one *caught* destroying the evidence?"

"No sir."

"Do you know how big this case is?"

view two

Words written in in a magazine?

"They're all called DJ _____." the manager grunts, I can't spell it.

"DJ this, DJ that, DJ the other." Actually he named two or three DJ's here, but I won't embarrass them. "Just to make it stand out, to make it different we wanted Something DJ. Turned around. Anyway at that time we were playing a set in this little club, and we were the last

DJ of the morning. People must have liked it because the word got out. Everybody was telling their friends: You've got to check out the last DJ."

view three

"Close it down."

"This is the biggest acid factory in the country. We have been satisfying the brain of the new generation, we can't just close it. How sure are you?"

"This guy I think I saw twice or three times? Just around you know? Well I was in Upstairs Downstairs and a panda pulled up outside and he got out."

"What did you do?"

"Back entrance double quick. I don't think he followed."

Paul felt a twinge of the gravy train about to end.

"How many days ago was this?"

"Days? It was just now."

Sirens.

view two

"Data Jive!" He snorts, I can't spell that either, is he trying to kill me? The most difficult DJ crew to interview, but right now the *only* one worth doing a double spread on, despite what other music press is doing. Yes it's a magazine. It's been work all the way, ever since the announcement that The Last DJ was breaking their media silence. maybe cracking would be better, after all making an announcement that there would be one, exactly one, interview given hardly constitutes breaking. Everybody who wanted *that* interview submitted a recent non-photo interview. For my sins I got it, and it's been work work work ever since.

view three

Five minutes ago Paul had been doing the only job in which he had ever felt justified. Then the twinge. As he heard the sirens he was plunged from gravy train dream into absolute worst nightmare and was running up the metal rungs of the factory ladder. The second to top one broke. Shit. His shin hit the top rung and tripped him. He caught sight of Ray letting himself be pulled away by Danny. He got up and ran to the emergency button.

"You! Stop! Now!"

He paused and his leg gave way beneath him, his shin screaming.

The button.

view two

Happy to be doing it? No. Interviewing The Last DJ - who think all music press is shit - in a totally dingoid squat somewhere *outside London* - probably illegal. Not happy at all. But I'd fucking cut off my right tit for the job. All of this your beloved interviewer goes through for you gentle reader. You should be pleased: at least this interview isn't in one of those crappy four pence photocopied fanzines. To return to the interview then, but with some *appreciation* of the difficulties. I feel pleased it wasn't one of this paper's writers who coined the term "Data Jive".

view one

"Yes sir, I remember exactly what I said next."

"Would you repeat the words please."

"Don't touch that fucking button. Sir."

"Then what happened?"

"He pressed the button, sir."

"From the floor officer?" asked Paul's lawyer.

"Yes sir. The button was very close to the floor. The wires to it were attached to the gangway running above the tank, then dropped straight down to where the explosives were fixed."

view two

Most DJ's try to look over the crowd and generally try to "feel" their mood. Not The Last DJ. His associate explains:

"Of course we still have that, but we wanted more feedback. We thought 'OK the state of the crowd is what we want to know about, the crowd is where we should be.' So we hit on the idea of the monitor. These days in the big clubs, we have several of course. The monitor would be dancing, with the crowd, and would use hand signals to tell the DJ how the crowd was, and where they could go. Like this for faster, like this for long attack, like this for higher pitches" He goes on, his hands doing "Data Jive".

view one

"Yes we do have proof that it was a tank full of LSD, that your client knew this and that your client knew that pressing the button would detonate a charge placed to destroy the tank, therefore the main evidence. I will add that this act obviously endangered the lives of our arresting officers, and those of his accomplices."

Paul's lawyer went quiet.

Paul remembered the button, the pain in his now bandaged leg, tripping on the rung, seeing Ray and

Danny. His head jerked up. Ray and Danny. "I saw him going."

The policeman suddenly took notice.

"He was with Danny. They had an escape route." At which point Paul thought of something else. "Bastards didn't tell me about it."

The policeman smiled inside. Danny had been pinched already. And if Danny knew where Ray was

view two

"You've got a large crowd, you have a number of monitors. They're all waving these signals according to how their bit of the crowd is getting on you see?" I do see. The DJ of The Last DJ stands on the stage, not only feeling the crowd, but getting on-the-dancefloor second-by-second reports of how it's going down. "Yes", they say, all of them laughing as they do, "but it's more than that." Oh. They go on to explain how some of the code works. Wow. These are not just on-the-dancefloor second-by-second reports. more of a head-up display. Here's how it works:

view three

"But that means -" Ray stopped running as the metal grille above him clanged open. Danny stopped and turned, saw what was coming and shouted "Ray!" as the deluge of concentrated LSD from the ruptured tank hit, drenched and dissolved. Danny stood, transfixed by the sudden subtraction of Ray, the sudden addition of a fast spreading, dissipating cloud in the foot deep water in which he was standing. Then running, but too slow. The stuff numbed his feet and he fell, feeling his hands graze, the skin break, on the submerged floor.

view two

"SDB". Flyers have these letters on. "SDB". All real venues are booking DJ's who do it. Or are they? How? When they don't know what it stands for. Semantic Data Beats. If they know that, they certainly don't know what semantic means.

"What they're doing isn't SDB." So says one of The Last DJ And he ought to know, after all they invented it. "They're just playing a certain kind of music." he continues. "We well what we do is different. We don't play tracks, as such, we go on with a selection, a large selection, of programs and samples. At any time up to twenty will be playing at once."

view one

The two policemen laughed as they drove. The junior of them was driving, and chuckling, as the other, sitting in the passenger seat, spoke.

"A credit to himself and the men who trained him. What else was there? Oh yes, something about alertness and flexibility in action. Outstanding."

The driver stopped the car at traffic lights. "Of course it would've been no use without the excellent strategy and planning which has characterised this operation and indeed the latter part of your career, sir."

They both laughed again.

"Left here for the hospital."

"Right you are sir."

view two

"The DJ can't have a lot of lights on stage. It distracts people. That's why all the disks have tactile labels." Tactile labels? She shows me one. A 3.5" floppy with four layers of gaffer tape stuck on the side. The tape has been cut - serrated along one edge. Holding it, I find that I can feel the jagged edge pretty easily. "They're set up in a rack, with enough room for a thumb between the rows. They're arranged in scales, plus he sits with us and helps us put down the programs." They record new stuff for every time? "Only about two hundred new ones. We have five hundred regulars."

view one

"He can't be a complete wanker or he wouldn't be a superintendent I suppose. ' Course he didn't have all the info' either."

The junior policeman made no response until he had completed the left turn. "With all that praise he was heaping on my highly trained powers of observation I forgot to mention that the reason I collared Danny was that he was stumbling around in a large metal pipe screaming 'Acid! Acid! Get it off me! I've cut my hands and it's gone in! My feet have dissolved!'" Both policemen laughed again.

"Difficult part was keeping my face straight and convincing him we were going to help."

view two

She shows me a mass of wires and circuit boards. "At the centre's an Atari ST. We drive MIDI from our own software. We took the floppy drive apart so the disks can be put in and removed quicker - you have to, like, hold it on and push the shutter back with your finger but we cut down the time to load. This part comes out."

She lifts out a chunk, attached by a twisted rope of cables that reminds me of nothing so much as a DNA model, which ends in a small strap and three big spongy buttons. She hooks the strap over her thumb and the buttons hang across the palm of her hand. The sponges have soaked a shit-load of sweat.

view one

"Let's hope he's still talkative. I want that cunt Ray." Both policemen got out of the car. A uniformed constable met them and they exchanged ID card looks.

The constable led them towards a side door on the main hospital building, saying "We've got him in a private room sir. The results from the lab, and the initial examination are back. They're just inside."

The senior officer looked up suddenly. "He can't see us from his room can he?"

"No sir, he's on the other wall."

"Right, I want a good look at those results before meeting him. I want to take my time over it so don't let on we're here, OK?"

"Understood sir. I've arranged use of a junior doctors' tea room for you sir." The constable held the door open.

"What was your name again constable?"

view two

"They're a bit grunk aren't they? We could probably charge a lot of money for a suck on these buttons. We wanted to change them, they're just cut up pieces of sponge, but he says they fit his hand now." she goes on. She loves this computer. She tells me how it frees the DJ to decide, how the DJ can queue and play programs with a minimum of attention being diverted. But she doesn't mention the hood. So I do.

"What about the hood?" I say.

"I have to see what's going on on the screen, in case something goes wrong. And we have to monitor other things, like what time it is. The screen has to be on, but we don't want lights on stage, so we put a blackout hood over it, and over my head so I can see."

view one

The policeman bent, buckled, and tore apart a plastic cup whilst his junior colleague finished reading the reports. He heard the gentle plop of the folder landing on the table and looked up. The other policeman was frowning too.

"No trace of LSD on his clothes or skin." his colleague mused. "Plenty of the stuff in the water.

Plenty splashed on the walls below. Traces in the wrecked tank even. None on our Danny boy."

The uniformed constable let a doctor into the room.

"He can be moved anytime, his sedative's worn off now."

The policeman nodded, "Five minutes".

The doctor nodded and left the room.

"Let's give him something to chew over on the way."

view two

"After a while people realised the monitors were there and were signalling to the DJ. That's when it got interesting. Yeah, people started signing to the DJ themselves.

"Pretty difficult to tell who's a monitor and who's just one of the crowd. The whole scheme is designed to be easy for the DJ to follow. So it's difficult for anyone to follow right? Wrong. If you know what you're looking at, even the advanced codes are pretty easy to decode. We tried, like, bracelets, gloves, stuff, but too difficult to spot, for the DJ. Or too easy to copy. Then we thought what the hell? Let 'em do it."

view three

Ray looked up at the holed tank. The concentrated LSD hit him squarely in the face without even time to close his eyes. A heavy tingling sensation penetrated his skin and the muscles on his face. Some part of his brain decided there was no way to limit the effect now and opened his mouth. Another, more reflexive part, lifted his hands, which were immediately drenched. He sat back on his knees. The tingling filled him. There was a brief flash of nausea as his sense of which way was up departed and then the tingling was gone. In its wake was the familiar, to Ray, disorientated acid high feeling.

view one

"I'm telling you. His body dissolved."

"Danny, I heard you the first time. And I'm telling you you've got a car ride to my nick to decide to tell me the truth." The policeman wasn't quite shouting.

view two

There's a lot of The Last DJ and it is very clearly a collective effort - between monitors, manager, programmer and of course the DJ himself, who

although present the whole time said nothing until I was leaving.

"Thank you for coming. It was a good interview."

There's nothing else important to the mission in this magazine article, prepare to exit. Three. Two. One. I open my eyes. The light is very dim.

"Are you alright?" A young woman is asking me. around her voice I can hear a muffled, fast, musical beat. The source of the beat is not distant. This must be the chill-out room - whatever that means. The girl looks concerned that I haven't answered.

"I'm fine. Thank you."

"Have you got any left? Can I have some?" It's a boy behind her.

"Some what?"

"Some of what you're on." He laughs and they both get up - all three of us were sitting on the floor. They walk off, carefully picking their way through other seated people. Her concern seemed genuine.

I have a mission, but I don't have to do anything yet. Because The Last DJ isn't, or aren't, on yet. I will kill their DJ, and as many of the them as I can. I have no gun, or any other weapon but that's OK because I am an expert in unarmed combat. Neither my escape nor my survival are important. Right now I guess I should reconnoitre the club. I've never been to a club before - I never took to dancing. I've got some burn-in from my mission - like "chill-out room" - but I'll need more to complete. Or maybe not because as I stand up and walk around it starts to look familiar. I must have a burn-in map.

There're three floors - the music sounds the same to me, lucky there's a poster up saying where my target is going on. They'll be waiting in a small room behind the kitchen on the top floor. I have an image of the exterior of the building in daylight. There's a fire escape a few yards from the window of the room. I can get to it from the roof, which means sneaking past a bouncer. I'm good at that.

view four

"There's no need for anything else sir. I've placed an agent in the club."

"When did you place him?"

"Her sir. About half an hour ago. She's got her orders."

"What kind of agent?"

The only reply was a raised eyebrow.

"You recalled, landed, programmed and launched in -"

"It's quite enough time sir."

"I do read your people's reports, you know. Heavy going as they are. The time you've allowed is -"

"With respect sir, if we don't push our techniques we'll be left behind."

"You can play keeping up with the Jones's - or the Schmidts or the Patels - on less important jobs. I want insurance. I'm arranging to have a large batch of poisoned LSD available cheap at the location."

view two

I wait in the warm summer night on the fire escape stairs, just a few yards from the open, but barred, window. I can hear their conversation.

"We *need* a large audience."

"How do we get them all into it? There's not many SDB'ers out there. They're likely to just do their normal dancing."

"There was the interview."

"I have a way. Drugs. We buy everything that's on sale here. Get it all in here. Link through it."

Why aren't the degenerates laughing with glee at the prospect of loadsa drugs?

"Between you and me and the monitors OK, we've tried it, but the whole floor?"

"The whole club man. This is it. He's coming tonight. He'll help I think."

"The interview fixed it. Everybody will Data Jive, thinking they're telling him to Playit Faster - when really they're speaking a whole new language. The jive is going to call him."

"It's OK. Now buy the drugs and get ready to meet the alien."

That must be why I'm here.

view one

"Sir, the man was responsible for the manufacture and distribution of huge quantities of dangerous and illegal drugs. Frankly, if we had caught him, all that would happen is he'd get sent down."

"I wanted him. I don't believe he's dead with no trace."

"If you're so concerned about his death, sir, then how about calling it murder. I've just noticed something."

The policeman took the stapled sheets of paper from his subordinate's hand.

"Paul's statement?"

"He says he fell over, saw Ray and Danny, then pushed the button."

The policeman frowned. "So what?"

"What was it you said sir? About endangering the lives of his accomplices? If he knew where they were going it'd be more than endangerment. It'd be premeditated."

The frown cracked into a smile. "And he thought he was going to get off easy. He shops Ray as the

kingpin, getting down on the drugs charge, but suddenly he's right up again. On the big one." He paused for thought. "If we want him to be. I mean if we make it clear that he had no idea where Ray was running to then he's down a few rungs again isn't he? But if we don't. On further questioning." He let it tail off. "What do we want from him?" Thoughts of chastising his officer for wishing a citizen dead vanished from the policeman's mind.

view three

After some time Ray realised that he wasn't just tripping. That he was not hallucinating, since that implied some kind of distortion. He was reminded of an occasion when he had just been tripping, when the feeling had come over him that all his senses were one sense. Then, he had found that by trying, he could distinguish his senses. If he concentrated, colour was indeed an optic sensation, and this was different to pitch, which was an auricular sensation. But now he found that he could not do this, no matter how hard he tried. Which is why it was not hallucination. There was nothing to distort. No matter how hard he tried to let himself settle out and stop tripping quite so heavily, no hint of ordinary vision would return. Ray started to get The Fear.

The Fear, the normal fear, was not unfamiliar to Ray. He had felt it many times, and had seen

others getting it too. Equally he knew ways to deal with it. This time there was a difference. Ray could feel the fear taking off; he perceived the vector of its growth and it was steep. He was reminded of another trip, one which had gone bad. On that occasion a friend had helped him by asking him about lots of day-to-day stuff. He reached for his most recent mundane memory.

Police sirens. Paul running up the ladder. Danny pulling him away down some great big drain. Running through water. Then stopping. Then everything stopping. Cold water in his shoes; trousers floating free of his ankles, but stuck to his shins; the sound of Danny's voice. These were the last specific sensations he could remember. After that everything was abstract. Moving towards a friend. Then feeling that his presence injured his friend and withdrawing. Then a long period of motion and diffusion, with occasional moments of lucidity.

Ray could remember thoughts and abstract sensations from earlier moments of lucidity. He put together the thoughts with those in his mind and assembled a conclusion: for him, Ray, specific sensations were a thing of the past. Somehow he had, quite literally, got off his face. In such a way that he wasn't getting back on. Ever.

Ray decided to leave lucidity alone for a while. The fear was too much.

Café Ultimate

Short stories

Mister Jackson

Mister Jackson trades in the financial markets. He is very successful and earns a large income. He attributes his success, in part, to not paying rent for office accommodation. Instead, Mister Jackson uses various mobile telecommunication services to conduct his business.

It is necessary, for good reception, to remain in one place for a period of time. Long-term car parking is almost as expensive as office space in the areas covered by the broadcast data services which Mister Jackson uses. Hence, Mister Jackson is frequently to be found in Café Ultimate. On average two days out of every seven.

His car pulls up outside, he gets out, instructs his chauffeur "Collect me in four hours for lunch." then carries his briefcase inside. His chauffeur drives around more or less at random, but never more than a few minutes from Café Ultimate.

Mister Jackson always leaves his credit card behind the counter. The staff know his order - black decaffeinated coffee to be kept coming, and

two slices of buttered crispbread every half hour. He sits at a table by the wall and takes his data display and message pager from his briefcase. When he is not working, but is in a restaurant, Mister Jackson finds mobile phones annoying and considers those employing them indoors rude in the extreme. Hence, when Mister Jackson switches on his data display he always sets low brightness, and he carries a pager which has both "bleep" and "vibrate" settings. When he wishes to make a trade he hurries to the soundproof telephone kiosk just inside the door of Café Ultimate.

Mister Jackson uses an advanced model of data display - and expensive item - and one day somebody in the café decided to steal it. He waited until Mister Jackson had hurried to the telephone kiosk, then stood up, as if to leave.

His exit route took him past Mister Jackson's table and as he passed he suddenly snatched up the unit and ran for the exit. Mister Jackson was making a deal at the time:

"No, I want to sell fourteens at seventy-five."

"I'm not interested in selling sixteens."

"No. Fourteens at seventy-five."

"Fourteens at seventy-five I said."

"Hang on a moment I've got something else. How about if I buy those XM's from you?"

"You've been sitting on them for ages. Offer them as thirties and I'll bid seventeen."

The thief was just about to pass the kiosk and make good his escape. Mister Jackson took two quick steps backwards out of the booth, still holding the handset to his ear. The cord between the handset and the phone unit stretched out and caught the thief at neck height. Mister Jackson quickly wrapped the cord around the struggling thief's neck and pushed him back into the kiosk, resuming his conversation.

"Sorry I didn't catch that."

As the thief tried to free himself from the cord Mister Jackson's left palm caught his chin and struck the back of his head against the metal casing of the phone unit.

"Sorry there's some noise here. It sounded like you offered them as thirties for twenty."

Mister Jackson hit the thief's head against the metal box a second time.

"Didn't catch that either, it sounded like you said you weren't interested."

The thief slumped from the combined strangulation and blows to the head.

"Yup, I heard you fine that time, it's a deal. Mine at seventeen." Mister Jackson completed the deal by giving authorisation codes for both trades then pulled the telephone hook down with his hand. He released it, then called his chauffeur.

Soon the car pulled up outside Café Ultimate. Mister Jackson helped put the failed thief on the back seat.

"Take him to the nearest casualty room. I'll pay the bill, but make sure it's anonymous."

"Very good sir."

Hekst Hardcore

Meridienne looked at the men's black uniforms and the implements attached thereto. She thought "They project hate, if I don't respond with fear the can't attack." Jamis, her only companion looked like a little boy compared to the men in the café.

"We're just trying to find the road to the North" she said. "We must've passed your café four times before we thought to come in. Ask directions." Meridienne smiled. Jamis looked nervous. The men looked blank.

After a short pause their leader smiled. "All the roads kind of look the same don't they?"

"Yes they do."

Meridienne and Jamis laughed slightly, all the men smiled too and the tension seemed to be broken.

Inwardly the men were smirking - their leader, Hekst, was only ever friendly to strangers when he'd thought of something really hard-core to pull on them.

"Let's see now, North you say." Meridienne and Jamis nodded and Hekst began to give directions. "OK, you go left out of here down to that star junction. Now you've got two roads going like this." He gestured with both hands. "Then there's a kind of track, going off, sort of at an angle like this." He made another gesture but became dissatisfied. "Hey I know. Why don't I draw you folks a map?"

"Thanks very much, that'd be great." said Jamis.

Hekst's left hand caught Jamis' collar, whilst his right grabbed the young man's belt. The other men moved quickly. Meridienne found her arms pinned to her sides from behind. She struggled and a second man wrapped his arms around her neck. As she tried to fight them off Meridienne caught a glimpse of Hekst picking Jamis up onto a table. Meridienne felt a piece of wood passing against her chin. Then, with a sharp twist, her head was jerked upwards. From the corner of either eye she could see the long stick the man was using. In front of her more men were holding Jamis down, one applying the same stick neck lock which held her in painful immobility.

Hekst flicked open a six inch blade and cut the buttons off Jamis' shirt in one staccato motion.

"Now then. We're here." Jamis took breath sharply through his mouth as Hekst cut a small square, millimetres across, just to the right of Jamis' solar plexus. "Don't squirm so much son, I'm trying to help." Hekst teased Jamis' left nipple with the blade and his men sniggered. "So you go left out of here", drawing the knife across to Jamis' left ribs, a little blood sprang immediately, "then there's a star junction with one, two, three, four, five, six roads coming off it. You want this one." Hekst extended one arm of the asterisk up towards Jamis' neck. "On this road you want the one, two, three, fourth turn-off. That'll take you North." Hekst wiped and closed the knife, then had an afterthought.

"I'd better", he searched for a word, "emphasise that turn off." Hekst opened the knife once more and made a second cut by the last and flicked out a narrow wedge of flesh. Jamis cried out.

As the men released Jamis and Meridienne one asked a question:

"How come you give them the right directions Hekst?"

"So they *have* to look at it, idiot."

The Cruelty-free Commando

So long as you buy something, the staff don't mind if you sit a while. Especially at a quiet time of day.

You can have a cassette recorder on your table even. Not for playing of course, but for recording. Like if you're doing an interview.

Interviewer: So how did he come to be called "The Cruelty-free Commando"?

Subject: (laughing) Not just him but the whole group of us. That came about after one time, a long time back, near the start when we were making Molotov cocktails. Anyway we'd got a load of bottles, I don't remember where from, just collected here and there I reckon, and we'd stole some cans of petrol - holding up a gas station and somebody says "What about soap". Anyway we didn't know anything back then so everyone says "What soap?" like what do you want soap for, you know with petrol bombs. So they said they'd read in a CIA manual about adding shredded soap to the petrol, and we thought well you can't argue with that, you can't argue with the CIA you know? (laughs). Well first thing we thought is how are we going to shred it and somebody says they saw a cheese grater in the kitchen. I couldn't believe that, man, like its a broken up old squat house and there's a cheese grater in the kitchen. Anyway there was one. So I said I'd go to the corner store and buy soap. It's now that your man pipes up and says "What brand of soap you getting?" I thought he was joking so I said just whatever's cheapest you know, maybe get a money off voucher for the next purchase (laughs). But he's serious, I think with him everything had to be a statement or it wasn't worth doing. We stole petrol so as not to prop up the oil companies, we lived in a squat because paying rent just helps to prop up the regime of ownership and so on. Anyway, to return to the soap, he said he didn't see why we should support vivisection and that he didn't use soap and shampoo that had been tested on animals or that contained animal ingredients. Well at first we just laughed and somebody said "What is this, the cruelty-free commando?" and because we were all laughing like that, I think, is why the name stuck. And of course we couldn't come up with any counter arguments so I had to go out shopping for cruelty-free soap.

Interviewer: You're saying that every incendiary bomb you threw contained no animal products?

Subject: Yes sir! He made sure of that. The Cruelty-free Commando.

Interviewer: The Cruelty-free Commando.