

A.K.C.T.

issue three

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Michael & Julia In the *Part Three* Michael dissects a routine whilst Julia watches, then they're off to Club Venice to relax with friends and strangers. Originally featured in Sheets Project.

Hardface *Part Three* Friday night, eat and fight. Yoder meets some of Deena's friends but has a good time anyway. Harlib and Jo go looking for a taste of life Outside and get one. Opening section featured in Sheets Project, followed by new material.

It's about time *Part Two* The start of some Masonic disciplinary hearings. The case for the prosecution is stated, but will the defendant show up in time?

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

Café Ultimate *Short Story* Open all night, including when the clubs close and everyone comes out from coming out to play.

Michael & Julia In the

Part Three

In the off-license

Michael held the door for Julia, after entering the shop himself. She stopped just inside the door, but he walked straight in. Julia noticed Michael relax the hunch he had adopted walking through the rain, as she relaxed also.

Beers, wines and spirits covered the shelves of the off-license. The ubiquitous rack of sweets was somehow missing. The only compromise to intoxication was a row of dusty bottles containing mixers. No crisps even. There were three staff, all behind the counter, one standing watching a film on a quiet black-and-white television set, one sitting in a chair reading *Nineteen Eighty-four*, one sitting on a cushion reading an *Alpha Flight* comic of which there was a pile next to him. There were three other people in the shop, customers, two girls and one man.

By Julia's reckoning the two girls were only over drinking age by virtue of their make-up. They had obviously just got in from the rain and were shivering in their sparse clothing. One of them had just emptied her purse into the hands of the other. Julia watched as she took back a five-pound note, put her purse away and moved to the nearest shelf to scrutinise the prices. The other girl shifted all the money to the palm of her left hand and began counting it with her right.

The man at first appeared to be pacing the floor restlessly, but without purpose. When Julia looked closer she could see that he had something in his hand which held his attention. He would take a few paces, pause looking at the object, then move in a different direction. It was a mobile phone. Eventually satisfied the man pressed two buttons and held the phone to his ear.

"Hello it's me."

"Yes I'm sorry, I know it's late."

"I'm in our favourite off-license." He stole a glance at the totally oblivious staff, foolishly hoping they had heard what he thought of as a compliment.

"What can I bring you? How about some of that port you like? Warre's is it?" The man called to the counter with the phone still to his ear, "Excuse me." There was no response. "Excuse me, do you have Warre's? Warre's port?" The book reader looked up, blankly, but in the right direction. He blinked and pointed.

"Wine's over there."

"Can you tell me if you have Warre's port? I can't go over there or I'll lose my signal. Can you tell me please?"

The man returned to his book.

"Excuse me." The man now spoke to Michael. "The staff aren't very helpful are they? Perhaps you could look at the wine shelf for me? I'll lose my signal if I move. Warre's port I'm looking for. It's a light green label. Sorry what was that darling? Sorry it's a white label with black writing on it. Plain looking my wife says."

"Sorry mate I'm just here buying lagers." Michael was affecting stupidity.

"Yes but could you just look over there." The man pointed awkwardly, not wanting to change his position. "At the wine section."

"No not wine, lager. Yeah?" Michael held up the four-pack he had selected. "You don't get wine in cans, not big cans, only small cans, and bottles. This is lager."

The man's eyes searched left and right. The girls were out of his view, there was only this thick, and possibly drunk young man in front of him, except then he noticed Julia. The man looked at Julia, Michael followed his eyes. Julia could see his dilemma, the possibility that the idiot in front could actually help him would probably lost if he spoke to the transvestite by the door. Which would he choose? Clearly prejudice was at work, Julia decided that if he could overcome it and ask her she would help him. The man allowed his roving gaze to settle back on Michael.

"I can see that that is lager, but I want wine."

"Well it's just there behind you." Michael feigned perplexity.

"Yes but I can't go over there because I'll lose my signal. So would you please look for me?"

"Five quid." Michael held out his hand, stepped within reach of the man.

"What!?"

"Come on, you've got a mobile phone you're not poor. Besides your wife's going to rip your nuts off if you go home empty handed. Fiver please." Michael smiled horribly.

"I haven't got a fiver."

"How are you going to buy port then? They don't take credit cards here you know." Michael turned and walked to the counter, Julia joined him there as he put the four-pack on the counter. The book reader put it down to take their money - they paid half each, and to make an announcement.

"We're closing."

The girls came to a hurried decision, brought three different cans to the counter and deposited a pile of change. The man with the phone was in distress.

“Excuse me, sorry. You do take credit cards? Barclaycard? I mean Visa?”

“No, sorry. No credit cards.” said the member of staff, deliberately loudly, so that it would be audible over the phone. The man started talking frantically.

“Darling I'm doing the best I can. The staff won't do anything and none of these people will help me. They're all so self-”

“But it isn't my fault. There's-”

“Threatening to rip my nuts off isn't going to - Hello? Hello?”

Michael and Julia left the shop as the man began to remonstrate with the staff about licensing hours, and the equivalence of Switch and cash.

In the street

Michael led the way to the club.

“It's about twenty minutes. I like to keep the things I need within easy reach - The Three Vikings, Club Venice, a choice of cinemas.” He looked at Julia quickly “And of course an off-license where one can bait the middle class.”

Julia concentrated on avoiding the puddles left by the rain, which was now a light drizzle. She was worried about Michael's change of character in the pub. From depressed and quiet when accusing her of attacking him to lively and playful in the off license. She glanced at him sideways. Michael was trying to restrain a smile the way that city people do when walking in public. As she returned her attention to the pavement Michael laughed quietly and muttered.

“Not wine, lager yeah?” He laughed again then repeated the phrase louder and with a slightly different emphasis and added “See? It's lagers yeah?”. His voice changed “I said something about big cans too. Can you remember it? It was very funny.” Julia looked to see if Michael was really asking her. He was not, he had already moved on. Now he was experimenting with posture also. He held the four-pack up in front of himself with his right hand. As he walked he adjusted his arm and pulled his face into different expressions intended to convey a certain character. Julia smiled as she realised he was not practising as such, but playing to himself.

Michael's last presentation of the character, which he did three times before resuming normal walking, was to hold the four-pack with his arm straight and twist it from side to side whilst saying “La-gers...Yeah?” Finally he lowered his arm and laughed again.

“So Julia.” Michael said as soon as his laughter faded. “You didn't help the guy find his port.”

“What?” Julia had been caught by surprise. She had thought Michael completely wrapped up in his routine.

“He wanted Warre's port? But couldn't look because he'd lose his signal in the wine section?” Michael prompted her. “You didn't help him.”

“No. But, well.....” Feelings and half arguments crowded in on Julia. Michael laughed at her sudden inarticulateness. She looked at him crossly. “I don't have to justify myself to you Michael.”

“Of course not, I didn't say you did.” Michael smiled to annoy Julia. “I just said you didn't help him. Why should you? You don't know him do you?” Michael paused, then added, non-rhetorically, “Well do you?”

“No. But-” Julia stuttered, falling into Michael's rhythm almost without volition and allowing him to continue.

“No.” Michael echoed her. “Might as well ask by what right he could request your help.” Michael remembered that the man had not actually asked Julia and hastily added “Or anyone else's for that matter.”

Julia felt herself carried along, yet somehow wanting to disagree.

“Would he give anyone help? I doubt it.”

“You don't know that.” Julia tried to stand against the tide. “You're making assumptions about a person-”

“Oh for God's sake.” Michael interrupted, adopting an impatient tone “We're all over eighteen aren't we? I think that's a fair assumption about him, don't you?”

“Yes but-” Julia started, too tentatively and Michael cut her off again.

“Well then.” Michael started speaking a little slower “Look, you did one on him, I did one on him. It was a con, a game, a routine, like a sketch on TV. Only it's more enjoyable to do it live than to watch isn't it.”

Julia was confused. Michael's speech made her ask herself why she had chosen not to help, and enjoyed watching and not helping. Julia felt that she would have helped if asked. This did not answer Michael's point which was that she had not offered. Or was this Michael's point? He had said that she did not have to justify herself to him. There was something challenging in Michael's tone, rather than his words, to which Julia felt she had to respond.

“I don't understand what you're getting at.”

“I'm not getting at anything. Can't I say anything without you thinking I'm getting at you?”

“Is this about me being on the attack?”

“You said you weren't on the attack, and I agreed. Well.....” Michael paused for thought, but could think of nothing.

“Do you think we're competing here?” Julia stopped walking. “Michael?”

Michael stopped and turned to face her. “I made a few remarks.” He spread his arms, turning the

palms of his hands towards her (causing the cans in the four-pack to clonk against each other). "It's just a bit of discussion. Sparring. There's no need to get heavy." Their eyes met. Julia's probing expression contrasted with Michael's open protestation of his innocence.

Julia broke the moment by dropping her gaze and resuming walking the way they had been going. Michael watched her and fell into step as she passed him. They walked for thirty seconds in tense silence before Julia stopped and grabbed Michael's arm. As soon as he stopped walking and turned to look at her, Julia put her arms around Michael's neck. Pulling herself close she kissed him on the lips. Then she parted her lips slightly and pulled at his upper lip, then his lower. Michael got over his initial surprise and opened his mouth, tilting his head so they could kiss fully. Julia responded similarly and presented the underside of her tongue which Michael tasted with the tip of his for a moment before they were lost entwining and roving. They kissed for a long few seconds before Julia pulled back slightly and opened her eyes into Michael's.

"Did it really feel like I was attacking you?" She asked quietly.

Michael mumbled a don't know almost incoherently, his eyes flicking downwards.

"I didn't mean it to. I just wanted to know something. To know you, and not just your routines and games."

A huge distance showed behind Michael's eyes as he said "Did you find anything?" He seemed close to tears and Julia hugged him more closely. Her head dropped forward to rest on his shoulder. She felt a light kiss on the back of her neck.

"Oh Michael." Julia had no other reply. It was too much for her to find Michael's concerns about himself the same as her own.

"Still want to go to the club?" Michael said it very quietly, almost straight in Julia's ear.

Julia leaned her head back, releasing her hug slightly. "Yeah." She said, her voice up-beat. "Club Venice!" Julia's voice became louder as she released him completely. "Let's go!" She grabbed his hand, turned and pulled him into a run.

They ran along the dark street splashing and laughing, Michael struggling to keep up.

In the queue

Michael had to say "whoa!" three times before Julia would allow them to stop. She released his hand stood, bent over, with her hands on her knees recovering her breath. Looking up she saw Michael stumbling to a wall for support, whilst he recovered. Julia got her breath back first and stood up straight.

"What's up? Can't hack the pace? Too unfit?"

Michael shook his head, but could not speak.

"Come on, come on." She said, assuming her coaching voice and clapping her hands twice for emphasis.

"We should've gone left there." Michael managed, breathlessly.

"Oh OK." Julia looked back at the junction they had just crossed. "Ready then?" She assumed a running stance.

Michael propelled himself from the wall. "We're nearly there. We can't run the last part." He started walking.

Julia walked next to him. "Why not?" She asked, taking his hand in hers.

"Not allowed."

"Oh." They both laughed a little.

Julia noticed a few people walking into a turning further up the road. She supposed, correctly, that this was their destination also. They reached the turning a few minutes later. It appeared to be an access road to the back of a factory, except that factories don't usually have doormen, and factory workers usually wear overalls.

The queue was about ten people: short, as Michael had predicted. At the front was a group of goths, half of whom were wearing little more than underwear and half of whom seemed to have donned the costumes for two Hammer House of Horror extras at once. The two girls from the off-license were next. At the back was a pair of women, what Julia noticed about them was the slogans on their clothing. One of them had on a pair of black CAT boots. Around the heel upper of left boot was written the word "dyke", whilst the right read "boots". The other woman was wearing a white windcheater with the words "Girl Attack" printed in black across the shoulders and "Hurt Him tour" in grey lower down. Julia had heard of the band, vaguely. As Julia and Michael took their place behind them in the queue the woman in the jacket turned her head. She looked Julia up and down, then glanced at Michael. She showed Julia a brief twitch of smile around the corners of her lips before turning back. She whispered to her companion who then turned to take a brief look for herself.

There were as many people hanging around as there were in the queue. Julia wondered why, aloud. Michael explained that Club Venice was members and guests only and that every week there were people who turned up hoping to persuade a member to take them in as a guest. Members were allowed two guests each, but most turned up with just one friend so there were always plenty of opportunities.

They had been waiting a minute when the door opened. The goths at the front huddled forward only to be disappointed. The door was opening for somebody to be ushered out by a doorman who returned inside. The person was an attractive

young woman in a knee length white dress and white court shoes. One of the two doormen explained the situation to her. It appeared that she had sneaked past them, saying she was a member, only to be ejected inside. The doorman was not pleased by this deception.

“Smile prettily and walk past' doesn't work on these guys.” Michael said quietly.

The woman was persuaded of the implacability of the doorman and looked at the queue, assessing her chances with each individual.

“You can come in with me if you take your dress off.” Dyke Boots called. The Goths sniggered as the woman in the white dress blushed. “Oh go on.” Dyke Boots encouraged, but to no effect. The woman went to stand around with the other hopefuls.

A little while later the goths were let in. Michael and Julia moved forward as a couple wearing S&M leather gear under their light coats came to stand behind them.

“Hey Mike!”

Michael turned to look at the young man shouting to him. Julia was surprised because she always called him Michael.

“Well well, Mister Saturn.” Michael greeted the man who came to stand by them. Michael introduced Julia to the newcomer. Julia placed him in his early twenties. He talked in a lively and animated tone, about his job, TV, going out, and generally about his life since he had last seen Michael - apparently only two weeks since.

“Exactly two weeks ago” Saturn checked his watch “to the minute. Spooky eh? Hey is she trying to get in?”

Saturn was looking at the woman in the white dress, who looked back and smiled. Michael affirmed her status as the woman walked over.

“Are you looking to get in?” Saturn asked the woman.

She nodded vigorously without speaking. Still without saying anything she then made eye contact with Saturn, raised her eyebrows and tilted her head quizzically. With a single fast motion Saturn replied by drawing out his season ticket holder and snapping it open to show his Club Venice membership card. The woman closed and opened her eyes in slow blink, and softened her querulous expression with a refined smile. Saturn kept his eyes on hers as he turned his body to face the entrance and moved his left elbow away from his side to offer his arm. The woman straightened her head, then tilted it back to look at Saturn's arm in mock disdain.

Julia looked away from the dumb show for a moment to check the size of the queue. It had grown even in the short space of time since she had last looked - clearly Michael had chosen his time well.

“I know it's mine but I thought you had it.”

The raised voice came from one of the girls at the front of the queue. She and her friend had been about to enter, when a problem had arisen. They were now trying to establish who was the guilty party. Everyone near the front of the queue could hear their remonstrations.

“But we're here every week.” This was directed at the doorman who shrugged.

“I'm not here every week, but I believe you. If you're here every week you know the rules. No-one gets in without a card.”

“It's your card, I thought you'd bring it.” Said the other girl, searching through her large draw string bag in spite of what she had just said.

“But I gave it to you.”

The woman in the white dress was wearing a small smug smile, all the more smug because it was small. It died on her face, to be replaced by a look of dismay that followed Saturn as he disengaged their arms and stepped forward.

“To the rescue.” He intoned, striding forward and presenting his card strongly. “It's OK officer the girls are with me.” his affected deep voice made the doorman smile. He waved them in with a slight flourish. “Cheers Sat.” One of the girls made a sexy cherub smile for him.

The doorman watched them go in and, after a signal from inside, gestured the next two people forward. Dyke Boots showed a card as Girl Attack went in, then followed her. She paused in the doorway to offer the woman in white a last chance by looking at her and extending her right hand with the fingers extended and together. The woman looked away until the door had been closed.

Julia and Michael were now at the front of the queue.

“Excuse me.” Julia looked over her shoulder at Michael who was talking. “What size shoes do you wear?” His question was addressed to the woman.

“Seven.”

Michael turned to Julia. “Can you wear seven?” Julia nodded. “I think we solved the problem of your shoes. And not a moment too soon.” He turned back to the woman “You can come in with us now, if you'll lend us your shoes.”

The woman looked down at her shoes, perhaps trying to remember how much they had cost. “Will you carry me?”

“What?”

“How can I walk with no shoes?” She asked, not unreasonably. “You'll have to carry me in at least. On your shoulders.”

Julia looked at Michael to see if he would even look away from the woman to her. She did not detect even a flinch. “OK.”

The woman approached and Michael bent forwards, putting the beer cans on the ground. "No mate." the heavy doorman advised, "you squat down on your haunches." Michael did so. "Now you just stand over him. That's it. OK now stand up slowly. Straighten your back straighten your back. All right?" The doorman co-ordinated and held out his hand for the woman to hold during her shaky ascent. Clearly he had done this sort of thing before, he certainly had the build.

The doorman looked at Julia. This was understandable, she allowed, after all the man with whom she had arrived now had a pretty young lady straddled across his shoulders. She gripped his head by the temples, and he held her ankles, to try to maintain their posture. Julia tried to meet Michael's eyes, to exchange a look at least. He seemed not to be responding. Maybe it was because he was still a little unsteady, maybe it was because his view was obscured by the woman's legs, bare since the white dress had ridden up in her mounting manoeuvre, maybe he was laughing too much or maybe he just chose not to.

Julia loosened the hi-tech fastening on the training shoe on her right foot and stood on one leg to pull it off. She hopped over to Michael and lightly grasped the shoe off the woman's right foot, not seeking eye contact on purpose now. The court shoe fit and she repeated the operation with the left shoes. She considered the pair of trainers for a moment before unthreading a length of lace from one and tying it to the other. She hung them around Michael's neck, meeting his eyes as she did so. Michael blew her a kiss. Julia blew one back and bent down to pick up the beer cans.

In the club

Julia paid for all three of them, showing Michael's card which she had taken from his inside pocket. The building was a slightly converted factory. The ceilings were high, allowing Michael's passenger to ride in comfort, and without danger. A corridor led into the large main room, which was divided into a dance floor, almost empty at that early time, and a seating area, filled with a jumble of all forms of chair and a few specimens of seated humanity. The woman and Julia both looked around at the industrial interior, filled with flashing coloured lights and loud tekno dance music, but Michael walked on across the seating area without looking.

On the other side of the room was a curtained portal with a member of club security standing in front. Julia showed him Michael's membership card and they were allowed through. There was a broad staircase behind the curtain, obviously part of the original building, lit by clumps of red and white candles placed at irregular intervals along the floor and walls.

They climbed the stairs to a room perhaps a quarter the size of the main room downstairs. This room was lit by more candles, mostly placed on the large oblong tables strewn about the room. The music here was quieter, Ambient. The chairs around the tables were less diverse than those downstairs.

"Can I drop you off somewhere?" Michael asked, twisting his head upwards a little.

"That table." the woman pointed.

It was close and Michael managed to reach it without collapsing. He lowered himself until the woman's feet could be planted firmly on the table, then ducked his head and backed out. The woman turned around, still standing on the table and smoothed her skirt, smiling down at Michael.

"Find us before you go, and you can have your shoes back."

"OK."

Michael went to join Julia, who had already been joined by Saturn. Julia handed Michael a can as he approached then opened one herself after he took it.

"I always said Michael would only put a lady on a pedestal to look up her skirt." Saturn joked. Julia noticed Michael reflexively turning to where the woman now sat on the edge of the table. Following his gaze she noticed that the woman had not crossed her legs, instead she sat with her knees together and both feet dangling.

The three of them found an empty table to occupy. The two girls who had got in with Saturn, sat down with them, as did a few more people.

They all knew each other very well and Julia felt she had little to contribute to their conversation. She was aware of Michael trying to bat something her way once or twice, and looking at her slightly more often, but allowed her attention to wander, returning to the talk from time to time. It appeared that Michael and Saturn were like a double act. Nobody talked across anybody, and everybody made comments on most topics, but when Michael and Saturn really got going the others stopped to listen.

The first thing Julia noticed outside the conversation was the woman in white being approached by a man with a four-pack. His clothes were stylish and completely black except for a single large white paisley on the back of his jacket, and a smaller one on the left breast. She could not hear their conversation, if any words were said, but could clearly see the man offering her a can he had separated from the others. She accepted. He did not pass the can, but, holding it upright around the top in his left hand, pressed it down on her knees. She parted her legs just enough to allow the can to pass between them onto the table. Without releasing the can, and using only the fingers on his left hand the man pulled the ring-pull then separated a beer for himself. He looked at her

body as he opened his beer and took a deep draught. She looked at the can wedged between her knees for a moment before picking it up in her right hand and drinking from it. After a few more sips each the man placed a chair directly in front of her and sat down. Julia could not see whether her feet were resting on his knees or not.

Her attention was brought back to the table as they were approached by a woman wearing a bright red one-piece swimsuit, black stockings, black leather gloves and a black chalk-stripe waistcoat. She stood by one of Michael's friends and leaned over him.

"Excuse me I think I've just smudged my eye shadow. Can you check?"

"It looks OK."

"Thanks." The woman walked off, brushing one gloved hand across Michael's friend's shoulders.

Julia leaned close to Michael and said quietly "In her place I wouldn't call anyone's attention to my make-up. They might see how much I was wearing and realise my age." Michael sniggered.

At around midnight Michael suggested some dancing and they went downstairs. The dance floor was busy. A young man coming off the floor, soaked in sweat, paused to comment to them "It's banging tonight mate, banging." He had to shout to be heard over the music, which was indeed banging. Michael got deep into his dancing straight away, but Julia preferred to look around, moving into it gradually. The desk was in a corner of the room, flanked by floor-standing speakers on the two walls forming the corner. The enclosed triangle was where the energy was. Looking through a strobe of waving arms and flailing long hair towards the desk Julia could just see the DJ, wearing headphones behind the desk, as he was joined by another man. A cheer from the closest dancers was just distinguishable from the music as the newcomer picked up a microphone.

"Warm up?" he made the enquiry in a soft voice.

They cheered again.

"Warm up?"

They cheered louder.

"OK"

The MC unwound some flex for the microphone from somewhere to give himself distance. His head started nodding in time, then his whole body began to move. Julia moved closer to the front, finding herself next to Michael's manic dancing. The MC moved more like a boxer than a dancer, bobbing lightly on his feet and holding his arms across his chest. He let the DJ wind the crowd up even more with the music. A few whoops were heard. Julia lost attention on the desk for a minute, but snapped back when the music suddenly ceased. The MC stood with his right hand holding the mike upside down above his head and screamed

"If you like it say play it faster!"

The crowd roared and the music came back. Julia and Michael danced crazy with the rest of the crowd.

After perhaps an hour Julia felt she wanted a rest, also she was starting to feel a little sleepy. She drew Michael to the side of the floor.

"I want to go back upstairs." She had to shout to be heard.

"What already?"

"I'm feeling tired."

"Oh. Do you want some speed?"

Julia was shocked at how casually Michael had asked the question. She had not realised Michael took drugs. Then she told herself that it was wrong to be shocked.

"Um. No thanks."

They went to the curtain, where Michael had Julia admitted, advising her to crash at their table, before heading back to the dance floor.

Julia found the table. Some of Michael's friends were still there, some of them were already crashed. She slumped, resting her head on her arms.

In the small hours

Julia was awoken by Michael pulling at her shoes. She was still sitting in the chair where she had slumped, her legs were bent and her feet were under the chair. She quickly twitched them under the table, out of Michael's reach. Julia sat up a little straighter, intending to tell Michael to leave her shoes alone, because she was sleeping. All that she managed was the word "Michael" and some incoherent mumbling. Julia began to slump back to the table, slowly.

"Julia. We have to give her back her shoes." Michael reached up - he was kneeling on the floor - and gave her shoulder a light shake. The shaking made Julia straighten up a little. She peered at Michael and blinked.

"My shoes." She said, and began to slump again.

Julia was expecting to slump onto the table, a flat surface. Therefore when her arms came into contact with something lumpy she paused her slump. Julia's hands felt a ridged composite, cloth and plastic. Her eyes opened and looked at a pair of training shoes. Her training shoes, she realised. Julia looked under the table. At the end of Michael's suit trousers she saw a pair of white court shoes on her feet. Julia reached down and fumbled with them, eventually removing them. She pushed them back between her legs, under the chair. Turning back to the table, she saw a hand, Michael's hand, removing the training shoes. She did not guess that it had been Michael who had placed the shoes to interrupt her. With all

obstacles removed Julia made herself comfortable and went back to sleep.

Michael handed the shoes to the man in black, with a white paisley, and watched him take them over to a girl in white sitting on the edge of a table. He turned to look at Julia's back for a moment before putting the pair of shoes on the table next to her. The shoes were still joined by the pair of laces that Julia had unwound. Michael

hooked the laces over Julia's right ear, vaguely thinking that this would make it difficult for anyone to take the trainers, or for Julia to forget them. Not that anyone would forget to wear shoes, he smiled, thinking it must be the speed.

Michael had been upstairs to get a drink of water, and to chill out. He now finished his drink and went back downstairs to dance again.

Hardface

Part Three

chapter six

At 18:00hrs Harlib's screen flashed: he had set an alarm in the morning. He finished the call he was on, tapped his screen a few times to log out and removed his headset. He held the headset for a few seconds, pulling at the foam earpiece, then abruptly dropped it on the desk and stood up. He turned around, knelt one knee on the seat of his chair and drummed a short tattoo on the back, raising a little dust.

"Friday night, and I just got paid." he said to Yoder's back.

Yoder was talking on his telephone and ignored him.

Harlib listened to a sentence, glanced at Yoder's screen and concluded that his friend would be busy for a while yet. He dismounted his chair and walked off. Harlib paused as he left the room, catching Yoder's eye. He waved and Yoder waved back without interrupting his conversation.

When Yoder next noticed the time it was 18:30hrs. He decided to call it a week. He logged out, dumped his headset and left in a hurry. Yoder lived on Oxford Plaza, the name the planners had given to Single Quarters Accommodation Area 6 to make people feel more at home. It was about a ten minute walk from TradeAdmin to Oxford Plaza. Yoder ran and made it in seven. His employee ID opened the outside door, and the door to his three-room apartment.

Yoder closed his door behind him with his left hand as his right tugged at his tie to loosen it, then undid the top button on his shirt. The run across the complex had left him a little sweaty and short of breath. He breathed deeply, freed of the restriction of his collar, shrugging his jacket off as he took two steps to the sofa (currently configured as a bed). He dropped himself and the jacket on the sofa. Yoder's dangling tie got in the way of his hands as he bent down to undo his shoelaces and he pulled it off angrily. As his feet shuffled out of his shoes, Yoder undid one more button on his shirt, then pulled it and his vest off over his head.

He struggled with the still-fastened cuffs for a moment before dropping the shirt on top of the shoes. Yoder flopped his torso back onto the bed, leaving his feet on the floor. He undid his trousers and rocked back to lift his legs in the air, then removed trousers, underpants and socks in one two-handed movement. He dropped the garments between his bare feet, on top of the shirt, undershirt, tie and shoes as he rocked forward again. Yoder continued the rocking forward motion into a stand, then a walk and took two steps into his bathroom. His right hand picked up the towel from the radiator on the wall just outside the door as his left twisted a knob, bringing a spray of water from his shower. As Yoder brought his right arm inside the cubicle, to join the rest of his body, the heel of his right hand pressed the switch by the door to turn on the bathroom light.

The bathroom/lavatory was obviously a slot-in module. The main room was a module, but not as obvious. Like most of the Mann HQ complex, Oxford Plaza had not been built for its present purpose. When it had been built it had been an office. Like many such buildings it had been deserted at some point during the wars. It had remained so until a few years before Yoder's shower when Mann Estates had selected the disused building to fulfil an expansion requirement. Mann Defence had been involved to establish occupance (shoot any people who might already be living there) and had co-operated with Estates to extend HQ Perimeter (stop anybody else getting in). Estates had completed their work by structural integrity improvement (stop the thing from falling down), property renewal (re-plumb, supply electricity, and plug in as many pre-fabricated modules as would fit), social placement (name it "Oxford Plaza") and finally, inhabitation (move some employees in).

Yoder finished a quick shower, towelled a little, then pulled his grimy shower curtain aside to step out. He wiped condensation off the bathroom mirror and decided he could get by without a shave (he had no time). Yoder returned to his main room patting himself with the towel. He came to a stop in front of his open wardrobe, drying himself

between the legs. Once satisfied that he was dry, he dropped the towel. He donned underpants and socks from a drawer within the wardrobe, a soft white shirt and a silky loose fitting black suit from the same hanger, and a pair of smart casual shoes from the wardrobe floor. He checked himself once in the mirror on the inside of the left wardrobe door, rolled his shoulders to settle the lapels, and left the room.

He came back in almost immediately as he realised that all his stuff was in his work jacket.

Next to the HQ warehouses there was a large shop, named "E.D.'s", where Mann employees could spend their company credit. Shad Harlib went there straight from TradeAdmin.

E.D.'s had five floors and stocked a wide range of produce and goods. Harlib went straight to menswear on the third floor, and then straight to casual. He looked at the leather jackets on display for a short while, examining price tags and feeling for the quality. He had just about made up his mind when a voice behind him said "Can I help you?" He turned to find a young shop assistant smiling at him.

"Yes. I like this one." Harlib said, not smiling back, indicating a safely fashioned black leather jacket.

"OK." The assistant reached past him to take the jacket off the rail. "There's a mirror just over here--"

"Oh I don't want to try it on thank you. I'll just take a medium."

The assistant was holding the jacket's shoulders, one in each hand, ready for Harlib to try. "A medium?" the assistant said, eyes flicking left to right, assessing Harlib's shoulders. "Wouldn't you like to try it on just to be sure?"

"No thank you." Harlib thought how he could explain. He settled on "It's not for me, you see." rather than go for the whole story about how he was going out that night. Not just out but Out out. Out where they didn't take Mann employee credit. Out where a person had to barter. In a way he was fortunate. Mann had a good reputation and their stuff, stuff that he could buy with his credit, was quite widely accepted.

"OK. If you'd like to follow me to the till - unless there was something else you wanted?"

Harlib smiled at the last remark; at least some bit of whatever training course the assistant had been on had made an impression.

"No that'll be all." At Harlib's reply the assistant turned to go to the till, with the jacket. "Excuse me, sorry, no I don't want that one."

The assistant glanced at the jacket "I thought you said medium?"

"Yes but I would like one out of stores."

"They're just the same as this one." The assistant looked perplexed.

"Is there some problem?" A manager's attention had been drawn by the conversation.

"Not at all." Harlib was faster than the assistant. "I just want a jacket like that one, but from stores. Still in its sealed bag."

"Very good sir." The manager turned to the assistant. "Just rack that one would you. I'll serve this gentleman."

Mann Entertainment's alcohol outlets came in three sizes. Smallest was the Mobile, of which they maintained up to fifty. A location became a fashionable hang-out, an Entertainment Mobile would start parking there, until the fashion changed. Every Mobile had a van and a handcart. If the spot was outside the handcart served as an extension of the van. If inside however, the hand cart would be taken to the location, and the van served as a store room. The Mobiles each had a staff of four and they moved fast. For example, there was the time when a nearby building collapsed and there was a new view across the Capital from the seventh floor corner of a staircase in Leominster Plaza. After a two days it became a place to hang out. People brought beer and sandwiches, watched the sunset, held hands and so forth. On the third day Mobile27, "Golden Bell", parked their van by the entrance closest to the staircase, left the driver there, and took the handcart in the lift. They sold beer and sandwiches, and coffee, soft drinks, fruit juice and more besides every day for a few weeks as the place's popularity grew and then waned. Then they went to park by the South corner of Warehousing where somebody had seen some foxes or badgers or something.

Next up from the Mobile was the Room Bar. There were ten of these. One in every Accommodation Area and a few more. They each had their regular clientele, their own bar manager, and therefore their own style. From "Iron Men" where traders went to swear at each other and imbibe vastly (and expensively) to "The Cleveland" where the few retired Mann employees who did not choose to leave the Capital would go for a quiet drink.

Finally there were the three Clubs. Each occupied at least three floors and provided food, several bars, and dancefloors with DJ's or live bands.

Club Venice was one of the Clubs. It was sited in what had once been a factory. The harsh industrial architecture contributed to Yoder's anxiety as he arrived ten minutes late for his meeting with Deena and found that she was not there.

Had she gone in? Met somebody else? Left angrily?

"Bakaff!" Yoder looked at the waving, smiling young woman calling his first name. After a

moment he realised it was Deena and his anxiety was dispelled. He had not recognised her at first, in fact he must have looked past her when he had arrived.

“Hi Deena.” Yoder replied after a moment, when his surprise had worn off enough for him to speak.

Deena smiled again, at her own success as much as to Bakaff Yoder. Like him, she had gone home and changed. To enhance the effect of her change she had contrived some reason to go to TradeAdmin earlier that afternoon. She had asked Yoder to point out somebody to her. Then Deena had been wearing her office clothes, she had been Deena Office. Now, with make-up, taller heels, shorter skirt and stylish jacket, she was somebody else. Bakaff had certainly, visibly, noticed the change - which is why Deena smiled.

This being their second meeting, and only their first date, Deena and Yoder did not kiss when they met. It would have been ridiculous for them to shake hands and so, in the absence of physical contact, a slight awkwardness arose after they had verbally greeted each other.

“Shall we go straight in?” Deena pushed past the awkward moment.

They moved towards the door, reaching for their employee ID's to pass the doorman.

Sun Tzu said that every fortress should have one weak spot. Mark Twain said “Keep all your eggs in one basket, and watch that basket.” Hence there was only one good, wide road through Mann HQ. Too many roads would have given intruders too much mobility. When a new area was annexed Mann Defence made sure that the serviceable width of any roads enclosed was reduced to the point where a car could not use them. Equally they made sure that the one proper road was well defended along its entire length. The point where the road left the complex was the most fortified area of HQ. Known as Main Gate, it was the local command centre of Mann Defence and, on the night Deena and Bakaff met outside Club Venice, was also Jo and Shad's rendezvous.

When she arrived at Main Gate the first thing Jo noticed was the gate itself. She had been driven through it before, but not often. The three metre square grey steel doors took her attention and made her feel a little nervous. Or that might have been the armed Mann Defence troops standing around, or the gun emplacements on top of the gatehouse. A soldier sitting in the back of a jeep looked at her then looked away and resumed a conversation. Jo looked around, feeling out of place. She and Shad had arranged to meet in the Departure Office here, but where was it? She suddenly didn't want to ask directions from those soldiers in the jeep. Then she noticed the sign. Next to the main gate were the personnel gates, heavy security doors with armed guards. Next to

them was the sign. “Main Gate Departure Office” in large black letters in the centre of the white board, “Mann Defence” in small red letters in the bottom right hand corner. Next to the sign was a door. Jo hurried towards it, hoping Shad would be early and be there already. The door was closed and had no window in it or next to it to show where it might lead. Jo stopped herself from turning around to look for confirmation or advice, grasped the handle, turned it and pushed. Then she pulled, the door opened and she went through.

On the other side of the door was a lit corridor. On the wall on Jo's right were a sign “Departure Office”, a man and a woman, not armed or carrying any equipment, and a door. The man and woman were talking about, and looking at, a bruise on the inside of the woman's right forearm. She had unbuttoned her shirtsleeve to show it.

“Sorry” Jo muttered, walking past them and through the door.

“Good evening.” A uniformed man behind a counter greeted her.

“Oh.” Jo started. “Hello.”

“Can I help you with anything?”

“I'm meeting someone. Here. Actually I'm a bit early.” Jo said, nervously.

The man smiled and nodded. “That's OK. Have a seat.” He made a gesture. This prompted Jo to look at the room she found herself in. Like a reception but more Spartan, military, less welcoming. There were no decorations, no windows, no pot plants, nothing to soften the atmosphere. The five chairs, lined up along the length of the wall opposite the counter were uncomfortable looking. Jo sat, noting that the man paid her no more attention as he took a sip from a cup concealed on his side of the counter. On top of the counter there were two display cards, with leaflet pockets. One was entitled “Do” at the top and then again “Don't” lower down. The bullet points in between were too small for Jo to read from where she sat. The other was entitled “GuardPager” and had an enlarged photograph of some pocket gadget and some text, again too small to be read. On the wall next to Jo was a map of Mann HQ complex and the surrounding area. Three perimeters were marked on the map. The smallest, labelled “Secured”, enclosed the HQ complex itself. The next was labelled “Patrolled”, and the largest labelled “Attended”. There were notices pinned on the map, explaining Mann Defence commitment in each of these areas. Jo read these notices for a few minutes until Shad turned up, on time.

“Good evening.” the guard behind the counter greeted Shad as he walked through the door. At the same time Jo said “Hi”, stood and walked over to him.

“Yes. We'd like a couple of GuardPagers please.”

“Of course. Employee ID please.” The guard reached for a cardswiper.

Shad took his card from his jacket and handed it to the guard. Jo had reached the counter, by then and picked her ID from her handbag. She placed it on the counter with a plastic click, a little put out by the fact that Shad had ignored her and answered the guard.

The guard passed Shad's card through the swipe, waited a few seconds for the screen display to show OK, then bent down to unlock and open a drawer on his side of the counter. While the guard's attention was directed away from them, Shad took Jo's arm lightly and kissed her on the cheek. “Hi” he whispered in her ear, leaving his face close so that they could kiss on the lips as she turned to look at him.

From the drawer the guard took out what Jo supposed was a GuardPager. He unscrewed part of the unit, plugged it into the side of the cardswiper machine and waited a few seconds for the machine to beep. Then he passed the other part, which was small enough to be held in the hand, to Shad. He followed the same swipe, unscrew, beep sequence with Jo's card and another GuardPager. Jo looked at the unit in her hand. The GuardPager was not too heavy, cased in sturdy black plastic, and had a single rotating switch on one side.

The guard picked up a telephone and dialed a number.

“Hello Response? Departure here. I've just released a couple of GuardPagers, I'd like to do a test. Thanks.” He looked up at Shad. “Would you like to try that one?” Shad clicked the switch. “Yes? What was the number. OK check. And I've got another one.” The guard looked at Jo, who clicked the switch easily. “Number? Check. Thanks. That's all.” The guard replaced his telephone. Jo noticed Shad clicking his GuardPager switch back and followed suit.

“You know about the response zones and so on?” The guard asked.

“Yes thanks, I've been out a few times.” Shad answered for himself and Jo.

“OK then, have a nice evening.”

“Thanks.” Shad held the door for Jo, who said “Bye.” as she walked out. The woman with the bruise and her companion were gone.

As they walked to the personnel gates Jo wondered whether to ask Shad about what the guard had said about response zones and so on. The armed guards there inspected their ID and pagers and allowed them to pass. There were troops outside too. Shad took Jo's arm and lead the way along the side of the road. They passed a few temporary buildings and bunkers. Jo also became curious about the E.D.'s bag Shad was carrying. He wasn't the type to give presents

without reason or occasion. A combination of nerves and curiosity forced Jo to speak.

“What's in the bag Shad?”

“Money.” He smiled to himself at the joke.

When a Mann employee wanted something, they went to a Mann Retail outlet and took their Mann ID card with them. The shop would swipe their card in order to charge them. And this was generally the easiest way for them to spend. In certain specific circumstances, however, this was not the easiest way.

Every table waiter and waitress who wanted a tip could not be expected to carry a cardswiper with them all the time. Neither could every opportunist selling you a flower for your girlfriend. In recognition of this, places like Club Venice had cash dispensers, and depositories. The cash dispensed was specific to the place; lira in Club Venice; and useless elsewhere. In addition to their dispensers, Club Venice also issued you some lira as part of their entrance fee.

Consequently, having paid “in”, Deena and Bakaff had both had lira just after entering Club Venice, and consequently had been able to split the price of their tray of food and beer. Deena had dropped a few lira at a counter with Bakaff before going off to scout for a table. By the time the snack food had been presented, Deena returned and beckoned to Bakaff to follow her. Which he did, with many a “Sorry” and “Excuse me” to get the tray through the crowd around the serving area.

Deena was particular about where she sat to eat and drink. It mustn't be too loud, nor too well lit, nor too busy. She was familiar with Club Venice and knew a few spots that fit her criteria. Bakaff was less particular about where he sat. As he was the one carrying the tray he favoured somewhere close to the serving counter from which they had bought their stuff.

“Look there's a couple of places. Deena. Over there.” Both Bakaff's hands being occupied with the tray, he tried to gesture with his head.

Deena turned around and frowned, pretending not to be able to comprehend Bakaff's head jerk. “There'll be a place this way.” she said, turning back and continuing.

When they finally sat down, Bakaff had been lead from the bright lights of the serving counter, past several dark corners, along a wall by one of the strobe-lit dancefloors and finally up a luminescently painted back stairway to an obscure cul-de-sac gallery. The open side offered a view over the dancefloor they had passed. The wall had a painted mural. Also there were comfortable tables and chairs, all but three unoccupied.

Bakaff put the tray on a table and sat down opposite Deena. He picked up one of the small plastic bottles of beer and took a generous swig. He sighed loudly as he replaced the bottle, and

paused to relax for a moment before investigating the food.

“That went down well.” Deena said.

“Mm. One of those days at the end of one of those weeks.” Bakaff had heard the line somewhere.

The food consisted of two piles of dippers surrounded by twelve small tubs of different dips. One of the piles of dippers was a pile of grilled bread pieces, the other was a pile of fried and salted potato shapes. The dip tubs were either red, indicating meaty content, or white indicating veggy content. There was enough for two people who didn't want to get too full.

The beer consisted of four pairs of small plastic bottles. The contents of each pair had been brewed in a different country: England, Italy, Africa, India. There was enough for two people who didn't wish to get too drunk.

Deena and Bakaff ate and drank and didn't say anything for a few minutes. Then they slowed their eating and talked about work for a while, then about music. By this time the dips had nearly been eradicated. Only one blob of one meaty dip remained.

Bakaff held the dip tub in one hand and a piece of bread in the other. Lightly squashing the pointy end of the bread, he ran it around the inside base of the tub, scouring it clean. After a quick check that no dip remained, Bakaff popped the whole piece of bread into his mouth. Deena had been discussing the relative quality of the first and second collections of some musician Bakaff had heard of only vaguely. Suddenly she reached over the table and held the hand with which Bakaff had just finished off the dips (and the bread).

“Did you have the last of that one?” she enquired.

Bakaff chewed quickly, wagging his head from side to side with his eyebrows raised to say “Well? What if I did?”

“I didn't have any.” She spoke quieter, and leaned across the table to be heard.

“I though you didn't like it.”

“A taste might have been nice.” Deena paused, still holding Bakaff's hand, her face now even closer to his. “Don't you want to give me a taste now?” She extended the longest finger of her grasping hand and touched Bakaff's chin. He got the message.

As Bakaff twisted his head one way, Deena leaned forward and twisted hers the other way. The wet inside of Deena's lips brushed Bakaff's closed mouth then withdrew slightly. He opened his mouth as hers approached again. Their lips met, but did not join, as their tongues touched and moved against each other. The kiss made a sound like eating.

The two men and one woman who had also been occupying the gallery walked past them, not looking. Deena, and then Bakaff, started giggling.

They parted and sat back in their chairs, Bakaff automatically reaching for a beer bottle.

Deena picked up another beer bottle, got up and went to stand and look at the mural. Bakaff followed her. He stood next to her, looking where she was looking.

The mural covered the wall; it was 5 metres across by 3 high. It depicted a number of grey figures playing or gesturing or dancing amongst several abstract black buildings set on a smooth white surface. The figures were androgynous, naked humans, but with no faces, hair, or other features.

The blankness of the front of one of a figure's head “stared” directly at Deena. The figure had its right arm raised level, its right hand open, indicating the rest of the picture. Deena turned her head to follow where the hand pointed. This caused her weight to shift towards Bakaff. Their arms touched. She let her hand find his. Bakaff's hand held a beer bottle. Deena took his hand and raised it in front of her face.

“Not much beer left.” she said. Taking the bottle with his other hand, Bakaff brought it to his lips and drained the contents. As he did so he lowered the hand which Deena still held.

“None at all now.” he answered, pleased with the response.

Deena put her own half empty bottle down on the nearest table, stretching to avoid having to release her and Bakaff's now entwined fingers. “Shall we go and shuffle our feet a bit then?” She swung her hips to and fro as she said it, her hand and therefore Bakaff's swung in counterbalance.

“Yeah.” Bakaff shrugged and was led away by the hand back to the luminescent stairs.

A few minutes walk from the Main Gate floodlights Shad took a small torch from his pocket. At this distance Mann Defence thought it prudent to keep the area free of rubble and potholes (hard cover). Therefore, with the aid of the torch, Jo and Shad had no difficulty walking along what had been a road, between what had been inhabited buildings.

The torch cast only a small patch of light, which meant that Jo had to walk close by Shad. Or it would have, had they not already been walking arm in arm. Jo was not about to let go of Shad. For somebody used to living in the close environment of Mann HQ, which is constantly bustling with noise and people, the dark and quiet of the Capital at Night was more than a little agoraphobic. Who knew where the nearest person was? Apart from Shad. And who knew who they were?

Shad felt Jo's grip on his arm and said nothing. The sensation of risk was all part of the Out out experience and he would do nothing to reduce it. Like talking.

Five minutes later, the darkness and quiet was disrupted by a passing Mann Defence patrol. Jo and Shad were civilly asked for ID and wished a nice evening by one of the soldiers. Jo was torn between a feeling of comfort that the other members of the patrol maintained attitudes of ready vigilance, and a feeling of fear of whatever it was that they were being vigilant at. Shad led her further from Mann HQ and into the night.

It was only a couple of minutes later that Shad said "We're nearly there now." and pointed out a bright white light on the side of a building.

The building looked as if it had once been tall - twenty storeys maybe. Now only three and a half stood; the top storey having no ceiling over half its floor. Some of the nearby buildings were taller, but none looked as structurally sound. As she approached, Jo noticed a second light on another wall of the building. The lights were obviously late additions to the building. Jo guessed that there was probably a light mounted on each wall to attract attention. The lights certainly weren't there to illuminate the building's exterior: its walls and surrounding piles of rubble were wreathed in darkness. The entrance to the building was a metal staircase up to the first floor. A little way from the foot of the stairs was a crude metal brazier full of burning rubbish.

Shad switched off his torch and pocketed it as they got to the brazier. A man emerged from the shadows. He wore sturdy boots, heavy denim jeans and a long bulky hooded coat which could have concealed anything. He called a neutral greeting to Jo and Shad.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Can we get in?" Shad stopped walking, so did Jo.

"What've you got?"

Shad held out the E.D.'s bag, turning the side towards the brazier to illuminate the logo printed there.

"Let's see it." the man said, coming closer.

In plain view, Shad opened the bag and took out the jacket in its sealed transparent bag. Shad held it in front of him in both hands. The man came right up to him and leaned over the bag, scrutinising, but without taking his hands from his pockets. After ten seconds' inspection he straightened and looked at Jo and then at Shad.

"OK." The man jerked his head and turned to walk to the metal staircase.

Jo waited as Shad hurriedly put the jacket back in the bag, then followed him as he followed the man now clanging up the stairs. At the top of the stairs a metal door with a glass window was barely discernible against the wall. The door and the window had been painted the same deep dark green. The man made a few glove-muffled poundings on the door and called his name.

"Chas."

After a short delay, the door opened a crack, and then fully. The corridor behind the door was not lit, but a faint glow was cast against its walls from somewhere within the building. Barely a silhouette as he pressed himself against the wall by the hinges of the outswung door was a man, one arm outstretched holding the door open. Chas, followed by Shad then Jo walked past him into the corridor. He released the door behind them and it swung closed with a click.

A few steps inside, the corridor (once a fire escape) made a T junction with a second corridor. Chas stood to the right to let Shad and Jo pass to the left. The doorman gestured them on saying "Go through". Behind her, Jo heard a brief muttered exchange of words, then the sound of the door opening and closing. Then she was in what appeared to be the main room of whatever establishment they were in.

The room still resembled an office, which indeed it once had been. The proprietors had not made any time-consuming alterations to the room. A number of small rugs had been scattered on the floor. It was lit by candles, and from a hearth in which some brick shaped pieces of fuel were burning. Wiped tables and desks were placed around the room, and surrounded by a selection of chairs. Only three tables were occupied. At one a middle-aged man sat flanked by two burly younger men, a jug of red wine sat on the table in front of them, but they touched it infrequently. At another sat several clean, brightly dressed young women who picked at a plate of salty snacks placed in their midst and sipped water from small plastic tumblers. At the third occupied table sat two tired looking big men eating slowly but surely from well-filled plates of meat and vegetables, and drinking from large beer bottles. These two were in fact the only customers in the room, apart from Jo and Shad.

Shad seemed to know what to do so Jo just tagged after him.

He went to the table at which the three men sat. They stopped their conversation.

"Evening" said the middle-aged man.

"Evening" returned Shad, as he took the wrapped jacket out of the E.D.'s bag and placed it on the table. One of the young women walked over to the table and stood ready.

The man nodded as he picked up the jacket. He made a careful inspection of the seal and the Mann logo with his eyes and fingers. "What you after?"

"Fresh food and wine for us and some spare."

The man said "Yes" and nodded to the young woman, evidently a waitress of some sort.

The waitress smiled at them and led them to a table. "There's new chairs over here."

Jo sat and felt a little self-conscious. Shad sat and was at his ease. After enjoying Jo's self-consciousness for a minute he decided to move to phase two. To help her to relax a little, Shad chatted to Jo about his previous trips out. It transpired that Shad had been out to this place and to one or two others. Shad had an easy manner with his areas of expertise which Jo found attractive. By the time the food arrived, on enamel plates with metal cutlery, Jo was not at all tense - the chatting, and half a glass of wine, had seen to that.

When Jo asked what the meat was, Shad said "city-meat" before the waitress could answer her. Then he explained that this meant the flesh of an animal or animals that had been hunted locally.

Jo found surprising the difference in taste and texture of fresh food, as compared to what she usually ate. She and Shad talked about this, and then about differences in other aspects of that evening compared to her usual evenings out. By the time she had finished her food, and another couple of glasses of the wine, Jo was holding forth with passion, and perhaps some bitterness about the controlled quality of life within the Mann HQ complex. By this time more people had arrived in the place.

As Shad and Jo were debating starting their second bottle of wine, three men came up to their table.

"Can we sit here please?" one of them asked.

A quick look around told Shad that there were no unoccupied tables in the room. He could think of no reason the men should not share their table, except for a vague uneasiness. It was not wise to trust too quickly in the Capital.

"Sure. Here, I'll move my coat."

The men sat down and exchanged smiles and "good evening"s. Jo moved her chair a little closer to Shad.

The men talked amongst themselves, but loud enough to be heard easily by Jo and Shad. Their conversation started with a free exchange of opinions on the beer they were drinking. This progressed onto opinions about what they had drunk the previous week, then to what they had drunk somewhere else, when that drink had taken place and who had been there - it was argued whether or not all three of them had been there. This blossomed into a discussion of their mutual acquaintances and their relationship to one another, commercial, familial or just social.

Meanwhile Shad was introducing Jo to the pastime of people-spotting. This involved looking at a person in the room and guessing their background. Some were obviously company employees just by their clothes - Jo and Shad fell into this category. Others were obviously not - Shad pointed out a couple dressed in clothes so old as to be shapeless.

Some could have been either - the three men sharing their table fell into this category.

Their clothes were clean and they had shaved and washed properly before coming out: most non-employee Capital dwellers did not have access to hot and cold running water and tended to look more unkempt. On the other hand, from their conversation, they spent a fair amount of their leisure time out in different places: most employees restricted themselves to their company's provided entertainment, and although people like Shad (and Jo, since this evening) did venture out, they certainly did not do it every week. Their conversation on commercial topics was ambiguous: they talked of people being "with" other people, or in somebody's "group"; it could have meant department, then again it could have meant raiding party.

People-spotting requires discussion between the spotters. Such discussion should be discreet, for obvious reasons. When Jo and Shad began their spotting that night, they had observed the rule strictly. But as they progressed through their second bottle of wine they, and the rule, became somewhat relaxed. Consequently the men sharing their table overheard themselves being discussed.

"No. We're drivers. We've got a couple of terrain vans. We move stuff." One of the men summarised.

"I'm not sure what category that puts you in." Jo said, smiling and feeling witty. "Who do you work for?"

"For ourselves." The same man replied.

"Where do you live then?"

"In the vans mostly. We travel around"

"Always in this area though." Another of the men joined the conversation. "What're you laughing at?" This was directed at Jo who had started to snigger.

"Nothing. It's just that you don't look as though you just stepped out of a van."

"Oh yeah. Usually we look a bit rougher." The first man caught the line quicker than his companion.

"A lot." His companion tried to get back in.

"But tonight's special, you know. We're going out. Not here, I mean after this."

A conversation started between Jo and the two men, who turned out to be named Jack and Polit. Then Shad joined in. Jack and Polit's companion followed the conversation but remained silent except for the occasional laugh or monosyllable. In the man's absence at the lavatory Polit explained that this was usual for their mate Coll, but that he would be all right later on. Time passed and the wine was finished.

"You having another?" Polit asked Jo and Shad. "Because our beer's about finished and we'll be

moving on just now. So if you want to come with us.....”

“Oh I don’t know.” Jo looked at Shad for an answer.

“Come on. It’ll be good. They have music and stuff. It’s not far, we’ll drive you.” Jack encouraged, looking at them both.

“Yeah, why not?”

“Are you sure Shad?” Jo spoke quietly, trying to look him in the eyes to let him know that the question carried something hidden.

“It’ll be OK.” Shad met her gaze. It sounded to him like the place was not far. If they did seem to be going any distance, he could simply activate his GuardPager. That was what it was for after all. And anyway, these guys seemed sound. He had been out plenty of times and counted himself a pretty good judge of who was who by now. “I’ll just go to the loo and we’ll be off.”

“Yeah, good idea.” Jack followed Shad. As he left the room, Jack paused. He and Coll exchanged a meaningful glance which nobody else noticed.

There were smiles all round as Jo, Coll and Polit stood and put their coats on. Coll and Polit started to leave the room straight away but Jo hesitated. She wanted to wait for Shad.

“Come on. Jack’ll bring him in the other van.” Polit twitched his head towards the door and looked at Jo. Coll was already half-way across the room and did not look back. Jo took a quick look at the door Shad had gone through, hoping he would come back now and break her indecision. He did not and Jo had to make up her own mind. Shad had already said it was OK; she could feel the switch on the GuardPager in her jacket pocket; Jack and Polit seemed like friendly enough people; Jo was fairly drunk. She started walking, Polit fell into step behind her.

At that moment, Shad Harlib was on the open top floor of the building. The men’s lavatories were located there. They were the portable chemical kind, surmounted by a canvas tent for privacy. Jack had politely let him go first. Shad finished, shook and squeezed, and then zipped himself up.

As he came out of the cubicle he was surprised to receive a heavy punch in the stomach. Before he could recover, Jack grabbed his hair from behind to straighten him up for a hard fist across his nose and cheek. Shad just had time to double up and stagger, and to taste blood in his mouth, before Jack kicked the side of his head hard enough to knock him unconscious.

There was a little lighting on the roof, so Jack dragged Shad’s inert form off to one side quickly before kicking it a couple more times to make sure. Jack noticed that he was on the top of a steep slope of rubble piled against the side of the building. Just to make sure nobody would find Shad, Jack rolled him down the slope. Before

leaving, Jack dusted himself down and urinated in the lavatory.

Because of the music, Deena had to shout her questions about Bakaff’s whereabouts, and answers had to be shouted back to her. Following the directions thus given, Deena picked up her handbag and went from the flashing lights of the dancefloor, through a doorway, into a palely lit room.

The room was populated by people sitting on upholstered settees. Deena scanned them, looking for Bakaff, but found nothing except a few smiles. In an alcove was a kiosk where water was sold in bottles. Deena described Bakaff and what he had been wearing to the man serving there but he was unhelpful. Bakaff was no longer in the room. Or he had never been there: observations made and also passed on whilst dancing on a dancefloor are not the most reliable. Deena checked the room’s exits to be sure. She saw Bakaff in a corridor leading from the room.

The corridor had no lighting of its own; it was illuminated by faint light from the night sky coming in through a series of long windows on one side. Bakaff was standing by the second window, looking out. There was a soft flash of moonlight caught on the surface of liquid as he lowered a transparent bottle from his lips.

“What are you doing over here?” Deena called, her tone betraying annoyance.

Bakaff turned at the sound of Deena’s voice. As he watched her approach Bakaff listened to the sharp clicking of her heels as it mixed with the beat of the nearby music. The grey light shaded the clothing-cloaked curves of her chest and thighs. Beyond the hem of her skirt, and above the collar of her jacket, the dimness of the corridor made her skin appear perfect and smooth. The dream of the overall image was spoiled, however, by the cross straightness of Deena’s mouth.

“Having a drink of water.” Bakaff replied when Deena reached him. “Would you like some?” Bakaff did not proffer the bottle, he turned back to the window.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going off?” Deena ignored Bakaff’s offer.

“I was just checking if you were still interested in me and my whereabouts.” Bakaff spoke his answer to Deena’s reflection in the window.

Deena restrained the angry rhetorical question which rose to her lips. She took the bottle of water from Bakaff’s hand and took a swig to give herself time to think. She had a plan for this Friday evening: moderate drinking, a little eating, lots of dancing, and some sex back at her place to finish. Deena felt that it had been proceeding well until now. Actually her plan had gone awry following a chance encounter with friends on the dancefloor.

Deena loved to dance. Therefore when she danced with somebody, it had no significance. Bakaff, on the other hand, did not love to dance. To him dancing had social, and perhaps intimate, significance. When Deena and Bakaff had encountered some of Deena's friends dancing, she had naturally started dancing with them, and had taken Bakaff with her. Sometimes she danced close to Bakaff, but sometimes further away, as the individuals within the group moved around.

Bakaff had seen that Deena enjoyed dancing and had found himself wondering. Had Deena come out primarily to dance? Would Deena now continue her evening with her friends who, unlike Bakaff, enjoyed dancing as much as her? In his insecurity Bakaff had left, rather than risk failure. He had bought a bottle of water, which he had needed anyway, and gone to stand in the semidarkness and feel sorry for himself.

Deena was not aware of all the details of how her evening had gone off course. Even so, after two swigs of water, and a pause staring at Bakaff's left ear, she had reached a mostly correct conclusion. "Bakaff got pissed off at me spending time dancing with my friends." The corrective action was obvious to her.

"Bakaff of course I'm interested in you and your whereabouts." Deena stood close to Bakaff and put one hand on his shoulder. He turned from the window and looked at her. Dropping the water bottle, Deena put her other hand on Bakaff's other shoulder. Deena stretched upwards as Bakaff bent forwards. Her arms encircled his neck, whilst his hands came to rest on her hips. Water from the bottle glugged quietly as it formed an unnoticed puddle around their shoes. They kissed.

Not just a kiss, though. More like an over-kiss, with many sub-kisses. All parts of their bodies participated in the kiss. One of Deena's hands played in Bakaff's hair, whilst the other clung to his shoulders. One of his hands slipped under her jacket and roved across her shirt-covered back, whilst the other felt the roundness of Deena's buttocks through her skirt. Both their mouths snatched only the occasional breath between the licking, tasting and twining of their tongues and lips.

As their passion rose, Deena shifted sideways against Bakaff, pressing the joining of her legs to his thigh. She could feel his erection hardening against her hip. Suddenly, Bakaff took his hand from her behind and replaced it on the back of her thighs. From there it was quickly slid up under her skirt right to the top of her tights. Bakaff hooked a thumb over the elastic and pulled down. His fingers stroked the few inches of skin thus exposed briefly. Next, Bakaff tucked his hand inside Deena's knickers and spread his fingers against her bare skin.

The touch excited and aroused Deena further, but she realised that this was too far to go in a public

place like Club Venice. She broke off kissing Bakaff and moved her mouth close to his ear.

"I think we'd better go back to my place about now." Deena loosened her hold on Bakaff.

"OK." Bakaff extricated his hand from Deena's underwear, pausing to smooth it down before releasing her completely.

"Thank you." said Deena, giving him a quick peck on the lips. Removing her hands from Bakaff and placing them on her own hips, Deena finished settling her underwear with a quick wriggle.

Deena said "There's an exit this way." pointing down the corridor, away from the dancefloor, and they started walking. At first they just held hands, but they soon moved closer, to the point where each had an arm around the other's waist, with fingers tucked in the other's waistband.

On their way out they passed three other couples who had also chosen the corridor as the location for their Friday night snog and get off. It was a fifteen minute walk across Mann HQ from Club Venice to Salisbury Towers (Single Quarters Accommodation Area 3) where Deena lived. No words passed between Deena and Bakaff during the journey, although they did laugh from time to time as they enjoyed the difficulties presented by walking hip to hip. They did not separate until they reached the outside door of the block, where Deena had to get her ID card out of her handbag. They joined again only briefly as they kissed in the lift on the way to her apartment.

After getting changed earlier that evening Deena had set the dial next to the switch for the lights in her main room. Thus, after she had opened the door and switched on the light, she and Bakaff walked into an environment suffused with the soft light Deena felt most suitable for romantic encounters.

As she closed the door, Deena directed Bakaff to the sofa (which could also be configured as a bed). She joined him there after depositing her jacket and handbag on a table by the entrance.

"Would you like some music on?" Deena said quietly, turning her face towards Bakaff.

"OK."

Deena leaned forward and picked up a remote control unit from a small table. Pointing it at a black box in one corner of the room she pressed a button. LED's lit on the box and the room filled with soft instrumental music. Deena replaced the remote control on the table. As she leaned back she found that Bakaff had extended his left arm so she shifted to lean and sit against him. As Deena rested her head on Bakaff's chest, his arm dropped to lie across her shoulders. After a few moments of stillness to allow the music to permeate the mood, Deena lifted her head. Feeling the change in pressure on his chest, Bakaff turned his head slightly. He found himself looking into Deena's

raised face. Her eyes were closed and her lips slightly parted. He leaned forward and they kissed. The kiss was not like the previous one. In the moonlit corridor, they had been anxious to convince each other of their desire. Consequently, their passion had risen in a hurry. Here there was nothing to make happen: both Deena and Bakaff knew that they were going to have sex now. They took their time and kissed comfortably and luxuriously. Shallow licking of tongues and lips gradually became probing towards the teeth, which gradually became deep exploration, which in turn became shallow licking to allow for breath to be taken, and for the cycle to begin again.

The kissing continued as Deena reached her left arm across Bakaff. Taking purchase on the far side of his chest, she swung her legs up and rested them across his lap. She found that she needed both arms around Bakaff's neck to keep herself upright and close enough to kiss. Whilst his left still supported Deena's shoulders, Bakaff's other arm descended to let his right hand find her legs. One knee held his interest for a while, then he spread his hands across both.

Deena broke off the kissing to say "Take my shoes off."

The slip-on court shoes were easily removed and dropped to the floor. Deena bent her legs and pulled herself up to a position sitting crossways on Bakaff's lap. They started kissing again. With a slow nylon sigh Bakaff began to slide his right hand up the outside of Deena's left leg. Deena pressed her thighs together and dampened herself with tight gluteal rotations as she enjoyed Bakaff's gradual traversal.

The caress started from a manacle grip on the ankle. From there the hand passed over the swell of the calf. It lingered on the crown of the bent knee, before descending. Halfway down the hand came to rest. The fingers were spread and moving, either stroking or squeezing the thigh.

After a while in this position, Deena moved things to the next stage. Picking a convenient moment, she slipped from Bakaff's lap to a standing position. Looking up at the ceiling, she felt behind her for the fastening on her skirt. Deena located the button and zip, but had to smooth down the ridden up folds of her skirt before she could undo them. The garment slide to the floor, Deena stepped out of it, then flicked it to one side with her foot. Lifting her shirt, Deena put her fingers inside her tights and knickers and slid them down to her knees. She turned and sat her bare fesses on Bakaff's lap.

Immediately, Bakaff's hands found the skin around the top of her thighs and his warm breath found her right ear.

"Stop it, you're distracting me. Nice distraction."

Bakaff's breath and hands moved away and Deena was able to complete the removal of her pantihose.

This done, she crooked one leg and swivelled around to face Bakaff. As Deena settled her now unclad legs into a comfortable straddle, he replaced his hands on her, this time holding the bare cheeks of her arse one in each hand, and leaned forward to kiss her again. Deena kissed only briefly, before moving her mouth sideways to his neck.

Bakaff twitched away as her tongue tickled him, then again as Deena pressed forward more forcefully. His head bent to one side to make his neck inaccessible. "Ticklish?" she asked.

"Yes." he replied, giving an extra squeeze to her buttocks.

"Oh dear." Without warning, she grabbed his head and shoulder firmly and drove her face between them. There Deena nibbled, kissed and licked Bakaff into a frenzy. She did not stop until his breath was coming in deep vocalised gasps through his open mouth and his hands were clawing her back and clutching her buttocks. After a few seconds his breathing returned to normal and his hands relaxed.

Deena took one of Bakaff's hands in hers. She slid it from her back, across her groin, and through her pubic hair, until his fingers rested on her vulva.

"Press." Deena directed, then, as Bakaff complied only tentatively, "Press lover, go on." Bakaff pressed more firmly and Deena was able to rub herself against him. "That's it.....That's it.....Fuck." she gasped brokenly before returning her attentions to his neck.

Bakaff was still too ticklish. This time she grabbed his head and went for his ear. First she filled it with hot air from her lungs, then she let her tongue approach slowly, finally driving the point right in. After doing his ear, Deena stopped frigging herself on Bakaff's hand and sat up straight.

"Take your clothes off lover. I'll pull the bed out." She stood up by easing herself backwards.

Bakaff stood up and moved away from the sofa.

The small table on which the remote control lay had to be moved from in front of the sofa to make space for the bed to be opened. After placing the table by the side of the sofa, Deena turned it so that a small drawer in one side could be reached by somebody lying where the bed would be. Deena quickly moved cushions, tugged on the strap to produce the bed, and dropped a duvet on top. She took her shirt and bra off and dropped them on the floor, then got on the bed and used various limbs to push the duvet flat. The stage set, she lay, naked, on her side, on top of the duvet, and waited for Bakaff to finish undressing.

Bakaff climbed onto the bed from Deena's left. After a light push from her, he lay on his back. As he had approached, Deena had noticed that Bakaff had lost his erection whilst undressing. Now, leaning over him slightly and smiling, she took his

tumescent penis in her right hand and gave a couple of pulls.

There was a good response. Deena withdrew her hand and held it under her chin. She stopped smiling to work her lips so that saliva gathered. She dipped her head and parted her lips to let a blob of spittle fall into the palm of her hand. Estimating two blobs were necessary, Deena repeated the process.

Moving carefully, Deena ladled the liquid onto the head of Bakaff's circumcised penis. Before it could drip off, she quickly worked her hand up and down the shaft, spreading a glistening wet layer over the whole member. Bakaff's cock hardened quickly and after a sharp intake of breath he murmured "That's good". After a few tugs, Deena let go, not wishing to masturbate him all the way.

"One second lover." she said, turning to reach for the drawer in the table. Inside, Deena kept sealed condoms, loose for easy picking. Moving to a kneeling posture, she opened and discarded the seal on the one she had taken out and proceeded to apply it to the top of Bakaff's knob.

Bakaff smiled and lifted his head so he could watch. With an expert combination of stroking of his shaft, cuddling of his balls, and massage around the root, Deena kept him hard as she unrolled the prophylactic over his penis.

"Shift over to the middle." Deena said, shuffling back a little to allow Bakaff to slide his body across the bed. As soon as he had, she climbed on top of him.

Leaning forwards, supporting her weight on her elbows, Deena gave Bakaff a tonguey kiss. He could feel her breasts against his chest, her stomach against his stomach and her legs spread across his middle. As they kissed, Deena shifted her weight to her left arm and reached her right arm behind her.

Bakaff's hard-on was not difficult to find, nor was Deena's own moist opening. She rubbed the rubber-clad tip of his glans against her clitoris a few times before pushing it inside her. Releasing Bakaff's member, Deena eased back to take him a little further into her wetness. They finally had to quit kissing as she unbent her arm and straightened her torso to slide her vagina the rest of the way over his penis. Deena paused a few seconds to appreciate the simple pleasure of holding a piece of mansmeat inside her before beginning the fuck proper.

That first coupling of Deena and Bakaff lasted about one hour. An observer might have detected no changes in position, but Deena knew enough ways to vary the sensation that the time just flew by. Most of the time she made sex friction by rocking her body forwards and back to slide Bakaff's fat stiffness in and out of the cloying slickness of her cunt. Sometimes she would add a small left or right swing, either when the shaft was

completely encased, or when just about to commence in the passage of her pleasure. Sometimes Deena would reduce her movement and urge Bakaff to hook his hands around her shoulders to pull her down over his thrusting cock. At the peaks of her excitement, however, Deena would change to a more energetic up-and-down bouncing action to plunge Bakaff's hot piece into the frothing chamber of her love engine.

Deena felt the onset of the first bursting of Bakaff's pleasure as his movement changed from smooth thrusting to a strained jerking inside her. The change of his breathing and the sudden urgency of his body compelled her to her own high frenzy. Deena's mouth demanded immediate deep merging with Bakaff's, forcing her body down to allow the union. His arms wrapped their electric torsos together. To preserve Bakaff's shoulders, Deena drove her hands into the duvet they lay on where she could grasp and squeeze as hard as she needed to express her ecstasy. Bakaff's moment froze his arched frame for three muffled but still palpable spurts. With just a few more strokes Deena brought herself to rain a reply over his still twitching organ.

They lay panting, enjoying their consumption. Bakaff slid his hands around on Deena's sweaty back. They kissed again and Deena said "Hold the end then." Bakaff reached around her spread arse and gripped the collar of the condom. His penis had shrivelled quickly and was easy to withdraw.

Deena rolled of Bakaff and told him where to dispose of his semen. He would have found the lavatory quickly anyway - there being only two doors off her main room. When he returned, heralded by a quiet flushing, Bakaff found that Deena had already slipped under the duvet. He slid into bed behind her and reached one arm across her supine form. They fell asleep hand in hand.

"There's Jack now." It was not more than five minutes after Coll had driven off in the large terrain van. His passengers turned to look behind them. Jo, who sat next to Coll, had a better view than Polit, who sat behind on what was obviously an extra seat bolted in to the cargo area. She could tell the location of the second terrain van only by virtue of its headlamps which cast a wide pool of white in front of the vehicle. Jo could not see any of the van itself, much less its occupants which was what interested her most.

The vans, true to their name, seemed able to traverse any terrain, no matter how uneven or unstable. They were not fast, however, and Jo thought it was not yet necessary to worry about setting off her GuardPager. She looked at her watch, just visible in the van's gloomy interior, and decided that she would allow another five minutes. Before that time was up though Coll brought the van to a stop.

“Are we here?” Jo directed her question to the Polit as he seemed the more talkative.

It was Coll who replied. By roughly grabbing her slim wrists one in each hand. It took a moment for Jo to realise what was happening, then she started shouting at him to let go.

“Grab her mouth!” Coll shouted to Polit, who did so, pulling Jo's head back against her chair. With Jo silenced, he spoke his remaining orders quieter.

“Use one hand on her mouth! Take her hands!” Jo saw and felt her uselessly struggling arms passed one at a time to Polit's hand waiting just above her head. No matter how much she twisted, Jo found Polit was strong enough to restrain both her hands in just one of his. Polit's other hand remained where it was, holding her mouth shut and her head back.

“Right. Now where is it?” Coll started to pat Jo down. Misunderstanding his intention, Jo twisted her body from side to side to hinder his groping.

“Fuck's sake.” Coll put his face close to Jo's. “Stop struggling!” Jo felt a tiny drop of saliva fall on the tip of her nose.

For a moment the force of Coll's voice made Jo do just that. Then she considered. In her position, there seemed to be no advantage in struggling. Maybe later. And in that case, there was no point in exhausting herself now. Jo sat still and relaxed her arms, letting them hang from Polit's grip, which did not relax.

Coll resumed his patting.

“It's in her right jacket pocket.”

“How d'you know?”

“I saw her feeling it in the place, didn't I.”

“Clever boy.” Coll put the fingers of his right hand, but not the thumb, in the outside pocket on the right hand side of Jo's jacket. Once his fingers touched the seam at the bottom of the pocket he closed his hand and ripped. The pocket and its contents came away in his large hand.

“Bingo” he murmured, scrutinising what he held in his hand. Having found what he wanted, Coll emptied his hand behind the back of his chair. From the corner of one eye Jo saw a clean tissue, a lipstick, a piece of paper, the material that had once been her jacket pocket, and, of course, her GuardPager, fall to the floor of the van. She'd have to get that back later. Somehow.

“Keep hold of her till Jack gets here.” Coll ordered, sitting back in his chair. “You can go with him. I'll keep this one and see you later.”

“Going to be long?”

Coll looked Jo up and down. “Might be a little while. What're you like then?” The question was directed at Jo, who could not answer. Through the revulsion, she found herself thinking - one of the men would be leaving. Which would mean only having to fight one.

A change in the ambient illumination announced the second van's appearance. Then its lights were switched off, then flicked on and off. For a moment Jo worried about Shad.

“I'd best park before you let go.” Coll got out of the van and left the door open. Jo watched him in the beam of the van's headlamps. He walked over to where some long planks of wood were leaned against a nearby wall. After a quick look around to check nobody was watching, he started to lay the planks on the ground.

Jo saw her chance. She took a deep breath and pulled her arms free.

“No no no no no.” Polit admonished, easily gathering her arms and holding her against the door. “Don't be naughty now.”

Now that Polit had to use both hands to hold her still, Jo's mouth was free. Free for screaming. “Help! Rape! Mann employee in danger!”

Polit laughed at that and, for one moment, Jo also found it amusing. Then she bit his hand.

Polit breathed in sharply but did not release Jo's wrist. Through her teeth, Jo felt a new tensing in his hand. Aware that she had not yet broken skin, Jo clamped her jaw down harder. Polit's breath made more noises, then she heard him murmuring “Yes. Go on. I'm harder.” Jo redoubled her efforts, feeling some pain in her wrists now as Polit's grip tightened. “No” Polit strained, as Jo's teeth finally started to sink in.

Coll got back in the van and immediately assessed the situation. Resting the palm of his left hand on Jo's forehead, he extended the fingers and hooked index and middle inside her nostrils. He pulled back slowly. The pain was too much and Jo had to release her jaws. Abruptly she felt her mouth clamped shut. Jo realised that she had closed her eyes in the struggle. On opening them, she found Coll looking at Polit's hand where she had bitten it.

“You're getting there, mate.” Apart from holding her head down and her mouth shut Coll was ignoring Jo and talking to Polit.

“I can feel it.” There was a new clenched intensity in Polit's voice. “Next time. Next fucking time. It's close.” Suddenly Jo felt very scared of Polit.

A few breaths later, Polit's grip relaxed to what it had been before Jo had bitten him. Coll released her head and put the van into gear. If there had been anybody to hear her screaming before, they would have come by now Jo reasoned. Now that the van door was closed she did not bother screaming again.

Where the planks had been leaning against the wall, there was now a wide square opening. Wide enough for the van to enter. The headlamps illuminated a room large enough to be a bay for several of the vans. Coll drove the van in and all the way to the far wall, then killed the engine. The headlamps went out.

In the darkness, Jo felt a strong hand take hold of her hair and tug her in the direction of the driver's seat. Her hands had been released, but now she needed them to scramble across the seat and out of the van at the pace dictated by the pulling at the roots of her hair. Once out of the van, her hair was held low and Jo bent over to minimise the pain. Without pause she was pulled, and found herself having to walk at a brisk echoing pace across the dark uneven floor of the indoor garage. Jo dared not stumble. She heard Coll, very near and Polit, further away, saying their goodbyes:

"See you later. Put the planks back, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Jo reached for where she knew the hand holding her hair had to be. She felt an arm and grasped it with both of her hands, to reduce the tension in her hair. It helped a little, but Coll kept on leading her at the same pace. It was dark, but Coll obviously knew where he was going and navigated easily. Jo's leg hit a doorway she couldn't see. Then the echoing stopped as they entered another room. The fact that Coll was letting her hold his arm made her think that maybe he was finally letting his guard down.

"If you let my hair go -"

Coll paused to shut Jo up with a quick slap in the face from his free hand. He resumed his dragging, free hand outstretched now to feel for the metal edge of the spiral staircase. Coll clanged up the stairs, ignoring Jo's pleas for him to slow down. He enjoyed the sound of her yelping in pain as she ascended clumsily.

At the top of the stairs Coll extended his hand again, this time feeling for the curtain across the doorway to the visitors' room. He found it, pushed it aside and stepped inside the room. Using both hands, he swung Jo around, released her hair and shoved her towards the far wall. He heard her trip on something and fall. Reaching to the floor just to the left of the inside of the doorway, Coll found a battery lantern. He picked it up, felt for the switch and twisted the fader until soft light filled the room.

The room was around 3 metres by 6. The walls and low ceiling were dirty, but otherwise bare, concrete. There were no windows. The floor was the same concrete as the walls, but had a few stained rugs piled on it. It was on one of these that Jo had tripped, and now sat.

Her office clothes were scuffed and torn in places and dusty all over. Her mouth was slightly swollen and had bled a little. After all that pulling, her hair was in urgent need of treatment with a more than average conditioner .

Coll stooped to put the lantern on the floor. With a powerful shrugging motion he took off his light polymer jacket. Turning and taking his eyes off Jo for a moment he put his hand past the curtain to drop the jacket outside the room.

He stood for a moment, staring impassively at Jo. Unwilling to meet his gaze, Jo found herself looking at his clothes. Removing the jacket had revealed a small designer label (the word "KEY", with the letters worked into the shape of a key, in dark blue) on the left upper arm of his high neck white pullover. Another small logo (a green disc with the words "stack lager" in white letters) adorned the simple buckle on the belt which held up his smart, dark blue, three-pleat trousers. The turn-ups of the trousers broke across the instep of a pair of black leather zipped ankle boots.

Three steps forward, and then a fourth as she vainly scuttled back against the wall behind her, brought Coll within reach of Jo. He undid his belt and slipped his hand inside his trousers and shorts to adjust his swelling penis.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Jo asked, still hoping to forestall the final part of the assault. Now she made eye contact, and regretted it. The expression on Coll's face had changed. What had previously been an impassive mask was now tightening with hostility.

Silent and still staring, Coll took his hand out of his trousers but did not refasten his belt. He bent down and took hold of her knees, one in each hand, and made to drag Jo away from the wall against which she was huddled.

"No. Don't do this to me." she pleaded, struggling.

Coll released Jo's legs and straightened up so that he could kick her. A cry of pain escaped her lips as his foot landed high on her left thigh, just below the hip. Now his face was a taut frown and his teeth were just visible past his parted, whitened lips.

Coll bent down and took her knees again. This time Jo did not struggle. Once he had pulled her back nearer the middle of the room, he knelt down at her feet. Leaning forward and using his elbows to force her legs apart, he grabbed at the crotch of Jo's suit trousers with both hands.

"At least let me undo it!"

Coll's only reply was to rip the trousers wide open. The object of Coll's desire was now almost in sight. Only one rather flimsy obstacle remained. Intent on its speedy destruction, he took a fistful of Jo's light blue knickers, including the elastic at the top, and pulled. The garment stretched, but did not quite break.

"Ow!" Jo yelped as the taut elastic cut into her sides and back. "It won't break like that. At least let me take it off."

Coll said nothing. The knickers were now so out of shape that he could easily have left them as they were and still been able to commit the rape he intended. But he enjoyed the feeling of the stretched elastic on his hand. So much so that he took hold of another section in his other hand, wound his fingers into it and pulled until it

snapped. The wire-stretched material did not bite into his fingers. It did not even hurt him.

Nothing had hurt since he had pulled Jo up the spiral staircase. At that point he had started to harden, just like Polit's hand had hardened when Jo had bit it. Only more so and all over. By the time he came to ripping his way into Jo's pants his whole body was *hard*, even his *face*.

With the feeling of air on her pubic region Jo realised the last moment had arrived.

"Why don't you say something?" She made a final appeal.

Why not? thought Coll. Pressing one finger between her unspread labia he said something: "Feels like it's going to be a bit of a dry ride. Not very moist are you? Never mind, you'll bleed soon."

"Not before you do." Jo muttered. Without warning both her hands struck at his face. Coll got his eyes and mouth closed in time and Jo's fingernails did nothing but scrape harmlessly over his hard skin. Unable to believe what she saw, Jo clawed again, but still with no effect.

"How can" Jo's voice trailed off, stunned. "Oh fuck" she swore slowly.

"Just what I was thinking." Coll said, throwing his weight forward. He landed squarely on Jo's upper body, knocking the breath out of her. Immediately, he secured both her hands in one of his, leaving his other hand free to undo his trousers. Jo was just about getting her breath back as Coll clumsily pushed his trousers and shorts down.

In his totally hardened state, Coll was irresistible. Jo could only flinch and gasp as he held her down and worked his stiff penis in and out of her. She pleaded for him to stop several times, but he was determined to get all his cock in her before he came. Jo felt no weakening in Coll, even after he ejaculated.

"Ahh" Coll made a satisfied noise as he stood up. "Fun fuck over and the night is yet young."

Jo let her legs relax to a more comfortable and less spread position. Reflexively, her hands moved to cover her injured and hurting pudendum. Noticing blood on Coll's now flaccid penis she lifted one of her own hands to check. The sight of the sticky redness made her cry.

"What's the surprise? That stuff comes out of there every month doesn't it?" Coll joked, cruelly. "I'm going to wash it off me. You stay here." He left the room holding his open trousers up with one hand.

As the sound of his footsteps receded, Jo noticed that Coll had not taken the lantern with him. He

probably expected her to just lie there crying, she thought. Almost shocked at herself for being capable of it, Jo found herself wondering what was going to happen next. Was Coll going to kill her? Keep her prisoner? Or something else? She had no way of knowing. What she did have was a chance to escape now. She could take the light, get back to the van and set off her GuardPager.

Ignoring the pain as best she could, Jo gradually stood up. She took the lantern and tried to remember the way back to the van. It wasn't difficult and within a few minutes Jo had quietly, although painfully, reached the bay.

The rear door on the driver's side was the nearest to where the GuardPager had been dropped and Jo tried it first. It opened and she put the light on the floor inside.

"What are you looking for?" Coll called out as he walked across the bay.

Her only hope was to find the pager. Jo began to search frantically. In the short time before Coll reached her, she found her pocket and all its contents, apart from the GuardPager. Despair filled her as she realised that Polit or Coll must have taken the unit at some time just after the parking the van.

Jo started to cry again and did not even bother to turn as Coll ran into her. Dazed from the impact, Jo felt herself thrown across the back seat of the van, where she lay face down. Coll climbed in and lay on top of her.

"That was a bit silly. Thinking you could get away and call the redcoats like that." Coll said quietly in Jo's ear. As he lay on her soft body, he felt his cock stiffening again. "Hang on. I think I could go for some seconds."

Jo just lay there crying with her legs together. She was aware of Coll's hand feeling his erection and then undoing his trousers. "Right, spread 'em and give or it'll be a buggering." Jo obeyed and was subjected to the second rape of her life.

When he had finished, Coll got out of the van and did up his trousers. He closed the door on a shivering, curled up, and whimpering Jo and went to move the planks from the exit.

Later, a few minutes drive from his place, Coll stopped the van and dumped Jo.

"My calling card." He said, tossing a thin, light blue card from the driver's seat before driving off.

Jo picked it up and turned it over in her hands. A message was poorly printed in red letters on one side. In the receding tail lights of the van she could just manage to read "You have been serviced by The Lager Bastards".

It's about time

Part Two

chapter seven

Kepker closed his eyes and tried to come to terms with his powerlessness. He could do nothing to save himself. Nor could Nefer do anything. That left only a certain man whose superior he was. This man was also the principle object of the pursuit Nefer had mentioned on the radio. And was the man to be accused in the imminent trial. No prayer he knew seemed appropriate. He opened his eyes and saw Nefer moving his head to look past him.

Nefer made a gesture of greeting and Kepker looked round. Kheb had returned with three men, all wearing suits - Italian or French tailoring Kepker guessed. Kepker surmised that one of them must be the man known as Germany. A man who had been brought in from a foreign lodge as an impartial judge - a step taken only in cases of the most serious misdemeanour.

Nefer stood up on his mat, then took a deliberate step forward off the mat. The three newcomers stood a pace from the mat on which Kheb had been sitting, Kheb stood with them. They did not put down the sports bags they carried.

Nefer introduced himself by speaking his name "Nefer" and making a gesture.

One of the three newcomers said "Germany" making the same gesture. He paused, dropping his hand, then raised the hand again to make a different gesture. "I am come to judge this matter. I am Usser." He held the gesture until Nefer repeated the new name "Usser". As he dropped his hand and turned around everyone began moving.

Nefer picked up the radio. "We are now in session. No more messages. I will call again when we are intending to enter the room."

"Understood, sir."

chapter eight

The men who had been waiting on the roof returned to their mats and sat down. The new arrivals busied themselves with their bags. They took out mats, candles, several wooden half-masks and two wooden cases. Usser opened one case and took out an ornate metal bowl, and a similar bottle. Taking a small mat and the bottle and bowl with him, he walked to another part of the roof. His companions picked up the candles and watched him.

Finding a suitable place, Usser dropped the mat on the floor. Then he took a compass from his

pocket and adjusted the alignment of the mat. When satisfied he beckoned his companions over.

Indicating the approximate direction with his outstretched right arm Usser instructed the movements of one assistant. Once the man was close, he crouched down to sight along a line embroidered on the mat, still giving directions as before. The assistant carefully placed the candle, which was in a simple holder, on the roof and adjusted its position according to Usser's silent instructions. Once the placing was exact, the man took a lighter from his pocket and lit the wick of the candle. Three more candles were placed in this way, forming the four corners of a square.

Usser made final sightings, then set the bowl on the mat and poured water from the bottle into it. A mat for sitting was placed within the square, as well as five more candles.

Once all this was complete, Usser took his position sitting on the mat, and with the masks and the second case beside him on the roof. His assistants placed a second small mat in front of Usser, and within the square. They placed a third mat, larger than the other two, on the roof outside the square. All this done, they sat on the third mat.

Usser whispered a short prayer in Latin, asking for his judgement to be true. He took a mask and solemnly placed it over his eyes. The mask had no fastenings, but sat on his head, which he kept level. Then he undid a button on the breast of his shirt and drew out a pendant on a chain. All the others on the roof likewise unbuttoned and drew pendants out.

Usser opened the wooden case next to him. Slowly he took from the case a cloth-wrapped item, roughly one foot long and three inches in diameter, when wrapped. Usser carefully unwrapped a small staff, shaped like a shepherd's crook, which he laid on his lap. He folded the wrapping and put it in the lid of the case. Usser repeated this procedure for another two Egyptian staves, placing them in his lap also. The next items he took out and unwrapped were representations of the Masonic tools: a set square, a level, a rule and a pair of dividers. These Usser placed around his knees on the mat, in plain view of whoever would sit on the other mat. Two wrapped objects remained in the case.

Usser arranged the three Egyptian staves between the fingers of his left hand.

The trial began. All proceedings, questions and answers were whispered. Usser called Nefer first.

chapter nine

Nefer stood and walked to the mat in front of Usser. He sat calmly: he had expected to be called first as he was the formal instigator of the trial.

Raising his right hand to present the three staffs, Usser selected one of the Masonic tools with his right hand and passed it to Nefer. Nefer accepted the tool with both hands. Usser took up another tool in his right hand and began his questioning and judgement.

“Nefer, you requested a judgement after a note came to you from the hand of your subordinate. The note was an appointment to meet at a certain place and at a certain time.”

Usser paused long enough for Nefer to make a formal affirmation then proceeded.

“Your subordinate understood the note to be from one of his subordinates. This person is Apep. Your subordinate confessed to you that he and Apep had been engaged on a project of some kind.” Usser stopped: Nefer had gestured that he wished to speak.

Nefer lowered his gesturing hand and raised the hand, holding the Masonic tool. “I understand my subordinate's rôle to have been that of protector only.” He lowered the tool after speaking.

Usser raised the tool he held, thought for a moment, then made a modified statement: “Your subordinate confessed to you that he had protected Apep whilst Apep had been engaged on a project of some kind.”

Usser paused again for Nefer to make a formal affirmation.

“This protection had consisted, in the final stages of this project, of the use of influence through our brothers, to stop the effective pursuit of eight murder investigations.”

Nefer heard Kepker shift on his mat and felt his gaze. He exerted his self-control and did not turn to look. Nefer gulped and made his formal affirmation, pleased he had only to whisper.

“All of this you have told to me and no more.” Usser said, pronouncing a formal end to the initial statement.

Nefer affirmed for what he thought would be the final time and shifted his legs a little, ready to rise from the mat.

“Have you investigated the case, and do you now have more knowledge?”

“Yes.”

“You have investigated the murders further?”

“No.” Nefer answered without thinking, slightly off-balance at being asked further questions at this stage.

“You have investigated Apep's private life?”

“No.”

“You have investigated Apep's professional life?”

“No.”

“What form has your investigation taken?” Usser's voice had lost none of its ritual tone, but Nefer detected that a direction was being taken. He had no time to think before answering.

“His submitted diary has been read.”

Usser sat completely still and quiet for 3 seconds before responding.

“His diary.” The tone of his voice was subtle. Nefer heard a statement, a question, and an accusation. He panicked and started talking too fast, faster than he was thinking.

“All brothers submit a diary, a continuing diary-” he faltered over his words and started again. “Every month all brothers submit a diary of their experiences and thoughts, as part of their prayers and operations-” Nefer's voice tailed off. He had lost his thread. All he could think of to say was that he had been prepared to be the one to open the trial with a few questions, as a matter of procedure. Then that he had not been prepared for a critical line of examination. He stopped himself saying this; which meant that he said nothing.

Usser left Nefer just enough time for an uncomfortable pause, but not enough to begin to gather his thoughts, before pursuing. “I am aware of initiation and conduct in our craft. What does Apep's diary show to you?”

“An insight into his ideas, his state of mind. We must know his psychology to proceed.” Somehow, Nefer had found himself on the defensive; trying to justify his actions before Usser had made any actual criticism. Nefer realised that it was time to start stalling. He decided to say no more now and nodded once to show that these two sentences were his whole answer to Usser's question.

Usser decided to change tack.

“Investigation of the coroners' reports on the bodies of the murder victims revealed much. The similarities and the differences both give clues to us.” His tone suggested he was about to begin a long exposition.

Nefer detected Usser's change of tack, with not a little worry. He had asked for an external judgement to ensure that he would be exonerated of any guilt. But now Nefer felt himself possibly getting involved in the long, messy and difficult work of the actual investigation. Not something he desired.

Then Nefer noticed what Usser had actually been saying. He wondered how Usser could have got access to the autopsy reports? The man was a senior brother, but in France. All the murders had taken place in England. Nefer's worry increased, but Usser started talking again before he could start thinking properly.

“All the victims were women. All had the same blood group, admittedly a common one, and also certain tissue type similarities. All had recently

given birth. There was difficulty in identifying all the bodies, but for different reasons: wounds sustained during the murder, mutilation of the corpse, water damage, decomposition and so. Different methods were used in all cases. This prevented any connection being made by the police. All the women were single or separated, and none had been reported as missing. Usser paused to examine the man seated before him. His discomfort was clear. Usser left unstated that Nefer had discovered none of the information he had just recited and continued his triumphant onslaught.

“As to Apep himself now. You know his profession at least?”

“A surgeon, I believe.”

“The term anatomist would perhaps be more correct, or do I make a mistake in my English?”

“I don't really know enough to comment.”

“Well, a person whose primary work is as a researcher at a university, who teaches and publishes papers in medical and scientific journals, as opposed to a person who performs operations on the sick would be more properly described as an anatomist than as a surgeon. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Good. To review Apep's career, then, I have consulted his papers, published under his common name, and the reviews of his peers.”

A cold sweat had been gathering in Nefer's armpits. Now he felt a drop trickle down his right side. Usser had found out who Apep was. This should have been a secret from everyone except his immediate superior, although some of his close brothers could be expected to know.

“Apep appears to have attained, and kept, his university post on the basis of his work dissecting the human head and neck. He was no genius but his papers were generally regarded as good, solid work. One was even included in a book.

“He seems to have been productive, in a regular way, up until about two years ago. Could it be that, at that point, Apep chose a different direction to work in? It seems that he completed a paper just six months ago that was not published. Further, the paper was not even put forward for publication. The decision not to apply for publication was taken by Apep's boss at the university, who would have had to approve all submitted papers. The reason given was a lack of evidence, that the paper was too much speculative.

“The paper, entitled ‘Towards an anatomical basis of morphic resonance’ is indeed highly speculative. But, it does reach conclusions, conclusions regarding glandular function mostly. And they are most speculative. Not what one would expect from the solid worker Apep appears to have been. And I don't believe it.

“Oh, I believe it is his work. But I don't believe it is pure speculation. I believe Apep would not reach such conclusions without proof. Apep would make experiments, it is his character. The paper, viewed as practical, rather than theoretical as it is presented, leaves little doubt as to the nature of the experiments.

“Such phrases as ‘partially formed’, ‘growing’, and, ‘immature’ are used through-”

“Oh Jesus. I didn't know I mean you're talking about children, babies. If I'd known-”

“Silence!” Usser raised his voice, and his left hand, to stop Kepker's interruption. Then he repeated the word in a whisper. “Silence.” The man's outburst was over and he resumed.

“Such phrases as ‘partially formed’, ‘growing’, and, ‘immature’ are used throughout the paper. Clearly Apep refers to the glands of new-borns.

“This, in conjunction with the fact that Apep has murdered eight recent mothers leaves us without doubt that a most serious crime has been committed. And perhaps is continuing.” Usser closed his exposition, and dismissed Nefer with a gesture. Then he called for a pause for a moment of silent prayer.

As Nefer went to sit, Kepker caught his eye. Each saw a reflection of their inner state in the other's expression.

Kepker cursed himself and reflected on how he had reached the sad situation in which he found himself. It was true that he had let the one now known as Apep go too far. But it had all crept up on him rather, little by little. That could happen to anyone. Finally he had gone to Nefer. At first he had thought that Nefer would help him. When Nefer had called on a foreign lodge to provide a judge, Kepker had been assured that this would be the best way to bring the matter to a swift conclusion. Yes there would be some damage, but better to admit some guilt and to make attrition sooner rather than let the matter go further and get even worse. However, not much later it had become clear to Kepker that he was being made the scapegoat. Just when he had thought it could not get worse, the foreign judge had arrived. He had his own ideas it seemed. Even Nefer was not coming out unscathed. And whatever happened to Nefer, something worse would have to happen to Kepker. The exact wording of some of the more grisly oaths he had sworn in his time with the Freemasons started to call themselves to his memory.

Usser announced the continuation of proceedings. Dread and helplessness welled up in Kepker. He thought about throwing himself off the roof. He waited to be called but, instead, one of Nefer's men said “It's time”.

“The rendezvous? Very well.” Usser acknowledged. With a few ritual phrases, he suspended proceedings. Again, everybody except

Kepker had something with which to busy themselves.

"We're coming down now." Nefer was on the radio again.

"It's OK, sir. They've gone into the bedroom." the watcher replied. "But they're not asleep."

The "soldiers" were occupied taking things from their bags and checking them. Kepker noticed handcuffs, coshes and other close-quarters pacifiers, as he had expected, but was surprised to see two of the Frenchmen with what looked like tins of paint and paintbrushes.

Although they would be taking a certain amount of the Masonic paraphernalia with them, some was to be left in place on the roof. One of Nefer's men was therefore to stay behind as a guard. Once everything had been checked the other men began to leave the roof by a service door.

"Nefer. Do I really have to go down?" Kepker had no wish to face Apep, his junior brother, whom he felt he was betraying.

"He has asked to meet you. It is proper that you are there." It was Usser who answered, but Nefer nodded agreement.

chapter ten

One of Nefer's men stayed in the stairwell - a good place to hide. The rest of the party, going by the address written on the piece of paper Kepker had brought with him, went to the door of Charlotte's flat.

Quietly, one of Nefer's men picked the lock and opened the door. They all crept in.

The angle poise lamp on the table, and the computer, were still switched on. The bedroom door was closed, and this muffled the sounds of music and frenzied love-making emanating from there.

Usser sat down on the sofa. Kepker followed when he was beckoned. Nefer pulled back the curtain and gave a quick wave to the man outside with the stethoscope, then he too sat down. The other three men busied themselves making the room ready.

One lit some candles and placed them around the room. The other two took the tins and brushes they had brought down and went to the bedroom

door. First one, and then the other painted a broad line around the door. As the second man applied his layer a pale foam bubbled up. When they had finished, the sounds from the bedroom could no longer be heard.

With the room ready, and with about ten minutes to spare before the appointed time, the three soldiers took up stations. Two waited just behind the door, one held his cosh ready, the other a pair of handcuffs. The other stood behind Kepker, making him nervous.

Kepker had been surprised when he had read the address at which Apep wanted to meet him. Surprised because he had never been there before, nor even heard of it. He had told this to Nefer, whose own researches had also found nothing special about the place. Now they were there, in an ex-council low-rise block of flats and still there was no clue as to the reasons for Apep's choice.

As the exact time approached, the silence in the room grew tense. Nefer fingered the radio. Would it crackle into life with a message about Apep's approach from one of the several external lookouts? Would that be their first warning? Perhaps the man on the window would see him first? Failing either of these, a primary observation would be the herald. Would it be the sound of the lift? Maybe footsteps on the stairs? Or just outside the door? The rattle of a key in the lock, even?

Everybody in the room was shocked when, from nowhere, Apep stepped onto the coffee table.

On his feet he wore plain black shoes, which made no noise on the table. His tall, heavy but fit, body was clothed in overalls like a factory worker's. They were dark blue in colour but reflected light strangely. The overalls' hood was down and the top part of the chest was unzipped. A black cotton shirt was revealed on Apep's chest, but it was to his neck that all eyes in the room were drawn. Apep's neck was bandaged, and the bandages extended to a bulge the size of a grapefruit resting on his left shoulder. From within the bandaged lump two wires emerged. The wires were plugged into a tiny personal stereo which Apep held in his left hand. His right hand was in a pocket of the overalls, and his face wore a pained expression.

The pain lessened slightly as Apep pressed the stop button on the stereo.

He cast a quick look around at his startled audience and then stepped off the table.

Nightmare, Sleepwalk, Remix

Part Two

chapter five

I wander about downstairs, and count my assumptions. There was only one person killed on

the bed. It was the person who lives in the room. Two, not bad. This is the job my Client wants me to do. Three, still acceptable. I decide to proceed and consider my next move. Obviously I'll be

going to the club to see Chasing Satan + support. I go back upstairs to get her diaries which I will obviously be reading. As I enter her room again I think how obvious it is that I want to speak to her house mates. Pity I have to wait for them. I put the envelope down and pick up her diaries. What envelope? It's one of the giro's. I must have picked it up while I was wandering about downstairs. Except I didn't pick it up. I was thinking. Or part of my brain was. I was thinking I'd have to wait but now I don't want to. And I don't have to because I'm a magician.

I go back downstairs to the kitchen. I trust myself that Alison Brown, the name on the envelope, isn't upstairs. I write the letters of her name in columns in water on the draining board. I read across the rows out loud.

"Aoo lnw ibn sr."

Come on down Alison. The shout echoes slightly as I wipe the draining board and obliterate the letters. She'll be with me in half an hour tops. I collect the diaries and plan how to meet her.

She probably won't want to stay here to talk. I fetch my jacket and check I've got money. I put the giro's in my inside pocket and find the tattoo. It survived the attack and experience tells me it's going to be useful. I find a plastic bag in the kitchen and wrap it up carefully. I put the diaries in another bag and I'm ready to go, nearly.

After leaving I may not be able to get back in. I go back up to the room and sit in a corner not facing the window. I don't like it, but I have to take the room with me. I scan left to right, noting, remembering. Then right to left. A few more times and I close my eyes and try to recall details, floor, clothes, chair, blood. It's a complex picture and I don't know what I'll need to remember later: it's twenty minutes before I can visualise the room completely. I keep practising until I hear a key in the door.

chapter six

I pick up my jacket and make noise walking so she isn't frightened by my voice. "Hullo?" I call from the landing. I walk down the stairs. When I can see her I add "Do you know anything about what happened here?" so I have a moment to check her out.

A skinny eighteen year old in rags, Docs and a hooded army surplus coat. I can't see it, but I'm pretty sure it's got a big A for anarchy painted on the back. "Are you the police?"

Actually an interesting question. I resist the temptation to smile enigmatically and make cryptic remarks about the higher law. I can't see her face to be sure, but probably Alison's not concerned with cosmology right now. Probably she's concerned about not getting arrested and having the shit kicked out of her.

I keep walking down the stairs and tell her "I'm not police." To forestall the next question, I add "And I don't carry ID."

"We did call the police."

Looks like I misjudged her. She sounds like she needs to be told she did something right, which makes sense now that I think about it. Alison's a witness and I need her to cooperate with me. Because I'm not the police, I can't use the law to compel her. I could just flash the giro's, but I prefer to have her on my side. A little analysis could go a long way here, maybe all the way.

In front of me is a girl who, last night, had one of her friends fine blended, maybe in front of her. There was nothing she could do about it. Where did she turn? Straight to an authority figure, then ran. Poor young anarchist, having to call the pigs to help a friend. Analysis complete. Now to compose a reply.

"The police called me. I'm here to find out things, but not for them. They're not involved now."

She looks uncertain. Her eyes dart glances at my face, at the floor, at her side of the open door. She's looking for a certain bunch of envelopes, no doubt.

"I think you saw something last night, and I'd like you to tell me about it."

"Have you got our giro's?" The darting glances have stopped. So young to be so suspicious.

I put my jacket on. "You mean these?" I show her the envelopes, then put them back in my pocket. "Yes, I've got them. And if you tell me about last night then you'll have them."

"Those are ours. They're not addressed to you. You can't just take them." She holds her hand out. "Hand them over."

She has a point I suppose, but so what? "Like I said Alison, it's my job to find things out here. If I give you these now you'll run away now, and then I won't have found out anything, will I?" I let that sink in for a moment. "Can't you wait till I've bought you a cup of tea and we've had a conversation?"

She goes for it, although I have to up the offer to breakfast. She knows a nearby cafe so we go there.

Without thinking I buy two teas. At least I remember not to drink mine. Alison eyes it as it sits and goes cold while her breakfast is being prepared. I never eat in greasy cafes like this one, but even so the sight of her plate of bacon, eggs and beans makes my stomach rumble.

She doesn't want to talk or think about what happened last night and I don't make her until she's finished eating. I get her a second mug of tea, remembering not to buy myself one this time.

Her reluctance to talk doesn't make for an easy conversation. At every pause Alison's eyes flick to the right hand side of my chest, where the giro's are in my pocket. Despite this I do find out some things about Kate - the dead girl (Kate Valedictan from her giro) - and what happened to her.

She took the occult seriously enough not to talk about it to her housemates. Her boyfriend is in a band; Alison remembers the name "Chasing Satan" when I prompt her. He visited her yesterday evening. She remembers him coming over at about eight and leaving at eleven. She doesn't know if he smokes or not. No point asking if it's Camel then. Yes she did see Kate alive after he had left, in fact they had a chat late that night about boys and anarchy and stuff.

Seems like it hasn't sunk into Alison yet that Kate has gone. That Kate did not die of cancer, or in a road accident, but of causes completely outside Alison's experience and comprehension has contributed to this delay in her appreciation of reality. Turns out Alison didn't even see Kate die, although she did hear it, or the start of it.

Kate Valedictan's death started a few minutes before 04:00hrs. Her screams woke the other three people in the house. They gathered outside the door to her bedroom, wondering if it was a bad dream and whether or not they should go in. Finally one of them, Tom (Thomas Kraft), decided to open the door. He closed it after maybe one second. When he turned around his face was white and his whole body was shaking. He told the others that they had to call the police and get out, immediately. Which they did. Kate went on screaming for the ten minutes or so that Alison took to dress and pack. She was still screaming when they left.

"We should have gone in. Maybe there was something we could have done."

"Other than get yourselves killed? I don't think so somehow." It seems to comfort her a little.

I've already paid. I leave the giro's and my card on the table and walk out.

The neighbours shrug when I ask them about the people who used to live next door. Some noise last night. A police car later when it was all quiet again. Then they shrug again. Not supportive of squatting, not hostile, even indifference seems like it's too much trouble. I go home.

chapter seven

"The magickal diary of Soror Utchaluna". Here we go. It takes the rest of the day to read but it seems like even longer. Kate took her magick cold and without humour. No laughing matter this diary.

I copied out a few pieces, which I'll read again tomorrow but as I lie in bed hungry I concentrate on general impressions.

Kate was in an occult group named Puissance Res. From time to time she mentions other members. Only names in magick of course, this being a serious business. Point is, I didn't run out of fingers counting Fraters and Sorors. Magickal order or just a few kids getting grandiose?

The workings are pretty standard stuff. The protections look OK, so do the curses and blessings, but the invocations are just way too elaborate. Kate's diary records results like "feeling of energy and tingling". Not exactly "the body of a bear, a human head, but with a duck's beak" stuff, but so what? Visible manifestations? Who needs them. Not Puissance Res, that's for sure. It's pretty clear they'll stay small and together for a while as they are, at least until their leader gets bored.

The line is that the angels keep these kind of people out of trouble, and out of the way of real seekers. Which means allowing them to get good at the basics but not much more. So how did Kate get herself into something that would kill her?

Nothing in the diary leads to Kate's death. She wasn't in the middle of a big working. There's no incomplete banishings. No recent curses to rebound on her. No ignored dreams. Puissance Res had not raised up that which they could not put down. The last entry is a regular meditation in the afternoon before the night of her death.

All of which suggests that Puissance Res is not directly responsible for what happened. But maybe somebody they know is. For sure they're a lead. And that's something I'd be stupid to ignore.

I wake up. Wash, dress, drink water, read notes.

The pentacle around Kate's bed was cast about eighteen months ago. The rest of the group came round to her place for the occasion. Pure water, lots of carmine red and soot black, new paintbrushes discarded afterwards, drums and incantation. She's even copied out the spell used: "A barrier that none devils nor daemons nor any summonéd forms may pass, neither can their bodies, their spirits nor their powers nor their missiles." Seems pretty clear.

The tattoo was done about one year ago. Not much reasoning given in the diary. Probably because Kate's real reason: "everyone on TV's got one" doesn't sound like it has much to do with causing change to occur in conformity with will. It was done locally, she checked the design with her friends, she copied out the spell: "The inscription of this symbold thereon does make the magus' skin to be impervious to the attacks from the devils, and from elementalles, and other manners of creature from beyond nature. From their claws, hooves, horns and other bodily instruments, also from their fiery breath, lightning bolts and other

harms, also from their weapons - be they magickal or be they mundane." She might not have had a sense of humour, but she at least she didn't mess about with anything less than all-inclusive.

I've got a few of their names in magick copied out as well.

The notes go in a jacket pocket with everything else. They'll be re-read, when I get the odd moment. And I'll need them with me today when I go hunting Puissance Res.

chapter eight

Into town on the tube again. Destination the West End, a little way from which is the Lost Continent. The bookshop and mail order outfit, that is, not Lemuria. I go in and ask for my contact by name:

"Morning. Is Glen in today?" I know he is because I doused before I came out.

"Yeah, he's downstairs. Do you know the way?"

"Yes thanks."

Down to where the computer is. Where Glen feels at home. He's not Special this time around, but he sure knows a lot. Like an encyclopaedia. Must be all those books and magazines he reads. And I do mean all. I knock at the door marked private.

"It's open." Glen's voice is soft southern English university, and not at all stuck up.

I've gone in and closed the door by the time he's finished what he was typing and swivelled his chair away from the monitor so he can see who's come in.

"Gerard! It's been ages." He gets up to give me a hug, which I return.

Before he sits back down Glen moves a couple of parcels off a chair so I can too. The parcels halve the office's standing room when he puts them on the floor. I say standing room because I've actually no idea how large the office is - the walls are always hidden by stacked cardboard boxes.

He frowns "Did I post you a Waite deck last week?"

"Yes I got them a few days back thanks."

"Good." He reaches for a mug on the desk, then thinks. "Would you like some tea?"

"No thanks." It's a lie, but hey, it's in a good cause.

Glen and I go back a long way. We hack a few names about for twenty minutes or so, then he pops the question.

"So what brings you down here?" I'd almost forgotten that I came for a consultation with this oracle of the occult margins.

"Looking for something. A group."

"You're joining an order again? That's great Ger'."

"Not joining, just want to get in touch or something."

Glen knows me well enough to know when I'm for real. He shrugs and asks me "Who is it?"

"Small order. Name of Puissance Res."

"I've heard it somewhere. Got any names of people?"

I hand him the short list I copied out of Kate's diary. The paper's folded so he doesn't see the spells. I don't want Glen's curiosity to get him involved in anything at this level.

He remembers one of the names on the list. We go upstairs to the fanzine racks. Buried on the lowest rack is a copy of the second issue of Teutonic Way magazine. Even when I buy the 'zine for a quid Glen's boss doesn't seem too pleased at me taking twenty-five minutes of his time.

I say good-bye and agree to meet Glen and go out some time soon.

I find a park to sit in and read the article. Conservative rubbish. Only useful thing here's the address and that's a B.M. Box. Predictable, I guess. The serious types tend to overdo the anonymous thing.

So all I've got is a confidential forwarding address. So I'll write a letter.

It's lunch time, whatever that word means, so I've got a few hours before the post offices close. I take my time with the letter. To give myself time to think, I scout around for appropriate materials. Some heavy quality paper and an italic felt-tip from an art shop gets the job finally.

The letter goes like this: Leaving my group. They're going all messy - blood and sex. Energy that shouldn't be mucked about with. Chanced on the Teutonic Way article as if by fate. Just what I was thinking. Happy to do an apprenticeship, but veiled references to good degree of competence. How about a rendezvous sometime? It's in the post.

I stay up late reading and stuff to mess up my sleep patterns. I want to catch main Z tomorrow afternoon, in case I have to stay up for some follow-through after the gig. It works.

chapter nine

I stroll past the queue outside the club, to present my comp and get in first. Inside is not much brighter than the night outside. The bar's easy to find and has some tables and chairs next to it. I sit where I can see the stage.

Pretty soon some guy sits his lager at my table and strikes up a conversation. Pity, I was just getting into the Fred Carter Performance Unit's stage piece.

"All right?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Yeah. You here for, what're they called, Chasing Satan?"

“Yeah, you?”

“Nah. Support band me. Servants of the Deceiver. Mind you I liked 'em better when they were Political Uniforms.”

“Better name.”

He reckons I'm taking the piss and stops talking to me. Then when he goes to get another pint he doesn't come back. I get another chance to look around.

The crowd's clothes make the place look even darker. There's a fair sprinkling of some of the lesser known occult symbols on the backs of

leather jackets, but otherwise they're fairly standard model early twenties gothic.

Later, the support band comes on. Much later, Chasing Satan come on. At which point the symbols leave their places around the bar, and at the back, and get closer to the stage.

Chasing Satan're good. The drums are interesting, and the singer's got a good voice. Pity I can't really hear his lyrics. I can feel magick here, coming from them.

When they're in mid-set is when their auras'll be brightest, so I wait till then before doing the eyes closed and then opened only not opened bit.

Café Ultimate

Short Story

Radio KTFQ

Pete worked the night shift at Café Ultimate. He started at ten and left at six. Between eleven and five there were no other staff on. Sometimes people would ask him if this was dangerous: working alone in the small hours. He would reply that it was generally OK but even if it did get “a bit naughty” he could handle himself. The cornerstone of Pete's ability to handle himself was being aware and observant. “Spot trouble before it starts and it can be prevented” was Pete's watchword.

One night just before two Pete became aware of, and then observed, some potential customers standing outside the café looking in at the menu hanging above the counter. Four tall blokes, late twenties, smartly dressed, fit. Pete guessed that they had just come out of a club. He started to worry: people, especially men, often got boisterous after they had been out clubbing (if they were not too wasted). It was only a short step from boisterous to trouble.

And these were certainly boisterous. They were pointing at the menu, laughing, talking, and walking around on the pavement as they did so. Then one of the men sneaked his arm around the waist of one of the others. Having done this he took a quick glance at the other man, but the other man made no move to indicate that he had noticed, although he must have. The two men had stopped pacing and were standing facing Pete, though looking over his head. Apparently emboldened by the lack of complaint, the first man moved his hand lower so that it disappeared from Pete's view behind the second man. Pete stopped worrying. The men were gay and gays were never any trouble.

The men walked into Café Ultimate, gradually approaching the counter.

“Mineral water for me. A big bottle, please. I need to rehydrate.”

“D'you know I'm starving all of a sudden. Can you do me a roll? Ta.”

“Two teas, please.”

They sat at a table big enough for four and started chatting about the club they had just left. The two who were having tea very soon dropped out of the conversation and got off with each other. The other two continued to talk for a while, ignoring the necking couple next to them. At a natural break in the smooching, a few whispered words were spoken between the two men. The couple separated, stood, and announced that they were leaving. Pleasantries were exchanged to the effect that it had been nice meeting the others and that it had been a nice evening. The two remaining men continued to talk on the same subjects for a while then lapsed into silence.

“Well, I want to head home.” It was the one who had ordered a bottle of mineral water, half of which he had now drunk.

“Yes. Just let me finish my roll.”

“No, I'm going to go back to my place.”

“But....I thought....”

“I'm really tired. I've got things to do tomorrow. Sorry. Maybe another time.”

“Next week?” A bit eager sounding that.

“Same place? Yeah might do. Bye.”

“Bye.”

The remaining man looked unhappy, annoyed. He pushed what remained of his roll around its plate a little, tapped the table, scratched his head, then, suddenly remembering, looked at his watch. He got up and went to the counter.

“Could I have a coffee please?”

“With milk?”

“Yes please.”

Pete took a cup and saucer and poured in coffee. As he was getting the milk the man spoke again.

"Does that radio work?"

"I think so. Shall I check?"

"Would it be all right, I mean could you tune it to 99.7?"

"Sure." Pete put the white coffee on the counter, where the man could reach it. He took the man's payment then turned to the radio.

At that time of the morning most stations seemed to have closed but as Pete approached 99.7 a crackly voice came forth.

".....the minister was not available for comment. That's all for now, more news at three."

Some powerful guitar chords, then a champagne cork being popped, then a loud splash.

"It's a little after two. That's what I call late, and this is the late show. Coming at you, over you and inside you for the next three hours this is Dick Froth on Radio KTFQ Keep This Frequency Queer."

Dick played a record. Peter noticed the man was relaxed and smiling now, he left the radio on.

"Hello to everyone who's just come out of William. In case you didn't already know hang on, if you didn't know already then you are nowhere and nothing. Do such people listen to my show? Do they Jack? Jack's my producer. What's that?"

"Don't be stupid Dick." the muffled voice of the producer answered.

"OK Point taken. As you probably don't know, William is now every Tuesday at Club Venice. So, OK let's get to the phones. Anybody just got in from William get on the phone now."

A jingle voice announced the phone number then some adverts came on. Pete looked up and noticed the man rubbing his chin thinking. Evidently he rejected the idea of calling with a wrinkle of his nose.

"OK I've got twenty lines up. Who's it going to be? Who's it going to be? Well, none of you, you sad losers. You went to William, hoping you'd find someone. A bit of a dance, thought your luck was in, but you ended up with nothing, sitting on your own, at home. How do I know? If you'd got off would you listening to KTFQ Late? Would you? So now you've dialled in for a bit of compassion. Pathetic. Get off the lines, all of you. What Jack? Too harsh? Tell them the truth? All right, all right. You can stay on if you're prepared to be bitter. I want bile, now. Acid. Why? Because I just got dumped. And you know what the worst thing about it is? I keep seeing happy couples, smiling, joking, kissing. Must be because it's Pride week. What a joke that is. Let's all walk around wearing pink triangle badges, holding hands and being proud. Who's proud to be gay? Unattractive wankers who can't get a shag unless they

advertise. I'll tell you when I'm proud, I'm proud when I've got my cock stuffed into a cute boy's arse and I'm pumping it full of hot, high protein, intestinal lubrication."

More adverts and another record.

"They're going to fire him this time." The man addressed his remark to the world in general, which, at that precise moment, meant Pete.

"Yeah?"

"For sure."

Advanced analysis concluded.

"OK. Line six. Your chance to get bitter."

"Hello? Dick? I've never called your show before. Am I on now?"

"No you're off because you were too slow. Useless. You all have got one more chance. It's line five."

"Straight people!" An explosion. Line five clearly knew how to get on Dick's show.

"What about them?"

"They're the ones making Pride week" The caller could think of no word and settled for a strangled cry of hatred "Uargh! They're ruining it."

"Is it the liberals, line five? Muscling in? What's it got to do with them right?"

"I'm walking down the street OK? and I see this hot guy with a Pride sticker. We get talking, we have coffee. We talk some more. So I pop the question OK? And what does he say? 'Oh I'm not gay. I'm wearing this for solidarity.' Can you believe it!"

"You don't want solidarity you want a shag, right?"

"Yeah. In fact if there's any straight people listening, wanting advice on how best to be supportive to lesbians and gays then pay attention. Next time you see a person wearing a gay Pride pin go right up to them and offer them your body. That's it."

"Sorry but I'm going to have to scratch that, line five. If there's any straight people listening then switch off now! I don't want you."

"Yeah Dick. Hey, why don't they have Straight Pride week. Truth is nobody's proud to be straight."

"Actually the truth is that guy you chatted up was gay but didn't want to sleep with a dork like you. G'night line five."

Another record. More adverts.

"You know something? I'm not feeling so bad now. I think I've found a cure for the single man's blues. Verbal abuse. Yeah. OK if there's any security guards out there, who want to make me feel better then call now. But be warned, you're gonna be crying."

More adverts. Another record.

Pete looked up to see the man tipping his coffee cup back to drain it.

“Another coffee? It's on the house.”

“I won't be able to get to sleep if I do.”

“Really? Not at all? I mean not even by four a. m.?”

“Probably not.”

“How about five a. m.?”

“I shouldn't think so.”

“And now the big one: what about six a. m.?”

“What's so special about six?”

“I get off at six.”

“Looks like I do too.” The man took the coffee with a smile.