

HEAT STROKE



Mike Crowson

Christine Wagstaff

HEAT STROKE

Mike Crowson

Published by Lulu.com

First Published 1997
This Edition ♥ Mike Crowson 2007
ISBN 978-1-4092-1118-1

By the same author:

The Rings of Poseidon
Only the Darkness
The Flag and the Flower
The Riddle and the Key
Wytchmoor Edge
Parallel Loop (occult Short Stories)
&
The Witchmoor Edge Detective Stories:
Witchmoor Edge
On Edge
Outside Edge
Over the Edge
Leading Edge
Edgeways On
Female of the Species (Short Stories)

HEAT STROKE

PRELUDE

The ward smelled of cleanliness and illness, of disinfectant and polish. The steady beeping and the patterns on the screen told the story of a regular heart-beat, and the LCD numbers recording his breathing rate were remarkably consistent. However, the equally rhythmical pattern of brain waves on the EEG monitor suddenly jumped around and his eyes moved under his eyelids as he slept. His temperature had risen a little too.

The nurse checked the drips and tubes supporting life and glanced in passing at the various monitors. She had already taken the first step towards the next bed, when she looked again at the temperature reading and frowned. The rise was not great but it was noticeable, and any change in the condition of one so seriously ill was a possible cause for concern.

'I'll check it again in fifteen minutes,' she thought. 'Any further rise and I'll page the doctor. If there's no increase, I'll check it again before I call her. She won't be grateful to be summoned at three in the morning if it isn't necessary.'

The nurse looked more carefully again at the monitors and then moved on, curiously uneasy about the slight change, to check the next patient.

CHAPTER 1

Isaac Brainridge looked 'odd'. That was the first reaction of the police constable, as Brainridge answered the door. The man before him was a little above average height and no more than average build, but he had a pointed beard and was otherwise completely bald. He was dressed entirely in black - shirt, tie, trousers, shoes.

'Probably black underwear as well,' Constable Stewart thought irrelevantly.

Brainridge had odd eyes - they were different colours from each other: one violet blue, one quite green with flecks of amber brown. When, incidentally, one describes him as 'bald' that is strictly accurate and no exaggeration. Apart from his beard, there was no hair on his head at all - no eyebrows, no trace of hair around the sides of his head and no hair even in his ears. The caller thought that the man looked rather like one's idea of a dungeon master in a game of dungeons and dragons, not that he actually played that particular game himself. The bald man smiled at the constable.

"Good afternoon," said Brainridge. "Can I help you officer?"

The policeman shook himself out of his surprise. While being odd might have been cause for a charge of witchcraft in medieval times, it is not a crime in itself - which is just as well, since many of us are in some way 'odd'. Moreover there did not appear to have been a crime and Brainridge was anyway a witness to the accident, if that is what it was, not a principal in it.

"I believe you saw the dog attack ..." Constable Stewart paused and consulted his notebook, " ... Anthony Simmonds. Over there in the park this morning."

Brainridge nodded. "From a distance," he said.

"I'd like to ask a few questions and possibly get a statement."

"You'd better come in." Brainridge held the door open and stepped aside, closing the wrought iron grid in front of the door and then the door itself behind the police officer.

"Come through to the living room and sit down," said the bald man.

The living room was unusual rather than odd. It was unusual only in that there was no TV or music centre or telephone - just books, books and more books, some of them ancient leather bound tomes.

On the floor beside the settee was an interesting looking collection of wires, terminals and circuitry. It looked to the constable rather like a video game of some sort Brainridge had been building or repairing. He thought it might be a game, because there were headphones and what could have been a mask, rather like one of those 'virtual reality' game terminals, which vary the image you see as you look around. There were also, he noticed, a couple of terminals that could be stuck to the skin, like monitors on an electroencephalograph. Perhaps the object was not a game after all, but something to do with psychology.

The woman sitting in the other armchair did not look odd or unusual, though she was certainly striking. She was young enough for the policeman to conclude that she almost certainly wasn't Brainridge's wife.

'Early or mid thirties,' thought Constable Stewart. 'His daughter, perhaps.'

She had long dark hair, held at the back by an enormous silver-gilt hair grip, strong dark eyes, a strongly shaped face and nice legs, shown off by a skirt just shorter than knee length. She was well dressed, well groomed and elegant.

"Sit down," invited Brainridge, and the policeman pulled his attention back to the job in hand and took out a pencil. He sat down and opened his notebook at a blank page.

"This is my niece, Athena," he said, indicating the woman as he settled back onto the settee himself and continued, "She is visiting me this afternoon, but she was not here this morning and did not see any of the events which concern you."

"I see," said Constable, "And you are?"

"Isaac Brainridge."

"And this is number 42, is it not?"

"42 Millfield Walk, yes."

"Your occupation?"

"Various," answered the bald man, a trifle unhelpfully. "I write things and invent things and sometimes I do things."

"Self employed," said Constable Stewart as he wrote it down. "And your date of birth?"

There was a brief pause. "I'd rather not say," answered Brainridge.

The policeman looked up, pencil hovering. "It's a usual part of a statement," he remarked, obviously still waiting for a reply. "Your date of birth, sir," he repeated. He supposed it was not material to this particular statement, but he was curious about Brainridge's reluctance to reveal his age.

There was a pause, during which the pencil hovered and the policeman looked puzzled and felt frustrated. He waited.

"The thirteenth of January eighteen seventy," said Brainridge at length.

At first Stewart thought the man was being funny, but there was no smile on his face and he didn't look amused. Then he thought that possibly Brainridge was being deliberately obstructive, but wasn't sure how to challenge him. That date of birth would make him more than one hundred and thirty, and he didn't look half that age. A very odd forty-five to fifty but not much older and certainly not one hundred and thirty.

Brainridge sighed and got up. He opened a drawer in a bureau full of books and took out a folded paper of some age and a couple of other less antique items. He passed them over to the constable.

On closer inspection they were a birth certificate, a pension book and a senior citizen travel card. The birth certificate was in respect of one Isaac Brainridge, born in Northampton in 1870. That could, of course, refer to somebody long dead. The pension book was also in the name of Isaac Brainridge, of 42 Millfield Walk. That suggested that the bald man was, indeed, who he said he was, though he might not be the same Isaac Brainridge whose birth was recorded in Northampton in 1870. The travel-card had a photo as well as the same name. There was absolutely no doubt that the owner of the travel card was now sitting down again opposite.

Constable Stewart wrote, "The thirteenth of January eighteen seventy." in his notebook and passed the papers back to Brainridge. He crossed out "self employed" and wrote "retired". He was sure that there was something wrong here, but being very old is not a crime. Neither is appearing younger than you are.

The policeman glanced at the niece. Her face was still and expressionless, but he felt she was laughing at his discomfort. He decided that it was probably just his imagination and he struggled on with the interview.

Can you tell me what happened to... " He flipped back a page. " ... Anthony Simmonds." The name was familiar enough, but he had forgotten momentarily in his discomfort. Tell me in your own words what you saw."

Brainridge seemed to shrug a little. "I was out front repainting the wall, where that young vandal had been defacing it."

"Simmonds?"

"Yes."

"What had he been doing?"

"Defacing the wall. He painted slogans and his name on it. I was repainting it and he was watching me from the park."

"Did you speak to him?"

"We did not speak, nor was I watching him. I saw him run away from the front of my house with a spray paint can in his hand a few minutes before. I saw him still in the park watching when I went out, but I had my back to him most of the time. I heard a loud growling and turned to see a large dog attack Simmonds, then jump right over the fence and run off towards the main road."

"What was the dog like?"

"Grey and shaggy. Big - about waist high, though not heavily built."

"Any distinguishing marks?"

Brainridge looked rather scornfully amused. "I doubt whether there are many grey, shaggy dogs about waist high," he said.

"No. No, I don't suppose so," Stewart admitted. "Had you seen the dog before?"

"Psychically, a short while earlier, but not 'in the flesh' so to speak." The policeman didn't write that down.

"There was a glazier here, I believe."

"Correct."

"He was fitting a replacement window in the front door?"

"Yes."

"Do you know whether he saw anything?"

"I doubt it, but you could ask. It was Wilson's Glaziers in the High Street. I rang them up last night and asked them to call, because I knew Simmonds was going to break a window this morning."

The pencil hovered over the notebook again. The constable was not surprised that Simmonds should do something like that. On the contrary, the youth had been a known vandal and petty thief. No, it was more the way the remark was phrased. Psychic sightings and premonitions of vandalism were not in the ordinary run of affairs, any more than hundred and thirty year old witnesses.

"Right," he said, snapping the notebook shut and wishing that it had all been something simple like a housewife seeing Simmonds teasing a dog. "I think that's all. I'll call back later with a statement for you to sign and I'll talk to the man from Wilson's."

Both men stood up but the woman remained seated and silent. Brainridge walked with Constable Stewart to the door, which he opened politely.

"Good afternoon, officer," he said.

"Good afternoon sir," said the policeman, realising that the woman had not spoken to him at all.

The door closed behind him as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with a hanky and the air of puzzlement off his face. "Strewth, that was a queer one," he muttered.

The bald man returned to the living room where the woman was laughing to herself.

"Uncle Isaac," she said, "You were most unkind to that young man. I found it difficult to keep a straight face."

"Unkind?" Brainridge was genuinely surprised. "I answered the questions he asked."

Correctly speaking, Athena was not his niece. Her grandfather on her mother's side had been the much younger brother of the man she called 'uncle'. However, she shared sufficient offbeat interests to make him mildly interesting to her. That and the fact that he had money and some valuable books and no other relatives to whom either book or cash could be left. Along with her interest in the money, she also had a passing curiosity about the collection of wires and cables lying around the living room floor.

"It was marvelous," she said, still laughing at the thought of the young policeman's face.

"It sounds as though you enjoyed yourself." His tone of voice suggested that he did not entirely approve of his niece and her attitude.

"Oh, I did. I haven't any time for the police."

"And the law?"

If Brainridge's smile earlier had been polite and neutral, Athena's was thoroughly unpleasant. "I make my own laws," she said. "And enforce them," she added as an afterthought.

"As you see fit?"

"Yes."

When she had finished cultivating the probability of a substantial bequest at some unspecified date in the future and trying unsuccessfully to discover more about the electronics on the living room floor, Brainridge saw her off.

Back inside the living room he opened the bureau drawer again and put away the birth certificate and travel card. He closed the drawer, opened the desk itself and took out a mobile telephone. A mobile phone is hardly a distraction when switched off and inside a bureau was still not the usual place for a telephone. It was a 'quirk', quite minor when put alongside his appearance, that he still found the presence of the thing something of a disturbance. Brainridge had not wished to be disturbed or distracted earlier, and would shortly wish to be left alone again. For the moment he switched on the instrument and pressed out the digits of a number.

"Good afternoon. Planetwatch, can I help you?" said a friendly male voice.

"Good afternoon," said Brainridge. "Could I speak to your Manager or Director, or whatever is the appropriate title."

"You mean Ms. Hackett, the Action Director." said the friendly voice. "I'll see whether she's available. Who shall I say is calling?"

"Isaac Brainridge." He wondered whether it should have been 'whom' rather than 'who'.

"And what is it in connection with?"

"I have a technical development, or invention if you prefer to call it that, which could be of considerable value to Planetwatch."

"I see," said the voice. "Hold the line a moment." There was a click and a pause. Then the voice came back. "Ms Hackett will speak to you now."

There was another click and a different, though equally friendly voice said. "Hello. Mr Brainridge I think you said. How can I help?"

"I think," said the latter, "that it would be difficult to explain over the telephone how Planetwatch could benefit from what I have to offer. Can I stress, by the way, that I am not seeking any financial advantage of any kind for my ... er ... invention. If I could call in and take up half an hour of your time with a demonstration it would save a lot of explanation which you would, anyway, find very hard to believe."

"Sounds intriguing," answered the voice of Liz Hackett. "How about next Tuesday morning."

"That would do very well. At what time?"

"Say, ten o'clock. Do you know where to find us?"

"Oh yes. Until next Tuesday, then."

"Right. Bye."

"Good afternoon," said Brainridge. He rang off, switched off the instrument, returned it to the bureau and closed the desk again.

The bald man lay down on the settee. He put the headphones on and then stuck the two terminals carefully to the sides of his temples with surgical tape. He flipped a small switch on the board of intricate circuitry which had so intrigued Constable Stewart earlier.

"I must put it all in a case before next Tuesday," he muttered. He slipped on the mask and settled himself more comfortably, shuffling himself down and moving a cushion up onto the arm of the settee. He reached up to adjust a knob on the front of the mask.

"I think we'll try thirty years on," he said to himself and fiddled with the knob. "Ahh," he murmured contentedly, and slipped off to the future telepathically.

In an occult supplies shop in York a tall blonde woman in her late twenties was opening the post. She was Gill Benderman, the part owner of the shop. It was early afternoon and the post had arrived hours ago, but an assistant had been looking after the shop while Gill had kept an antenatal appointment.

Gill now lifted a hand in gesture as the assistant left and said "Bye," without looking up.

The post was more interesting than usual or, at least, one letter was. This particular letter was from her publisher. 'Dear Miss Meadows' it ran - the publisher still used her maiden name - 'I am pleased to tell you that the publication date has now been fixed for THE PATHS OF THE TAROT' This was her second book and, though hers was a 'niche' market that was unlikely to produce a best seller or film rights, the income was useful.

There was also a letter that Gill recognised as coming from the occult lodge to which she and her husband belonged. She had opened the routine call to the monthly meeting and skimmed through the agenda, when her husband Steve came in.

Gill looked up from her reading and smiled. She was a striking and quite cultivated, rather than an actually beautiful, woman. She was a shade tall for a female, her violet eyes were a little too close together and her face slightly too long to go with the rather high cheek bones. Nevertheless, with her longish hair and pleasant manner, she was almost beautiful. Steve grinned at her with the easy-going confidence and affection he had for this very astute woman.

"In the back," said Gill, jerking a thumb over her shoulder "I just made it,"

Steve went past the display of crystals, round the back of the counter and into the tiny kitchen. He emerged with a mug of coffee and Gill

sipped hers while she read. "I just got a publication date for my second book," she said.

"I said 'congratulations' once, but I'll say it again," said Steve.

"Well say it then!"

"Congratulations," he said.

"Thank you," said Gill.

Steve opened the letter from the lodge and read. It was a summons to a meeting and the agenda looked interesting. "On another matter and being psychic, but only a little," he said, "I think we're going to get a visit from both Athena and Mordacai in the near future."

"There's trouble brewing between those two," Gill remarked, taking the summons. She studied her husband, who was now checking the float in the till. He looked up and smiled affectionately.

"Talking of being psychic," she said "I think we're going to get a phone call or letter from that Hackett woman at Planetwatch, sometime in the next week or so."

Steve looked up in surprise. "You haven't heard from Liz Hackett in ages," he said.

"We will," she said, though she had no idea why she felt so sure or what the nature of the call would be

CHAPTER 2

Liz Hackett was rarely stuck for an answer, but this proposal had her stumped. Like Constable Stewart (and many others, it must be said) she thought Isaac Brainridge looked decidedly odd. Not so odd, though, as the ideas he was putting forward. The idea of an electronic device to enhance telepathic time travel was ... Weird? Novel? Preposterous? At any rate, it was completely 'over the top' for an environmental organisation with a strong scientific component and a reputation to defend. She looked at her visitor and thought about it.

There was no doubt that knowing what would result from a particular course of action would be very useful to a small environmental group, up against the wealth and influence of multi-national companies. Of course, there was a whole raft of questions, not least of which was the obvious one - if you can 'see' the future, does that mean that it will happen exactly as you see it, whatever anyone does? If nothing can change what is preordained to happen, then her organisation might well be wasting its time and effort. She might just as well pack up and go home.

'On balance,' she mused, not quite audibly, 'the whole ethos of a political pressure group is based on the premise that the future can be changed!'

Quite apart from the question of whether the future is fixed, was the practical one of whether you can see it. In this case the series of questions was perhaps a little more delicate. Firstly, could you, with the help of this electronic device, see anything at all? Secondly, if you could, was it 'the' future or simply 'a' future? Thirdly, who was going to tell her what it was he or she had seen?

The first question could be easily settled by taking up Brainridge's offer of a demonstration. The second question was something that wars had been fought over and she really needed the advice of someone likely to remain calm and collected about the issue, and to assess any impressions

impartially. This led to the third question. Who would assess the whole invention for her?

Then she had a bright idea. A moment of inspiration. A book she had read called *The Ring from the Past* had been about time or, perhaps, about experiences of other times, and she knew the author. In fact, knowing the author had been the main reason for reading it.

The book had been written by a woman called Gillian Meadows and that lady had helped her once before. She had produced some evidence, written and on computer disk, about something - it didn't matter what - that a multi-national company involved in genetic engineering had been up to: or was going to be up to. She had implied in the course of conversation that she had acquired it initially from 'dabbling'. What, precisely, she had dabbled in was not clear, but her book was quite suggestive.

Liz Hackett was very careful about keeping notes of telephone numbers and addresses she knew for sure she would never need again. It was sod's law that she would sometime need any number she threw out. She took a large, hardback notebook from her desk drawer. This was her repository for unneeded phone numbers.

"I think," she said to Brainridge, "that I'd prefer to have the demonstration done with somebody who understands what they're doing, if you've no objection."

"Not at all. In fact, that would simplify things enormously for me"

"I'll try and set it up right now, if you don't mind waiting. Perhaps you'd like a coffee while I see whether I can arrange it."

"Thank you."

Liz picked up the phone. "Can you give me an outside line and then bring me a couple of coffees and some biscuits, please... Thanks." To Brainridge she said, "Coffee's on its way." and then started to flip through her book of telephone numbers. She found the name she wanted, pressed out the digits of the number and waited for Gill to answer.

Gillian Benderman, neé Meadows, and her husband were, as he had predicted a few days before, receiving a visit from Mordacai Brand. Mordacai was master of the lodge to which Gill and Steve belonged and was, therefore, an occultist of considerable experience. In this respect he was very like Isaac Brainridge and both men had pointed beards too - but there the physical similarity ended. Where Brainridge was somewhat above average height and otherwise quite hairless, Brand was much shorter than average and had a considerable head of bushy hair, rather piercing dark eyes and looked very dapper in a smart tweedy suit and hat.

What concerned the gentleman were the ambitious activities of one Athena Harcourt-Jones. It is worth noting that the lady's ambitions were not to do with her gender, nor was Mordacai's reaction anything to do with his. In spite of his years the latter held no gender related prejudices and in spite of her lack of years and quite elegant appearance, Ms Harcourt-Jones was, as Constable Stewart had surmised, an unpleasant person. She had also a big opinion of herself and a scorn about taking reasonable precautions.

If a mountaineer belittled a safety harness and ropes when they were essential, others with more experience would look askance, regardless of the gender of the mountaineer. What had brought Athena Harcourt-Jones and Mordacai Brand into conflict was an occult matter, but it was in essence not dissimilar to the mountaineering metaphor.

The master of the lodge was now canvassing support against an attempt to unseat him. This problem of balancing the caution of the experienced with the impatience of the newcomer was one of the roots of the problems which broke up the famous (or infamous) Order of the Golden Dawn in the 1920s. On the basis of her own experience, Gill was inclined to side with Mordacai and was about to say so when the telephone rang. She picked it up.

"Wheel of Fortune Occult supplies," she said, "How can I help?"

"Hello," answered the voice of Liz Hackett. "This is Liz Hackett of Planetwatch here. I wanted to talk to Gill Meadows."

Gill recalled her own, off-hand prediction and was momentarily struck dumb, then she covered the mouthpiece and said to Steve, "It's Liz Hackett."

"You said she'd call. What does she want?"

"I'll tell you when she tells me."

"Hello?" said Liz's voice, somewhat worried by the silence.

"This is Gill speaking. Hi Liz. I was expecting your call, but I didn't know what it would be about. Nor did Steve. What can I do for you?"

"I thought for a minute we'd been cut off. Look, you will probably think I have a terrible cheek to phone and ask, but I need your help again. This time I want to tap your understanding of time and time travel." She had intended to be a bit more circumspect, but the 'we were expecting your call' rather threw her. Anyway, Gill didn't sound surprised to hear from her and that was a help.

"Time travel? That sounds interesting. What exactly did you want to know?"

"I have a gentleman here with me who wants to demonstrate a sort of electronic aid to telepathic time travel. A Mr Brainridge. Isaac Brainridge, and I wondered whether you would look into it for me."

Liz tried to make the request sound everyday and reasonable, which it wasn't. For one thing Brainridge was sitting only three or four feet away and could hear the conversation quite clearly - probably both sides of it. For another Gill was taking it all very reasonably.

"Depends whether I've to go to him or vice versa, and whether I can fit it in with writing and the shop and being pregnant. In principle, okay," said Gill. "I'm curious and I'm willing."

"I'll see whether something can be arranged about him coming to you," said Liz. "Hold the line a minute." She glanced towards up at Brainridge. He didn't look as if he was listening, though he had heard every word, as his answer showed. "If Planetwatch were to pay your expenses, would it be possible for you to drive up to York and visit my colleague?"

"Of course," said Brainridge. York was the home of his niece and he could look her up at the same time. He was quite amused by Athena's

efforts to cultivate her bequest, especially as he had no one else to whom the money could be left. "Ask her if Friday is satisfactory. I will combine the trip to York with family business."

Liz spoke into the phone again. "Would Friday morning be all right?" she asked.

"This coming Friday? I don't think that would be a problem," said Gill. "Do you need instructions on finding us?"

"You'd better tell me how to find the shop, though Mr Brainridge could probably find it from the address."

"I know York," interrupted Brainridge. "I have relatives there," he said, but Gill was already giving directions.

"Right. Come up the A1 and off it onto the Leeds-York road. Take the first exit from the York by-pass, keep straight on until you come to the traffic lights in front of Micklegate Bar. Turn right and there's a car park immediately on the left. Park there and walk back to Micklegate Bar, go through and we're about a hundred yards on the right."

"Sounds straightforward enough. The address and phone number I have already. Tennish on Friday morning then?"

"Sounds fine. I'll be in touch with a report afterwards."

"Look forward to hearing from you and Gill..."

"Yes?"

"Did you say you were expecting?"

"I said I was pregnant. Yes."

"When's it due?"

"Not for a two or three months yet. I'll get your report done, never fear."

Liz smiled. "Well, Congratulations. And don't rush when you have other things to do, but ... Thanks."

"No problem Liz. And no congratulations yet, because I haven't done much except swell up. I'll be in touch. Bye."

"Bye."

Liz Hackett put down the telephone and turned back to Brainridge. "Gillian Meadows is a writer who knows a good deal more than me about time and the philosophy of time," she said.

"I have read her book," said Brainridge. "She is a cautious and responsible woman in her writing. I shall be interested to meet her."

He seemed satisfied with Gill giving an assessment of the value or otherwise to Planetwatch of Brainridge's invention. The whole thing seemed a mad idea and it could without doubt get the environmental group a bad reputation if it was leaked to the press and handled the wrong way. As it was she had defused most of the possibilities - she had committed Planetwatch to nothing, but handed the whole matter over to someone who was quite capable of spotting a fraud, if that's what it turned out to be, while still being able to take advantage of the offer if anything should come of it. Quite a satisfactory conclusion really, since even the most unsupportive elements of the media would find little to criticise.

Gill, on the other hand, was curious. She knew nothing about Brainridge, particularly not that he was related to Athena Harcourt-Jones.

She would undoubtedly have sensed his occult background, but she would still have been curious about the 'invention'. Whether she would have liked that odd gentleman is another matter entirely.

Steve and Mordacai had heard most of the telephone conversation, including some of what Liz had said. What they had not actually heard could be quite easily guessed, so neither had questions to ask. "He's coming Friday, then?" remarked Steve.

"Yes," said Gill.

Isaac Brainridge was punctual. He arrived at the shop, not at 'tenish', but at ten precisely. He carried the electronic gadgetry in a suitcase, which he laid gently on the counter of the shop and introduced himself to Gill.

"You will be Gillian Meadows," he said, looking at her searchingly with his one blue eye and one green eye.

"Yes," she said, "and you'll be Mr Brainridge. This gentleman is my husband Steve."

Gill observed the appearance of her visitor without the same surface reservations felt by both the police constable and Liz Hackett, but she certainly sensed in his presence the powerful occultist and thought that there was probably no fraud here. She was, however, more cautious now that she had actually met the man.

The latter nodded and asked, "Have you somewhere you can lie down comfortably. It's easier lying down than just sitting."

"There's a settee in the back room. I could lie on that."

"And you will need about fifteen twenty minutes during which time you will not want to be disturbed. Will your husband deal with any customers that come in during that time?"

"Sure," said Steve amiably.

"Have you a socket I could use to plug in the electronics?" asked Brainridge.

"Just by the foot of the settee," said Gill. "There's another by the table, where the kettle's plugged in, but that's not as convenient."

The bald visitor began to unpack the suitcase. The circuit boards and wiring were now safely inside a case not unlike a computer case. Not unlike one, because that is what it had been before his adaptations. The headphones, monitoring terminals and mask were now separate items which he plugged into sockets in the box. Finally, he plugged the whole device into the mains and turned it on.

"Lie down on the settee," he told Gill, "and put the headphones on." She did as he instructed. "Now tape these terminals to your temples. Here, let me help." He secured the terminals to Gill as he had secured them to his own head the week before.

Steve stood in the doorway and watched. He hoped that the device was safe. "What's the voltage of that thing?" he asked.

"Very small," Brainridge assured him. "There is a computer power unit in there which drops the power down to only about fifteen volts and, even though the amperage is stepped up for part of the system, for most of it

the equipment uses only about 500 milliamps." He turned his attention back to Gill.

"You will see that this mask has a small knob here, right between the eyes," He helped her position the mask and then guided her hand to the control. "The knob controls how far forward you project. I'm afraid the controls are not strictly accurate yet, but they are close. You can see a register of dates advance or retard with the control as you turn it. Try it for your self."

Gill settled herself comfortably and fiddled with the control.

Brainridge picked up something rather like the bell push on a cable, used to summon a nurse in hospital. "The numbers disappear when you press this button," he said, placing it in her hand. "It's the vital switch to transport you to your chosen point in the future. It incorporates a variable time switch which will return you at the end of the set period, though you can, of course, return to the present at any time, just by pressing the button a second time."

Gill said nothing, but adjusted with the control on the mask. She picked a date more or less at random - 2195. She set the time switch for fifteen minutes, relaxed herself on the settee and pressed the switch to start her time travels.

CHAPTER 3

The room was a comfortable and well-furnished office with just the one occupant. There was a desk with a computer terminal and another at right angles to it, with a combination of telephone and monitor screaming "Videophone" at Gill. There was just a single chair - a swivel type with arms and castors, more the sort of thing one might associate with the director rather than the secretary - strategically placed between the two desks. The woman was seated here. In addition there were two chairs, which looked as if they would be comfortable to sit in, next to a table with a more functional appearance, on the other side of the room.

The floor was tiled in rather southern European looking ceramic tiles, rather than having, polished woon, lino or a carpet, and the decor was principally shades of yellow, orange and brown, which didn't seem exactly restful. The pictures on the walls were framed abstracts with a look of visual muzak about them. It was all quite pleasant but slightly ersatz. Gill could not 'feel' a temperature, but the occupant of the room was casually dressed in a flimsy blouse and showed no sign of chill. A jacket hung behind the door and was more for decoration than warmth, Gill thought.

Gill took in the scene. It was novel but lacking in features or interest. Nothing was happening and there was nothing with which to relate the experience, whatever it was. It seemed impossible to establish a date either, since there wasn't a calendar in evidence. The woman was of pleasant good looks and appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties. There was an air of competent boredom about her. Her clothes had a faintly nineteen sixties look about them, with an almost indecently short miniskirt, though the jacket behind the door had a more nineteen fifties 'bum freezer' appearance. It was black leather (or leather substitute) and was hung on a plastic hanger but designed for style not function. Gill wondered for a moment whether she had managed to go back in time rather than forward.

The woman sighed and said out loud, "Take a break. I've got one or two things to sort out."

At first Gill puzzled over who on earth she was talking to, but a slightly metallic though otherwise very human voice asked, "Do you want me to try the busy fax numbers again for the reminders?" and she realised that the conversation was between the woman and the computer.

"Oh, yes," answered the woman and the computer monitor switched itself off.

"Smug machine," Gill thought, and wondered whether, as the whole thing was telepathic, she could get inside the woman's head, as it were.

... "God I'm bored," I thought ... and she realised that she was now seeing everything from a slightly different point of view.

... I got up from the desk, took my jacket from behind the door and went out of the room, the door sliding open before me and sighing shut again behind me, chanting "See you later, Magareta Noonan," as it always does. I wish the damned door would call me 'Maggie', like everyone else.

In front a sign pointed right to the 'recreation room' and left to the 'exit'. I turned left - I couldn't face 'recreating' or whatever you're supposed to do in a recreation room. As I turned I passed a pleasant looking young man and wondered whether he currently had a partner.

"Hello Maggie," he said as he passed.

I waved my hand slightly, in a gesture of recognition, though actually I don't know him that well. He's just a potential screw who has an office here. I've only had my own office in the building for about six weeks and I don't really mingle much in the recreation room, so I don't really know many people, other than to say 'Hi' to. The idea, of course, is that an office in a building with others gives you more opportunity for socialising than working from home does. Sound though rather obvious thinking, but it does depend on the co-operation of individuals for it to work.

The door slid open and wished me "Goodbye", politely but impersonally as I walked through into the street.

Gill was, as she had wanted, inside the head of the woman called Maggie and, given time, could probably have gone through her thoughts like studying a file or watching a succession of videos. For the moment she decided to just allow herself to 'be' the woman.

I turned into a MacDonatelli's Italian Restaurant and sat down at a table. "What I need is a partner," I thought. "When fertile women reach their mid-fifties like me they're already thinking about partners for raising offspring. I'm not fertile, of course. We can't all be fertile now that we live longer or the world would be overrun."

The Communicator on the table lit up. "Can I take your order now please," it asked with a syrupy sweetness.

"A frothy coffee and a dinky biscuit, please," I said. If you miss off the 'please' to these machines they are rude back to you, and I can't abide a rude machine, which is absurd, of course.

"Will that be a large or a super-large, MacDonatelli, caffein-free, Italian-style, frothy coffee?" asked the same syrupy voice. There isn't a human involved at all, but I find it helps my sanity if I pretend there is, which is pretty insane, so perhaps I'm mad anyway, and just pretending to be sane.

I suppressed the urge to say 'small' - which is what it meant - and answered, "Large."

"And will that be a large or a giant sized super crunchy MacDinky biscuit?"

I gritted my teeth and said, "Large." thinking that it would have to be a pretty dim human to put up with a job like this.

"That will be one unit ten," said the communicator. "Please insert your currency card into the slot.

I took the purse from my jacket pocket, took out my currency card and, as instructed, stuck it into the slot. I put my palm on the print reader. There was a slight whirring noise and the card popped out. "Thank you. One moment please," said the communicator.

A paper bag containing a small paper cup and a tiny biscuit popped out from the central delivery point just below the communicator, and I braced myself. "Enjoy your meal and have a nice day," said the machine. I'd like to shoot the stupid sod who programmed that phrase into it!

It occurred to me that all coffee was now decaffeinated. Caffein had been genetically engineered out of coffee plants years ago, as anything else dangerous had been eliminated from food plants in the same way. The only dangerous components in food were the ones we added or engineered to make it look, taste or keep better. This train of thought prompted me to reflect in passing on whether it was still coffee I was drinking. Thinking this kind of thought is hard work, so I turned my attention back to the question of being bored.

I don't have a partner and I haven't had one for ten years or more. A good screw would be welcome now and again. A real one, not just my vibrator and my imagination, but I would be lucky to find a sexually satisfying partner easily - intellectually satisfying, yes, but that isn't what I need. It isn't that I don't look good, or that I'm too choosy - genetic engineering has made sure we all look reasonably attractive.

What to do? There is a sex supplies shop in the next street: I'll go there later and see what they've got in the way of robots. Perhaps I could find something in that line to tide me over my present boredom crisis.

As to work, maybe I should retrain for something either more emotionally demanding, like nursing, or something more intellectually challenging, like law. I sipped the coffee and thought that it tasted like coffee, whether it was, strictly speaking, coffee or not. I would need an intelligence and aptitude test to change careers, but I thought I would ring the Academic Assessment Unit as soon as I got back to the office.

Being decisive about things made me feel much better, which any counsellor will tell you is normal. I finished my MacDonatelli, Caffein Free, Italian Style, Frothy whatever it was, placed my rubbish in the Instant

MacCycler next to the communicator and got up to MacOff before I went MacPotty.

The front door of the building slid open as I approached and it gave me a polite greeting. Outside my office I rested my hand against the print reader and the office door checked its records before it said "Welcome back, Margareta Noonan" and slid quietly open to admit me. 'Quietly' in the sense of 'without any mechanical noise' I mean!

"Did you manage to get through on those calls?" I asked the auto-sec as I took off my jacket and hung it up.

"Instruction not understood. Please repeat," it said.

It can be a frustratingly pedantic machine at times and I felt a passing urge to tell it to 'MacOff'. Instead I repeated the question more slowly and clearly. "Were you able to fax the rest of the reminders?" I asked.

"Yes," it replied.

"Well let me see the view screen then." I went over to the chair and sat down as the screen lit up - but remained blank. "Show ... me ... the ... reminder ... schedule," I said with an exaggerated patience completely lost on the stupid inanimacy of what is, after all, only a glorified computer. The data duly scrolled itself down the screen. The reminders had indeed been sent but, if a computer says it has done something, you can bet your boot disks that it has. Funny expression that. I wonder what boot disks are. Or were, when the expression originated.

"Okay," I said, "you can turn off the screen for now." The screen went blank.

I swivelled the chair round to face the video-phone. "Outgoing call," I said and a warning light came on. "Get me the Academic Assessment Unit," I told it.

There was a short pause while it searched its memory for the number, then the word 'dialling' came up on the screen and it said "Dialling the number for you." There was a pause and the word 'dialling' was replaced by the word 'ringing' and it said, "Your call is ringing."

An older woman - probably in her mid-eleventies - appeared on the screen. "Academic Assessments," she said, smiling professionally, "How can I help you?"

"Hello," I answered, "I'm Maggie Noonan. WN-4600-2790. I'd like to arrange an assessment."

I left my office a bit early, so that I could visit the sex shop before it closed at two. I stood outside somewhat irresolutely, admiring an interesting collection of robots, male and female, some of which looked decidedly attractive. Those too old to have genetically engineered resistance to HIV tend to rely on robots for casual fun, but I lacked any sort of experience in what to choose. It would be rather like ordering a meal in a posh restaurant for the first time - you want to order things that go together and not make a fool of yourself. I went inside.

A female about the same age as me approached. "Can I help you?" she said. The woman seemed calm and had an air of confidence

about her. Either she was a well-trained salesperson or she really knew her stock and could give sound advice. I hoped it was the latter and the rather naughty thought crossed my mind that it must be fun really getting to know your stock in a place like this!

"I'm between partners and I was thinking of a robot for the time being," I said. I didn't say 'ten years between', but that wasn't her business. "I thought a robot might 'fill the gap', as you might say."

"I'm looking for a good home," said a tall female. "I'm programmed AC/DC at the moment. Want to share me with a partner?"

The woman was wearing nothing but crotchless knickers and a very inviting smile, but I was slightly irritated that she hadn't listened to me. "I said I was between partners," I snapped, becoming aware as I spoke that I was in conversation with a robot. I looked again. A very tasty robot indeed.

"We can re-programme her while you wait, if you like," said the shop assistant smiling. As far as I knew she was a human. At least, she was the only one in the shop fully dressed.

"I think I'd like to look at all the possibilities before I make up my mind."

"Suit yourself," said the robot rather abruptly. I didn't like her - its - manner much and wondered whether it had anything to do with the AC/DC programming. She looked inviting, though, and also wondered about her qualities in bed.

"What else do you have?" I asked.

"We have some very interesting male robots," said the human. "They're programmed to respond to your preferences and recognise an orgasm. They learn from experience too, up to a point. In addition they're all fully equipped with a vocally operated override for safety and comfort. All in all they're very satisfying as physical partners, though they are a bit limited intellectually."

"Unlike the men I've encountered," I remarked, "They tend to be quite good intellectually but hopeless in bed."

"Well, when violence and aggression was genetically engineered out of the species, sexual assertiveness seems to have gone with it, I'm afraid."

"You sound regretful," I said.

"Not really," answered the woman. "It has made a lot of business for us. Quite a significant proportion of women like their men to show a ... er ... some positive qualities, as it were, providing they can remain in control. We can programme that into any robot, no problem. With the override you can remain in control, while having as much of whatever you want. We can programme for absolutely any taste, requirement or fetish," she said.

"I'm not into domination," I commented, "But the men I've met have seemed a little ... well, uninspiring."

"Ah," said the woman, with a knowing smile, and dropped her voice conspiratorially, "if you don't fancy a robot but you miss a little 'assertiveness', I think I can help you."

"Yes?"

"Yes. We have undertaken a little genetic manipulation of our own. At least our suppliers have. There's nothing actually illegal about it, though the authorities might very soon make it illegal if they knew it was being done."

I was mightily curious. "Go on," I prompted her.

"We have genetically engineered the ideal partner. Either sex, of course. The male version is not too bright, but he can be trained to do housework and cooking as well as being exceedingly good in bed. He's always ready and, like a robot, he doesn't take offence if you don't feel like it. He's got a dong like a donkey and a good physique."

"But they'd take years to mature and train and what would you do with them if you got fed up and wanted a change?" I objected.

The woman paused. She hesitated just long enough for me to realise she was wondering how much to tell me and, in turn, I wondered what she was holding back. "That's what the authorities might object to if they realised," she said. "These partners have been genetically modified to develop quickly and age quite quickly. At about five or less they're ready to train and you get about fifteen years good use from them. We'll give you a fair trade in before that or dispose of him or her for you after that."

I was a bit worried. "That sounds rather callous treatment for a human."

"Oh no," said the woman, "They're not real humans. They look like the traditional ideal for a male or female, depending on what sex they are, of course, but they're not real humans. Look on them as a sort of animated robot. For a woman they tend to be better than a robot, since robots are a bit lacking in 'give' when they lie on you. Not that some aren't very good," she added, thinking of her wares, I suppose.

For a fleeting moment I reflected on whether genetic manipulation simply speeded up evolution or created something new and different. Was I a human, within the traditional meaning of the word? Was the woman in the shop? It would be a problem for a theologian or a philosopher, were they not extinct species and ethics an extinct study. Was the race still the human race? If it wasn't, could genetic engineering be considered evolution or was it mutation?

Did it matter anyway? The moment passed, because this kind of thought was giving me a headache. I couldn't undo the genetic changes that made me what I am, and I wasn't at all sure I wanted to anyway. I shivered as if a cloud was passing the sun and then the moment passed and the sun shone again, like it always does.

"Okay," I said, "If I say I'll have one, how long do I have to wait and how much do I have to pay?"

"There's more to it than that. Are you WN or WF category?"

"WN. Woman Non-Fertile."

"Good, but I'll have to see your ID card and check your status myself. To satisfy our suppliers we have to be scrupulously careful. Some of the males I referred to are fertile, so we can only supply a female to a WF. We would certainly be in trouble with the regulations if we started selling fertile mentally subnormals to WFs and they got themselves

pregnant." I noted in passing that, even if she resorts to in vitro fertilisation and sperm banks, a woman doesn't actually 'get herself pregnant', and cloning has never been legal. It still requires at least two people, sometimes three, even if they've never met. However, I let that one pass.

The woman was still talking. "Our suppliers have several of each sex in training now." she said, "We can arrange for delivery this evening, if you like. On the other hand, they're rather expensive, I'm afraid. Seventeen thousand units, though we can do long term credit on them, if you require."

I thought about it only briefly. "All right," I said, "I can afford it so I'll have one. A male."

The woman pulled a catalogue from beneath the counter. "There are photographs and descriptions of the 'personal partners' here," she said. "Look through and choose."

It was hard to make a choice from a book, but they all certainly looked hunky. "This one," I said pointing almost at random to one called 'Roger'.

"I'll bring Roger round to meet you this evening," said the woman

I got out my holocard and my ID card, thinking that I'd better tidy up the flat before he arrived ...

Gill thought that she would be interested to see how the woman lived and, very abruptly, 'fast forwarded' to the evening. She was not aware that she had actually done anything, other than think about it, to incur a momentarily dizzying blur of disjointed images followed by a new scene, still from the viewpoint of Maggie Noonan. She thought about 'looking around' and experienced a slight metal jerk, to sort of hover over the scene.

She was somewhat disappointed to find the apartment generally similar to the sort of thing one might see today. It was a very small but well arranged, single bedroom affair, though Gill admitted to herself that, if there were never going to be more than two people living there, more space was unnecessary. The decor was a more relaxing shade of green than the colour of Maggie's work environment. Like the office, the flat seemed to be floored with ceramics and there did not appear to be any source of heating, such as radiators for instance.

The centre piece of the living room was a very large TV screen built into the wall. As in Orwell's world of "1984" it was impossible to escape the viewscreen, but there the similarity ended. Although it was on, there was an on/off switch and a control to change channel suggestive of a number of channels. The screen itself showed sharp, clear colours and the programme appeared to be the news. Unfortunately the sound was turned down to a level below that of audibility or it might have provided fascinating and very useful information and, try as she might, Gill could not find a way to influence Maggie's actions - there seemed to be no contact with her conscious thought processes.

The woman was looking around the room uncertainly and Gill wondered what was on her mind, though she could probably guess. Just thinking about the subject of Maggie's thoughts was enough to merge her with the woman once again.

... I'd just finished the housework and tidying up the flat, when it occurred to me to check the fridge and the food cupboard. Under the operation of sod's law, I was out of several things I would need and there was nothing for it but to go to the all night Super Store. The question was, could I go and get back before the sex store dropped off Roger. You could bet your boot disks that sod's law would operate again if I tried it.

It was not the first time that I had thought how useful it would be if you could vid. the Super Store for the things you needed. They won't let you do that, I'm sorry to say, though they'll quite happily deliver your order once you've been there. The reason is painfully obvious. They won't let you vid. for what you need, because they want to sell you a lot of things you don't need as well, and they can do that better if you're there in person.

While I was still dithering, the door announced a caller. I knew who it would be, but I told the front door viewer to show me the visitor. The living room view screen switched to the front door camera and it was, as I had expected, the woman from the sex shop.

"Hello, it's Ruth Kenny from 'Bedroom Frolics' here," I heard her say into the communicator. "Just dropping off Roger."

"Come on up," I told her, straining to catch a glimpse of the partner I had bought.

I told the front door to let her in and went to the door of the flat to wait for her to come up.

Ruth Kenny appeared with a bloke who looked every bit as good as the photograph in the catalogue. He had dark curly hair, good build - not overdone like a body-builder, just fit - and a nice, tight, sexy bum. Wow, was he ever hunky. "This is Roger," she said, completely unnecessarily. "Roger, meet Maggie."

The bloke handed me a bouquet of flowers and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Er ... Come in," I said, a little inadequately, and he went past me carrying a holdall and small case.

I waited for Ruth to follow, but she said, "I won't come in because Roger needs to spend some time settling in with you. It takes a couple of hours to bond properly." She turned to go. "Have fun," she added.

After she'd gone I told the flat door to close and went to the living room where Roger was waiting.

"Welcome home," I said. "I hope you'll be happy here."

"Very nice," he said, looking me up and down, "Fancy a quick screw just now?"

I must admit that seeing him there had been making me think along exactly those lines, but the longer I left the Super Store the more I'd regret it later. "I've just got to pop out for a few minutes to get one or two things we need. Can you wait 'till I get back?"

"Sure."

By the same little mental jerk, Gill separated herself from the woman as she slipped her jacket on and went out. She would have quite liked to see the Super Store, but she wanted to have a closer look at the

flat and at Roger and to see whether she could get him to watch the rest of the news. He was staring at the viewscreen.

... "I can't hear it. The loud control is next to the channel changer." I'll turn it louder. There is a sign behind the woman. "The n-e-w-s." It is all talk. I don't like it. I'll switch over to something I like. The channel controller is on the left. I'll turn the controller." The picture on the viewscreen changed. "Football. I like that sometimes. I think I'll sit down and watch it."

The door interrupted to announce a caller.

The door's talking. It says there's somebody there. "That isn't Maggie, 'cos the door would know her. That's smart. I figured that out for myself."

"Show me who's there." The picture on the view screen will show me who it is. There's a picture of a woman standing there.

Gill found Roger's limited intelligence very restricting and separated herself from his personality.

"Hello," said the woman, "It's Judith. Is Maggie in?"

"No," Roger answered, sounding fairly normal as he repeated Maggie's own words, "She just popped out for a few minutes."

"It's her friend Judith. Can I come up and wait for her?"

"If you like." Roger said, and told the front door to let her in. Then he went to the flat door.

When she came out of the lift, the first thing the visitor said was, "Where's Maggie been keeping you?"

'Judith' was unaware that it was a remark likely to be misinterpreted. Gill could tell that Roger was puzzled, and considered it a somewhat 'dumb' thing to ask, because the only place Maggie had kept him was the flat.

"Here," he said.

"He was eyeing her appraisingly as she walked past him. He stared at her, looking her over until Gill felt slightly uncomfortable herself and the woman began to blush.

"Very nice," he said at last, and asked, "Fancy a quick screw just now?" She recovered some of her composure and said, "I thought Maggie only popped out for a minute."

"She said she'd just got to pop out for a few minutes," Roger agreed.

"How about a slow screw tomorrow morning while Maggie's at work?"

"Sure," he said ...

CHAPTER 4

At that precise moment the time on the variable time switch ran out. Things were starting to get really interesting, but Gill found herself confronting another rather dizzying and disorientating blur, followed by the darkness of the mask, until she removed it.

She lay still for a moment or two, feeling rather as one does on waking from a very vivid dream - not exactly uncertain where one is but not quite sure of the time or circumstances. Gradually she came to her senses and sat up. She removed the headphones and the sticking plaster that held the terminals to her forehead. "That was interesting," she said, feeling immediately that the comment was a little less than adequate.

Steve was standing in the doorway to keep an eye on the shop, but there were no customers at that moment. "You all right?" he asked. His tone implied that he assumed she was and wanted to know what she had seen.

"Yes," she answered. "I didn't latch onto anything I could really say was important, but I was just feeling my way around and getting the hang of what I could do." She continued to Brainridge, "It's a peculiar sensation just sort of 'fast forwarding' through the bits where nothing is happening, and you can move in and out of other people's minds with no problem."

"You seem to have gained considerable control in a very short time," Brainridge observed.

"I don't know what an average time would be," she said, "but I found it easy to do, though there were moments when it was not entirely within my control. You said it's not altogether accurate in locating itself," she continued. "What are the chances of going back and continuing a story?"

"Well," said Brainridge cautiously, trying not to commit himself too much. "I'd say the chances of resuming the story are good, say seventy five or eighty per cent. Carrying on exactly where you left off is a different

matter. Twenty percent chance of that, I'd say, or even less. I haven't experimented enough to be certain."

Gill said to him, "Have you any objection to me trying another session after lunch, when I've had chance to think about this one properly?"

"None at all."

Steve came through to the back. "So what did you see?" he asked.

"As Bilbo Baggins said to the three Trolls in 'The Hobbit', 'A lot and nothing at all'."

"Bilbo Baggins said 'lots and **none** at all', not '**nothing** at all'," observed Steve, "and he said it by accident."

"Pedant! I meant that I saw a lot, but not much actually happened." and she gave him the gist of what she had seen, stressing the genetic manipulation and the side effects.

"You seem to have had an interesting and useful experience," said Brainridge at length.

"Yes, but I don't know anything about where I was or how society is - will be - organised: the hierarchy and government and so on."

"It sounds in some ways a very stable society," said Steve, "though I don't think it appeals to me at all."

Gill was unconvinced. "I don't know," she said. "I had a gut feeling that there was something seriously wrong and Maggie and the others I saw had a sort of 'head in the sand' attitude or a blind spot. At any rate, there was something they weren't facing up to. I want to try and go back to the same place and see if I can find out what."

At that point the shop bell rang as a customer entered. Steve went through and Gill heard him say, "Hello Athena."

"Oh-oh," muttered Gill. "Trouble has arrived." Brainridge looked at her curiously as she got up.

Athena greeted Steve like a long lost friend. "Hello," she said gushingly, "I'm really glad I caught you in by yourself. I wanted to have a quiet word about tonight's lodge meeting."

"I'm not alone actually. Gill's through the back somewhere, but go on." Gill took that as a cue to stay back and listen from obscurity.

"No need to call her. You can fill her in afterwards," Athena said rather dismissively. It may have been that, as Gill was the higher occultist, Athena felt she would have been less sympathetic to her cause or, possibly, she just felt any male would be more malleable.

"Well," she continued, "if you've got the summons for next Monday's meeting, you'll see that I have a resolution down about the rules regarding private experiments. The restrictions on the experimental work of adepts are getting too much and I'm going to propose that they're eased."

Steve had seen that she was also challenging Mordacai to become master of the lodge, but he listened without commenting on that point. "The rules haven't changed at all," he remarked. "It's you that's changed." No answer was forthcoming and, not being confrontational by nature and not wishing to provoke the woman anyway, he tried to sound

noncommittal. "Anyway," he continued, "there's nothing to stop you doing whatever you want outside the lodge."

"That's not reasonable." Athena sounded slightly irritated. "At the lodge you have everything you need, plenty of space and the right atmosphere. You just don't have the same facilities if you work on your own."

"The lodge imposes restrictions on what you do using their equipment and space. You please yourself when you're on your own."

Athena drew a deep breath. Steve didn't usually seem stupid to her but he was either playing games, she thought, or he hadn't got her point. She said with heavy patience, "Look. I know we please ourselves when we're on our own. That's another matter entirely. What I am concerned about is what restrictions the lodge imposes when you work in their space but on your own projects. I want to see those restrictions eased. That's why I'm putting the motion."

Gill decided to stay in the back with Brainridge for the moment, but the latter stepped through into the shop.

"Good morning, Athena," he said.

It is a mark of Athena's self control that she didn't so much as flicker an eyelid in surprise.

"Hello, uncle," she said, her voice showing a trace of irritation at being interrupted in mid-flow. "What a surprise to meet you in York. I didn't know you were acquainted with Gillian and Steve."

"I met them at ten this morning," he said.

Steve was rather relieved at the distraction. He hadn't wanted to clash directly with Athena, if it could be avoided, because she was a formidable opponent.

"Athena was just explaining her reasons for her motion on the agenda for the next meeting," Steve said to Gill as she joined them.

"I want an easing of the rules restricting adepts working by themselves," Athena said.

"If you climb a sheer rock face," Gill answered carefully, using the mountaineering metaphor, "items like ropes and crampons are a sensible precaution. The rules that you call restrictions are only the same sort of thing. If you use lodge premises the lodge has a responsibility to see that you don't come to grief. When you're on your own, it's up to you as an individual. Steve and I are always careful though."

"You two are always timid, you mean," snapped Athena.

"If you like," answered Steve amiably. "I make no pretence of being innovative and challenging." He was not afraid of the woman, but he realised she could be very disruptive if she chose. "Look, we'll listen to the debate tonight and decide then how to vote. In the elections for master as well as on the motion."

"If you keep an open mind it will help," said Athena, controlling her temper and wondering if she did have his support. Gill sounded like an opponent.

"I should like to visit you later, before I leave York," remarked Brainridge to Athena.

Athena thought suddenly of his money and smiled sweetly. "Are you free for lunch?" she asked.

"I was referred to Miss Meadows, Mrs. Benderman I should say, by an environmental organisation called Planetwatch."

"Environmental Organisation?" Athena was both surprised and dismissive. "Why are you wasting your time on environmental groups?" she asked.

"Strange as it may seem in one of my age, I am concerned that the human race should not destroy the planet," Brainridge said. "At any rate, I will need to talk over the results of a first test Mrs. Benderman is making on behalf of Planetwatch. I rather think she will want a further test session before we are through. All in all, I think we had better leave lunch and say that I will call on you later in the day."

Athena was furious, but her face was impassive. "I'll see you later in the day, then," she said, and turned to go. "I'll see you both this evening as well," she said to Gill and Steve. "Goodbye."

It was not immediately obvious to anyone just how annoyed Athena really was. As far as she was concerned, Steve had been stupid, Gill obstructive and, on top of that, Isaac Brainridge was wasting time and money on mere environmental matters.

Gill waited until Athena had left the shop and closed the door behind her before saying, "I don't think we're going to be able to avoid a row."

"Tonight?" asked Steve.

"Probably. If not tonight then sometime soon. And when it comes it's going to be a very nasty row. Athena is not quite as powerful as she thinks but she's no slouch."

"It's not my business at all," said Brainridge, "but that lady has quite enough about her to cause a lot of trouble. Even the powerful should beware of crossing her without realising it."

Gill thought that sounded like a prophetic or even a psychic remark and wondered who was likely to cross Athena Harcourt-Jones inadvertently. It was, however, lunch time and more pressing matters pushed the thought aside. "I could use a little lunch," she said. "Time travelling must be a hungry business."

"I'll buy us all lunch," said Steve. "There's a really smart little restaurant just a few doors down on the other side of the street." With that they switched out the lights and closed the door, adjusting the 'closed' sign, and locked it behind them.

Across the road Athena was just coming out a newsagents and saw the three of them leave. She frowned at the sight of Gill and was puzzled by Brainridge.

"I wonder what experiment the Benderman woman is doing for Planetwatch?" she thought, "and what uncle's interest in it is. I don't want him wasting too much money before I get it."

It's doubtful whether she actually considered the thought unworthy, though she wouldn't have expressed it aloud, but she dismissed

the matter from her mind and strode in a savage bad temper towards the rather classy restaurant nearer the Minster which she favoured.

As they waited in the restaurant for their order to arrive, Brainridge asked Gill what, on reflection, she thought of the morning's experience.

"I haven't had much time to reflect," she said. "What with Athena's visit and the thoughts associated with it, mature thought has been a bit constrained."

"What I can't seem to appreciate," remarked Steve, "is the more general question of what, precisely, one sees."

"The future," said Brainridge simply.

"That begs several questions," Steve objected. "Do you see 'a' future or 'the' future? Can one change or influence the things seen? That's just a couple of questions for a start."

Far from taking exception to the challenge, Brainridge visibly settled back to an argument he had clearly had before, possibly with himself, since he was something of a 'loner'.

"One view is that individual consciousness follows a line of 'futures'," he said, "like messages in a bank of pigeon holes. It is quite possible in terms of that view for the individual to choose the next pigeonhole. Once you have examined the contents of the pigeonhole you can't change them, because they are an established fact. Until you look inside a slot, they are infinitely variable."

"If that's true," Steve objected, "Just looking at the future makes it a fact, so what happens if you look into two contradictory pigeon holes and see two contradictory futures. Say there's a woman you marry in one future and don't in another. Which is correct?"

"Perhaps," said Brainridge, "something prevents you from looking at a contradictory future. Time is just a matter of which pigeonhole you look into first. The ones you've looked into are the past, the one you are looking at now is the present and the untouched ones are the future."

There was a brief pause as the waitress arrived with their soup, then Brainridge continued, "The findings of quantum physics, on the other hand, suggest that the universe is a holographic projection from a higher, implicate level, where time and space as we experience them don't exist at all."

"The Western Mystery Tradition holds views that are not dissimilar," Gill observed thoughtfully.

"Oh yes," Brainridge agreed. "But you can see that, if time and space really are an illusion, the future can be viewed as alternative present."

Gill said, "According to Steve, time is just a measure of change."

"If there was no change of any kind, you would have nothing to measure, and if there was no duration to measure," said Steve, "you'd have eternity, not time. Eternity is no much future without end and present without end."

"Hmm," said Brainridge, noncommittally.

"Again, according to Steve, change only runs one way."

"Why?" Brainridge asked.

"Because the first law of thermodynamics says that neither energy nor matter can be created or destroyed, only changed," said Steve. "And the second law of thermodynamics states that all change is from the useable to the unusable. Like you can only burn coal once. You can't burn it a second time or unburn it."

Gill continued the argument. "If time is a measure of change and change only moves one way, then it follows that time only moves one way and time travel is impossible," she said.

"So how do you account for what you saw this morning?" Brainridge asked.

"I can't," Gill answered. "That's why I'm so anxious to try it again."

"And how do you account for remembering former incarnations? Past lives?" Brainridge asked. "And what about the akashic records?"

"Past lives are part of your past. You are exploring an aspect of your own personality," Steve answered. "And akashic records are more like a video tape of past events. You can see what took place, perhaps, but it happened and you can't 'unhappen' it, if you'll pardon the expression."

"Although," Gill added slowly, "Carl Pribram has been suggesting that all memory is stored outside the person, in the quantum field. That would account for accessing memories of past lives and akashic records."

"I don't concede your argument at all," he said, "I reserve the point to be made later. However, my device is concerned with telepathy - what is experienced inside a mind staying firmly in the present. Until the argument is resolved, can I say, I am not implying time travel at all. I am exploring the future telepathically. The physical reality stays here in the present. Only the consciousness moves."

"Quite," agreed Gill. "I wasn't suggesting that the experience I had was not in some way futuristic. I don't think Steve was either," she added.

"No," said Steve. "It's just that I want to know whether knowing about the future is in any way useful. A friend of ours got into some difficulties trying to change the future, but her experience still left it a completely open question as to whether there is just one future or many of them."

"And whether trying to influence it actually causes it," Gill added.

"My point exactly," Brainridge remarked, which didn't add anything to the debate. "However, Tom Lethbridge did some experiments involving dowsing with a variable length of cord. He found that everything, including non-physical concepts such as time, responded to lengths between 1 and 40 inches. Then the cycle began again, except that the concepts 'time', 'death' and 'sleep' did not register on the second cycle. That led him to argue that there might be a higher level in which time does not operate at all."

"That ties in with what I said," Gill remarked.

"Quite," Brainridge agreed.

Eating interrupted the talking from time to time, as did visits from the waitress. Over coffee Brainridge went back to his reserved argument, and said, "I don't necessarily accept that time travel is impossible in every circumstance, you know. If you travelled to the nearest star - alpha centuri -

at the speed of light, sent a radio message and then came home at a speed greater than the speed of light, you would arrive before your message. If you returned at five times the speed of light, you would arrive back before you set off."

"Which may be a reason for arguing that speeds faster than light may not be possible," said Steve.

"I shall never know," Brainridge remarked with a shrug. "Not in this incarnation, anyway."

As the threesome strolled leisurely back across the street, Gill said, "I would like to have a further experiment with your equipment. I'm curious about that society which I encountered this morning, and I want to try and find out what is amiss with it."

"I've no objection at all," said Brainridge. "You haven't yet discovered anything which could be of assistance to Planetwatch."

"No," said Gill. "Not yet."

"If your husband would watch the shop once more," he said as Gill unlocked the door.

"As long as I don't have to cope with Athena a second time," agreed Steve. "Or Mordacai," he added.

"Come through into the back again," said Brainridge to Gill. "I'll set it up and we'll try to go back to the same place."

"Place?" asked Gill. "Do you mean place as in 'location' or place as in 'time'?"

"Both," Brainridge replied. "Location is the more difficult to control. I don't know where you were this morning, but it wasn't necessarily here, as in H.G. Wells."

"I didn't think it was," said Gill vaguely, settling herself on the settee and putting on the headphones. "I think I'll give myself thirty minutes this time Steve, if that's all right with you. I can always come back sooner if I don't discover anything interesting."

"Okay with me," Steve agreed, watching her adjust the mask while Brainridge attached the terminals.

"We need to get these in exactly the same position on your head that they were this morning," he said. "I can't see why it makes a difference to what you observe, but it seems to do."

He stood back. Gill fiddled with the controls, relaxed and pressed the switch.

CHAPTER 5

The room was a large one, with a long desk taking up most of one wall. At this desk sat an older woman with greying hair, playing with a pen and looking lost in thought. Beside her sat a younger man, fronted by several reference books and a thick, loose-leafed folder of printed matter.

Sideways to the long desk and at right angles to it there were several others along the sides of the room. At one sat a hatchet faced woman, who might well have been older than the one with white hair, and next to her sat two men of indeterminate middle age and an appearance which suggested to Gill 'civil servant' or 'local government officer'. Opposite them sat several more persons, among whom she recognised Maggie and Judith.

From the general layout of the room, Gill surmised it was some kind of court. There was a lack of the formality found in most courtrooms in the United Kingdom, except perhaps a small claims court. Gill did the obvious thing and listened to the proceedings.

"I cannot see," said the Examining Magistrate, "That either of these two women has broken any regulation. There is no doubt that WN-4600-2790 Maggie Noonan is not being as helpful as she could be. However, I think that her reticence is a matter of covering for some other person, not at present before me."

She looked towards the hatchet-faced woman. "Your evidence Doctor Delmartin amounts to no more than any fool could have informed us and the woman WF-0025-2774 Judith Savage told us herself."

"I was able to confirm that WF-0025-2774 was indeed pregnant and that she was unable to correctly supply the name and reference number of the father."

"Exactly," said the Examining Magistrate dryly. "You say she was pregnant. She tells me that she had a baby. I don't think a great deal of medical skill is required to diagnose that information. You say she was 'unable' to tell you who the father was, while she tells me that she doesn't know. Not knowing the name and reference number of the father of your child is not in itself a breach of the regulations."

"It ought to be," snapped the Doctor.

"I concur," said one of the two civil servants, while the other nodded.

"But it isn't," the Examining Magistrate reminded them again. "We have to investigate the regulations as they stand."

Then she made a remark Gill found tantalisingly interesting.

"After all," the woman continued, "It is unlikely that the regulations can ever be revised."

Why were the 'regulations' unlikely ever to be revised? Come to that, what were the 'regulations' and why was it an offence requiring a court hearing to consider a breach? Gill reflected that, considering how the story had been left when she had been returned so abruptly to reality on the previous occasion, she knew exactly who was the father of Judith's child. She thought that both Judith and Maggie probably knew as well, but they clearly hadn't admitted it.

"I wonder where Roger is now," she pondered to herself. "I'll bet Maggie knows where he is or she wouldn't be hiding anything from the Magistrate."

By a mental quirk she found herself looking at the room from the perspective of the white haired woman:

"Oh God, this case is boring," I thought. "The first breach of any reg. for years and it's as boring as a programme loop. I haven't been so bored since the last case I tried. Why is it that all four cases in the last eighty years have been so boring? I want to get back to the temporal reality game I interrupted to come here. I was just getting into thirteenth century France and Councillor Aguila will have guessed the reality by now. To make matters worse, that stupid doctor woman is becoming more and more annoying."

"Still, I suppose she is only doing what the administration official is asking her to do. It ought to be him I'm annoyed with, but I find her manner irritating. And both those two women are hiding information. Well, I'd better get on with a judgement. The sooner I can get it over with, the sooner I can get back to my temporal reality."

I gavelled on the desk and said, "I can see the point which is worrying the administration. They want to keep records of all babies born and make sure that they conform to human genetic specification. However, the regulations make no mention of any restriction on choice of partner or specific requirement that he must be named. The regulations state that the name and number must be recorded but make no provision for any sanction if he is not named. On the other hand, there is a clear inference to be drawn that there shall be a name and number to record."

"The mother in this case says clearly that she knows only that his first name is 'Roger' and that she does not know either the reference number or his mother's name. I find that WF-0025-2774 Judith Savage has not committed any specific offence but has, either deliberately or negligently, withheld information from this court. No specific sanction being prescribed and no specific offence having been committed, I think that she should be relocated in the agricultural sector, though no other penalty need

be imposed." Preferably, I think, relocated a long way from here, where she can cause problems for somebody else.

I turned to the senior administrator present and decided that I would give him the benefit of my irritation with the doctor. "Why the second woman, WN-4600-2790 Maggie Noonan, was brought before me for examination, I completely fail to understand," I said, "Apart from being a friend of the first woman she appears to have nothing to do with the matter at all. However, it is clear that she is not telling this court some undefined thing, which may or may not have a bearing on this case. She should likewise be relocated in the agricultural sector with no further penalty."

I added, reinforcing the point with a vindictive nastiness, "Let me stress that the court has imposed no penalty and the two women are to be treated as if they had chosen to relocate: they are not prisoners and are free to make their own arrangements as to relocation."

I could have just dismissed the case. Probably I should have done. However, there's an advantage in relocation: it becomes a problem for somebody else, not me. The whole business has been tedious and boring, the evidence varying between the naive and completely irrelevant and the doctor small minded and vindictive. Give me virtual reality over real reality every time.

I yawned with a bored tiredness. If there were any other cases, they could wait until next year. There hadn't been anything for ten years or more and I didn't expect anything else, but I didn't ask. "Adjourn until next Oneday," I said, thinking of temporal reality and thirteenth century France....

Gill found herself watching the Examining Magistrate stand and walk out, followed by her Clerk. She wondered what the 'agricultural sector' involved. It sounded like some kind of punishment. She also reflected on the strange attitude of the magistrate and the way in which unchanging regulations were hardly ever broken.

Maggie and Judith were also collecting their things together and leaving the room in company. Gill hardly noticed any decision to follow them, but she did so.

"Let's go for a drink somewhere," Judith said. "Relocation is bad enough, but the agricultural sector is a bit grim."

"Might as well enjoy the comforts of civilisation while we can," Maggie agreed as they went down the steps into the street. "Are you leaving Roger junior in the creche 'till later?"

"We can think about the relocation better without him for the moment. MacDonatelli's?"

"Where else? Enjoy it while you can," said Maggie, no doubt with the reservations she had expressed when Gill shared her mind on the previous occasion. For the moment Gill just watched as they turned into the same cafe she had seen previously.

Gill made a conscious decision to follow them later and looked around her. The 'town', 'suburb' or 'city' consisted of pedestrian walkways, flagged and with palm trees and yucca trees providing some shade but with covered walkways of tinted glass down the centre of the roads. Since there was no sign of rain and people were using the walkways as shade, she

thought they might well be to protect users from the sun. "Why not just plant more trees?" she wondered.

There was no sign of traffic and the buildings seemed an odd mix of shops, offices, public buildings like the courthouse they had just visited, and what she presumed were apartment blocks. Gill had no way of telling whether the place was small and unimportant or whether the population was small everywhere. She likewise had no guide as to where in the world she was. The sun seemed stronger than Britain: more like southern Spain in summer perhaps but beyond that, no clue. She flipped without difficulty to the cafe where Maggie and Judith had received their order.

"It's a pity I didn't know Roger was fertile," observed Judith, with no sign of any regret at poaching her friend's partner.

"One of those things," said Maggie, seemingly also unperturbed. "Now, about the agricultural sector. That means Alaska or the Yukon or Siberia or going all the way to Antarctica."

"There's not much in Siberia," Judith remarked. "I don't fancy rice production in the northern swamps."

"No. Canada doesn't appeal to me much either, though I don't know why. Besides, the overland journey is a drag. Let's settle for Antarctica."

Judith looked doubtful. "Long journey by sea," she said. "It will take months."

"Nice holiday, though."

"Then there's the matter of Roger senior. We'd have to smuggle him aboard. It would be too boring to travel without him."

"I could get the sex shop to take him back and give us a couple of robots instead. They owe us a favour for keeping quiet in court. A couple of nice robots would lighten the journey and wouldn't have to be smuggled."

"True," said Judith, a little reluctantly.

Gill wondered whether Judith had some trace of affection for Roger. She also wondered why the journey to Antarctica would take months and why the journey to northern Canada had to be 'overland'. There was something amiss with the society, as she had surmised on her first visit. Rice growing in Siberia was also weird. And agriculture in Antarctica? She listened with growing puzzlement.

"We'd better go to the Relocation Agency," Judith remarked. "The sooner we get the thing started, the more likely we are to get a real choice."

Maggie looked as if she didn't follow the reasoning. "We can drop round to the agency, but I don't see it makes any difference to where we go. She sipped her drink and waited for Judith to elucidate, but she didn't.

The two women finished their drinks, threw their paper bags and cups in the recycler and left.

"Relocation Agency is in the same building as the Court House," Maggie remarked.

Judith headed straight for the shade of the walkway. Maggie joined her. Neither spoke of it, but both women made an obvious point of keeping in the shade. Now that Gill came to think of it, Maggie was pale skinned and obviously did not indulge herself in the sun. Judith appeared to

have the blood of one of the darker races in her, but it was too diluted for Gill to be certain which. She too, however, was assiduous in avoiding open sunlight.

The Relocation Agency was a small, shady office with orangy-yellow decorations, a tiled floor and light brown blinds. A man was sitting at a computer, totally absorbed in a game. The man moved a roller ball, tapped some keys and cleared the screen, then turned his attention to the visitors.

"Can I be of assistance," asked the man.

"We have to relocate in the agricultural sector," Judith said.

"The agricultural sector?" queried the man. "That's a lot of trouble. Can't I interest you in the industrial sector. That's a lot easier for me to organise and closer to civilisation for you."

"Apart from the fact that the agricultural sector will be cooler and more comfortable, we've been ordered there. We don't have a choice. Check your records."

"I've checked them once this week," the agent complained, turning reluctantly to the computer. "Show me the compulsory relocation schedule," he told it. Two entries scrolled down the screen. "WN-4600-2790 Maggie Noonan, relocate to agricultural sector," he read. "WF-0025-2774 Judith Savage, relocate to the agricultural sector. Well, they weren't listed on Fourday when I checked."

"No," said Maggie, with the same attitude of addressing the mentally subnormal she had displayed when addressing her autosec and to the orderphone at MacDonatelli's, "The court ordered it today."

"Today," said the man. "That's quick. I'm surprised they've posted it on the computer so soon."

"Shows how badly they want to get rid of us," said Maggie, wasting more irony on the man. "What have you got going in Antarctica for two and a baby?"

"Antarctica?" said the man, trying to keep up with her. "Let's see. Show me the Antarctica vacancy list." Details dutifully scrolled themselves down the screen.

"You're in luck. Two people needed at Fossil Bluff. One is an agricultural operative the other a nurse. You'll have to retrain, but that's no problem. Both are straightforward impulse hypno-learning for two days and a week's practical instruction."

"When is there transport?" Maggie asked.

"Oo, you are in a hurry, aren't you? Show me the departure schedules," he added for the benefit of the computer. A series of dates and destinations scrolled down the screen.

"Godhavn and Thule ... no, that's Greenland. Nair ... no, that's Canada. Ah. Halley Bay, General Belgrano and Port Siple. From Port Siple to Fossil Bluff is only about 200 kilometres overland. That departs ... twenty-two day next month, so there's plenty of time to get the re-training done and everything sorted out"

Gill felt a growing itch intruding into her substitute reality. It was necessary to ease the mask up and scratch the side of her nose. This was

accomplished without any real disruption to the scene before her in the agency. Unfortunately, as the mask slipped back into place, it jolted slightly. There was a mind-jarring blur as the scene advanced by several years. Gill clawed mentally at the dizzying blur, clutched at dream-images of sailing boats manned by monkeys and desert shores and wild storms and tried to get the maddening jumble of impressions and fleeting pictures to stabilize...

INTERLUDE

The steady beeping and the patterns on the screen told the doctor that the heart beat was regular, and the numbers recording the patient's breathing were remarkably even. What was causing the concern was his temperature. The doctor looked at the records again, yawned and frowned in concentration.

The Intensive Care Unit was warm and the lighting brighter than it would have been on the wards at this hour. The first streaks of grey were lighting the eastern edges of the sky, presaging dawn. The doctor shook himself slightly: it had been a long night.

"You were right to call me," he said to the nurse, "though it's beyond me." There didn't seem to be any cause he could see. He took out an instrument like a pencil torch, pushed up one of the eyelids and examined the pupil.

"Seems all right," he said, vaguely and yawned again. Certainly there was no dilation of the pupils. "You'd better change the drip to one with an antibiotic, just to be on the safe side. Try clindamycin, I think. Keep monitoring the temperature and, if it doesn't come down in an hour, or, if it rises any more, page me again and I'll have Doctor Morgan look at him. Perhaps she can throw some more light on it."

"Yes, Doctor Asad," said the nurse, thinking to herself that the young man hadn't any more idea than she had herself why the patient was suffering in this way. "Shall I take a blood and urine sample for culture first?"

"God, yes," the young man muttered. "Once you introduce the anti-biotic, it will be impossible to identify the infection. I almost forgot that and the consultant would have moaned."

"You didn't almost forget," thought the nurse. "You completely forgot. And she'd have done more than moan, as well." She was wise enough not to say anything and the doctor wandered off, yawning, while

she hustled efficiently to fetch the new drip and the equipment to take the samples.

"Can you check up on bed three?" she said to her colleague. "I was just going to do that when the doctor arrived. I've just got to change a drip and take some samples on bed two." And she went through into the storeroom.

CHAPTER 6

The blaze of confused images was followed by such blackness that Gill thought for a moment she had somehow cut short the experiment. She was on the point of cursing her luck when she realised that the blackness was far from total and was, anyway, dark blue, rather than black. For one thing there was starlight and for another the eyes of an animal glowed in the darkness.

As the glow approached through the Antarctic night, she saw that it was not a pair of eyes, but lights mounted on something slow moving. The lights showed her to be standing on or, at least, her consciousness was on or over, a partly ploughed field and the last thing she remembered clearly was the talk of agriculture, so Gill assumed that thing approaching was a tractor. The lights approached slowly and without the sound of an engine though. They were accompanied instead by the plod of big feet and the straining creak of a harness. The snorting and breathing of a large animal and the silhouette of an enormous horse, outlined in the glow of lights fastened to its sides, clinched it: the lights were not the headlights of a tractor. The powerful beams were mounted on a huge plough horse. The animal drew up at the end of the furrow, just alongside her, and a figure stood back from the plough.

In the dim light to the rear of the beams Gill could see little, but she supposed she was watching either Judith or Maggie. There was only one way to be certain. Thinking about merging with the person before her was enough to complete it....

"Well, that's enough for now." I thought. "The ploughing is half done and Tilda can do the harrowing and sowing on this half, while Andreas does the other half of the ploughing. All to schedule."

"Chilly wind from the pole tonight." I turned up my coat collar and pulled my hood forward. "Can't be much above freezing and full daybreak is another two weeks or so away," I began to unfasten the lights. I switched one of them off, but I usually leave one on until the last minute, so that I can

see what I'm doing. I've never actually been taught to do this job. I just do some of the work for Tilda or I'd go out my mind with boredom.

By the improved light Gill could tell she was male, and wondered where this fitted in with the story.

I coiled the cables and stacked everything carefully at the edge of the field, thinking about boredom. Inside the centre, lights behave in a twenty-four hour cycle. The part they call morning I have hypno-learning and videos. The stuff is inanely simple. I've used the IT-terminal to watch lots of other stuff to keep from going out of my mind. I've discovered you can use an ordinary IT-terminal to access whole libraries somebody 'rescued' from what used to be universities, whatever they were - I don't quite understand where they fitted into the old learning system, but they seem to have been centres of knowledge.

I unfastened the horse from its harness and led the animal into the truck. The rear side folds down to make a ramp. I patted its rump. "Take a break boy," I said. "About one quarter of the work done for this year," and pushed the rear into place.

I wondered whether the horse felt as fed up and confined as I do. The 'afternoon' sessions for 'entertainment' were the worst of all. Mindless videos, stupid games. I spent some of the time reading, some of it doing jobs like this one and the rest just marvelling at how anyone could watch the junk my mother watches.

I returned to the remaining lamp, switched it off and put it, along with the portable wind generator, under the tarpaulin. I thought it would be safe enough there until Andreas came out to do the rest of the ploughing 'tomorrow', and turned back to the vehicle.

"Start," I told the truck, and the dashboard lit up. "Headlights," I told it and the way in front was illuminated by great swathes of brightness. I get a kick out of the technology, which everyone just seems to take for granted. I think I'm the only one in the centre who has bothered to find out how it works. How anything works. I don't know whether I have the tools and parts to build another truck or another generator, but if I had, I think I could. Anyway, I edged it out of the field and onto a track.

There was no sense of bumping or jolting over the uneven ground or a dirt track; everything in the cab was even and quiet and the vehicle accelerated to about twenty miles an hour without any effort that Gill could see. At least no effort that translated itself into gears or noise. She wondered about the motive power of the truck and whether it hovered somehow, rather than running on wheels.

The journey did not take long and the vehicle pulled up before a collection of long, low buildings, some of them showing lights. The man used vocal commands to switch off lights and power and then climbed from the cab to fetch the horse.

A yard light came on, which made much easier the job of getting the horse out of the truck. As he took the reins and led the animal towards one of the buildings, a different light came on and the first went off. "Some kind of proximity sensor," Gill thought. It was hardly new technology but the

application seemed 'smoother', if that was the right word. Another light came on and lit the way down a gently sloping ramp to the stables.

Inside the building, in the better light, Gill could see that the animal was huge - it towered above the man. "Just breeding or another example of genetic engineering?" Gill wondered.

Gill, now completely separated from the man, could see that he was youngish, as his thoughts had implied, fit and quite handsome, in a world of reasonable looking people. Although there still was insufficient light to make out his features clearly, he had a vaguely familiar look about him. He put the horse into a vacant stall and fed it, put the flashlight onto a charger and went through a door and along a passage. Gill took in the larger scene.

He went through into living quarters and shrugged off his high collared jacket. Through an open door a woman was setting a table for a meal. "Hi, Tilda," he said, and the woman glanced up.

"Hello, Roger," she said, looking at him somewhat appraisingly, but the man walked past, into a sitting room.

The sitting room was large enough to have seated a dozen or so, but just two people were there. Judith and Maggie were watching a viewscreen. Roger walked across, turned off the set and turned to face the two women.

"What did you do that for?" demanded Judith, indignantly. "We were watching that, you know."

"I wanted to talk to you," said Roger.

"You could have waited until it was over. You know I like 'Tales of Times Past'."

"When that was finished you'd have gone to supper or started watching something else," he answered, looking like a younger edition of his father, but sounding very much more intelligent. "You'd do anything rather than talk about life. Well, not so much talk about it as think about it."

"All right," she snapped, "What do you want to talk about?" Maggie watched curiously but said nothing.

"I intend to travel a bit," he said. "I've arranged to join a ship that's leaving Port Siple in a few days time. I want to see some other places."

"It's all right here. Anyway, you can't relocate without consulting the Relocation Agency. It has to be done properly."

"I'm not relocating, I'm travelling," said Roger. "I don't know why everyone is classed as juvenile until they're thirty two but, for another twelve years or more, the Relocation Agency wouldn't even be interested in me. Until some computer puts me onto their computer they won't even know I exist. Nobody ever checks anything."

"You have an autosec to remind you of things." Judith still sounded annoyed. "There's no point in having an autosec if you've got to remember things yourself."

"Well, I've already talked to one of the captains. He said he'd give me passage from Port Siple to Rio Gallego and the Relocation Agency won't give me any trouble at all."

"You can't do that." Judith did not sound particularly scandalised by the idea, nor did she seem overly concerned about Roger as an individual. What she said was more a statement of fact as she saw it than an expression of her feelings on the subject.

"I certainly can," he answered.

"And what would you do in Rio Gallego?"

"Look around for a couple of hours and then go north."

"Oh well," said Judith, "if you're eh? What did you say?" Her expression was not exactly 'open mouthed', but it wasn't far off.

"North. Buenos Aires."

"And what would you do there?" Judith was recovering from her surprise and still did not sound unduly concerned. This time, however, she sounded genuinely puzzled.

"Join one of the Reclamation Teams. I want to see for myself what's happening to the earth."

The conversation had gone so far that Judith was almost beyond spoken reaction, but her face carried an expression of incredulity, born of a complete failure to understand why anyone should want to know what was happening to the planet. Her whole world must have been made up of 'me' and 'now' to be so surprised.

Roger continued, "The ship 'Francis Crick' is in dock at Port Siple now, with salvaged equipment reclaimed from somewhere north. I'm going to Siple tomorrow to join it, and I just wanted to let you know."

"Oh," said Judith, "Well, if you've made up your mind" Her voice trailed off. It didn't seem to her that it was either possible or desirable to circumvent the regulations.

Roger turned to go, but Judith stopped him. "Turn on the viewscreen when you go. You turned it right off and it doesn't hear voice commands unless it's on stand-by." He turned on the screen and left.

As Judith went back to watching 'Times Past', Maggie got up and went after Roger. She followed him to his room. "Can I come in a moment?" she asked.

"Sure," he answered.

"I just wanted to talk to you a minute."

"I'm not changing my mind," he said, a touch ... what was the word? 'Assertively' Maggie thought.

"I don't want to talk about the future, I want to talk about the past. There are a couple of things you should know. They explain why you're a bit different from other people: why you speak out for yourself and show more initiative; why you are more curious and have less regard for the regulations than most. Your mother should tell you really, but she's clearly not going to, so I will."

"Go on," he said, interested. Maggie sat down on the bed to explain about Roger senior. "Well," she said, hesitating again, "Your father was genetically engineered to be different from most humans."

"How, and by whom?" he asked.

"A sex shop was trying to create perfect partners with a shorter ... er ... shelf life and more assertiveness."

"And something went wrong?"

"Oh no. Something went right. It's just that he was fertile and so was your mother. Your father was supposed to belong to me, but she ... er ... borrowed him. I'm not fertile, so there wouldn't have been a problem if she hadn't met him."

"There wouldn't have been a me either if she hadn't met him," said Roger. "Mind you, I wouldn't have minded you for a mother if you'd been fertile."

Maggie gave him a look that suggested that she might have entertained ideas about their relationship which didn't include mother and son. "Well," she said, "your mother was fertile and she met your father."

"And I've inherited his characteristics?"

"Some of them, anyway." She was thinking of Ruth Kenny's description of Roger senior's sexual tackle and wondered whether Roger junior had inherited that as well. "You're more intelligent than he is but you have matured faster than normal and you do look like him." She continued to regard him with a degree of speculation and wondered whether he would be interested in a No. That wasn't quite appropriate somehow. "I think you will outpace the regulations any time you choose. And, Roger...." she paused, not quite sure to put it.

"Yes?"

"If you're ever in tight spot, you should remember that your father was really something as a partner. You probably could be too."

"I don't know very much, I'm afraid. Somebody would have to show me."

That was an open invitation if there ever was one. "It's a pity we're so short of time," she said, closed the bedroom door and gave him a wicked smile, remembering his father's opening gambit.

To say that something happened 'next morning' implies sunset and sunrise. The Antarctic night was uniformly ... well, night, but inside the community the lights dimmed for what would have been night, north of the Antarctic circle, and brightened again as the community assembled for breakfast.

Gill decided to travel with Roger junior and see what the human race had done, or would be doing, to the planet. At least she would have something interesting to report to Planetwatch.

The 'road' to Port Siple was just a bulldozed track with a thin layer of gravel, picked out by the glow of headlights but, as the conveyance didn't actually touch it, nothing more was needed. The hovertruck glided smoothly along the trail at a steady speed that was difficult to estimate but must have been quite considerable. From time to time there the lights of other communities like the one at Fossil Bluff.

Port Siple itself was a somewhat larger collection of buildings, some of them grain elevators, but Gill could make out little in the darkness. The dock area was better lit, however, and stone jetties ran out to sea, obviously able to cope with a number of boats. Only one was alongside at the present, however, and Gill stared as the hovertruck pulled up alongside it.

The ship was a large, sail powered, four masted trimaran. She wasn't sure afterwards of the right way to describe the vessel, but it seemed to have a bridge forward of two masts on the centre hull, which was a good deal wider and fuller than the two outer ones. These outer hulls had one mast each.

The crew was busy unloading various unidentifiable items, which they began stacking directly in the hovertruck. Roger went on board. Gill was struck dumb. Most of the crew that she could see were, or appeared to be, apes.

CHAPTER 7

The '*Francis Crick*' eased through the Antarctic night using an auxiliary engine - presumably electric, since it was silent - only to pull clear of the dock. Once under way it seemed to rely on sails alone - but the crew was as bizarre as Gill had thought from a distance that it might be. They were all apes - about ten of them.

Roger had followed the captain into a bridge, mounted far forward on the centre hull, and dumped his bag in a corner. The bridge had a curved glass windscreen, which would have a commanding view ahead in daylight, and a wide, curved panel of instruments and screens.

This collection of instruments and screens seemed to Gill as futuristic as one would expect from the twenty-second or twenty-third century, and appeared generally more in keeping with a space ship than a sailboat. There was an image - presumably a radar image, but it looked clear and sharp enough to be television - which showed a detailed outline of the coastline and sea around them. Another, most likely produced by a variety of sonar, showed in considerable detail the seabed below, around and ahead of the ship. There was a third screen showing a map of what Gill thought was the South Atlantic, but it didn't seem quite right. This map was projected onto a large screen in green, and little red lines and figures were superimposed, so that the result looked like a TV weatherman's map.

An ape came into the bridge. "Sails set," it said in a gruff, clipped and rather lisping voice. Gill would have jumped out of her skin - except that she had left behind in the twentieth century - but neither Roger nor the captain seemed surprised.

"Stand down B watch to get some sleep," ordered the captain.

"Aye, Aye sir," said the ape, and left.

"It still seems odd, Alfonso, them talking," said Roger.

"You get used to it. Once you get used to the idea of them as crew you get used to them talking."

"I presume it's something to do with their training," said Roger

"More to do with the genetic modification, I think," Alfonso replied with a degree of indifference in his voice. "They gave the beggars a human gene or two to make them easier to train and, either accidentally or on purpose, stuck one in to enable them to talk as well."

"Who thought of training them as crew?"

"Don't know, but it was a good idea. They love climbing around the rigging and they have a high natural tolerance to Ultra-Violet, so being out in the sun is safe enough for them too."

It seemed to Gill that the last point was probably the reason for the genetic dabbling. Using apes in dangerous sunlight was a way of adapting to a problem without having to solve it. The idea of a technological fix appeals to scientific brains, and anything that puts off difficult decisions appeals to politicians, not that they'd been much in evidence in 2225 (or whenever, exactly, this was) so far.

Captain Alfonso studied the monitor screen, which showed the whole South Atlantic. "According to the satellite, the weather is reasonable ahead, you'll be pleased to know."

"This is my first trip by sea," said Roger looking at the screen, but rather casually, as if he didn't really understand it. "I don't know what sort of a sailor I am, but there's no reason to suppose I'd be a good one in rough weather."

"Well, it looks like a smooth voyage. The storms can be really fierce by mid-summer but it won't even be spring for a week or so."

Gill didn't know much about the dynamics of various kinds of hulls for boats, nor could she say with any certainty how much freight the trimaran could carry, but it certainly seemed to move along for a sail powered boat.

She had worried over that - 'worried' in the sense that a dog would 'worry' a bone. She mentally 'chewed over' the subject and viewed it from a variety of angles. Agriculture at the South Pole meant much higher global temperatures: sails rather than an engine meant no emissions from the vessel to contribute to further warming. The two distinct factors taken together looked like a serious problem of planetary warming ... a runaway 'greenhouse' effect.

Floating ice doesn't take any more room when it melts. When you make a martini and lemonade you have to put the ice in the glass first, because the floating ice displaces the drink: if you don't put the ice in first, the glass overflows when you add it. On the other hand, the martini and lemonade doesn't overflow when the ice melts, because the water released by the melting ice is only the same volume as the water displaced by the ice itself.

Steve was quite well read on this sort of thing and, Gill mused, it would be relevant. As far as she could remember, most arctic ice floated – floats, while a lot of the Antarctic ice didn't - doesn't. Melting the Arctic ice wouldn't make that much difference to sea levels, but the Antarctic ice was a different matter. Gill wished she knew more about the problem and resolved to ask Steve. On the other hand, she seemed to recall that scientists could not agree whether warmer temperatures would mean

melted ice and higher sea levels or higher water vapour levels and lower sea levels.

The second thing that was causing her a certain amount of confusion was the mention of a 'satellite'. Everyone she had seen, with the clear exception of Roger junior, seemed to be totally content with life as it was (or, life as it would be) - no questioning of any aspect of it; no doing anything more than the minimum requirements of the job, whatever it was; no challenge to, or questioning of, the 'regulations' laid down by the government or council or some other body quite anonymous. Who, then, had decided that a satellite was needed? Who had positioned it? Who was making the decisions about the organisation of society? She had neither seen nor heard sign of government or democracy, only 'administration'.

There seemed to be no way to find out what was wrong with this society other than to get inside Roger's head again and join him in looking at the planet. She wondered whether it would be possible to influence him into asking the right questions ...

"Who put up the satellite?" I asked.

The captain shrugged disinterestedly. "It's been up there years," he said.

"But who put it up there in the first place?" I persisted. "And who would repair or replace it if there was a problem?"

"It hasn't let us down yet while I've been at sea," Alfonso told me, "but I don't suppose anyone could build another." He studied the seabed ahead. "Or put it up in orbit, even if it could be built," he added. I had the distinct impression that the subject bored him.

I yawned. "I feel a bit tired. Do you mind if I go below and rest a while?" I asked.

"Grief no," he said. "Take cabin two and sleep all you want. I'm going to put the ship on auto pilot and sleep a bit myself soon, anyway."

I hadn't thought of that. There was only one human and he couldn't stay awake indefinitely. "Who will run the vessel while you're asleep?" I asked.

"The apes will wake me if there's any break in the routine," he answered.

I went down the steps and into the passage below. An ape was padding towards me.

"Will you want a drink on the bridge?" it asked, holding the handrail with both hands and scratching its head with its foot. "I was just going to make some cocoa."

"That would be nice, but I was going to my cabin. Can you bring it there?"

"Aye, aye sir," said the ape, and went up the stairs.

It seemed I'd hardly closed the cabin door before the ape was back with the drink. It put the mug on the bunk side table and was about to leave, when I asked it, "How long have you been crewing?"

"Ten trips," it answered.

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Running around the rigging in the dark? You must be joking. We only do this job because the ultra violet would kill humans and because we don't need pay, except a few bananas."

"Why do you do it, then?"

"I don't know. Training plays a part: most animals do what they're trained to do. Even humans don't seem to do much beyond having fun and doing whatever job they're trained to do. Pride has something to do with it, too. They tried to train Orangutans first, but that was a disaster."

"Disaster?"

"Yeah. They were virtually untrainable for higher functions. The crews mutinied. Some took over ships. There's even one or two pirate ships around, they say, manned (if you'll pardon the expression) entirely by orangutans."

"But apes don't mutiny?"

"Not so far. We talk about it, but the creeps will do anything for a banana."

"So apes stay loyal?" I said. A comment or a statement really, though there was a questioning tone to it.

"Most of them. Oh, you get one bad banana in every bunch, but most of them are harmless."

"I thought you said pride had something to do with it. You don't sound very proud."

The ape looked affronted, as far as an ape can look anything. "Consider," it said. "A million or so years ago, humans were just like us. What goes around comes around. Now they wish they were like us again. We don't mind the heat and we're resistant to U-V light. You have to wear U-V goggles and wide brimmed hats to go out in the atmosphere you've ruined."

"Anyway, I'm not going to bump you off in your sleep, so rest peacefully." It swung onto a pipe in the passageway and hung sideways by two hands and one foot. "Good night," it said and closed the cabin door with the other foot.

"Show off," Gill thought, releasing herself from Roger and following the ape. It swung along the pipe in the passage and ran up the handrail alongside the stairs, onto the bridge. From there it went out into the darkness. At the foot of the port mast it stopped to speak to another ape hanging on a rope supporting the mast and smoking a pipe.

"Calm," it said between puffs.

"Yes."

"You've been talking to the second human?"

"Yes. He's much more inquisitive than most I've met. Even asked me if I liked the job."

"And do you?"

"I told him, running around rigging in the dark isn't the way I'd choose to spend my time."

"At least the food's regular and there's plenty of bananas."

"All you think about is your belly," said the talkative ape.

"It's a start," agreed the other, and took another puff at the pipe.

As the vessel glided steadily northwards, the water flowed past us in an even stream and a steady wind blew behind us from the polar region. The normal sequence of days and night began to appear over the horizon. At first it was just an hour of light between dawn and sunset, but the days quickly grew to a recognisable and identifiable length.

As soon as there was sunlight, the apes set up solar panels on the decks of all three hulls and Alfonso used controls on the panel to angle them so as to receive the maximum light. He said the panels were to charge the batteries providing power for all the vessel's equipment and its tiny auxiliary engines.

One day a shoreline appeared off to the left. I resisted the temptation to go out in the open unprotected and watched instead through the tinted screen, while Alfonso carefully studied the on-screen projections of the coast and sea-bed.

"Where are we?" I asked him.

"Rio Gallego is just up ahead," he said. "The sea level rise isn't too bad here. The ground rises quite steeply and it was not a very prosperous town. They simply moved everything onto higher ground and the river estuary isn't a lot wider than it was."

"What about Buenos Aires?" I asked.

"At the highest point of sea level rise a lot of it was flooded," Alfonso replied, "but the sea level's dropped a bit and there's more than enough of it left for the small population it has. There's not much beyond the base for the reclamation units." He picked up a microphone and said into it, "Stand by for docking procedure. Both watches to the sails."

He turned the steering wheel in the centre of the panel several times to the left and watched the sea bed scan closely to line us up on the deepest part of the channel.

Alfonso picked up the microphone again. "Lower the port and starboard sails," he said, and replaced it in the rest. The ship began to slow down. 'Make less way' is the nautical term, I believe.

The shore was ahead of us now and, in half an hour or less, we were sailing up an estuary with the banks of the river about half a kilometre apart and narrowing. I could see a town ahead on the left bank of the river.

"Rio Gallego," Alfonso said, and picked up the microphone again. "Lower and stow all sails except the aft mainsail," he said.

As we approached the town our speed dropped away even more and, when we were level with it, he spun the wheel several times to the left. Slowly the ship swung round in response to the wheel and the town moved across the windscreen until it was dead ahead and barely three hundred metres away.

"Lower the mainsail," said Alfonso into the microphone and flipped a switch on the panel.

The vessel crawled forwards on the auxiliary engine towards a jetty, arriving just up river of it so that the flow of the river allowed us to drift gently alongside it. Using the mike again he said, "Make the ship fast." He

relaxed a little and turned to look at me. "Rio Gallego," he said, and switched off all the power.

"Now what?" I asked him.

"First I have to see about unloading this cargo, then I have to see the apes housed. You can visit the Travel Unit on the dock, if you like, and ask them about transport north. Get your hat and goggles and don't forget your bag," he added.

He rubbed on some sun block from a tube in his pocket, adjusted his goggles, picked up his wide-brimmed hat and put it on as he went out onto the deck. I picked up my own from the locker near the doorway to the deck, put them on and stepped into the open air for the first time since leaving Port Siple. Outside it was about an hour to sunset and pleasantly warm.

There was only one other ship in Rio Gallego and 'busy' was not a word that sprang to mind in describing the docks. The apes were engaged in unloading the cargo, mainly grain, from the hold, while I just stood and watched. When everything seemed to be in hand, Alfonso strolled over.

"Up onto the shore and turn right," he said. "The third building along is Travel Unit. They have an enquiry desk."

I didn't know whether the regulations said anything about extra passengers on a cargo ship. He hadn't said anything about it before, but I decided to make own way from here on and found the unimpressive building he had indicated. I looked at the faded facade and the sign that said 'Travel Information Unit', and guessed that they were asked for information once in a very long time.

A woman in her early thirties got up and wandered over. "Can I help?" she asked, looking at me the way Aunt Maggie did that night in Fossil Bluff.

"I was wanting to go north and I wondered what there was in the next day or so."

"You get your travel warrant from the Relocation Office," she said. "The warrant gives the time and date assigned for your journey."

"Where is it?"

"Just across the corridor," she said and pointed.

I turned to look where she indicating and hesitated: "When does the office close?" I asked, wondering whether I could sort something out that day, and where I could stay if I couldn't. It was already nearly sunset.

"About an hour after it opens, next three day," she said. As it was only nineteen day today, that was the best part of a month. "There isn't much call for a Relocation Office here. Nobody wants to go anywhere else," she added by way of explanation, "It's nice and cool here, so we're all happy."

"Except me," I pointed out. "I haven't anywhere to stay."

Her eyes lit up like Aunt Maggie's when I said I didn't know much about sex. "You can stay with me," she said.

I remembered Maggie's advice about getting help in an emergency and wondered whether it would work. "Thank you," I said. "I'm sure I can find a way to repay your hospitality."

"I'm sure you can," she simpered.

"When do you finish work here?"

"How about now?" She turned from the counter to a man at a computer. "I'm going early, Raul," she said. The man neither moved nor acknowledged the remark. I think he was probably asleep.

The woman came round the counter and I got a clearer look at her. She was, as I said, very young, in her early or mid-thirties at the most. She had dark hair and dark eyes but a lightish skin. She was, like most females I've seen, presentable. She wore a lightweight skirt and a lightweight, long sleeve blouse. She picked up a jacket from behind the door and led the way out of the office.

"Seen enough?" she remarked cheekily at my observation of her.

"You'll do," I said.

"I hope you will."

"Oh, yes," I answered. "Yes, I will. You haven't told me your name, by the way."

"Katerina. What's yours?"

"Roger." I did not quite feel the confidence I was trying to show, but I was going to see whether Aunt Maggie was right.

CHAPTER 8

I spent the night with Katerina, but I didn't rest much: she was far too active sexually to be a restful partner. She wasn't as expert as my Aunt Maggie but then, that lady's been practicing longer. Maggie's lessons, brief though they had been, were very handy when I put them to use in Rio Gallego, and I was able to give Katerina quite a good time.

However, Katerina was sexually active for something to do, I think. While, unquestionably, I lightened her boredom, she'd have been better off with a robot. At least, I'd have been better off if she'd had a robot: as long as you give them time to plug in and recharge their batteries, the things are tireless, and I'm not!

During her infrequent pauses for breath I asked her about herself. "Is that the first job you've had?" I asked her.

"Mmm," she said, sounding disinterested in the question and at the same time propping herself up on one elbow to scrutinise me and see whether I was ready for further adventures.

"Do you like the work?" I asked.

"No."

"Why not?" I persisted.

"It's boring. All I ever do is arrange cargos and bills of lading on the same train that comes in twice a month in winter and once a week in summer. Always the same things. Bor-r-r-ing."

"Why don't you change jobs if you're bored?" I wondered aloud.

"What else is there to do?" Before I had chance to answer, she added, "Anyway, the other jobs are all boring too. And talking about work is boring too," she added as a warning that she wanted me to change the subject.

I thought to myself that boredom is largely a state of mind. I had read on vid. a poem by one of the pre-Spanglish writers. He talked of 'getting the hump', which was pretty much the same thing as boredom, and said:

'The cure for this ill is not to sit still, or to frowst with a book by the fire but to take a large hoe and a shovel also and to dig till you gently perspire. '

I had needed an encyclopedia to understand him, but he's right. You need to actively **do** something to overcome boredom. Like I said, it's largely a state of mind.

All the same, I didn't want to be thrown out so I didn't say so. Instead I asked, "When does the train come in next?"

"There's a train from Punta Arenas tomorrow. After it's gone I can get out of that stupid office and we can go off somewhere."

"Out?"

"Yes. As long as we take sun block U-V goggles and wide brimmed hats for the open stretches we'll be all right. I know some nice shady glades amongst the chirrimoya plantations."

I could imagine she did, but I'm not a robot. If she was going to play hell with my nights I wanted the daytime restful.

"What time is the train?" I asked.

"It arrives mid-morning. The driver has a rest and something to eat while the monkeys set up the return wagons - they've been loading those all week. Then he drives it away early in the afternoon."

"Monkeys?"

"Well, apes. But you know what I mean."

I did know what she meant. In fact, I was thinking out loud rather than asking a question. If the driver was in the office or the canteen, there would be no humans around to supervise the apes. It would mean going out in the midday sunlight, but I should be able to get at the train without trouble to stow away, if that's what I decided to do.

"Where's the train going?"

"I didn't notice," she said, "but they usually come from Bahia Blanca and then go south to Punta Arenas or go north to Comandero Rivadavia. From there they go ... Oh, I don't know. Somewhere else." She sounded as if she didn't care.

"Is it going to Bahia Blanca, where the Relocation Agent comes from?"

"I don't know," she said dismissively. Anyway, he won't be on the train this time, and you've got to wait for him," she remarked.

"No," I said, wondering where this might lead, though I had a slight suspicion.

"No. He won't be down here for two more weeks. There's nothing in the regulations to say you can't just travel on a train, but there's nothing to say you can so, until you get a travel date from the Agent ..." She gave me a look that I think was meant to be seductive but was more a combination of sly and coy, and added, "But you could stay with me until then."

"I can't stay with you for nothing?" I said, meaning it innocently. Still thinking out loud, really.

"Oh, you'll pay for it. In kind. In fact, you can start being kind to me now."

I gave a mental groan and turned towards her with what I hoped was a wicked grin. "How kind would you like me to be?" I said.

"Oh, very," she answered. So I was.

Katerina was obsessed with her personal pleasure in a very unhealthy way. I couldn't get her to talk any more about work or anything to do with it. She did get up long enough to get us some food, but she didn't even get dressed then. A nude woman is interesting and sex can be fun, I found, but both tend to pall after a while, if they are the only sources of entertainment.

The next morning I would have needed very little effort to persuade Katerina to stay away from work. In fact, I had to be careful not to say anything to make her stay away, because I wanted the day to myself. I assured her that I would be all right. I said I needed the rest to be ready for the evening, though I intended to leave town in the course of the day and I'm really not sure how long I could have put up with her anyway.

Don't get me wrong. She's all right as person, quite pleasant. She's all right as a woman, reasonable shape and looks, and quite fun to have sex with. It's just that she's a complete hedonist and very self centred. I don't mean that in such a disparaging and censorious way as it sounds, exactly. I mean that she has no mind or awareness beyond herself, her pleasures and her needs.

Alfonso was a bit like that really. He did his job, had his fun and be damned to the rest of the world. Everyone I've ever known is that way inclined, though Aunt Maggie is rather more curious than most people about the world in general. She accepts things too easily for me but she does wonder about them sometimes. If it wasn't for her, I'd think there was something wrong with me. Perhaps there is. Why can't I just accept everything and have fun? Why do I plan to leave Katerina at the first opportunity and travel to the hotter and less comfortable parts of the world? I can't answer that, but I know that's what I do plan.

Anyway, I collected together some food and several cans of drink. I stuffed them into my bag, and carried it down towards the river, looking around anxiously to make certain that I was unnoticed. I need not have worried: the town was not busy and everyone seemed to be indoors.

I wandered along the dock area of Rio Gallego, wearing my wide brimmed hat and my U-V goggles, of course, and watched the hover train pull in. There is a single rail along which the electromagnets of a linear drive chase themselves. Every wagon of the train had its solar panels to charge up the batteries that powered the linear drive, just like the pictures on the instructional videos. I'm not really sure, how the hover part of it works, but it's something to do with a magnetic field. Not the one which powers the train forward - that comes from the combined effect of the electromagnets on that single rail I mentioned - this is more to do with the earth's own magnetic field, I think. I don't understand the science in the

videobooks I studied on my own account, but I'm not the only one, because no one can explain it to me.

The train drew up alongside the dock and a couple of apes began removing the panels from the tops of the wagons. One sat on top and uncoupled the panels, passing them down with his feet to the other below. A line of loaded trucks formed another train waiting to go. With no great hurry but considerable care, the apes mounted the panels atop the wagons of this second train.

I stood in the shade of a building and watched. While the apes were occupied with the panels, the driver uncoupled the control car and moved it onto a side rail. Then he walked across to the office of the Travel Unit. I suppose he got his meal from a canteen in that building, or possibly had other business there. From my place in the shade I watched him enter the building and then studied the train again.

The question was, whether to simply hide away in one of the wagons or speak to the driver. He might, like Alfonso, be happy to take another person with him for the company, or he might refuse. As Katerina had said the night before, the regulations were silent on passengers other than those authorised by the Relocation Agency. If he refused it might, in the first place, be more difficult to get into one of the wagons unseen, because he would be more watchful. In the second place, it would make an excuse impossible. Apart from that, there was just the one train and one driver, or so it seemed from what Katerina had said. I might possibly 'blow it' for future departures as well.

On the whole, I thought it would be best to lie up in one of the wagons and, if challenged, to say that I had been sheltering from the midday sun and fallen asleep. It was a rather thin story, but better than nothing and quite useable provided that the driver had not already turned me down as a passenger.

As the sun got higher in the sky the apes finished and the train simmered in the noon silence, unguarded and unobserved. It wasn't too hot really - it was only spring and we were quite a long way south - but it was pleasantly warm. I glanced carefully around to make sure that no one was watching, and then I picked up my bag and wandered from the shade towards the wagons. I walked past them, to the side facing the river, so that I was hidden from the town, and looked at them. The cargo appeared to be all agricultural produce.

I strolled with a studied, hopefully innocent, curiosity, past several trucks full of grain of some kind and came upon ones stacked with boxes of fruit. One of these wagons was only about two thirds full. There was room on the top, under the solar panels, to fit quite comfortably, so I clambered up. With a couple of the boxes positioned so as to make a place to lean back, and my bag and my jacket to sit on, I made myself comfortable and drifted off to sleep.

I was wakened by a gentle rocking movement to find the train travelling in almost complete silence. There was a faint, electronic hum as the current flowed through the coils of the magnets. As you probably know, a linear drive is simple enough and has been around for a couple of

centuries, possibly more. The electromagnets are alternatively negative and positive. The rail takes up the same polarity as the field and the opposite poles chase each other along the rail, while the identical poles try to escape each other. As the train hovers, there is no resistance to the movement and speed is dictated by the strength of the current flowing through the coils of the magnets. We were actually travelling quite fast.

Each coach was travelling at the same speed. Presumably they were linked to the control car by control cables, but I don't think there was any element of pulling, because each wagon was separately powered and each was hovering. We simply slipped silently along with a faint hum and a rush of air. I sat forward, where I could see round the panel, and looked out. There was not a great deal to see: just groves of trees and fields of vegetables around little clusters of houses and low buildings. The countryside itself was an undulating plain.

"This must be Patagonia," Gill thought, trying to remember what little South American geography she had learned in school. "I thought it was drier as well as cooler. Getting hotter must have made it wetter as well." She, or rather Roger, noticed clouds building up from the east.

"Hello," I thought, "We're going to have a shower. It's a good thing these panels are here to provide shelter." The train swished silently on until the sun went in, then it slowed to a crawl and finally came to a stop. At first I wondered why, but I figured it out. The train ran on solar electricity. More correctly, it ran on photo-voltaic electricity. The electric power was generated by light and, as light faded there was insufficient power to run the train.

This would explain why it took so long to make a straightforward run. There was no movement during the hours of darkness or during heavy rain. I took out a can of drink and a couple of sandwiches and finished off the meal with a piece of fruit from the boxes around me. 'Chirrimoyas' it said, and they were all right, though I don't think I'd ever had one before. Certainly not a raw, unprocessed one.

By the time I'd finished eating the rain had eased off, but the sky was already getting darker as sunset approached. The train moved off rather more slowly than before, but I realised it wouldn't keep going for long, and I was right. Half an hour later we stopped and I was sure we wouldn't be moving until morning light.

The night was cool without being cold and my coat was quite adequate. I stepped rather stiffly down from the chirrimoya wagon and looked around in the last dregs of daylight. About fifty metres away across rough grass there was a small shed or barn or something, which looked abandoned. A small plantation of trees I could not identify in the fading light began just beyond and, a little way ahead, I thought I could see the lights of a small town. The control coach of the train was illuminated, from solar charged batteries no doubt. There seemed to be plenty of room in the cabin, so I supposed the driver meant to spend the night there. I walked across the scrubby grass to the barn, hoping I might find something more comfortable than the boxes of custard apples to sleep on.

The shack was part barn - part small dwelling, perhaps for emergency use. I walked around the abandoned building and opened a large door, leading to the 'barn' part. It was empty and dusty, with nothing to identify what had been kept here. Nothing I could see, anyway, for the light was almost gone.

I closed the door and walked around the barn some more. One end had another, smaller door. It wasn't locked, though it protested at being opened. Inside was a one-roomed living area, which was empty, dusty and didn't appear to have been used for years. There was no water, no light that worked and no necessities of any kind.

There was, however, a bunk with a blanket but no mattress. Whether it was more comfortable than the chirrimoya boxes would have been, I can't say. I think it was only my tiredness from the previous night's activity that made me fall asleep, using my bag for a pillow.

I woke with light streaming through the one window, wondering at first where I was and then what time it was. I got to my feet and looked out of the window. The train had gone.

CHAPTER 9

"Hold it right there, punk, or I'll shoot!" the voice half yelled, half snarled.

I'd reached the small town and was looking at an odd building, surrounded by a chain link fence, when a loud voice shattered the quiet and burst in on my thoughts. I turned and saw, despite the solo voice and a singular verb, two men. One was dressed straight from the twentieth century, like a policeman in the cultural videos of American life. He was somewhat over six feet tall, well built and wearing the full uniform, including a flat cap with a small peak instead of a wide-brimmed hat, and no goggles.

The second man was a little shorter, a little stockier, though not overweight, and much older. He was wearing the usual wide-brimmed hat and U-V goggles, with what might have been a uniform of sorts. His shirt was a light brown with button down breast pockets and button down flaps on the shoulders. His trousers, wide leather belt, hat and fancy boots were a matching darker brown. Above his left shirt pocket was a tab, on which was embroidered the words 'County Sheriff'. Neither man had any sort of weapon that I could see and both men wore reasonably friendly expressions on their faces.

"Okay, I've got you surrounded. Throw down your weapons and come out with your hands up," snarled the tall man. His smile was a completely incongruous mismatch with his voice. "Up against the wall and spread your arms while I search you for weapons."

I looked around. There wasn't a wall. Then I looked at the uniformed man again. I assumed him to be a robot and, from his striking good looks and excellent physical build, I presumed he was a male sex robot, reprogrammed for this purpose, whatever 'this' was.

"Which wall?" I asked politely.

"Don't get clever with me, punk," it said.

"Ease off a piece, Peabody," the older man said to the robot, and then addressed himself to me. "Don't mind him, son. He don't mean no harm. He's just a mite keen."

"Against the fence, then," Snarled the robot. "Jump to it or I'll shoot."

"Take no notice of Peabody, son," the human said.

"He said he'd shoot," I pointed out.

"He ain't got no gun, son," the old man said patiently, and sighed.

"I said to ease off a mite, Peabody," he added to the robot.

Peabody seemed an odd name, even for a robot, and the human was nearly as big a cliché as the hunky computer. The former spoke like something from a 'wild west' video entertainment - nineteenth century North America with a distinctly 'Southern States' accent - while the other had an accent that I thought from historical and cultural videos might be the early twenty-first century United States of North America, rather like his uniform. At any rate, the pronunciation of both was archaic and some of the words not very Spanglish. Most of the words were modern, but the accent wasn't, if you see what I mean.

"I represent the administration in this town and you're a stranger. Now, there's no law against being a stranger, a' course, but I was wondering who you were and what you were doing. So," he said amiably enough, "who are you and what are you up to?"

"I was left behind by that train that spent the night just down the track there," I said.

"Left behind?" He looked pointedly at my bag. "Got off it, you mean. So you just walked here?"

"It wasn't far," I answered. "Only just over two kilometres."

"You eaten yet?"

"No."

"I was just going back to my office when I saw you. How about you come back there with me and I'll rustle something up."

It was phrased as an invitation in the form of a harmless cliché, but there might have been something more to it than that. Whether there was any implied compulsion was irrelevant - I was quite hungry.

"Sounds great," I said, and fell in beside him, the big robot striding along on the other side of him.

"Don't try to make off," it growled, "or you'll make my day."

"Easy, Peabody," said the old man.

There was a crackling sound like a radio and a female voice said "5th Precinct control to officer eight nine four. Give me your location. Over." The sound came from an instrument clipped to the robot's front pocket. I took the thing to be a radio and, when he pulled a microphone from his top pocket and replied, my suspicions seemed confirmed.

"This is eight nine four. I'm outside Agrifac 3, at the junction of Ninety-fifth and Main. Over," said Peabody. I wondered where the other ninety odd streets were, because I certainly couldn't see any sign of them. And, if this was 'Main' street, the remaining ones had to be pretty insignificant. I seemed to be in a very small town.

"Give me your status. Over," demanded the instrument.

"We've just apprehended a suspect loitering by the perimeter fence of Agrifac 3," answered the robot. "We're bringing him in for questioning. Over."

"Affirmative, eight nine four. Over and out."

There was a minute of two of silence, and then the human said, "Where d'you come from?"

"My home's Fossil Bluff," I said.

"Can't say I've ever heard of it," he commented. He obviously doubted the existence of such a place, because he added. "Whereabouts do you claim it is?"

"Antarctica."

"Seems to me you're a long way from home," he remarked. "How did you get here?"

"Ship to Rio Gallego," I said.

"And you were on the train ... Where d'you say you were headed?"

I hadn't said, as I suspected the policeman well knew. I shrugged, which the old man saw but the robot, being the other side of him, couldn't see.

"Hey, punk. We're talking to you," it snarled, and I had to laugh. "Cut out the funny stuff and answer the question," It rumbled on, "And wipe that smile off your face or I'll wipe it off for you."

The robot still had an incongruously sexy leer, but I wasn't sure how far it had been reprogrammed. In case it actually attempted to carry out the threat and offered violence, I said, "I didn't have any clear plans. I was heading in the general direction of Bahia Blanca and from there I was thinking of joining one of the Reclamation Units and going north to have a look at what we've done to the planet."

"What you want to do that for?" The old man appeared curious, even incredulous, but his tone was friendly.

"Join a Reclamation Unit or look at the planet?" I asked, puzzled by the question.

"Either or both," he answered "Antarctica's a nice, cool spot. Looking at the planet isn't going to help the way it is, but going where it's hottest, just to look, will be a mite uncomfortable for you. Seems to me you're too curious for your own good."

"Does that mean you're about to try and stop me?"

"If you want to make yourself uncomfortable that's your problem, son, long as you don't break any regulation I'm supposed to enforce along the way," he said, turning into the doorway of a small building that stood alone.

The town was not large and it didn't have ninety-five streets. Less than a dozen would be more in line with what I could see. On the other hand, it was not just an agricultural centre with a few farms and nothing else. In that, it was more like Rio Gallego than Fossil Bluff. The latter is just a farming settlement: in the former, there had been the docks and a few buildings carrying out business connected with trade and transport, as well as the homes of farm workers. Here there were a few farms as well, but

people also worked in three odd-looking buildings, like the one I had been looking at when the robot spoke. I resolved to ask the human about them, as soon as I had the chance.

The robot stood back, waiting for me to enter the building. "Inside, punk, and don't try anything," it snapped.

"Am I under arrest?" I asked it.

"We'll ask the questions."

I followed the old man round a counter and through into an inner office. "Is your partner always so friendly?" I asked.

He grinned at me. I was beginning to sound like an old movie myself.

"I programmed him my own self, just for something to do," he said. "He don't mean nuthin' by the way he talks and he don't have no weapon. He just keeps me company in a pretty boring job."

Boring. I had heard someone else describe work as boring. Katerina was only a day ago, but it seemed an age.

"Forty-seven years I've been the law in these parts and there's been no crime in all that time, and no one's broken any of the regulations. Leastaways, not so far."

"Have I broken them?"

"Not so's I know of," he said. "You broken one or two habits, but that ain't illegal. Still, you've broken the monotony too, so I'm going to do a proper job of questioning you ..."

"And you'll answer," the robot added.

The old man glared at it. "... before I let you go," he finished. "Now, some eats. Peabody, the office."

"Sure," acknowledged the robot. "I'll handle the front desk and deal with the enquiries." I thought that, if they hadn't had a crime for forty-seven years, they probably hadn't had many enquiries in that time either, but I wasn't sure it would be wise to say so. I followed the old man into a small kitchen.

"Could you handle a full fried breakfast," he asked, taking the bacon and scrambled egg out of the cupboard. He laid strips of bacon on two plates and ladled a generous helping of scrambled egg alongside it.

As I told you, I was hungry. "Yes," I said, wondering where he was going to fry it.

"Hash browns and refried beans?" he asked.

I'd never actually had 'hash browns' or 'refried beans', whatever they were. I supposed they must go with the persona he had adopted. "Why not?" I said.

He arranged everything on two plates and put them in the oven to blast them for a second or two.

"What's an Agrifac?" I asked. I don't know why I asked, but I remembered that the robot had given our location as 'outside Agrifac 3'.

"This here bacon," said the old man, pointing as he took the plates from the oven, "It's made in an Agrifac. They grow the proteins on big troughs of oil and then process them with different flavours and textures. One time, back when I was little, folks used to grow live pigs and

kill them for bacon and spare ribs and things. I can't say I fancy the idea of eating bits of a dead animal now, but there you are. Primitive folks did some pretty weird things. Anyway there aren't any pigs left these days and they make things like bacon and eggs in an Agrifac."

"Oh," I said, as he carried the plates to a table in the back office. "And hash browns and refried beans as well?"

"Hell no. You grow the potatoes and beans. All an agrifac does is process them." He peered at me. "Say, what kind of stuff do they grow in Antarctica?"

I ignored the question. "All that produce on the train. That was heading for an Agrifac?"

"I guess so. Now quit talking and make room for the grits."

I didn't quite understand the words, but the table was piled high with old video-books and films and I presumed he wanted me to make space for the plates. As I gathered them together to dump them on a spare chair, I couldn't help reading one or two titles: 'Hill Street Blues', 'Kojak', 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', 'A Few Dollars More', 'Police Academy' ... From the pictures on the covers it was pretty clear how the old man's pastimes had influenced his personality.

"Come and git your eats," he said. So I sat down and ate. The food was okay.

After the meal we had a drink. The old man said it was 'coffee'. I've had coffee before, of course, but usually you just pour on the hot water and there it is. This time he strolled back from the kitchen with a jug of dark coloured liquid.

"You want whitener in it?" the old man asked.

"I think so," I said. "It's always been a light brown colour when I've had it before.

"Prefer it black myself. Time was, they used to put milk in it. Cow's milk, not woman's milk. Seems a filthy idea to me, but cows have gone. Like pigs. Me, I prefer my coffee hot, black and strong enough to float a horseshoe."

You'd have to have a pretty big jug to fit a horseshoe into it. The horses I'd seen in Antarctica were hefty creatures.

"What happened to the cows?" I asked. "And the pigs."

"Pigs I don't know. Cows, they farted too much."

"I beg your pardon."

"Granted, son, granted."

"No, I meant I didn't understand you. Why would cows farting be a problem, as long as you didn't have them living with you."

"Cow fart is methane gas. That's a greenhouse gas. They got rid of the cows to cut down the gas."

"You're joshing. There would have to be a lot of cows to make much difference."

"I ain't joshing, son. They surely was a lot of cows one time, and all farting methane all day long. Anyway, I drink my coffee black, so it don't matter."

I thought about it. Horses there were, I'd used them and I'd seen pictures of cows. Some of the historical videos I'd watched had shown great herds of cattle, which backed up what he said about there being a lot of cows. Perhaps he wasn't joking. Apart from horses, the only animals I'd seen in the flesh were apes. I wondered what had become of the others.

My strange host took a thin piece of wood from a packet and began poking his teeth. "Now," he said sitting back. "Let's get a few facts straight. Peabody!" he called. "Fetch me a notebook computer and the spare recorder from the front office." He leaned back with the piece of wood sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

The robot came in with a palm-sized computer, which the man opened and placed on the table in front of him. The robot was also carrying a small black plastic instrument. As he came into the room the radio came to life again. The same female voice said, "5th Precinct control to officer eight nine four. Give me your location. Over"

He picked out the microphone from his pocket with his now free hand and answered. "Eight nine four. I'm at base, manning the front desk. Over."

"What is your status? Over"

"Questioning a suspect. Over," it said.

"Affirmative, eight nine four. Over and out."

"They check on your movements a lot," I remarked.

"Nobody gives a damn where I am," said the old man sadly.

"That's just a voice responsive recording. Makes me feel somebody cares."

"The radio transmits a recording?"

"Ain't a radio, it's a recorder, like the one Peabody is carrying, only smaller," he said, taking the instrument from the robot and setting it up. He looked at his watch and started the recorder running. "Eleven hours twenty two," he said. "Captain Huckleberry J. Gomez, Southern Area Police, Commodoro Rivadavia Local Unit. Recording of examination of a suspect." he looked at me and shook his shoulders slightly. "Okay, son," he said, "what's your name?"

"Roger Savage."

"Address?"

"Fossil Bluff, Antarctica."

He paused. "You're sure you want to stick to that story. I can easily check it out."

"So check it out," I said. "It's true."

"Don't get lippy," growled the robot.

"Okay," said the old man mildly. "Age?"

This could be a problem, because I look much older than I am.

"Twenty," I said.

Captain Huckleberry J. Gomez stopped the recorder. "Son, we can check that out too."

"Do you have ID?" demanded the robot. "How about a driver's licence?"

"A driver's licence. What the hell is that?"

"Come on," it growled. "Everyone has a driver's licence."

I appealed to Gomez. "Tell him nobody drives anything any more."
"Easy, Peabody," said Gomez without thinking about it.

I pulled out my ID card and showed it to him. He looked at the picture to see that it really was me and checked that there was a thumbprint on it.

"Shall I put out an APB on him," volunteered Peabody, holding out a hand for the card.

The old man gave it to him. "Put it in the snooper," he said. Peabody turned to me. "Robocop will tell us if you're lying," he threatened, and walked over to the machine. He flipped it on and inserted my card. Gomez turned in his chair to see the machine better. The reader picked up the details from the magnostrip and scrolled them onto the screen.

"Roger Savage. Age twenty," Gomez read, "Mother Judith Savage, Fossil Bluff, Antarctica. I guess I owe you an apology."

"A juvenile," said Peabody, sounding disappointed.

"Does your mother know where you are?"

"I doubt it," I said. "She knows I meant to travel, but I haven't been in touch with her since I left Fossil Bluff."

"Runaway. That make's him a delinquent juvenile," said Peabody, sounding more enthusiastic. "We'll find a charge and make it stick."

"Easy, Peabody," said the old man. "The snooper there is checking if there's anything on him. If his ma reported him missing we'll send him back. If she ain't made no report, he ain't done nuthin' and we can let him go."

"With a caution," said the robot hopefully. "An arrest would be better, but a caution will do if there's no proof."

"Let's get this straight," said Gomez, "You left Fossil Bluff by boat?"

"No. Fossil Bluff is inland. I hitched a ride to Port Siple." Gomez nodded. He'd obviously heard of Port Siple. "Then I took a ride to Rio Gallego."

"What ship?"

"The Francis Crick."

He nodded again. "And there you caught a ride on a train?" I nodded. "Answer for the notebook," he said.

"I got on the train while the driver was resting," I told him.

"Who gave you permission?" he asked.

"Nobody. I just got on."

"Bumming a ride," growled Peabody. "That's a breach of State Law."

"I don't believe it is," Huckleberry J. Gomez corrected it mildly. "That explains why it went without you when you got off for the night," he said, more to himself than me. "I guess it also explains why you got off in the first place."

He tapped his finger lightly on the start button abstractedly for a few seconds, not using enough pressure to start it running, then he heaved a sigh.

"Think you're crazy, son, wanting to go north, but I guess I can help you a mite if the snooper doesn't turn anything up."

I glanced at the machine and wondered how Huckleberry J. Gomez could help, and why he would want to.

CHAPTER 10

The card reader, which Captain Huckleberry J. Gomez of the Southern Area Police referred to as a 'snooper', was also a sender-receiver unit, which automatically searched all other units for anything on any subject whose card was read. It did all sorts of other things, I think, and should properly be called an Autocop. Peabody referred to it as 'Robocop', which really meant that Gomez had programmed that name into his memory, in his twentieth century New York persona, I suppose.

In any event, it was only about a quarter of an hour before the response to Gomez and Peabody's enquiry came through. As soon as it appeared on the screen, I read:

Subject:	Roger Savage, Fossil Bluff, Antarctica.
ID:	70098143
Mother:	Judith Savage
Status:	There are no reports against this entry.

Besides the message on the screen, there was a printed copy. The robot picked it up. "Robocop says he's in the clear," it said disgustedly. It turned to me and added, "But we'll get you next time, punk."

"Easy, Peabody," said Gomez automatically. To me he said, "Seems like you're in the clear, son. Well now, mebbe I can help you some."

"How?" I asked.

"My, you are in a rush," he said. "I got me a sister. Lives up Bahia Blanca way. Now she's a councillor," he went on. "Years ago we had regular elections, and she was elected for these parts."

"I've never heard of elections or councillors. There was no mention of them in the instructional videos," I said "Some of the historical videos mentioned them, I think, but they were referring to elections happening centuries years ago."

"They was elections up to ... say, forty or fifty years ago. Then folks kind of gave up on them."

"Why?"

"Nobody bothered to vote," said Gomez. "An election ain't no good if nobody votes, and they didn't."

"I find that hard to believe," I said, realising as I said it that I didn't find it hard to believe at all. Katerina wouldn't have got out bed to vote and I don't think my mother would have torn herself away from the viewscreen long enough to vote either. I would have voted. I think Maggie might have and I think the old man might have as well, but I could believe that most people would not bother.

"It's the way things were, all the same," Gomez said.

"Is your sister still a councillor, then?"

"I guess so," he said, thinking about it. "Ain't nobody unelected her. Anyways. If you like I'll put you in touch with her. Fact is, it's about time I visited her myself, so mebbe I'll take you there. Fact is, you can ask her all your questions and could be you'll get some help locating these Reclamation Units you wuz talking about. I don't know that she can help you her own self, but I reckon she'd know who to talk to."

Gomez was looking tired and a little sad. "I'm getting old, son. I'm more'n two hundred years old now and I'm tired of life here."

"How about relocation?" I suggested. "Or re-training?"

He shook his head sadly. "Another town would be pretty much like this one," he said. "I'm too old for retraining. Me and my sister, we was among the first people engineered to live longer. Back at the start of the twenty-first century I had me some good friends and the world was full of all kinds of folks. Now..." he paused, looking more worn than ever. "Now, pretty much all those pals have gone and they ain't many people left. The world's dying, son."

He looked absent. Probably his mind was remembering all those years ago. It occurred to me that two hundred years is a long time for a human to live. Of course there is the possibility of retraining for different work or changing partners, but somehow it doesn't seem appropriate for a human to live that long. Of course they do - usually to about a hundred and eighty or a hundred and ninety. I might feel differently when I'm old myself.

At last he appeared to pull himself together a little. "I don't know as I want to do a different job, anyway. It ain't that I don't like what I'm doing, or the place I'm doing it, exactly, but I feel grey and worn. I may wear brown, but I feel grey, if you get my drift. Kinda like a shadow at sunset. Fadin'. Losing that sharpness of outline and intensity." He sighed. "Still, if you want to meet my sister..."

"Thanks," I said. "I'd appreciate that."

"Well, he said, "There's a train carrying Agrifac 2 produce, leaves at thirteen hundred hours today. Same train calls in here from Puerto Monti, over the Andes, same time every fourteen days. Stops here, drops four wagons, picks up eight extra and goes on to Bahia Blanca. If we ride with that train you could be at my sister's the day after tomorrow. If there's no rain."

"What about permission to ride?"

"I'll speak to the engineer, son. There won't be no problem."

"And what about your job here. Who'll do it?"

"Hell, there ain't been a crime for forty seven years. 'Tain't likely there'll be a rush in the next few days. I'll just tell the chief over in Comodoro Rivadavia that I'm taking a few days off, case anyone should wonder where I am, not that anyone would even notice I'm gone. Now I got to call my sister and arrange for us to go see her. Wouldn't do for us just to turn up there, would it now?"

"Where does your sister live?" I asked.

"Like I told you, Bahia Blanca," he said. He turned in his chair and called to the vid,

"Videophone: Get me Margareta Gomez in Bahia Blanca."

The screen machine repeated, "Margareta Gomez, Bahia Blanca." Then it said, "Checking the number." And after a short pause, "Your number's ringing for you." I wondered what the sister of Huckleberry J. Gomez would be like. Whether she'd be as eccentric as her brother.

The woman who answered the vid. was small and sprightly. I suppose she was like Huckleberry J. around the eyes, but she was darker skinned - she more obviously had aboriginal blood in her somewhere. She peered a little short sightedly from the vid, and then smiled broadly as she recognised her caller.

"Why HJ, how nice to hear from you. What d'you want this time?" Her voice was a bit thin but full of energy still, and totally lacked the pseudo-wild west accent of her brother, though it was a trifle archaic still. I had the impression from the first listening that she had been a Spanish speaker before adopting Spanglish, like the rest of us.

"That's no way to speak to your own flesh and blood."

"Come on now," she said, "When did you ever call me without asking for something?"

"Listen, I got someone here and it seems to me you'd be interested to meet him."

"Yes?"

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me closer, so she could see me on the vid. "This here's Roger Savage, from Fossil Bluff, Antarctica," he said, "He thumbed a ride to Port Siple, persuaded a ship to carry him to Rio Gallego and then jumped a train."

"Hello," I said politely, into the pause.

"He's twenty, he's got initiative and interest in everything, like I ain't seen in a hundred years. Could be you'd find him interesting to talk to."

"Could be," agreed Margareta Gomez. "Twenty." Her eyes suggested a little more curiosity than before.

"He wants to join a Reclamation Unit and look what we've done to the planet. As a race I mean."

"Does he?" she said. She looked even more interested.

"Well?" Huckleberry J. demanded.

"Come and talk to me," the woman said to me. "My brother has his eccentric side but, underneath the facade, he's pretty shrewd. If you're

all he says you are, you'll be an interesting diversion, if nothing else. Could be you'll turn out more than that." She peered at me. "Twenty?" she said a second time. "You look a lot older than that." She turned her attention to her brother. "Right, HJ, you see him on that train and I'll arrange to meet him."

"I'll do that," he agreed. "Fact is, I was thinking of coming along of him. Few days break won't do me no harm and I'm kinda interested in what you make of him."

"Well now, that is a surprise. I haven't had a visit in thirty years. You don't phone much either."

"Yeah," he said. "I guess it will be kinda nice. So, how you been keeping."

"Same as usual," she answered. "How about you phone me sometime when you don't want anything?" The expression was friendlier and more affectionate than the words.

"I told you, I thought you'd be interested to meet this guy."

"Bullshit, HJ. See you the day after tomorrow. You look after yourself now."

"I surely will, Margareta." The screen went blank and Gomez said, "End of call," to the machine.

For myself, I wondered what 'bullshit' was.

"Well, son," he said, turning to me, "if Margareta says she'll see you, she's interested and she'll help you."

"She doesn't see just anyone?" I asked.

"She's old," he answered. "Older than me by more'n fifteen years. She was one of the first people changed. Maybe the first, I ain't sure. She's going on for two hundred and twenty, I reckon. I fergit her exact age." He was silent for a moment. "So does she, son, and she don't like to recall, so don't go rushin' to ask her."

He glanced at his watch. "I'd better vid. the Area Office and tell them I'll be away a few days. After that we got to talk to the engineer from the train," said Gomez. "I generally mosey down there for a chat."

He turned to the vid. again. "Get me the Comandoro Rivadavia Area Police Office." Then he called, "Peabody!"

"Sir," the robot answered smartly.

"We'll need transportation to the train."

"I'll check with control which mobile is available, but I believe it's unit 14." He pulled the microphone from his pocket and said into it, "Eight nine four to 5th Precinct control. Over."

"Go ahead eight nine four. Over," said the same female voice I'd heard before.

"Transportation needed from base to Central Station. Which mobile is available? Over."

"Unit 14. Over," the voice informed him.

"Affirmative control. Over and out." Peabody turned to us. "Mobile 14," he repeated, quite unnecessarily, since we'd both heard.

At that point the videophone was answered by a young woman in a brown shirt, like that worn by Gomez but without the words 'county sheriff'. "Area Police. Can I help?" she asked

"Hi," said Gomez. "It's Captain Gomez. Just to let you know that I'll be out the office a few days. 'Bout a week at the outside."

"I'll make a note," she said, "Thanks for calling."

"Bye," said Gomez, and the screen went blank.

"Okay," said the old man getting up. He adjusted his goggles, picked up his hat and led the way out of the building.

We walked round to the side of the building and, parked there, was a ... a what? A vehicle of some kind, I suppose. It was a complete reproduction of a New York police car from the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, as far as I could remember from the videos. It consisted of four wheels on the outside, the front two of which could be turned at various angles by a fifth one on the inside. Moreover, a robot similar to Peabody sat, stock still, at this inside wheel.

There was a metal base to which the wheels were attached and it looked as if the thing ran on them, instead of hovering, and could be directed by the robot inside turning that fifth wheel. I don't think you could go far in a contraption like that, because you'd need roads that were hard and level wherever you went, like you see in some of the historical cultural videos.

Over the metal base with the wheels, there was a white plastic body, like something out of an instructional video, with the word 'Police' down the side. It also had a red coloured bump on top. From the various videos I'd seen, it must have been a red flashing light.

"Get in, son," said Gomez, opening a door so that I could climb in the back.

He threw in my bag, which I had completely forgotten, closed the door and bent to unplug the vehicle from a solar panel. I guessed that the panel had been charging a battery. Peabody climbed into the front seat, next to the other robot, which was still just sitting there.

The old man climbed in the back with me, closed the door and reached over to flip a switch and turn on the robot driver.

"Central Station and hurry," Peabody growled. "We got to escort this guy to a train and time's wasting."

"Central Station? You got it," said the robot driver, in exactly the same accent.

The vehicle pulled out onto the road without a sound. The thing must have been battery powered, as I had assumed. We crawled along at no more than ten kilometres per hour.

"Step on it," said Peabody, and the speed went up to maybe fifteen or twenty kilometres an hour.

Peabody growled again, "We got to get through this traffic," he said and switched on a siren and, I suppose, the flashing lights. "We're being followed. We need evasive action. Take a left here.

There was no left turn and the vehicle kept straight on at a steady fifteen kilometres an hour. Peabody wound down the window alongside

him, leaned his head out and pressed the machine attached to his front pocket. There was a sound like a gunshot.

He pulled out the microphone and yelled into it, "Mobile 14 to 5th Precinct Control. Over."

The voice came from the tiny recorder. "Go ahead mobile 14. Over."

Shooting on 121st. Send us some back up. Over."

"Affirmative, mobile 14. Over and out."

"I sent for some backup," the robot told Gomez.

"Easy, Peabody," he said.

It seemed to me that the robot had pressed a button himself to prompt the recording of a gunshot. That seemed a distinctly odd thing to do, so I asked Captain Gomez about it.

"You ever notice, son, robots do exactly what they're programmed to do and don't stop to think out whether it's logical or reasonable?"

I thought about that without comment. I suppose he must have programmed a random element into the robot's behaviour, so that he would never know exactly what it would do. That must make things interesting!

There was no other vehicle in sight. A man we passed gave Gomez a friendly wave, acknowledging his idiosyncrasies no doubt. The 'station' was just a dead end siding where the wagons were assembled, and the distance from the office was no more than five hundred metres or so.

"We made it," Peabody announced proudly as we drew up beside the train. The engineer had just climbed down from the cab, and was dusting of his trousers as we got out of the car. Gomez did the introductions.

"This is Roger Savage," he said. "I'm fixin to take him to meet my sister at Bahia Blanca. Is it okay if we travel with you?"

"Okay with me," agreed the engineer, and he shook hands with me. "I'm Julio," he said. Throw your bag into the control car and we'll have a drink before we leave."

"Peabody, stay with the mobile and keep an eye on the train."

"Protective custody," it agreed, and looked around in a manner that should have been suspicious, except that I could see his face. The expression was one self-conscious slyness.

"Easy Peabody," the old man told it mildly. "You can't arrest a train, even for its own good. Just keep an eye on it."

"Sir!" said the robot smartly.

The canteen was a small MacDonatelli's, which meant that the choice of food was limited. That probably explained why Gomez made his own food. We ordered on the orderphone. Gomez put his card in the reader and the drinks arrived.

"How's things Julio?" Gomez asked.

"No boats from the north any more," he said. "We're still in touch with the northern sector via the satellite lines and it seems that several ships set out. They just didn't arrive at any southern sector port."

"Don't say. What do they reckon has happened to them?"

"Supercanes. There's no evidence, of course, but everything points to them being lost at sea and supercanes seem the most likely cause."

I remembered what the ape had said. "I hear that some former crews of orangutans turned pirate," I said. "Maybe the missing ships ran into pirates."

"Go on," said Julio, "That's just an old ape's tale."

The old man looked gloomy. "Cheer up," the driver continued. "If we've been cut off we can still manage."

"I reckon the human race has had it," said Gomez.

"Not your problem, or mine," said the driver.

I was startled and I most certainly disagreed. I think the old man did too, though he didn't say so directly.

"Could be you won't notice if you're dead," he observed, shaking his head.

"Well," said the driver, "Got to get this train to Bahia Blanca by the day after tomorrow. Come on you two," he added, rising.

I stood up and looked towards Gomez. He was looking sadly and reflectively at a paper cup of caffeine-free coffee with no whitener, still half full. He swallowed it down, stood up and said, "I better switch off those two robots before we go. They'll be fine in the mobile, but I don't know what-all they'd get up to on their own, if I left them running."

Julio laughed - he'd obviously encountered them before - and we all walked out into the sunshine, adjusting our U-V goggles.

CHAPTER 11

We glided into Bahia Blanca mid-afternoon two days later. The rail line ran to the industrial zone, where it branched into a number of factories and warehouses. The town itself was bigger than those I had seen thus far, with trees and shaded walkways in the streets and gardens all round. All the same, there were not many people in evidence, and I wouldn't have called it busy.

I had looked about, as we drew to a stop, for any sign of Margareta Gomez, but failed to see her standing in the shade of one of the buildings, until we stepped down from the control unit.

The journey had been faintly interesting but quite uneventful. Julio had been glad of the company and there was plenty of room for three in the cab. It had been planned to provide space for about four or so passengers - people relocating, for instance - so we were not even cramped. This space included, as I had thought on my first journey by rail, living accommodation.

I had hoped to find out more from this man who travelled and, had he been more like Captain Gomez, I easily could have done. It was inevitable that Julio had seen and heard plenty on his travels but he was temperamentally closer to Alfonso or Katarina. He did his job with the minimum effort required, enjoyed his leisure fanatically and paid no attention to the world around him. As a consequence there was little to learn from him.

I don't think I gave any indication of my disappointment. At any rate, we thanked him, said our 'Goodbyes' and walked across to where Gomez had spied his sister waiting in the shade. She was, as I had observed from the vid., a sprightly old lady. She was also small and slight, but she bubbled with energy.

"Hello HJ.," she said as we came up to her, "Good to see you again. It's been too long." She gave him a hug and kissed his cheek, then turned her attention to me. "Good afternoon, Roger Savage. Welcome to

Bahia Blanca." She paused, and then said, with the intonation of a question but clearly a statement, "You met Peabody and Johnson in Las Plumas?"

"Las Plumas?" I realised I hadn't even asked where I was when Huckleberry had found and questioned me. That name was such a mouthful that I could see why his sister called him HJ, and wondered what the 'J' stood for. "I met Peabody, but who's Johnson?" I asked.

"The driver," said Huckleberry.

"Oh," I said. "Well, I did meet Johnson, but we weren't introduced." I hadn't actually been introduced to Peabody either, come to that.

"If you met one you met the other," Margareta observed. "My lunatic brother programmed them both. Have you left them to run things?" she asked him.

"Nope," HJ. answered. "I switched them off before I came here and left Las Plumas to look after itself."

"Much safer," she said emphatically. "Well, both of you, let's go home."

Bahia Blanca was further north than I been thus far, but not by so very much. Still, it was noticeably hotter than Rio Gallego and even hotter than Las Plumas had been. It was afternoon, some time to sunset but beyond the hottest part of the day. It was only spring too, but I was already sweating. High summer here in the heat of the early afternoon must be unbearable. I could see why HJ found it incredible that anyone should go to the most torrid regions of the planet from choice.

It was not so very far to where Margareta Gomez lived - but we walked, and it was far enough.

Her flat was a ground floor one, overlooking gardens in which it was possible to sit in the shade of trees. The flat itself was pretty much as Katarina's had been, but larger. The floors were tiled and cool air blew through small grids on the floor. The decor was relaxing and, though there was a viewscreen in the living room, there were also dozens of video-books and even a few that I recognised from the instructional videos as being old-type paper books.

The front door of the building and the flat door were secured - ours never were in Antarctica - but the doors recognised Margareta and opened for her with a friendly "Good afternoon, Margareta Gomez. Welcome home." I think I might get tired of being welcomed home when I'd just slipped out to sit in the gardens for half an hour. It might be nice after a few days away, though.

"Come in," said Margareta, adding for my benefit, "I never moved when my daughter grew up, so I've plenty of space. I used the second bedroom as a consulting room when the council was active. Now I use it as a library, but there's room for you to sleep there." She turned to her brother. "I booked you the guest room across the hall. I thought you'd appreciate a proper bed."

"I surely would," HJ agreed.

"Roger can move into the guest room if he's still here after you leave." Margareta added.

After the sunset we went into the park area and, after we had wandered among the trees a little we sat in the peace. The gardens were cool and pleasant in the dusk and there was a strange, soft sound that I couldn't identify, providing a dreamy background. I asked Margareta what it was.

"These gardens play a tape of natural sounds from away back," she said, "Birds and insects and such like. When I was little there were still birds and cicadas around. Gone now, of course. Makes me a little sad to think of it and the tape is just an indulgence to the whim of an old lady who used to be a councillor, when there was a council."

"Are you still a councillor?" I asked. "Your brother thought you were."

"I said no one had unelected you, far as I knew."

"That's technically correct. The council adjourned itself and resolved not to hold further elections until someone petitioned for them."

"And nobody has?" I said, making a remark, rather than asking.

"Not for nearly fifty years," Margareta said. "Now that we've started to talk of such things," she continued, "we may as well keep to the subject. You told HJ you were twenty?"

"I surely ... I mean, yes," I said, catching myself slipping into 'Huckleberry' mode. One person thinking and talking like that is enough, but I caught a glimpse of that gentleman smirking. "Why is that so important?" I asked.

"You know that everybody has been engineered to develop slowly and age slowly," she said. "What they did was to engineer a few people to live longer, just as an experiment. Changed their genes when they were embryos. Now, some changes are passed on to offspring and some changes aren't. These were. At first they approached just a few women who had embryos implanted because they were infertile. They wanted volunteers to take part in the experiment. Our mother was one of them. She was the partner of a key researcher and I was the very first successful live birth of a human genetically modified to live longer. I think they probably got the genetics wrong. I've lived far too long already."

"It's even possible to have viruses carry some changes from one subject to another. We've been able to do that deliberately since the nineteen nineties. There was nothing new about the technology when it happened sometime early in the twenty-first century. Viruses either accidentally got into genetic material or were deliberately put there. Then they got out again ..."

"Ain't likely it was a double accident," Huckleberry observed dryly.

"No," said Margareta, "but we'll try and stick to facts for the moment, and we can't prove that was any sort of official decision, or even a deliberate act. Anyway, that's almost certainly how it happened. All women found themselves having children that matured slower and aged slower. I was about thirty by then and HJ there was just a toddler of fifteen."

There was no wonder that Huckleberry had looked back sadly on the friends he had outlived. Friends must have outgrown him repeatedly when he was young and he must have outlived those of early adulthood by many years. I felt vicariously sad.

Margareta went on, "You don't look right for your age. Seems to me you must be some kind of genetic misfit."

I knew only what Aunt Maggie had told me before I left Fossil Bluff, but I passed on the story as far as I knew it.

"Yep," said Huckleberry, when I'd finished, "I reckon that makes you a misfit. I bet your ma was surprised."

"Apart from turning off the viewscreen in the middle of something she's watching, it would take a lot to surprise her," I said. "I had to turn the viewscreen off like that, just to talk to her. I'd rather have had Aunt Maggie for a mother." Actually, she had not displayed motherly feelings towards me that last night in Fossil Bluff, but it was quite true that I felt more attached to her than my own mother. Perhaps being lovers was the next best thing to being related.

Something else was beginning to bother me. "Some women are fertile, others not?" I said. "Yes?"

"That's right."

"How come there is a difference between them? They must be changed individually, surely."

"Once people started living longer," Margareta explained, "everyone could see that the population would grow rapidly if it wasn't slowed down, so the decision was made to genetically modify women again."

"Taken a-purpose this time," HJ interposed.

"Now all women are infertile at birth," Margareta explained, "but a small random number are modified by injecting them immediately after birth with the genes to develop the right hormonal balance. They produce eggs and are fertile."

"So that's how it's done."

"Trouble is, son," said Huckleberry, "male fertility is dropping. It's been declining a little at a time for more than two centuries, and the increasing levels of ultra violet have made the whole problem worse. Fertile female can screw all she wants, but she can only get pregnant if her feller is fertile too."

"But that's easily remedied," I protested. "All we need do is inject the genes into more women."

"Tain't that easy," interposed HJ. "Fer a decision like that you'd need the council, and it put itself on ice fifty years ago."

"Surely it could be brought back to life."

"Only if some one were to petition an election," Margareta said.

"And that ain't like to happen," said HJ. "Anyway, most women don't want the responsibility or the trouble of raising offspring. They'd as soon not be fertile, I reckon."

"Everybody I've met is concerned solely with their own comfort and pleasure," I said angrily. "And the planet is overheating too."

"You said it, son," Huckleberry agreed.

"The human race is dying," remarked Margareta.

"Human race, hell," Huckleberry retorted. "The planet is dying and the humans have lost the race."

"And not just the humans on the planet," said Margareta sadly, "We have lost most of the wild life as well." I thought silently of the farting cows. "Some we got rid of deliberately, mostly because it was unavoidable. Other creatures just died out because we destroyed their habitat or made the planet inhospitable for them - creatures like penguins and polar bears. Some we hunted out of existence - like whales and fishes. Now most of the world is too hot or too dry for wild things. We can only have recordings of the creatures we've killed off."

"I'd still like to see what humans have done to the planet," I said, obstinately thinking that being uncomfortably hot would be no worse, on balance, than being dead.

"I think that can be arranged without difficulty," Margareta said. "If you're really sure you want to see what it's too late to change."

I breathed the cool night air with more appreciation than I had before and listened to the sounds of birds and cicadas and other insects, trying to imagine that the animals were all around me, and not just an electronic memory. I felt unbelievably sad about the possible loss of the planet and all life on it, and wondered how human beings could have been so stupid all those ages ago. I wondered how it had happened, and realised I might learn more from these two than all the instructional videos available.

"Tell me about the world when you were young," I said. "And tell me where we went wrong."

"You've seen the instructional videos, surely?" Margareta said.

"I don't want the past packaged up in videos or glossed over," I said, sounding harsh and angry, even to myself. "I don't want to be told how great the world is. I want the truth. I want to know what you felt life was like and where you think we're heading."

"I told you where we're headed," said Huckleberry, "But there ain't nobody listens to an old man."

"I'm listening," I snapped.

He nodded. "I reckon you are at that, son," he agreed. "Though I don't reckon there's a hell of a lot you can do about it, anyways," he added.

"Well," said Margareta, it's a long story and not one I care to start on an empty stomach. Let's save it 'till later." She got up with a bounce that suggested that, although she was old, there was plenty of life left in her yet. HJ and I rose as well and we followed her towards the house.

As we strolled from the gardens, there came wafting a most beautiful scent. "What's the scent," I asked. "Is that artificial too?"

"No," Margareta answered. "It's a small tree that smells only at night. In Spanish it was called dama de la noche."

"That's 'lady of the night' in Spanglish," said Huckleberry. "Sis spoke pure Spanish when she was little. I didn't. By the time I was learnin' to talk, most folks was using Spanglish."

Why does dama de la ... whatever you said, only smell at night," I asked.

"In the days when there were many insects around," Margareta explained, "most plants were fertilized by the insects flitting from flower to flower. Dama de la noche used the ones that came out at night. It developed that beautiful scent to attract them. You can smell it over hundreds of metres."

The front door said, "Good evening, Margareta Gomez. Welcome home." as we went in and I wondered whether trading all humming, whistling, flitting insects which fertilized the plants, for a talking front door was a good swap. I wondered whether we couldn't have had both.

CHAPTER 12

"So tell me about the world when you were young and what went wrong with it," I said again, as we sat back in the three comfortable armchairs after we had eaten.

Margareta Gomez glanced at her watch and sipped her coffee. Outside it had been fully dark for several hours now, and some of the street lighting was going off. Being solar powered, it ran for only so long as the batteries had been charged during the day, and it was still spring, with days lengthening but not at their longest.. The windows were closed to keep in the cool air, but the blinds were open and moonlight slanted in one corner.

"I think," said Margareta slowly, "I'm going to start with a history lesson. I've been giving this some thought since you first asked, and I concluded that you wouldn't follow a lot of our memories and feelings, unless I gave you some background first. Things not mentioned in the instructional videos or the auto-teacher programmes. On the other hand, unless we tell you about our childhood you won't understand what's happened since, and why we feel like we do. It's going to take some telling." She glanced at her watch again, took another sip of coffee and launched into her tale.

"We're nearly three decades into the twenty third century," she said. "I was born two hundred and six years ago, in 2019. The story of what went wrong with the world first started about a hundred and fifty years before that, I suppose, though people didn't realise fully what they were doing until about 40 years before I was born.

"In the eighteen hundreds, there was a change in living styles they called the 'Industrial Revolution'. By the middle of the nineteenth century they were burning fossil fuels ... you do know what I mean by 'fossil fuels?' I nodded. "Well, they were burning them pretty well exclusively by then. They used them first in factories, power stations and to make trains run. We weren't far into the twentieth before people began to use them in aeroplanes and cars as well. All these fossil fuels dump carbon dioxide in the air and that began to raise the temperatures. Did the auto-teacher

cover the greenhouse effect?" I nodded again and she continued. "Industries produced gases which damaged the ozone layer as well, and there were other greenhouse gases besides carbon dioxide. Methane from rice paddies and all the animals ..."

"All those farting cows," Huckleberry said as an aside. Margareta frowned but ignored him.

"But didn't the scientists realise there was a problem?" I asked.

"For a good while nobody thought much about the various problems beyond cleaning up the smoke," she said, "and, when they did realise that temperatures and sea levels might be rising, scientists were employed by bodies such as automobile manufacturers and power companies to argue with the independent ones. They debated things like whether global warming was happening and what it might mean."

"It must have been obvious that it was happening," I said.

"Well, it stands to reason that when you double glaze the greenhouse it'll get hotter," agreed Huckleberry, with a forthright common sense his ancestors seem to have lacked.

"Whatever the case," Margareta said, "it seems that all through the latter part of the twentieth century, scientists from various disciplines warned about possible problems, while the economists tried to show that it would be cheaper to adapt to higher temperatures than stop adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere."

"Economists?" I queried. I'd never heard of them, apart from an odd passing mention in one of the videos.

"They used to advise folks with money how to make it and folks without any how to spend it," said HJ obscurely. I presumed he was being flippant again, but I didn't understand him.

"Economists were like financial fortune tellers who tried to disguise their total inhumanity by cloaking it in science," said Margareta. I didn't understand her either, but I gathered that neither brother nor sister liked economists, whatever they were, and I wondered why. "I'll come back to economists and economics later in my story," she added.

For the moment I reserved judgement and changed tack. "What about the ordinary people?" I asked.

"Ordinary people were too attached to their cars and their good living, I think," Margareta said, a little sadly. That didn't seem to have changed much. Not the 'good living' bit, anyway. "The trouble was that the damage to the planet was being done by the better off residents of the wealthy countries. The better off didn't want to change their ways."

"That's pretty selfish."

"Son, you don't know what selfish is. There's things those videos and auto-teachers don't tell."

"I'm afraid my brother is right," said Margareta. "Has it struck you that there are very few people in the world?"

I thought about it. "Well, yes," I said. "But only now you mention it."

"And yet a virus carried genetic changes that caused individuals to live longer?"

"But you said they took steps to limit the population."

"True," she agreed. "But that would only cause a drop over a couple of generations, and generations last a lot longer now than they did then. I'm a grandmother. I'm a hundred and fifty years older than my granddaughter, but she hasn't got around to having offspring yet, and she's fertile. The population of the planet ran to billions. Now it's just a few million. What do you think happened to all those people?"

That was very puzzling. "What?" I asked.

"Died, son," said HJ. "Mostly they starved to death when the richer countries wouldn't share the food that they had."

"You see," explained Margareta, "Wealth was shared out unfairly. Some people and some countries had a lot more than others. People in the rich world didn't want to give up their cars or their air travel and their other luxuries. Because of that, carbon dioxide levels kept rising. Because CO₂ kept rising ... "

"CO₂ ?"

"It's just the chemical name for carbon dioxide. Don't you learn nuthin' from those auto-teachers, son?"

"You don't learn chemical names unless you study science," I said.

"Nobody studies science no more," Huckleberry said.

"So," I answered, a bit niggled, "nobody knows the chemical names of things any more."

"As I said," Margareta went on, "Because CO₂ levels kept rising, temperatures kept rising too and so did sea levels. The interiors of continents started to get drier and crops failed."

"Couldn't people just move to areas less affected?" I asked.

"The world was divided up into lots of separate countries and those in the rich countries didn't like the ones from the poor countries. They called them 'economic refugees' and said they were illegal immigrants, trying to get a better lifestyle."

"Mebbe some of them was," HJ remarked, "but most was just hungry. Runnin' from starvation, and that was mostly the rich folks fault in the first place."

"Anyway," said Margareta. "You can see the kind of tensions in the world at the time we were born. Climate changes and rising sea levels were really beginning to make themselves felt, but the planet was still mostly habitable. There was ice on the Antarctic landmass still. Though the gene pool was declining, there was still a wide variety of wild species left and some of it was still not owned by the various companies who patented the genes of most living things."

"So, what was the world like?"

Margareta sighed and looked distant for a moment. "Our family came from a place in what's now the Northern Sector. It was called Texas and it's all deep in the desert regions now. Then there was lots of open space and sky and grass, along with the cities and the oil wells..."

"And millions of cows farting methane into the air," Huckleberry added. I think he was just trying to provoke his sister.

"Lots of cattle as well," she agreed, amiably ignoring him. "On a warm afternoon in the country you could still see hay ..."

"That's dried grass," HJ interposed.

"I know," I said, nodding. "We use plough horses in Antarctica."

"Plough horses were out of date in Texas," Margareta remarked. "They used lots of diesel powered tractors, all belching out diesel oil fumes, including CO₂, into the atmosphere."

I presumed 'diesel' was some variety of internal combustion engine which burned hydrocarbons, but I didn't interrupt the flow to ask. "Anyway, you could sit back during the afternoon in summer, and listen to the birds and grasshoppers and bees and other insects. In winter the wind could whistle cold across those prairies. Now there's just sand and rocks and heat."

"What happened?"

"Mostly heat, son," HJ answered as his sister sighed again. "That and the dry insides of continents and over cropping the soil. Mostly just the heat, though. Leastways, in the end it was."

"There were millions of people living in vast cities," Margareta continued. "In the rich world most people had their cars and every convenience, though there were poor people, even in the rich countries. Parts of most cities had run down areas where people scrabbled for a living."

"That's where I got the stuff I programmed into Peabody, son," said Huckleberry. "I didn't have nothin' else to do, so I looked out all I could about the New York police department and programmed it into Peabody. Didn't help none, but sure as hell gave me a piece to do, an' that made me feel better."

His sister continued, "Cities in the poor world were hell for most of the people. Long, hard work for very little money or just no work and starvation. There were rich people there too, but not so many."

"You don't make it sound a very nice place," I said. "Probably I'm better off where I am."

"Some of it wasn't very nice, son, but at least it was alive and kicking. If the people been different, well, mebbe the world could have been made okay its ownself."

Margareta shook her head. "No, HJ," she said. "The world was like a person coming down with a fatal illness. It was just a little off-colour then, but the virus had been incubating for a hundred and fifty years. By the time we were born, it was already too late. Our grandparents should have done something in the twentieth century."

"I reckon mebbe you're right," HJ agreed reluctantly.

Margareta took another sip of her coffee and pulled a face. "Ugh," she said. "It's gone completely cold, and I really don't like cold coffee."

"I'll get you another," Huckleberry said, rising.

"I could do with something longer and stronger, HJ," she said handing him her cup. He went into the kitchen.

"What does the 'J.' stand for?" I asked her.

"Absolutely nothing," she said. "Huckleberry J. Gomez is his full name. Our mother was Angelina Gomez, and she had a craving for huckleberries while she was carrying him. Our father called him Huckleberry because of that. His friends used to call him 'Huck'," she added wistfully, "but I always called him HJ."

HJ returned to the room carrying three glasses, in itself a bit of a feat. "Good stiff drink," he said. "See if this is stiff enough, son."

"What's a huckleberry?" I asked.

"Danged if I know," replied HJ, "but my ma sure craved them when she was carrying me."

The drink was longer and chilled, but it had a bite to it. I don't know quite what was in it, but the sharp, strong taste was pretty good when you got used to it. I asked what it was.

"It's a margarita, son. That's the tequila you can taste. You can't really get it no more, but Margareta, she likes a margarita and she knows a guy who 'stills his own tequila. Was illegal once to do that, but 'tain't no more."

"You were telling me about where the population went," I said, trying to get them back on track.

"You recall I spoke of 'economists'?" Margareta said.

"Yes."

"Well, their real offence was to provide a way out for all those folk in the rich world who wanted to hold on to the good life. The politicians who led the various countries didn't want to face elections with unpopular ideas. Ideas which might lose them votes with those who lived well, if the ideas didn't appeal. In the nineteen nineties there was a man called Narwhals at a Northern Sector university called Yale and another called Fankhaus working for the government in a Northern Sector country called Britain. They both pointed out that the people most affected by climate change would be living in countries that weren't causing it. They figured out a value to people, based on how rich a country was. The result, they said, was that it would be cheaper to let the poor die than change they way of doing things in the rich countries."

I was aghast at the idea. "You're not serious," I said.

"Oh they dressed it up in fancy talk, but that's sure enough what they meant," said HJ.

"I doubt whether ordinary people would have been so selfish," said Margareta, "but it gave politicians a way out. They just lied and argued and sat on the facts until it was too late."

I was not so sure about ordinary people. The ones I had met wouldn't have actually done anything cruel or mean, but they were certainly self-centred and petty and certainly hid behind the regulations as away of avoiding work or making decisions. Well, present company excepted, anyway.

"My sister's mighty trustin'," remarked HJ. "Whether folks meant it thataway or not, it's what happened. Millions starved to death in the poorer countries of the world."

"There were border disputes that flared into full scale wars as those on higher ground tried to keep off those from lower lying areas and the ones with food tried to protect it from the ones without. The result was the small population you've encountered and the ruined planet you want to see."

Margareta stared off into space a moment. "I remember reading an old Australian poem once," she said. "Very old. Twentieth century, but it does tell you why people felt as they did" She quoted.

"I have grown past hate and bitterness,
I see the world as one.
But though I can no longer hate
My son is still my son.

All men at God's round table sit
And all men must be fed,
But this loaf in my hand;
This loaf is my son's bread."

"People didn't mean to be selfish, I don't think," she said, "They just put themselves and their families first."

"You'll understand me still being a mite sceptical," HJ commented. "Like I said, sis it too trustin."

I still wanted to see for myself what the human race was and had been doing, though I was beginning to agree with Huckleberry - it sounded too late now to do anything about it.

"Will you help me travel?" I asked Margareta.

The old lady didn't answer me directly, or not straight away. "My grand daughter organises Reclamation Units," she said. "She spends two weeks in Buenos Aires alternately with a month here in Bahía Blanca and she's home at the moment. I'll introduce you to her tomorrow." She drained her drink and added, "If you want to know what the planet is like, she'll tell you. If you're really determined to see what it's like, she could probably arrange it for you."

CHAPTER 13

I think my first impression of Cassiopia Gomez was inaccurate - either that or she changed. If the latter is the case, I don't know what changed her so much or so quickly.

She was three times my age, but she didn't look significantly older than me and was, as most people are, presentable and intelligent. I would put her about 175 or 180 centimetres tall and lightly built, with dark, wavy hair and brown eyes - except for the height, she probably had much the same appearance as her grandmother would have had at a similar age.

At my first meeting with her, she seemed more interested in recreation than work. This is a seemingly common enough feature among those I have run across, but not at all what I expected from Margareta's grand-daughter. She appeared strangely reluctant to discuss the nature and composition of the Reclamation Units and I half expected her to make difficulties about my intention to go north.

We were at her flat, Margareta, HJ and I. It was a much smaller place than Margareta's, so it was crowded: the flat was 'bulging out like a bricklayer's bum' as HJ put it, though what his saying referred to I have no idea.

"You want to go north yourself," Cassie repeated, surprised, when the matter was raised. She thought about it for a while, then said, "Well, I can certainly arrange it, if you're sure."

I said I was sure, and she continued, still rather reflectively, "Recovery Units are only as good as the quality of the materials around to be recovered and those who do the recovering. The trouble is finding enough people to supervise the work. We've tried robots," she explained, "but it's difficult to programme them to look for something when you don't know what you're looking for. Taking advantage of an opportunity as it comes is not a robot's strong point. On top of which, they don't work well in extremes of heat, and the sand gets in their mechanisms." I could see that might be a problem.

"Apes aren't much use either," she added. "They can be trained to do specific tasks, just as robots can be programmed, but this job requires initiative and selectivity. And they don't respond well to the extremes of heat and sand either, any more than robots do. Or humans, come to that. After all, they have a higher tolerance to U-V than humans, not heat. They don't like it and I don't blame them.

"There haven't been any human volunteers for more than a century. Nobody volunteers for anything." I couldn't see anyone volunteering for anything that meant effort, thought or discomfort. Society is, or has become, very self-centred. I wondered if it had always been so.

"More than that, though," she continued, "you have to have human teams with a leader that can use his or her imagination and knowledge, and you have to work at night when it's cooler and there's no U-V. The trouble is the lack of team leaders." There was a pause, during which she looked rather uncomfortable. She continued, "The teams themselves are mostly made up of ... well, you know ..."

I didn't know. "I don't follow you," I said.

She looked at Margareta and HJ. Margareta sighed and said, "When you reduce the population and interfere with genes as much as humans have done, curing genetic faults and illnesses and so on, you reduce the size of the gene pool. Decreasing the size of the reservoir of genes to draw from has the same long-term effect as incest.

"Ever since the earliest times there have been restrictions on mating with close relatives. Every religion has had a taboo on mating of fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, sister and brothers. In some tribes and nations, like the Navajos in what used to be the USA, there were clans and you couldn't marry into either your father's clan or your mother's either. Even if you had a different family from your intended partner, you still had to go to a third clan to find one.

"It was always a moral imperative, but there was a very good physical reason behind it. You tend to get faults much more frequently and a smaller reserve to correct them from, if you breed parents with offspring or siblings with each other. These days, the majority of relationships don't lead to offspring, so I suppose there's no longer any physiological objection to incest. At one time it even looked like a way of controlling AIDS, but most people still don't like the idea.

"As far as the present regulations are concerned, there is in theory a system for finding and aborting genetic misfits, but ... well they happen. That ship you sailed to Rio Gallego on, the Francis Crick. That was named after a scientist from more than two centuries ago. He was one of the first genetic engineers. He was quite famous and won a prestigious prize, called the Nobel Prize, for his work. He said that no child should be allowed to live unless it was genetically correct."

"He said it weren't human, son, unless the genetics were right," Huckleberry interposed.

"I read a passing reference to Francis Crick in one of the educational videos," I remarked.

"Any child with a serious abnormality or genetic illness is simply not fed at birth. Some problems slip through, though, and the council agreed to use any who were mentally deficient in socially useful ways."

"What she means, son, is that they weed out most of the mistakes but, time to time, they miss a few. They keep them out of sight by using them in the Reclamation Units."

I did not like what I was hearing, and I think Cassie had probably been trying to avoid telling me. I don't think Margareta liked it much either.

"More and more mentally subnormal people are being sent to the Reclamation Units," Cassie said. "The last few years the trips haven't recovered anything useful, mostly because there hasn't been anyone to supervise the rapidly growing numbers of the subnormals."

"The birth rate has dropped dramatically," said Margareta, "but the number of genetic errors is increasing. I checked with the hospital. The normal birthrate is practically zero."

"Even I'm genetically abnormal," I said, not sure that I was joking.

"If you was normal you'd be doing whatever you do fer fun in Antarctica, 'stead of chasing round the torrid zone looking at what you can't change anyways," Huckleberry observed.

"Maybe the human race is doomed and I can't do anything," I said, "But I want to go down fighting. I think I'm crazy, but I want to see what we've done to the planet." I turned to Cassie. "How about it?" I said. "Are you going to arrange for me to go out with a team?"

"If you were willing to organise a team, I'd jump at the chance to send you."

"I want to go. I'll take charge of a team for you, though I'm not a scientist or technocrat."

"That doesn't matter. However, there's another problem I think you should be aware of."

"Which is?"

"Heat storms. Every two or three trips our teams run into the storms. The recovery vehicles are equipped with all kinds of both early warning and survival systems, but occasionally we lose the odd one."

"I'll risk it," I said.

"If you're determined to go, I shall make good use of you," said Cassie.

"I reckon," HJ ruminated, "I might just go along of you. Mebbe find something I can give Peabody as a present. I can take a look at the world while I'm about it."

Margareta didn't comment, but Cassie said, "I'm not so sure it's a good idea at your age. The conditions are likely to be rough."

"If I lose mesself in a heat storm, well, I've had a run for my money," HJ observed.

I recalled that both he and Margareta had suggested that they had lived too long. Perhaps he really didn't care about the risk. Whatever the case, I liked the old man and I hoped he would travel with me, even if he was rather eccentric. Actually, I rather think I liked him because he was untypical.

"If you'd like to stay a while, Roger," Cassie said when we rose to leave, "we could talk over the trip and decide where you're going."

"You stop a mite if you feel like it, son," said HJ. "Me and sis, we ought to spend some time together."

I wasn't sure whether he was just being polite or really did want some time alone with his sister. I decided that it might well be the latter, especially if he kept to his decision to go north with me. "Well," I said, "I would like to know more about the Units and how they operate."

After she had seen them out and they had left, Cassie sat down again. "It's a relief to have a normal human to send next trip," she remarked, and added "I'll take up HJ's offer too, if he doesn't change his mind. I oughtn't to, but I'm desperate." She paused, then added, "I'll probably go out myself as well."

I had no particular comment to make and there was an uneasy silence. She obviously had something on her mind. "What are you thinking about?" I asked her.

"Look," she said, "I think HJ is probably right when he says that the planet is dying. I've sent my reports in after each trip, but there is no response from those with a scientific background. Nobody actually cares what's in the reports. I've no scientific training, so my comments don't count, and the scientists don't want to leave their comfortable offices and look for themselves what's happening."

"And what is happening?" I asked.

"The desert is moving south rapidly. The hottest parts of the world are getting hotter, heat storms are getting bigger, fiercer and more frequent and sea levels are beginning to drop."

"I thought the problem was sea levels rising, not falling."

"It used to be. I think the heat is sufficient now to increase the amount of evaporation. I talked to one of the scientists. He wasn't all that interested, but he answered a few questions for me. He pointed out that water vapour is a greenhouse gas. The more water evaporates, the hotter it gets, and the hotter the air, the more water vapour it can hold without condensing into clouds and rainfall."

I thought about Julio and the ships from the northern sector which never arrived. I digested the new information without commenting, because I was puzzled by the science behind it. There seemed to be a paradox beyond my grasp. "Why do you have deserts if evaporation is increasing?" I asked.

"I don't know. I think it's what I said, the hotter the air the more water it can hold without raining, but I'm not sure. My science isn't good enough for me to figure out an answer and the scientist I talked to either couldn't or wouldn't explain. Anyway, I'd already decided that I would go and look in detail myself next trip, and see what's happening."

"Where's your office?" I asked.

"The base for the Reclamation Units is at Buenos Aires," Cassie said. "You go by submarine from Bahia Blanca."

"Submarine?"

"It's nice and cool underwater. You drag along a raft with solar panels to which there's a breathing line attached as well. The ship stays cool and, if there's a supercane, we simply close the breathing line, haul the raft down to safety and stay on the sea bed until it passes.

At Buenos Aires there's a pool of Recovery Vehicles. We keep them sheltered from the sun, close to where the submarine lands. The trouble is that desert has reached down past Buenos Aires now. We have to ship in drinking water as well as food, and sand storms interfere with our work. If things get much worse there, we may need a new headquarters office."

"Will you get it?"

"Where from? The regulations tick along but there's no one to make decisions. It's rather like a train rolls after the power stops. It just keeps going until something stops it or you cut power to the hover unit."

"Can't you call an election?"

Cassie was dismissive. "Nobody would even sign the petition to call the election," she said, "and, if they did, nobody would bother to vote."

I thought that was probably true on both counts. There didn't seem much to be done.

"What happens to people living where the desert is advancing?" I asked.

"They simply relocate. They can't keep moving, though, because there will eventually be nowhere left to move to."

I could see that. In short, decisions needed taking and no one wanted to be bothered taking them. What was needed was a revolution and a dictator, twentieth century style. The trouble is, you need people for a revolution and a dictator is pretty helpless if no one takes any notice of what he or she dictates. I was beginning to see what was behind HJ's pessimism and Margareta's resignation. I couldn't see what was to be done.

"I'll bring forward my next tour of duty and we can go to Buenos Aires at the end of the week," Cassie said. "There's only me doing the job now and a sort of fill-in person to look after the ... er ... " She tailed off, then added, "The other two organisers have retrained to do something else less demanding and more comfortable." She paused for a moment looking thoughtful. "I don't think there's anything we can do, but I want to know," she said.

"Where were you thinking of going on this trip?" I asked.

"We'll go up the bed of what used to be the Rio de la Plate as far as the ruins of Asuncion, I think," Cassie said, "and look there for any items to recover. We'll take three vehicles, with you, me and HJ in charge of one each. We'll have a crew of two helpers each. What do you think?"

"I don't know anything about the geography and, anyway, you're the boss," I said. "Have you a map I can look at, so I can see where these places are?"

Cassie got up and went to fish around in a bureau drawer. "Normally I don't have anything to do with work in the house," she said, "but

I brought a map home with me this time, because I wanted to think this one through."

I could see that my first impression of her was completely wrong and that she had more about her than anybody I'd come across, apart from HJ and his sister. Maggie did have a sort of questioning curiosity, but Cassie seemed to have 'inherited' her grandmother's drive and concern. I don't know whether this awareness of the world around had been 'inherited' in the sense of a quality passed on genetically, like brown eyes or blonde hair, or was a skill learned, but she had it.

I had been thinking as well that she seemed to know what she wanted to do. As she spread the map on the table, it occurred to me that she had already been giving considerable thought to the detail. I went over and gazed at the map.

The first thing I saw was just how close, relatively speaking, Buenos Aires was to Bahia Blanca. The desert was looming near. The second consideration was just how much of the world was uninhabitable. Cassie pushed back some strands of hair from her face and my third thought was that she was a rather nice woman really. Much more interesting than Katerina.

CHAPTER 14

The submarine was cool and reasonably comfortable, though it bounced around a little when the supercane struck. To someone used to the long Antarctic night, life on board was quite acceptable. It was not, of course, possible to go outside the vessel, in the way one could leave a house in Antarctica, even with daylight three, four or five months away, but it was otherwise not dissimilar.

If the 'genetic misfits' were on the craft there was no sign of them. In fact, the crew consisted of an incommunicative human female called Weleda, who was in charge, and two apes who may have been more talkative, but were almost invisible. They stayed away from the humans almost completely.

It crossed my mind to wonder why apes had been used at all. The main justification for employing them as crew on the trimaran had been, according to Alfonso, their higher tolerance to ultra-violet radiation. There wouldn't be any U-V on board a submarine and there was no outside work - for obvious reasons. Weleda was not very approachable and Cassie was otherwise occupied at the time, so I was left with only my own conclusions. I inferred that the apes were with us because, in any sort of emergency, sail power could be used instead of the solar electricity. Mind you, a metal boat on the surface would quickly become an oven.

I dismissed the question of the apes at the time and forgot about it afterwards, but the whereabouts of the sub-normal members of our crew nagged at me. I raised the matter in Cassie's cabin one 'evening'. I twisted a strand of her dark hair around my finger and said distractedly, "What happens to the ... er ... genetic ... er ...?" I was not sure how the question should be phrased. This was not a very appropriate moment either, really.

Cassie understood the incomplete query immediately. "They live at the Recovery Base," she told me, not seeming to mind either the question or the timing. On the basis of her previous descriptions of it, that didn't sound much of a place. It would be like living in the submarine year

round, except for excursions into less comfortable surroundings to work. I put that thought to Cassie as tactfully as I could. She put a brave face on her answer, but I'm not sure how much of it she believed.

"They have some virtual reality games centres and the view screens," she said. "It's surprising how complete their lives seem to them," she added, a little abruptly. Perhaps she was not so certain as her words implied.

Anyway, I made up for the awkward question in the next little while. Cassie had a passionate intensity that I think was born of bleakness and personal need. She was not like Aunt Maggie - curious and friendly, and even less like Katerina - self-interested and fun seeking. Cassie was a real woman, intellectually desirable as well as pleasing to look at. I could have lived with her, if there was much living left to do.

There was a panel in the control room like that on board the Francis Crick. It showed the coastline around us on one monitor, the seabed on another and the weather across the whole of the South Atlantic on another.

"There's radar on the raft, and an antenna for receiving satellite signals," Cassie explained, "as well as the solar panels and the breathing line."

There was also a camera giving a clear colour image of our immediate surroundings. It largely duplicated the coastline image on the monitor, but the picture was sharp and the camera could look around it, like a remote controlled eye.

The satellite weather image gave us plenty of warning that a storm was approaching. Indeed, though the storm was vast and severe, it looked for a while as if it might miss us altogether. Standing behind a silent Weleda, I traced its passage in a southerly, then southwesterly direction, until it became clear that we were in its path. I watched the pictures from the camera and saw a smooth, greasy swell developing. The sea was at once calmer than normal - devoid of the ripples, low waves and small disturbances that are the usual feature of the ocean's surface - and more threatening. There was no wind, but the sea rose and fell with a greasy slickness, as if greatly disturbed somewhere.

As clouds began to pile up to the north east, Weleda said, in a rare burst of chattiness running to a couple of dozen words, that we had better shut down everything and rest on the sea bed. She explained that it would all be much more difficult if we waited until the storm was right upon us. "The storm is only a couple of hundred miles across," she said, "and, judging by the monitors, it's travelling at nearly fifty miles an hour. At that speed it will be here in about half an hour and it'll take around four hours to pass. The waves will be too high to risk floating the instruments for at least another four hours after that. We'll need to shelter on the seabed for eight to ten hours."

HJ was watching with interest, but he didn't say much. We looked on while Weleda shut down the systems to save power and the various monitors blinked off, until only the one displaying the ocean floor remained. As a fail-safe, it was impossible to haul down the raft of equipment, until a

red lever on the control panel had closed off the airline. There was a storage point on the deck where the whole raft could be securely clamped.

Using the seabed monitor, we then settled down on the ocean bottom, about eighteen or twenty metres deep. Most of the lights, along with everything related to the drive, were cut and we waited. There was no guide to what was going on in the world above, beyond a depth monitor which could tell us the height of the waves.

The submarine was cool and quiet, and the storm passed by without much disturbance. At the worst of it, the ship rolled about somewhat and once or twice, at the very height of the storm, we were bounced on the bottom: picked up by the roots of a huge wave and then dropped with a jolt and a grinding rumble.

"Ho-ly cow!" Huckleberry observed at the most violent of these disturbances, "that was big as a Texan's ego."

"What's a Texan?" I asked.

"They ain't any no more. But when they was some they had big egos," he answered. The answer was so unhelpful that he might just as well not have bothered. The ship bounced again, but not as strongly. "It's rougher'n a buffalo's bum out there," he said.

"It's quite a storm," Cassie admitted, "but we're safe enough, so don't worry, uncle HJ."

"I ain't worried," he said. "I ain't had so much fun since ... Comes to it, I ain't never had so much fun."

"Would you like something to eat?" Cassie asked. "We can't go anywhere and there's not much to...."

"Yes I have," said HJ. "I mind there was one time I tried to programme Peabody to do a drugs bust and he arrested the doctor. That sure was fun."

The old man was kilometres away, or years away, to judge from his expression. At that moment I wasn't really hungry, but I fancied a drink. Another wave slammed us into the sea-bed, a sort of parting shot from the passing storm, but I bet it was fierce on the surface. "Just a warm drink, I think. As it comes," I said.

"Right," said Cassie.

HJ was laughing gently, that faraway look still on his face. "What's wrong?" I asked him.

"Nothin', son, nothin'," he answered. "I was jus' rememberin'. Had me a girl one time. She was twenty some and I was forty some, but we were pretty much the same physical age. I guess I fell in love. Trouble is, I was genetically engineered and she wasn't. She was an old lady of seventy odd and I was still in my prime."

It must have been sad for him sometimes, being different from those around him.

The storm blew over and eventually we let the raft back up to the surface. It was still dark when the various systems were started up again, so we waited out the night and then recharged our batteries before travelling on.

The shoreline monitor showed our craft entering a wide estuary, but it was a little while before the camera could pick out the coastline in any detail. I stared. There were low, brown hills and sand dunes at the water's edge, broken by occasional outcroppings of rock. I have never seen anything so unfriendly, so inhospitable, so empty. I just gazed in a stupefied awe.

Cassie came up behind HJ and me. "Well?" she asked.

"There's nothing there. No grass. No trees. No life of any kind. No colour even, but a sort of dirty brown."

"The desert," she observed, stating the obvious.

"Why," I asked, "is it desert so close to the sea?"

"It's desert because it don't rain, son," HJ observed.

"I meant, why doesn't it rain, with all this water around."

Cassie frowned. "That's what I asked the scientists," she said. "I told you. All they could say was that there aren't any rain-bearing, on-shore winds."

"That storm must have gone ashore," I objected.

"True," she admitted, "but it was a bit further south and, anyway, there was very little rain with it. I think it must be just as I tried to explain. Hotter air can hold more moisture without it raining."

"You need something fer raindrops to form round," said HJ, catching me off guard with his scientific knowledge, "and cool enough air to condense the moisture into rain. I don't know which of them's missin', but I reckon one of them must be. Mebbe both."

"I didn't realise you knew about science," I said.

"It's pretty basic stuff, son. Time was, most people learnt the basics." I must have continued to show astonishment, which could have been offensive, I suppose, because he added, "Don't take me for a fool just because I play the part most of the time."

Suddenly I understood that Johnson and Peabody were just ways for a lonely old man to pass the time, while the 'Wild West' persona was no more than a protective front, disguising much. It dawned on me that it is possible to learn an awful lot in two hundred years, if a body was so inclined. I covered my embarrassment by studying the pictures of the shoreline again.

"I can't get over how bleak it all looks," I said.

"You have to go right into it in a recovery vehicle to really appreciate it," said Cassie.

"Appreciate?"

"Get the full impact. That's what we've done to the planet, and it's spreading. Steadily and remorselessly." I didn't answer, because there was nothing I could say. "Changed your mind about the venture?" she asked.

I didn't answer straight away. Huckleberry stood alongside us and gazed with us at the images on the screen. "No," I said at last. "I said I was going north, and go I will." I continued to stare at the pictures before us. "I don't think I've ever seen anything so empty, even on the videos," I added. "What do you think of it, HJ?"

"Hell, it ain't empty son," he answered, "It's dead."

The submarine docked in pens that jutted out into deep water and were covered over to keep the sun off.

"We stay here until after dark," said Cassie. "There's a covered walkway over to the Headquarters building and it used to have solar-powered air conditioning, but sand kept drifting over the panels and it didn't do them a lot of good." I observed again the helplessness of society. Surely the panels could have been raised on stilts. "It's a cooler walk over to the Recovery Headquarters once the sun's set," she continued.

I noticed that the concrete wharves against which the submarine was now moored towered some way above the vessel. I wondered why. "Is the tide out?" I asked. Both Cassie and Weleda were around, so it wasn't obvious which of them I was talking to.

"Must be," Cassie answered. "Look at the height of the quay above us. The pens were built at the height of the sea level rise, but it can't have dropped that ... "

"No," corrected Weleda. "High tide's in half an hour."

"It can't be." Cassie looked uncertain and her words were more a complaint than an argument. "If it is, then the sea level must have dropped a couple of metres in the last month or so."

"It has," Weleda asserted in her abrupt manner.

Cassie was stuck for any further comment and I digested the information. I wondered whether falling sea levels was an alternative to supercanes as an explanation for the non-appearance of northern sector ships. I decided it probably wasn't. At least, not on its own. A change in coastline or the appearance of islands would certainly confuse and possibly delay shipping, but it would hardly cause the ships themselves to disappear.

Since we approached the headquarters of the Reclamation Units after dark and by a covered walkway which was more than two thirds underground, I had no image of the outside of the building until much later. Inside it was like the homes in Antarctica. Largely underground, with windows only on the upper levels and then heavily tinted against the ultra-violet and very limited access to the outside. There was a way from the top level to the roof, used only at night, so that the solar panels could be checked and cleared of sand. That, along with the walkway by which we arrived ourselves and the garage exit, provided the only ways in or out.

The staff of the building was small. There were just some service robots, eight sub-normal workers and the supervisor that Cassie was replacing. We were a little early and the supervisor - a bloke called Pat - went to the submarine with such alacrity that I didn't even get a proper introduction. Cassie said only that he was 'all right', but he rushed off.

Cassie connected a pipe to the base's water tanks and they were topped up from the submarine before it left in a haste I felt to be indecent. There was nothing waiting to be shipped, nothing recovered and no vehicles were out, except one, which Pat indicated carelessly that he 'presumed lost'.

HJ and I wandered round to explore. The tinted windows on the upper level looked out over a scene so bleak that I could scarcely stand it. Sand drifted up against buildings which marched away on both sides of what must have been a road, in an avenue so long I could not believe there had ever been so many people in the world. In the middle distance, part of statue protruded from the sand and everywhere there were buildings, empty and sand-scoured, but not ruined. Nowhere was there any sign of life. Neither HJ nor I said anything, but I noticed that his eyes were tear-filled as he turned from the windows. I could only guess at what had been lost - he could remember.

The Garage and warehouse were all part of the building, so we meandered aimlessly into this area as part of our exploration and general look around. There was a largely empty space with rows of shelves, obviously meant to accommodate the recovered stock as it was sorted and classed. There was nothing on the shelves but oddments of old junk. In the garage were seven huge machines. By the empty spaces I judged there must at one time have been a dozen or more. Did that small number of recovery vehicles support the whole of society in the southern sector, I wondered out loud.

"They's not so many folks as all that," HJ observed, half answering the question that I had spoken unconsciously. "Still, you'd figure there should have been more vehicles than this. Maybe they were garaged somewhere else one time, and this was just a service bay."

"I'll ask Cassie later," I said, and we turned to go back to the other handful of souls in the building.

CHAPTER 15

My 'team' had been introduced to me as 'GeMi-12/G' (pronounced Jemmytwelvejee) and 'GeMi-35/G' (pronounced ... well you can figure that out for yourself). It had sounded like 'Jimmy' rather than 'Gemi' when Cassie had first said it. She had told me that everyone called them Gary and Cindy. I gathered that she had given all her workers names that had no official standing and were really only nicknames, but which were a good deal less confusing than the official ones, as well as being more personal and more friendly. They were, then, Gary GeMi-12/G and Cindy GeMi-35/G.

Cassie had explained that 'GeMi' was an acronym, made from the words GENetic MIsfit, and that the number was no more than the order in which the 'genetic misfits' had been identified. The letter 'G' after the number was the reference of the identifying centre. Other centres would, she said, have other suffix letters, and I wondered whether they would also have their own numeric sequences as well.

I had not been identified as a genetic misfit, but I might have been, had I been raised in a more populated place. Fossil Bluff was a small and tightly knit community and I had made myself popular by doing the work of others to pass the time. Obviously I had better be more careful about disclosing my age.

The records sent to Cassie when a 'GeMi' was transferred to her were very sketchy and never showed a parent-name. "Anything which might identify them with anyone is not just kept confidential," she said, "the data is wiped off the records."

"Back up disks?" I ventured.

"Absolutely nothing."

"Time was, son, all the records was on paper - birth registration documents n' so on." Huckleberry had remarked. "Now the regulations call fer information to be kept on disk. Easier to get at, easier to keep and easier to change."

"Yes," Cassie agreed, "and easier to wipe away altogether."

"Yup. That's why they do it I guess."

"I don't know that it's thought through in that way as a plot,"

Cassie replied. "Nobody cares enough to plot or plan anything."

I didn't think that anybody thought enough to think through a scheme like that either, but I allowed that Francis Crick and his ilk might have done. I didn't comment and Cassie continued, "The fact is that somebody decides a child is a 'genetic misfit' and an autosec somewhere wipes off any information by which they could be identified, transfers them to the Reclamation Unit Base and then removes all trace of them from the back-up records. Apart from the reference number, they don't exist." She was bitter about it and I think now her initial reticence on the subject had been due to a wish to conceal just how bitter she was, until she knew me better.

Gary and Cindy, who had no name, no background and not even an existence officially, beyond being a number for the supplies and staffing of the Reclamation Unit, looked 'normal'. I no longer know what 'normal' really is, but they didn't look 'abnormal' in any obvious way. They looked just the same as anyone else - the right number of arms and fingers and heads, average height, average build and reasonably pleasant looks. I suppose that the routine checking of babies would have picked up anything obviously amiss genetically at the time of birth. I must have looked normal at birth, otherwise I wouldn't be here today.

When one talked to Gary or Cindy, or any of the others, come to that, it was obvious something was not quite right. As I have already said, they looked okay and quite natural enough, but their thought processes and their perceptions of the world were those of someone much younger. I had only encountered one child in Fossil Bluff, but it was like talking to her.

The vehicles of the Reclamation Unit were large. They had tracks, rather than hovering, because of the weight they had to carry, and could only make about fifty or sixty kilometres an hour. According to Cassie they could only manage that on level ground. Of the three, one was adapted for living accommodation and she was in that herself. The other two had much less space for people, as opposed to freight, although the entire party could have squeezed into either.

In 'mine' the control panel was not dissimilar to the ones I had seen in the trimaran and the submarine. There was nothing like the seabed monitor, of course, and the radar reading was unnecessary most of the time. The only time that particular equipment would be used, Cassie had explained, was when we needed to move among ruins in the dark. Most of the time, the vehicles stayed stationary during the hours of darkness, in order to conserve batteries. On the other hand, there was a weather monitor, from which a satellite could give early warning of a heat storm. I could see that was an essential for an exposed surface truck.

There was a radio link between the three transporters and voices were as clear as if the people were sitting next to me. I wished they were. I missed the presence of HJ, even though he wasn't far away and his voice

over the radio was as near and cranky as if he were sitting next to me, making his often obscure and always eccentric remarks.

Cassie's voice was clear too. I like Cassie, I believe I could live with her as a partner. The trouble is, she is as likely as her Grandmother to reach two hundred years old, which means that she matured slowly and will age slowly too. I clearly didn't and won't. Right now our development ages seem similar enough and our bodies as well as our minds seem a good match. In fifty years time they almost certainly won't be.

We had not spoken of any permanency of relationship and it was probably too soon to consider moving in together anyway. What was more to the point was what the immediate future holds for us and, depending on that, what the intermediate future might hold. There was a degree of risk in the present escapade, but it didn't seem to be a large one. It was a lot safer to have several units travelling together. In the event of an emergency, all of us could fit into a single vehicle. Even if two of the three broke down, which was unlikely, we could all make it back to the Reclamation Base with a minimum of discomfort.

The way was level. We followed the bed of a river - the Rio de la Plate - as Cassie had planned. It was sandy and the sand drifted up in clouds behind the lumbering machines, Huckleberry, at the rear, remarked that it was 'worse than riding drag on a herd of cows.' On this occasion I understood him, because I'd taken the time to watch an old 'wild west' video.

"I don't reckon so," I said, trying to imitate his accent. "All the old time cowboys had was a bandana to keep off the dust."

He laughed. "I guess you're right, son," he said. "I was just thinking of seeing where you're going. When a body rode drag he weren't paying no mind to the trail ahead, and there ain't no argument 'bout that."

There wasn't. "If we drive side by side everyone would be able to see ahead," I said.

The column shuffled itself around and we drove three abreast. That way the dust drifted away, obscuring the rear view but not interfering with forward vision at all.

"Better?" I asked

Huckleberry's voice came back over the radio. "Fer all there is to see ahead, I might as well be riding drag," he said. "At least, if I can't see nothin' fer dust I can imagine I'm missin' something."

Cassie's laughter came over the airwaves at that, but HJ was right. There was damn all to see. Nothing but a sandy river bed, cutting wide and level through a sandy plain and low sandy looking hills rising in the distance.

Towards mid-afternoon we lumbered past the remains of a village by the river. Most of the houses were just humps in the sand, though one or two taller buildings stood clear of the desert floor. A jetty leaned a little drunkenly into the dried up river bed, but what I could see of the buildings looked more or less intact.

"Anything of interest for us there?" I asked the radio, directing the question to Cassie, though I didn't specifically say so.

"Not really," her voice came back. "We could stop here on the way back if we've drawn a blank on the rest of the trip. I hope that isn't likely."

That was an odd way to phrase it and I noticed she didn't sound at all sure. The autosec in the Reclamation Base had given her a 'shopping list' of various items it had been notified were in short supply. Low inertia electric motors, particularly in or from fridge freezers, were listed, as were solar panels, relay switches and control panels or one way diodes. A photo-electric cell will generate electricity all the time it is light. People usually put a battery at the end of it, so it charges the battery as long as there's sunlight. Without a one-way diode, it simply reverses the process when the light fades, and allows all the power to leak away from the battery as soon as it's dark.

It was still at least an hour to sunset when Cassie came on the radio to tell us to pull up at a wide bend a short distance ahead. "If we stop there and shut down all the drive systems, we can charge up the batteries while there's still some daylight," she explained. "Shut down everything but the air conditioning, the weather monitors, heat storm alarms, radio and the lights. I'll get the meal ready and you can switch everything off and come on over as soon as the sun sets.

We pulled the transporters up alongside each other and adjusted the solar panels to a suitable angle to gain the maximum benefit from the remaining light, just as Cassie had instructed. Then I shut down the various electrical systems. The weather showed steady and the alarm predicted nothing alarming. The drive function readings were quite normal and the battery reserves looked happily high and charging nicely in the last of the remaining light.

"Come on you two," I said to Gary and Cindy, who had been playing with a portable virtual reality game all day. "Get yourselves cleaned up for dinner."

"I'm hungry," Gary complained. "When do we eat?"

"We're having dinner in the other wagon," I told him.

"Can't we have it now?" he asked.

"Cassie's making it," I said patiently.

"I like dinner with Cassie," Cindy said, a per pro of nothing in particular, and they started packing up. I thought that it was little wonder there had been losses in the units if they had been letting innocents like this loose on their own. It might not be against the regulations to send out mentally retarded Reclamation Units but, morally speaking, it was criminally irresponsible. No doubt mentally subnormal people were as expendable as apes.

Before we went across to the living quarters I shut everything down, closed the panels away, lowered the aerials and secured the shutters. If there was a storm during the night, everything would be as safe as I could make it.

The air outside was a solid wall of heat, even after sunset. Cassie had parked her carrier-truck at an angle to my own and HJ's, so that her adjustable floodlight could pick the way to her cabin door more effectively. "Close the door. Keep it as cool as possible," she yelled as we entered.

"I thought nights were cold in deserts," I said. "That's what I read in the instructional video books."

"Used to be that way, son," HJ answered. "I guess it's another side to what Cassie says. There's so much greenhouse gas that the heat don't escape at night." He paused. "Hotter than an Navajo's sweat bath now, even at night."

I'm not sure what 'a Navajo's sweat bath' is. Was. It was certainly uncomfortably hot that night though, and that's what he meant. It was also silent and deserted. Not a sound except the wind, nothing and nobody outside our party. No plants, no animals, no water. No machinery except the transporters, and they were silent now. It was eerie.

Late that night, with darkness and stillness all around, I lay next to Cassie, our fingertips just touching. I told her that it was hard to sleep with all emptiness closing in on us. She stirred on one elbow and switched her light on to fiddle with something. As she switched her light out again I heard the soft sounds of the recording that had been playing in the gardens outside her grandmother's home. I listened to the soothing night sounds of the long lost insects and birds and I could almost smell the scent of the *dama de la noche*.

As we lay there in silence I felt Cassie slip her hand in mine, and I knew that, like HJ and her grandmother, she cared about the world and mourned its imminent demise. There was no need to worry about how things would be in fifty year's time. I leaned over and kissed her softly in the dark and her face was wet with tears.

Perhaps, I thought, there was no need to worry even about how things would be in fifty week's time.

CHAPTER 16

"Mama, where are my sun glasses?"

"Mama, where is my sun block?"

"Mama, where is my sun hat?"

The toybot doll had a whining, irritating voice with an early Spanglish, almost American accent. Not so archaic as HJ's accent but much more difficult to follow. The word formation equipment in the toybot was also much more primitive than would have been used in a more modern adult robot, like an autosec, say. All the same, Gary and Cindy loved their find and playing with it was going to make them quite hopeless as the crew of a Recovery unit.

"Go back into the transporter with that thing," I said.

"Gee mama, it's hot today," the doll said.

"Take the crib unit with you," I added, holding it out. It was quite heavy, and I wondered why. The explanation was obvious immediately on closer inspection. It incorporated a device for charging the toybot's power unit from a standard household solar supply.

"Gee mama, it's hot today." The toybot said. I stuck the crib unit in Cindy's hands, since Gary was holding the doll and her hands were free at the time. In any case she was the nearer of the two and the thing was really winding me up.

"Gee mama, it's hot today."

"And close the cab doors behind you," I said, reminded by the whining voice. "If you don't close the door, the transporter will be just as hot inside as it is outside."

"Gee mama, it's hot today."

"Yes, well shut the transporter doors behind you."

"Gee mama, it's hot today."

"Shut the bloody doors behind you!"

"Can I have a drink mama?" the voice faded into the distance as the two of them went back to the unit. I sighed and the sigh sounded very loud in the complete silence that followed. In the distance I heard a vehicle

door slam. That was probably Gary and Cindy. I heard a bumping in another part of the building and headed for the noise.

Huckleberry and his two helpers were moving a freezer onto a hover-trol, so I took a corner and gave a hand. "Careful you don't do yourself an injury."

"Thought if I pulled a muscle or somethin' you'd come an help and mebbe I'd get an easy ride home." HJ was grinning. "Okay, you fellas just mosey on back with this thing and I'll help you unload it later."

His helpers looked confused. They just stood there.

Huckleberry sighed and looked at them. "Take to heap big wagon. I come help," he said. His crew stood open mouthed, too confused to even ask what he meant.

"Go to the truck with this trolley," I said slowly and clearly, pointing first to the hovertrol and then in direction of the transporter, to make sure they followed what I was saying. "Take the trolley into the truck but don't unload it. Come straight back here." They smiled happily, nodded and exited with the hovertrol, rushing the load away at a run.

After the two helpers had left, Huckleberry grinned and remarked, "Like talking to someone who don't speak the lingo."

Nobody spoke the same lingo as him any more, but I didn't say so. "It's not really that," I said. "You have to spell out the simplest things in detail or they don't understand. It's like talking to children."

"Generation gap, I guess" he said. "You find anything interesting?"

We were not in Asuncion. Cassie had thought it less than necessary to go that far, because we had come on a small town treasure-trove. There were the remains of an agrifac, sand filled but mostly intact, with nearly all the equipment still inside. There were also several houses and other buildings un-emptied and a train still on the sidings. The train was a real find. There were fourteen large and easily detached solar panels still on it.

Cassie had expressed surprise that the panels remained intact and hadn't been ripped away by a heat storm. Huckleberry said that he minded when an old fashioned hurricane had flattened a town except for the cinema. Cassie said a supercane wouldn't leave much today, nor would a heat storm, and I wondered what a cinema was. Inside the drive unit of the train, the batteries were fully charged, so it seemed the panels still worked.

By driving round the town in daylight we had gained a general impression of the lie of the land, but a detailed study had to wait till after dark and was, of necessity, conducted by floodlight. The first night we had just looked around. The second night we had stripped the train of useable electrics and taken some things from the agrifac. The third night we were in one of the central buildings. Offices and a MacDonatelli's downstairs and homes upstairs.

"Cassie's stripping out the air conditioning out of the homes, to get at the cooler fans and the motors," I said. "My crew found a toybot doll and they've gone back to the transporter to play with it."

Huckleberry looked puzzled for a moment then smiled. "Toybot?" he said. "Like a talking doll? I ain't seen one of them in years. Mama I wanna bottle," he added in a baby voice.

"Gee mama, it's hot today," I said, imitating the doll, but I don't think he was listening to me.

"Used to cry fer a bottle, then wet theirselves," said HJ, his eyes far away.

"They couldn't wet themselves now. Not here," I said. "They'd just steam."

HJ looked surprised at me and chuckled, making a noise like someone with a bad chest. I was a bit surprised too. Obviously his weird sense of humour was beginning to rub off on me. "Yeah," he said, "time was you could pop behind a bush for leak. Not now. No bushes and it would evaporate straight off anyways." He laughed again. "I like that. Real sad, but I like the humour in it."

I supposed that it was a choice between laughing about it and crying about it. Which you preferred to do was quite arbitrary and I can't see that it would make much difference to the planet which one you chose.

Working all night meant the batteries of the transporters had to be charged during the day from the solar panels. This in turn meant that somebody needed to stay around the control unit, in case of a heat storm - a strong wind would rip off the panels and immobilise the vehicle more or less permanently. The upshot was that the team was split up during the time we worked in that small town. For one day more after we finished I had to stay in my transporter, alternately watching the weather monitor and dozing. The weather stayed tolerant - nobody could call it kind - and Cassie allowed us to reassemble for the night in the main living quarters again.

"Right," she said. "Pressure is dropping a little, way to the north west. We've had a long stable period and I'd like to head back to base before anything nasty develops."

"This heat ain't exactly nice," HJ observed.

"Gee mama, I'm hot," a whining voice added.

"Our baby doesn't like it here," Cindy said. "She isn't well."

"Can we eat now?" Gary asked. I glanced round and saw that he was holding the toybot. Whether 'we' meant him and the doll or everybody in general was not clear.

"Can I have my bottle now?" That was the toybot and I noticed that its voice was slowing down and deepening in pitch.

"Can we eat now?" That was a human.

"In a minute," Cassie said. That was Cassie.

"Gee ... mama, ... it's ... hot ... today." That was a statement of fact, and the speech mechanism of the doll was definitely slowing down. No doubt it required putting to sleep with the battery charging crib plugged into the mains.

"Yup. So hot, even the sun's got a sunburn," HJ agreed. He sounded quite amiable. My feelings towards the toybot were definitely not so friendly. In fact they were becoming increasingly murderous and even

Gary and Cindy were pushing their luck. I thought I'd say nothing about the battery for a while and get some peace. A mistake as it turned out.

"We'll eat in a few minutes," Cassie told them. "The meal is almost ready." Considering they were interrupting her she sounded remarkably calm. Mind you, neither Cassie nor HJ had put up with three days of the inane toy's whining voice. I had.

"At first light tomorrow we'll start back the way we came," she said. "If we follow the river bed to the first bend we can come up onto the plain. I've worked out a compass reading. We follow that by dead reckoning and come back to the river by the ruins of the village we saw the first day out. We can stay the night there and make it home the next day."

"That's a day and a half instead of three days," I said. I wasn't arguing - Cassie was the boss and anyway seemed to know what she was doing.

"The river bends north then a little east then a bit north again and then away east again before it starts south. We can cut out a day and a half's travel. Possibly more."

She seemed to have it all thought out. She was a good leader for this kind of expedition.

"You mean the river used to bend thataway," HJ remarked. "Now it's just the bed that does the bending."

We lay side by side in the dark again, holding hands and listening this time to soft music. There was a guitar or two, a breathy pipe, two or three different rattling and drumming percussory sounds and another instrument, I wasn't sure what. There was also some singing softly in background. The words sounded pure Spanish.

"Interesting synthesizer," I whispered.

"It's not synthesised," Cassie answered, also almost inaudibly. "It's a very old recording that uses real instruments. It was my grandmother's mother's."

The music was silky soft and spoke to me of the vast heights of lonely mountains. It was almost painfully beautiful. "What's it called?" I asked.

"Fragments of a Dream," she answered. For a while we listened in silence. By the time she spoke again I had almost forgotten what she said. "That's all we have left now," she continued, still barely audible, "Fragments of the dream we once had." 'We' probably meant 'the human race' rather than anything personal, I thought. She was silent for a few seconds more before she added, "I think we'll get back to base okay. There's no reason why we shouldn't get back to Bahia Blanca. Then what?"

I didn't know. "I don't know," I admitted. "I like being with you and I'd like to be your partner, but I don't know how long the planet has." I didn't know how long I had either. No more than twenty years before I started looking older than Cassie. Perhaps thirty before I began looking too old.

There was such a long silence that I thought she had fallen asleep. I listened to the long dead people playing their actual instruments and singing softly. I was interrupted by Cassie. She reached across and pulled me to her. "Not long, I think" she said, referring to the question of

how long remained. "Not long. But we can use what little time there is." She was wildly passionate, but I had fleeting moments in which to consider whether I was experiencing some kind of precognition.

Afterwards we lay in the dark again. "The world can end now," she said, and slept.

"Yes," I whispered to the sleeping form beside me. "Yes, I think it can." Then I must have fallen asleep as well.

Next morning the vehicles lumbered into life. We travelled abreast down the river-bed for a while, then Cassie's voice broke the comparative silence of the airwaves. "I think we'd better get out of the old river bed here," she said. No preamble at all. "Just about a kilometre ahead, the river bends left and the banks get a lot steeper as we approach the bend."

Where we were at that point the banks were low and not particularly steep. I couldn't remember the country ahead, but Cassie must have been taking notice on the way out. I eased up the transporter and, as soon as the others were clear, turned towards the bank. The other two machines also slowed and turned.

The loaded vehicles were slow climbing the bank. The tracks churned up the sand and the transporters slipped back almost as far as they climbed. I turned the machine at an angle to the old river bank, leaning almost to the point of toppling, but lurching in clouds of dust and sand onto the level. I pulled a little distance from the bank top, in case the other transporters rushed up the final few yards. Then I halted the vehicle, aiming it in approximately the right direction and waited.

While the vehicle waited, Cindy tapped my nervously on the shoulder. "The foodblaster is making sparks," she said.

We hadn't had much food in our own wagon and I'd only used the foodblaster once. It had been all right then. I glanced outside and saw that Cassie had made it up the bank but there wasn't any sign of HJ yet. "Hold it for a moment," I said into the radio. "I've got to leave the controls for a minute. Possible emergency."

"Take your time, son," Huckleberry's voice came back. "I'm havin' a mite of trouble with the wagon gettin' up this bank."

"Do you need a tow?" I heard Cassie asking as I slipped back.

The foodblaster wasn't sparking any more because it had switched itself off. Gary stood alongside it. "What's inside?" I asked, "You've got to take off any metal foil and leave out the cutlery."

"There isn't any food in it. Only our baby."

"What baby?"

"The one we found," Cindy said.

The toybot was more than half metal. Why the hell was that thing inside? Unless the circuit breaker had cut in soon enough, we wouldn't be having cooked food on the way home.

"Why did you put the toybot in there?" I asked, pointing at it.

"We was cremating it," said Gary.

"It died," said Cindy, and started to cry.

"It's not dead," I said. I opened the foodblaster and took out the doll. "You put it in the crib and charge the batteries." I considered the

possibility that the combination of subsonics and infra-red and X-rays might have damaged the doll's mechanism, but there would be a protective metal casing round the important chips in a toy.

I put the doll in the crib, wired the crib to the mains, switched on the charger and waited.

"Gee mama, it's dark," it said. "Can I have a night light, mama?"

Gary's face lit up and Cindy stopped sniffing. "You've got to let it rest for an hour or two. In future, you'd better put it in its crib to charge every night." The thought of that bloody doll wittering away in its irritating, nasal accent, into the far future made the prospect of the imminent heat death of the planet seem momentarily almost welcome.

When I got back to the controls, HJ had scrambled up the bank. We lined up side by side. "Take a setting exactly south east," Cassie instructed over the radio. I'll do the actual navigating but we can avoid colliding or getting lost if we all follow the same direction, keep the same speed and don't wander off." Speaking for myself, I had no intention of wandering off and getting lost.

There must have been a slight wind, because the sand was stirring. Across the rippled floor it snaked along, not rising or interfering with the view, but I didn't like it and I felt uneasy."

"Dust devils," Huckleberry remarked. "Wind's gettin' up a piece."

"A little," said Cassie, "but nothing to worry about. If anything goes wrong, follow the compass setting exactly until you come to the river, then use it as guide back to base."

"The trail home," HJ observed.

"That's right," agreed Cassie. "I don't think we'll have any bother though. There's an odd weather pattern to the north west, but it's a long way off and it appears to be stationary."

I looked at the satellite weather chart. I don't understand weather charts much. All I could see was an oval area of low pressure stretching off the display screen. It was far to the north. There were little blue arrows pointing inward towards the lowest point. "What are those arrows?" I asked the radio.

"Winds," said Cassie's voice. There are some pretty severe winds sweeping into the low pressure area, but they're a long way from us."

"Now where in tarnation is all the air going to in the centre of that thing?" Huckleberry asked about an hour or so later.

I looked at my display screen. Not much seemed to have changed, except that the low pressure system seemed to have grown even bigger and the winds have spread out too. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"If you look at the pressure it's fallen, but there's more air than ever rushin' into it. It ain't movin' but it's sure growin'." HJ didn't sound worried, more puzzled than anything.

"Good question," said Cassie, "but I don't have a good answer. It is growing too, but it's not moving and it's nowhere near us."

By late afternoon the area of low pressure had grown enormously, but it still hadn't moved. It was still a good way from us. I thought maybe there were more curling snakes of sand than before, but they didn't seem

to slow the transporters down and they didn't interfere with vision. The ruins of the small town or big village appeared ahead of us.

"I think we'll stop among the buildings," Cassie said. "The walls will provide us with extra protection if it should turn nasty during the night. We can charge the batteries a bit before sunset."

HJ's voice came over the radio. "I mind the banks was a bit too steep to get into the river bed here," he remarked

"Yes," Cassie agreed, "But we can stay close to the top of the river bank from here. It's only half a day's travel. Usual routine. We park the transporters and charge the batteries until dark, then you shut everything down and join me in this one."

We went through the usual routine for a little less than an hour, then I closed down everything that could be closed down and shuttered everything that could be shuttered. "Come on you two, let's go across to Cassie."

"Three," Gary corrected.

"Gee mama, it's hot today," the toybot whined.

I sighed. "All right then," I said. "Come you three."

There was a noticeable wind this time. Not particularly strong, but very hot. The sand whipped about us and scoured my pants. It was unpleasant and uncomfortable and I was glad to get into the living quarters.

"That thing is still not moving," Cassie remarked.

"But the son of a bitch surely is growing big," said Huckleberry, peering at the monitor.

At that point the time switch on Brainridge's electronics ran out and Gill's consciousness was jerked back to the twentieth century.

INTERLUDE

The steady beeping and the patterns on the screen told the registrar that the heart beat was regular, and the numbers recording the patient's breathing were remarkably regular. Only his temperature was causing concern. The doctor stood a pace behind her, watching and frowning in concentration.

"Sister first noticed the rise," the doctor remarked, "and the temperature has crept up a little since she drew my attention to it."

"You were right to call me," the registrar said, "though you seem to have done everything appropriate. I don't understand the problem." There didn't seem to be any cause she could see. She took out an instrument like a pencil torch, pushed up one of the eyelids and examined the pupil.

"Seems all right," she said, "and you changed the drip to one with an antibiotic." Her voice hardened just a little. "You took blood and urine samples first, I presume?"

"Sister saw to that I believe," he said, thankful that the nurse had remembered.

"Sister?"

"The samples have gone straight to the lab," she said.

"Of course, it's far too soon for any results," Dr. Asad added.

The registrar nodded. "What did you prescribe?" she asked.

"Clindamycin," the Doctor said, hoping she didn't feel that was too strong, but she only nodded again.

The registrar looked again at the patient. "There's no sign of trembling," she said. "There are no obvious symptoms of bleeding around the brain and no problem with anything that I can see apart from temperature. I really don't see what else you can do. It's some kind of malignant hyper-pyrexia. Keep monitoring the temperature and, if it doesn't stabilise in the next hour or so, page me again and I'll arrange an MRI scan."

'Hyper-pyrexia!' The nurse snorted to herself. 'She's just hiding behind long words. That's nothing but a high temperature no one can explain.' To the registrar she just nodded efficiently and said, "Very well."

The doctor had been watching the patient closely while the registrar was speaking. Now he asked diffidently. "There are some rapid eye movements from time to time which suggest dreaming. Is that compatible with the other symptoms."

The registrar didn't answer, but looked again at the patient. "Add an EEG," she instructed the nurse. "I'd like to know what's happening inside his head. She turned to the doctor and added quietly, "I don't really want to waste time on an MRI scan, if I can help it, because it is rather unlikely to tell us anything more than the symptoms in this case, but you never know."

The doctor nodded sagely, and the patient's temperature rose by another half degree.

CHAPTER 17

The small, elderly man rose to his feet and said, "Fratres and sorores, pay attention whilst I open this lodge of the Order of the Morning Light." His voice was not loud but it resonated round the substantial temple room. He filled it with his presence.

Mordacai Brand was dressed in a full-length grey robe, tied at the waist by a thick cord. The hood was pulled up over his head and most of his face was hidden. His beard was visible, as were his bushy eyebrows and his sharp eyes as grey as his robe. The members of the order rose to their feet. They were similarly dressed in hooded grey robes, and the assembly looked like a chapter of medieval monks. It wasn't medieval: if the assembly had been held in the middle ages, those present would have been quickly brought before the inquisition.

The lodge itself was a small hall, about twice as long as it was wide, high ceilinged and pleasantly decorated with symbolism of the Western Mystery Tradition. Behind the master's chair there was a large cross with a rose at the centre. The arms of the cross were painted with the colours and symbols of the banishing ritual. At the opposite end of the room was a representation of the 'tree of life' and the paths of the Tarot. The windows were covered in heavy drapes of dark blue velvet.

Brand addressed the assembly. "Frater Kerox. What is the first care of every frater and soror?" the speaker demanded.

A figure with a sword rose to his feet. "To see that the Guardian is in place," he said.

"See that duty done."

The figure bowed slightly and turned towards the door, opened a tiny square hatch and peered out. A similarly robed figure sat in an almost empty anteroom, hood thrown back and eyes watchful but relaxed. Besides the chair in which he sat, the only furniture in the limited space in which he was seated, was a table. On it was an ornate cross. It was lying flat and was decorated with a painted rose in the centre and a number of other

symbols, also painted, on its surface. Whether the human was the 'Guardian', or whether something else, tied to or represented by the symbols, blocked the way to intruders would not have been clear to an observer, unless that intruder was an adept of some skill..

The Guard closed the hatch and turned back to the assembly. "All is secure," he said.

"Soror in the south. What is the master's place?" the little man demanded in his resonant voice.

"In the east, as the archangel Raphael stands in the wind to the east of the great circle." The speaker was Athena, her dark hair showing, by carefully contrived accident, at the sides of her hood.

"Frater in the west. What is the place of the first warden?"

"In the south, as the archangel Michael stands with flaming sword to the south of the great circle."

"Soror in the north. What is the place of the second warden?"

The voice that answered was Gill's. "In the west," she said, voice vibrating like Mordacai's, "as the archangel Gabriel stands, spray drenched to the west of the great circle."

"Frater secretary. What is the place of the third warden?"

The secretary looked up from the minute book. "In the north, as the archangel Uriel stands with the earth's bounty to the north of the great circle."

The master turned to his immediate predecessor, standing to his left. "Frater past master, what is the master's place?"

An older and shakier voice answered, "In the east, as the archangel Raphael stands in the wind to the east of the great circle."

"The circle is complete." Mordacai turned and picked up a short sword from beside his chair. He pointed to the east with it and spoke under his breath.

He walked to the south and pointed the sword at Athena. "Adonai Tzaboath," she said.

Then with the sword he moved round to the west, and the second warden said, "Eh-hey-eh."

He walked to the north and pointed the blade towards Gill. She vibrated the word, "Agayla," making it sound like three words.

Mordacai walked back to his own place and put down the sword. "The circle is charged," he announced, and threw back the hood of his robe. "And the lodge is open," he added, and sat down.

Gill was not sorry to sit again herself. She rubbed her swollen stomach and felt the baby give a little kick. Steve was sitting a little way off, among the members with no particular office. Next to him was Brainridge, who turned out to belong to another lodge of the same order. He was spending the night with his niece before driving home.

The secretary began the minutes of the last meeting, but Gill was not paying much attention. She was considering once again her experience with Brainridge's contraption.

She had witnessed the heat death of the planet from a surfeit of global warming or, at least, had been prevented from seeing the actual end

because time had run out. There wasn't much doubt that the end of all life had been imminent, though. The question came back to one of 'was that inevitable?'

She considered what she had read of precognition, and what she knew of it, from this life and previous ones. One forgets, because the event itself was such a catastrophe, that the Titanic was less than two thirds full. On the maiden voyage of a great and much talked about - in modern terms one might say "over-hyped" - liner, there were cancellations galore, missed sailings and so on. This was not an isolated incident. A survey of North American railway accidents in the late forties and early fifties had showed that, on the day of a crash, the train had about half the number of passengers carried by the same train on the previous three days, the same day of the previous week and the same day a year earlier.

Gill couldn't even remember the name of the book in question, but there was still the Moorgate tube train crash. The tube train had crashed at the height of the morning rush hour, at the city end of its journey. There had been no survivors in the first two coaches, but the total death toll had been only forty-eight. Forty-eight people in the first two carriages. Twenty-four people in each coach? That was not even a third of the seating capacity. Her memory of the rush hour tube was of people crammed like sardines, hanging onto hand-rails and standing jammed together. And then there was Ladbroke Grove train crash, when two crowded commuter trains collided and the first coach of one was swept by fire. The train was usually jam-packed with passengers standing at the ends of carriages: again there had been a remarkably small death toll.

All the evidence seemed to suggest that precognition at a subconscious level was fairly common. So what did that say about the future and where did 'free will' come into it. What about prophets, prophecy and the public face of prediction. On the face of it, prophecy did not have a very good track record. You could skip Mother Shipton's prophecy. Careful research had shown that two books about her in the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth century had attributed to her a good number of things she never said at all. Ursula Shipton had never, as far as could be ascertained, predicted anything beyond her own lifetime.

What about Nostradamus? He left a lot of predictions in the form of a long and very obscure poem. He wrote in sections of one hundred lines, called centuries. No link between one hundred lines and one hundred years had ever been established and his obscurity had led lots of people to say, in effect, "Oh, so that's what he meant," after one event or another. The obscurity was born of a need not to incur the wrath of the inquisition, in which he had not been entirely successful. The patronage of a French king had been more useful.

Edgar Cayce had been very good when his predictions concerned individuals. His family and the organisation he had established were amazingly good at recording every prophecy he had ever made. They had a catalogue of thousands of 'readings'. The ones related to the diagnosis and treatment of patients, even ones he had never met, were largely accurate, with such a high percentage of 'hits' that doctors marvelled.

California had not, however, disappeared under the Pacific following an earthquake and Atlantis had not risen above the Atlantic near Bimini. At least, neither event had happened yet and both were overdue by fifteen or twenty years on Cayce's 'reading' of events.

So what were the implications of all that and much more? Gill pondered the information from various angles. Short-term events in the life of individual people seemed to pose fewer problems than the more impersonal ones. That was one obvious conclusion.

All right. So predictions based on the behaviour of an individual are reliable. Take the Moorgate crash. You could say that there was some reason why the driver was suspect. He accelerated through the station instead of stopping and drove the train at twenty miles an hour or more into the wall of a dead end tunnel. Never mind why. Whether he was drunk or had a heart attack or committed suicide, it is still possible to know - assuming that you accept ESP in the first place - that something is amiss. Or that something is going to be amiss. A passenger on the doomed train can then exercise free will, get off a station early and walk to work the extra distance. Or catch another train, or whatever. The heat death of the planet needs the collective neglect of a lot of people, or so it seemed to Gill.

The heat death of the planet could be taken as resulting from the sum total of the behaviour of many individuals: too many people in the 21st century put their personal comforts first. Was this simply a reading of the likely behaviour, like a reading of the tube train driver's state of mind?

She turned next to a consideration of Brainridge. She had recognised his occult strength the moment she had met him. He was staying with Athena and was her guest here tonight. She had seemed genuinely not to know that he was a member of the same order, through a different lodge. Gill wondered how she could not know something like that.

Brainridge was sitting back watching proceedings with a benign expression. With his bald-head and hawkish features he somehow looked like an ascetic medieval monk and his thoughts were kept entirely to himself. His invention had been an interesting collection of experiences, but were they the future? Were they inevitable? Was it, on the other hand, just what might happen if the human race did not collectively change its ways? Was it, perhaps, more akin to virtual reality - a sort of 'virtual future'?

Gill was still musing on the experiences of the day when her attention was dragged back to the proceedings.

"Item four on the agenda," Mordacai said. "The award of the degree of Adeptus Major on Soror Benderman. The soror has completed all the necessary examinations by the panel of elders and successfully exercised the ritual requirements of the degree. Soror Benderman."

A tall figure with a staff rose and walked towards Gill, who rose to her feet. It was a slender woman in late middle age, very upright and quite solemn. She bowed slightly to Gill, who took off a ribbon from round her neck, placed it on her chair and stood forward slightly. The woman took her by the hand and led her to the east end of the assembly. "I present to you Soror Benderman, who has been approved Adeptus Major by a panel of elders," the woman said to Mordacai.

"Soror Director of Ceremonial, thank you for your presentation." He directed his attention at Gill. "You having proved your progress to a panel of the elders, and having been installed by them on the astral, I present you with a mark of your progress." he said, and picked up a ribbon - wide heavy crimson material with an insignia of shiny metal suspended from it - from beside his chair and placed it round her neck. The two bowed slightly and then the woman led her back to her place.

Gill's thoughts were now well and truly on the proceedings, which was just as well, since the meeting had reached that point on the agenda when Athena's motion was to be discussed.

"I think," Mordacai said, "That a fair discussion might be better served for the next item if I were to vacate the chair. I wish to participate in the discussion and I want neither to be seen as pontificating from the master's chair nor to be restricted by it. I will ask my predecessor to again step into my place."

The tall figure with a staff rose again and walked to the old man. It was same slender woman with the same solemn grace. She bowed slightly to the past master and then led him by the hand to the master's chair. They shook hands, then the woman with the staff led Mordacai to the place previously occupied by the old man. He sat, she bowed slightly and returned to her place.

"Item five on the agenda," said the old man. His voice was old and wavered a little, as it had when he had spoken earlier, but it carried wisdom and patience as well as age. "A motion regarding the precautions which the lodge and the order require adepts to take when conducting their own affairs on the premises of the lodge and using the resources of the order. You have the exact wording of the proposal before you on the summonses. Soror Harcourt-Jones. You may put your motion."

Athena rose to her feet, took a deep breath and filled the room with her presence.

CHAPTER 18

Athena was not just annoyed, she was very, very angry. Furious. Gill knew it, even though she hardly spoke with her after the meeting. Mordacai knew it, because she snubbed him angrily on her way out of the building. Steve knew it, partly because he reasoned that she would hate being thwarted but mostly because she was enveloped in rage like a cloud. Even one not particularly sensitive to such things would have recognised that something had upset her.

Brainridge must have known. They had come in Athena's car and she had talked almost incessantly about the proposal and what she would do as Master of the Lodge. She was totally preoccupied with her plans and Isaac Brainridge had watched them at the very least put back, possibly broken.

Athena's car was a Porsche and, like most of her possessions, it was designed to reflect the persona she had adopted for the benefit of the world at large. She had some money of her own, inherited, but she enjoyed affluence and the good life, which was why she had an eye to Uncle Isaac's money as well. She did not enjoy working for her elegant lifestyle, which is not say she couldn't be efficient, suave and organised when it suited her needs. Tonight, however, she did not drive well. Her fury made her far too aggressive and a Porsche is not a car with which to be aggressive.

The drive home started badly. An Escort GTi skimmed by, too close and too fast, just as Athena was about to turn out of the gates onto the main road. She jammed her foot down, stopping so suddenly that she and her uncle almost went through the windscreen would have done so had their seat belts not been securely fastened.

"What was that?" Brainridge asked, surprised.

"Escort GTi," Athena answered through gritted teeth. "They're like hemorrhoids. Sooner or later every asshole gets one." Her lapse into profanity was elegantly done, but it showed her anger.

"Don't let him upset you, dear," Brainridge said mildly. It was not intended as a rebuke, but it didn't improve Athena's foul temper.

"I'm annoyed by the evenings events, not upset by the irresponsible driving of some psychopathic jerk," she snarled.

"What can you possibly find annoying about the meeting," said Brainridge innocently. "You almost won a secret ballot for Master of the Lodge, and there was a lot of support for your ... er ... extreme ... views in the meeting itself."

"What do you mean by 'extreme'?" Athena asked dangerously.

Brainridge looked so innocent he seemed not to have noticed the danger. What he said appeared at first to be irrelevant. "Someone I knew quite well - less than a friend, you understand, but I did know"

"Yes, yes."

"The man was an excellent sailor in small boats. Raced dinghies and so on and very good swimmer too. Had several life saving certificates and he's done quite well in competitions when he was younger too ..."

"Get to the point."

"He was sailing solo one day without a life jacket. Boom hit him on the head and knocked him into the water. Knocked him out at the same time."

"I don't see what that's got to do with anything."

"He drowned, my dear, in spite of being an expert sailor and an expert swimmer, because he wasn't wearing a life jacket. It doesn't matter how expert you are, or how experienced an adept you are, you still have to take reasonable precautions."

This was not what Athena wanted to hear, and she drove even more viciously, roaring past other vehicles, driven by those road users unwise enough to be out when she was around. "After all, you're wearing a seat belt as you sit there," he added.

"That's the law," she said, through gritted teeth again. "You wear a seat belt while you're driving."

Brainridge looked at the speedometer. The car was doing nearly ninety. "At seventy you drive a car," he observed. "At ninety one just aims a missile."

"I've not hit anything yet."

"I hope," Brainridge said mildly, "that you've not been aiming at anything."

Athena was kept only by the thought of Brainridge's supposed fortune and his undoubted age from venting her anger on him.

Brainridge reflected on the evening's events and his own remarks to his niece. Perhaps he had added to her annoyance a little and perhaps he hadn't - the fact that he pondered this at all suggested that possibly he did not know Athena as well as he thought, and that he was not as psychically perceptive as she thought him. Or it may have been that age was at last dulling his perceptions. In any event, he concluded that the events of the evening had been sufficient on their own to explain her fury.

In spite of the relatively narrow margin of the vote, to which Brainridge had drawn her attention, she had presented her proposal to a basically unsympathetic group of individuals. What she considered

weakness and restriction on her own freedom of action was generally held to be thoroughly sensible caution. The corollary of thinking something is 'sensible caution' would obviously be to consider its opposite 'stupid' or 'naive' recklessness. Athena would not particularly resent anyone considering her reckless, but the suggestion that she was stupid or naive? To imply such things was to provoke her wrath.

It should not be thought that she was quite without support. For one thing, she was an attractive and elegant woman, and the possibility of winning her favours was enough to influence a few male members of the lodge. Athena was also very articulate and persuasive, which was an additional strength to her case. Another consideration was that she had money and the poise and confidence it brings. In her case it also brought an unendearing arrogance, but money did help.

The vote had been lost, but not by so wide a margin. The vote on the proposition led to a vote of 'no confidence' and an accompanying ballot for Master of the Lodge. This latter election had been secret, which made for a truer reflection of Athena's support. Mordacai had been re-elected, but a less egocentric contender than Athena would have been mollified by the size of her own vote. Numerically it was not large, but the membership of the lodge was small. In terms of percentages, her vote was surprisingly good. Surprisingly, but not, as far as the lady herself was concerned, comfortably.

The Porsche made it back to Athena's detached house unscathed and she parked it in her garage. Brainridge made it back to the house tired, and went to bed. Athena made it back in a fury, and went straight to the drinks cabinet in her lounge, where she flung down the door with enough venom to rattle the contents, just short of that point on the Richter scale that would have broken something. She looked amongst the contents for a very stiff drink and poured herself three quarters of a tumbler of a rare and expensive twelve year old, matured Irish whiskey. She did not insult the quality of the whiskey by adding water, but showed her glass to the empty ice bucket, walked across to an armchair, taking a substantial swallow on the way, and flung herself down to fume about the way the evening had gone.

In bed Issac Brainridge was reflecting on the evening in general and his niece in particular. He concluded that she was very angry, although he still did not consider her anger justified. He thought that she would calm down in a day or two, but it could easily take her all of that. It might be better to just withdraw quietly and resume contact once she had 'cooled' a little. He would leave first thing in the morning and talk to her again at the end of the week.

Downstairs Athena finished the whisky. It did not appear to make her drunk, not visibly anyway. Her hand was still steady when she poured another. The drink, however, had not reduced her rage or mellowed her anger. She still fumed at her rejection by the lodge. She set that problem aside, without being in the least degree mollified, and turned to the two other questions which concerned her: Uncle Isaac's money and Uncle Isaac's electronic gadgetry.

Before the meeting she had not really had time to consider the invention, or whatever it was, but she was curious. What was it? Why was Gill Benderman 'testing' it? Why not her? Come to that, how was Gill Benderman testing it? More importantly, from her point of view, did it have any potential for obtaining either more money or more power? She had better make an effort to be nice in the morning and chat him up a bit. She completed a Shakespearian doctoring of the fates by finishing her second large whiskey and going to bed, leaving the drinks cabinet still open and her empty glass beside the bottle.

Isaac Brainridge woke early next morning, as the elderly often do. Sleep left him entirely, so he got up and listened. The house was quiet: Athena was still asleep or, at least, he assumed she must be, since there was no sound from her room. A housekeeper came around eight thirty, so that lady was unlikely to be here for over an hour. She did not live in and worked only until about two, doing cleaning, housework and preparing lunch before she left.

Brainridge dressed and potted around the bathroom then, as there was still no life stirring in the house, he went downstairs in search of a drink. In the kitchen he filled the electric kettle, switched it on and made himself a cup of coffee. There were three cartons of long life milk in the fridge, one of which was opened. He added milk, ignored the sugar and sat down with the coffee to consider.

Athena seemed to be asleep and she would probably wake up in the same foul temper in which she had gone to bed. Brainridge did not know very much about his niece's sleeping habits, but waking her up before she was ready might well make her black mood blacker. The prospect was not a cheering one. He decided that he would be best to stick to his decision made the previous evening - to leave early and contact her later in the week.

He glanced at the time on the kitchen wall clock and went in search of paper to leave a note. Next to the telephone seemed a good place to look and he found notepad and pen there, as he had hoped. He tore off a sheet and returned to the kitchen, where he sat at the breakfast bar to finish his drink and write the note.

Dear Athena,

I had to leave early, as I mentioned yesterday, and I did not like to disturb your sleep.

Thanks for your hospitality. I'll be in touch in a day or two. I may even need to visit York again before the week is out and, if I do come up, perhaps I can have the pleasure of your company at dinner.

Yours sincerely,

Uncle Isaac.

He considered that the suggestion of his undivided attention at a later date and the offer of dinner ought to 'draw the sting' from the worst of her temper. Athena, he considered was a dangerous young lady. She was very good looking, very persuasive, not without occult power and quite

without scruple. These were a potentially dangerous combination for anyone who chanced to cross her. She was also irresponsible where ordinary precautions were concerned, which made her an almost suicidal danger to herself as well.

It would not do to let her loose on the future with his telepathic time-travel machine. He was not sure how she could misuse it, but he had no doubt that she would try. Athena's karma was already in debit, and it would not be in her own best interests to allow her karmic debt to increase still further – to knowingly allow that would be unhelpful to his own karma.

He gathered his things together, left his note in a prominent place on the kitchen worktop, and slipped out of the front door. He put his few necessities in the back of the estate car with the electronic gadgetry, started the vehicle and reversed quietly out onto the road. Just as his car emerged from the gate, the housekeeper arrived.

"Good morning, Mrs. Mason," he said politely. "I wonder if you would be kind enough to do something for me."

"Morning Mr. Brainridge," she answered him cheerfully enough, thinking how this Uncle of her employer was always polite and gentlemanly. "If I can help, I will." She was quite willing to do any favour that would not provoke Athena.

"My niece is still asleep, so I left a note for her on the kitchen work top. I wonder if you would find it and take it up to her."

Delivering a note to Athena sounded harmless enough, as long as she didn't have to wake her to deliver it. "Yes, I'll find it and take it up, Mr. Brainridge," she said.

"Thank you," he said. "Good Morning Mrs. Mason." And he drove off.

There was nothing unusual about turning into a filling station and filling the tank of his car. Afterwards his behaviour was a little 'odd' or, at least, eccentric. He moved forward, out of the way of anyone using the petrol pump, and went into the shop. He paid for the petrol, at the same time buying a felt marker. He also begged two substantial, empty cardboard boxes destined for the rubbish bin.

These two boxes he carried to the rear of the station wagon and opened the hatch. He carefully packed all the electronics - the wires, terminals, boxes and so on - into the two boxes and folded down the flaps. Next he took the felt tipped marking pen and wrote on each box: "THE PROPERTY OF STEPHEN BENDERMAN" and the address of Steve & Gill's lock up shop in Micklegate, York.

When he had finished, he closed and locked the hatch and went in search of a telephone. Inside the store again, he dialled a number and left a brief message on his solicitor's answerphone. This done, he returned to the car and drove out of York in the general direction of the A1, on which he intended to drive south.

Mrs. Mason potted around. She collected the empty glass from the drinks cabinet, straightened the rows of bottles and closed it. Athena and her guest had been out all evening and, apart from Brainridge's coffee

cup, there was no other washing up. She put on the kettle and found the note. She heard the post drop through the letter box as she was making herself a cup of tea. She poured one for Athena, collected the post and took it with the tea and Brainridge's note up to Athena's room.

There was no answer to her knock, so she opened the door and went in. Athena was just stirring, so she put the mail and the cup at her bedside and went out.

Athena did not really have a hangover, though the previous day's events had given her a slight headache. She woke in no better frame of mind than she had gone to sleep. The thought of her humiliation - as she saw it - at the lodge roused her anger again, like poking to life a dormant fire. The new day added new fuel and her anger blazed. Time had most certainly not taken the edge of her ire. She had not mellowed. Her more controlled self, however, suggested that she had better cultivate Uncle Isaac. The question of what he had invented again popped up.

Athena sat up in bed. She took a sip of the tea and put down the cup to read her mail. At the top of the pile of post was the note from her Uncle Isaac. In fairness - or at least to make credible what followed - it must be remembered what she proposed to get over or around two defeats which had set back her own plans and schemes. She set much store by her decision to try and discover Uncle Isaac's secret and how she might use it. And by his money. Now he was gone. He was out of reach for several days. The note itself was innocent enough, but it was the last link in an unfortunate chain.

Athena thwarted was every bit as dangerous as the worst fears of those who had encountered her. The cloud of rage around her would have been visible to anyone remotely sensitive and nearly so to the most sceptical. And she hurled it at her departing Uncle.

CHAPTER 19

All day Gill was surrounded by a niggling sense of foreboding, which hung around her, like a cloud of pollution hangs over a city in windless weather. The feeling was vague and unidentifiable, and Athena's foul temper the night before might have been sufficient on its own to prompt it. Her time travels with Brainridge's electronic gadgetry might also have been responsible, but she didn't think so. It wasn't the baby, kicking with a friendly familiarity, she was certain, but the general aura of impending something-or-other made concentration more difficult than was usually the case.

It was mid-afternoon when the policeman called at the shop. Gill preferred to write early in the mornings, when she found the words flowed most freely. As a result Steve usually saw to breakfast, did odds and ends of housework, then opened up the shop around nine thirty. Gill generally stayed at her word processor until eleven o'clock or so, then she took her turn about the house and got lunch for one. At two they returned to the shop together. Much of the turnover of the enterprise came via mail order and it was in the afternoons that the bulk of this aspect of the work was done.

This daily routine was well established, disrupted somewhat by Gill's pregnancy, but still a predictable course of events. It meant that both were normally to be found in the shop each afternoon, as they were when the police officer arrived.

"Mr. Benderman?" the constable asked. He appeared young - no more than his early twenties - and seemed both new at the job and embarrassed by his immediate assignment.

"Yes," Steve answered, mildly curious.

"I'm not sure how to broach the matter," said the young policeman, prompting greater curiosity. "There was a serious accident on the M62 this morning. The driver is alive but unconscious. We checked the

registration details with the computer records, and found the car was registered to an Isaac Brainridge."

Gill instantly recognised this as the source of her general uneasiness. She was shocked but not really surprised. She experienced very much the emotions one has on hearing of the death of a relative who has reached great age and has become seriously ill - not in the least surprised but still enough of a shock for the symptoms to occur mildly. She couldn't see Steve's face, but he was less openly emotional anyway.

The policeman continued, "There was no actual identification on the driver, which is odd in itself, and apparently there was no answer when somebody tried the address shown on the registration entry."

"Where do I come in?" Steve asked.

"Well," said the policeman, "In the back of the vehicle there were two cardboard boxes marked 'The Property of Stephen Benderman' and bearing this address. There was the remote possibility that you were the driver of Mr. Brainridge's car. You might even have taken it without permission, though it was not reported stolen."

"I see your dilemma," said Steve.

"Not my dilemma, exactly," said the constable. "All I was supposed to do was check this address as tactfully as I could and look for you. The local police in Wakefield were not at all sure who the driver was." Steve nodded and Gill wondered about the name and address, and about what was in the boxes.

"Do you know this Mr. Brainridge?" the constable asked.

"Yes," Steve answered. "We were with him yesterday, more or less all day. He spent the night near York with his...." he looked at Gill.

"Great niece, I think," said Gill. "I think it was his niece's daughter. He's a lot older than he looks." She did not think it appropriate to mention how old. Besides, that was not relevant. "What hospital did you say he was in?"

"I didn't say, but I think it was one in Wakefield."

"We had better go and visit," said Gill. "He wasn't an old friend exactly, in fact we hadn't heard of him a week ago. I met him as part of a business relationship, through a friend and Mr. Brainridge had become a friend himself, I suppose."

"I could find out which hospital for you. If you go over to Wakefield, you could pick up those packages as well. Mind you, I don't know what sort of a state they'll be in. I understand it was quite a nasty crash." A thought seemed to occur to the police officer. "You say Mr. Brainridge stayed with his niece?"

Gill corrected him. "Great niece, I think," she said.

"Do you have an address? I don't think the West Yorkshire traffic branch found anything to indicate next of kin."

"Her name is Athena Harcourt-Jones," Steve told him. "I don't have an exact address, but she lives at Easingwold. Out on the Thirsk road."

"We could probably get an address for you, given a little time," Gill said, thinking that the Lodge Secretary would have a record. "We know her ourselves vaguely and I think I know someone who will have it."

"The station at Easingwold will probably know her. It's a small enough place."

"Come back to us if you need the address," Steve said.

"I will," said the policeman and turned to leave.

"You were going to check which hospital Mr. Brainridge is in," Gill said.

"So I was," he said. He stopped and spoke into his pocket radio. "498 to York control, over"

The voice on the radio sounded near and relatively undistorted. "York control. Go ahead 498."

"Enquiries we're doing for West Yorkshire at Wakefield, regarding the accident on the M62 this morning. Do we have information about which hospital the driver of the car is in? Over"

"One minute and I'll see whether we know." The radio went dead.

"I don't remember any mention of which hospital," the young constable said, just filling the silence whilst they waited. "It's West Yorkshire's enquiry really, not North Yorkshire's. We're just trying to help. We may have to ring Wakefield for you and ask."

The radio sprang back to life. "York control to 498, over."

The police officer pressed the 'speak' button and answered. "498. Over," he said.

"Driver is in the Intensive Care Ward at Pinderfields Hospital. Over"

"Pinderfields in the Intensive Care Ward. Got that. I've finished the enquiries and I'm returning to HQ. Out."

"Message timed at four fourteen."

By way of the A1 and the M62, Wakefield is no more than an hour and a quarter's unhurried drive. The shop was only about ten minute's walk from Gill and Steve's flat and normally they walked it. For one thing, parking in the centre of York is a problem and for another the exercise was useful and much cheaper than visiting a gym. It also allowed time for thought, which driving does not and modern living generally makes difficult. On this particular day, Steve walked home and fetched their car, so that they could make the drive immediately the shop closed.

At a filling station on the outskirts of York, Steve stopped for petrol and Gill bought some flowers. It was, by coincidence, the same filling station at which Brainridge had stopped that morning on his way through the city.

The sense of gloom, which had impinged on Gill's thought processes all day, had lifted partially with the arrival of the policeman and, seemingly, left completely when he did. Her remark to Steve as he climbed back into the car and fastened the seat belt was not, therefore, part of a general unease. "You know," she remarked, "I wasn't surprised to hear that Brainridge had an accident."

"No?"

"Shocked, but not surprised." Steve waited for her to continue. "I had a sort of uneasy feeling all day."

"I noticed you were quieter than usual."

"I wonder whether Athena was involved."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "How?" he asked.

"I've no idea. It's just that she was in such a foul temper last night that she could do anything."

"I can't see her crawling around underneath the car to loosen the wheelnuts or cut the brake pipes," Steve said, half seriously, half joking.

"I don't think I mean anything like that," Gill answered. "In fact I'm not sure what I do mean."

"Well," Steve remarked, "you could turn the psychic side of your attention to something potentially more serious for us."

"What's that?"

"If those boxes the policeman mentioned contain what I think they contain, Athena may not be very pleased about it. It may be a good idea to get our hands on them before she hears about it. And try to see that she doesn't hear," he added.

"Not in her present mood, anyway," Gill agreed.

Pinderfields is a large hospital, on one of the several roads between the motorways and Wakefield City Centre. The car park is vast, but Steve and Gill arrived before peak visiting hours. They threaded their way through the complex one-way system to a vacant spot and followed a signpost to the Intensive Care Ward.

There was a waiting room outside the ward itself. On the wall was an injunction to the effect that all visiting of patients in Intensive Care was entirely at the discretion of the medical staff. A nurse asked who they were visiting, enquired into their relationship with the patient, frowned at the remoteness of the connection, noted from his records that there was no record of next of kin and led them in.

The ward smelled of cleanliness and illness, of disinfectant and polish. Brainridge lay still and silent on the bed, covers drawn up to his chin, eyes closed and head swathed in bandages. He was surrounded by equipment monitoring every vital function. The steady beeping and the patterns on the screen of one of the monitors told the story of a regular heartbeat. There was another small screen displaying a number in red LED digits. That looked like his breathing rate and another indicated his temperature. The monitors said he was alive, but he did not stir.

When you visit someone in hospital there is often an uncomfortable silence. Once the patient has been given family news and told the visitor how he or she is feeling and thanked the wellwisher for whatever gift has been brought, there is often not much to say. When the patient is unconscious in intensive care, there is absolutely nothing to say. Steve and Gill gave the flowers to the nurse and asked about Brainridge and his condition.

The nurse was not able to say much that the monitors to which Brainridge was attached had not told them already. She didn't know anything about the accident and the hospital had little information about the patient. "I believe the police have some further information which is on it's way over to the hospital. I expect the doctor will have it shortly, but I don't know what it is," she said.

Steve looked at the notice over the bed. "Doctor in charge: Ms. Randall; Nurse in charge: Sister Eve Sanders. He wondered whether he was speaking to Sister Sanders. He also considered who was supposed to benefit from the reassurance given by the proffered information. The anxious relatives, perhaps. Reassurance would sometimes be vital for the next of kin.

There didn't seem much point in standing at the end of the bed simply looking at the unconscious Brainridge, generally getting in the way, so they thanked the nurse, promised to return and made their way back to the car.

"If we drive to the police station there may still be someone around who knows about the accident," Steve observed. "If we go to the police station first, then find somewhere nice to eat, we can still drive home in reasonable time."

Gill agreed.

Sergeant Wiley was getting near to the end of his shift, but he wasn't about to leave for a little while and seemed glad to be interrupted by Steve and Gill.

Sit down both of you," he said gesturing with one hand and trying simultaneously to stifle a yawn with the other. "Excuse me. Been a long day."

"I hope we're not keeping you," Gill said, noting the yawn.

"No," he said. "The day's not done yet." He was an older man, probably nearing retirement. He pulled himself together. "It's been a strange case all round," he began, taking a file from his 'pending' tray. "First off there didn't seem to be any identification at all. None on the man himself and none in the car. Not even an insurance certificate. That's why the officer on the scene ran the check on the registration details. Nottinghamshire boys couldn't get an answer from the address the computer gave us. Then we found your name and address on the boxes and wondered whether you were the driver."

"I see your problem," Steve said, to fill the silence left by another yawn.

"This afternoon we brought the car in ourselves and did a more thorough search. The back was folded down for the boxes. Under the folded seats we found a small briefcase. There wasn't a lot in that either, but it was marked 'In case of accident contact ... and a phone number'. I rang the number and it turned out to be a solicitor."

Sergeant Wiley paused. Steve was puzzled by the odd facial expression of the man, and Gill thought he might be coming to the interesting bit.

"The solicitor knew who Brainridge was all right and was about to go into details of the will. He sounded surprised when he learned that his client wasn't dead and said he would get the hospital to let him know when their patient did die. I was so surprised by his attitude that I almost forgot to ask about relatives."

"But you did ask," said Gill. It was part remark and part question.

"His only relative is," he glanced at the file, "Athena Harcourt-Jones. She's the daughter of his great niece." the Sergeant frowned. "When I remarked about that making him old, the solicitor claimed he was more than a hundred and thirty five. I didn't believe him, but I didn't know whether it was a joke. He said his client carried a birth certificate with him, so we searched the briefcase again and found it tucked into one of the pockets. The 13th of January 1870 he was born. I've sent it over to the hospital."

This information was pretty much in line with what Brainridge had hinted over lunch the day before, Gill recalled.

"How did the accident occur?" Steve asked. "Or don't you know?"

"We know pretty well," Sergeant Wiley said. "And that is yet another odd thing. A couple of unlikely coincidences. First he had a tyre blow out at the same time the bonnet flew up - we have witnesses to that. Then the hospital tells us he had a mild heart attack at about the same time."

"I think I'd probably have had a severe heart attack if the tyre had blown at the same time as the bonnet flew up, while I was on a motorway," observed Steve.

The Sergeant smiled and gave a snort that was probably a laugh. "Possibly," he admitted.

"Athena," Gill thought. She didn't voice her thoughts, but a heart attack, a blowout and the bonnet flying open, all at the same time?

"Whether the heart attack came first or last I wouldn't know," the policeman continued, "but he swerved onto the hard shoulder and hit the crash barrier. Then he bounced into the back of a motorway maintenance truck. He had slowed down a lot by then, but the front end of the car was pretty smashed up. He took some getting out of the wreck. I don't know whether the contents of your boxes were damaged. They look all right but they must have been thrown around."

"Thank you for the information," Gill said. "Can we be of any further help?"

"I don't think so, thanks. I'll get your boxes for you on the way out. You may as well take them with you." Steve was about to comment, but Gill caught his eye. "The solicitor confirmed it was in order," the sergeant added.

"You mean he knew about them?" Steve was surprised. Had Brainridge phoned his solicitor after leaving the shop the previous day. If so, why?

"He seemed to know all about it," the policeman said, and rose from his chair, yawning again.

CHAPTER 20

Sister Eve Sanders stood at the end of the bed, watching Ms. Randall and her visiting colleague. Dr. Mateos sounded American and, since she lectured at the University of Texas Medical Center in Houston, it was hardly surprising. There was also a slight trace of a non-English speaking accent that the nurse could not identify.

It was nearly time for Sister Sanders to be making the final checks of her patients before handing over to the nurse supervising the night shift. Doctors were more often in evidence in the Intensive Care ward than elsewhere in the hospital, but it was nevertheless late for an unpagged visit from any of the medical staff.

The outlook for the patient was unclear. He had received severe bruising and had been crushed inside the crumpled vehicle. He had broken several things and might have internal injuries yet to be uncovered. He had also suffered a mild heart attack. However, the greatest immediate concern was over his concussion. The X-Rays had shown no fracture of the skull, but he had received one hell of a bang on his head. According to the monitors, nothing of significance had changed and there was nothing to indicate why Ms. Randall should be showing such interest in the case. The sister was waiting because medical etiquette required it. She was listening from curiosity.

"I thought you'd be interested in this one, though it isn't your specialty," Pauline Randall was saying. "Take a look at this birth certificate the police sent over, then take a look at the patient."

Dr. Mateos took the certificate and examined it. She gave a low whistle. "Is this genuine?" she asked.

"The police seem to think so. They say his solicitor drew attention to his age."

Dr. Mateos handed the certificate back and stepped alongside Brainridge to examine him more closely. She turned back the covers part

way to reveal more of the subject of attention. Randall put the paper on the bed and joined her.

"He certainly doesn't look it," Dr. Mateos said. "If he was as old as that, what the hell was he doing loose behind the wheel of a car?"

Pauline Randall assumed the question was rhetorical and didn't answer. That was a good question though, but one primarily for the police. Whilst the two doctors were busy, Sister Sanders picked up the birth certificate herself and glanced at it curiously. Then she looked again more closely, not believing her first glance. She folded it and returned to the bed, thinking "God, that makes him over a hundred and thirty odd ... I don't believe it."

"He sure doesn't look his age," Dr. Mateos was repeating. "I have a colleague at Texas U. who would be real interested in this guy. It's a pity he won't get to see him."

"There's an outside chance that he will, I suppose," Randall said. "Well, let's get a snack in the canteen before we call it a night." She turned to the nurse. "I will be unavailable for the next hour or so and then I don't want calling unless it's an emergency. Page Doctor Asad if you have a problem."

With that the two doctors left and the Sister glanced at her watch. Time to make the rounds. She noticed Brainridge was running a slight temperature. Not quite a degree up, but it hadn't been higher than normal before. She made a note to watch it.

"The stuff in the breadcrumbs isn't really veal, I don't think," Ms. Randall remarked, "but it's quite eatable all the same."

"The food's generally not bad," Dr. Mateos agreed. She had a freshly made omelette with some salad. "Not brilliant, but okay for the price."

The canteen was almost empty and the choice was limited at this late hour. The two doctors sat at a table in the staff area. A couple of visitors were finishing their coffee and a nurse was having a quick meal of a sandwich, a yoghurt and an orange juice and reading a paper before beginning her shift.

"What did you mean 'an outside chance'?" Dr. Mateos asked, and Randall looked puzzled. "When you were talking about your long-lived patient."

"Oh that," Randall's face cleared. "The police told me that Brainridge's solicitor said his client wanted to leave his body to medical science to find out why he had lived so long. They mentioned it when I was pouring scorn on the idea that he could possibly be so old, but I don't think it was a joke."

"Medical science?"

"There may be some curiosity value in the matter, but I shouldn't think anyone would be that interested," Randall remarked. "Off hand I don't even know anyone who's researching into the subject."

"I know someone who'd be real interested."

Pauline Randall recalled her visitor's remark at the bedside. "Oh, yes. So you said."

"Ben is trying to isolate the gene responsible for how long we live. He wants to try and develop a 'longevity gene' and transpose it to a foetus."

"Ben?"

"Dr. Gomez. He'd really go for your what did you call him?"

"Brainridge."

"Your Mr. Brainridge."

Ms. Randall looked thoughtful. "Well," she said slowly. "I don't want to lose a patient, of course, but he is seriously ill. His skull isn't fractured, as far as we can tell, but he is very old and he's had a severe blow to his skull, as well as all the other things. If he dies and if we can keep him going on a life support machine, I suppose he could go over to Texas. Assuming Dr. Gomez really wants him."

"I'll talk to him tonight. They're six hours behind us." She glanced at her watch. "It's quarter past nine now, so it's quarter past three in Houston."

"You are keen, aren't you? Next time I go by Intensive Care I'll have them put an EEG on as well. If we can catch him brain dead and keep the vital functions going, your Dr. Gomez has a chance."

"You don't know just how keen Dr. Gomez is going to be."

"Well, don't forget that I hope to keep my patient alive," said Ms Randall, getting to her feet. "You make your phone call, I'm going to my office. I'm on call, but I've some reading and some sleeping to do if I'm not interrupted."

"Sure. I'll see you in the morning," Dr. Mateos answered, getting to her feet as well.

Dr. Mateos also went to her office, in a different wing. She picked up the telephone, dialled herself an outside line and then dialled the number of the Houston Medical Center. 'Let's see,' she muttered, '001 for the US and 713 for Houston ... ' She waited for the connection.

"Medical Center," a receptionist answered.

"Line 4062."

A phone rang three times before it was answered. "Ben Gomez speaking," said a male voice, "How can I help?" The speaker had an American accent, overlaying a foreign one, like that of Doctor Mateos, but more pronounced. The additional 'e' before the 's' in 'speaking' and the slight problem with timing of stressed and unstressed syllables gave him away as one whose mother tongue was Spanish.

"Hi Ben, it's Angelina. Have I got some interesting news for you."

"Good to hear from you Angelina. I'm missing you here."

"I'm missing you too, even though this exchange is interesting. Only another three weeks or so before I'm back with you."

"The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned."

"Me too. The break has cleared things for me. It's been enough for me to make up my mind. I can't wait to get back to Houston."

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear it. Now, what is this news you have?"

"There's a patient here. Birth certificate says he's about one thirty five. He's seriously ill and he's leaving his body to medical science to study why he's so old."

"How old again?"

"One hundred and thirty five this year."

There was a silence. Finally Dr. Gomez said, "That's old. What's he in for."

"The car he was driving was involved in a serious accident."

This time the silence was longer. Ben Gomez said very slowly, "He was **driving**."

"That's right. It's no joke. I've seen the certificate myself. The man does not look his age at all, but he's seriously ill."

"I'm still not sure I believe it," Ben said. "But even if it's true I'm not likely to get even a look in."

"Listen," Dr. Mateos said, confidentially and excitedly. "I have e-staked a claim for you. If he dies and if you can fund it, he will be sent to Houston for you." In her excitement she too was showing a more pronounced accent, a reflection of her Spanish American background."

"e-Straight up?"

"I'm not joking. The guy is very old and very ill, but we have to hope he recovers, it's not fair otherwise. All the same, Dr. Randall is going to order an EEG, so that, if there's a brain death, he can be kept on a life support machine until you can get hold of him."

"The guy's your patient. Of course you don't want to lose him. There's more excuse for me hoping I get my hands on him."

"That sounds callous."

"It does," Gomez agreed. "But I'm real excited by the prospect. I've been hoping for a really old subject for a long time. This could be my big chance."

"I'm excited for you too. How about the cost of transporting him?"

"I can get the funds to move the guy, if you can get a hold of him. Keep in touch on that one."

"I rather hoped," Angelina replied, "you wanted me to keep in touch anyway."

Ben's voice changed. "Of course I do. I'm just so impatient to realise some of the possibilities, that's all."

"Well, if you're talking about possibilities and dreams, here's another one."

"Yeah?"

"If you isolate a longevity gene and transfer it into a foetus, you can plant it in me. As long as you plant one the normal way first."

"Sounds like a pretty good offer," he said laughing.

"You will not get a better offer, I think," she answered him, rather coyly, and lapsed into Spanish for the remainder of the call.

Later that night, the duty sister noticed a rise in the patient's temperature and, puzzled, she had Dr. Asad paged.

The Intensive Care Ward was warm and the lighting brighter than it would have been elsewhere in the hospital at this hour. Dr. Asad yawned and tried to concentrate on Brainridge. The beeping of the heart monitor was steady, the numbers recording his breathing rate showed it a little fast but remarkably even. Only his temperature gave any cause for concern.

"You were right to call me," he said to the nurse. There didn't seem to be any visible cause. He took out an instrument like a pencil torch and pushed up one of Brainridge's eyelids to examine the pupil. "No dilation," he remarked. He stood up and yawned again.

"You'd better give him an antibiotic," he said. "just to be on the safe side. Try clindamycin, I think. Keep monitoring the temperature and if it rises any more, page Ms. Randall as well as me."

"Do you want me to take blood and urine samples for testing?" the nurse asked.

"Good God yes," he muttered. "I almost forgot. Tell you what," he added. "Put an EEG on him as well. I don't think it will tell us anything, but I'd like to know what's going on inside that head."

It was almost daylight when Ms Randall joined Dr. Asad at the bedside. The doctor stood a pace behind his superior, while the nurse stood waiting for instructions. The patient's temperature had risen steadily all night and was now alarmingly high.

"Sister first noticed the rise," Asad remarked. "And the temperature has risen considerably since then."

"Hmm," Randall said noncommittally. She was thinking that they were right to call her for once, though they had done everything appropriate. "I don't understand the problem."

She took Dr. Asad's torch and pushed an eyelid back to examine the pupil. "Normal." she said. "What antibiotic did you prescribe?"

"Clindamycin."

"And you took samples for testing first?"

"Sister saw to that."

"The results are not back from the lab yet," the nurse said.

"They wouldn't be back yet," Pauline Randall agreed. "Well I can't see anything to explain the hyper-pyrexia. No sign of trembling and the pupils seem normal." She peered at the EEG. "The EEG was a good idea, though I don't think it's going to tell us anything." She remembered her promise to Dr. Mateos and acknowledged to herself that the EEG would actually tell them one important fact. To the nurse she said, "Keep monitoring him every fifteen minutes or so and if there's any further rise I'll arrange an MRI scan in the morning. There's not really much else to do."

On the way back to her office, she dropped in to the room used temporarily by Angelina Mateos. The grey of early dawn was providing some light, but not enough. She turned on the light and looked around for something on which to leave a message. There was a scrap pad by the phone, given by some drug company as part of a sales promotion. The

competition between pharmaceutical companies for the sale of legal drugs is sometimes only marginally less intense than the competition between gangsters for the sale of illegal drugs. Less violent in method, of course, but often not much less intense.

Pauline Randall wrote:

"Dear Dr Mateos,

It looks as if you get your patient fairly soon. If Dr. Gomez is interested, tell him to start making arrangements.

Give me a call.

Pauline."

She left the note on the desk and drifted out, switching the light off again. She would try and get some more sleep before breakfast.

Athena had been trying to work off her rage in a night of physical passion. One of her admirers at the Lodge was well rewarded for his loyalty, though the lady herself regarded the matter as payment for future services, as far as she thought about anything beyond her immediate needs. In any event, by the time she finally got the solicitor's message and learned that her Uncle was in hospital after a road accident, it was fully daylight. She phoned the hospital and was informed of the deterioration of his condition. She thought it would be advisable to talk to the lawyer, as soon as it was a sufficiently reasonable hour for him to have arrived at his office. In the meantime, she went to the drinks cabinet and poured herself a stiff one.

Before Steve left for the shop that same morning, he started to take the electronic equipment from the boxes.

"What are you up to?" Gill asked.

I thought I'd hide this lot before Athena sees it."

She'll find out you've got it. Don't annoy that woman more than you have to."

What do you suggest we do about it, then?"

Tell her it doesn't work. It probably doesn't work now anyway. Lose a couple of bits. if she asks about the tests, I'll tell her I didn't make much progress."

Steve nodded and thought it over. "I could lose the terminals that you fastened to your forehead. They plug into the main box, so I could put them away."

"Do. I'm not afraid of meeting Athena head on if we have to, but I'd rather not. Disable the thing and then let her try it for herself if she wants to."

Steve took the two leads with the terminals on one end and put them to one side. Then he stuffed everything back into the boxes. "Hello!" he said. "There are some papers here." He unfolded them. "They look like circuit drawings."

"Lose those as well," Gill said.

"Hmm," he acknowledged thoughtfully. He put the papers in his inside pocket and the leads in a drawer. "I think I'll take the boxes back to the shop," he said. "We're more likely to see Athena there than here, if we do see her. She might be pipped off with everything to do with the Lodge."

"We'll see her," said Gill.

CHAPTER 21

Athena took the spare keys to her Uncle Isaac's flat from the drawer in the bureau and stood tossing them up and down in her hand. Her uncle had given her a set of keys 'in case of emergency'. This wasn't what you would really call an 'emergency', but judging by what the hospital had said, Uncle Isaac wouldn't be needing them in the immediate future. In fact, from what the ward sister had told her, he would probably not be needing them again.

A glance at her watch suggested that it was time for the solicitor to be in his office, so Athena put off any decision. She placed the keys on the bureau desk and went across to the telephone. For a moment or two she simply stood looking at the instrument. "Damn thing," she thought.

She had a formidable and persuasive presence. She was an elegant and good-looking woman: a telephone removed her presence, diluted her persuasiveness and screened her looks. She did not like it for situations demanding anything beyond the ordinary requirements of business and communication. She resolved to ask the solicitor for an appointment. She could meet with the man and give Uncle Isaac's flat the once over on the same trip. That decided, she picked up the phone.

The building in which Messrs. Wicklow and Wicklow had their offices was a late Regency or early Victoria one, originally a house, in a pleasant square not far from the city centre. The ornate iron railings were presumably post war, unless the owner had had remarkable connections in high places at the outbreak of war, but they looked genuinely as old as the property. The whole exterior was well painted and pointed. It looked 'cared for'.

Inside too, the offices were well maintained. Apart from the reception area, where the floor was light coloured polished wood, there were expanses of tasteful carpet. The decor was quiet and the receptionist polite, friendly and well groomed.

"Ah yes, Miss Harcourt-Jones," she said, "Mr. Wicklow is expecting you. You're just a little early, but I believe he is free at the

moment." She picked up the phone and spoke into it. "Miss Harcourt-Jones to see you, Mr Wicklow Very good, I'll send her up right away."

The woman put down the phone and looked up at Athena again. "Mr Wicklow will see you immediately. If you go up the stairs and turn right, his office is straight in front of you."

Athena thanked her and mounted the stairs. Being 'seen immediately' was good for her ego. She liked the place. "Efficient and tasteful," she thought. There was just the one door straight ahead of her when she turned at the top of the stairs. It was marked with a nameplate and was ajar. She knocked and entered.

"Come in and sit down," Mr Wicklow said gesturing genially. Athena was astonished, as usual hiding it well. The solicitor was a young man. It caught her completely by surprise, though it certainly pleased her. She had built up a picture of an elderly man, wizened and close to retirement. She had been so certain about the kind of legal representative her uncle would choose - and now she was no longer sure.

The young solicitor was a little above average height and slender. Not effeminate precisely, but lacking the build which would have gone with sport on the one hand or over indulgence on the other. He was dark and clean-shaven and he wore glasses. In a suit and a restrained tie he was conservatively dressed and looked the image of a family legal advisor - not a dynamic 'go-getter', but one to inspire quiet confidence.

"I was just going to have coffee," he said eyeing his visitor. "Will you join me?"

"I think I will, thank you," Athena replied. "I rushed straight here without stopping and a coffee would be really welcome."

Mr. Wicklow picked up the phone. "Make that two coffees please Mrs. Norris," he said, and replaced the receiver.

The puzzling question of her Uncle Isaac's choice of lawyer resolved itself almost immediately, once they started talking.

"Mr Brainridge had been with this firm quite a long time," Mr Wicklow said by way of opening. "The business has been in the family for several generations. My father was not a partner, but my grandfather was - in fact he still comes in three mornings a week, though he's long past retiring age. His father was a partner in his time and so was my great grandfather's father."

He paused and Athena guessed correctly some of what was coming.

"Mr Brainridge was originally my great grandfather's client. He defended him in court and kept him out of prison when he was a young man. A fraud charge based on some rather rash predictions. The predictions were correct and those who lost money did not believe in precognition." Mr Wicklow smiled slightly but he did not seem to think the events particularly amusing. He concluded, "There was no evidence of fraud and the case against Mr Brainridge collapsed. However, he has remained a client ever since, and that is a very long time."

At that moment the receptionist knocked and entered carrying a tray with the two cups of coffee, along with a sugar basin and a plate of

biscuits. She placed one cup on the desk near Athena and put the other in front of Wicklow. The sugar basin and the plate of biscuits she placed half way between them and then she left noiselessly, closing the door behind her.

"Sugar?" said Wicklow, helping himself and stirring carefully.

"No thank you," Athena answered. "I don't indulge myself." Not in the matter of sugar, she didn't.

"To return to the matter in hand," the lawyer said. "You did not come to hear about what is long past, but to talk about the present and your future prospects."

Athena had expected a struggle to get any sort of information from her uncle's solicitor, whilst he was still alive. She hadn't learned anything important yet, but the prospects seemed reasonable. She moved her chair so that the young man had a better view of her, then crossed her legs to show them off. She leaned back, made her presence as overwhelmingly friendly as she could, and smiled.

"Well," she said, "uncle is seriously ill after his accident, and I did want to know that his business undertakings and financial arrangements are in order."

The young man looked at the enchanting vision before him. "I would not normally discuss the affairs of a client with anyone else while he is still alive. I think Mr Brainridge has to be an exception, and I will explain why." The explanation appeared to be at least partly for his own benefit - a justification, perhaps, or the need to talk to someone about a very strange person. "My client is abnormally old. So old that neither West Yorkshire police nor the hospital believed his age when I first disclosed it." Athena was not surprised at that.

"It was a serious accident and he is critically ill as a result," Mr. Wicklow continued. "I have heard from the hospital that his condition has worsened overnight and he is not expected to recover or, indeed, to live long. I have to face the fact that, at his age, there is very little hope and you, I'm afraid, must accept the same prognosis."

Athena was not particularly upset about the accident. Indeed she guessed that, whether or not she had actually caused it, she had certainly precipitated it. She held Isaac Brainridge in mild contempt but she felt a certain limited affection for him, as one might for a relative's elderly dog, for example. Except that this dog had some curious bones buried somewhere.

"I presume he left instructions for his affairs," she said, "he never said much to me on the subject, not even regarding funeral arrangements and one doesn't like to ask."

"He made a will, if that's what you mean," Wicklow said. "He left his body to medical research into why he was so long lived and a certain amount of money for that research. He made a few specific bequests to specific people and organisations, such as Planetwatch for example, but you are his principal beneficiary."

Athena was stunned about the medical research. 'Old fool,' she thought. 'Why not just get on with it and die? Why search for a kind of

immortality?' It occurred to her that this would save her the trouble of making funeral arrangements.

She wondered next about Planetwatch. Why on earth would Uncle Isaac want to leave any money to them. She hoped he hadn't wasted too much of 'her' money on 'irrelevant' projects. She did not, however, voice her concern. That would have been less than diplomatic. Athena couldn't give a damn about diplomacy for its own sake, but her uncle wasn't dead yet.

"Mr. Brainridge had a substantial library of books, I believe, some of them rare and valuable. He willed them to you. I cannot say 'left them', because he hasn't 'left' anything yet. I will obtain the key to his flat from the hospital, if and when he is pronounced dead, and you can arrange to collect them. The rest of his effects will be part of his estate."

Athena did not offer the spare set of keys she was carrying. A first look at his flat might be very useful, and she intended to call there as soon as she had left the solicitor's office and had a meal.

She put the really important question as casually as she could. She let her skirt ride up her legs a little, leaned forward confidentially and smiled. "How much is my Uncle worth?" she asked.

The solicitor should not have answered the question, but Athena was really trying, and she was very hard to resist. "There are shares and other investments to be cashed," he said, enjoying the attentions of an elegant lady, "but I think, once everything is realised and the specific bequests made, you should receive several hundred thousand pounds. Perhaps close to a million"

Athena leaned back again, well pleased. "Did he mention a device - something electronic - he was working on?" she asked.

"I don't think so," the solicitor answered, thinking about it.

"He didn't leave it - didn't mention it going to anyone else?" It was too recent a development, she thought, so he wouldn't have mentioned it in the will. "I'm talking about something developed over the last few months," she added

"The only thing he mentioned recently was a couple of boxes for Stephen Benderman. He said he wasn't bequeathing them to anyone because they weren't his. Very odd phone call really, because it implied that he knew he was going to have the accident. He rang up yesterday morning, about an hour before the crash."

"Perhaps he wasn't feeling well. He was old. Maybe he just felt that he might not make it home." Athena had a shrewd idea what was in those boxes, and she wasn't pleased. At the moment 'several hundred thousand pounds' and a certain degree of puzzlement about why Steve should have been singled out, held her back from being angry again. Temporarily.

"You might be right," Mr. Wicklow said, "but I had a very unusual client and I haven't forgotten that fraud case last century. That seems to have been precognition of a sort."

The flat smelled faintly of flowers, due either to a particularly fragrant pot pourri in the bathroom - the door was open - or to one of those carpet deodorizers you sprinkle down then vacuum up. A woman came in to clean three mornings a week. She was not a home help. She recalled that Uncle Isaac had been rather scornful of them. "They are not allowed to climb on things, to hang curtains or change light bulbs, which is what most reasonably fit old people need. They're only allowed to do the things you can do yourself."

His was a private arrangement. Not that he 'acted his age' any more than he looked his age. 'Act your age' carries the implied slur that the one addressed is behaving like a young child. Uncle Isaac was quite fit enough to hang his own curtains or change his own light bulbs. His domestic help was hired simply to allow him more free time, and because he had always been a fastidiously tidy person.

Athena was pretty certain that, whatever the electronic gadgetry was supposed to do, it had been in those boxes handed over to Steve. What it was, she had no idea, but there might be clues amongst his papers. Why it had gone to Steve was also a mystery.

The solicitor had confirmed that Uncle Isaac's library was coming to her, and it was worth a lot of money. He had been a discerning collector, limiting himself to rare books on occult and related philosophical subjects. She didn't want to turn her bequest into cash: some of the books really were interesting and desirable acquisitions. She couldn't resist a quick look, even though this was a deviation from her main objective.

An early edition a Malefus Malifacorum - seventeenth century, perhaps - and in remarkable condition, must be worth tens of thousands by itself, and there was a contemporary edition of John Dee's conversations with spirits. There were others almost equally dramatic. She had seen the books often enough, but thinking of them as hers made her much more aware of their value.

She tore herself from the books and started to search for any clue to the nature of the invention. She went through the bureau drawers, one by one, disturbing nothing but taking a general inventory in her mind while she searched. Nothing. She went into the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards and drawers. She did not expect to find anything of significance there, so she was not disappointed, but discovered nothing more than that Uncle Isaac was a tidy man, and she knew that anyway.

Frustrated, Athena sat down for a moment to consider. There was no indication of any kind that the thing - whatever it was - had ever existed. She supposed that the plans must be inside Brainridge's head, and anything there looked gone. The boxes given to Steve probably contained the only prototype, whatever it was. There was no certainty that there was anything worth further trouble, but Uncle Isaac had been mysterious and Athena was curious. There seemed no alternative but a direct approach to Steve.

She glanced at her watch. Even if I leave now and hurry, the shop will be closed before I get there. I'll have to visit him first thing in the

morning. I'll ring him tonight and arrange to drop in while Gill isn't around. He's easier to handle than her. She glanced at her watch again.

"I think I'll just phone the hospital again."

She got up and took the mobile phone from the bureau. She switched it on, checked the number in her diary and pressed out the digits.

"He's alive, but still unconscious," Sister Sanders said. "He's in critical condition and his condition is still deteriorating, I'm afraid."

The nurse looked across to the bed where Ms. Randall, Dr. Asad and Dr. Mateos were standing. She couldn't hear them from here, but she knew what they had been saying before the telephone rang.

"He can't last long with a temperature like that. Even the ventilator hasn't slowed his breathing down that much. Tell your Dr. Gomez to get a move on Angelina."

Dr. Mateos had nodded and the Registrar had turned to her junior. "Dr. Asad, as soon as the equipment arrives from the private clinic I want him transferred to it. The nurse will let you know when it gets here. He doesn't leave here until he's clinically dead, but there's no reason why we shouldn't free up an intensive care bed. We're short enough of them as it is."

"I'll phone tomorrow," Athena said after a pause.

"Yes do that," Sister Sanders responded sympathetically. "We'll be in touch if there's any change."

By the time she had switched off the mobile phone and returned it to the bureau, she was already reconsidering a direct approach to Steve. As long as Gill was not around, she thought she could handle him, and he seemed to be on his own most mornings. However, if anything went wrong, there would be no fall back position. At present he wasn't aware of her interest. She went carefully over her visit to the shop two days ago. She had showed no interest then. Possibly a direct approach should be a last resort.

When she slipped the Porsche back onto the motorway she was still considering where the boxes were likely to be and whether she could get her hands on them without being noticed

CHAPTER 22

While Athena was speculating on what Uncle Isaac's electronic 'thing' might do, Steve was investigating the question of whether, after the crash and the severe jolting it had received, it still did anything at all.

To the rear of the shop was the room in which Gill's experiments in telepathic time travel had been conducted. This room, which went the whole width of the building, was part stockroom, part kitchen and part small living room. In one wall was the arch communicating with the public area of the shop. In the opposite wall were a window and another arch. The window overlooked a small yard, accessed by a door in the narrower, rearmost room. This smaller room was the 'post room' and was used for packing and dispatching the mail orders which such a major part of the business. Besides the back door it had a window, also overlooking the yard. It was thus, though narrower than the storeroom cum kitchen, somewhat lighter and brighter.

This post room was functionally furnished with a large table to work on and wall racks containing the necessities. At present the table was a litter of the two boxes and their contents, along with Brainridge's drawings and plans. Steve stood surveying the jumble, tracing the various circuits, matching them with the drawings and trying to understand them not, it should be said, with a high degree of success. Gill appeared in the doorway.

"I thought it was taking you a long time to put the glass in the window," she remarked.

"What? Oh the glass. Yes I finished that."

"And cleared up?" she asked, eyeing the tin and the putty knife.

Steve looked up from the drawing he had been examining and followed her gaze. "Well, I cleared up the mess, anyway," he agreed. "I think I understand the different parts of this," he said, indicating the table and the bits strewn across it, "but I just don't understand why any of it does what it does."

"Does it still 'do' what it 'did' before the crash?"

"No idea. I think the only way to be sure would be to try it. All I can say is that most of it doesn't look damaged."

"What about the two wires you left at home?"

"That," Steve said, "is the one bit I think I do understand. You remember you were able to move in and out of other people's heads and see things from their point of view?"

"Yes."

"That would mean you had to think about it. That suggests that your thoughts had to be read, by something which could pick up your brain waves, like a terminal on one of those things they use to measure the brain patterns of people with epilepsy."

"An encephalograph?" Gill ruminated. "That's very astute of you, but I do see what you mean. Without those wires you wouldn't have any control over what you saw, once it was away and happening."

Steve started to pack the things away in the two boxes. "That's enough for one day," he said. "We can take the things home," he added, indicating the boxes."

"Do you think you could build another of those whatsits - those telepathic time machine things - from the plans?" She gestured vaguely at the table.

Steve looked uncertain. "It's very involved circuitry, but the plans are clear and detailed." He paused, considering it. At length he said, "Probably I could."

"Then leave the boxes prominently on the table."

"Why?"

"I think that you-know-who will try to help herself. If she asks directly about them we could lie about the gadget and even let her try it herself, minus the terminals. Something tells me she won't ask us unless an attempt to steal the boxes doesn't work."

Steve did know 'who', and he could see that stealing the boxes would appeal to her. She resented being beholden to anybody for anything, and would feel she owed them something if they let her try it. Logically, he didn't really think she would steal it, but she might. "Are you trying to make it easy for her?" he asked.

"Depends what you mean by easy." Gill's expression was one of sly amusement. "First do something which will disable the thing, then help me create 'Confi'."

"Confi?"

"I can't create a guardian, that would involve too many violent and negative thoughts and too much ill will. In the first place I just can't hate enough. In the second I don't want all that adverse karma. On the other hand, Confi loves people, or he will do. He really wants the best for everybody, including Athena."

Steve was puzzled. "Who or what is Confi?" he asked.

"He will be, rather than is, a very friendly octopussy cat, with a pink body, nine tentacles, and the face of a really friendly moggie," she

answered. "'Confi' is short for 'confusion'. He will really mean well. He's going to be such a loving, helpful little thought form."

The theory of a thought form is a very simple one, though occult. Every thought, however fleeting has a subjective existence for the thinker - it lasts as long as he or she thinks it: an image or a picture in the imagination exists for the one who conceives it. If a thought - hatred or love or whatever - is really dwelt upon, it begins to have an existence beyond the thinker. It can lead to murder, or suicide or acts of heroism. This thought affects one's karma, and begins eventually to have an objective existence: it can be seen by others.

In the infamous 'Order of the Golden Dawn' of the turn of the century, it is said, each member was required, before passing to the degree of adept, to deliberately create a 'thought form'. This image had to be sufficiently objective and have an existence of sufficient clarity that it could be seen by all the other adepts.

True or not, Athena would certainly believe this theory and would, moreover, have no problems such as Gill had voiced, in creating a guardian or some other, even more negative or destructive vehicle for her ends. Steve's puzzled expression began to fade. The penny was beginning to drop.

"Oh," he said, "And can you have an octopussy with nine legs.

"All right, a 'novopussy' if you like," Gill said. "But I still prefer 'octopussy'."

"The trouble with a thought form is that she'll just do a banishing ritual and that will be that. She'll be rid of it."

"A cat has nine lives. She'll have to banish it nine times." Gill answered with the same amused expression on her face. "Besides, I don't mean the thing to stop her, just to make her so sick of the whole business that she'll give up, especially when it doesn't work anyway."

"Okay," Steve agreed, though he was sceptical about the possibility of Athena giving up easily. "She might lose interest if she thinks she won."

"Empiric," Gill said, laughing. "You don't like her, do you?"

Steve grinned. "She's all right as long as she gets her own way and nobody crosses her. What the world really needs is Anehta."

It was Gill's turn to be puzzled. "Anehta?" she said.

"The reverse of Athena. The other side of her. Generous, caring, loving ..."

"The sort of person who would like an octopussy cat as a pet? Funny thing is, Mordacai said much the same thing."

"Mordacai?"

"Mordacai. I discussed it with him on the phone a little while ago."

"That woman is going to do something really destructive sooner or later if someone - or something - doesn't interfere. Maybe Mordacai can stop her. With Confi's help, of course," he added.

"Confi won't stop her, but he may slow her down a bit."

"Steve grinned even more broadly. "Okay, when do we create your nine legged octopussy cat? And Athena's opposite as well?"

"In about ten minutes time, when the shop closes and Mordacai arrives. Now, what can you do to disable the time machine"

Steve was about to argue that it wasn't a time machine, when he realised that Gill knew that, so he didn't bother. "I don't know that I need 'do' anything to disable it," he said. "You know the little knob of the front of the mask where you adjust the year to which you travel?"

"Yes."

"The only outwards sign of crash damage I could find is that knob. It's broken off and the adjuster jammed."

"So you can go somewhere, but you've no control over where?"

"And no control over anything when you arrive, Yes. I don't think our friend will be persistent enough to tease anything useful out of it."

"No," Gill agreed, "Especially not with Confi to help her. I'll go and shut up shop and wait for Mordacai while you finish tidying up. Then we'll create our helpful little character." She disappeared into the front of the shop.

Gill, Steve and Mordacai stood around the table in their robes of the order, like medieval monks, as they looked at the lodge meeting. Before them on the table were the two boxes, nine scented candles of six different colours and scents, an incense burner with charcoal glowing red and nine packets of different incenses. There was also a child's kazoo, one of those curled up things with a feather on the end, that shoot out with a whistle when you blow into them and a couple of party poppers, left over from something or other.

Are you sure the kazoo and the party poppers belong in a ritual like this?" Steve asked. "It doesn't seem serious or imposing enough."

"You misunderstand," Mordacai answered. "The ritual is deadly serious, but the thing we want to create is not."

Gill threw some incense on the burner, picked up the kazoo and marched round the table, to an accompaniment of doubtful musical quality. Steve and Mordacai marched round it in the same direction until they stood at the opposite ends. Then Gill lit the first candle.

"Start with a tentacle," said Mordacai, "all nice and yellow and well meaning. Close your eyes and see it clearly."

Gill picked up the party squeaker, threw the kazoo to Steve and the trio marched round the table again.

They stopped and Mordacai resumed his monologue. "Now," he said, "imagine a pink, furry body with the face of a friendly pussy cat on the end of the one tentacle."

Gill lit a second candle and threw a different incense onto the charcoal. In the rising smoke one could almost have seen the creature.

"Make it radiate love," said Mordacai. "A benign love for everyone. Make it gentle but stupid. Helpful but completely disorganised."

Each of them closed their eyes and concentrated on the form in imagination until, gradually, it took shape. Each time they marched around

the table and added another candle, they visualised one more of the nine tentacles: a range of different colours and lengths. The creature was smiling and loving. It rubbed up against one and purred, just like a large, contented, amiable cat.

When the creature was complete, they concentrated on its nature. "March round the table anti-clockwise," Mordacai instructed, and set off clockwise himself.

The three marched round and round the table, in opposite directions, bumping into each other and frequently staggering and laughing. Gill was making, all the while, the most awful noises with the squeaker, while Steve played nursery rhymes on the kazoo and Confi turned excitedly with them, half hidden by the smoke of incense, but objectively real nonetheless.

At Mordacai's command they stopped while Gill shovelled even more incense on the burner, so that smoke rose like fog. Then they marched again, making themselves thoroughly giddy and thoroughly silly with all the antics. At the climax, Gill and Steve fired off the two party poppers and Confi purred and clapped two of his tentacles in pleasure. What a jolly party! What a happy, not so little, octopussy cat.

When it was over, Gill went to lie down for a while on the settee in the living area, while Mordacai sat there, still in his robes, and Steve put the kettle on. While it heated, he cleared the table. All the electronics he returned to Brainridge's boxes, leaving the two boxes in plain view on the table. The rest of their equipment Steve cleared away, though he left the streamers fired from the party poppers decorating the table. Then he went back into the living room to make the drinks.

Gill lay on the couch, Confi was curled up contentedly at her feet, pink and furry, his tentacles curled out of the way, except for one green one, laid protectively across Gill's pregnant stomach.

Steve stuffed all the plans and drawings into an inside pocket of his jacket, hanging by the back door and returned to pour the water.

"That should slow her down," Gill said. "I'm beginning to feel better already" She sat up, dislodging Confi a little, and sipped her tea. The octopussy floated onto the settee and sat beside her.

"The idea was a good one," Mordacai remarked reflectively. "Many who dabble in the occult take themselves far too seriously, and sometimes incur a karmic debt, just to maintain their dignity. Nothing we have done tonight will do harm to anyone, but it may halt an evil."

"As I said before," said Gill, "Confi alone won't stop Athena, but he may slow her down."

"Confi needs an owner," Mordacai observed. "The creation of Athena's exact opposite might be interesting."

Gill yawned. "Perhaps we had better think about Anehta," she said, "She would look just like Athena. Her doppelganger, but she wouldn't be the same. Another thing, Athena will get rid of her more easily than Confi, so she isn't worth as much effort."

"That is true," said Mordacai, "but we must still make sure she looks identical and that others can see her." To Steve he added, "On this occasion we can be much more solemn and serious."

He rose to his feet again, and so did Gill and Steve.

To create Anetha they stood again around the table. They visualised Athena: dark hair framing a handsome, elegant face with dark eyes; slim but shapely build - physically just like her. There the similarity between Athena and Anehta ended. Where one gave no thought to anyone but herself, the doppelganger was a martyr and put the needs of others first. Where Athena was selfish and grasping, Anehta was generous. Where Athena was decadent and amoral, Anehta was prim and puritanical - and she would have no hesitation in making her opinions known. In short, as Gill observed later, she was Athena's conscience.

"And she'll have her pet to help," Steve added. "We must introduce them. Anehta meet Confi. Confi, this is your friend Anehta. Athena is your friend as well." Mordacai looked amused, but Confi purred.

"Right. I've had enough in my condition. I know it's my turn to cook, but you can make dinner for Mordacai and me tonight."

"That sounds like an excuse," Steve said. "You look all right to me."

"I am and it is, but I don't feel inspired, after that little lot, and we have a guest. Remember that once, in the dim and distant, you were a professional chef."

This was nearly, but not quite an accurate statement. However, it was near enough, so Steve decided not to argue. "All right," he agreed.

As it was they were late leaving the shop, and only missed the visit from Athena by half an hour. That lady had waited what she thought was long enough to make sure the shop was empty, before parking the Porsche just outside the walls and walking through into Micklegate on foot. The back yard of the shop opened via a gate into a back alley, not really wide enough for vehicles. There was just about room for a car or small van, but the alley ran to a dead end by the walled graveyard of an ancient and, supposedly, haunted church. There was, therefore, no room to turn.

Athena walked on the far side of the street, to a point opposite the shop and made sure that it was closed and shut up. She then walked back, crossed over Micklegate and cut through a walkway between two buildings which led into the alley. She counted the gates along the alley until she came to the one she wanted, and tried it. To her surprise it wasn't locked. She opened it and went into the yard.

There was a door into an empty shed, another into an outside toilet and the one into the 'post room'. This last door was firmly locked, of course. Athena peered in through the window. She could see two cardboard boxes on the table. If those were the two boxes her uncle had given Steve, she was in luck. She turned to go, noticing that someone had fitted a new window pane a short time ago and that the putty was not fully hardened.

She closed the gate behind her and walked briskly out of the alley to make a phone call to the young man she had been entertaining in bed recently.

She had not glanced through the window of the other room, or she might have seen herself, sitting on the settee, stroking a large, furry, pink octopussy cat.

CHAPTER 23

Athena was wearing a dark blue, figure hugging jumper and matching tight fitting trousers. The colour scheme was intended to make her less noticeable in a poor light and it was true that she could merge more easily into the shadow dressed like she was, but anyone who did see her would certainly have noted such an attractive and elegant burglar. Her accomplice, driving a BMW was also wearing dark clothes.

They parked the BMW to the rear of the ancient church, mentioned earlier, close to the churchyard entrance. Athena pushed open the gate of the churchyard and entered, her accomplice following and closing it behind them. Athena then led the way across the churchyard, through the long and untidy grass between the graves, to the wall at the end of the alley.

"Watch it," she whispered to her companion, "The ground is a bit higher on this side of the wall than the other."

"I hope nobody sees us," he whispered back. "This a bit public, but not the place the public usually wanders around after dark."

"It's all right, Tony," she muttered, as a car drove by on Micklegate itself, headlights reflecting off some of the tombstones on that side. "This place has the reputation of being haunted."

The man glanced uneasily around him at the graveyard and then followed Athena over the wall.

The gate into the yard behind the shop was unlocked as before, and Athena closed it before switching on her torch. "The glass was only put in the window this afternoon," she said. "We'll just dig out the putty and take it out again."

The glass was easily removed and placed to one side.

"Give me a leg up Tony," she whispered and, with a little help, she scrambled through the window and into the post room. The beam of her torch flitted around the near dark room. Only a little starlight and the general background glow of York shone through the glassless window. The

light of her torch fell upon the two boxes, still plainly on the table, as she had seen through the window in daylight. She opened one and shone her light inside. Wires and circuitry. It was a box of the sort of thing she had seen on the floor of Uncle Isaac's flat, and was almost certainly what she was looking for.

"Take these, Tony," she said in a low voice." She passed the unopened box through the window, a piece of streamer sticking to it.

"Have they been having a party?"

Athena had not really noticed and was still taking very little notice of anything but the job in hand. "Hang on, there's two boxes," she hissed.

As Athena turned back and folded the other box shut, she was aware of a cat purring, just below the level of consciousness. She couldn't recall having seen a cat here, but assumed there must be one, without even being aware of the thought. She handed the second package out of the window. "Here's the other one," she said. "The key's in the lock, so I'll come out of the door," she added.

The key turned easily, the bolt slid back and the she went out through the door, leaving it ajar. "Just a minute," she whispered, and disappeared into the outside toilet to heed the call of nature.

A green tentacle pushed against the open back door and slammed it shut.

"Must be a draught," Tony thought in passing, while a blue tentacle turned the lock and two yellow ones slid the bolts home.

"I hope you're going to put that glass back," Anehta said.

Tony looked. As far as he could tell it was Athena, but it wasn't the sort of thing that normally concerned her. "No putty," he said. While he was speaking, a lilac tentacle had deposited the tin and the putty knife on the window ledge. Then Confi floated out of the range of vision. Anehta pointed.

Tony shrugged at this strange woman's whim and picked up the sheet of glass.

"There'll be fingerprints all over it," he remarked.

"Someone might break in if we just leave it open."

"They'll know someone broke in," Tony pointed out, "as soon as they discover whatever it was you took has gone."

"Worry about that later," the apparition said. It picked up the boxes and walked out of the yard. Tony had started on the second side of the window when Athena returned.

"What the hell are you doing," she asked.

"I'm going as fast as I can," he said irritably, assuming that she was complaining. How quick a worker did the bloody woman think he was? He was no glazier. Athena bent to pick up the boxes.

"Where are the boxes?"

"You took them to the car," Tony answered, realising as he said it that she hadn't. But she had. How could she have done, if she was in the toilet. How could she ask him to fit the window if... He was confused. He dropped the putty knife and ran to the gate.

Anehta was crossing the churchyard. He couldn't see her with any clarity, but he could see movement: it was either Athena or Athena or ... He ran to the wall and started to scramble over, wondering if the haunted churchyard could be connected in some way.

Athena followed, but couldn't quite make it over the wall, because, as she had pointed out herself, the drop was greater on this side. She gripped the top of the wall and tried to pull herself up, digging her toes into cracks in the rough, stone wall. She was beginning to slip back, when a green tentacle pushed her foot up. Athena stopped slipping back and managed to get one leg over and, with a struggle, to sit in safety on the wall itself.

"Thanks," she whispered to Tony. Then gulped slightly when she realised that her accomplice was already several yards ahead and disappearing in the darkness. Athena was not at all troubled by the thought of ghosts, which are insubstantial creatures anyway, but she was puzzled. If Tony hadn't helped, who had? She looked around. Confi was already out of sight. He had gone back to close the gate, and push home the bolt that Steve had left off.

When Tony came through the churchyard gate, Anehta was standing by the car holding the boxes. "It took you long enough," the doppelganger said.

Tony unlocked the car and let in Anehta with the boxes, then he climbed in himself, started the car and drove off at speed. As he raced off, Athena emerged from the gate and stood for a moment, fuming by the kerb side.

"Pratt!" she snarled. "Psychogenetic son of a psychotic psychopath! He's either scared and unreliable or a double crossing bastard." She strode to a phone box, furious, to ring for a taxi, followed by a kind, well-meaning, helpful, stupid, muddled octopussy cat.

Tony, on the other hand, had Anehta for a passenger. She sat bolt upright in his car, so tense that it could be felt. "Don't drive so fast," the apparition said.

"Relax. Have a cigarette," Tony said and took a packet from his jacket pocket.

"I don't smoke," Anehta snapped primly, and smoothed her skirt. Tony wondered when she'd changed. Athena certainly smoked. The car ashtray held three butt ends for which she had been responsible on the way here - or there, since they were now somewhere else. On other the hand, common sense dictated that you didn't argue with Athena, so he didn't.

"We'll soon be home in bed," he said placatingly.

"Not in the same bed, if you make love like you drive," the thought form said. Tony thought about the lady's favours and slowed down. She was certainly not herself tonight.

"That light is red," Anehta shrieked, reaching her foot over and trying to jam it on the brake. The car lurched to a stop. Tony was first furious then greatly relieved as he saw a police car edge out of the side road.

The BMW was at a slight angle but behind the white line. The police car turned onto the main road ahead of them, driving at pretty much the speed limit. The light turned green and he was presented with a dilemma. Should he keep within the speed limit and attract the attention of the police because he was following the rules of the road too exactly to be entirely innocent? Or should he act more naturally and incur their attention because he was exceeding the limit? He settled for a steady thirty five or thirty seven miles an hour - a little above the limit - and the thought form next to him relaxed a little.

"Good job you noticed that police car or I'd have been nicked."

"I didn't see it," Anehta said.

"Then why...."

"The light was red."

Tony looked to see whether Athena was joking, but the thought form had a straight face.

The police car's blue light started flashing and it pulled over. Tony sighed and pulled over as well, pressing the window winder as the policeman approached.

"Good morning, sir," the Constable said politely.

Tony waited.

"May I see your license and insurance certificate, sir?"

Tony produced them and the policeman looked them over.

"These are in order, sir. Would you mind telling me where you're going?"

"Home, officer," Tony answered. "We've been out for the evening and we're almost home."

The Constable glanced at the address on the driving license again. "So you are," he said. His colleague shone a torch on the tax disk and then on each of the tyres. "Been doing anything interesting?" the policeman asked conversationally.

"We've been doing some burglary, officer," Anehta said, leaning across. "We broke into a house and stole these boxes. Would you like to see them?"

Tony, not by nature designed as a liar and a crook, was speechless, but the policeman thought the apparition was joking. It - she - smiled so sweetly that he didn't believe there had been a crime.

"Very droll," he said. "Good night, sir. Madam."

The two policemen walked back to the police car together and got in. Tony pulled past the stationary vehicle and drove homewards with a sigh of relief. He was thinking that his passenger had not looked as if she was joking.

The delay with the policeman meant that Athena's taxi arrived only moments after Tony's car. He and Anehta got out of the car and were about to enter the front door, which he was opening as Athena strode up the short gravel drive. She saw her alter ego with the two boxes in the hall light, and guessed what had happened, or most of it.

Tony saw her coming and was instantly puzzled at the sight of the two women. They looked identical. Anehta saw her too. "Oh-oh. Trouble,"

she said. "Now Athena, don't do anything hasty. You know what they say - 'act in haste, repent at leisure'," she added anxiously as the angry woman followed them into the living room.

"Keep it quiet," said Tony. There are two other flats in this house and I don't want to disturb anybody."

"No indeed," Anehta agreed primly.

Athena stood facing her double and scowling.

"I hope you're not going to do something you'll regret later."

"I never regret anything later," Athena snarled dangerously. "Give me those bloody boxes, I don't want them harmed when I deal with you."

As Gill had predicted, Anehta was quickly disposed of. The banishing ritual did not do any harm to Confi, but he gave up trying to get into the house and curled up in the back of Athena's car and went to sleep, as cats are wont to do when faced with what a human might consider a boring wait.

In fact Athena did not stay that long in the house. Just long enough to keep Tony happy and no more, before she emerged with her precious cardboard boxes and climbed into the Porsche. Confi yawned prodigiously and eyed her carefully from the rear seat. The house, not the woman had been astrally cleared by the banishing ritual but, like the smell of cigarette smoke, the atmosphere clings to those who have been in it.

The lady was curious about her hard gained gear, whatever it did, and meant to find out. In her hurry she drove fast. As the Porsche roared through the darkness, Confi studied the speedometer and slowly decided that forty miles an hour was a much safer speed than nearly eighty. A tentacle curled around the drivers seat and under the accelerator. The car slowed as the gas pedal came up.

Athena pumped and stamped on the pedal. The car jerked forward as the gas pedal went down and slowed again as it came up. The driver's temper did not improve. Athena stamped. The car lurched forward. The tentacle pulled and the car jolted back.

Athena saw the flashing blue light before she saw the car or the tentacle. She pulled in, pressed the window winder and put on her best smile.

"Same lady, different car," said the policeman as he saw her.

It was the same police patrol car that had already stopped Tony and Anehta. Athena was an intelligent woman, and she put together the constable's remark and Tony's explanation of what had taken place earlier, and realised what had happened. She also recognised Gill's hand in events.

"I left the car at my friend's house. More ... er ... discreet that way," she smiled at the officer.

"This car was jolting and jerking around," the policeman observed.

"I'm afraid I'm having trouble with the engine," she said. "It was perfectly all right earlier. Now it isn't pulling properly."

"I see. May I see your license and insurance, madam. Just as a matter of routine."

Athena smiled and handed them over. The other officer walked back from the car. "Registered to Athena Harcourt-Jones from Easingwold," she heard him say. They must have been running a check to see whether it was a stolen vehicle.

The first one glanced at the license. "That's her," he said. "She'll be going home. She says she's having engine trouble. The story's probably true." He turned to the window and handed back the papers. "There you are madam. Are you sure the car will get you home?"

"I think so. For one thing I haven't far to go. For another, the problem seems to be at higher revs." She smiled sweetly again. "As long as I keep the revs down I think it will be okay."

Confi snuggled back contentedly.

It was getting light in the east by the time she drove into her own drive and parked the car. Athena picked up her boxes and, followed unobtrusively by Confi, she went into the house.

She dumped the damaged 'time machine' on the settee and picked up her cigarettes. "Bad for your health," came a furry pink thought and a tentacle whipped the lighter out of sight.

Athena looked around for a light. She opened the drinks cabinet and poured herself a substantial whisky. She hunted in vain for a match or cigarette lighter. Eventually she went into the kitchen to light the cigarette from the gas stove.

While she was out of the room, Confi was looking at the whiskey. "Too strong," he thought, and picked up the water jug.

Athena was angry about the night's events. The only good thing about it was that she had whatever it was. She thought it had been too easy at first, breaking into the shop, and wondered whether Gill had done more than create a rather ineffectual guardian. Anehta had been annoying, but easily disposed of. She considered herself a better occultist than Gill and much more advanced - as if they were studying Karate and she was black belt, second dan, while Gill was merely brown belt or lower.

"Gill's too squeamish to do well," she thought. She walked back into the lounge, drawing on her cigarette and picked up the drink ...

She saw Confi smiling amiably and purring. "I like you," it thought. "You're Athena and I'm your friend."

"Gill!" Athena threw the glass at the pink furry creature.

The octopussy cat caught it in one tentacle, still purring madly. It rubbed against Athena, at the same time as putting down the glass, gently and safely, on the cabinet.

"You ... little monster ... You psychedelic freak," she screamed, and flung at it a rage so solid and so substantial that the one which caused Uncle Isaac's accident was as nothing.

Confi used three tentacles to catch it. He held it for a moment. Athena thought that he might return the present and braced herself, but he threw it to one side, and it bounced into the outer darkness of the astral.

Athena recognised that this was something more substantial and wondered where it had come from. "I'll deal with you later," she said. "Right now I want to investigate what it is I've got. I'm going to take it into my

temple, where you can't go, and I'll do a banishing ritual to make certain you stay away."

In the Intensive Care Ward at Pinderfields Hospital Dr. Asad looked at the monitors surrounding Isaac Brainridge. "I think there is no doubt," said the Doctor. "He's clinically dead." He turned to Sister Sanders. "You had better page Dr. Mateos, as she instructed. I think Ms. Randall will want to sign the certificate herself."

The nurse nodded and clicked efficiently away.

Confi was curled up, sleeping peacefully. He had found a warm spot, as cats will do, and was hovering over the back of the fridge freezer, where the warm air rose.

Athena was studying the gadget in the banished stillness of her 'temple' room. The main box had several sockets, one of which was marked 'headphones', so she plugged the headphones in. There was a socket marked 'viewer'. Presumably the mask thing went in there, so she plugged that in as well. Another was marked 'switch'. The device with a button on must be the switch. That, too, went in.

There were two other sockets, but no sign of anything to plug in. She wondered whether they were for anything important. Clearly you had to put on the headphones and mask to see and hear something. There was only one way to find out.

Athena plugged the telepathic time machine into the mains, still wondering what it did. She put a cushion on the carpet and lay down on the floor, making herself comfortable. She adjusted the headphones over her ears and the mask in front of her eyes. Nothing happened.

'Obviously,' she muttered, 'you switch it on by pressing the button on the switch.'

She pressed the button.

CHAPTER 24

The transporter ran more or less silently over mainly even sand, with just the occasional rock jutting from the surface to cause the slight jolting and the faintest noise of bumping. There was also a faint electronic hum. The sand stirred in a wind, inaudible to Athena, snaking amongst the ruins.

"I'll pull up close to the wall of the larger building. You two pull up facing towards me, so that your doors are as close as possible." Athena could not see to whom the woman - Cassiopia Gomez - was speaking, but she could see there were two other vehicles lumbering along just behind, and guessed.

"HJ, since you're in front, you pull up with the back end of your truck opposite my cab and use your rear door. Roger, you draw up right behind him."

"Sure thing, Cassie," Huckleberry's voice carried the same sense of fun it always did.

Cassie was looking with an anxious puzzlement at the control panel. "I think you'd better lower the panels and aerals and switch everything off as soon as you're in position," she said. "The storm still isn't moving, but it's getting bigger all the time."

As Athena watched, Cassie drew the truck up close to the wall of a ruined building, handling it with a skill she had to admire. Then Cassie flipped off some of the switches, halting the faint humming sound and all movement. There was no sound from outside.

The other two vehicles wheeled awkwardly round. The first shambled almost past before stopping.

"Got my ass end right opposite your door, Cassie," came HJ's cheerful voice. "Bout four strides in the open."

"Close everything down for a storm and come on over," said Cassie.

The solar panels atop the first vehicle lowered themselves into recesses on the roof, and a cover slid over to protect them. Then the

satellite dish also disappeared. By the time the third vehicle had maneuvered itself into place, three figures were emerging from the rear of the second vehicle. To judge from the struggle they had against the wind, it must have been considerable.

There was a clattering sound from somewhere below and to the right, a pause and then a louder sound.

"Come on in," Cassie called out, rather unnecessarily, since they were already in.

"God, it's hotter than a firefly's ass out there," HJ said.

"There aren't any fireflies any more, so I wouldn't know."

"And that wind," he said. "If you stood out there fer one minute, it'd sand blast your boots clean. If you stood out there fer two minutes it'd sand blast them clean away."

"The wind's getting up?" Cassie asked.

"It's got up," Huckleberry told her.

"I'm afraid you have yet to witness the full force of a heat storm." She pressed some buttons and flipped a couple more switches on the control panel. Something slid across in front of the windscreen, but some displays were still lit at the controls.

There was a further clattering sound. "Here's Roger," said Cassie, seeming pleased.

"Gee mama, it's dark. Can I have a nightlight?" came a whining voice.

"And Gary and Cindy have that damn doll with them," HJ said, grinning.

"They may need something to comfort them before the night's out," Cassie remarked.

There was a second clatter and Roger walked in with Gary and Cindy. "You two go and talk to the others until dinner time," he said.

"Gee mama, I'm hungry," the doll whined, "Can I have a bottle?"

"Take it through the back and give it a feed," Roger said with a patience Athena didn't feel.

"Don't know how you put up with that thing," said HJ.

"I thought you liked it. You seemed to find it funny last time you saw it."

He sighed. "Yeah, I guess I did at that. Seems to me though, the doll may be around after we're gone. Now that, I reckon, ain't so funny."

"No. No I guess not," Roger agreed. "What's the weather screen look like?" he asked, changing the immediate subject, but not so far that everyone didn't know exactly what was on his mind.

Cassie glanced at the monitor again. "The storm is growing all the time," she said. "The wind is rushing more and more air into the low pressure system, but the pressure's falling not rising."

"I don't understand it," Roger said.

"Heat Stroke, son. Heat Stroke." Huckleberry answered. "The planet's dyin' and there ain't a damn thing we can do about it."

"Let's sit down in the rest area for a while," Cassie suggested. "I don't feel like dinner just now," and she led the way back.

Huckleberry hesitated a moment. "Don't think you'll be feeling like dinner no more," he said and followed.

In the rest room Cassie and Roger were slumped on a settee, holding hands. Roger was saying. "I'd make love to you one more time if I had the energy. But I haven't."

"Pity," said HJ. "The world oughter end with a bang." Cassie lifted an eyebrow and he laughed a little at his own attempted humour.

"Gee mama, it's hot in here," said a whining voice.

"You're dang right it's hot in here," Huckleberry muttered in agreement.

Outside the wind raged. The ventilator pipe was turned away from the wind to get the maximum shelter, but it didn't ventilate much. The air conditioning ran flat out, trying vainly to reduce the temperature inside the transporter. The wind ripped off the satellite dish and the monitor went dead.

Eventually the wind reached such a force and strength that it began to draw air from the overheated vehicle. Had the temperature been less, somebody might have prolonged the inevitable by closing the breather tube and using the compressed air. Nobody did.

Inside there was neither movement nor sound - except the whining toybot.

"Gee mama, it's hot."

"Gee mama, it's hot."

"Gee mama, it's ... too ... hot!"

