

A.K.C.T.

issue two

fiction@AUTOTRASCEND **BM Box 3641, LONDON WC1N 3XX, ENGLAND**

Michael & Julia In the *Part Two* The afternoon becomes an evening of discovery. Originally featured in Sheets Project.

Hardface *Part Two* Introducing the Warlords of Mann Trading, where all is not as it appears. And introducing the warriors, where it's Friday afternoon. These initial chapters originally featured in Sheets Project.

It's about time *New Story* Elaine and Charlotte's academic discussion of human temporal perception turns out to have great practical value as they get mixed up in the strange case of the Freemasons vs The most evil man in All Time.

The Last DJ *Conclusion* The alien, the DJ, his assassin, her controller. This section all new material.

Café Ultimate *Short Stories* And then there was the time when the café was in a rough area.

Next issue

Nightmare, Sleepwalk, Remix *Part Two* Gerard's clues lead him to Chasing Satan, a band, and Puissance Res, a magickal order.

Michael & Julia In the

Part Two

In the room where he lives

After a short tube journey, then a short walk, Michael and Julia were outside the front door of a large house. Michael rented a bed-sitting room on the top floor. After ascending the stairs Julia finally dropped her sports' bag and her portable stereo. She sat back on the edge of the double bed and let her shoulders drop. She watched Michael walking around a screen to where she knew there was a sink. Julia lay back at the sound of a glass filling with water.

Julia had not been intending to have sex with Michael at this time. Not in the cinema when he put his hand on her leg. Not in the underground either. Certainly not as she climbed all the stairs to his room. But somehow being here in his room on his bed she wanted to. Also she wanted to talk to him. But the one did not preclude the other she thought, as she closed her eyes.

"Do you want a glass of water Julia?" Michael called from behind the screen.

"Yes please." she sang, thinking "No. I want your cock in my cunt."

Michael came around the screen with a glass in his right hand and stood over her. Julia knew he was there but just lay still hoping he would get on the bed to give her the glass. He did not. She opened her eyes, raised herself on her left elbow and took the glass. Julia looked into Michael's eyes, and kept her eyes locked on his whilst she took a draught of the water. She kept staring as she let her head fall back and lowered the arm holding the glass so it rested on her body. Julia was acutely aware that she was lounging sexily, Michael was having that effect on her again.

"I'll have to get changed for Club Venice." Michael turned away from her, went to the open wardrobe.

Julia took a sip of her water, thinking "Now he's going to get undressed right in front of me. How am I supposed to control myself?"

Michael shrugged out of his jacket and laid it across a chair with a little care. He stood with his back to Julia and unbuttoned and removed his shirt, then pulled his T-shirt off over his head. Julia watched the muscles of his back move as he leaned one hand against the wardrobe and undid a shoe with the other. He shifted to do the other shoe, after pulling the sock off and dropping it on the floor. Julia looked at the very slight overflow of Michael's middle over the waistband of his jeans, as he removed his second shoe and sock. Michael reached into the wardrobe and stopped. His head

dropped slightly, his left hand moved to his waist and he swore.

"Shit." Then he raised his head, his expression blank as he looked sideways. "You'll have to change too."

As Michael turned to look at her it occurred to Julia that he had thought of what she was wearing whilst he had not been looking at her.

Julia looked down at her clothes. Comfortable trainers, jeans, shirt over a T-shirt, casual jacket. "I didn't know there was a dress code."

"Not for the ground floor, but I go upstairs. It's not a code as such but you just don't go up there dressed like that." Michael turned away from her, rubbing his chin and frowning to help him think.

Julia got up and went to the wardrobe, she had had an idea. "What will you wear?" she asked, standing to his left.

Michael pushed a hanger aside to reveal a silky, loose fitting black suit. "It's nothing special. It's just not ordinary." He frowned at the suit, which was Italian.

"Why don't I wear some of your clothes?" Julia suggested.

Michael straightened, Julia watched his eyes moving up, then left, then down, mirroring some analytical process. He stuck his lower lip out, then withdrew it, then nodded. "Yeah." he agreed.

Julia stroked her right hand down Michael's back, which made him twitch slightly, only stopping when her fingers were inside his underpants, feeling his left buttock. Michael froze, deciding whether he wanted to have sex then. Julia had chosen her moment.

"Why did you touch me today?" she asked quietly.

Michael's arms dropped to his side, he looked up and took a breath. "I don't know."

Julia moved closer, putting her left arm around his abdomen. She rested her chin on his arm, kissed his shoulder lightly, then leaned her head back to say "Was it because of talking to that man?"

Michael stood still and answered "Robert. I guess I don't talk to people I don't know very often."

Julia kissed his shoulder again then moved her body against his, shifting her right hand so that her little finger was pressed in the cleft between his buttocks. "Why don't you touch me more often?"

"In public you mean?" Michael raised his right hand and scratched his head nervously, then rubbed his neck as he answered "It just seems like a really possessive gesture. Like I'm saying you're my property."

Julia turned him to face her, put her arms around his neck and smiled at him. Michael did not smile back, and she felt she had to speak. "It's okay. It's not the inquisition. It's not a test. I just want to know."

Michael put his hands on her hips and looked down, making a slight snort. Julia reassured him further "You haven't failed." She kissed his lips. Then again. The third time he kissed back. After the kiss finished Julia began kissing Michael's neck and chest. Her arms lowered as his rose. He touched her hair and neck, whilst she pushed her hands under the waistband of his jeans to feel his buttocks again.

After a minute or two Julia stopped kissing Michael's chest to say "We can't do too much with me fully clothed."

Michael took this as a signal, released her, and went to sit on the bed. Julia stood in front of him and took off her jacket. She reached for the top button of her shirt, then stopped. Looking into his eyes she leaned forwards until her hands were on Michael's knees, then said to him "You never undress me."

Michael shrugged "You're not my doll." He was holding her hands in his hands, lightly.

Julia smiled the same smile again "Good reasons. All good reasons." Without warning she lurched forward, carrying Michael onto his back and making the bed squeak. She grinned at him mischievously "C'mon let's just play."

In the pub

Julia was finding Michael's clothing an experience. As usual, as they walked the short walk to the Three Vikings from where he lived, Michael was quiet, giving Julia a chance to analyse the ways Michael's office clothes felt alien to her.

Michael's suit jacket hung its weight from her shoulders with a different emphasis to her own jackets. His shirt, done all the way up, and with a tie, had pulled across her chest so she had substituted her aerobics top for her usual bra. The suit trousers had had their fastenings adjusted, but still required a belt to stay up.

Julia felt restricted in some places she was used to being free, but not in a bad way. Some places, usually untouched by clothing were constantly being brushed. Even the unaccustomed absence of stimulation across certain areas of her skin made her tingle a little as her body told her those parts must be exposed, even though her mind knew them to be covered.

Even when she had stood still in front of the mirror in the bathroom Julia had felt different. Walking, Julia felt as though she was being stroked at every step. Two minutes out the

walking had to stop and the running had to begin - it started to rain heavily.

Julia had to follow Michael, or she would have arrived at least a minute before him. As it was she could only pull away when the pub was in sight. However, rounding the final corner Julia missed the entrance and Michael got in first. His first words, once inside, were a breathless "What'll you have?"

"Pint of lager please." Julia always had lager. "I'll find a place to sit."

Michael went to the bar, on the other side of the room. Julia noted large oblong tables and small circular tables, none unoccupied. She selected one end of a large table, gave a small smile to the people at the other end and sat on a settee built against the wall.

Julia had adapted to re-evaluating common actions: walking, running, ascending steps and now sitting down. She noted that each had a small amount of novelty, something that was easier in Michael's clothes, something that was more difficult. Although she had a feeling of overall activation, Julia found it quite easy to tell herself that the whole room was not staring at her. Julia stretched her legs out beside the table and looked down at her shoes.

Julia was wearing her own shoes; the only part of the ensemble that did not fit the overall look. Michael was wearing his good shoes himself so Julia had had to wear her trainers.

Julia looked up from her shoes and took in the medium sized pub. The furniture was more durable than comfortable. The light fittings were more sturdy than decorative. The floor was bare boards. There were shelves on most of the walls, populated according to their altitude: From the valuable and/or breakable objects on the shelves closest to the ceiling (Julia noted large glass jars, elaborate china mugs, intricate wood carvings and an antique sewing machine), down to rows of bought-by-the-yard Old Books on the shelves a person might actually reach. Julia could see the next room had a pool table and Casuals, but the bar did not extend there. This meant that, when a round was due, the Casual whose turn it was had to come into the main bar area to buy. As Julia was surveying she noticed one carrying four pint glasses looking around with distaste at the young relaxed people in this room. Julia liked the atmosphere, here and there was the occasional fashion head, there might have been one or students in the room but overall it was pleasant. And there was a jukebox.

Michael brought a packet of peanuts and two lagers to the table, then sat down said "cheers" and took a sip of his. Julia followed. Michael opened up the packet along its whole length and placed it on the table so that both of them could pick peanuts from it.

"It just occurred to me that I haven't eaten much today." He said. He put a handful of nuts in his mouth and chewed.

At the other end of their table people were talking about umbrellas. Julia could hear their conversation.

"You can tell a lot about a person by their umbrella. Like a golfing umbrella says big and bold. He doesn't mind if people notice him."

"The people shall quake at my passing."

"Exactly. But this - " he paused to make some gesture Julia could not see. "This says the opposite. It's a timid umbrella."

"Unassuming. Modest."

"It's the umbrella of a person with no friends. There's no way you get more than one person under there."

"Not at all, I've had another person under this, and it was very cosy I might tell you."

"It sure was if you had them."

"Oo-err misses."

They all laughed and took pulls at their drinks. Julia smiled too. Michael caught her eye. He was also listening to their conversation, and smiling and drinking.

"I agree with you, but only for cheap small umbrellas." The word cheap was emphasised. "This is a Knurps umbrella, from Germany. They're so popular there that small men are sometimes called Knurps. Also it's small enough that I never forget it."

"What do you mean? If it's smaller you're more likely to forget it."

"Not at all. If you have a large umbrella you have to put it down somewhere. On the luggage rack, on the floor or wedged behind your seat. That's how you forget it. As soon as I come in I can fold it up and put it in my case. Also because it's expensive I make sure not to lose it."

"Well there I've got to disagree. Expense has no bearing on losability."

"That's even more clear than the smallness-"

"I've done experiments, well a trial anyway. I decided I was sick of losing umbrellas. So I made a rule that whenever I lost one I had to buy a more expensive one."

"When did you stop?"

"A hundred and twenty-three pounds. And then I found one. I'd lost the hundred and twenty-three pound one, guy in the shop didn't have anything which cost more, and I found one on a train. I've had it for two years now." There was a pause as the umbrella in question was reached for and held up. "There you go." Julia risked a look, but not Michael. A logo was partially visible on the wet surface of the folded umbrella.

"What's that logo?"

"CDD corporate. Never heard of them."

"I had a pretty nice umbrella once. It fell over and I couldn't pick it up."

"Why not? Where did it fall?"

"It's not a question of where but what. And the answer is a big pile of dog shit." They were groaning and laughing, as were Michael and Julia. "The handle went right splat in the middle. And I looked at it and I could smell it and it was ... I think that dog must have been seriously sick you know? From the smell." The groans and cries of "No" overcame the speaker who shut up and took a drink like the others. And like Michael and Julia.

"They're good aren't they?" said Michael, quietly so they would not hear him. He sipped his drink, then added "They pay these people you know, it's a floor show." before putting down his lager.

"Oh really? Maybe they could give you some work." As she said it Julia realised it had come out sounding nasty.

"Well you're on the attack today." Michael mumbled, abruptly looking down into his lager. He turned the glass with his right hand, then shifted his head to rest the left temple in his left palm and looked obliquely at the tiny bubbles fizzing up through the liquid.

Julia had been sitting back when she spoke. She watched Michael's right hand as it continued to rotate the glass clockwise. After a few seconds she leaned forward ready to speak. Then she decided not to. Julia stayed leaned forward and looked at Michael's fringe. She was finding out about Michael. Julia reached out her right hand and touched the back of Michael's left with her fingertips. Only his eyes made any response, a reflexive twitch to look at her hand then turned back to the bubbles.

Julia had been ready for Michael to pull away from her or leave the table even. Perhaps he would have made an excuse like putting money in the jukebox. That would have shown him incapable of something, Julia felt. Another possibility which Julia considered was for Michael to have taken her gesture for an apology. Apologising either because she had not intended to attack, or because she regretted her attack. Julia was pleased he had not made these responses.

"Don't accuse me of attacking, Michael." She said quietly.

"I'm undemonstrative, I'm something else ..." Michael waved his right hand towards the people to whom they had been listening as he grasped for words. "A floor show, I don't talk to people, I'm unfeeling ..." Michael came to a halt, finally looking at Julia's eyes.

"So what?" Said Julia. She had realised what was giving Michael pain. "I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm not trying to teach you. You don't have to change. -" Julia realised she had been about to say that she loved him as he was and had stopped

herself. She had no time to ask herself why. "And don't tell me I'm right."

Michael made a small laughing snort then grinned because he had been about to tell her just that. Instead he grabbed her right hand, which had remained on his left hand since Julia had reached out to him, and kissed the palm quickly. "You're a good person Julia." He smiled again and Julia smiled back, "stubble" she said, scratching his with her finger. He released her hand and they both finished their drinks. Julia got up to buy her round.

Julia headed towards a gap in the people at the bar, only for it to be filled by a man as she approached it. His friend, who was standing at the bar, started speaking to him immediately. Julia turned sideways to fit by them and place her order at the bar and could hear their conversation.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Was the jukebox music playing in the bogs?"

"No."

The other man tutted. "Oh well never mind. I just put some Debbie Harry on, I fancied having a wank to it." They both laughed. One and then the other started singing along to the jukebox.

"Feeding ducks in the park and wishing you were far away. That's entertainment, that's entertainme - hent."

Meanwhile Michael was listening to the other end of the table again.

"I'm doing pretty well at the moment, I just picked up some catalogue work. Funny job actually."

"Why's that?"

"It's a camera catalogue. I can't use my own gear because every shot in there has to be taken with that model of camera. The EOS 400 has to be taken with an EOS 400, the 100 has to be taken with a 100 and so on."

"Lucky they don't do it with filters. How can you take a photo of a red filter through a red filter. It'd come out blank."

"Would it? Or would it come out clear?"

"Err ... good point. Don't know."

"Lucky they don't do it with lenses. Like with a telephoto lens you'd have to leave the studio just so you could shoot it." The speaker's arms were spread wide. "With a wide angle you'd get the lens like that" the speaker held the forefinger and thumb of his right hand out "in the middle of the page" the fingers spread out. "And with a macro you'd get, like, an extremely detailed view of the manual focus knob or something."

The others in the group were laughing only a little. Michael concluded they were not photographers. He turned his attention to the next table.

"Working in a restaurant gives you that too. First of all, every person who asks for coffee gets asked by us 'with milk?' right? We can't say 'black or

white?' because there are too many tourists who don't understand."

"What is this white coffee of which you speak?"

"And to nobody does it occur to say 'coffee with milk' instead of just 'coffee'. OK apart from that once this guy asks for coffee and I say 'with milk?' and he says 'No. Just coffee.' in this really indignant tone of voice, like I've asked him such a stupid question."

There was a small pause for drink and another person took up the thread.

"We used to close at five. So after five we tidy all the food away and start cleaning the surfaces. One day, at quarter past five, this guy comes up and asks for another coffee and this girl tells him 'Sorry we close at five.' at which point he looks at the clock on the wall and says, angrily 'But it's quarter past five!'"

They laughed at that.

"It's like the Marx Brothers isn't it? 'It's quarter past five!'"

"Are you sure she didn't say to him 'We're closed at five.' Maybe he took it literally. You know, at the moment of five o'clock we are closed, not before or after, but at that moment."

"Sorry we're closed now. Why don't you come back in one second when we're open again?"

"One nanosecond."

Julia returned, put one pint on the table, said "I'm going to the jukebox" and left Michael alone again. Michael shifted attention back to his own table.

" - it's to do with the way the microwave heats things. The water in the cup is all at different energy levels. When you put the spoon in they have to equalise all of a sudden."

"That happened to me but with a sugar cube. I dropped it in and it exploded. And the tea was frothing out over the table too. It was like that bit in Sleeper."

Julia crossed the room to the jukebox. She put a pound coin in the slot and started flicking through the albums by pressing a large red button on the machine. Julia could hear two people talking at a nearby table.

"He's all right, but he's a bit of a tea mates."

"A what?"

Infected, The the.

"Tea mates."

"What's one of those?"

Anarchy in the UK, The sex pistols.

"Tea mates. T M A I T S. Too Much Acid In The Seventies."

At another table was another conversation.

"I did some portraits over there, rich people mostly. Some couples, some kids. The strangest

one was this bloke who wanted me to paint his mistress."

"What with no clothes on or something?"

Life in the fast lane, Eagles.

"Not just that. He wanted one nude, for his living room you know where all his visitors could see it. And-

Hanky panky, Madonna.

"That's so macho and territorial. Here's my woman, one of my women. It's like a hunting trophy."

Dear Jessie, Madonna.

"I was at one of their parties and she liked it, used to point it out to people. She was into astrology and shit, thought the painting gave her power. Anyway the point is he wanted another painting of her too. But not all of her, if you catch my drift."

There was a pause and somebody said, in a hushed voice "You mean her cunt?"

"S right. I don't know where he hung that one."

Michael Caine, Madness. Julia's last selection made she turned to cross the room. On the way back she encountered a little congestion and had to stop.

"Not in my room. One of those bastards comes in, I pick up a magazine. Whap! Spider food."

Julia found, as she approached Michael, that she could now discern to which of the surrounding conversations he was listening, just by looking at him from the back. He was ignoring the people at the other end of the same table.

"No no no. I don't want to go there. I've got a severe case of indie-gestion."

"You've been reading music papers again haven't you? I've told you about that."

"All the bands which are just another band with a pretty girl in front spend so much time saying they're not. The interviewers play up to it, going on about how intelligent they are. They're not intelligent, people just pay attention to them because they're attractive and they want to sleep with them. I bet if you tried to argue with them they'd be all over the place. 'Oh you're talking back to me. People don't usually do that, they just agree with me to flatter me.' That's all it is."

Instead he was back with the catering worker on the next table.

"We did some catering in the city once. It's a completely different world. Traders man, they earn so much money, but you can't talk to them. Like where we were, they would be coming in to this room in the breaks for coffee and so on. I thought we'd stand there with pots and milk jugs and so on, but the supervisor says no. The first time he'd tried that. Asks this trader if he wants milk, what does he reply? Fuck off."

There were sharp intakes of breath.

"What do you do then, let them pour it themselves?"

"They would riot. No. Just make four areas for milk, no milk and sugar, no sugar. Can't pour out too many or they get cold before somebody picks them up. And they'll still complain and swear. They think they're so important. But, in a way, they are; they make millions for their companies, a year."

Julia sat down opposite Michael. Michael smiled at her, his head bobbing in a small, continuous nodding motion. Julia felt as though she was being evaluated. She looked back at Michael and mimicked his head movement, with exaggeration, then opened her eyes a little wider. Michael made a small, light laugh, stopped his head movement, took a drink and sat back in his chair, still smiling, his eyelids relaxed slightly. Julia could tell he was still calculating, and felt a little uncomfortable. She wondered what he was working out.

"What are you thinking?" Julia asked.

"Oh nothing." Michael replied. His eyes refocussed, past Julia. "I think it's stopped raining. We ought to get going."

"But it's only half ten." Julia wanted to stay in the pub until she found out what Michael had been thinking about.

"They don't have a drinks license so we'll have to go by the offy." Michael countered. "Now's a good time to get there, the queue'll be quite short, and we'll be able to find a table."

"But I've got this to finish." Julia indicated her half full glass.

Michael's response was to drain his own glass and offer her a hand with hers. Julia declined. By the time she had finished it Michael had stood up to leave.

When they got outside they discovered that it was still raining a little.

Hardface

Part Two

chapter four

Louis Hunter was a budding warlord. He worked for Mann Trading, a warlord-friendly company,

with a Staff Focused management policy. Which meant they believed in keeping good people by offering them promotions and pay-rises (as a worldwide trading company, Mann Trading

handled all kinds of goods, which meant their pay was worth having).

Louis Hunter was about to be offered a promotion and a pay-rise, both big. As he knocked on the door to his head of department's office, he was sure he was to be offered something, but was not sure how much. This presented no problem, if it was not enough he knew how to get something better: by moving to another company, and he had somebody lined up, just in case.

"Come in."

Louis walked in to find Jane Bryant, Head of Department, Defence, Mann Trading alone in her office. She was walking towards him, smiling, hand outstretched. He shook her hand automatically, although he was put a little off balance by the formality of the gesture. They were on first name terms, in the corridor at least.

"Hi Louis. Have a seat." She gestured towards a chair by the table in the centre of the small room. Now he was Louis again.

"Umm. Thanks." Louis sat. Jane turned her back to him to shuffle a flip chart from where it rested against the wall to a position closer to the table. Jane was a full warlord. She felt his unsettlement; subconsciously she had noticed a dozen body and facial language indicators. Equally subconsciously she had planned Louis' unsettlement. She generally liked to take control of a meeting early, like before it had started.

The flip chart in position, Jane turned and addressed Louis. She spoke softly and not too fast.

"OK. As you know this is a review meeting for you, and you'll see why I'm doing this, as your head of department, rather than Jack, who's your manager in a few minutes." Jane half turned to draw a simple tree diagram on the top sheet of the chart.

Louis' hopes lifted. Jack Dewey, Manager, Stationary Defence, Mann Trading was, in theory, his immediate manager. Recently though he had been working on projects for Jane, Jack's boss, and even for her boss Aaron Abrams, Board Member, Operations, Mann Trading. Louis felt that if Jane was talking to him, it must mean a good promotion, especially as she was drawing a diagram of company structure. Maybe he was headed for Office of the Board Member?

"I think you know most of this anyway." Jane said, half to him, as she finished her diagram, by adding initials to each node of the tree.

"Defence comes under Operations, along with other things like transport and utility. Under Defence we currently have the sections Stationary, Land Mobile and Sea." (Louis noted the word currently.) "Now. My office has been looking at this arrangement, particularly at Stationary, where you currently work." (Louis noted it again.) "Stationary deals with security at our ports and

warehouses, at the farms and processing plants we own, as well as all our offices, including this one. It's quite a wide spectrum, and it's become clear that the headquarters building is a very special case, especially now because we're expanding headquarters. It's going to be the only really large office we have."

Louis had official knowledge about headquarters expanding (it had been Announced), he had unofficial knowledge of the aim of having no other large offices, but he had had no knowledge about re-evaluation of headquarters office defence. This made his gossip antenna twitch. Louis asked himself how it could have come about that he had not heard about this re-evaluation. All those "currently"s stimulated his mind, and he thought fast. It could not have taken long, and was therefore not a genuine evaluation. More likely, Louis decided, a decision had been made on some other basis, and this was a justification exercise, creating a palatable reason for whatever the decision was.

This was as far as his racing mind had got whilst Jane had been speaking.

"With the board's approval, I am creating a new Defence section: Headquarters." Jane paused to draw another branch on the flip chart. "I want you to head the section."

Louis fought back a huge grin, and the urge to jump in the air whooping. He looked back at Jane, who was looking straight at him, a serious expression on her face. Now he knew the real reason for the re-evaluation: they were creating a new senior position just for him, to keep him within Mann Trading. Louis quickly weighed a few acceptances and chose one.

"Sounds like a challenge." He nodded. "Something I can really get my teeth into. There'll be a lot to do. When and how do I start?"

Jane smiled. She was unsure of Louis' ability to handle the section head job, but it would keep him quiet and also put pressure on Jack, by taking away some of his power. Jack hadn't been doing so well lately. Should Louis not make a good section head, the section would continue to exist, and could be returned to Jack, or given to somebody like Louis, a young lion who fancied himself, or herself. That had been Jane's real objective. She had wanted something to hang above the pack, something for them to fight over to distract them from the post of head of department.

Mark Sovereign would not have described himself as a warlord. This was because he did not follow fashion. Some of his colleagues followed fashion, avidly. They not only talked with each other about new ideas in management, but actually had paid agents working at other companies to find out their new ideas too. He regarded those colleagues

with quiet contempt. Mark wasn't at all like them; he was a long-termist. A very-long-termist. But then he could afford to be. Mark Sovereign did not age; he was immortal.

Mark's immortality was not the power of a unique individual, such as No-number Zen. Nor had his immortality been the result of a lengthy study of occult science, which was how Witch Carter had acquired her abilities. Mark Sovereign's immortality had been given by a supernatural entity, as had Mister Sunrise's powers, although a different entity. Mark Sovereign's aging process had been arrested by Antichrist. He was one of a small group who had been so blessed.

The blessing had taken place during the wars which had led to Collapse. Antichrist had known what those wars would be like, and how they would be different to previous wars. Principally, the wars would not be two-sided but all-against-all, the destruction would be global and almost total, and there would be no winners. This time there would be no opportunity for His organisation to simply wait out the storm, and take advantage on the side as they had done previously, for instance by secretly assisting war criminals in return for a share of their plunder. This time a Special Intervention would be necessary.

Twelve men were chosen to take His organisation through Collapse. They were to allow its apparent destruction, and go underground. After Collapse they were to rebuild the organisation, in secret, until it was of sufficient size and power to return to a dominating public position. This would take a long time, hence the immortality. At the blessing, Antichrist had revealed a complete plan detailing the actions and goals of each of the twelve men at every stage, from that moment until the rebuilding was complete. The plan had been followed to the letter, religiously. As the wars and Collapse had run their long and destructive course the organisation had lost support, sustained direct attacks, suffered from splits and faction, and had finally died. The twelve men were therefore currently engaged in the rebuilding phase. In the plan each man had tasks assigned to him.

One of Mark Sovereign's tasks was the creation of a global travel and communications network, usable by the organisation. He had joined Mann Trading in order to achieve this. And to secure a position of great personal power and wealth for himself, which was equally part of the plan. He had applied to join as a Trading Assistant, a "commission package" job which meant it paid only a tiny fixed salary. Which was why it was a good place to start - applicants weren't asked a lot of difficult (for Mark) questions about their background and history, if they didn't succeed the company dropped them and hadn't had to pay them much anyway. Mark Sovereign had not been dropped. He had been lifted.

His bosses had noted two characteristics they wanted to use at a more senior level. The first was a nebulous ability, somewhere between "lateral thinking", "attention to detail" and "seeing new angles". The second was not at all nebulous: he had a nose as hard as a diamond; when he dealt with people they jumped, rolled over and gave discounts. Mark had accepted promotion, several times, and had soon been working for heads of department, and board members. Picking his moment, once his work had impressed them, but before they wrote him off as a super legman forever, he had made his pitch.

Mark Sovereign's idea had been to have a team dedicated to liaison between parts of the company. At the time there had been a real need for what he suggested; the board had been well aware of inefficiencies existent because of rivalry and poor communications. The board had created Strategic Liaison Team, attached to Office of the Chairman, with Mark Sovereign as its head.

Over the next two years the board noted many individual successes and general improvements, all resulting from their own wisdom in having created the team, and from the efficient management and visionary leadership of Mark Sovereign. And over those two years, the "team" had been expanded, in scope and in personnel. On the day that Louis Hunter had an early morning meeting with Jane Bryant, Mark Sovereign was comfortably settled as Head of Department, Strategic Liaison, Mann Trading and had been so for six months.

Mark was fully as happy as the board with StratLiaise but for different reasons. Reasons that were in line with Antichrist's plan. Mark had expanded on his original, rather narrow, liaison brief. He had explained to the board that, yes, they had made great strides in facilitating inter-departmental communication, but that they could go further. Rather than waiting for situations in which two (or more) departments decided to communicate, they could actually be seeking out situations in one department which might have bearing on, or contain useful lessons for, another department's activities. "Pro-active liaison" Mark called it, so that the board would like the idea. What it actually meant was that it was now the brief of StratLiaise to be aware of everything that happened in the company, in any department, just in case it could be of benefit to another department. Therefore StratLiaise staff had to be in touch with all departments, and at all locations. This meant they had to have access to excellent communications, be they data or voice, and, for those vital face-to-face meetings and site visits, to excellent travel facilities. Mark and his department went everywhere and talked to everyone. And with so much traffic, it was easy to fit in extra items, the odd extra few passengers here and few pages of coded information there, especially if you were head of department. An objective fulfilled. And in a way typical of Mark's style: the details of

the initial team's job, the small changes to the department's brief, not rushing to create a network, but letting it grow, with him at its centre, all were his trademarks, and for millennia had been the trademarks of the organisation for which he really worked. As a head of department, Mark was very well paid, which also helped his objectives. But as head of department of StratLiaise he could find out about almost anything going on anywhere in the world, which was much more important. Mann Trading had interests, but not offices, all over the world, in all kinds of fields - everything had some impact on what they did. There was a lot of news, a lot of situation reports, a lot of bulletins, a lot of up-to-the-minute datafeeds, circulating through Mann Trading. But wait. Who knew whether a Sea Defense report on a pirate group operating around Bornholm might be of use to, say, Armaments Trading? Who knew whether a Plankton Production newsfeed about changing temperatures in the Kuroshio, should also be fed to Sea Transportation? Why, Strategic Liaison of course, so all reports had to go through their system, just in case. They all had to be indexed. They all had to be retrievable, by anybody with clearance of course. And Mark Sovereign had clearance (also he knew the indexing system inside-out). Oh yes, his objectives were very clearly in his sights.

At the moment that Louis was accepting the Headquarters Defence job, Mark was reading his e-mail. He had just finished reading the final agreed policy document on super-powered individuals. There weren't many around, but Mark wanted to know about them nevertheless. He had put the right people in touch with each other to ensure that Mann Trading kept records on any extraordinary people encountered. Records which were, of course, within his reach. He was pleased with the document, and keyed for the next unread item.

"Good Usage, SysAdv monthly bulletin" appeared on the screen. He flicked through it quickly, noting subject headings and keywords. On page four his finger slipped off the PageDown key accidentally. As he felt for the top of the key again, the page remained on the screen. Forced to take more than the casual glances he had been taking, Mark noticed something. A list of names.

The list, introduced by the phrase "Attending Meeting:" appeared in a figure entitled "Names without dept idents". Mark reached for his mouse and clicked the figure id "fig 2". A menu appeared and he clicked "Start of paragraph". He read:

"The guidelines state that in a free text message, dept idents should be appended to the names of employees. The bad example in fig 2 is also taken from a recent real message. This case is especially noteworthy, since the list of names could have been linked, as a block, to the Pnl database, thus ensuring that all extra information on the

employees, including dept ident, was immediately available to the recipient of the message. Note that, should a message with Pnl attachments be sent to a recipient without access to Pnl, the mail system inserts text equivalents, as far as is possible, into the message, before forwarding."

Returning to fig 2, Mark read the list. He had vaguely heard of all the people on the list, although none were from StratLiaise. Not content with vague recollections, Mark set about getting something more concrete. Working quickly, he opened Pnl, and cut and pasted the list of names into a Search window. He expanded the results to fill his screen and stared at the resultant table. Family name, First name, PnlId, Department, Team, Current projects, Line manager, Job title and links to other databases were shown for each of the people attending the meeting. Mark scrolled left and right and up and down and followed links, browsing. Suddenly he took a sharp breath and recoiled from the screen. He had a sudden cold feeling.

All the staff on the list were at the same level in line: two down from Head of Department, but all of them were from different departments or sections. Somebody had run a meeting, with people from all over the company, and nobody from StratLiaise had been there. Which is what had made Mark Sovereign take a sharp breath. The links, to the diary and to the StratLiaise contacts log, showed that all the people at the meeting had been involved in a Strategic Liaison project in the last nine months, but that no two of them had been involved in the same project. Which is what had made Mark Sovereign recoil. There had been a board directive three months ago, to all departments, that a StratLiaise consultant was to attend all meetings attended by three or more staff of Head of Team equivalent seniority. This was the exact seniority of all the people on the list. Further, SysAdv had suggested changes to the diary system to notify StratLiaise of all such meetings automatically, and these changes had been adopted company-wide. Only two parts of the company could have avoided stating their adoption or non-adoption, and therefore need not have adopted the changes: The Board and Internal Monitoring. The Board was the less likely of the two to have called a meeting of Head of Team equivalents. Which is what made Mark Sovereign feel cold all of a sudden.

InternMonit were onto him, and he had found out only by a stroke of luck. Mark didn't see it as luck though. He closed his eyes and mentally offered a prayer of thanks. Then a prayer for strength and calmness, since he was beginning to panic a little. After praying he felt a little better. He felt able to think at least. Mark considered, and quickly discarded, the notion that he was being paranoid.

It occurred to Mark that he had been shewn that InternMonit were after him. This must have been

for a reason. The most obvious reason was so that he could do something, before their investigation got too far. Mark made a quick plan of action. It wasn't really necessary to act against the investigation directly, he decided. Direct action would be difficult to do, and catastrophic if discovered. On the face of it, there wasn't that much to investigate anyway. Cutting down on his extra transport items for a while (six months, nine months?) was the first element of his plan. Any irregularities InternMonit might find could be made to look like old stuff, passing through loopholes which had since been closed. None of it could be traced to him anyway. They could still make things a little rough, but if he could come up with a major success from somewhere he should be able to brazen it out. A major success was the other element of his plan. Maybe the board would be presented with an InternMonit report, one which would have to include something about how the irregularities noted were no longer continuing, and just after that StratLiaise would come through with some triumph from somewhere, and the board would say they didn't want to get rid of somebody who was making the company money just because of a few old mistakes. Panic over.

Of course cutting out his own activities would be inconvenient, what with him being asked to help out with that Central Temple business. Maybe he could turn Paul down? After all it was Paul who had underestimated those blasted heathens anyway. Than again he might just be able to get away with something.

His calculations were interrupted by Spence, one of his staff, reminding him of a meeting in his office. Mark Sovereign closed Pnl and brought his attention back to his job. He was going to need a success to beat off InternMonit, he reminded himself.

Iaga Bookman was a warlord. Coincidentally, she noticed the list of names in "fig 2" on page 4 of Good Usage at about the same time as Mark Sovereign. Her reaction was completely different however. She did not panic - she became furious. And she had not had to look up the names in Pnl, because she, Iaga Bookman, VP consultant, Internal Monitoring, Mann Trading was in charge of InternMonit3351, Investigation into StratLiaise.

Nobody outside InternMonit was supposed to know about the investigation, other than those at the meeting, and here was the list of names being mailed to the whole company. Iaga was doubly piqued by the fact that her simple security measure of not listing dept idents, to conceal her purposes, was being held up as an example of bad practice. She checked the author: William Scammel, SysAdv. Who the fucking hell is he? Now Iaga did have to open Pnl. As a senior member of staff in InternMonit Iaga's access was pretty much total. In a few seconds she had mug shots and life story

in front of her. Iaga scowled as she skimmed Scammel's career history.

So our Bill was a high flyer, was he? Recently moved to headquarters on account of his outstanding work eh? Iaga ignored the attached Project Reports, doubtless all were brimming with praise for this boy wonder from the middle of nowhere, and went straight to the contact section. She was going to fill him in on a few situations. He had to learn that what passed for high flight out in the sticks was considered under the radar here at HQ. He had to be made to appreciate the lowliness of his position in SysAdv, under Utility, under Operations, when compared to certain people who where under nobody but the Chairman. He had to be told that nobody messed with InternMonit. Iaga reached for her telephone and caught sight of a note stuck to the handset. "Do not use when angry".

Iaga had printed the note and stuck it there herself. Her fingertips tapped the note a few times then settled. Then started moving across the note. As her fingers ran along the edges of the top layer of clear adhesive tape, Iaga looked at the letters being revealed and concealed. The nail of her middle finger caught on a small tear and she toyed for a while: smoothing down the tape, then picking at it to lift it again. After a few scratchings the tape had formed an unsightly fold. Iaga found a small pair of scissors in one of the drawers of her desk and carefully snipped at the tape. Then she tore the folded part off. She looked at the neat half-circle cut from the top layer of tape and was satisfied with her restoration. Iaga had cooled herself down.

What would have been the result of chewing out William Scammel? The list of names was out; the damage was done. Of course steps should be taken to stop this kind of thing happening again, but doing too much right now might attract attention. After all the article did not identify the mail as being from InternMonit. Quite possibly Scammel himself did not know. That was an issue, one Iaga could address herself. What else? Nothing. Apart from the exposure of the whole project. That was a big issue, too big for Iaga on her own. She decided to involve Itaro, her boss.

Iaga turned in her chair and looked into the office at the end of the room. Itaro held his telephone against his right ear with his right shoulder, speaking into it whilst he typed and looked at papers on his desk. She could not go in right away, and anyway, it would be a good idea to find out if Scammel had known that his example came from an InternMonit memo before talking to Itaro.

Iaga returned to her screen, twitched her mouse to clear the screen saver, and paged down to the end of her Pnl entry on Scammel. The last entry was dated six weeks ago: William's assignment to the electronic mail team. What had he done since then? Why had his manager not kept his records

up-to-date? She read the sign on her telephone again, then turned in her chair to look in the opposite direction to Itaro's office. Looking down instead of looking up. She found what she was looking for three desks away.

"François" she called. A few heads at desks turned a little. François Givry stood up, looking at his watch, and walked to Iaga's desk.

"Good morning Ms. Bookman" he said with a slight bow. "How may I be of assistance?"

At the next desk an employee smiled at François' formality. Not Iaga.

"This chap's Time&Eval is not up-to-date" Iaga said, pointing to her screen. "It's six weeks since the last entry."

"Six weeks. Yes that's correct." François agreed, performing a swift mental calculation. "I can inform you of the procedure for monitoring completion of Time&Eval reports, if you wish?" François raised his eyebrows.

Iaga nodded, resisting the temptation to make a sarcastic response. François lowered his eyebrows as he gave a single nod, dipping his head less than an inch, and informed her.

"A Time&Eval must be completed for every employee no less frequently than once every four weeks. A lapse of longer than this is automatically detected, by InternMonit's regular CheckT&E query. The query launches a mail to the manager for every lapsed employee. This is recorded. The manager will receive a second automatic notification after six weeks. After eight weeks an InternMonit Issue is opened, and an InternMonit staffer, of at least Consultant grade, will be assigned."

Iaga found that she had to concentrate to avoid being lulled into a doze by the soothing correctness of François' delivery.

"So a six week break is not serious?"

"Not uncommon, I think. I can generate a report on average lateness of outstanding T&Es, if you wish? It will be no trouble."

The eyebrows again, but less this time.

"No no. It's this person I want to know about. William Scammel."

"Yes. I see. Since his T&E is late I can call his manager, if you wish?"

"Mmmm" Iaga assented.

"Very well. I will do it some time this morning and inform you of the result." François turned to return to his desk.

Iaga called him back. "François, can you do it from this 'phone?" she said, indicating the telephone on her desk.

"I can, but I need to open a new issue." François paused, turning to face Iaga, but pointing to his own desk.

"It's for an existing issue; the number is classified. I just want to find out what he's been up to in the last six weeks. And can you do it straight away please?"

François nodded and blinked at the same time, then walked back to Iaga's desk. "If I may?" He said, reaching towards her keyboard. Iaga leaned back in her chair to give François room to type. Using the Pnl record already on the screen, François found the manager's name and telephone number. He picked up the handset and dialled.

"Hello, is that Juliette Cobb?"

"Good morning Ms. Cobb, you are speaking with François Givry. I'm calling from Mann Internal Monitoring."

Poor Juliette, thought Iaga. François should have advised her to sit down before he told her who he was.

"I am calling with regard to the Time&Eval for one of your staff: George Scammel."

Juliette answered that and Iaga took the opportunity to scribble on her pad. François noticed, read, and nodded to her without pausing in his conversation. "Yes. Yes, I see. If you could complete the report soon. Or, if you prefer, just give me an idea now, and then complete when you have time."

François nodded to Iaga again, then began echoing what Juliette was telling him.

"Mr. Scammel's been working on the Message Clarity Guidelines project. Yes. From design to publication. Yes. And on post-publication awareness. Yes. Some system programming, to check messages in the e-mail for adherence to guidelines. I see. It was quite time-consuming you say? OK. Because of privacy. I see. What was that again? Yes. I understand. So this took longer than expected because Mr. Scammel had to be sure to extract only the offending parts of the text, and try to avoid anything private. Yes. Yes I think I saw the article. And now he's working on some automatic, sorry what was that? Format To Guidelines. This will reply to any mail not following guidelines, with a corrected version. OK then. Thanks for that. No, but I might call back later. Good bye."

"Thank you François, that's just what I needed to know."

François smiled in acknowledgement. "Will you enter ten minutes spent, please?" he said, looking at his watch.

"I'll do it right away Monsieur." Iaga turned back to her screen as François returned to his desk. By the time Iaga had updated the Issue Log, Itaro was off the telephone. She went immediately.

Iaga knocked on the open door, just above the sign "Hirosaki Itaro, Head of department, Internal Monitoring, Mann Trading".

"Have you got a couple of minutes? I've got a bit of a problem."

"Sure, come in." Itaro gestured to a chair in front of his desk. Iaga sat in the chair. "Tell me your problems Iaga." Itaro finished typing something on his keyboard and turned to face her, smiling.

"It's about StratLiaise." Itaro's smile slipped. "If they're smart, they've worked out that we're investigating them."

Itaro sat, almost fell, back in his chair.

"No Iaga." He said, wishing it not to be true. "How?"

Iaga directed him to the latest Good Usage. After he had read and had this explained to him, he invited Iaga to accompany him to the stairwell.

"I will certainly have a smoke, and I will consider throwing myself down the middle."

chapter five

"Do you know who that was on the stairs?"

"Who?"

"Hirosaki Itaro. Chief Bastard of Secret Police."

"Bloody Hell. So who was that with him?"

"One of his assassins I expect. Lurking on the stairs to pounce on some hapless traddy like you or me."

The two men had to raise their voices to be heard above the noise of Mann Trading Administration department. Somewhere on the higher floors in the building were traders. They bought, they sold, they made decisions, they required information. Down in TradeAdmin was where it was made to happen. Down here people had only one name each, more took too long to say. Harlib and Yoder had just returned from lunch, and now had to rejoin the ranks of traddies in the maelstrom.

"Yoder, these didn't get sent." A young woman handed some sheets to Yoder as he sat down.

"Harlib-"

"Stop!" Harlib barked to the boy. "I'm not back until I have my headset on."

Yoder took the sheets automatically, wondering what they were. A quick scan and he saw two phrases "Despatch order" and "Wilbeest steaks".

"I got them to give-"

"Who are you speaking to son? Say it again."

"Sorry. Harlib. I got them to give us a line on NEPSAT. You can use that to call the North."

"Aren't these" Yoder looked up; no woman. "Fucking shit." He picked up his telephone headset.

"Jumping. Where?"

"Line 455."

"A1 M R and U O and O." Harlib tapped the touch screen on his desk three times. The summary was replaced by a detailed entry.

"What did you say?" Harlib had dismissed the boy from his attention. He had to pause to think of what he had said.

"Bollocks bollocks boll- Trade Admin, Yoder speaking." Yoder's soliloquy was interrupted by a telephone call.

"There is still a non-deliver on the instruct."

"Yes all of them."

Yoder winced at what the trader said, then the line went dead and he took up his earlier theme.

"Cunting instructions for fucking Wilbeest steaks."

"A1 M R and U O and O? Excellent, message received and understood, over and out." The boy was dismissed again, as Harlib selected line 455.

"Hi. Been trying to get you all day. I'm checking today's trade min 9805. Thank you. Hi I'm checking trade min 9805. Exit confirm? Thank you. Bye now" Harlib tapped his screen again. The display changed to reflect that the lead had left the warehouse. His next task was to check its arrival.

"Hi. Yoder here, TradeAdmin HQ, I'm getting non-connects direct to Gaborone, can you deliver some instructs for me? Thanks Raj. Coming your way." Yoder tapped his screen, picking up the trade and routing via Dubai. He took and released a deep breath.

The record for Haulier 67 was on Harlib's screen.

"Hi Anne. Harlib TradeAdmin here. I'm tracking a delivery your team made earlier today, during the down, reference is yesterday's trade min 9805. At the factory 11:00hrs. Very good..... Yeah catch you." Harlib turned to Yoder to see if he had time to talk.

"Road people. She might be doing a delivery to HQ soon, and wants to meet me because I have a sexy voice."

"You and fifty other fuckers, man." Yoder replied.

"Yeah but I'm unique."

"So? You and fifty other unique fuckers." was Yoder's riposte. "Besides, what about Jo? Or is that going to be finished by then?"

"Actually I'm seeing Jo tonight." Harlib turned to look towards Yoder's eyes. "We're going out."

"Out? What out out?" Yoder was suddenly serious. He turned to Harlib, meeting his look immediately.

"Yeah."

"You're mad."

Harlib shrugged.

"It's dangerous man. I mean it's not safe. Anything can happen."

"I've been out before."

"Really? You never told me."

Harlib shrugged again.

Mann provided a number of bars and restaurants, cinema, theatre, live performance, all kinds of relaxation. All within the headquarters complex. Yoder had found these outlets sufficient. When he went out, he usually went to one of four of the bars, depending on his mood. Occasionally he branched out and went a little further afield. But he had never gone out into the Capital at night. He had seen it through the window, in pictures, videos, paintings and he knew what it was like. This did not give him any urge to go there however.

"What is there to do that you can't do inside?"

"There's places to go. You've got to watch your step, but, you know....." Harlib tailed off. Yoder was his friend and let him pause to gather his thoughts. Harlib spoke, apparently to the floor. "I got bored with Entertainment. I mean they're good and everything but, it's just not interesting. It's not different. There's no" Harlib sought a word. "danger." As soon as he said it he knew it was the wrong word.

"You want danger? So you can die?"

"You know what I mean."

"I just think- TradeAdmin Yoder speaking. You're taking Jo with you? Sorry say that again."

"She wants to go." Harlib said quietly, tapping his screen. "Hi. This is Harlib from HQ TradeAdmin. I'm chasing an outstand for today's trade commod 656. Arrived 09:00hrs OK. Was there a down? Oh OK equip fail. I can report that. Oh you have. Really? That long ago. Well, I'll involve a trader that should speed things up. NP. Bye now."

"Yes the screen's correct, the instructs are in delivery. It means they're being routed. Via Dubai. I'm doing the best I can, the link to Dubai was up at least. It'll come up on the screen." Yoder winced again. "And you have a nice day too. Fuck's sake."

Somebody was approaching Harlib's desk from his right hand side. He noticed from the corner of his

eye, held up the index finger of his left hand as his right tapped his screen. When what he wanted was displayed he turned to the person who had approached.

"Go ahead." he told the young woman.

"Harlib. I'm not sure what to do with this." She held a printed sheet of paper in front of him.

"Ah. That is a StratLiaise share directive." He looked up at the woman's baffled face. "It means that somebody is to be notified about all movements to do with the trade. Do you know how to set it up?"

"I've never seen one before."

"You don't see them very often. OK watch." Harlib directed her attention to his screen.

"Hi. Yoder here TradeAdmin. You asked about circulation of regular reports? OK well you can have Cancel or Subscribe. If it's Subscribe they have to ask to go on receiving the report, otherwise if it's Cancel they go on receiving until they ask not to. Which report is it? Right. I could ask them all. I mean I'd have to go through the circulation one-by-one. Sure. I guess I could make a start this afternoon. OK. Bloody hell. Why can't you just have Cancel or Subscribe you moron. I'll just call everybody on the fucking circulation. Like I haven't got ten million other things to do."

"I detect Maudwell. You should have sold him boy. Now you end up with ten tons of shit to do. Hi. This is Harlib from TradeAdmin, you traded some coffee earlier today? Yeah that's gone through now, like the screen shows, but I thought you might like to know the reason for the delay was an equipment failure, unserviced for one week. Yes I thought you might. It would be better if you did. Traders scare them. Ha ha. Sure the reference is OEFSR3324. It stands for outstand equip fail service request. That's correct. You're welcome. Bye now."

"Hi. Yoder here TradeAdmin. I'm calling about the Traders' Dictionary Monthly Update which you currently receive. I don't know really, I'm just calling to see if you want to go on receiving it, or if you want to cancel. You haven't read it? OK. Sure, I can call you back later. Bye. Oh I'm so pleased it's Friday and I'm going out tonight."

"Not back with Rabina?"

"No it's Deena."

"Ahhh! Well there's no need to go overboard. A simple thanks will suffice."

Yoder smiled. Deena was Jo's friend and she and Harlib had introduced them. Jo and Deena sat back to back in a similar desk layout to Harlib and Yoder. But one floor up and a little quieter. They did not have to shout to each other to be heard.

Deena Folmira was finishing a questionnaire. "So delivery times was the most important thing. Fine. Now finally onto the things you found were a problem. Well, of the things that you had to do or buy or change, in order to qualify for Mann Retail, which was the most problematic. Right, the data terminal and lines, yes other people have mentioned that. Well Mann Trading is committed to reliable supply, and that means we do a lot of monitoring throughout. Our own internal tracking is quite rigorous. Mmm yes I see. OK. Well that's all the questions. I'm pleased that you'll be taking up the full contract and thanks for your time. Good Bye."

"Have you got many more to do?" Jo Payech turned to ask her, as soon as she finished talking.

"Just a few actually. I think I'll get most of the tabulation done today too." Deena replied, assessing a screen full of names, most of which were displayed dim.

"You've being doing a few every day haven't you?"

"Oh well." Deena played down her own efficiency. "I don't like leaving things till the last moment."

"I wish I could be like that." Jo moaned, looking at her own screen. "Why isn't it this evening yet."

"You wouldn't want that, you'd have all that outstand for Monday then." Deena tried to encourage her friend gently.

"Monday's not today though, is it?"

"It will be." Deena thought, but did not say. "Time for a coffee. Want one Jo?"

"I'll come with you."

They carried their mugs to the kitchen, chatting on the way.

"Plans for the evening? Seeing Shad?"

"I am actually. What do you think?" Jo held her arms away from her body and looked down, indicating her clothes, for a moment. Deena looked at Jo's trouser suit.

"It's a bit officey for going out in isn't it?"

"Yeah, but Shad said I should dress down."

"Why where are you going?"

Jo made a subtle face which said "wait till we're alone in the kitchen." Deena waited, intrigued.

"Shad knows this place. It's inside the patrolled area."

"Outside you mean?"

"Yes. I've never been out of HQ before. Not going out I mean. I've been out on-site and visiting and stuff of course" Jo rattled on, betraying her lack of confidence to Deena. By the time she had finished, the coffee was made, poured, milked and sugarred.

"Well if you've thought about it " Deena allowed her sentence to trail off unfinished as they left the kitchen, heading back to their desks.

It's about time

New Story

chapter one

There is no time, there ain't no time. Even time ain't got no time. Charlotte sat humming in the office trying to distract Elaine. She looked over, but Elaine continued to type intently. Charlotte tapped her desk three times with the side of her shoe and sang very quietly "What time is love?" Elaine continued to type as Charlotte continued to sing "Bring the break, what time is lunch? lunch, lunch, lunch. What time is lunch?" Charlotte sang her own words to the tune of the White Room remix. Elaine stopped typing and stood up. Charlotte stopped singing, leaned forward pretending to look at her screen whilst looking out of the corner of her eye towards Elaine.

To her annoyance, Charlotte noticed that Elaine had not put her shoes on (they would still be under her desk, concealed behind the modesty board). This meant that she was not yet ready to go for lunch, and there was no point even thinking about how to persuade her to go to the pub. Charlotte wanted Elaine to go with her to the pub. Elaine went to the laser printer by herself. Charlotte

resigned herself to another alcohol-free afternoon and started leafing through a proposal that she had put off considering.

There was the muffled sound of Elaine padding back to her desk from the printer, followed by the clear sound of Elaine swearing "Oh hot fuck, you shitting bastard-bastard" followed by a gurgling strangled screaming.

Charlotte looked up as Elaine became calm without losing her anger. She noticed Elaine unplugging her keyboard with obvious excessive force, saying "Right we'll fucking see shall we." and decided to act quickly.

Charlotte was not quick enough for Elaine's first assault on the monitor with the keyboard. However, she did manage to stop Elaine doing more than breaking off the contrast knob by grabbing Elaine's arms and moving her away from the crashed machine. Elaine allowed Charlotte to restrain her.

"Are you all right?" Charlotte held Elaine's wrists, although it was no longer necessary for restraint. Elaine did not release herself. Charlotte secretly

lusted after Elaine and hoped that she was not releasing herself because she liked the touching.

"It's crashed and I've lost three fucking hours." Elaine explained.

"Isn't it saved?" asked Charlotte.

"If it was saved it wouldn't be lost would it?" Elaine retorted angrily, jerking her wrists free and dropping the keyboard on her desk.

"What about the auto save?" Charlotte asked, then realising that although she was trying to help, she was also re-focusing Elaine's anger on herself.

"I switched it off because it slows it down. It's all lost." Elaine replied sulkily, dropping herself heavily into her chair to sit looking past her knees into the darkness under her desk.

Charlotte turned to face the same way as Elaine, standing to her right. She placed her left hand on Elaine's right shoulder, which was not completely covered by the summer top Elaine wore, hoping that the contact would be accepted as a friendly gesture. "I was only trying to help." she said quietly.

"I know." Elaine replied, her anger exhausted. "I'm sorry." Elaine did not move her shoulder as she spoke - Charlotte hoped it was deliberate.

Charlotte reached her right arm forward for a printout on Elaine's desk just to bring herself closer. Suddenly Elaine jerked forward and snatched the sheets of paper from Charlotte's hand. She quickly flicked to the last page.

"I forgot the printout." she exclaimed. Elaine read quickly, flicked to another page then smiled. "It's all here. Ha-ha." She sobered slightly as she leafed through the pages.

"I'll have to re-type it all in." Elaine stared at the first page, thinking, then said "There's too much of it. It'll take ages."

Charlotte half-remembered something, frowned to conjure the rest. "Wasn't Imogen talking about an OCR scanner the other day?"

Elaine went quiet, staring at the printout, on the boundary between accepting help from another person and resigning herself to doing all the re-typing herself.

"It's got to be worth a try hasn't it?" asked Charlotte, treading with care. "Let's show it to her. She may not be able to help anyway." she added, aware that she was creating an escape route, thus making it easier for Elaine to agree.

Elaine shrugged and made non-committal noises.

Charlotte picked up Elaine's telephone and dialled Imogen's extension. After two rings a man answered.

"Workstation support. Ben speaking."

"Hi Ben, it's Charlotte. Is Imogen there?"

"Hi Charlotte. She's at lunch, I think"

"Maybe you can help me anyway. Do you know anything about the OCR stuff she's got in?"

"No sorry it's Imogen's project. I can leave her a message to call you?"

Elaine, although unable to hear the conversation, guessed that there was going to be some delay. "It'll have to be right away." she butted in.

Charlotte felt her slipping away. "Do you know when she'll be back?"

"I think about hang on, now when did she go out?"

Charlotte pursed her lips and exhaled through her nose, her eyes rolled up to look at the ceiling in irritation.

Ben interrupted his own rumination. "Oh here she is now. Imogen, it's Charlotte." There was a pause.

Charlotte turned to Elaine, who was waiting for her computer to boot. "She's there now." Elaine did not even look up, Charlotte was becoming desperate.

"Hi Charlotte?"

"Imogen. It's about the OCR scanner."

Imogen stopped unwrapping the sandwich she had bought. The scanner was her pet project of the moment.

Five minutes later Charlotte had persuaded Elaine to go for lunch with her while Imogen scanned and spell-checked the printout.

chapter two

"So what is the piece about?" Charlotte asked, thinking about how much she wanted to have sex with Elaine.

"It's part of SGM." Elaine raised her voice over the sound of the traffic as they made the short walk to the wine bar Elaine had chosen over the pub.

"Seeing Jim?" Charlotte queried, having misheard.

"Single General Model." Elaine clarified as they arrived.

Charlotte went to order the drinks, Elaine found a table. Charlotte found Elaine's table and set down her G&T and her own B&C. "So?" she said, sitting down and noting the small lipstick mark made by Elaine's first sip.

"So what?" Elaine replied as Charlotte made her own mark, similar but pinker.

"What are you doing on S G M?" Charlotte expanded, putting her glass down.

"Oh. Time." Elaine prodded her glass to make the ice move. Charlotte looked at the length of Elaine's extended elegant finger and thought of ways to get the conversation going.

"So why was this morning's work so important?"

"Because there's a deadline and " Elaine paused to sip "because yesterday morning there was a meeting."

Charlotte murmured interestedly as she watched Elaine's neck's swallowing action.

"James and me and the other James."

"The boys' club." Charlotte muttered.

"Everything I'd done this week." Elaine's tone changed, showing emotion, which Charlotte liked. "'Oh it's really good and everything, but it should be part of language.' they decided." Elaine made a spreading wave with both hands, exposing the inside of her wrists to Charlotte's gaze. "Great. 'I should think I can incorporate it quite easily.'" Elaine's head bobbed from side to side as she quoted James, but Charlotte was still looking at the clear skin on the ridges formed by the tendons over Elaine's left wrist. "He can incorporate it easily because he hasn't written anything himself." Elaine tapped the table sharply with her right hand, then took a long sip on her drink as she realised she had raised her voice. Charlotte drank too. Elaine began talking again, quieter this time.

"So I had to find a new angle. God I racked my brains." Elaine paused, aware that she was talking because she was drinking and had not eaten. "I really liked that time-as-a-social-construct stuff." She wondered if Charlotte was bored by this and checked she was not looking away before continuing. "Last night it came to me. Time as a fourth space dimension."

This phrase was not meaningful to Charlotte - not as meaningful as the roundness of Elaine's breasts anyway - yet she knew she must make a response. She decided that encouragement to explain was her best tactic, rather than appearing too stupid to understand and shifting the topic of conversation to something of more common interest. The key word in Elaine's last sentence was "space", Charlotte decided. "But how is time a space dimension?" was the question she formulated and spoke.

It had the desired effect of making Elaine pause for thought and Charlotte rewarded herself with another sip, using the movement involved in taking it to disguise a shift of position to give her a view of Elaine's legs.

"Well umm let's start with a two-dimensional world." Elaine paused and made eye contact with Charlotte. As soon as Elaine spoke again Charlotte shifted her attention back under the table. "OK the surface of this table is two-dimensional. Flat. Suppose it's populated by two-dimensional things like squares and circles." Elaine's left foot was flat on the floor, but her right lay lazily on its side, tilted away from her left. The ankle was only slightly bent. "Suppose we overlay a grid and co-ordinate system on it and plot where the centre of a specific circle is. So we've got this circle and it's here, this far from the right hand

edge of the table, this far from the bottom of the table." Elaine's hands were moving around the table, but her legs remained stationary. The left was upright, the right leant away from it, giving Charlotte a view of just a small part of Elaine's upper left thigh inside her skirt. "What if we make another dimension perpendicular to the surface of the table and take it to be time. The further up we go, the further back in time." Elaine's hands now moved up and down above the table, necessitating some shifting lower in her body. Charlotte watched Elaine's skirt stretching over her twisting waist and thighs. "Supposing the circle doesn't move, then through time it appears as a cylinder, straight up vertical." Elaine's hands encircled the hypothetical cylinder and she ran them up it, back in time, raising her weight slightly and causing her above the knee skirt to ride slightly higher. "But what if it's moving?"

Elaine sat down fully, her left hand tugged at the hem of her skirt almost subconsciously as her right hand traced the hypothetical circle's movement along the table to the bottom edge. "So it was over here, and it moves to here. But we're representing the past by the third dimension so when it was back here it was in the past and therefore we would plot it up here." Elaine raised herself again. This time Charlotte concentrated on the point just below the lowest button on Elaine's top, which was slightly too small for her. As Elaine stretched up a small triangle of skin was exposed by the pulling of her shoulders against the garment - untucking it from the waistband of her skirt. "So plotting it through time gives an oblique cylinder, whereas the stationary circle gave a plain straight vertical cylinder." Elaine had finished her explanation but not her drink, quite. She sat and looked Charlotte in the eye for her conclusion.

"From one perspective there are three space dimensions, but the two-dimensional inhabitants see it - no wait sorry." Elaine paused, breaking eye contact. Charlotte liked Elaine's eyes, they were hazel, and hoped that contact would resume. It did, as Elaine corrected herself. "From one perspective there are three space dimensions, but from another there are two space dimensions and one time dimension." Elaine was happy with this and finished her drink. She offered to buy more drinks and Charlotte agreed.

Charlotte watched the button and zip on the back of Elaine's skirt and tried to grasp the idea of a fourth space dimension being time. She had not attained a total understanding by the time Elaine returned just minutes later.

Elaine placed the drinks on the table and noticed that Charlotte was deep in thought. She wondered again whether she was talking too much. She was justified, she decided, since she was the one who had been dragged out.

"I think I understand. Thanks." Charlotte took some of her drink. "So what about our experience

of time?" This got Elaine thinking very hard and started a whole new discussion.

Forty minutes into the discussion Charlotte interrupted "What time is it? Shouldn't we head back?"

Elaine smiled at this question. She explained why as they left the bar. "When you say 'What time is it?' in a way you're really asking 'Where are we?' or 'Where is the Sun in relation to us?' because time is measured in terms of the Earth's rotation." Elaine held her hand up in a formation suggesting holding a large ball and illustrated the rotating. Charlotte looked at the hand invoking roundness and started thinking about Elaine's breasts again.

"Yes but it's where we are *now* so it's still time isn't it."

Elaine's reply was lost in the noise of traffic. It is not possible to have a detailed conceptual discussion when walking down a busy road. Charlotte and Elaine passed the journey back to the office with few words.

chapter three

Elaine wanted to pick up her file from Imogen so she went to Workstation Support directly. Charlotte went with her to be in her presence. Imogen was not at her desk so they went to Ben's to enquire. Ben was on the telephone.

"..... well if you want them to feel caring put 'Thank you for taking time' but if you want them to feel thrusting put 'Thank you for making time'. Oh, and if you want them to feel clever put 'Thank you for finding time' OK you're welcome. See you later." Ben put the phone down and turned to Charlotte and Elaine with his eyebrows raised.

"Yes?"

"Do you know where Imogen is Ben?"

Ben frowned at Imogen's empty chair. "She must have popped out." He got up and went to the desk. As he leaned on it he put his hand on something hard. "Funny. She's left her watch." He held it up to show the two women who had followed him over. "I suppose you want that document she was scanning" he said, touching Imogen's mouse to clear the screen saver.

"Requested task is complete." Ben read from the screen. "Is this it?"

Elaine stepped around the desk to peer at the screen. Charlotte looked at the slight swell just visible through the arm of Elaine's top as she moved the mouse to view the file. "Yes. That's it."

Ben found a diskette, copied the file, and gave it to Elaine with the original printout which he pulled from the scanner's sheet feeder.

"Tell her thanks very much." Elaine said to Ben. "I hate losing time."

chapter four

The clock on Charlotte's screen showed 17:00hrs. She stole a quick glance at Elaine. Elaine was oblivious, typing and thinking. Lunch that day had been the first really long conversation between just the two of them. Charlotte felt quite close to Elaine now and wanted to capitalise. She had no plans for the evening, but was forming one rapidly. Charlotte decided to work late that evening.

By the time her clock showed 18:30hrs, the proposal she had been working on had every possible spelling error, typing error, grammatical error, factual error and example of poor style marked in red, with a marginal note and two or three alternatives listed. Elaine was still typing and thinking.

By 19:30hrs Charlotte had done a complete back-up of her computer, re-arranged all her pens and pencils (discarding those which did not work and sharpening those which required it), sorted out all the paper on her desk, in her trays, in her drawers and on her shelves and finally she had even emptied her handbag and examined and ordered the contents. The cleaners had been around and remarked about how much waste paper she had. Well it had to be done sometime.

But it had all been worth it because at 19:32hrs Elaine was, at last, switching of her computer and packing up. Elaine looked at her watch and groaned.

"It's pretty late." Charlotte opened. "Do you want to have dinner somewhere?" She hoped it sounded casual.

"Why not." Elaine replied, looking for her jacket, then remembering she had not worn it because of the hot weather.

They went to a nearby Chinese restaurant. Elaine was too tired to read the menu properly so they ordered set menu J for two, and a bottle of red wine. All Elaine could think about was the document she had been writing, which she had not finished. Charlotte was quite happy to let Elaine talk about it. It appeared that Elaine was less happy with the model now than when she had described it at lunch time.

"It doesn't include any of the properties of time as we perceive it. This is interesting because it allows us to play with ideas. Unfortunately it doesn't really constitute a model, because it's too difficult to think about our experience of the passage of time. As an aside - one of the play ideas - this gives us a new way to look at memory. The straight view of brain function has memory as being a part of the brain that gets set, by which I mean marked or written to, by events, and which we can then examine when we want to know what happened. Rather than that, we could conjecture

that there is something in the brain which literally senses backwards in time."

Charlotte found that she was becoming genuinely interested in Elaine's subject. Of course she still wanted to do things with her, so she turned the conversation. Charlotte did this subtly by making a response to whatever Elaine said, and then describing a trait or experience of hers which accounted for her response. This naturally led Elaine to account for her own statements. Which led them to just talking about themselves, getting to know each other very well. With the wine helping it along, Charlotte's plan was proceeding well until coffee. Suddenly Elaine thought of something.

"Yes, like you said, everything has led us to this point." Charlotte could have kicked herself for saying it - how could she have been so stupid as to introduce a step back? Elaine continued as Charlotte raged at herself. "Every decision in the past has led here. There's this theory that when a decision is made this actually splits reality into several realities, one for each way the decision could have gone. Each reality then plays out separately. This means there are millions and millions of realities being created all the time. That's something I never liked in that model - it's too much of a cop out. But next is to ask why do realities only diverge, why not converge too? Maybe when realities are similar they tend to snap back together. Maybe the past is changing too - so long as its outcome would be the same." Elaine seemed excited, but to Charlotte's great annoyance seemed to have forgotten about them becoming close friends.

"I should really write this down right now. It's too late to get back into the office." Elaine paused. "Charlotte have you got a PC?"

Charlotte answered "Yes" automatically, she was too annoyed to think or notice where the question led.

"Could I come back to your place and use it?" Charlotte thought this sounded stupid; It was without doubt the most feeble excuse for inviting yourself back to their place she had ever heard.

"Sure Elaine." she said, smiling. Charlotte's plan appeared to be coming together.

At the bus stop Charlotte realised that her plan was not coming together after all.

She had sat next to Elaine on the plastic bench, then had shuffled slightly so as to be touching her. Elaine had said "Sorry" absently and moved away a fraction - as though she had unintentionally touched a stranger on the street. Charlotte realised that Elaine had meant only what she had said about using Charlotte's PC.

The short bus ride passed in silence. Elaine thought about the changing past, memory, aging and convergent reality. Charlotte resolved that she would come-on to Elaine.

chapter five

Ten minutes after entering Charlotte's flat Elaine was typing on a portable on a table in the living room. Charlotte had been to the lavatory and was pouring two gins and two tonics in two glasses in the kitchen.

She came into the small living room carrying a straight glass in each hand. Charlotte walked to the table smiling, but Elaine was intent on her typing and did not notice. She felt frustrated and put Elaine's glass down heavily. Elaine's head twitched to look at the source of the loud click, then moved back to look at the screen. Charlotte's smile dropped, Elaine could have said "Thank you" at least. She went to the sofa and sat down in a huff.

Charlotte swallowed about half her G&T at once and shivered. Elaine started talking.

"The problem with the space dimension model was that it was too simple. You say that time is just another dimension, like the first three, but then you have to explain how come this dimension is so different to the others. You end up putting it all down to perception and that's not good enough. Or rather it's not enough, not enough model." Charlotte stopped listening.

She eased her shoes off, put her legs up on the sofa, lay back and closed her eyes. The sonics of Elaine's voice were pleasant to her and it was to that, rather than the content to which she paid attention as she finished her G&T.

Charlotte awoke and opened her eyes, wondering how long she had been asleep. The main lights were off. Elaine was standing by the table where an angle poise lamp was switched on. Elaine stood with her back to her. Elaine had untucked her top from her skirt, presumably for comfort, and had taken off her shoes.

As Charlotte blinked, Elaine pulled her skirt up all the way to her waist. Elaine bent forwards and pulled her tights down both legs. Charlotte watched Elaine's hands running over the surface of her legs. Elaine turned slightly, steadied herself on the table and removed the tights from one foot and then the other. Charlotte half closed her eyes, afraid that Elaine might notice, even in the dim light, that she was watching. Elaine hung her tights on a chair and rubbed her thighs and buttocks before pulling her skirt back down. She was about to sit back down when she thought of something.

If Elaine was feeling uncomfortable from wearing the same clothes all day, all evening, and now into the night, then probably so was Charlotte. As Elaine turned to look Charlotte quickly closed her eyes.

"Charlotte, are you awake?" Elaine whispered.

Charlotte played asleep.

Elaine took two steps and stood by Charlotte's feet.

"Charlotte?" Elaine looked down at the trousered legs, then at the waist fastening. "Not very comfortable for sleeping" she mumbled to herself. Elaine knelt by the sofa. Charlotte kept up her pretence as she felt Elaine gently undo the button and pull apart the fly zipper. She could feel Elaine's staring presence.

Charlotte lay still, willing Elaine to touch her, maybe just to see what it was like, or perhaps to give her a friend's peck on the cheek, or perhaps to undress her a little more. A long second passed as Charlotte listened to her own breathing. Then she heard Elaine's clothes rustle. Elaine was moving!

Her heart sank as she heard Elaine stand up, walk back to the table and sit down. Charlotte shifted and made noises in her throat, pretending to have just awoken. She felt she could get away with a certain amount of noise and squirmed up the sofa until her trousers had been worked down far enough for her to feel the fabric of the sofa under her thighs. She was propped against one arm of the sofa, undoing the cuffs of her shirt before she spoke.

"Hi Elaine, what time is it? Or should I say where are we in relation to the Sun?"

Elaine laughed a quiet snort and picked up her wristwatch from the table. "It's five past one." she said, looking at Charlotte's shadowed form.

"Well I'm going to bed." Charlotte stood up and pretended to be surprised as her trousers slid to the floor. She stepped out of them and walked towards Elaine, undoing her shirt. She noticed that Elaine watched her coming, but could not see her expression clearly. By the time she had reached the table, Charlotte's shirt hung open. She was vaguely aware of Elaine's eyes flicking from her face to her breasts to her groin.

"Are you going to work on this all night?" Charlotte asked leaning forward to look at the screen and to allow her to steady herself by leaning her left hand on Elaine's right shoulder. The movement also brought their legs into contact.

"We cannot talk about a frame, moving through this fourth dimension, as being the now, because by making time to be a fourth dimension we have written out slash denied slash undefined slash made meaningless the concept of movement." Charlotte read from the screen, becoming aware that Elaine's hand was touching the back of her left leg.

It was a gentle, tentative touch. Charlotte moved the fingers of her left hand against the skin on Elaine's shoulder to show that she welcomed the touch. She did this without taking her eyes from the screen.

"Furthermore, where is consciousness? If we suppose that the passage of time is a product of our perception of the fourth dimension, just as

perspective is a product of our perception of three space dimensions." Charlotte paused. Elaine's hand was now holding her left leg, about half way between the knee and the buttock. "This sentence isn't right." Charlotte tapped the screen with her right index finger.

Elaine removed her hand from Charlotte's leg with a stroking motion and leaned closer to the screen. Charlotte maintained the contact of her left hand by allowing it to slide across Elaine's shoulder and neck as she leaned.

"It starts 'If we' but has no 'then' part." Charlotte's left hand slid inside Elaine's top and down her back a little way. Elaine sat back, saying nothing. Charlotte looked down at her. Their eyes met.

"I've never done this before. With a woman I mean." Elaine said quietly, fingering the hem of Charlotte's hanging shirt.

"I though not." Charlotte replied as she stepped across and then sat on Elaine's lap, straddling her. She put her arms around Elaine's neck and kissed her lightly on the lips. She pulled back slightly, to check Elaine.

Elaine, her eyes closed, reached forward to kiss Charlotte lightly, then heavily, openly, hungrily, passionately and deeply.

The Freemason balancing on the drainpipe outside the second floor window, with a stethoscope on the glass, activated his throat microphone.

"Sir. They're doing it in the chair. I mean in the living room."

His superior, waiting on the roof, acknowledged this. "OK. I'll have Germany met by the front door. We don't have to be in that room for another forty minutes. If they haven't left by then, well I'm not letting the privacy of a couple of dykes get in the way of the pursuit. Keep me informed. Out."

chapter six

On the roof were five Freemasons sitting on three mats. The three largest men sat together on the largest mat. The Freemason with the radio sat on the thickest mat. The remaining man sat nervously on the smallest mat.

Following the message from by the window, the Freemason snapped the switch on the portable radio down and off. He turned and looked at the nervous man for a moment before directing his look, and an instruction, to one of the three men sitting behind him.

"Kheb. Go and meet Germany. Wait on the street." Then he had a better idea. "Hang on. Wait in the corridor outside the flat."

The man replied with a bowing nod, stood and left the roof by the maintenance access door.

The nervous man turned to watch "Kheb" go, then looked at the remaining two men. Like Kheb, they

wore business suits which did not conceal their burliness. Assessing them and himself he saw no possibility of overcoming even one of them. Another chance might be to persuade them to allow him to escape. In normal circumstances he outranked them, but at the moment this too was a futile hope. Also he had tried it earlier, when they had come for him. They had not even acknowledged his questions. Everything had been done by the book, even including their uniforms, of which he knew they still wore a few items under their suits.

The only person who had addressed him, at that time and since, was the man who had just switched off the radio. A man who now insisted on being called Nefer, although his name was Peter. Equally, since the arrest, Nefer had insisted on addressing the nervous man as Kepker, although his name was David. The names were chosen for a reason. Something to do with their respective rôles in the current affair.

The despatch of one "soldier" to meet Germany suddenly made the actual trial seem very close,

and Kepker became desperate. He cleared his throat.

"Peter-"

"Don't use that name." Peter cut him off verbally, raising a hand for emphasis. "And I hope you're not going to try and discuss the imminent proceedings."

"I just wanted some advice about a couple of things." Kepker pleaded.

"My advice is that you tell the whole truth when in the presence of he-who-will-judge-the-matter. You are a witness, but also on trial. Perhaps you should pray while we wait." was the stern reply.

"But if it weren't for me you wouldn't even know to be here. That'll count in my favour won't it P-" He stopped himself using his superior's common name. "Won't it Nefer? It will won't it?"

"I can give you no answer." He looked at Kepker. What he felt was not compassion, yet he could not forget that he was this man's superior, hence responsible for him. "Compose yourself. And remember: with dignity."

The Last DJ

Conclusion

view two

They've bought their drugs now.

"You aren't going to believe this." There's the sound of plastic bags rustling as they are removed from pockets and put down on a table.

"Bloody Hell! There's loads."

"It was cheap too. I don't know what's happening. It just kept coming. And then I asked if he had any more and he said wait a minute and brought back another pile."

"That is a serious trip. You'd stay up for fifty years solid on that lot."

"Something's up here. Check a few pieces." More rustling and some clinking in the background now.

"Nothing's up. Don't be paranoid."

"Maybe it's fate."

There's a tense silence for a minute and a half (I have exact time sense).

"It's acid all right. Something else too, though. Like a different chemical process was used maybe."

"What kind of process?"

"I don't know. There's some other things. Residue I should think."

"Can you check further?"

"Not without my lab. But there's no need. This stuff'll work OK."

"Come on let's do it."

"OK. Ready?"

There's sounds of movement. It goes quiet for a bit whilst they "link". I could creep to the window and take a peek but it isn't worth the risk.

"Should we put it all back out now?"

"Leave it a bit."

"It makes me nervous looking at this much stuff all at once."

"Twenty minutes."

view one

"I can't get Paul for murder without Ray's body right?" The policeman was telling his superior, angrily, having stormed into his office. "So I get the seized stuff sent to the lab for more analysis. We already know it's LSD but we don't know if it contains bits of Ray. Except it doesn't get sent. First it doesn't get sent right away, 'cause of some clerical problem. Then it doesn't get sent at all because we haven't got it." The policeman was livid. "How can we lose so much stuff at once?"

"We didn't lose it." His superior said quietly.

"Well somebody lost it. The biggest acid bust ever. Gone. Once their lawyer finds out Paul and Danny'll be on the street again. Clean."

"Nobody lost it. It was taken."

"What?" Something about his superior's tone made the policeman stop his tirade.

"In the national interest."

"What?"

"Orders from higher up. Lightning." The officer paused to point a finger and make a zapping noise. "So basically we won't be setting fire to anyone in transportation or storage. Sick isn't it. Do you feel sick Jim?"

"Yeah."

"Me too. Wanna go take some drugs?" He mimed tipping something from a glass into his mouth with his elbow bent.

view two

"I still can't get over how it's finally going to happen. Remember how it all started?"

"Yeah. When we thought the drum machine was knackered."

"Thought you couldn't program it properly more like." They laugh.

"Then you said 'Hey I like this bit. Can you do some more?' and I had to admit, like, actually I didn't know the drums could do that."

"Then there was that time you wanted to work all fucking night, remember? The next day we got up and said 'Meddy did some good stuff last night you know' and then it turned out you'd crashed an hour after us but left the rig switched on."

"That's when it started getting weird. And we were just, like, leaving it switched on after we'd finished and then seeing what would end up on it."

view four

"I'm just not ready to make the same conclusion sir. You must admit it's pretty fantastic."

"I don't understand why we have to go through all this again. But if that's what it takes then we will. The first reports show a loss of control of certain aspects of one of our satellites. It changed what frequencies it was listening to, OK? The next reports show more loss of control. You don't dispute that something was taking control, progressively more and more, of one of our satellites?"

"I don't dispute it sir, it's in the reports in black and white. And I agree it doesn't look like random glitches. At certain times, the satellite is being instructed by somebody other than us. But I don't see why it can't just be a hacker. Either a student having a laugh, or even an agent. We have hackers, so has everybody else."

"But this is disproved by further investigation. You've read this next report?"

"Yes but-"

"No buts. There was a total security clamp down. Passwords changed, new programs on the satellite

itself, staff moved, the satellite was even put into some kind of maintenance mode so that no legitimate access could be made. Now if we had a hacker, any kind, they'd at least take a little while to find a way through the new security measures wouldn't they? But what do we find? No interruption in the pattern at all."

"It's a security leak, or the measures weren't all they were said to be."

"It's an entity. An intelligence with an electromagnetic basis, rather than a physical basis."

"With respect sir, are you listening to yourself? I don't know if I should laugh or cry. An electromagnetic space alien?"

"Well you'll find that a number of high ranking scientific men, all over the world, don't find the idea laughable at all."

"All right sir. I admit there's a possibility."

"And you admit that, given what this entity has achieved with just one of our satellites, it has a massive potential as an intelligence asset? Even a weapon?"

"Yes, of course. If it exists."

"So on that basis it'd be best if it communicated with us then."

"Agreed."

"Well the reports show that it's main interest started out as pirate radio stations, playing tekno music. Subsequently it specialised in SDB music stations. Finally it settled on paying visits to a particular team, known as The Last DJ. By the way, I do mean visits. Whenever the entity relinquished control, it left the antenna pointed at the same place. Conclusive?"

"If you say so sir."

"I do say so. And I further say that pirate radio people and some weird band that live in a squat are not the kind of people I'd like to have in charge of an intelligence asset. Would you?"

"No sir I wouldn't. But I agree with all this, and I've placed an agent."

"I don't like the way you seem to be treating this as an exercise that's all."

"I'm treating it as a full operation sir. The agent I've placed is one of my most advanced, both in terms of conditioning features and training."

"This could be a decisive operation. We've been trying some things at the satellite. This is a new report you haven't seen yet. They think we could trap the entity in the satellite in some way. Now they're not ready to do it yet, and the entity has forced our hand rather - it's clear it's going to attempt to contact that band in some way in two days time. That's why the contact must be prevented."

"Marconi's Ghost. Nice code-name."

view three

Ray felt music. At first it was a very faint sensation. As more people in the club took the LSD that The Last DJ had linked through the sensation became clearer. Ray was being forced back into lucidity.

This time it was good. There was no fear, just rhythmic musical beats. Unsure how he could be feeling this, Ray concentrated on the sensation.

He became aware of people. He could not talk to them, but he was somehow in touch with them. All of them. All at once. Ray guessed that they were all dancing to the music, and hence he could feel it. And he was enjoying it in the same way as he used to enjoy dancing.

As he started getting into the feeling, Ray found that he could shift his concentration. He could be closer to some dancers than to others. Where the music was clearest, he felt that the dancers enjoyed the presence of his concentration. Ray thought that they probably felt it at some subconscious level, or just thought they were getting off more than usual. In some places, however, the dancers tended to reject his presence. Ray labelled these areas as being more up-tight dancers, less ready to relax their control. Ray could feel the number of dancers in his awareness expanding. As it did so he concentrated on the new areas, finding out who was into it and who was up-tight.

Ray had been enjoying this for some time when he became aware of a network. Apart from his own presence there was something else joining the dancers together. Ray perceived links. As he looked closer, it became apparent that the links went up and not just across. This network was not flat, but had levels. There was one node at the top level, which was linked to ten or so at the middle level, half of which were linked to nothing else, but half of which were linked to all the rest of the dancers.

Ray moved his concentration to the top level. Here he felt a presence, and perhaps it felt him? The music was clearest here, and he could sense decisions about the music being made. He could sense when some rhythm was about to get softer or faster or deeper. It felt like a command post. And the presence there was trying to contact him, but in a language he could not understand.

Deciding it might be a part of his new existence he did not yet comprehend, Ray stayed listening. He could make no sense of what he heard. Also he could find no way to initiate communication himself. All he could do was remain. He tried allowing his concentration to drift away, to try to indicate that he could not understand. The top level node was aware of his withdrawal, but when he returned, all he got was more of the same incomprehensible messages. The top level had to be a single person and there seemed to be more there for Ray to see than with any of the dancers.

Nevertheless he could not make himself heard. It was frustrating.

Then Ray noticed something else. Something that was spread through the dancers like a cloud. Something bad and getting worse. Something which seemed to be a part of him. He abandoned his attempts at communication. Could he lessen the effects of the cloud? Although within him, Ray felt the cloud to be foreign, and he was sure it hadn't been there in his previous lucid moments. Could he then withdraw himself, and thus the cloud? He tried but could not. He had previously been able to withdraw himself from his friend (which must have been Danny he now realised) he remembered, but this was different. Maybe because that time he had reached out, whereas this time he had been diffused in some way. There was no time to think about this, Ray realised. Although the dancers seemed oblivious, the ill effects of the cloud were growing in them.

But if he could not withdraw himself, maybe Ray could still manipulate something that was within him. Trying not to think of a bodily equivalent, Ray visualised an intention and let his subconscious do the rest. It worked! But the cloud was, well, like a cloud: impossible to grasp. Also simply moving the cloud around did no good, it was still there in the dancers doing harm. It had to be expelled. Ray picked a small area and visualised again. It worked again, partially, then Ray felt a strain and had to stop. Noting that the cloud did not return, he paused a moment to recover. The cloud had to go, and it wasn't going to be easy. Ray braced himself. Feeling all the cloud, and the limits of his presence, he pushed. He felt something inside him break, but he kept on pushing and pushing. Ray had a glimpse of the cloud half gone, then passed out, exhausted.

Something revived him. Ray felt a small injection of energy. Somebody was talking to him, in the same language as the top level node had used. But it was not the top level node. The language was still incomprehensible but Ray felt that the speaker was more fluent. He quickly found the top level node again.

view two

There're bouncers here. The bouncer's job is security and dealing with trouble. Murdering members of the band, or whatever they call themselves, would constitute trouble.

It's easy to keep track of where the security staff are, because they're easy to spot. They're all tall and broad, and they wear black nylon jackets and headset communicators.

I wait until The Last DJ are well into their set. The crowd of druggy degenerates is dancing crazy. I push my way to the front, doing a passable imitation of somebody dancing. Unsurprisingly,

nobody seems to mind a hardbody chick in tight clothes wriggling past them. My passage is lubricated by the sweat now pouring off the dancers. Some of the people nearest the stage are literally dripping - if they stopped dancing they'd look extremely ill.

I get to the front and have a last quick check around. There's only one bouncer anywhere near the stage and he's not close enough to make a difference to me, and besides, somebody else seems to have attracted his attention. The DJ is looking out over the crowd, checking his Monitors. One of the crew has her head in a hood, the other three might as well have; they are completely absorbed in their music-making. There's a no risk approach: a step up onto the low stage, two paces over some trailing cables and my primary target will be complete. Time to hit.

But just as I'm about to step on the stage, the one behind the hood whips it off and looks straight at me. She knows what I'm doing and is getting up to get in my way.

view one

After the collapse of his biggest acid bust, Jim the policeman took three days off. Next day he came back to work to find a message on his desk to call a certain detective. As a result of the call, later that day Jim found himself in a meeting with an enthusiastic young woman.

Following brief introductions, she started the conversation.

"It all took place in a dance club and there seems to be a drug angle."

"What all took place, I mean what are we looking at?" Jim sensed excitement as the other officer spoke.

"I'm looking at two murders, and probably an accidental death. You're looking at a small crowd of very ill LSD users, complaining about some sick bastards called The Last DJ selling them poisoned acid cheap. But I think your skills can help my murder investigation too. I think there might be a drug connection, basically because I can't think of anything else."

"OK. So it's not the acid-heads at the hospital?"

"We're going to the hospital to interview the man who seems to be the only usable witness. He was on security duty at the club. He's had to have surgery because of injuries sustained at the incident." She handed Jim a file. "I was going to leave in half an hour. Is that convenient?"

view three

The new arrival had replenished Ray's energy after he had expelled the poison. But this was nothing

compared to what happened once it started talking to the top level node.

Suddenly Ray had spatial awareness. He had a three dimensional picture of where all the dancers were. Each dancer appeared as a floating tangle of lines, with strands hanging down. Ray realised that he was seeing the dancers' nervous systems: the tangle being the brain. The tangles floated at different heights, depending on how tall the person was. As he realised this he had a fleeting sensation of an entity listening to his realisation, as if it was listening to the answer to a question.

Ray looked for the network he had sensed earlier. It was visible! But now he could see that the nodes which he thought had gone nowhere actually connected to another, more complex system. The second system was made up of thicker lines, but more densely packed and covering a smaller area. The lines were not tangles, like the brains, but formed of straight segments, corners, squares, circles and other geometric shapes. Dazed by his new sense as he was, Ray recognised that he was seeing electronic circuitry. Naturally, where there was tekno music, there would be synthesizers and there would be computers. Again he felt the listening presence.

Obviously, Ray's new spatial awareness was due to the entity which had energised him. It had integrated itself with him. But Ray had experienced no loss of control or will. In fact, now that something like the sense of sight had been returned to him, he felt more in control. Could this entity be something he had experienced before his change, but now appearing to him in a different way? The entity was listening to his question. Thinking it would make things easier, Ray delved through his memories of his life. Nothing he could think of provoked any response. This entity was something new and alien. This consideration brought an affirmative. The concept of alien. And Ray sensed that he was equally alien to the entity. The integration of Ray's awareness, and knowledge, with the entity's had effected them both.

The entity started talking to the top level node again. Now Ray felt that, although he could understand the language, he could not understand the subject under discussion. He caught some of it. Something about integration between the top level node and the entity. Then the entity saying something about a third unit, which Ray realised meant him. Apparently his presence was unplanned. Then there was further discussion. Ray gained an impression of hesitation but soon lost the thread. He turned his attention elsewhere.

As Ray became accustomed to his spatial sense he noticed something. There were two holes in the crowd of dancers; two gaps in the network. The holes were person sized. The edges of the holes had a character of rejection about them. Something more than just an unwillingness to

dance. Something like a positive attempt to put up armour against the current. Obviously two unusually up-tight people, Ray thought. Unusual that they should go out to a club. More unusual that they should be in the thick of the dancers, and pressing their way towards the front. Towards the person who was the top-level node.

With a jolt Ray realised that this was more than unusual: it was wrong. He'd better tell somebody. Maybe the network was in danger.

view one

"Well, I'd been watching this bloke, off and on, since he arrived. He wasn't making trouble or anything but something wasn't right about him. I had a feeling. I mean you do get occasional people who just come in and stand around looking but he wasn't like them. He hadn't come in with anybody, he didn't really seem to know what to do in a dance club, he didn't seem to be enjoying it even." The big man in the bed was telling what had happened in his own words. Jim sat by the bed in which the man lay. Next to Jim, nearer the man's head, sat the investigating officer. She held out a Dictaphone to record the big man's voice.

"Anyway he started to push his way to the front. I thought he was up to something, so I tried to get into a position to stop him, in case he did try anything. So I'm pushing along, you know, but not being too heavy-handed, and keeping my eye on him. I didn't see the girl until she was getting on the stage, by which time he was also getting on the stage, and I'm thinking 'great, two of them now'. So I asked for help and went to stop him first."

"When you say you asked for help, how did you ask for help?" asked the woman.

"With that fucking headset I was wearing." The man reached towards where his ear would have been, underneath the bandages covering the right side of his head. The woman nodded and the man continued his account.

"He was a bit higher than me, on stage, so it was easiest to just grab his leg and trip him. He fell over into a bunch of computer equipment." The man paused. His eyes flicked to the Dictaphone for a moment before he continued, something not lost on either police officer. "I looked over at the girl and she's hitting one of the women in the crew. I can remember her fingers, like this." The man made a weak thrusting gesture with his right hand. All four fingers were rigidly extended, and held together rather than being spread. "And she hit her right in the neck, hard." The man put his hand against his own Adam's apple, the plane of the palm horizontal. "I remember her chin snapping down and her ponytail flicking forwards before she collapsed. I knew she was dead."

view three

Ray had some trouble telling the entity about the approaching problem. It seemed difficult to explain in terms it understood. After he had, whilst the entity conveyed the warning to the top-level node, Ray started wondering if he could not do something himself, possibly with the entity's assistance.

In answer he received a vague notion about boosting the energy in the network, or in the circuitry, or in the nervous systems that he could see (all three seemed similar to the entity). Ray thought about electrocution, and this seemed in line with what the entity was conveying.

The problem was that the threatening people were not connected to anything that Ray could see. Indeed, this was how he had deduced that they were a threat.

Just as Ray was thinking this, it suddenly wasn't true any more. One of them had slipped or something and now was connected, to some circuitry. In three places Ray had a view of that person's nerves. The nerves did not look like the dancers', though: the picture was fainter and did not extend much more than a centimetre away from the circuitry.

Ray had no time to wonder about why this might be. He turned on the juice before the person could disconnect. A tracery of nerves appeared as clear, sharp black lines. Ray could see a web founded on joining the three points, but extending in a cloud around them. He just had time to recognise that the three points had been the two hands and the face before the web blurred and then vanished.

view one

"She didn't so much as break step. The DJ was just behind the woman she'd hit. She went straight for him. In the neck, right? But not hitting, grabbing like this." The man held out his right hand again, this time forming a pincer with his thumb versus his index and middle fingers. "She fucking tore his windpipe out. It can be done you know, you put your fingers here." Again he brought his right hand to his neck, this time pressing the ends of the pincer into the fleshy part under the chin. His trachea was encircled by his fingers. His voice was thus slightly distorted as he said "Close the hand and it comes out."

"I have seen the bodies of the victims, sir. You don't have to convince me."

"Yeah well I just wanted to say that you hear these things can be done, but seeing it is different, you know?" His right hand now waved expressively.

"OK. Please continue."

"Looking back, I should've just hit her. She's just killed two people, and I just grab her. Stupid. I

don't know. Anyway I grabbed her just as she was turning round after getting the DJ. She looked so small, I thought I'd restrain her. Pretty funny, right? Maybe she was small, but it was like wires: hard. As soon as I wrapped my arms around her she was twisting around. She got an arm free, or maybe I never had it in the first place. I hardly saw it then wham! Right on my ear. It was a punch I think. Then again. I couldn't hold her. The pain was just, fuck. Then she got away completely, must have hit me a few more times. Anyway I passed out."

Jim sat, impassive. Partly because it was up to the investigating officer to conduct the interview, but mostly because he had read the reports, both of the corpses and of the man's injury, already. For Jim the clinical detail of the written word had more impact than even the most articulate witness.

According to the report, the first blow had probably shattered the headset's speaker, damaged the outer ear directly, and the inner and middle ear by compression. The following blows did further damage to the outer, middle and inner ear, some damage to the temporal bone but were most destructive in that they drove the bits of metal and plastic into the middle, and perhaps inner ear, hence the surgical operation to pick them out a few hours before the interview. The autopsies' reports had been all together simpler. Two of, overwhelming damage to the superior part of the trachea, causing asphyxia and death. One of, deep electrical burns to forehead and palms of both hands, current would have been sufficient to induce cardiac spasm and do overwhelming neurological damage, either of which would cause death.

As was his job, Jim asked himself whether the attacker been on drugs. Much as the case fascinated him, the honest truth was that people on drugs absolutely did not fight in such a precise and lethal manner.

view four

"Bit of a mess I suppose sir."

"It's a bloody awful mess. But we've avoided the worst. We can be pretty sure Marconi hasn't fallen into anybody else's hands, although we don't know where it is."

"My agent hasn't reappeared either. And the Controller who followed her in to Collect after Completion is dead."

"I'm fully aware of that and there's no need to take that tone."

"Sorry sir. It's possible she could be a bit of a problem. We haven't actually had an agent of her capacity do a partial and go rogue on us before."

"No. What will she do?"

"Her mission will remain I suppose."

view two

Following The Last DJ's split in disgrace, amidst allegations of drug dealing, this paper has received a note. In the note, signed by five members, The Last DJ protest their innocence. It is difficult to see how they can make this claim. It is clear that they *did* sell bad drugs to many people at a certain club on a certain night. Some of those young ravers may never rave again they were so traumatised. It takes a certain attitude to sell poisoned acid to an entire club. No wonder they're changing their names and operating separately, a move the note says has been forced on them.

I don't read any more. They're still out there. Somewhere. They'll surface, maybe not in the mainstream world, maybe not for a while, but I can lie low just as long as they can. Longer in fact: I've been trained.

I crumple the music paper I was reading and throw it in a bin by the park bench I'm sitting on. Seven wasps are disturbed by this. I pinch them out of the air one-by-one, killing them as they fly around.

Café Ultimate

Short Stories

Staff wanted

"My daughter's gone off to college." Tim, the proprietor of Café Ultimate, paused to allow time for the usual response to this statement, then replied "Oh. Biology." Then he realised that the young woman with whom he was speaking had not made the usual response. Or any response at all. She just sat down looking around at the interior of his café.

"What kind of people come in during the day?" She said a few seconds later, when she had finished her inspection.

"Oh well, not many people at all really. A few more at lunch but Sue and John come in eleven till two to cover that." Tim avoided answering the question.

"You don't get kids in then? Playing truant." She asked it casually, not looking straight at him.

"Oh well a few I suppose."

"Last place I worked was full of them in the day. You telling me you don't get any?" She locked Tim's eyes and he hesitated, almost blushing. "I don't work for a liar." she added, for emphasis, still looking straight in his eyes.

"OK we get children. Who probably should be at school."

"I thought so. That's why you said come round at six in your ad isn't it?" She paused to look at the café's evening clientele. "This is the nice shift. After the little bastards have gone home, and before the big bastards have got up." She flicked her head back to Tim. "Am I right?"

"Yeah you're right. So I suppose you don't want the job then. Because of the kids."

"Oh I can deal with kids, I learnt how at my last place."

A glimmer of hope that he might regain control of the interview flashed at Tim. "Oh yes, what experience do you have?"

"Only place I've worked was Bob's."

"Oh yes, I think I've heard of it. It um closed just recently."

"Yeah it's closed. Bob couldn't really keep it open. You know, considering it was burnt down in a delinquent gang fight." Tim hadn't wanted to say it, but of course he had known.

"Um yes."

"Listen I don't want some poor innocent girl falling for that 'come by at six' thing and then getting gang-raped behind the counter. I'll work here."

Tim said nothing in reply. He just sat and blinked a few times, lost in thought.

"I'll start nine-thirty tomorrow yeah?" The young woman stood and extended her open right hand across the table.

"Oh yeah. Nine-thirty." Tim said, shaking the hand absently. "Do you want a coffee or something?"

The young woman looked at her watch quickly. "OK."

"Tony." Tim called across the room. A man behind the counter looked up from wiping a surface. "Let her have a coffee and a cake or something." Tony nodded as the young woman walked over to the counter.

Tim got up to go back to the stock room. He was thinking about an innocent girl who had worked behind a counter, and had been gang-raped. Biology.

Complimentary Coffee

Jane, the new member of counter staff at the café, twisted the cold tap to make water dribble slowly into the empty coffee jug she had placed in the sink. She took the full jug from under the filter and

put it up onto the hotplate built into the top of the coffee machine. After a quick glance at the jug in the sink, to check that it was not filling too quickly, she took out the machine's filter and, with a deft flick of her strong right wrist, discarded the steaming wet coffee grounds into the green plastic bag that lined the bin. She placed the empty filter upright on the draining board and reached up to the shelf where the filter papers and packets of grounds were kept.

At the exact moment the water in the jug in the sink passed the mark on the side of the jug, Jane was inserting the replenished filter back into the machine. She turned off the tap and poured the jug's contents into the top of the machine. Placing the jug on the hotplate below the filter caused a light on the side of the machine to flick on. The light indicated that inside the machine a process had started; the water would be heated, then passed through the filter to drip, as coffee, into the jug below.

During this routine a boy watched Jane's body. He was sitting at a table in the café with two friends. His friends were in his year at school, but only theoretically, since they never attended classes. His two friends could only see Jane by turning their heads. When Jane had started her machine refill sequence the boy had begun tapping the fingers of his right hand on the table, tap, tap, tap, tap. When Jane had reached up to put the full jug on top of the machine, then again when she had reached up to get a fresh filter paper and packet of coffee from the shelf, and finally when she had reached up to pour the water into the top of the machine the boy tapped his fingers faster, tap-tap-tap-tap. This caused his companions immense amusement which they suppressed, squirming and smirking to each other.

After she had placed the empty jug beneath the filter Jane noticed that, as was her habit, she had not put the lid on the jug. The lid, which had a small hole in its centre to allow the passage of the coffee, was on the draining board. She quickly removed the jug, put its lid on and replaced it under the filter. The light flicked off and then back on as she did this. Earlier that day, Tim had stopped by his café to see how his new employee was doing. Then, he had lightly told her off for not putting the lids on. Tim considered that, since few people came in the café at that time of day, the coffee would cool down too quickly if the jugs were left open.

As she turned back round, Jane noticed a couple leaving the café and smiled them a quick goodbye. Except for the three boys, who Jane thought were unlikely to buy anything, there was now nobody else in the room. The mid-morning lull had begun. Jane turned to where her bag lay on the floor and bent down to rummage for the book she had brought with her.

"Miss? The time on that clock is wrong." Jane turned at the voice. The tapping boy had walked around to the end of the counter. Actually coming behind the counter would have constituted a clear transgression. Jane would have been entitled to be cross had he done this, so the boy had stopped just short. He had not lost his child's instinct for the grey area. The boy's companions had stayed where they were. They sat with their elbows rested on their table, but their fore-arms held upright so that they could hide their giggling faces by hunching.

"Are you going to get it down and change it?" The boy restrained a smile as he spoke.

"Something wrong with your friends?" Jane asked, glancing across at them. "Are clocks funny now?" They hunched further and pressed their eyes shut, restraining their laughter to make it obvious that the joke was private.

"What's funny is the way your tits bounce up as you stretch." His companions hunched further and went on laughing, but Jane noticed that the boy in front of her was now staring at her in a very serious way. Suddenly it had become necessary to assess him as a physical threat. The boy was tall for his age, taller than Jane, and not built small. She remembered that Tim had shown her where there was a baseball bat kept under the counter.

The boy took a step forward, reached under the counter and took out the baseball bat. Without taking his eyes off Jane, he dropped the bat behind him. The clatter of the wood on the tiled floor stopped his friends' laughter. They unhunched and looked up.

"I want to see them bounce up and out of your bra and through your shirt. I bet those little buttons are just about ready to pop off. Especially with a bit of tearing." The boy reached towards her, edging forwards.

"Barry!" One of his friends called.

The boy turned guiltily to look at the door of the café, expecting to see somebody watching or about to come in. There was nobody and he relaxed out of the half-crouch into which he had dropped. He looked at the boy who had called. The boy's aghast face told Barry why the boy had called, even before he started stuttering.

"Fuck's sake. What is it?" Barry said angrily, hoping to shut the boy up.

The boy only continued to stutter.

"OK" Barry sighed, "Run away if you've lost your bottle. Just don't put me off. Now, where was I."

"Look out." the third boy shouted.

Barry had been turning back to face Jane. He heard the shout and flinched as she thrust her right hand out. Thus he avoided most of the boiling content of the filter Jane was flinging in his face. What he did not avoid caught him on the side of his head and ran blistering down his neck inside his shirt. "Shit shit shit. You little slag." Barry took a

step back, wiping and flicking the scalding water-drenched powder with his hands.

In the few moments' delay caused by Barry's friend's sudden reluctance Jane had considered her position. The counter curved round behind her to meet the wall, boxing-her in, so she could not have run away. To use the coffee jug, Jane would have had to lift it off the top of the machine and take the lid off. The filter only had to be slid out. Hence she had chosen the filter.

Now that the pain had momentarily immobilised Barry, Jane had enough time to take down the jug and remove the lid. She did so and threw the entire contents at Barry's head. The coffee in the pot was hotter, more liquid, and hit Barry more squarely than her previous missile. He stopped swearing and started screaming. He turned away from Jane, blundering his way out from behind the counter. Jane pursued him, getting two ringing hits on his bowed head with the Nevva-Krak drop-proof glass jug before he stepped on the round baseball bat and tumbled to the floor. Jane put down the jug as she picked up the baseball bat. She got two double-handed overhead swings at Barry's thighs before his friends rushed over.

Barry was curled up in a ball of pain, his face and head on fire, a dull blackness in his legs. Jane stood, holding the bat menacingly and glaring at Barry's prone form and his hesitant friends. She took a step back.

"Get him out of here." she ordered them. They complied.

Jane sat at one of the tables for a minute, until her heart resumed its normal pattern. She mused that life was that little bit less stressful when you left the lid off the jug.

Growing up

It was early afternoon when the tall man came in. Only five customers were in the café. The man walked straight to the counter, where Jane greeted him with a smile and raised eyebrows.

"I'll have heavy tex' and tomato in a white roll please, to eat here. And a black coffee, no sugar."

Jane noticed the man leafing through notes in his wallet from the corner of her eye as she prepared the roll. This was unwise, she thought, and bound to attract undesirable attention. She finished the roll, put it on a plate and poured the coffee wondering if there was some way she could warn him. As she passed the plate and saucer across the counter, Jane noticed that attention had indeed been attracted. A seventeen year old thug, one of a pair who had been sitting at a table in the café, had walked over. He stood close to the man, who could not have failed to notice him.

Jane charged the man for his food. The thug spoke.

"No it's more than that. There's a service charge." The thug extended a hand, open to receive.

The man paused to look at the thug. His hand froze, holding a note, half way between his wallet and Jane's hand. "A service charge?" The man did not sound afraid, nor as if he did not understand that he was being robbed.

"Yeah. And you pay me instead of her." The thug twitched the fingers on his outstretched hand in a beckoning gesture.

"You've got to be a hard man to take money from people. A tough guy."

"Yeah well don't make me show you. I'll bust you up."

"OK." The man put the note he was holding into the thug's hand.

The thug looked at the note, reading it's value. Then he looked at the man again.

"Are you tougher than that?" The man asked.

"You make another joke and I'll bust you up anyway." the thug said, a mean expression on his face. "Now give me your wallet."

The man drew the remaining notes from his wallet. "Are you this tough?" he said, holding a few folded notes. The thug snatched at the money, which the man held onto by flicking his wrist away.

"Give me that fucking money or I'll put you on the floor!"

"OK OK, take it." the man said, turning his wrist back. "But if you're not this tough", he wagged the notes slightly "you're in trouble."

"You're weird." The thug took the money.

"Well, at least I know how tough I am." The man left the café.

The man returned to Café Ultimate the following day. It was seven-thirty in the evening and the place was getting busy. The post-work crowd had left the café by then and were being replaced by the usual late evening clientele: small gangs of young punks. The punks liked to show off to each other. Mostly they were content to just call insults and posture; only occasionally would things get nasty, and then the punks generally took it outside. Even so, Tim placed a couple of fairly burly male staff behind the counter at that time of day.

Jane had come in at seven-fifteen to collect her wages for her first week, and had stayed for a toasted snack. There was a shelf wide enough to take a plate and saucer around the inside of the café's seating area. Jane sat at a stool facing the shelf, taking a quick look around as she did so. Looking around at the occupants of the café just once was a sensible precaution; looking more often invited the occupants to look back. Invited, or challenged.

The two thugs Jane had last seen taking the "weird" man's money were sitting at a table. They looked different now: one wore an expensive looking jacket, the other a number of flashy neck and wrist accessories. Clearly, the boys had stayed later than usual to parade their newly purchased finery and plumage in front of a slightly older crowd. Hence, unlike Jane, they looked around more than once. When people looked back they smiled at them. And the people looking smiled back. The boys were enjoying themselves. Both of them had been a bit worried about staying late, until the twenty year olds arrived, but they had reckoned that if they were to "play it nice" they would come to no harm. It was all proceeding to plan.

As they checked everybody walking into the café, the thugs recognised the man they had robbed of all that money as soon as he entered. They were too surprised to make any kind of greeting. After looking straight at them, to show that he had noticed them too, the man diverted his attention to placing his order.

"I'll have heavy tex' and tomato in a white roll please, to eat here. And a black coffee, no sugar."

Again the fat wallet came out.

The thugs had a brief discussion whilst the man's order was prepared. They quickly explained his re-appearance as just a manifestation of the man's weirdness. They were whispering about whether to approach him, perhaps to rob him again, when the man answered the question himself by calmly sitting at an unoccupied chair at their table. They fell silent, aware of several pairs of twenty year old eyes being turned in their direction.

He looked at them briefly, his face expressionless, then made a neat diagonal cut, dividing his roll into two pieces. The boy who had actually taken the money, who now wore an expensive jacket as a result, was the one to speak.

"Are you a charity?"

The man's shoulders moved a little as he kicked the thug under the table. The boy yelped, but the man seemed unsatisfied. He kicked again, landing correctly this time, and the boy and his chair tumbled to the floor.

Given a little time by the man's need to kick twice, the other boy had drawn a knife (another flashy accessory). He now lunged across the table, the knife in his right hand. It was the move of an inexperienced fighter, and the man easily avoided by leaning back in his chair. At the same time he expertly caught the boy's knife hand at the wrist. Pulling the boy forward and off balance, the man slammed the wrist to the table. As he did so he curled the fingers of his other hand, his right, into a half fist, as though about to knock on a door. He raised his right hand then smashed it down into the back of the boy's hand. The crockery on the table jumped, spilling coffee and hot chocolate. Then

again as the man repeated the strike. The man took the knife from the boy's weakened hand, but did not release his wrist. He switched his grip deftly, plunged the knife all the way through the webbing between the boy's thumb and index finger, then ripped his hand back and down, slashing the flesh apart. The man released the wrist as he stood up and the screaming boy quickly gripped his hand with his other hand, pushing the severed parts together. His screaming subsided into swearing as he crouched over his hand. The man reckoned him no longer a threat and turned to the other boy.

The boy he had kicked had brought himself to a standing position by using his chair as support. Leaning forward slightly, so that he could hold his injured left knee with his left hand, the young thug held his right hand in front of him, the palm open in a stop gesture.

"All right, you win. What do you want? You want the money back? You want-"

"Call me Sarrio pip-squeak."

"Yes. You win Mr Sarrio. What do-"

"That's Sarrio, just Sarrio. And I want you to know that you weren't tough enough to take from me."

Sarrio thought the young thug was faking a little and kicked fast and low to the boy's left knee. A sharp cry escaped the boy as he crumpled forwards a little. Before he could recover Sarrio moved in and punched him a couple of times, stomach and chest. Then he grabbed the boy's ears, one in each hand, dragged him round and butted his face on the edge of the table. He lifted and butted seven more times, then dropped the boy to the floor. Sarrio picked up the chair and sat where the boy had been sitting. He pulled his own plate and cup across the table and began eating.

The boy raised himself on his arms. Dimly, he could see blood dripping to the floor between his expensive sleeves. His friend, who had wrapped a handkerchief around his mutilated hand, helped him get up. They left the café, one hobbling, supporting himself with an arm across the other's shoulders.

One of the burly men from behind the counter came out with a cloth in his hand. He wiped the table, then the floor. As he was picking up the boys' crockery Sarrio spoke to him quietly.

"Sorry about the mess."

He discreetly passed a few coins to the counter-man.

The next day, Tuesday, Sarrio came to Café Ultimate at two-thirty in the afternoon. He was still there at seven-thirty when he had visitors.

There were two of them. They stopped just inside the door of the café. One of them pointed to Sarrio, after looking around briefly. As they

walked across the café, towards Sarrio, heads turned and the room went quiet. This was because of the state of one of the visitors, the one who had pointed.

He was limping, and his face was severely swollen and bruised. Half way over to Sarrio, somebody whispered "It's the kid who robbed him". His companion was older, old enough to be his father, which indeed he announced himself to be with his opening sentence. It was addressed to Sarrio, in a calm but serious tone.

"This is my son. Do you recognise him?"

"Recognise him? With his face all mashed up like that? How's anybody supposed to recognise him? Maybe if you had a photo or something." This provoked a few sniggers from the other occupants of the café.

"That's pretty funny." The man stayed serious. Sarrio had hoped that the boy's father would lose his temper following his joke. He tried again.

"Sorry, I'm being insensitive aren't I. He was born that way, am I right?" he began. "Let me guess. You screwed some whore up the arse, shot your seed into her diarrhoea, and he's what came out. You should have used one of those thick condoms."

The man lost his temper. He lunged at Sarrio, fists flying. Sarrio simply stood up with his chin down and his arms up, protecting his head and chest. He took two or three blows to his guard, then checked forward, inside the range of the man's flailing arms and went to work with his elbows.

The man had been too busy hitting to worry about his own guard. Four solid blows to his ribs landed before his temper abated and he realised he was hurt. He stepped backward to disengage. Sarrio let his fists fly then, right-left right-left. The man paused, dazed by the punches to his head. Sarrio took a breath and pulled back a little. Although appearing to be withdrawing, Sarrio was actually giving himself room to kick. Sarrio's waist and shoulders turned and he put his full weight into the kick. The onlookers gasped in sympathetic pain as the point of Sarrio's left shoe sunk into the man's abdomen. The man doubled over, breathless. Sarrio held his guard for a second longer, then decided that it was enough and the fight was over.

"You'd better help your dad home." Sarrio said to the watching boy.

The swelling meant that nobody could tell what expression was on the boy's face.

"Come on dad. You did your best." He led his father, staggering, out of the café.

Sarrio watched them leave slowly. Hushed conversation began again amongst the other customers. One fragment reached his ears.

"Good kick. He brought the knee high and turned his hips right into it."

Momentarily, Sarrio felt like hitting whoever had said that. He realised he was still standing, and sat down. He looked down at his empty plate. All they could see was a good kick, but Sarrio saw the start of a career. He remembered some gangster beating up his own father and remembered how it had made him realise that he had to take care of his own life. It had made him a man.

Foreign food

Sarrio became a regular customer at Café Ultimate. Very regular. Sunday afternoon, Tuesday afternoon and early evening, Thursday afternoon and early evening. He had a constant stream of visitors, but only ever one at a time. One day two people came in together to see him, Sarrio obviously knew them and called to them when they had just got inside the door.

"Hey! Only one person. If you both have to see me then one at a time. OK?"

One of them left.

Some of Sarrio's visitors just came to talk with him; always in quiet tones. Some came to give or receive money; always discreetly and under the table.

Sarrio ate and drank throughout the day. To drink: either a cup of black coffee with no sugar, or a small bottle of mineral water. To eat: either a piece of a particular cake or a white roll filled with heavy texture pro-meat and sliced tomato. Also, Sarrio insisted that his visitors bought something. If somebody approached his table empty-handed he would say something like: "Look, you can't just sit here, it's a café. Go and buy something. The coffee's good, so is the cake."

The staff were happy: Sarrio was always polite, always insisted on politeness in his guests, and always took a moment to calm down the more unruly and troublesome customers who might otherwise disrupt the peace and quiet. Also, he always left a generous tip at the end of his stay. Tim was happy: he had regular customers, and the place was losing its reputation as a hang-out for wild kids.

As a mark of his happiness, Tim bought a batch of stand-up plastic triangles with "reserved" printed on them, just so he could leave one on Sarrio's favourite table three days a week. Sarrio was flattered and pleased at the "reserved" notice. He tried to think of a way to repay this kindness. It came to him on his next "reserved" visit as he stared up at the blackboard fixed above the counter.

A few days later Sarrio came to Café Ultimate accompanied by another man. He was shorter than Sarrio and a little nervous looking. Sarrio bought him white coffee with two sugars and a packet of three biscuits.

A few minutes after they had sat down, Jane noticed that the man had taken out a notepad and was writing and looking up above the counter. He left after fifteen minutes, when he had finished his coffee and two of the biscuits. At the end of her shift, Jane mentioned the note-taker to her relief, who mentioned it to Tim later.

Tim was worried. Was Sarrio helping a rival by telling him Café Ultimate's prices? Did he intend to open his own café? Neither seemed to make sense, which only worried Tim more: he could see no motive in Sarrio's actions.

A week passed, during which Sarrio came and went as usual. Tim's worry did not subside. Whilst the copying of information from the menu felt like some kind of violation, it in no way overstepped the limits of acceptable customer behaviour. However, he could think of no way to raise the matter and was forced to let it lie.

Then one evening, at the time when Tim was always at the café, Jane came by unexpectedly. Tim's first thought was that, in his worried state, he had forgotten that it was her night to be paid. He checked the calendar first, then asked Jane directly. She said "Oh I'm just on my way out, fancied a coffee." She seemed evasive. Tim just said "OK". He did not get her a coffee, such was his distraction; he forgot he was behind the counter.

Then Sarrio came in, it was Monday and therefore unexpected. More unexpected was that he had three men with him, carrying a long, tall, thin, bubble-wrapped package.

"You like it?" Sarrio said to Tim, who was staring in bewilderment. Sarrio looked at the package, seeing the cause of Tim's confusion. "Turn it round. It's the wrong way up." The men turned the package over, no easy feat due to its size.

Tim blinked, trying to focus on what was beneath the bubble-wrap. Then he smiled. It was a new menu board. He started laughing, then remembered his manners.

"Thanks Sarrio. I don't know what to say. I mean, you shouldn't have."

"Don't mention it." Sarrio turned to his men. "Who's got the numbers and stuff."

One of the men pulled a plastic bag from his jacket pocket. Sarrio took it and went over to Tim, dismissing the men with "Put it against the wall over there." He gave Tim the bag and, putting his arm around Tim's shoulders, led him over to where the board was being leaned against the wall.

"These are the numbers you put on it for the prices and things. You just stick them on tonight and I'll have they boys around tomorrow morning to hang it up and take that old one down." He leaned a little closer "And you could put some of the prices up you know. You're getting different people in here now." There was one more thing:

"Oh look, I changed this bit here." Sarrio leant down and pressed a piece of the wrapping to make the letters underneath more clear. "Where it used to say Bar B Q, I changed it to Barbecue, see?"

"Oh yes."

"Bar B Q, what does that mean? What is it, pronounced Barb'k? Sounds like Iraqi food or something."