

A.K.C.T.

issue four

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Michael & Julia In the Conclusion Julia wakes up and makes the scene for breakfast. Michael gets some sleep while Julia reads, then it's back to his place for the start of a beautiful relationship. Originally featured in Sheets Project.

Hardface Part Four Coll gets picked on. The Lager Bastards mass and talk about a certain group of Buddhist caravan guards. No-Number Zen meets Innocence, a post-karmic human.

It's about time Part Three The defendant states his case. Elaine and Charlotte realise something is going on. And where is Imogen?

Nightmare, Sleepwalk, Remix Part Three Gerard ligs a little in pursuit of clues. His Client appears.

Michael and Julia In the *Conclusion*

In the morning

"Julia wake up." Michael lightly shook her shoulder again. Julia mumbled, then straightened suddenly and looked around. Within a second or two she was awake and had oriented herself.

"We're leaving now." Julia could see that this was true. Michael's friends were all standing around the table, except for herself and one other who was proving reluctant to be shaken awake. They all looked a little subdued, but were still talking. Julia fiddled with the knot in the laces of her trainers.

"What time is it?"

"Seven."

"Not bad. Stayed here 'til ten one morning." There was a pause as the person speaking blew air from puffed out cheeks. "I was wasted."

"The funny thing about Saturday night here is, like, no part of it takes place on Saturday."

Julia had separated her trainers and now bent down to pull them on. By the time she had done this the final person had been revived, at least enough to walk. Julia could see that people were now trickling out of Club Venice, although it was still open.

Outside the group stood on the pavement, in loose order, blinking, stretching and yawning.

"Well now the Sun's coming up....." Saturn sang/groaned in the vocal style of Tom Waits.

"And the rest." Michael said, beckoning to draw forth words from Saturn's mouth.

"I've told you I don't know the rest." Saturn replied in his normal voice, then corrected himself and repeated the phrase in the rusty, gravelly texture with which he had sung.

"Besides, It's seven Sat', the Sun came up hours ago."

"Maybe it did." Saturn returned to his own voice, the other was too rough on his throat. Saturn pursed his lips and blew short bursts of air through them, making little popping noises to help him think of another song. "It's another tequila sunrise." There was the barest pause "Dum de dum dum dum de dum." He managed

before bursting into wild laughter, in which he was immediately joined by Michael.

Julia thought it must be the speed, or the lack of sleep which made them laugh like that. It was not that funny. She looked at them, then at their friends. The performers had more endurance than the audience. Michael and Saturn's friends were walking wreckage. Some were standing, hunched in the road. Some sat, crouched on the edge of the pavement. None of them were keeping up with Michael and Saturn, who were still lively, if a little manic looking. After a while their laughter stopped feeding back and Michael was able to speak.

"Well, what are we up to today?" The question was clearly directed at Saturn. "Apart from singing the opening lines of US pop melodies referring to dawn."

"Let's just do a couple more, then sing about morning for five hours and then sing about lunch." Saturn suggested. Nobody else laughed.

"Tubes are running now."

"Yeah."

"I'm going to walk to King's Cross."

"Let's go home."

"OK"

"The litany of the single-end candle burners." Michael exclaimed. "Come on. Sleep's for humans!" Julia detected a routine. "Packing it in already? You laggards!" Of course his outburst, which was indeed just a routine, and was recognised as such by his friends, had no effect.

"See you next time Michael. Cheers Sat'."

"Bye Sat', bye Mike."

"Bye."

"See you."

"Bye Julia, nice meeting you."

They said, waving, and being waved to.

"Tchah. Just us again." Michael said quietly as his friends receded.

"And Julia." Saturn corrected him, making a dramatic gesture in her direction. Michael and Julia exchanged glances.

“Well. What are we up to?” Julia stressed “are” taking the two steps necessary to reach them, and making a small opening gesture with both hands.

In response, Saturn's eyebrows suddenly raised. His enlarged eyes flicked left and right as his face did Shocked Surprise, Extreme. Then his eyes turned to follow the movement of his right hand as it moved, from his expression, of its own volition, in front of his face. Michael and Julia joined the game, their stunned faces leaning close to The Hand. Saturn's hand stopped moving, and started quivering. Then went suddenly still and formed into a pointing finger, pointing straight up.

“Let's go visiting.....” Saturn whispered.

He lifted his elbow to turn his forearm horizontal. Now he pointed across his body, down the street away from Club Venice. All three of them kept their eyes on the hand. Saturn shifted his body and extended his arm.

“Og and Stillness.” Saturn finished his sentence. He took his eyes off the hand, and stared in the direction it pointed instead.

“And Name.” Added Michael, turning his gaze also.

“And Name.” Saturn repeated.

Julia put a hand on each of their backs and ran forwards. Michael and Saturn were pushed ahead of her, also having to run. Michael peeled off after twenty paces, Saturn after thirty. Julia stopped and let them catch up and they proceeded walking arm in arm.

In the kitchen

“We're nearly there.” Saturn said, for Julia's benefit.

“Hey there's Mark and James.” Michael pointed. “Julia can you catch them? They'll let us in.”

Julia looked at Michael with arched, querulous eyebrows.

“I'm too fucked to run.” He replied to her silent question.

“They're not far. You won't have to run.”

“Well I'm too fucked to jog too. Please?”

Julia snorted and trotted away to intercept Mark and James. Saturn watched as she called, then caught up as the men stopped walking. He waved when Julia pointed to them and they turned. Only Mark returned the wave. Julia talked to them

again and then all three turned and resumed their journey at a hurried pace.

“Oh shit.” Michael and Saturn chorused as they broke into a sort of run. They caught up at the entrance to the alley between two terraced houses.

The house on the left was like the others on the street, it had net curtains instead of blackouts on the first and second floor windows and did not have its front door and ground floor window completely boarded up. Unlike the house on the right.

The five people proceeded in silent single file down the alley at the side of the house, obeying an instruction painted on the red brick wall in one foot tall white letters: “Shhh!”.

At the end of the alley were two wooden gates. One lead to the garden on the left and had a small sign screwed onto it which read “Beware of the dog”. The other, which was more sturdy in design and which had obvious reinforcements, had a poster pinned onto it which read “When freedom is outlawed, only the outlaw is free”.

“Oh, who's put this here.” Mark's effeminate voice and gesture referred to the poster which he now tore down, crumpled and threw over the gate on the left.

The gate was secured by a length of chain passed through it and around the gate post. Mark pulled on the chain, bringing a large waterproof padlock into view, which he then opened with a key from a pocket on his long black coat. The five people filed in to a patio and garden, both small and very overgrown. James opened the back door of the house with a key from a pocket on his long black coat. Once again they filed in, Mark last, having secured the gate behind them. They were in the kitchen, and were greeted by a short young man with a shaven head, who wore only a pair of khaki combat trousers. He and the kitchen were clean, in fact were cleaned by the same agent - himself.

“Morning degenerates.” He said, apparently to Mark and James who did not smile. Then, switching to a Brooklyn gangster accent, he said “Who's a dame in a suit. She wit' you Mikey?”

“I think Michael is with Julia.” Saturn said smiling enigmatically over them. They exchanged slightly tense glances. The man noticed and introduced himself to prevent an awkward silence.

“Helix. I'm making tea.”

"I'd love one thanks." Said Mark as he took a few steps and sat down at the table in the centre of the kitchen. The light was on in the kitchen and Julia noticed how tired he was - he sat forward in the flimsy chair, his shoulders huddling the coat around him, his head hung and looked at his hands in his lap. He seemed drained of more than just physical energy.

James walked around the table and across the room to a curtain across a portal leading from the kitchen to the hall. Through the small crack between the curtain and the wall, Julia could see more dirt and clutter in the hall than she could see in her panoramic view of the kitchen. James stopped by the curtain and turned his head to look at Mark.

"I'm going up. Are you coming?"

Mark did not turn to face him as he replied "I just said I'm having tea." He spoke slowly, with emphasis on each word. James paused for a few long seconds, then with a quick "OK" pushed the curtain aside and left the kitchen. His footsteps were not unduly loud but the creaking staircase could be heard anyway.

"Oh God, what's wrong with him?" Mark looked sidelong at the place where James had paused by the curtain. "Well that was a scene wasn't it loves." He said to the guests, resuming his usual camp tone. "Sit down, do." He waved to the other chairs around the table. Julia, Michael and Saturn complied, but hesitantly. "Oh we've created a bit of a mood haven't we? I can tell." Mark stood up, dropping his long coat onto the chair and revealing a white T-shirt with a large pink triangle and the black words "out out out out" printed across it.

"Well don't worry, because I'm going to have at least one cuppa, or should it be a mugga? Yes make mine a mugga Helix." His hands flexed in various directions as he spoke, and continued to do so. "I'm having at least one before I go and " he paused, considering his next word, "help" he decided "him upstairs. So there won't be any mood here." The others smiled at his camping.

"I'll tell you a story whilst we're waiting for our tea shall I? Actually it's not a story because it's true. It happened this week, to me, well where I work. Anyway it's a great story and I've told everyone I've met since. Which means you're getting the rehearsed version. Including that bit." Mark took a step towards Saturn, who was sitting closest to him. "What I do is I'm a barber you see. Men's hair." He reached out and played

with the hair on Saturn's crown a little. "Hm. Could use a little of my treatment I think. Anyway there's a few people in this story, two really, besides myself and him up there." He nodded upwards, indicating upstairs. "We work together you see. Well not exactly together, I mean not on the same head at the same time of course, but together, you know, in the same shop. Funny it's called a shop isn't it, usually you go out of a shop with more than you came in with. Not in our place, not unless you get something for the weekend." He paused. "Ooh I've lost me thread. Where was I?"

"Two people in the story, and you."

"Oh yes. Well we're not in it really. Bystanders you see. Anyway there are two characters, two *dramatis personae*." Mark paused to roll his eyes to the ceiling at his Latin. "A hero and a villain. I'll start with the hero, he's my hero. He first came in about four months ago when he got a new job, and changed jobs. He has his hair short. number three all over, straight at the back and no sideburns. He's always wearing a suit. Anyway when he came in the first time I could tell he was" Mark leaned over the table to create a conspiratorial closeness to his listeners, he whispered "one of us." He extended a limp wristed hand in their midst to emphasise.

"We got talking almost straight away, which is unusual. People don't talk to their barbers nowadays do they? And we have ways you know. We drop little hints. Anyway the next day he came in again. He waited for me to be free, then sat down and asked for the same haircut again. That's sweet isn't it? Anyway we played little games. Well I carry this brush in the breast pocket of my overall. It's got quite a thick handle and the joke is I put it in my jeans, like this." Mark demonstrated by putting his right hand in the pocket of the jeans he was wearing and half clenching it to make a lump stand out. He stepped even closer to Saturn and assumed a tonsorial stance. He held his left hand over Saturn's head with the fingers touching Saturn's hair. "So while I'm doing his hair I'm rubbing this hard thing against him. No, other people in the shop can't see it. I'm not like that." He turned an admonishing look on his sniggering audience as he demonstrated by pushing against Saturn's shoulder lightly. "I can see he's smiling in a funny way, and I wonder, well what's he up to." Mark stood back from Saturn, discarding his right hand lump and his stance, to allow himself more expressive hand movements. "Well when I looked

- Oh thank you love, I mean Helix.” He broke off as Helix put down an assortment of mugs filled with light brown tea, resuming only after taking a sip.

“When I looked, he was holding something under his gown. There was this projection in his lap. I nearly squealed. I was like this.” Mark paused to draw a breath in for a shocked expression, which he held for a second or two for his audience before proceeding. “I was stunned motionless. ‘He’s got his jumbo out’ I thought. Because you can’t see can you? There’s this gown, kind of draped over I remember I could tell he’d taken one hand off the arm rest, and I was thinking you know it wouldn’t be difficult would it? A bit of quiet unzipping and the snake-charmer’s raising the flag isn’t it? But after a few seconds I thought ‘No, no, be sensible Mark it’s just his fingers’.” Mark held his right hand, with the index and middle fingers extended and pointing straight up. “I hope I was right. Anyway this isn’t the story. This is just to introduce the hero. He never tells me when he’s coming in, likes to surprise me he says. On the day of the story he came in when the villain was already there, they’d never been in together before.” He took another sip on his tea, longer now it was colder.

“So the villain. He must be just about forty. He has his hair ordinary. He’s local, works near there too, when he’s working. He comes in, sits down to wait, and reads from The Sun. Recites if you please. The Sun says..... Send the wogs back, Eat the unemployed, String ‘em up and cut their bits off. And anything about us. He’s bigot all the way through. ‘What does gay stand for? Got AIDS Yet.’ Ha ha ‘How did AIDS cross the Atlantic? It bummed a lift.’ I ask you. You can do without that at work can’t you? After he came in the second time, we’d had enough, we decided to get rid of him. So we thought OK, we’ll camp it up when he’s here. He didn’t believe it. He started going on about how it was all rubbish about hairdressers, we all had girlfriends and this was all joking around. For his benefit. Then we went really over the top, oh I should say he comes in every three weeks, without fail, on Thursdays. So the next few times we stepped up. Finally we had make-up on and these black leather waistcoats? The whole look. More than we’d go clubbing in even. He just thought it was more of a joke. We couldn’t get rid of the little turd.” Mark paused to finish his tea.

“Now we’re at the story. They’re both in. I’m doing the hero, and James is doing the villain, who is giving it his usual. We were just laughing, ‘Oh but if you kill all us queers who’s going to cut your hair. You’ve got to be sensitive to cut hair.’ His usual reply you know ‘It’s all a joke, you’ve all got girlfriends.’ Then suddenly my one shouts something about how the other guy is a coward, ‘your kind are all mouth’ I think it was. Then he went on about ‘You say you’re going to beat up the queers, or round them up and burn them, but you never do anything.’ I didn’t know what he was talking about but he was so angry, he was pointing at him like this and shouting, his face was all screwed up like this. I didn’t want to say anything. The other one has got to reply of course so he’s giving it all this ‘Show me one of them bent bastards and I’ll smash his face in.’ What do you think? ‘Come on then.’ he says ‘Start here.’ Bigot, you know, he’s a bit thick, he thinks the hero means me and James, so he says about how we’re not like that, it’s all a joke and so on. Well he makes sure this one knows what he meant, right, he’s stood up, looks him in the eye and says ‘I am gay.’ straight at him. ‘I’m a poofter, a fairy, queer, bent’ and a few other things Oh yes ‘Marmite driller.’ and ‘chucky stabber.’ He stands there just staring at this man. His gown slowly comes loose and slides off, there’s hair. Everyone’s frozen. There’s people waiting - they don’t dare move. James and I are standing like this.” Mark took a placatory posture, with his hands at chest height, the palms turned to face away from him. “Rooted we were. Eventually the other one says ‘All right, you’re asking for it you’re gonna get it.’ And he stands up like this pushing the gown off like that.” Mark waved his left hand across his body. “Trying to.” Mark froze the hand. “It gets caught up in his legs, or he treads on it, something. He staggers straight into a knuckle sandwich, man. He falls back, there’s blood, a tooth even, he’s holding his mouth. I was quite queasy. But James, he’s done first aid, suddenly he’s triggered, he knows what to do. He picks up the tooth,” Mark’s expression showed extreme distaste “says ‘This has to be pushed back in now’ and he does it. Disgusting. Then he tells me to call a cab to take the guy to hospital. My hands were shaking so much I could hardly dial. James leans him over a sink to keep the blood off the floor. My hero watches all this, and says to the guy over the sink ‘I told you I was a fairy. I’m the tooth fairy, except I knock them out and don’t give you sixpence.’ Then he

picks up his gown and sits back down. I couldn't believe it. He's expecting the rest of his haircut. And he's still going on, like 'Don't forget to tell them you got your face kicked in by a pansy will you? Going to the police are you?' I don't think James dared say anything back, but he looked at him, and he stopped. I couldn't see what else to do, so by the time the cab arrived I was cutting his hair again. Five minutes this guy is standing over the sink, there's mirrors everywhere he doesn't dare look up, because he knows who's looking. Just as he's leaving he gets one more. I'll always remember this, it's etched. He turns slightly, catches his eye in the mirror and says, clearly but not shouting 'Come queer bashing 'round my neck of the woods mate - I'll tear you a new one and fuck you through it.'

In the squat

The end of Mark's story was greeted by a gasp from Julia, a short laugh from Saturn, a sharp intake of breath from Helix and nodding silence from Michael.

"Can I use that?" asked Saturn.

"The story? Talk to my agent about royalties-" Mark interrupted himself with a wide yawn. "Oh dear. Excuse me, do" he apologised, covering his mouth in politeness and embarrassment. "I think I'll retire, if you don't mind." He looked up to the ceiling, gazing at James' estimated position. "I'd better see what's wrong with his jealousy anyway." Mark walked from the kitchen with a "toodle-oo" and was soon heard on the creaky stairs.

Helix stood to collect the mugs from the table. In his mind the mugs had been clean mugs, then become tea mugs, and were now dirty mugs. He would soon return them to being clean mugs. After he had picked up all the mugs and turned to go to the sink, the others exchanged looks, and smiles, about his alacrity.

"Helix, you'd make somebody an excellent wife." Saturn said to the man's back. "Actually, will you marry me?"

"Sexist remarks." Julia muttered under her breath.

Helix had placed the cups in the sink and was running water from the hot tap over his hand, waiting for it to heat up. He turned slightly to look at Saturn, not having understood the question. Then he realised "Oh the cups. No no,

it's just that they're easier to clean if you don't let them dry." The water had heated up a little, and he turned back to the sink.

They exchanged amused looks again, except Julia, whose expression was disapproving. Helix was used to his attitude to cleaning being cause for amusement. He did not mind much because he knew he was right, that prompt cleaning saved time, and lengthened service life.

The cups were finished in less than a minute. Helix stopped the water and picked up a cloth. He turned back to the table and leant against the sink as he dried the mugs, and then his hands, and spoke to Michael.

"To what do we owe the pleasure, Michael?"

"Well a chap's got to make his rounds hasn't he?" Michael replied.

"Especially scenesters like ourselves." Saturn added.

There followed a brief discussion of the word "scenester", which Julia ignored. She was considering the gesture with which Michael had accompanied his answer. It was the kind of gesture that Mark had used when speaking. This was, Julia realised, another way of creating distance, another way Michael stopped things touching him and prevented himself from being involved. By taking something, in this case a gesture, from his surroundings and turning it around, he avoided using something of his own. Having reached this conclusion, Julia returned her attention to the conversation going on around her. Helix was speaking.

"Well there's plenty of scenesters here for you. They arrived Friday evening. Didn't go to sleep until some time last night." He paused to look at a clock on the wall. "They're probably ready to wake up and start partying again just about now. Shall we go and see?"

Saturn shrugged and stood up. Michael did the same, and looked down at Julia.

"Coming?"

Julia looked past them, down the hall, then stood up as well. Helix led the way from the kitchen and along the cluttered hall to the doorway of the front room, the door to which formed part of the hall clutter. The hall was gloomy, the front room dark, until Helix switched on the hall light. Helix stood in the doorway, Saturn next to him, leaving Michael and Julia leaning and craning to get a view.

The front room was smaller than the kitchen, which took the width of the house, and more square. There was a sofa and an armchair in the room. The furniture and floor lay under a coating of bodies, some in sleeping bags, some in blankets, some under long coats, some under other bodies.

"It's like a graveyard. Only less healthy." Said Helix, with distaste.

"We're not dead." Said a muffled voice from inside the room.

"We're not even asleep." Said another.

"We just can't get up without some music."

"So put some on." Helix replied. He was losing patience. Helix was suffering from chronic lack of recognition as "only together person in the house" and he had noticed that the stereo, which was visible as a set of tiny red and green lights in the opposite corner of the front room, was switched on and had therefore been left switched on all night.

"But we can't move, Helix." whined a voice.

"Yeah, we can't move until the music's put on." whined another.

"Please, Helix."

Helix took a deep breath. The whining had put him on the point of losing his temper, and he hated to lose his temper. "I'm going to get dressed." He said and turned to ascend the stairs.

Saturn moved to allow Michael and Julia an easier view of the room, and its huddled occupants. Julia counted ten people, perhaps - she had trouble deciding whether some of the piles were one or two.

As Helix's footsteps receded up the staircase there was a slight rustle from the blanket covering the sofa, and a young woman's face appeared. She called in a pleading voice "He-lix", then blinked and noticed the people in the doorway. "Saturn?"

"Hi Flick."

The face turned away from the door, towards the back of the sofa. "Hey Trick, it's Saturn."

A young man's head emerged over Flick's shoulder. The eyes blinked, then screwed shut, then opened wide.

"Hi Trick." Said Saturn, giving a little wave to help the sleepy eyes fix on his position.

"Hi Saturn." The voice was hoarse. "Is that Michael?"

"Put the stereo on Sat?" Flick interrupted.

"It's not possible." Saturn replied searching for a route across the room to the stereo, and seeing no carpet. "There's no floor."

"We've got to have music. We decided." A muffled voice explained.

Michael and Saturn went into a routine of trying to establish who was nearest the stereo, trying to persuade them to get up and switch it on, calculating how much movement was required to just reach out, how many muscles would be involved in this movement, and so on. Julia turned away early in the performance and was therefore the first to notice that somebody was coming down the stairs.

It was a man, Julia gave him thirty years, in a jumper and slacks, with trainers on his feet. His expression was one of deep thought and concentration. As he reached the bottom of the stairs Julia called him to Michael's attention.

"Hey Og." Michael said brightly, looking at the new arrival and obviously pleased to see him.

The man paused, staring at Michael. His head nodded gently as he concentrated. After a few seconds of thought he spoke.

"It's a greeting isn't it, 'Hey'. You said 'Hey' to like, greet me. I mean you could have said 'Hello' or 'Hi', not that I prefer them especially 'Hello' or 'Hi', or 'Wotcha' even. Of course there's words I prefer to use when I'm greeting other people, but I've got no preference when I'm being greeted, 'Hello', 'Hi', 'Hey'. I mean I'm not saying you had a reason to say 'Hey' instead of those other words, like 'Hello' or 'Hi', just like you could have, and I don't mind." Og paused, still thinking, then finished by saying "Yeah".

Saturn briefly interrupted his routine of persuasion and anatomical calculation to say "Hey Og."

"Yeah, you probably heard what I said to Michael, just now, like when he said that. 'Hey Og'. He said 'Hey Og'. I mean you weren't looking at me or anything, but you still probably heard it right? Not that you have to listen to me or anything, I'm not saying that, I'm not saying you have to listen to me. Nor does anyone else. But like I guess I'm saying that my reply stands, like it applies to you saying that, 'Hey Og' I mean, the same as it applies to Michael. Yeah."

Julia guessed from both Michael and Saturn's lack of reaction that Og was like this all the time.

"I could hear you all talking upstairs, not that you were upstairs, I was upstairs. When I was upstairs, just now, like before I came down, down the stairs, I could hear you talking. Like that's actually the reason I came down, downstairs. I mean I would have come down some time, I guess, but like this time around, your talking was the cause, or is the cause, your talking caused me to come down. Your talking about the music, I mean, music specifically is why I came down now, that's like, the cause. Yeah. I think maybe I can help, like perhaps I could assist you, help you get some music on. 'Cause like it doesn't have to be, like it's not essential, I mean any music player, any in the house of course, it doesn't have to be the stereo in the front room, the stereo in that room there, which is the front room, it could be another stereo, yeah? It doesn't have to be that one? Does it?"

"There was one in the kitchen!" Julia exclaimed, hurrying back to that room, then realising that she had been drawn into the game about not being able to move until music was played.

"We have found music." Saturn's announcement to the front room was greeted by a quiet chorus of approving "Yay"s from the still motionless forms.

"Stay here and maintain the beachhead. I'll return shortly." Saturn addressed Michael, who responded with a salute, then stood aside. Saturn walked past him to follow Julia into the kitchen.

Saturn arrived in the kitchen and saw Julia looking at the controls on the CD player. It was a portable, with two speakers, which could also play tapes and had a radio.

"A-ha. Helix's work I'll be bound." Saturn tapped a neat stack of CD cases next to the player. "They're all the right way up too." He continued, picking up the top case.

"Yes, they're easy to sort out that way." Julia picked up the next case, a CD single by a band named "Political Uniforms".

"Well, maybe you'd also make somebody an excellent wife. Actually will you marry me, now that Helix has turned me down?"

Julia was beginning to worry about Saturn, although what he had just said was obviously a joke. She turned and placed the CD case on the kitchen table. Saturn still held the case he had picked up.

"We're looking for something to get them moving." He frowned at the case in his hands. "I

think 'Right brain, Left brain' is too demanding for this time of the morning. What do you think?"

"I've never heard of them." Julia replied quietly, taking another case and looking at it closely to avoid looking at Saturn. The cover picture was a photograph with two extra items superimposed. The photograph, obviously from a pantomime, depicted the appearance to Cinderella of her fairy godmother. The superimposed items were a photograph of a pair of scissors, taken from a different scale photograph and appearing larger than Cinderella's torso, although held easily in her hand, and a speech bubble affixed to the mouth of the fairy godmother. In the bubble was written "Cinderella, you shall cut off his balls". Below the picture was the name of the album "No more dick victims", and above it the name of the group. "Girl Attack" Julia read out loud, "I've heard of them somewhere."

"Somebody was wearing a tour jacket at Club Venice last night." Saturn suggested.

Julia found his astuteness annoying, and said "No I'd heard of them before that." although she had not. She put the case on the table as Saturn read out another.

"I think 'Hard Reset' are probably too harsh." he discarded the case.

"How about 'Beep beep'?" Julia read another.

"Could be good. Oh, take a look at the names of their tracks." Saturn laughed and picked up another case.

The front cover had consisted only of the name of the band in large enough letters to fill it, leaving no border. Julia turned the case over to read the track listing, determined not to laugh because Saturn had. She could not suppress a chuckle, however, as she read:

1. one 2. two 3. three

and so on until

14. fourteen

"Just imagine their front man at a live gig standing and saying 'Thank you very much. This next one is called seven.' and the crowd roaring." Saturn paused to laugh again, then read out the next case. "'Big Coffee and the Wisdom Kids', hm, too crusty. Looks like 'Beep beep' is it unless this is something pretty special." He took the last case. "Hold the front page. 'Dental Emergency'. Yes." He opened the case and fumbled to put the CD in the player one-handed, until Julia took the case from him.

On the front, underneath the band name, was an iconic representation of a dentist, with a drill, and patient. Underneath this was a track listing:

(Pain is only) Your pain - Edit.

Double mint, double fresh.

(Pain is only) Your pain - Room one oh one mix.

(Pain is only) Your pain - The Last mix.

As usual for CD singles, the back cover was clear, with no picture. Julia opened the CD to get a better view of the inside front cover. There was a photograph of two men, standing about a foot apart, facing the camera. The man on the left wore baseball boots, black jogging trousers, a purple sweatshirt and an open black leather jacket. He wore a blank, but stern expression. A caption above his head read "The Dentist". The other man wore black clothes and shoes, all of which looked to have been painted with diagonal white stripes. He also wore a pair of dark glasses with white stripes across the lenses. Above his head was a caption which read "The Emergency".

By the time Julia had finished looking at the case, Saturn had set the CD player in the corridor, with the power lead trailing back into the kitchen, and pressed play. The CD started with a sample of an amplified, military-sounding voice speaking slowly and clearly over a shouting rabble. "We have come to restore order, and to establish discipline. And there can be no discipline" the voice paused "without punishment." This was followed by the predictable kicking in of a fast tekno beat. Julia found the track familiar, perhaps she had danced to "Your pain" at Club Venice.

The punk ranted lyrics of the first verse passed without response. It was not until the first "chorus" that some people in the front room began singing along. Others showed their appreciation in other ways.

"Pain."

"Is only your pain."

"Turn it up."

"Turn it up play it faster turn it up play it faster."

"Fuck off."

"Somebody get up and switch it off before 'Double mint, double fresh' comes on."

"Sad cunt - knows the track order on the single."

"Yeah, turn it off. Put 'Spread 'em and give on'."

There was a chorus of boos.

"What? I was joking."

There was a chorus of doubting noises. Saturn, now back by the front room doorway, took charge.

"OK. Break it up. Let's sort ourselves out. You, you and you you're nearest the door, you get up first. Make some room."

There were a few mumbled "Fuck off."s but general compliance. From the kitchen Julia saw a figure shamble down the hall.

"This way, this way." Michael joined in, directing with his arms. "Plenty of seats in the kitchen. Sir? No stretching in the hall. No pausing, let's just get in the kitchen. OK."

Julia pushed the table against the wall to make more room. Soon there were six people stretching and yawning in the kitchen, three of whom were seated on the rickety chairs.

"How many days have I had my lenses in?" Said one, rubbing his eyes.

"You took them out when you were at my place."

"When was that?"

"Don't know. What day is it now?"

"Sunday."

"Sunday? Sunday already? Fuck."

Their exchange was interrupted by a loud cough hacking from one of the other occupants of the kitchen. After a protracted session the girl seemed satisfied.

"I do like a good cough in the morning." She said, her voice clear.

That seemed to be a cue for the others to start coughing. One, Julia thought she recognised Trick, abruptly stopped, his mouth making small chewing movements, and his face wearing the expression of one who has just bitten into something bad. He stepped quickly to the sink, looked for a moment, reconsidered and turned slightly to spit in the waste disposal unit. Julia, fascinated, saw a brief flash of dull yellow pass through the air. Trick stared for a moment, appalled.

"Oh God." His face was pale as he moved the mixer tap over the waste disposal sink and turned on the cold water.

"Oh Jesus, it's not moving." He backed away from the sink a step. The others huddled around him to see.

"You're really sick Trick. You should see a doctor."

"You should see two doctors, man."

"Put the hot water on it."

"Poke it down."

"Shovel it down, you mean."

"I'm not touching it."

"But it's yours man."

"Look, the hot water's doing it." Trick reached over and switched on the grinder.

The combination of stretching, coughing and excitement seemed to have returned them to the land of the living. Chairs and leaning places on the wall and kitchen units were resumed.

"Is that T-shirt new?"

"Yeah."

"I thought it looked clean."

"I only got it yesterday."

"When?"

"In the market. Don't you remember?"

"Hang on, you've all got them."

"No it was at that party. That bloke was giving them away."

"Which party?"

"The third one. In that old office."

"No it was in the squat."

"This is the squat."

"No the other squat."

Julia found it impossible to follow any more as they all started talking at once. Instead she read the T-shirt slogans. "Rent is wrong". "Take control not ecstasy". "Dole decadent". "I got rigour". "My other T-shirt has a slogan". It took Julia some time to read the slogans, as she was trying not to be obvious about it, and by the time she had, the discussion about their origin had petered out, without reaching a conclusion. For a moment they all fell silent to listen to Dental Emergency, then Julia had a thought.

"Would anyone like some tea?"

"What did you say? Tea? What's that?" Said one of the young men.

"What do you mean 'What's that'?" Replied the girl who liked a good cough.

"I mean what's it stand for? I haven't heard of it."

The girl understood straight away. "You dope-head. It's T E A isn't it. Tea like cup of tea."

First the dope-head, then everybody else, began laughing.

"You should have said 'cup of tea'. 'Some tea' you said. How was I supposed to know?" His remarks were only vaguely, and good naturedly, directed at Julia.

"T for Texstasy. The Real Big brown one. Made the American way."

Saturn put his head into the kitchen. "Don't have tea here, we're going."

"Where? I'm not sure I should do up any exterior right now."

"Wasteland of course." Saturn's statement meant nothing to Julia, but everyone else seemed to brighten up instantly. Saturn ducked back and the six people followed him out of the kitchen, only to return when they remembered, with laughter, that the front door was boarded up.

"Wasteland. Of course. I knew there was a reason for crashing here."

When they returned to the kitchen, Julia was already holding the back door open. She looked for Michael amongst the people filing past her but did not see him. After the last had left Julia went back into the kitchen to look for Michael. He was standing in the hall listening to Og.

"Are we going? Like out I mean? I mean we're coming back, I know we're coming back. But are we all going out now, to the, you know, cafe, the cafe yeah? We're going there now yeah? And then we'll like sit, you know on chairs, in the cafe, and eat, like we'll sit and eat in the cafe? Yeah? sit and eat isn't it?"

Michael nodded. He had listened without a trace of patience, or impatience.

"Cool. I know the way, to the cafe I mean, and I'd see them anyway wouldn't I, I mean the people who've left already yeah? Yeah."

Og walked into the kitchen. Michael, following him, paused to call up the stairs. "We're going to get breakfast at Wasteland. Who's coming?"

There were hurried steps on the stairs and Julia heard a clear voice speaking quickly "Attend confirm. Immediate not diarised."

"Name! Yo! How are you? How's ambiguity research?"

Og walked past Julia to the back door. There he paused, staring at the lock. Michael came into the kitchen, followed by Name, Julia presumed, who wore trainers, jeans, and a white T-shirt with a slogan written across it with red, stick-on letters. He looked about the same age as Og. As the man stretched to put on a donkey jacket, Julia easily

read "What is the ultimate answer?". Name was talking to Michael.

"All public status follows. Status health OK. Status recent sleep OK. Status employ unchanged. End status. Request yours." Name smiled as though he had just told a joke, or perhaps explained something difficult.

Michael nodded in appreciation as he passed Julia without acknowledging her. "I'm OK." He paused at the kitchen door, turned to look past Name at Julia. "Are you coming -" he faltered, "Have you met Name?" Michael gestured with an open hand.

"How'd you do." Name extended his hand and smiled warmly.

"Julia." She said, shaking hands.

"Just call me Name."

"Come on Og." Michael pushed at Og's arm as he reached him.

"Um. Yeah." Og stared for a moment longer at the lock, chewing his lower lip, then walked out.

"Go on, I'll close the door." Name gestured Julia to go in front of him. Michael paused outside the door, and took Julia's hand in his as she reached him. Julia was wondering why Michael had faltered, had he been going to say "Darling" or some other endearment? Michael led her down the dark passage into the street, Name followed. On the street, Michael spoke to Name again, still holding Julia's hand.

"Didn't you say 'Health status' last time, instead of 'Status Health'?"

"Yeah but I decided that format wasn't really suitable for multiple word status categories like 'Recent sleep'. This way it's just the first word and the last which are part of the form. And the word 'Status' introduces every category which makes the phrase 'End status' more easily identifiable as a form element. It's important that form elements are easily distinguishable, as well as that they allow the required information to be unambiguously communicated."

In the cafe

Soon after leaving the squat Julia, Michael and the other late leavers had caught up to the main body of the Wasteland party. Julia noticed that they moved slowly in the morning cold, like reptiles. The couples were huddled, the single ones hunched, barely erect. In one or two cases

the hunching even went as far as their eyelids: shut. Nobody spoke during the few minutes it took them to walk to the cafe at the end of the road.

Having to close order to pass through the door of the cafe slowed the group down. Julia used the time to look at the cafe before entering, a precaution nobody else took. The cafe was large, occupying as much space as two standard sized shops. The name of the cafe was written across the whole width of its front. The words "WEST END LANE" appeared in squat, sans serif, painted letters, followed by the word "Cafe" in italics. Below the name was the window, free of steam at this time of year, comprised of four six foot tall panes of glass, covered with a metal grid. Below the window was three feet of grubby brickwork, then just pavement. Julia looked through the window at the cafe's interior. The linoleum, plastic bolted in chair-table units and white painted walls were all old and clean except for the cracks. Only three customers could be seen inside. At a table next to the window sat two men; from the paint and dust on their trainers, hands, jeans, sweatshirts and hair Julia surmised they were builders. Between them were two large empty plates, two sets of cutlery, two small empty plates, two mugs of tea, one mobile telephone and no words. An old man leant with one elbow, talking across the serving counter to the woman who took the orders (leaning with both elbows), and through the hatch to the man in the kitchen. He talked about many different things and the man and woman agreed with him.

The Wasteland party formed a quiet queue to the counter. As they waited in the warm, bacon scented air of the cafe they slowly unhunched. The serving woman, who had just been agreeing that it was quiet, was a little alarmed, but also pleased at the sudden increase in custom. The party started tentatively, with a few orders of "just a tea please" and several "bacon sandwich please"s, but got into its stride about half way and started ordering variations on the English Breakfast theme. Julia noticed that the woman had her own version of the fast food order takers' litany. After every order she asked "Anything else?", and then directed customers to sit with a gesture towards a trolley of salt, pepper, vinegar and tomato ketchup, saying "Condiments are just there. Sit anywhere you like." Og was directly in front of her in the queue, Michael just behind. In front of Og was Name, whose order was:

"Black pudding, two eggs, sausage, beans, a white coffee with no sugar and nothing else please."

The woman started, her usual litany had been rendered superfluous. After a pause she charged Name for his order and sent him to sit with her usual phrase. Instead of sitting down directly, Name stayed near the counter, watching Og. Julia noticed a certain tension come over Michael; he also looked at Og.

"Yes please?" The woman prompted Og.

Og looked worriedly at the menu hanging behind the counter, which had "WEST END LANE" printed across the top in squat red sans serif letters followed by "Cafe" in italics. For five seconds the woman looked at Og questioningly, then her eyes flicked to Julia, then Name, then Michael. Og said nothing.

"Remember what we discussed last time Og? Just have the same as me man." Name said. "Just say 'I'll have the same please' Og. Like we discussed."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I'll have the same. As him. Him there yeah? The same thing to eat, I mean things to eat I mean. And drink. Yeah." Og had forgotten something. "Please." He remembered, nodding.

"Black pudding, two eggs, sausage, beans, white coffee no sugar yeah?"

Og was overcome with thought as the woman asked him to confirm his order. Name stepped in to save time.

"That'll be fine. Here you go." He paid for Og's meal, and led him away.

"Thank you." the woman said to Name. She hesitated, rejected her normal patter again, then turned to Julia. "Yes please?". The train was back on the rails.

Julia ordered and paid, found herself a place at one of the tables occupied by other members of the party, then looked for a nearby spot for Michael. There was none. Meanwhile Michael had ordered and paid, and was now looking for Julia. Their eyes met. Julia shrugged, looking about to convey that there was no place for Michael, then met his gaze again. He nodded at a table for two, separate from the rest of the people, raised his eyebrows questioningly. Julia wrinkled her face and cocked her head to one side. Michael nodded and went to another spare place at a long table.

Julia smiled to her neighbours as she sat down, recognising Flick and Trick among them. They, however, were already in several conversations amongst themselves. Only one person, a man she did not recognise, smiled back at her, and he only briefly. Once everyone was seated mugs of tea and coffee began to appear amongst them. They continued talking. Julia listened, hoping for an in.

"It's an anagram isn't it? West End Lane, Wasteland."

"It's not. There's only one A in 'west end lane'."

"So?"

"And three E's."

"It's not an anagram then."

"It is. That's actually what anagram means."

"In which dictionary is that then?"

"It's got to have the same number of every letter."

"I'm not talking about dictionaries, I'm saying this is what it actually means."

"Oh here comes Mister 'I define language' again."

Julia switched her attention.

"I was reading about sexually transmitted diseases the other day. Like, if you think about it, the mouth and the anus are completely different chemical environments to the vagina."

"That's something that's never appealed to me."

"What STD's?"

"Anal sex. I can't understand why people try it. They must be so jaded."

Julia felt she could make no acceptable remark, she switched back.

"Holy and raw."

"Good one."

"Now hardly a."

"That's not a sentence."

"It could be the start of one. Like - what was it you said? - War on lady H."

"Now hardly a holy and raw war on lady H?"

Julia guessed they were still on anagrams. They lapsed into silence, thinking, mouthing words. If Julia could think of an anagram, of whatever they were trying to think of an anagram, she could join in. She was struck by nothing other than the realisation that it did not matter what their original phrase or name had been.

"Bacon sandwich, and another bacon sandwich?"

The serving woman was waved down by Trick. One of the sandwiches was for the girl sitting opposite him.

"Another one just coming." The woman assured.

The girl opposite Trick discussed the sandwich, after taking her first bite.

"I consider myself a vegetarian, because I eat only a little meat. Why has it got to be this kind of all or nothing thing?"

"You didn't have to have a bacon sandwich though."

"No but still, after deciding to become a vegetarian, I eat much less meat than I used to."

As more food arrived, conversation lessened.

The man next to Julia seemed to be picking at his full breakfast. He began by tasting each item in isolation, then going through the possible combinations. He treated the plate as a puzzle, the object was that the last forkful of food contained a piece of every item. He was successful today, finishing with a small piece from the middle of a slice of black pudding, a sliver of bacon, a tiny patch of sausage skin, a single baked bean and a corner of the white of a fried egg.

As people finished their breakfasts, and returned to the remains of their teas or coffees, discussion turned to the question of what to do for the rest of the day.

"I know what I'm doing." Trick drew his closed hand from the pocket of his jacket. "I'm doing some of these." He shook his hand, producing a pilly rattling noise.

"Trick. Put that away." Flick was worried. Trick grinned at her and she swung her arm, hitting his chest. He stopped grinning and put the pill bottle back in his pocket. Flick frowned at him for a few seconds until he said "Sorry". They had resolved their quarrel, and no uneasy silence descended.

"Hey I forgot to say this earlier." The man who had mentioned STD's earlier said suddenly. He continued in a lower voice. "At college, there's this system for medical students so we can get in to operating theatres. Well, I've got a way to get some other people in too. You interested?" He looked up and down the table, trying to lock onto a willing face.

"What can you see?"

"Road accidents, emergency operations, have to take a chance and see what comes in."

"That's really sick."

"It might be interesting."

"You watch it on TV."

"That's different."

"How?"

"Well you go then, you're so keen."

"I don't want to go. But that doesn't mean I think it's sick."

There were no takers for the operating theatre. People started standing up to leave. The people leaving had various Sunday morning destinations in mind, Julia heard parks, other people's houses, Chinatown and kicking around London mentioned. Julia noticed Michael standing outside the cafe and went to join him.

Saturn left at the same time. He stood outside wiping his lips with his hands, moving his tongue around inside his mouth, and pulling faces. "Intense grease meal." he said, appreciatively.

In the library

When those who were going to drift had drifted only Julia, Michael, Saturn, Flick, Trick, Og and Name remained on the pavement. Multiple vague arrangements had been made to meet up again that evening in pubs.

Flick took a packet of cigarettes from her pocket, put one in her mouth, then fumbled in Trick's pockets for a lighter. Saturn noticed and smiled.

"What's the sexiest way to ask for a light?" Saturn directed his question to everyone in general, but knew that only Michael would reply.

"Do you have some fire?" Michael said in a French accent.

"Light me." Julia remembered from a film.

"Touch my lungs." Saturn husked. Julia and Michael laughed a little and stood closer together. "I can't carry it off really. I think only a woman could say it. Hey Flick?"

Flick's fumbling in Trick's pockets had turned into a half cuddle. She turned her head to look at Saturn.

"Say 'Touch my lungs'"

"What?"

"Touch my lungs." Saturn repeated.

Flick smiled and turned away. She and Trick started walking, arm in arm. Julia looked at Saturn, then at Michael. She took Michael's arm and they too began the walk back to the squat.

Saturn hurried to catch up to Og and Name, who had also started walking.

Julia looked at the others and decided they were far enough away for her and Michael to have a private conversation. She told him about some of Saturn's remarks.

"It's not that I think he's after me or anything. They just seem like strange things to say." Julia tailed off, trying to convey her general unease about remarks such as "I think Michael is with Julia" and his proposal of marriage.

Michael pursed and relaxed his lips and said "Saturn's like me." quietly. Julia looked at his face, he seemed almost close to tears. "Like me one day ago anyway." He looked directly at Julia to say "Before you came looking for me." The corners of his lips curled slightly. "I understand him now, thanks to you."

Julia spoke in a shushing tone "Oh Michael." Their arms locked a little tighter, bringing them closer together. Their pace slowed.

"He wants to participate in things around him. That's not unusual I suppose, wanting to belong." Michael continued his analysis. "He wants to participate in our relationship. He wants to be your friend, well not exactly your friend, but something. He wants a place in your life. He wants a place in everybody's life, everybody he sees. I used to as well."

Julia suddenly had the feeling that she had taken Michael a great distance since their encounter in the shower. This had not been part of her original intention. Julia had envisioned a search on her part, not a journey for Michael. Had she completed her search? had she seen Michael's core? Before Julia could do more than ask herself these questions, her considerations were interrupted.

"Run. You'll make it. Push that pram fast" Trick was shouting encouragement across the road to a woman with a baby in a pram. A little boy was next to Trick, having already run across the road, against his mother's instructions. The boy was doing a little dance to celebrate the naughtiness of his disobedience. The woman did not try to cross the road immediately, but waited until it was safe.

Having crossed she frowned at Trick and smacked the little boy's bottom. He stopped dancing and pouted.

"John you're a very naughty boy. Don't ever cross the road before I tell you to."

"Hey John." Trick called to the boy, who turned. "Keep the faith". Trick gave the fist salute with his right hand. John's mother tutted as she took John's hand (which stopped him returning the salute) and hurried him away.

Flick and Trick had stopped walking during this exchange and the three groups caught each other up. Saturn started talking again.

"Do you remember that time in the underground Trick? When you said to that guy about adverts or something."

Michael whispered in Julia's ear "He remembers exactly what was said. Word for word. And so do I. He's asking Trick to involve him in the conversation."

Julia did not react to this analysis, although she could see that it was probably correct.

"Please sit down, I can't see that poster behind you." Saturn's delivery was completely deadpan. "Passengers should at no time obstruct the view of any advertisement." He continued in a formalistic tone, before bursting out laughing.

They had reached the squat. All except Flick and Trick started down the alley to the back door, then stopped as they noticed the absence.

"We should probably get back to our place." Trick explained. "It was pretty disgusting when we left."

"We found crisp crumbs in our bed." Flick added with a disgusted but amused expression.

"I can't remember the last time we had crisps, but there they were." Trick continued. "It's bad. We have to go clear up." The two of them waved and were waved to, then walked off towards the nearest tube station.

Name, who had keys, led the way into the squat, followed by Og, Michael, Julia and finally Saturn. In the kitchen a man in a long dressing gown was making tea. He acknowledged the arrivals with a smile and a nod.

"Request status and location confirm of diarised item game of scrabble please." Name said to the man.

"Ready in the front room." was the reply. The man had a very gentle, well modulated voice.

"We're going to play yeah? scrabble, like a game of scrabble, yeah? In the front room is it? Through there yeah?" Og nodded and walked through the kitchen and into the hall.

"I was kind of hoping to have bit of a sit down, or even a lie down in the front room." Michael spoke hesitantly.

The man in the dressing gown answered. "Use the library?"

"Oh of course. Cheers Stillness."

The man in the dressing gown, Stillness, smiled and inclined his head to accept Michael's thanks. Stillness and Name went to join Og in the front room. Michael led the way to the library "It's upstairs".

The library was two floors above, and the same size and shape as the front room. One wall had a window, the other three were lined with metal shelving on which books were piled. In the centre of the room were two rickety armchairs.

Michael entered, pulled the cushions off one of these and laid them on the floor declaring: "I need a bit of a lie down." Saturn followed him, saying "That seems like a jolly good idea." He took the cushions from the other chair. Julia did not feel like having a lie down. "I don't know, I guess I'll read a book or something."

"You've got quite a choice." Mumbled Saturn, now supine.

Michael mumbled agreement.

Julia wondered what had knocked them out so fast. She decided it must have been the big breakfasts. By winding one corner of the blackout around itself Julia was able to let a little light into the room. Now she had to select a book. She started with the shelf nearest. This seemed to have a pile of different pamphlets. Julia read some titles:

Zenrise series: Complexity is boring.

Zenrise series: The wrong way.

She picked this one up, quickly read the first sentence "There was once a Sufi mullah who always gave wrong directions to any stranger he should meet." then replaced it. She tried a different pile, picked up the first booklet, which appeared to be a scientific paper of some kind, entitled "Non-Euclidean elements in modern free ritual". Julia flicked the pages looking at some of the diagrams before replacing this too and moving to a different shelf. One with books on this time.

At the top of the pile was a fairly new paperback. Julia picked it up and read the cover. There was a title "Hardface" and a sub-title "The story of No-number Zen and the lager bastards." Finding a

comfortable place against the wall by the window Julia sat down, and opened the book at the first page of story.

In the end

After some hours of reading, Julia was suddenly disturbed by a tickling sensation on her right leg. Her leg twitched, a reflex against insects. As her frontal lobes caught up to her lizard brain, she realised that Michael had silently crawled over and touched her. Michael knelt grinning, with a finger to his lips for quiet. He reached out and pushed the hem of the suit trouser up a few inches and stroked the exposed part of Julia's right leg.

"Saturn's asleep" Michael's hand settled on her leg. "and I want my suit back." His other hand started fiddling with the belt buckle at Julia's waist.

"Not now. Michael." Julia cast a quick look at Saturn's recumbent form. "Well not here." She brushed his hand away and re-secured the buckle. Michael's hand found the other hem of the suit's trousers and rested on the skin of the leg underneath. Julia rested the book in her hands on her chest and looked at Michael kneeling at her feet with a hand on each of her ankles. Michael looked back, his hands not stroking, just holding.

"Are you going to walk it back to my place for me then?"

Julia nodded and Michael released her legs.

Saturn heard them stand, heard Michael go to the door as Julia replaced the book, then listened to them descending the stairs. He had not been asleep. He lay still and became depressed.

"We'd better make our good-byes." Michael said as they neared the ground floor.

Julia was about to admonish him for giving instructions when none were necessary, when she was distracted by the sound of laughter from the front room.

"They must be playing Illumination Scrabble." Michael's muttered explanation did not assuage her curiosity.

As they put their heads around the door "Good-bye" Julia did not notice anything unusual about the scrabble game, although she looked.

They left the squat, and began walking back to the room where Michael lived.

"What's Illumination Scrabble?"

"I don't know really." Michael replied after a pause for thought. "Not everyone can play. I can't for example. They told me."

From his delay in answering, Julia surmised that she was asking Michael about something sensitive. He had not given her an answer straight away, but considered what was suitable to tell her. She decided it could wait. Something to find out later. There Julia caught herself. Later? Yes later. She was feeling a future with Michael ahead of her. Julia asked no more questions right away, Michael made no attempt to explain further.

As they left the squat's street, Julia noticed a corner shop ahead. A man was leaving the shop as they approached.

"Hey! Get away from my car!" He shouted at a big man standing facing a 2CV parked in front of the shop.

The big man turned guiltily, dropping a screwdriver.

"What are you doing?" The man asked angrily, approaching his car.

The man by the car lunged forward, punching him in the head. He staggered, dropping a striped plastic bag of shopping to the floor. Michael considered that his anger had blinded him to the fact that carrying a bag of shopping in one hand, and a removable car stereo in the other left him wide open, without a guard. Nevertheless the man stepped back, rolling with the punch. Then he turned the step into a spin, going back towards his opponent. As he stepped around, his arm swung up and the short side of the metal case of the Pioneer connected with the other man's head. He carried the blow through and the man fell to the pavement. He steadied himself against a wall and looked at the sprawled figure for any sign of movement. There was none and he relaxed. The need to stay up passed, he sagged against the wall and sank to a seated position.

A little boy ran inside the shop as his father appeared at the door with another man. The other man pulled out a mobile phone and dialled whilst the shopkeeper checked the two fallen men.

"Do you think we should help?"

"Do you know first aid?"

"No."

"Nor do I."

They crossed the road. Julia noticed the little boy hiding behind his mother in the shop, but still peeking out. The shopkeeper put the fallen man

in the recovery position, and persuaded the man with the stereo to lie similarly. He held on to his stereo though.

"Everything seems under control anyway."

"Yes."

Michael reached out and took Julia's arm. He held it as they walked. "Fucking hell." She heard him mutter under his breath. They walked on in silence.

"Notice how quiet we've gone." Michael spoke as they turned a corner. "Violence, I mean not even directed at us. In fact we'd probably cope better if it had been. Like we can't respond to it."

"Release of adrenalin." A fitness instructor knows these things.

"I'm shaking. My voice is shaking, listen to me."

Julia was. "Michael, if you didn't have this reaction you'd be dead, or so used to seeing violence you'd have to be seeing it all the time, even then you'd still get adrenalin. You'd just learn to ride it I guess."

Michael went on expressing his own shock until it had become an entity separate to himself. Julia obscured her shock with data, much of it irrelevant, until it was completely hidden. They had both dealt with the incident by the time they reached the building in which Michael lived.

In the beginning

Michael opened the front door, entered and held it open for Julia, then closed it behind her. As he followed Julia up, Michael looked at the shapes her legs made under the suit as she ascended the stairs two at a time. There was a stretched-out tautness, subtly present under the slept-in bagginess. Julia enjoyed the fact of her fitness as she climbed the stairs without difficulty, keeping a good pace all the way to the top floor. There she waited a moment for Michael. Michael caused further delay by having put his keys away after the front door; he now had to take them out again to open the door to his room. Michael went in first, walked over to a small table and dropped his keys on it. Julia closed the door and went to stand close behind Michael. She reached her hands under his arms and around his ribs, allowing them to come to a stroking rest on his torso. This did not interfere with Michael's movements as he emptied his pockets onto the table.

Michael leaned back slightly, his back touching Julia's chest. She moved her right leg forward slightly, brushing against the outside of his right leg, allowing her groin to fit against the rounded corner of his buttocks. Julia was just slightly shorter than Michael, and she had to lift her chin just a little to rest on his right shoulder. She opened her mouth a fraction and warm breath touched his right ear.

Having emptied his own pockets, Michael reached his hands behind, patting and feeling the suit coat Julia was wearing. The sides were hanging and he slipped his hands in the outside pockets easily. Julia sniggered and Michael smiled as he brought out a snotty paper tissue and dropped it on the small table. Michael reached his hands backwards again, this time lower, probing for the pockets of the trousers. To fit his hands in he had to pull Julia against him tighter. She made a small contentedness noise in his ear. The trouser pockets were empty, but Michael did not remove his hands. He stroked Julia's legs through the thin lining, spreading and closing his fingers. Both his thumbs felt the ridge of the leg holes of her knickers at the same time. Clumsily lifting it through the pocket fabric, Michael squeezed the fingers of his right hand underneath. As far as he could squeeze them, he could just feel the slight roughness of her pubic hair. Julia breathed in deeply; she was enjoying the gradual, fumbling, playful journey. Her hands moved on his chest and abdomen. Julia and Michael stayed pressed together, making small movements, until she decided to remove the jacket he was wearing.

Julia took a lapel in each hand and pulled the jacket back over Michael's shoulders, pausing as he removed his hands from her pockets, and off his arms. They had disengaged. Julia took the jacket to the open wardrobe and put it on a hanger. Michael followed Julia and reached around from behind her, to remove the jacket she was wearing in the same way. Once he had pulled the jacket back over her shoulders however, he did not remove it, he simply released it. Julia held her arms back to allow it to fall to the floor, as Michael placed his right hand on her left breast and his left on her stomach. At first he placed his hand covering her breast, his fingers tracing the edges. Michael noticed that the aerobics top she wore under his shirt was smooth, unlike a brassiere. Moving his hand back, to allow his fingers to search across her breast, Michael found a place where two pieces of lycra joined. Satisfied, he changed the position of his hand

again, raising it to let his fingers dangle and find the muffled bump of Julia's nipple. Julia had freed herself of the jacket, and grabbed Michael's hips to pull him against her. She felt the hardening penis in his trousers against her soft behind.

Keeping the fingertips of his right hand drifting around the nipple of Julia's left breast, Michael brought his mouth close to her left ear. He breathed warmly on the ear, then kissed her neck just below it. The next kiss was slightly lower, just above the collar of the shirt she wore, and Michael curled his lips to make the kiss moist. Julia's breathing quickened as she tried to twist her neck to expose more to Michael's mouth, but found the shirt collar restricted her. She made a frustrated noise and Michael moved his hands to the shirt collar. Julia quickly replaced them, the right on her breast, the left on her stomach, but lower than where Michael had placed it, with her own hands, then impatiently pulled at the tie to loosen it and undid the top two buttons of the shirt. She stretched her neck up excitedly, pulling Michael's head onto her shoulder with her left hand. He burrowed the shirt aside with his neck and chin, and brought his mouth to Julia's neck. She gasped as he kissed and nipped her neck, gradually craning to reach the front of her neck, which Julia leaned her head back to offer.

As she leaned her head, Julia's body twisted slightly, and her right hand, which had been floating, found a way to Michael's groin. He jerked away slightly as her hand landed a little heavily. She breathed a sorry, and he bit her neck as repayment. Julia could feel a zip fly, an erection straining against underpants, a button and some kind of hook fastening. She groped at Michael's hard-on for a while, as he continued to work on her neck and breast. She decided it was time for a kiss.

Julia released Michael's head, and straightened her neck. Her mouth moved across his cheek as he got the idea. Their tongues met first, then their lips, as they slipped and slid deeper into each other's mouths. Michael seemed intent on reaching Julia's back teeth immediately, she controlled the urge to pull back and accepted his tongue, pushing her own back into his mouth. He eased a little after feeling her molars and their tongues twined, tasting underside, then top, then underside again; their lips sometimes together, sometimes apart to allow air in. Julia untwisted her neck by moving her hand from Michael's groin and turning her body to face him. They embraced each other. One of Michael's hands

touched the back of her neck, the other dropped to the small of her back, a few fingers slipped down the back of her trousers. Julia passed one hand over Michael's shoulder, but held the other against his crotch, feeling his balls and cock. Michael took a handful of Julia's shirt to untuck it, then slipped his hand inside her trousers, inside her knickers to rest on her left buttock. The kiss finished. They looked into each other's eyes for a moment before their embrace loosened and Julia knelt down.

Julia undid the button and hook on Michael's trousers, revealing another button inside. She undid this too and unzipped the fly. As his trousers fell open, the sight of a small damp patch on Michael's underpants at the tip of his erection greeted Julia's eyes. She carefully stretched the underpants, and pulled them and his trousers down to his knees. Julia supported Michael's balls in her right hand, and held the shaft of penis in her left. Michael looked down to watch Julia stimulating his cock. First she kissed the tip lightly with just her lips. Then she extended her tongue and licked around the head. Then she began to kiss with her mouth open. Each kiss was wetter and longer than the last, and on each kiss Julia's mouth opened wider. Finally she put the head of Michael's knob into her mouth. Michael watched her head bob and twist, and noticed the tail of her shirt hanging out. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the watery swirling sensation at the end of his penis.

Julia removed her hands to undo her trousers, and shoes. She pushed her trousers and knickers down a little, as she knelt, sucking. Michael felt that he would come soon, if Julia continued. He reached down with his right hand and lifted her chin slightly. She rocked back and looked up at his face. Julia knew why Michael had stopped her and she smiled at him. She reached out and undid the laces on his shoes, one with each hand. Michael leant on the cupboard for support and lifted one foot, then the other, as Julia removed his shoes and socks. Next she pulled his trousers and underpants down to his ankles, stroking his legs as she did so. He repeated the manoeuvre and soon stood naked from the waist down. Julia slowly stood up and shuffled to the bed. She sat on the edge to take off her own shoes. Before she could however, Michael had removed his shirt and T-shirt and quickly stepped over to do it for her.

Julia lay back across the bed, moving further onto it until just her feet were over the edge. Michael

pulled her shoes off, then leaned forwards and took hold of her trousers and knickers. Julia pushed her arms down and raised her midsection from the bed so that Michael could pull the clothes off her legs. He took her socks off in the same movement. Julia raised her head for a look at Michael's naked body as he stood at her feet, then relaxed, stretched her arms behind her head, and parted her legs.

Michael leaned forward, his right foot on the floor, his left knee on the bed between Julia's ankles. He ran one hand up each of her bare legs, pausing at the knees, and slowing to a stroke on the insides of her thighs. Julia opened her legs wider. Michael put his right hand to his mouth to moisten the middle finger. He liked to pause at times like this, just to spend a moment looking at a woman's vagina. Having had his look, he bent over Julia and probed the crack between her legs with his wet finger, not deeply, not yet.

Michael's finger made a few circles, as an approach, a request for admission, before settling on Julia's clitoris. Julia voiced her approval quietly. Michael pressed her firmly, Julia could feel his finger moving left-right, up-down and around, although it did not leave one spot. When he removed his finger, it was in a tracing movement, up across her bush, then around to her inner thigh. Michael leaned over her to play the fingertips of both hands on her inner thighs, and to stroke them further apart. Julia felt the moisture on the tip of one of his fingers and knew it was not spittle. Julia bent her knees, tilting her vagina up and giving access to both Michael's hands, as they neared the place where her legs joined. For a second Julia felt his hands brushing her hair to the sides, before Michael's face descended to her.

With his mouth open, Michael salivated over the already moist area. His tongue, as his finger had, introduced itself with a lap of pleasure around her labia. Then it settled on the same piece his finger had. After a few licks Julia found herself ohing and ahing and gripping and releasing the quilt on Michael's bed. Her vocal approval goaded Michael to the next stage. Moving on his elbows, he pushed his face hard into her crotch. His hands held the underside of her thighs, close to her buttocks. Keeping his teeth back, he now brought his lips to Julia's clitoris, actually sucking it, as well as licking. One of Julia's hands moved to his head, stroking him to continue. Michael kept at his station, occasionally pausing to push his tongue around and deeper into Julia's vagina,

until her ecstasy reached its first peak. Only then did he pull away to wipe a few stray curly little hairs from his face. Her hand brushed down to his shoulder, and she looked up and smiled at him. Julia moved her right leg to touch his side and stroked his bum with the sole of her right foot.

Michael reached out to the small chest of drawers by his bed and pulled the top draw open. Inside were two kinds of condom. He chose a ribbed style, and turned his back to Julia to sit on the edge of the bed between her legs. Julia sat up, behind him, against him; her legs touched his along the length of their thighs, her groin settled against his buttocks.

Julia unbuttoned the shirt she wore, removed it and discarded it. Her aerobics top following it to the floor almost immediately. She leant forward against Michael, her breasts cushioning against his back, and looked over his shoulder. He had torn the condom open and was fiddling with it. Julia let her hands drop to Michael's thighs, at the top, near enough to put the condom on for him if he wanted. Michael put the rolled prophylactic over the tip of his penis, pinched the air out of the tip and started the mission to unroll. Julia watched patiently, politely not interfering, but stroking his legs with her hands, and generally rubbing herself against him. The friction would keep him aroused, facilitating the conclusion of the operation. Not too eventually the thing unfurled. The condom was fully deployed. Now came the difficult task of deciding on a first position, without plainly discussing it.

Julia scuttled back to the head of the bed, and lay on her back. Michael turned and climbed on. Missionary it was. Julia tasted a little of herself as their tongues and lips met. She could feel Michael's sheathed erection bobbing about above her crotch as she spread and lifted her legs, resting her feet on Michael's calves. Michael moved his waist up and back to make his entry.

Without recourse to hand-guidance, his own or Julia's, Michael placed more than the head of his penis into her already damp vagina with a single push. She groaned with pleasure. After a few withdrawals they were comfortably fitted together. Michael settled his head by Julia's and they began pumping and gasping their way to where the Gods live. Julia had been half way there after Michael's eloquent vocal attentions, consequently she arrived sooner. But she did not

mind waiting, going through times and places. From an age of kissing, nibbling and rocking in and out. To an eternity where she accommodated his length from above, swaying forwards and backwards along it, as he fondled her arse with his hands, and touched and pulled her breasts with his lips and teeth. To where she backed onto him, as he gripped her hips and slapped her buttocks into his groin, again and again and countless agains. To where she lay flat on her face for ever, her legs pressed together by his knees as he sunk a path all the way from his balls moving against the backs of her thighs to his cock stuck all the way into her cunt. To where Michael finally came, face to face on top of her, his weight pressing her drawn up knees to her shoulders, his buttocks crumpled in her clenched hands, and his penis thrustloaded to the depths of her ecstasy.

Sweating and trembling, Michael and Julia kissed, without tongues, once. Then he adjusted to let her legs down and they lay, him on top of her and inside her and clasped in her arms. When his breathing and heartbeat had returned to normal and he could move again, Michael reached down to hold the collar of the condom and withdrew. Julia watched him as he struggled to a kneeling position, pulled the sheath off and tied a knot in its open end. Then he collapsed next to her and dropped the object in a small bin by the bed. Julia rolled against Michael and he put one arm around her. When they started to feel the cold from their sweat they found the duvet and snuggled under.

Michael took a moment to look at his alarm clock. "How can it be that late?" He wondered aloud. Julia giggled.

"Not much of the weekend left." Michael opined.

"No."

"We spent some time together."

"Yes."

"I'm glad we did. I love you now."

"I love you. It was fun."

"I don't think we should sleep now."

Julia made a complaint.

"We could rest a little." Michael compromised.

"Then go out and eat. Quite a big meal."

"Eat."

"Then come back here, fuck till Monday, then phone in sick."

And they did.

Hardface

Part Four

chapter seven

Coll's terrain van had a magnetic compass fitted in the dashboard, a mini-dish satellite aerial on the roof, a radio locator tuned to a similar unit in Jack's terrain van (two antenna fixed to opposite corners of the chassis for triangulation), and a view of the stars through the windscreen. Using a combination of these he navigated to his rendezvous with Jack and Polit at the music venue they were visiting that Friday night.

The venue was not entirely indoors. Fences with gates had been fixed across a few streets to enclose an area. Coll stopped his van at one of the gates as two guards came out of a derelict building.

"All right?"

"Yeah. All right?"

"Pay through tonight." That is "[You've got to] pay [to get] through [the gate] tonight [because there's something special on]."

Coll reached under his seat for the bag he kept for such occasions. With the bag on his lap, Coll went through the contents item by item; taking each one out to show the guards, describing it, then replacing it in the bag. The guards saw a packet of razors, a small calculator, some nice cutlery, a box of painkillers, a packet of cigarettes, and two paperbacks in English before they chose some batteries as his entrance fee. They directed Coll to a parking area. The other terrain van was easy to notice and Coll parked in a space next to it.

The car park was on one side of the fenced in area. On the other side was the venue's bar and stage. Light shone from the bar building's door and windows, and from no other building around there. Outside the bar, battery lanterns had been placed in more or less of a grid pattern to illuminate a clear area about twenty metres square. The lanterns either had their bases set in concrete bollards or were welded to stiff metal tripods to prevent theft. The area was bordered on one side by what had once been a loading stage. Now it was a performance stage, and therefore had a row of battery lanterns, with

reflectors fitted behind them, attached to the edge and up the walls around the sides.

A few of the lanterns in the clear area had people gathered around them drinking from cans and eating. Coll found Jack and Polit just outside the bar leaning against the wall. On the floor between them was a plastic wrapped 24-pack of canned beers, six of which were already missing. On top of the pack was a stack of plastic skiffs.

"Here he is." announced Jack.

"All right Romeo?"

Coll cracked a grin. "Yeah. Thirsty work though."

"Help yourself."

"Well. What shall I have?" Coll paused and scratched his head, overacting "thinks" for Polit and Jack's amusement. "I've got my lager shirt on, John." he recited.

"You've got your lager shirt on, John." Polit and Jack chorused the reply.

Coll looked left and right, eyes narrowed, then raised his eyebrows to look down at his feet. With a theatrical flourish, he lifted his left trouser two inches so that his sock was visible.

"I've got my lager socks on, too."

"Looks like you're having" Chorused again.

"Lager!" All three of them this time.

They finished the routine, a well established one in The Lager Bastards, in the traditional manner by taking random turns at barking the word "lager" in each others faces for ten seconds or so.

With the forms observed, Coll proceeded to pull a clean skiff from the stack, free a can from the plastic wrapping, pour the contents of the can into the skiff and then drop the empty can to the ground. After squashing it flat with his foot, he kicked it over against the wall behind Polit to join the other six crushed empties.

After a sip a thought crossed his mind. "What'd you give for them?" he asked.

"Them crap watches."

Coll nodded. After a few more swigs (half the glass) he felt settled.

"Band here yet?" he asked.

"No."

"Anyone else? Anyone we know?"

"No"

"Shall we go in and sit down?"

"Oh they're wankers in there mate." It was Jack who had spoken, and Coll looked at him. Jack looked away and wouldn't look back. Coll looked at Polit, who looked down at his boots. Coll thought for a moment.

"They say something when you got them?" He pointed down at the cans.

"Not really. Just mumblings."

"And there's only two of us. Well there was."

"Well now there's three. And one of them's me. So we'll see. Shall we?" Coll picked up the stack of skiffs in his free hand "Right, bring the lagers."

People in the bar turned to look at the three casuals walking in, then turned back to their conversations. Coll noticed a few smirks. Somebody had said something before. Coll wouldn't be smirked at; time to wipe those smiles off their faces he decided.

"All right are we?" he addressed the bar in general. "Sit there." he directed Polit and Jack to the end of a small high table half occupied by a few lads, but with a couple of empty stools at one end. "Can I have this? Cheers." He took a stool from another table and joined the other two who had put the lagers on the table and sat down. "Anyone want lager?" He addressed the bar again. Nobody replied.

Polit and Jack were casting furtive glances around at the people in the bar, and occasionally at Coll himself. Coll was proud of intimidating the whole room - perhaps fifteen people - especially as his two lads were there to see him do it. He could almost hear them vicariously bragging about it to their friends later. Just then Coll felt somebody looking at him for longer than necessary.

"Do you want lager?" He stared straight back at the man looking at him. The man turned back to his own table, cowed by Coll's threatening manner.

Coll turned back, casting a conspiratorial smile at Jack and Polit, and went to take a sip of his lager. As he picked up the skiff, however, he noticed a patch of grey crust on the white foam of the surface of the drink. He stared at it for a moment.

"Cigarette ash" he declared to Jack and Polit. He looked at the other men at the table. The one sitting nearest to him was smoking. "Cigarette" he said, pointing. The men were all sniggering into their drinks "nice one". Coll waited until the man put the cigarette to his mouth to make his move.

Coll's left hand clamped across the man's mouth and cigarette holding hand. At the same time, Coll's right hand slapped against the back of the man's head. The man's head was still ringing as he was pulled backwards off his stool as Coll jumped to the floor without letting go of him. By the time the smoker's mates had stood up, and Jack and Polit had reacted, Coll had punched his head against the floor three times.

"I'll handle this!" A man's voice shouted, hoping to forestall a brawl.

Coll looked up from his crouched position to see a small, fit looking man standing in the centre of the bar. The man was cool. He wore frayed black canvas and denim all over, he had a brimmed hat and a long coat on, he stood relaxed with his arms hanging at his sides, he had stubble. And his commanding tone had indeed made everyone pause.

His right wrist flicked and there was a flash of metal as he threw two gleaming shuriken. Coll took one on his hard right forearm; but the other hit him on the cheek. It was very sharp and penetrated a little way through his hardened skin. Coll snatched it out before it could fall, put it to his mouth and bit it in half. The man's eyes widened as Coll chewed half his best handmade shuriken.

Coll stood slowly and spat a wad of metal grit to the floor between him and the man in black. Without a sound he rushed forward. The man smashed two kicks, a punch and an elbow into him, but Coll just walked through them and wrapped his arms around him. The man's legs danced about looking for purchase and muffled squeaks escaped his mouth as his upper body strained against Coll's iron-plus grip.

"They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. But really it's through his ribs."

Coll shifted the man into a head lock. Requiring only his left arm to hold the man, whose arms flailed at Coll's impervious body, Coll drew back his right to deliver a crunching upper cut to the centre of the lower chest. The flailing decreased. After a second similar punch the flailing arms and dancing legs went limp. Coll punched a third time

to make sure. This time his fist came back wet with blood seeping into the dead man's shirt (a broken rib had punctured the skin).

Everybody in the bar stared at Coll. He turned his head, his gaze meeting everybody's eyes in turn, then nodded at the unconscious smoker on the floor saying "OK he started on me with his cigarette ash." Nobody disagreed.

"This started on me with his shuriken." Coll dropped the broken body on the floor.

"Any of you want to start on me?" There was a pregnant silence. "Or can I just have a quiet drink and listen to a band?"

Some people sat down, pretending or really not intimidated, but most picked up their stuff (including an unconscious friend in one case) and shuffled from the room. In the course of the next half hour more people left the bar to sit outside. Jack heard somebody saying that they wanted to get a good spot as they left.

"I reckon we'll get a good spot, eh?" he remarked, loudly, intending to be overheard by the people leaving.

"Pleased to hear it." another voice called out. The three casuals looked up and towards where the voice had come from: the bar entrance.

Seven more casuals were walking in. They were all dressed tidily, and were well groomed. They were all known to Coll, Polit and Jack: they were also Lager Bastards. Coll stood up to meet them. The seven newcomers stopped, then one of them stepped forwards and stood right in front of Coll. Coll smiled without showing his teeth. The man in front of him smiled back then hooked a punch into Coll's right cheek. It was a powerful punch but Coll just turned his face as it smacked into him. He replied in kind, but punched with his right into the man's hard left cheek.

"Your punch is weak as piss, Coll."

"Lucky your face is soft as a cunt then Joey."

The new arrivals sat down and helped themselves to lager.

"Is this it? Where's the others?" Polit asked generally.

"Too fucked to come out mate. Had a bit of a run-in." Jace, one of the recent arrivals, answered.

"Who with?"

"Few baldies." Jace saw that his slang was not understood and tried some alternatives. "Buddies. Z Monks."

"Yeah? Religious discussion was it?" Polit made a joke.

"Fuck off laughing, right?" Joey was not amused. "Ten of our mates are laid up, two of them might not make it. I'm after one particular hairless git name of fucking Innocence. Put five of us down."

"Sorry Joey." Polit meant it. "How'd it happen?"

"Nothing special really. There's this wanker, got a couple of trucks up Hackford way. Collects every two weeks regular. Decides not to pay somebody. Tells him to spin for his money. They come to me and say: knock this guy over, we know when he goes. Sent ten of the boys down. There's monks guarding the trucks. Had all their gear on right, robes and that. When they saw it was monks the lads gave them a chance. 'Hand over the stuff and we won't hand you a beating.' type of thing. The monks agree, till the lads get close and their guards are down. Then a few more of them jump out, including this mad fucker Innocence. Surprised the boys didn't they?"

There was general shaking of heads and cursing. "Bastards." "Easy to be tough when you get the drop isn't it?" "Taking advantage that is." "Don't ever go easy, that's the answer."

Had Innocence heard Joey's account of these events he would not have accused him of lying, although the story was transparently untrue. Innocence would have seen the fabrication of Joey's lieutenant, and Joey's belief of it, as a metaphor for the way desire clouds perception, and the way the unenlightened mind ignores the clouding. And is that not a Great Truth? Had Innocence heard Joey telling the story he would have smiled enigmatically.

Then again, he had done a lot of that recently. Ever since entering the post-karmic state his expression had been a succession of enigmatic smiles. While training, while fighting, while on look-out, while eating, just when he was walking around, even while sleeping, the same enigmatic smile played around his lips. Fairly soon he would die, presumably still wearing the same enigmatic smile.

Innocence knew that he would die soon, but he was not afraid. Apart from being free from fear as he was free of all desires, he was also post-karmic. Which is to say that he had attained all that he could in his present form, and saw in death nothing other than reincarnation in a higher form. Not exactly a frightening prospect. Post-

karmic entities are rare and short-lived. They exist as glitches in the moment it takes the wheel of karma to change up a gear.

It is said that training and study both involve the negation of one's desire in that they involve dedication. And this had been Innocence's route to his state. Specifically the study of martial arts and inner energy, or *chi*. Which made him a useful man in a scrap and a great asset to his temple's business: caravan guarding. On the other hand his new-found propensity to enigmatise raised certain practical problems when it came to reporting on missions.

Hence, on his squad's return to the temple, following the truck-guarding job on which they had encountered some of the Lager Bastards, the abbot had asked a more junior warrior-monk for an account of what had taken place.

"Only one incident in the two day journey, sir. We were attacked in the night by raiders of some kind. No firearms involved. The sentry spotted them and called Innocence before raising a general alarm. As soon as they attacked, Innocence and the rest of us charged them. We saw them off but didn't give chase, because we had to stay with the truck. Five of ours injured, no fatalities, no prisoners. Homage to the Buddha."

"Homage to the Buddha. Dismissed."

The abbot had been pleased that nobody had been killed. As a post-karmic, Innocence was no longer subject to sin. This meant that, unlike all the other monks, he did not mind killing people from time to time. The abbot had a bit of a problem with this. Although in theory, since Innocence was immune, it was not a sin, it still didn't feel quite right to him.

The abbot was in his sixties and still fighting fit, although definitely starting to slow down. He was a competent warrior and master, possessed an amount of *chi*, and was fairly enlightened, as would be expected. Nevertheless he felt somewhat uneasy around Innocence and other super-powered individuals.

After Innocence's return, the abbot's unease level had been further raised by a phone call from No-Number Zen announcing his arrival in the next few days.

chapter eight

"There's always room for men like you on a guard detail. There's a big merchant convoy leaving in three days. You and your companions will be paid the officer rate." The abbot was seeing No-Number Zen in his office. He had been relieved that the reason for Zen's visit was only that he was looking for guard work, and made him an offer quickly.

"I might want a different rate." Zen knew what was going through the abbot's mind, as he always knew the thoughts of others. Also he knew what was required for his mission to Central Temple. The abbot was so uneasy that he might just agree straight off. And, from his abrupt military manner, Zen guessed that the abbot didn't enjoy long conversations and negotiation anyway. No-Number went for it. "After the convoy's done the boys go on to another job. Not guarding. And there'll be no pay for it."

"No pay of any kind?"

"Fuck all mate. Central Temple's under some kind of siege. I'm going to bust it, when I know what it is."

"We're not part of World Compassion, but that doesn't mean I won't help them." The abbot reckoned for a moment. "I'll give you a squad plus any volunteers."

"Yeah." That was a fair offer. "Cheers mate. Homage to the Buddha." No-Number Zen stood up to leave the abbot's office.

"Homage to the Buddha. Oh and one more thing." The abbot stood as well. There was a question he had to ask, as a matter of form. He braced himself. "I was wondering if you would be Expounding the Way whilst you're here?"

"Nah!"

chapter nine

Some places kept their names through the wars and Collapse. Places with some kind of eternal character. Some places were abandoned or razed during the wars, and so lost their names. Some new places appeared, with new sounding names. And some of those subsequently got abandoned or razed themselves. Some of the old abandoned places got revived, and renamed, sometimes more than once.

Seventy-five Fifty-two was a place, a merchant town. It didn't have eternal character and might

or might not have been abandoned and revived a number of times. In those days, when caravans wanted to rendezvous somewhere before going into the Capital, they gave the place's co-ordinates, longitude and latitude. And because 0.75 longitude, 52.04 latitude was a good safe location, with good road and rail access, and power and water, and telecommunications, more and more people used it to rendezvous, and it attained a kind of permanence. But no name, other than its navigating co-ordinates, or Seventy-five Fifty-two for short.

Arriving in 75,52 by train, No-Number Zen, Witch Carter, Mister Sunrise, Innocence, two squads of Buddhist warrior monks and their captain, knew only the name of the merchant for whom they would be working: Harris.

The train station at 75,52 was a terminus. It was located at the main intersection, the heart. On disembarking and leaving the station, the party stood to look up and down the crossroads. Some of them had been to 75,52 before, but the place had changed - it was always changing.

The Mann Trading office was surrounded by scaffolding now, being developed into something more defensible. A building that had been another corporate office was now a tavern with tables outside. Another tavern, which had been a tavern before, had been painted on the outside. The truck repair shop's wall was higher and thicker than before, and now made from pieces of rubble held together with some new kind of cement. There was a second and larger dish aerial on top of the tall, but mostly empty building housing the local telecoms access shop. And somebody had done something to the roads. Previously they had been crushed down bricks, cement, concrete, paving and packed dirt - with plenty of tufts of grass peeping out. Not so much a road as a gap between the buildings. Now the middle of the road was a straight path of uniform black tarmacadam, wide enough for two cars.

The captain ordered them to split up and search for "Harris" and to meet back at the station in one hour. He told one squad of monks to check at the tower, then the lodging house, the other to find the hospital and religious missions which were a little way from the centre of 75,52. He knew it was pointless ordering Innocence to do anything so left the monk to himself. He seemed uncertain about giving orders to Zen and his party.

"Shall we check the taverns?"

No-Number Zen looked at Carter and Sunrise who shrugged assent. Carter could have found Harris with her novo-tarot deck, but she preferred to save her energy for something more difficult.

In the hour they met a corporate representative in transit to the North, a merchant just returned from the Capital, four different people who wouldn't say who they were, where they were going, or where they had come from, and two people who traded only within 75,52 itself. None of them knew Harris.

Back at the station, however, one squad of the monks had news.

Harris herself had not yet arrived, but her assistant was at the lodging house where beds and food had been arranged. They would leave tomorrow, which gave them an evening in 75,52. The captain gave orders for everybody to be back in the lodgings by midnight, but said they could do as they wished until then.

Innocence went off on his own. The monks split up, some went to find a quiet place for their devotions, some to return to the hospital, some just to take a look around. Zen beckoned Carter and Sunrise to one side and waited for the others to disperse.

They followed him outside the lodging house onto the busy street. People and vehicles bustled up and down.

"It's handy that we're starting here and we've got a night in town. There's somebody I could meet."

It's about time

Part Three

chapter eleven

All the Freemasons were stunned by Apep's sudden appearance. They stood like statues as he announced.

"I bring a great gift. I have conquered a mighty enemy of mankind."

One of the soldiers by the door recovered from his stun. He quickly moved his hand behind his back to hide the handcuffs. At the same time he took a slow step towards Apep to interpose himself between him and the soldier holding the cosh. The other soldier noticed the handcuffs and carefully stuck the cosh out of sight in the waistband of his trousers at the back.

Apep continued his rehearsed speech.

"Not since the great god Thoth played senit with Ra and won five more days in the year has a victory been scored over this enemy. I speak not of the defeat of Ra, but of time. Yes, time itself, that ever-present stricture, that most unyielding and weighty binding. No more. Brothers, those manacles lie shattered at our feet."

Apep made a planned pause for dramatic effect. Surveying his audience he did not see the joyous response he had expected. The faces of the three men on the couch, and the one behind it, held only shock, which he could understand. However Apep could not understand why the two other men in the room, the ones standing near the door, had blank expressions, almost as though they were not even listening. This was worrying for Apep because he was working to a very precise plan. He had allotted a certain time for his introductory speech, before he moved on to explaining what he wanted, and why he had chosen this specific time and place for the rendezvous. It was very important to Apep that the introduction and explanation were finished within their allotted time. Realising his calculations had been perhaps too precise, he hurried on to the final part of his introduction, hoping for the best.

"I have made experiments, and conducted operations which would not have been possible but for the help of our brotherhood. As witnessed by the method of my arrival, you can see that I

have succeeded. And so I return with this gift. The gift of time, or perhaps the end of time."

Usser noticed from the corner of his eye that the two soldiers had been edging towards Apep. This helped focus his mind on the matter in hand: the trial (after a moment of congratulating himself for having picked those two individuals to bring with him on this mission).

"I am Usser. I ask you why we meet in this place?"

The distraction worked. The two soldiers were on Apep as soon as he turned his attention to Usser to give him an answer. Coming at Apep from his left, the first Freemason grabbed the wires from the personal stereo, pulling two earphones from the bandaged lump on the side of his neck. This caused Apep to wince in pain, which gave the soldier time to swing the handcuffs and capture Apep's left wrist. Next moment the soldier staggered back, his head rolling as though he had been hit; Apep had pulled his right hand out of his pocket and jabbed at the man. The second soldier pushed vaguely at his companion to get him out of his way, as well as out of the fight. He blundered past a candle, knocking it over. It went out on the floor. There was something red and white in Apep's right hand, something he had obviously used to neutralise the first man to attack him, but the second soldier could not see what it was. He drew his cosh and took a fighting stance waiting for the third soldier to enter the fray.

Late into the fight, but anxious to make up for it, the third soldier stepped clumsily over the sofa, with no weapon drawn, but with his hands extended. Apep went for him and was expertly caught at the wrist and elbow. The third soldier twisted Apep's right arm, applying a restraining hold he had learnt in the French police force. A technique common to all police forces was then applied by the other soldier: the immobilised Apep was coshed. The blunt instrument landed on his left shoulder, just by the neck and he slumped. The soldier applying the restraint released it so he could support the now limp man.

Uncertain of the efficacy of the noise proofing foam, Usser ordered everybody back to the roof.

As he cast a worried look at the bedroom door, Nefer whispered to him "Should I have them taken care of?"

"Enough people have died in this." Usser looked at Nefer as he replied. Nefer saw only coldness there. Usser held his glance as first the left, then the right side of his face went dark as the candles were extinguished and gathered (the foam would dissolve in one hour, leaving no trace).

Naturally the soldiers were concerned with guarding Apep, the defendant in this case, and with carrying him up the stairs. Also, they were concerned about one of their comrades who had been "hit" and required help in getting up the stairs. Finally, their professional interest had been aroused by the weapon Apep had used - it was a taser baton, but smaller and lighter than any that they had seen, and of an unfamiliar design. It interested them; they wanted to see where the shock strength was adjusted, where the batteries were kept, what the batteries looked like, how it was activated, they wanted, in short, to play with it.

With all these distractions they forgot to keep a close eye on Kepker and consequently he was able to pocket the personal stereo Apep had carried. Kepker had not noticed the significance of the personal stereo at first, but when the soldier attacked, he had realised its importance. The stereo had been on when Apep arrived, but he had switched it off immediately. Therefore it had something to do with his sudden arrival. As the soldier had also deduced, it could therefore give him the ability to make a sudden departure.

Had the soldier not been as groggy, following his light electric shock, it is likely he would have remembered the stereo.

chapter twelve

The time came for Apep to speak in the trial. The man who had coshed him brought him round.

He could remember what had happened downstairs, and realised that his original objective was not now attainable. He found that he did not have his personal stereo, or his taser weapon. He presumed they had been taken by his apprehenders. Suspicion was to be expected he supposed, and he calmed his temper, thinking that he would have done the same thing in their position.

When Usser told him he was actually on trial, however, Apep got angry properly. These Freemasons were obviously too stupid or narrow minded to be the right people to bring his discovery to mankind. But he had to keep his anger cold: there was nothing he could do without his sounds. He had to play along and hope to get away later. Apep told himself that he had not come all this way and done all those things, to throw it away in a fit of anger. He took his seat in the appointed place and accepted a Masonic tool and whispered his formal affirmations to be truthful.

"Eight murder investigations have been stopped by your superior. Did you commit any or all of these murders?"

"To overthrow the tyranny of time."

"I do not seek a justification now," Usser interrupted, "if indeed any can be made. I ask the question again. Did you commit any or all of the murders?"

Apep paused. It was not important that he had done it, what was important was why. Eight lonely women was a cheap price for time travel. But from Usser's line it seemed to Apep that he would have to answer now to justify himself later. "Yes all of them," he admitted. "To overthrow the tyranny of time," he repeated.

"You speak of tyranny." Usser paused, thinking. "And the rule not to sin, is that also a tyranny?"

"We sin in war do we not? We kill then, for the prize of freedom. So I killed them, and others besides. It was the price. It was necessary."

Usser's face was partially hidden by his mask, but he was clearly somewhat shocked by the unrepentant mass murderer before him. He said nothing immediately.

Kepker noticed that a new kind of silence had fallen following Apep's statements. Looking left and right, he noticed the soldiers were shocked too. More importantly, in their distaste they were looking down at the roof, rather than keeping their eyes on the defendant. Now was Kepker's moment. Certain that the Freemasons would kill him following the trial, he must now throw in his lot with Apep.

"Take me with you!" Kepker rushed forwards and dived to where Apep sat, the personal stereo in his outstretched hands. Everyone took a moment to react to this sudden action in the stillness of the proceedings. Before the guards

could get up and cross the space to reach Apep, he had grabbed the stereo. Holding the earphones against the lump attached to his neck with one hand, he pressed play with the other. His neck straightened and his face twisted in pain for a moment before he disappeared.

Two of the guards were in mid-leap at the moment of Apep's departure. They collided with each other and landed on the floor. Seeing their confusion, and panicking at his own continued presence on the roof, Kepker ran. It was hopeless, he could not hope to evade all five guards for long. They closed in on him gradually, not giving him the opportunity to get to the access door, or the edge of the roof. Neither escape was to be allowed.

Kepker felt himself grabbed by the waist from behind, he struggled briefly then a voice he recognised said "It's me!" He let himself be pulled.

As he watched the second of his prisoners vanish Usser felt great rage building up inside him. One of the staffs in his left hand snapped and the other two fell to the mat. "What to do now?" he asked himself.

His masked head turned to look at Nefer.

chapter thirteen

"Considering how long we were at it last night, I feel surprisingly well rested this morning." Elaine sat back on the sofa, her arms stretched out along its back, her legs up and her feet resting on the coffee table. She was fully clothed in what she had worn the day before.

Her remark was addressed to Charlotte who was just coming out of the bathroom wearing make-up and an open towelling robe. "It's about time to go." Charlotte said in passing, brushing Elaine's knee with a finger. "You'd best put your tights on."

Elaine sighed. Having worked in the same room for six months, she had noticed that Charlotte was grumpy in the mornings. She had always thought it was the bus ride in to the office. "Where are they?"

"By the table. The computer." Charlotte called back from the bedroom.

When she bent over to pick them, Elaine noticed a candle had rolled under the sofa, and stopped against one of the castors. Odd, she thought, the flat being so tidy. Elaine had just put her tights

and shoes on when she heard Charlotte coming out of the bedroom. She picked up the candle and turned round.

"Where d'you keep your candles?"

"Isn't this your shirt?" Charlotte held a women's plain white shirt and had spoken at the same time as Elaine.

"Where did you get that?" Charlotte asked, seeming angry.

"On the floor. What's wrong?"

"I don't have candles in the house! I never have! Where was it?" Charlotte exclaimed. When she saw Elaine's face she realised what she was saying. "Sorry. Sorry I didn't mean to be like that." She apologised in a softer voice. "There was nearly an accident at my parents' house once, and ever since I've never you know. So I was surprised. Sorry."

"That's OK. And it's not my shirt, this is what I was wearing yesterday." Elaine held her arms slightly away from her body and struck a subtle fashion-photo pose with a fluid rotation of her wrists and a stretch of her fingers.

"But it's not mine." Charlotte checked the label in the collar. It was not a brand she recognised.

Elaine lifted a sleeve. She did not expect to find anything, she was just following Charlotte's own inspection. "It must be somebody else's."

"Whose?" Charlotte frowned, then looked Elaine in the eye. "What do you mean?"

"Just somebody who stayed over or something."

"There hasn't been anybody staying over." Charlotte said indignantly.

"All right. It's no big deal. I was just thinking about the shirt."

"Yes but I just wanted to say" Charlotte stuttered to a halt. What had she wanted to say exactly? She didn't know. "Better get going." She turned to get her case and go. Just as she reached the door, Elaine spoke again.

"It's Imogen's." Elaine had been left with the shirt.

"It can't be. How'd you know?"

"I recognise this spot on it." Elaine held the shirt up to Charlotte, presenting a sleeve on which there was a small black stain. "It's toner. I remember seeing it there yesterday."

chapter fourteen

It was lunch-time and Charlotte was considering where to go for something indulgent, unhealthy and expensive. She hoped this would cheer her up after her bad morning; one of her worst ever.

She had shouted at Elaine before leaving her place; about candles of all things, and then about how bitter she was about being single since her last split-up. Then on the bus, she had been positively sarcastic to Elaine about her impossible suggestion that Imogen had been at her place last night.

Charlotte was sure that Elaine would now not wish to go out with her ever again. Nobody wanted to go out with those dependent types. Elaine had got to know her at work, where she was professional, reliable, easygoing and, above all, self-sufficient. Now she probably thought that this was just Charlotte's office persona. She probably thought that underneath the pleasant and relaxed façade was a bitter, unpleasant, uptight and fucked-up individual. Furthermore, Charlotte felt she had made herself appear to be one of those people who, once you get close to them, burden you with the collection of faults that comprises their personality, and expect you to shoulder that burden on the basis of your intimacy.

She had now thrown away the only chance at losing her single status in ten months. She would be single and sad for the rest of her life. And she really liked Elaine and the sex had been about the best ever.

Just as she was resolved to go to lunch her manager, John, came into her and Elaine's room.

"Hi Charlotte. Really good work on the Warhol report. I can see you put in a lot of extra time. Thanks for that."

"Oh that's OK." Charlotte answered vaguely.

"Are you all right Charlotte?"

"Yes sorry. Miles away. I'm glad it's what you were looking for."

"More than what I was looking for. I was impressed, and Margaret will be too, I'm having a meeting with her this afternoon." John nodded and turned to Elaine. "Actually I came to see you too Elaine, about Imogen."

Charlotte got up. The good news about her work had depressed her further. She was still in touch with her ex-, and when asked what she was up to

she had only ever been able to think of something about work to say.

"Just going to lunch." she said quietly as she passed John and Elaine.

Elaine transferred her attention from John with a barely vocalised apology. "Aren't we going together?"

"Oh. OK." Charlotte stood by the door.

"I won't be long." John said. "Nobody's seen Imogen since yesterday afternoon. Ben mentioned you spoke to her yesterday afternoon about something and I wondered if she'd said anything."

chapter fifteen

"Maybe somebody put her shirt in your case. That could explain how it ended up in your flat."

Elaine was thinking out loud about possible scenarios of Imogen's disappearance. Charlotte was eating a tuna salad sandwich, without mayonnaise or butter, off a plastic plate at Tim's Sandwich Café - the place where she bought her lunch most working days.

Elaine's baked potato arrived and she stopped talking. Charlotte noticed her intent expression - her attention had shifted to the problem of the butter and cheese in her potato. Charlotte had been waiting for an opportunity to talk, and not about Imogen's shirt, which had turned up at Charlotte's flat, nor about Imogen's watch, which had been left at the office.

"I wasn't sure we'd be having lunch after my performance this morning."

Elaine looked up from her potato, a perplexed frown on her face.

"I mean all that stuff about the candle and the shirt." Charlotte explained.

"You're always like that in the morning." Elaine went back to her plate with a smile.

"Am I?" Charlotte felt deflated.

"Mm" Elaine nodded. "It doesn't matter." She took her first forkful of potato and cheese.

They both ate in silence for a few minutes.

"So you're saying somebody abducted her and put her shirt in my case?"

"Where did you find it?"

"Just on the floor with my shirt. Where you dropped it." The two women exchanged a slightly blushing smile as they remembered how they had

undressed each other the previous night: starting cautiously in the living room, finishing passionately in the bedroom.

Elaine sifted possibilities. Possibly she was wrong about it being Imogen's shirt. Possibly Imogen had more than one shirt with a stain in that place - Elaine recalled that she had two skirts with near identical ink stains on from where a pen in a draw in her desk had leaked ink which had soaked through the wood to the spot where Elaine's left knee habitually rested against it. Possibly Charlotte was lying about nobody having stayed over for the last how ever many months - but then why would Elaine have brought the shirt to her attention then? Maybe she had not recognised it. Elaine kept her ruminations to herself and decided to leave the issue for now.

Elaine and Charlotte ate and talked about people in the office for the rest of lunch. They left Tim's in time to be back at the office one hour after they had left. They walked side by side, close but not touching.

Suddenly both of them felt an arm around their waist, and for a moment assumed it was the other, until a voice said "Hi you two! How's it going? Have you just had lunch?"

They both looked at the person who now walked between them with an arm around each of them. It was Imogen. She was dressed in sensible shoes, a cream coloured skirt which reached to her knees, and a bra. She was switching between smiling at Elaine, and smiling at Charlotte. They were both so surprised that they could not speak and just kept on walking. People on the street stopped and stared.

Before the situation could sink in to either Elaine or Charlotte, and any reply be made, Imogen released them and with a cheery "See you tonight then." and hurried off around a corner. People on the street concluded she was a mad woman who had just accosted two office workers on the way back from lunch.

A few seconds later Elaine and Charlotte reached the corner themselves and looked. A policeman was standing by a car and talking on his radio. "It's here just like they said. Looks pro, not much entry damage. Yeah, driver's wing's dented. And the stereo's been ripped. All right, I'll stay till the crew get here."

"She didn't have a shirt on." Charlotte observed, faintly.

"And no watch." Elaine added.

Nightmare, Sleepwalk, Remix

Part Three

I scan the band members on stage from right to left. Possession doesn't show in auras. Murder does, but I'm not expecting it here, although it would make things easier. What I'm looking for is a connection to the Power. The lead singer and drummer have it. The bass guitarist, keyboard player, and lead guitarist don't. They just wear the jewellery.

I want to get closer to those two, and soon. Not because I'm looking for something specific, but because they're terrain. Just like Puissance Res, they're going to tell me about Kate. And just like Puissance Res, it won't be because I ask them to - it'll be because I get amongst them.

chapter ten

There's always a party after a gig. This club's big enough to have dressing rooms so it'll start there. The bouncer lets me through when I show him my complimentary ticket and tell him I'm a friend

of the band. So that means he's letting everybody through.

Sure enough, the room turns out to be packed. That's good because it gives me cover. On the downside, it means I only get in after some discreet elbowing. There's loud heavy music playing, and the people in the room talk drunkenly loud to be heard over it. It's well lit though, so I can look for my men.

The lead singer's on the other side of the room. He's talking with three men and it looks like they're all friends. Then I see the girl. She's hanging on to him so close I didn't notice her at first. She detaches her face from just behind his ear to exchange a few remarks with his friends. It seems like she knows them too so she must be his girlfriend. She's all over him so much his friends are embarrassed. I decide not to intrude.

The drummer is closer to me. There's a man and a woman holding hands and talking to him but he keeps looking past them like he's trying to find an excuse to get away. Helping people's what I do

and he looks as deserving as anybody right now. It's a tough crowd to sidle through, but I've done hatha yoga so I make it. Suppleness and balance.

The drummer talks to me straight away.

"Hi." he says.

The room's noisy so I keep it simple "Great set."

"Thanks."

"Have you seen Kate?"

"Who?" Maybe he didn't hear.

"I'm a friend of Kate's," I never met her but I am trying to find out who murdered her so I guess I qualify. "She told me to come tonight. I can't see her though." I look around the room when I say it.

"Oh. I don't know." He looks around too but it's pretty obvious he's just being a pro and doesn't know who I'm talking about.

"Listen, Kate told me to come because she thought you guys might want your cards read."

"Our what?"

"Cards. I do tarot readings." I hand him my card.

"Is it tarot cards?"

"Yes."

"Right, right. Yeah I'll keep the card, cheers."

The couple have drifted away but now they've been replaced by some girls. He's a drummer and I decide to leave him to it. I go home and the sun's up.

chapter eleven

I'm feeling ill. Headache. Itchy arse. Sweating. That'll be the lack of sleep, and the fasting. It's Saturday and, thinking about it, I haven't eaten since Monday.

You don't ever put a time limit on an angel. If they haven't shown, then you're not pure yet. Even wondering how much longer puts you in danger of losing it altogether: cynicism and lust for result.

But I'm starting to starve here. Something's wrong. Me, somehow. I cast my mind back, but I'm sure I haven't eaten since Monday. I was tempted a few times, but not seriously. Even dwelling hasn't been a problem. I've been too busy to dwell. Only time I've noticed it is when I'm doing up my belt after pissing. Which is where I'm wrong.

Too busy to dwell means too busy to think about it. Like I've forgotten about it. And you're not supposed to forget, you're supposed to remember and feel shameful. Some penitent I am. Just great: "Oh yeah I'm guilty of sins and unworthy of angelic contact, but I don't let it worry me or anything." How could I even think like that? How did it slip my mind?

Enlightened, Special, Pure, Whatever; I'm still human and I still fail. Now it's time for the magickal part. Not running from failure, but facing it and confessing it.

The cold shower nearly makes me pass out, but then that's real mortification for you. Upstairs in my temple I light the candles and accuse myself. Starting with arrogance by forgetting that I always need Help, and letting concern for the victim be replaced by the thrill of the investigation. Then progressing through all the little failures over the week. Which brings me on to more general concerns: enjoying the gift of Power, pride, envy. And all the rest.

"Stop Gerard. You may look at me." There's a touch on my shoulder and I lift my face from the floor. There's a girl reaching down to me with her right hand.

Her long fingers; her rounded arms showing traces of muscle here and there; the slight swell of her immature breasts; her flat, lightly defined stomach; her hairless groin; her slim, smooth legs; her bare feet; and her beautiful clear complexioned face; all exude compassion and love. I'm ashamed I ever thought of myself as a good person. I close my eyes and tears trickle between the lids and warm my cheeks as they drip to the floor.

"Get up Gerard." a quiet, close voice says as I feel my tears brushed away. "I have need of you."

How could an angel have need for a useless sinner like me? I start to tell her just how mistaken she is: "Me? But you can't? I'm not--"

"You looked upon my form without lust." she interrupts. "You're worthy."

The girl has a point so I let her help me up and dry my eyes.

"I am Athebriel. I am with you." she tells me. As far as my vision goes, she then disappears. Deeper senses tell me she's still around. So my Client's on board, and I've got Help. Surf's up I guess.

If they need me they need me alive so I'd better eat.

Looking at my bedroom clock as I dress tells me I've been in the temple 8 hours. And that the chippy is still open for lunch. Worst chips I've ever tasted, but I stuff them down so fast I nearly choke.