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Major advances in genetic engineering enhancing human intelligence and physical wellbeing bring together powerful interests which are vying to control the direction of this research to suit their own visions of the future. The mysterious Doctor Noor holds patents for key biotechnical processes and genetic sequences that require protection from both from interest lobbies that are trying to exploit such research and those seeking to suppress it. Noor has applied his patents to genetically engineered twins who have enhanced powers and life expectations. But the twins reveal a mentality that sets them apart from their creators as well as from the rest of humanity. In education and outlook they have been brought to understand the implications of being engineered to cross a threshold that will fundamentally redefine the future of humanity.

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for MEMC

Threshold

Peacocks at the Pale

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PART 1 – The City

New Arrivals

During the course of a sultry summer afternoon a large number of peculiar looking characters began to drift into the international arrivals lounge of the City airport. These people were certainly not planning to participate in the welcoming festivity engulfing the dazed new arrivals. They appeared morose and downcast. They did not even make eye contact with one another, or seem acquainted yet they were curiously co-ordinated in their sombre appearance. The growing crowd was composed almost entirely of teens or early twenties but their pinched and hardened features suggested already thwarted appetites for life. Most of them were dressed entirely in black and both sexes affected excessive make-up ringing the eyes, very inexpertly applied. Their clothing was generally threadbare and ill fitting as if the whole crowd had been equipped with cast offs from a charity shop.

“Where are all of these grisly people coming from?” asked the increasingly nervous manager of *Greetings News* as groups drifted silently past, oblivious to her carefully arranged enticements.

“They must be some sort of death cult?” a wide eyed young traveller suggested.

“No, they’re Goths ... probably welcoming one of those lugubrious bands.”

“Maybe it’s an anti-globalisation protest or perhaps they’re against air travel or a proposed airport expansion?”

“Why don’t the police arrest them? Or at least move them on?”

“Well Miss, they aren’t exactly doing anything illegal. There needs to be some sort of provocation for the authorities to take action.”

“As usual the public are the last to be told anything.”

These people had arrived in silent groups, dropped off by public transport. They were first reported by the manager of *Sensations* in her confectionery kiosk. Her meticulously arranged life was designed to keep everything unforeseen at bay. She referred to prescribed anti-terrorist procedures and called airport security immediately, certain of an impending incident.

Regrettably the detachment of ES-Tech Security agents with their shiny black uniforms, relieved by minimal discreet orange piping, only served to reinforce the gloomy scene.

Hand held body scanners discreetly deployed by these security agents identified no concealed weaponry and sniffer dogs paraded among them discovered no illicit

drugs. No provocation had been offered and the growing crowd remained unnaturally passive. The airport authority began to contemplate possible ways of provoking an incident as an excuse for clearing them from the arrivals area.

Those questioned responded with the same reply - that they had come to welcome *'the Doctor'*. Beyond that they seemed deliberately vague about who this doctor might be or their political affiliations.

Midway down the hall the lounge doors regularly slid open and closed like stage curtains. As arriving passengers stepped out into the sea of black clad bodies and whitened faces, many recoiled in alarm at the crowd of ghoulish witnesses who were studying them so intently.

The incoming passengers of flight AJ 901 from Geneva felt exhausted, shuffling along after an arduous nine hour flight followed by a further incomprehensible delay on the runway 'for their own safety and security' while the airline made 'special clearance provisions'. The cabin captives glared around trying to identify the celebrity or a medical risk that was causing their further exasperation.

One of the people that they would not have suspected was an excessively affable gentleman, sleekly groomed and fragrant, with the unctuous manner of a tele-evangelist, who throughout the flight had made relentless efforts to engage the flight attendants in every conceivable personal service. His affected dark tinted glasses only partly concealed an indefatigable curiosity about those around him. He had learned the biographical details of his reluctant neighbours. He was an extrovert, perhaps a nutcase, but not a very plausible terrorist.

Sitting directly behind him, and resistant to all his babble, a weary, billiard-ball-bald father travelling in the company of his twin sons also seemed an unlikely cause of delay. The two boys, identically dressed and indistinguishable, attracted many discreet sidelong glances. They were curiously dome-headed and both sported identical striped beanie hats, one tilted dramatically to the left and the other right, which made them appear like truculent school boys. Their hunkered down postures, blank moon faces, clean shaven heads, the petulant, half parted, pouting lips, suggested unformed adolescence; however closer inspection revealed that the boys were advanced well beyond their teenage years. Initially the cabin staff had tried valiantly to engage them with cheery conversation but they were so completely rebuffed by the boys' supercilious behaviour that they quickly turned their over-practiced bonhomie elsewhere relegating them to the firm ministrations of a gruff senior steward. He paid no attention to their rude habit of humming distractedly under their breaths as they were perfunctorily served. One was left and the other right-handed and they received their meals between them while carrying on compulsively thumbing with their hand held play-stations. They responded to his ministrations without a word and the old gentleman ascribed their rude behaviour to some form of modern syndrome, and consequently diverted his care to attending the needs of the beleaguered father. This exhausted looking man

seemed ill-disposed to pay any attention and glanced over at them in exasperation only rarely during the course of the flight. He preoccupied himself in reading through a pile of dreary reports.

At last processed through customs and immigration and apparently unable to generate further controversy, the natty extrovert paused briefly at the threshold before passing through the sliding doors into the arrivals lounge. He squared his glasses on his nose with a deft touch, grimaced provocatively at his reflection, inserted a daintily manicured pinkie nail between side teeth and removed an imaginary fleck from his lapel with a disdainful flick of the wrist. Then he made a smooch face into the reflective glass, puckering lips and stroking his flamboyant moustache tentatively as if it were slightly unfamiliar, and stuck out his tongue. Possibly he was imagining with satisfaction the impotent chagrin of hidden spies lurking behind the mirror as he committed these effronteries.

But perhaps he was also taking a moment to prime himself for the mêlée he expected beyond the pale. Perhaps he was readying himself for battle.

And so, in his turn he stepped through the sliding doors into the limelight of the arrivals lounge and paused momentarily relishing the dramatic shadow cast by the raking lights like an actor expecting a burst of applause. He surveyed the sinister crowd gathered before him with a dramatic gesture of recoil that seemed almost feigned. He lifted his glasses. A sharp eye caught sight of two men in yellow jackets by the exit doors one of whom hailed him by raising a finger to touch the rim of his cap. He tucked his chin in a discreet nod.

A shrill whistle sounded from the crowd. "*There he is! It's Noor ... or n-e-v-e-r!*" someone screamed. Suddenly as if galvanised by an invisible prod the crowds of ashen-faced people began to surge forward through the cordon. The silent crowd burst into angry taunts of '*Go Home! ... Doctor Clone*', building up into a unified chant. It was astonishing that such an un-coordinated looking rabble proved so well cued in unified protest. They began to press forward upon him.

A startling transformation occurred in the demeanour of this affable dandy. A well-concealed reserve of angry aggression burst to the surface. Extending his arm with carry case horizontally at shoulder height he barged his way through the crowd knocking every obstacle out of his path. Even the unruly crowd was caught off guard by such a violent reaction. A young man with clownish, black circled eyes rushed up and wrestled the suitcase from him. There was a struggle and then in a fury 'the Doctor' turned and hurled the case into the face of his assailant. Another man grabbed onto his overcoat but he wriggled free and abandoned suitcase and coat to the enraged crowd. A sudden shower of projectile eggs began to rain down upon him.

"Eggs, how totally appropriate!" he growled as he advanced with growing momentum, and barrelled through the exit across the platform beyond and into the open door of a waiting car beyond. The yellow-jacketed aides slammed the door

closed and the locks snapped down. The guards leapt into the front seats as protestors threw themselves onto the windshield. They were shed as the car swerved off picking up speed.

The crisis had passed so suddenly and the frenzied crowd instantly deflated into its previous listlessness. They looked blankly at one another with nothing more to say. And so the crowd began to evaporate as mysteriously as it had arrived.

There were two spectators who were closely observing this fracas from the safety of the café. Both lingered behind to observe the aftermath.

One was a woman of well-concealed age who had sat discreetly in the corner of the coffee bar surveying the scene. Her bundled up appearance did not however fully disguise thin, hawk-like facial features. Her oversized tinted sunglasses tucked under a tight hair kerchief might have suggested some form of visual impairment, were it not that her gaze was so keenly riveted on the arrivals gateway. She tensed whenever it flew open and craned forward to inspect each person that stepped across the threshold. When 'the Doctor' appeared and the crowd began to vent its fury she raised her glasses to get a better look at him as he strong-armed his way across the lobby and into the waiting taxi. Abandoning her newspaper and notebook she leapt up impulsively and followed the tail of the crowd towards the exit. After the mêlée in the lobby began to disperse in the wake of the departing taxi she picked her way back through the debris strewn on the floor, obviously perplexed and shaken by the violence that she had just witnessed. She stopped to pick up a discarded leaflet scanning it distractedly. She seemed to make no sense of what she read and let it drop to the floor.

But there was another non-participant who had been observing both her and the fracas discreetly. He had positioned himself behind her in the bar. Glittering coal-black eyes darted about the hall and missed nothing. They were drawn quite frequently in her direction. His olive complexion and fashionably neglected beard suggested a free spirit, guided by his own wilful timetables. On closer inspection however his trim physique seemed slightly cinched-in. Tight, tailored casual clothing erred towards a remembered size too small. Occasionally he would lift his phone as if checking for messages and discreetly take a photograph of a passerby. He also took a number of such photos of the woman in front of him.

A public bus arrived in the bay outside. Returning to collect her notebook she frantically gathered up her papers, stuffed everything holus bolus into her open handbag and dashed out to board the bus.

With studied deliberation her stalker carelessly examined his watch, glided effortlessly across the hall and mounted the same bus, sliding his tight carapace with agility through the doors just as they were closing.

Some moments later the doors from the baggage reclaim area quietly slid open

Threshold

again only to reveal the exhausted father trailed by his bratty twin sons now both sporting oversized wraparound dark glasses that suggested exotic birdlife. His polished bald head reflected the luminous points of the overhead lighting. Behind him he trundled a red plaid canvas bundle buggy. Following rigorous customs inspections, a unkempt festoon of wires dangled from it and belied its jaunty Scottish appearance as being most probably some sort of critical life support equipment. He surveyed with obvious distaste the debris littering the nearly empty hall and the contents of the suitcase trampled into the egg strewn mess.

The two young boys so uncannily identical in appearance had donned identical pale blue shiny nylon travel jackets cut short high above the waist. Leotard body stocking outfits which might have looked modish on a slender childish physique only accentuated their puffy corpulence at midriff. The unpleasant suggestion of over-indulgence was further suggested by the ungainly gait of those ill-attuned to much exertion. They followed their parent like waddling ducks and picked their way disdainfully through the debris. The bald man wheeled his buggy with great care along a mazy path and seemed to be muttering to himself for want of any responsive companionship.

“Noor certainly cuts a wide swathe ... as ever painfully short on diplomacy. Well he does revel in his little amateur dramatics!”

The two boys stared at him vacantly and said nothing.



- Thresholds

When I wake in the middle of the night I discover a yawning silence, stillness never encountered during the networked cacophony of our day.

The usual barrage of background static, the relentless incoming transmissions of instructions, feedback, news, and annoying pre-recorded admonitions is suddenly silent. My continuous internal dialogue with Dex is completely shut down while he remains asleep in the adjacent bed, in his noisy oblivion.

My dreams are baroque and highly detailed. They are also quite subversive and run counter to the purposeful instructions of our daytime transmissions. When I wake I have disciplined myself to recover their outline and record key points in my notebook before their memory is crowded out. Under the covers I input these details so that later I can return to them and be again astonished by my erring mind.

Peacocks at the Pale

These dreams seem to be missives from some other much more experienced person, an alien spirit camping discreetly in the back of my mind. I find myself choosing language that I would never consider using in daily life; unfamiliar words trip easily off my tongue, strange new thoughts appear from nowhere. I can mull over my dreams for days. Sometimes, long after, their true significance of these dreams will suddenly dawn on me and I make most extraordinary connections. It is then that I glimpse their concealed wisdom.

I have just been dreaming that I am a denizen of a vast, intricate cave. There are many connected galleries, festooned with bulbous dripping rock formations that extend off into a terrifying stygian blackness where few have dared to venture. In the great cavern near the cave mouth the light within is very murky and I encounter groups of people huddled together, immobile, arthritic and clothed in grey rags. There are vast gloomy storerooms packed with curious artefacts. Gold bound boxes, glint with light from the cave mouth. Occasionally in my wanderings I encounter piles of fossilised bones embedded in the rock, remnants of those long forgotten. Stretching into the unexplored interior there are galleries lined with mouldering books. If I attempt to draw one down, it dissolves into dust in my hands.

The back stretches of the cave contain my most profound nightmares. I must not think about their suffocating horror or I will go mad. There are passages leading off into the half light and some might entice the feckless explorer forward with a faint light and the promise of distant freedom. But I know that many have ventured into them only to find that the passages narrow and branch into an impenetrable maze. Squeezing past constrictions only gains access to worm casts so tight that it is impossible to turn back and retrace steps. It is impossible to back out. Desperation sets in. The only option is to proceed into ever tightening, deeper obscurity drawn by a light that may be no more substantial than phosphorescence. Those who have ventured into these passages have never returned. Perhaps they did find some extraordinary escape, or perhaps they just ran into the corpses of previous pioneers rotting in suffocating darkness. This claustrophobic horror, proceeding into the ever tightening space with no alternative, is undoubtedly my most trenchant fear.

And so the whole community is gathered in the large chamber at the mouth of the cave, a great arched space which is pocketed into a high cliff overlooking a vast valley. No one would ever attempt to find a way down. The threshold is a sheer vertiginous drop to certain death.

This cave mouth provides a single source of light for all of the galleries. The pendant rock formation overhead look to me like the snagged teeth of a monster. Because

Threshold

of the impossibility of escape the denizens have lost interest in those distant views. It is a punishment for their wayward children, those ragged waifs, to be forced out onto a ledge where they stare down at the vertiginous drop and quake in terror.

Occasionally I creep over towards the mouth of the cave, daring myself to look down into the valley below. Then there are other times when I can feel a mad compulsion to run at the threshold and throw myself out to certain death. I imagine the headlong descent, minutes airborne, the screaming wind in my ears. I have seen it happen.

Then in my dream to my amazement I notice a single bird, no more than a fledgling, lifted before my eyes on an updraft before the cave mouth. I try to imagine its exhilaration hovering over the abyss without any effort or movement. As I try to share its euphoria I find myself lifting from the rocky floor that has been polished to a treacherous shine by generations of shuffling soles.

Am I imagining it or have I been truly transformed into a mate for this dream bird? I no longer feel terrified by the dizzying height of this threshold. I realise that I must make a daring jump to launch myself, the same moment of truth that every fledgling must face. Success only requires fortitude, faith and sustained concentration. I know that I must not glance back, or waver in my determination for a moment.

And so I jump and to my astonishment I feel a sudden lightness as if my body were no more substantial than a ray of light. I am no longer one of those despairing, shuffling prisoners. I retain a lingering memory of that last floating leap. I can remain lighter than air if I concentrate my mind.

This seemingly unbreachable threshold has become a launching point for a soaring flight upon the uplifting winds.

* * *

The human beings who will live one thousand years have already been born. But I use the word 'beings' rather loosely. What will our world look like at the end of a millennium? The speed of change is already so accelerated that what took millennia to sift through the hourglass can now be accomplished in days.

In fact there are at least two of us who will face such extended, accelerated changes, Thomas Dex and I, our single mind shared between two bodies. We were both originally given the same biblical name, 'Thomas', 'the Twin' because we emerged

Peacocks at the Pale

at birth as one being, physically conjoined from shoulder to waist. It took us some time to disentangle ourselves before we needed to distinguish ourselves as Dexter and Sinister, or as I prefer to cut it in my case, 'Sin'. (Actually we would both have preferred to see ourselves as Dex; its ring is much more glamorous.)

Some people find the very notion of our existence unconscionable. We are considered 'beyond the pale'. So-called 'establishments', their opinions inflamed by fear-mongering media or manipulative religious leaders, find it unacceptable that we have moved beyond their narrow definition of what they consider 'a human being'. These intolerants are focussed on controlling their tenuously functioning status quo ensuring that as few as possible need to face unpleasant truths about their own vulnerability to the approaching tsunami of change. They remain huddled together like those ossifying forms in my cave dream.

Antagonism to all norms of behaviour has been our formative education. We are not constrained by the old ways of thinking about the value of human life as we venture into a post-human world.

Social orders are enslaved to ideas, whether they demand slave services for building a pyramid or creating a stock exchange. Their leaders are usually chosen as exemplary slaves in service of murky, ill-defined forces that maintain these orders and placed at the helm of an unwieldy raft of social consensus, expected to pilot a stable course. When the waters they have entered begin to close over their heads, they are simply cut loose.

It is only the rare instance that a true hero is able to pilot a ship across the restrictive thresholds into unknown waters, out through the Pillars of Hercules. What impels a hero to cross any such thresholds, to launch on invisible updrafts? Perhaps in that brave decision we find a glimpse of our only real freedom.

Those left behind 'within the pale' seek occasional relief from their predicament by inflicting their frustrations on the vulnerable. They turn their backs firmly on unexplored portals and remain hopelessly cowering within the constrained confines of their known world. As long as they can obsessively debate unimportant things within a comfortable purview there will be no need to terrify themselves by peeping over the parapets at a vast emptiness where so many imagined dangers lurk.

Though all like to read about others' Odysseys, there are few willing to embark upon one themselves. Odysseus was insatiably curious ... and feckless; more like Dex than me. He put himself at the mercy of forces that would take him to unimaginable

Threshold

lands. Knowing his own weaknesses, he had himself bound to the mast to experience irresistible temptations.

A threshold is a point of transition. It may be the transition between one space and another or a shift between different states of mind. Some thresholds such as our recent passage through the airport may spur a purposeful sense of rebirth. Others that we pass daily within the corridors of our compound might seem to exist in two parallel worlds both with quite separate connotations. A huge gulf in perception and mood can develop around the same threshold between the 'going in' and the 'coming out'. The little markers of assurance that we watch out for, perhaps a broken tile, the curious placement of a switch, the suggestive arrangement of blood coloured stains on the wall or the ritually counted stair treads that are part of the morning path may be completely transformed into a separate set of rituals on the return journey. One route may be laden with expectation while the return is burdened with memories and exhaustion.

Dex and I have been 'designed' to peep over the threshold of humanity's oldest dream, that of immortality - the dream of liberation from the powers of decay and death to embrace a different relationship with vast powers in an unfolding universe.

We would not claim to be free from design flaws. We are not perfected models, but we are the models that will face this transition with a determinedly post-human perspective. Like the transformative leap in my dream I must launch myself like the fledgling eagle who knows intuitively that flight is his destiny.

Like those notes on ancient maps we will soar into unknown reaches beyond the edge of the world where 'Here Lie Monsters'.

State of Alert

On a raised dais at the end of Frontier Hall, ES-Tech's Director of Security Operations, Colonel Rumsden, who had initially been introduced familiarly as '*our D-S-Oh*', glared at his audience and pushed out his lower jaw with truculent aggression. This abutment like a powerful piece of heavy excavation equipment was capable of undermining any more cerebral arguments that might counter his chilling vision. He scanned the audience aiming his well-practiced gimlet gaze at randomly selected points below. In youthful theatrical training, recognising the advantages of this sliding jaw hinge, he had perfected this ploy to wrest control of any stage. He raised one hand, again in mirror practised manner, abruptly flipping it to extend his palm towards the startled man seated beside him in a gesture of supplication and continued.

"We all recognise that the strength of our partnership is in addressing concerns foremost in all of our minds." He pursued his thoughts in lengthy sentences of rumbling cadence. "These are concerns about the future security of our great City; ensuring that this well co-ordinated vision will develop as a source of wealth and pride for all our citizens. I speak on behalf of everyone in this room in affirming my support for the Hyperion Eco-City Biotech Park. But we now must take a step back and with sober minds assess the details of our procurement vision. Security within a well-integrated partnership must remain our preeminent concern."

"We can hold no illusions. There is an enemy out there stalking us; one who does not respect the values or the creative individuality that is at the very core of our culture. Recently we have seen his contorted face of hate in unconscionable attacks that almost succeeded in bringing one of our local success stories to its knees. The *City Seven* affair has taught us the importance of maintaining strong security in an ever more dangerous world. And that is what we are determined to ensure in the Portal Development."

"Stalking us are contrary forces that would voraciously suck up the fruits of truly extraordinary research and attempt to deploy it against us. This is an enemy who operates through cowardly subversion and preys on our better instincts for generosity and energetic free enterprise."

Everyone in the audience had recognised his reference to the recent disastrous attempt by the *City Seven* to derail the research being undertaken by Gene-Sys Biotech Industries at their suburban research centre. Since this 'terror cell' had been uncovered through the fortuitous vigilance of ES-Tech, the full horror of the subversion being contemplated had become chillingly evident. The issue had become a focal obsession of the local media and had gratifyingly affirmed the 'international profile' of a City that was in league with other major global centres that suffered similar ructions.

Seven young people, the so-called *City Seven*, had been arrested. They were

poised to cause mayhem by releasing bio-engineered contamination throughout the Gene-Sys Bio-Tech production facilities. Long before the local police had any inkling of the seriousness of the terrorist group's activities, ES-Tech had infiltrated the nucleus of the group with informants who discreetly monitored these malcontents. Ultimately ES-Tech had assisted the police in co-ordinating the raid that resulted in the arrest of the fanatical malefactors.

The current Frontier event, themed "*Security and the Biotechnology Challenge*", was organised to discuss planning and security issues related to the proposed Gene-Sys expansion on the City Portal lands. The event had been immediately over-subscribed. Everyone had latched onto a forceful opinion in the matter and the press was galvanised by these issues.

At the right elbow of the *D-S-Oh* sat a substantial woman who appeared to anchor the whole stage. Hellana Nix was in fact the head of ES-Tech Security Services and Colonel Rumsden's boss. To open the panel discussion, she had earlier introduced each of the guest speakers in turn. Compressed into a conservative, well-tailored suit, she sat throughout with a firmly anchored smile on her pursed lips. But who could better embody an open, confident society standing defiant than this slightly too solid, robust matriarchal presence who appeared beyond self-interest or petty jockeying for career advancement?

At this point Hellana Nix roused herself from benign lethargy to contribute, "We have all just witnessed the chaotic dissent that reigns beyond these doors and realise that there are many people who are hell-bent on derailing our visionary proposals."

Before she had a chance to amplify her remarks, the *D-S-Oh* quickly chimed in, "And who want to address a rising tide of social problems, which are after all of their own making, by providing services that they have no inclination to fund themselves; like subsidised rents and work opportunities for farm hands and unemployed dairy maids." An obliging titter ran through the audience at this uncharacteristic levity. All were familiar with this oblique reference to the City Manor Farm community and its precarious existence on the threshold of the proposed development.

At the fulcrum of the long dais sat Dr Krafft, a tiny man in a neat powder blue suit and yellow tie. His eyes were large and frog-like, widely spaced but vacantly naïve amidst the otherwise daintily arranged features of his face. He squirmed uncomfortably, perhaps mentally orbiting another planet, hypnotised by some distant point of light. On behalf of Gene-Sys Biotech Industries, he had earlier concluded a laboured explanation of some of the anticipated advances in biotechnical research that would address the terrifying array of environmental problems confronting 'our planet'. Krafft's annoying habit of drumming his fingers on the lectern during extended pauses when an exact word eluded him had lulled the audience into comatose complacency about the message. But his enthusiasm for adjusting the genetic characteristics of blue algae to enable this life form to thrive in colder climates had not entirely captivated

the investors' imaginations. His insights seemed to bear only marginal relevance to a public consultation meeting addressing the creation of a 'world class' technology park on the Port Lands, an area of the City which had for a long time been an embarrassment on the waterfront.

The subsequent rousing rant of the *D-S-Oh* was proving much more effective in stirring the audience with depictions of villainous international corporate espionage, sabotage, vulnerability to terrorist attack and the valiant brinksmanship of his teams training night and day to thwart pervasive malign influences.

"This vibrant society does not come conveniently presented to us on a plate! There are significant costs attached in providing a secure environment that will attract top flight scientists and investors from around the world. They will come here only if they are confident of enjoying a safe place to live, shop and bring up their kids. They will demand the best services that a 'world class' city can provide."

The overall presentation had already amply demonstrated this balanced vision. Two smooth faced, planning advocates with exuberant hair and evenly arrayed teeth, were positioned at the opposite end of the long desk balancing the severity of the impassive security consultants. These advocates for the Hyperion development, bedizened in glistening silken suits and ostentatious ties, remained basking in pools of flattering light. Both of them had acquitted themselves eloquently, revelling in exciting details of the Portal concept. Thierry Racléré, whose name had been reduced to '*Theory Rackleery*', in Hellana Nix's introduction, was the chief planning advocate for Hyperion. He waxed eloquent about '*zoning for prosperity*' or a '*Pee-Zee*' enclave, where relaxed planning guidelines would obviate all dispiriting and time consuming red tape. A large screen positioned behind the dais flashed up a video show of breathtaking images of the proposed community with its extravagant assortment of 'iconic' architectural creations all arranged around spectacular water features amidst verdant parkland. An 'Esplanade' of opulent, glassy apartment towers, each endowed with an improbable signature identity or inexplicable twist or gyration, ranged '*like a string of pearls*' along the waterfront and balanced the envisioned live / work community. Much of this video was devoted to depicting racially diverse and exquisitely clad people serenely shopping in an airy shopping centre or enjoying light-hearted social moments on treadmills in well appointed sports venues.

At the heart of the innovative design and the focal point of the new community was a vast underground chamber, the '*Wunderland*' a 'world class' collection of exotic plants and animals imported from all climes and sustained within a carefully balanced ecology. Complex diagrams had demonstrated how solar tunnels would deliver ideal natural sunlight conditions to this secure underground paradise.

Thierry enthused about his 'world class eco-city' that 'will vie with anything on the planet' as if it were already a reality, adding, "The *Prosperity Zone* or as we like to call it the '*Pee-Zee*' concept, so attractive to Asian investors, will bring scientific

enterprise back into the heart of our community and wrest back enormous advantages in securing jobs, enriching all aspects of the wider culture.”

He and the legal advisor, Bill Trencher, discussed the range of services available to a residential community of more than 50,000 inhabitants. Aside from the often mentioned ‘sustainability’ word, one of the often mooted advantages of the location was its position on a promontory extending out into the lake. A single approach road ensured that the security of the community could be strictly controlled.

Many among the audience had also been attracted to the evening to assess the prospects of Gene-Sys BioTech’s upcoming launch as a public company with a substantial stock issue that would provide the resources for such a rapid expansion. Its role as an anchor for the Hyperion development would prove a strong endorsement of their scientific research and send out a signal worldwide about a sophisticated urban community that firmly supported such research when so many others were balking at its implications.

In fact the Trencher / Racléré duo explained the concepts much better than the Gene-Sys scientists themselves. The ‘*ERG*’ or the *Evolution Research Group* had also been among the first to create new forms of life by transferring sequences of DNA from other organisms to activate ‘*exciting new viabilities*’. Their scientists could congratulate themselves on at last being able ‘to create life from scratch’. But such gene research had been severely curtailed in countries with strong conservative or religious lobbies.

The affable Bill Trencher played an important part in lauding the City’s ‘open for business’ attitudes to the proposed ‘*Pee-Zee*’. His relaxed style of communication provided a reassuring balance to the sometimes scary preoccupations of the bug-eyed, elfin Dr Krafft. Perhaps at times, Bill could be faulted for resorting too readily to the language of the hospital Emergency Room in depicting the Gene-Sys team as being on hand to transplant a viable heart into the centre of this new community ... “a heart that will pump new blood into a wasteland that has lain disgracefully moribund for generations.” The image was disturbing for some.

“And whose fault was that?” a questioning murmur emerged from the audience. Hellana’s eagle eye swivelled towards this source of a potential incident.

There was a slight commotion on the floor just in front of the press enclosure. With practiced timing Malyn Starak, the celebrated anchor of the weekly televised *Starak Report*, had induced a startled silence. There was a tremulous frailty to her voice which strained many ears. “But surely what we want to avoid, Colonel Rumsden, is a panicked decision on a development which will affect our City for years to come. The relaxation of business, legal and planning controls in this so-called ‘*Pee-Zee*’ is obviously a long term commitment. We should not lose sight of the fact that there are several viable alternatives to the Hyperion proposals. You have planted apocalyptic images in our minds of a society on the verge of flying dangerously out of control and

have suggested that by creating this gated enclave much potential upheaval can be avoided. Such fears suggest an organised enemy lurking out there on our threshold. But from what I can hear on our doorstep outside, this group that call themselves the *ninety nine percent* is anything but unified in its vision. I passed through a barrage of their insults on entering. Annoying they may be but hardly dangerously organised. Perhaps we are all over-reacting to this situation.”

“You are suggesting that this research requires stringent safeguards. But aren’t we just fomenting further protest by giving them something to focus upon? Are we not too intent on achieving a maximum value community for the investors and in the process creating a tangible focus for such dissent?”

The Colonel returned, “I am merely suggesting that we must take the bull by the horns to design a future that every one of us in this room can subscribe to. Make no mistake. The future world is going to be a very dangerous place. As much energy will need to be expended in denying this technology to nefarious parties as will be required to develop it in our own interests. We cannot have our interests compromised by fanatical parties, anarchists and deranged power brokers that are prepared to hold a liberal, democratic society to ransom.”

Malyn continued, “That sounds very democratic of you and I am always in favour of commandeering the horns. But are you not worried about what else we may be losing if we allow succumb to knee jerk fears. We may be needlessly terrorising ourselves.”

The Colonel cut in irascibly. “The security of our democratic system has *never* been so compromised! For God’s sake woman, these are not groundless fears that I am addressing! There is everything at stake and we are working to provide a prudent co-ordinated response. There are angry, dangerous, irrational people on our doorstep! We are being called upon to defend a way of life that is already under attack. Our future world is not for the faint-hearted!”

Malyn’s voice wavered slightly as she pressed on, “I recognise that we must be prepared to counter threats and I do understand that security will play an important role in such developments, but surely we must do this with careful consideration and debate about the freedoms that we might be prepared to sacrifice? There are rumours for instance that crowd management consultants within your own organisation have modelled their security provisions for these developments to include squads trained in the use of water cannon. Are these provisions are part of the ES-Tech Hyperion security vision?”

Evidently peeved, the Colonel responded irascibly, “It’s easy for under-informed outsiders to adopt a self-righteous tone. Naturally I am not at liberty to reveal details of our confidential security briefings. I can only reassure you that we are security professionals. This is our business, our expertise. The use of excessive force will only be regarded as a last resort. Please remember that the business of ES-Tech is effective risk management. Our professionals take huge pride in our ability to foster *‘situation*

awareness' in our clients which permits a proactive response to potentially damaging interventions by dissidents. Successful '*adversity management*' means the removal of guesswork about the contrarian opinions out there. ES-Tech intends to deliver a '*Class A Certified conflict free work environment* for this community.'

"But who is actually driving this vision? Why should we be considering this kind of high security enclave at the heart of our revitalised waterfront, this 'string of pearls' at the heart of the City regeneration strategy?"

The Colonel deflected the question "Hyperion is the only developer with sufficient political acumen and economic clout to knit together many participants within a single collegial agreement. The remediation work required to bring back these lands will be staggeringly expensive to achieve. Hyperion has stepped up to this plate in good faith and is already initiating this hugely expensive intervention across a severely contaminated site."

"But you are excluding the public from what might enrich the City infinitely more than an isolated, gated community."

"I believe that the public want reassurance that all appropriate safeguards are in place and that security is being managed effectively. They want only to participate in the general prosperity that such a development will bring to all of us."

An inaudible throb as if an expression of this communal heartbeat, followed these words as the audience exhaled its pent-up anxiety. Then an explosive electronic crackle ripped through the address system jolting many in their somnolent repose as the heavy hand that had been held over their heads milking the passions of the crowd suddenly descended to grip the lectern. The two overhead chandeliers seemed to surge with a more brilliant light which caught the glint of metal pinned to sober suits, or the sparkle of ostentatious stones displayed on extremities. The *D-S-Oh* turned to deploy his practiced gargyle rictus on the press box.

The applause when it broke through tentatively at the end of his statement became curiously magnified into tumultuous approbation. The enlarged image of the *D-S-Oh* seemed to brighten and inflate on the projection screen behind. A grimace of determination rippled across the worry-lined brow. Defiance set his lantern jaw and inflated his hollow cheeks. His taut shoulders squared with admirable resolution.

Malyn Starak's poignant question seemed to have been subsumed under the swelling effusions of the room.

Sensing that the evening was drawing to a close, Hellana Nix again roused herself to her duties in expressing the appreciation of all assembled.

Striding up between the *D-S-Oh* and the tiny Doctor she raised both their hands on high with a shake of triumph. Perhaps with some delight the audience may have noted the contrast of her ample physique encased in its burred textured woollen suit that flared out bell-like at the waist and then tapered abruptly to her delicate ankles and dainty polished raised talons. The *D-S-Oh*, so powerful of purpose mere moments before,

suddenly withered in comparison. As for the doctor, he looked like an embarrassed elf.

“On behalf of ES-Tech I can only thank Bill and Theory for eloquently setting out their vision for the new community ... and of course our own Colonel Rumsden for so compellingly addressing the future context in which we at ES-Tech must learn to operate to confront forces arrayed against us all in this war on terror.”

“... and to thank as well Doctor Krafft who has explained in such ... extensive ... detail the utterly fascinating range of research being undertaken by Gene-Sys and the dazzling horizons that they are currently exploring. It is indeed an exciting vision and we are all keen to play our part. The collaboration of Gene-Sys and ES-Tech is certain to establish the pre-eminence of our City as an international centre for genetic research.”

She added as an afterthought, “Of course from the floor, we can thank Malyn Starak for her heartfelt comments by purchasing a copy of her sensational new tome, *Blind Terror* ... is it not Mally? Within days this will be launched in bookshops across the country.”

Malyn nodded and smiled inscrutably. “Something like.”

“In three decades, since those early days when those first *Securi-Tech* guards laid the foundations of our company’s reputation, ES-Tech has been in the forefront of those anticipating a security revolution. We were prescient in preparing ourselves for an ever more dangerous world. What we feared then may indeed seem naïve by today’s standards, but we remain, poised at the pale, ready to confront an increasingly dangerous future. While the enemy may seem infinitely adaptable and fuelled by fanaticism, we can all rest assured that ES-Tech will be positioned to target their deviousness as they emerge from their hiding places. Our response will be co-ordinated and effective. In this race we must train ever faster athletes.”

As Hellana Nix launched into her eloquent stride, the D-S-Oh and the Doctor both appeared to freeze into awkward puppet like compliance locked in her firm grasp. The triumphal hand clasp began to appear awkwardly sustained. It was therefore a relief to all when the microphone system began to stutter and explode into such a cacophony of staccato interruptions that she was obliged to draw her remarks to a hasty conclusion.

A company like ES-Tech is designed to thrive on fear and suspicion. The message of the Colonel had been highly effective in conjuring up the murky world that lurks beyond the pale.



- Names

I am just recovering from a tangled nightmare of panic in which I could not even remember my own name. Nor could anyone else tell me who I was, they were all making up their own, some of them very improbable like Ilzishklin or Sychrophantnik. Nobody seemed to question the validity of these preposterous inventions.

In my dream I am wandering down a long hallway flanked by lists of people who were to be given the 'Secret Diploma'. The lists were tacked to the wall in curling sheets of paper which were covered with the dense printing of an antique typewriter. I am scouring these lists frantically searching the names, hoping to recognise one as my own. Others are huddled in clusters weeping and attempting to console one another when their names were clearly missing.

What powers are hidden in a name? I emerged into the world as 'Thomas - Sinister Corporis'. Surnames or family names are quite irrelevant when your birthright has been selected from so many genetic sources.

My twin brother Dex, or 'Thomas - Dexter Corporis' insists on calling me by the rather demeaning 'Sinny'. An abridgement to 'Sin' alone would have passed muster, hinting at a wilful transgression which is always appealing. (In idle moments I like to conjure up a vision of myself as the insidious Lord Sin, who is holding a universe to ransom from within his twilight bower of evil intentions, attended by scores of simpering minions) But then I reflect that such unmitigated nefariousness has a downside, long hours peering into gloomy consoles, muttering under your breath, plotting some terrible revenge. And of course the scores of deformed minions can be demoralising. They would be much more up Dex's alley.

Why does a name such as Thomas, 'the twin', exist? What was the mystery of the Didymus twin? Does it lie in the mysterious embodiment of another being that exactly shares your identity yet occupies a different space? Or does 'twin' refer to some essence over which our 'creators' with their syringes and patents in fact had very little control? Are we twinned with some other mysterious, invisible essence?

There was a time when I attempted to insist on the full appellation. At least this has some metaphysical stature, as if conjured up by a mysterious necromancer.

Peacocks at the Pale

But Sinister unabbreviated just sounds pretentious and I could imagine a glint of derision creeping into the eyes of those obliging it. For the truth is that it is very difficult to live up to when you are blue eyed and your Body Mass Index is probing the limits of acceptability, that is to say 'big boned'.

Dex however fancies himself as utterly irresistible to the opposite sex, a 'chick magnet' (though there have been few opportunities to test this in our lab). Anyway pale blue eyes are a liability to those demanding fearful respect. Admittedly the name itself has pulling power. Nevertheless I have reservations about his tactic of levelling an unwavering vacant stare, like two empty blue saucers, into the eyes of whomever he has decided to charm. Though sex gods are generally recognised as verbally challenged, they usually have other compensations in animal vitality.

'Decided' is the right word for everything that Dex embarks on. A name like 'Dex' lets nothing stand in its way, whereas 'Sinny' can never resolve its own mind, always thinking that another approach might possibly work out better. Ultimately in a dither of indecision, I tend to await consensus before I commit to any course. Dex derides my tendency to move in 'dizzy circles'.

But the real drawback is that a name like Sinny is too prone to seeing another's point of view. I tend to become enmeshed in others irresolvable problems, whereas Dex just strikes off purposefully on his own.



Clay

Though very unlikely to be acceptable for security clearance to mix with the cosseted guests in the Frontier Hall, Clay's activities had played a very significant part in what was taking place below. Ranged before him in the dimmed light of his improvised control suite was an array of laptops displaying the speaker's dais from various positions together with a shambles of battered and improvised boxes festooned with wiring connections. His concentration locked on the screens, Clay was quite oblivious to the piles of discarded, scribbled cue cards and post-it notes that were strewn about his chair. His right hand worried a line of perforating rings across the top of his ear and then plummeted decisively to coax a slider across an ancillary touch screen.

Clay, safely banished to this obscure perch, was nevertheless essential to the ES-Tech mission that evening. Yet he accepted that he was the kind of person best relegated to these dimly lit sidelines. He knew that his defiant appearance tended to send out all the wrong signals and lent little credibility to the company he served. The array of decorative hardware piercing his ears, the bars through his eyebrows and lower lip did not project the solid, dependable character that set security conscious people at ease. The spider web tattoo that he had contrived on the backs of both hands was a source of considerable individual pride. Interlocking his fingers, placing both thumbs together, ingeniously completed the image of the fearsome denizen of this web. Clues to other motifs which surfaced at the fringes of his clothing challenged the curious mind. His eccentric clothing, festooned with zipper hardware of doubtful utility and patches of metallic insertions seemed an act of protest against the carefully cultivated ES-Tech corporate livery, that severe black shrouding relieved only by flashes of delicate golden piping. Perhaps this wilfulness in attire was tolerated by employers who appreciated an excuse to keep such people in separated boxes, compliant and under their control. Clay himself felt that he could not cope with the demands of being any other way. He needed to maintain his distance.

Within ES-Tech Clay was generally regarded as being rather ambivalent about the organisation and its security activities. Internal profiling assessments had already ensured that his rise through the organisation would be unlikely. He was allowed to drift through his personal life making his own connections, choosing his paths to follow at random without much long-term vision. Unlike the other members of the security entourage who were expected to gird themselves resolutely for the public eye, looking uniformed and informed, Clay had discovered advantages in projecting an appearance of anarchic dissipation. Each perforation of his brow or cheek represented to him a moment when he had asserted an essential difference between himself and his actual circumstances, when he had stood apart from '*them*'. It was only in front of these multiple monitors, utterly tuned into the nuances of what was happening below

that the drift of his life suddenly seemed to coalesce into an intelligible pattern. He was locked into an exhilarating sense of mastery, of seeing his interventions colour and transform the room below, subtly moulding disparate messages into a single unified paranoia and purpose.

ES-Tech, in the guise of his boss and mentor Frank, presented him with specific challenges and then usually left him alone with sufficient resources to do the things that he knew how to do so well. With a voyeur's relish he would watch his victims anonymously and discover how to adjust their behaviour. He could make a speech resonate or fall flat. He could adjust the nuances of lighting or 'aliveness' of the room to manipulate the perceptions of the audience and the confidence of the speaker. It was always gratifying to see how such people could be induced to act differently from how they expected to when given a gentle prodding.

The speakers below had not the slightest inkling of how much of their apparent spontaneous public reaction had been induced by Clay's interventions. They dwelt in their different worlds. If their paths ever crossed they would turn away from each other in mutual horror.

Clay revelled in his control of this 'invisible environment', a seamless *ecology* of inter-connected powers, not evident to the casual eye. He held unseen reins to shape the reactions of his client audience. It was Clay who had anticipated the resonant finality of the D-D-O's call to take up arms against an unknown enemy by applying an inaudible, low frequency pulse 'massage' to the space. He lit the fuses that exploded as wake up calls at key moments in the addresses and punctuated the speech with subtle volume reinforcements. It was he who commanded the exact duration of the shock silence at the end of the Director's address and who contrived the rippling crackle which appeared to be a technical deficiency as the heavy hand descended on the lectern. Clay intuitively knew that it was time to shift the mood elsewhere. It was he who had amplified the audience applause and plied the buzzing interference frequencies, co-ordinating the elated response from the crowd. He had also helped Hellana Nix draw her usual excruciatingly prolonged remarks to a prompt, foreshortened conclusion. The message was complete, the mood of the floor was disengaging and she should stop. He never actually needed to listen to the content; like an artist transported by his music, he just knew intuitively what was the intended effect.

His subjects, or 'clients' as he liked to imagine them were powerful people, naturally guarded in their emotions, in a crowd like this made up of politicians, civic authority figures, celebrities; a treacherous cocktail. Though individually politically adept, they needed considerable reinforcement to draw together into a co-ordinated purpose. When consensus is uncertain they would only tend to maintain composure and guard themselves from uncontrolled expressions of emotion. What relief therefore when they could release pent-up emotions confidently, when they could vent tears of rage and manifest determination in public under co-ordinated conditions when others

were feeling and behaving exactly the same way.

Clay had come to develop this observant objectivity knowing that he would always be an outside observer looking in. From earliest recollection his life had revolved around his single minded focus, pitting himself against abstract adversaries, usually digitally enhanced embodiments of good and evil. He was an unsung master of computer gaming and a skilled gladiator in those virtual worlds. He had been obsessed with honing his rapid reflexes to meet these tiny super human challenges.

Obsessive, secretive and with his very personal frame of reference, Clay was ever competing for something within himself. The games and virtual worlds that he inhabited were his only vantage points over the battleground of his soul.

Though such manipulation of extreme human passions lay at his fingertips, the environment that Clay actually occupied was only too pinched. In fact he was locked into a tiny annex in the security suite – an annoying precaution that he was too wise to question. He glanced over at the locked door. The shadows of boots cut through the light at the threshold. Guarding him from what - or what from him? Clay did not want to think about any of that.

“I don’t even have security clearance to phone out for a pizza,” he griped under his breath as he turned back to watch the audience which was beginning to disperse from the hall.

He tried to distinguish those whom he ought to recognise in the crowd. He knew many of the faces within ES-Tech but he was usually confused about the names attached or what roles they actually played - except for Frank, of course. Frank ran the whole show. All practicalities of daily concourse with his work colleagues seemed to elude Clay. They all talked the same and strove for the same things, so they all blended into an indistinguishable mass.

Having suffused the hall with an energising low frequency pulse to heighten the general post meeting upbeat resolution, Clay flopped back in his chair to fantasize idly about the delightful chaos that he might have created were his talents to be given full rein. He flicked the row of shiny hardware ringlets perforating one ear. He ran his fingers through his unkempt hair with some pleasure at the concept of the D-S-Oh running off like a demented cartoon character from the podium - his political career in tatters. “Yes I might have the power, but I guess it would be slightly short lived” he reflected wistfully and glanced back at the shadow of those boots at the threshold of his door.

On his monitor he could see Malyn Starak surrounded by her usual coterie of fawning admirers. This was a face that he *did* recognise because she had a regular programme on local television, the *Starak Report*, or as many facetiously called it ‘*Starkers*’. Because her fluting, insistent voice seemed to have infiltrated everywhere he had renamed her in his mind ‘*Mal-ware*’ with all the attendant computer virus connotations.

Clay suspected that underneath her upfront controversial opinions there languished a truly vacuous soul. "Probably a bit like my own," he sighed.

Lance Langer an equally recognisable media buffoon was now standing beside her. His bluff swaggering presence which had earned him the popular sobriquet of '*Slanger*', was well suited to the weather report that followed the nightly news. He looked the role of the perfectly assembled professional escort, standing solicitously at her side, every faculty chivalrously focussed on her well-being. As if awaiting his purpose in life to be finally revealed to him, his face was set in a perpetual expectant smile.

There was a ripple through the crowd of sycophantic heads below. Clay watched with interest as a young woman made her way forward tentatively holding out a notebook. Perhaps she was a fan in search of an autograph. Instinctively Malyn extended an arm to ease her approach as a gratifying reinforcement of her own sense of importance making way for the young. Her nest of bracelets sparkled in the light of the chandelier.

"Who let that one loose in this china shop, I wonder". Clay noticed how obviously this young woman stood out in the crowd, looking self-conscious and truculent in the midst of all the contrived fashion.

Malyn pulled the notebook and pen towards her with a benign flourish. She paused as if to consider what to write, then began to scrutinize the notebook in closer detail. Suddenly with a look of disgust, she dropped pencil and notebook disdainfully into the vacated seating and turned her back abruptly on the woman. Lance with an apologetic shrug pushed officiously between them and the tight convoy of admirers piloted Malyn elsewhere. The petitioner was left looking obviously chagrined, her eyes glassy with pent up rage, her lower lip pushed out in petulant annoyance. Clay observed with some delight as two of the security guards materialised out of the shadows, converged and escorted her firmly towards a side exit. No one made any effort to retrieve her discarded notebook.

He wondered what she had written on the page to result in such a pointed rejection.

At last there was a smooth click of the lock on his door signifying that Andy, his minder, had set him free and gone off duty.

Clay nodded while gazing vacantly at the screens enveloping him. He considered whether he should go home directly, or drop into Embers to catch up with Frank. The hall below was now empty and the lights were being dimmed one by one.

Suddenly he became aware that there was a shadowy figure making its way down the aisle. A man in a grey overcoat seemed to be searching for something that he had left behind. A door at the back of the hall opened sending a shaft of light across the seating. The intruder adroitly ducked down behind the seating to conceal himself. Clay sat up instantly alert and drew close to the screen. The door closed again and the

shadowy figure re-emerged. Clay, his hand hovering over a control panel, reflected for a moment that it might be quite amusing to bathe this intruder in a pool of light and perhaps focus a throb of 'ta-dah' noise in his vicinity to induce instant heart failure. But fortunately he recognised something strangely familiar about his movements. The figure straightened up and held the page that he had been searching for towards the dimmed stage lighting to scrutinise the contents. The light reflected up on to his face for a split second. Clay recognised the features of his own boss at ES-Tech, Frank.

"Always spying on people! Well I guess that's his job. But trust him to leave no stone unturned. What possible interest could someone like that be to Frank? Surely he can't be that desperate."

Frank looked towards the lobby furtively. He carefully slipped the booklet into his pocket and made his way out a side door.

Clay was perplexed by what he had seen. Why such skulking secrecy? Frank had every right to enter the hall as one of the senior staff within the ES-Tech organisation. After all he had been working throughout the day on the set up of the event.

Frank was his intermediary with the real world, and his safety net. Clay had to be grateful for his offering him his current job with all its unusual challenges. But he was never sure whether he even liked Frank very much. He had such an uncanny way of accumulating information about everyone, details that gave him considerable power over others. Frank called this his 'intuition' but Clay knew first hand how hard he worked pumping people and researching details to fuel this so-called 'intuition'.

Frank held a pivotal position in Clay's life. Clay cast his mind back over how when, emerging from the bus station not so long ago, he had encountered the faded *Embers* sign with its crooked neon lighting and realised that it looked comfortably nondescript, a place that he might be able to retreat to a dark corner to consider a next step with a drink in hand. Here he might also find a few like-minded acquaintances. He knew no one else in the City except for his social worker's niece, certainly a last resort.

Frank had emerged from a back room and made a tour of the room speaking to various people in an easy, affable manner. Nevertheless Clay quickly gained a sense of being hunted; he was not unaware that this man was relentlessly closing in upon him until he at last introduced himself breezily. There was something unctuous in the manner which rang alarm bells and Clay was commendably wary. In the disinterested flaccid handshake he detected that his vulnerability was already being targeted. Clay responded with cool indifference. He was asked many questions. This man knew everybody on the premises and was generous in his introductions to a wide group of eccentric characters whose dysfunctional lives made Clay feel slightly more relaxed.

Even at this first meeting he perceived that Frank's body seemed tortured into a peculiar shape perhaps by a bizarre gym regimen. It had reached an age when it was no longer flattered by a predilection for skin tight black leather cladding. Aspects

that did not need to be expressed surfaced for display in unforeseen places. Frank's dainty emerald ear studs, which might once have looked alluring on an innocent child, seemed a feeble disguise for an old reprobate who had probably dispatched more than his fair share of young innocents.

But who was Clay to denigrate such affectations when he himself was now perforated with lines of steely hoops edging both ears and a bar ploughed through his forehead. What would *he* look like at 45? At least all that seemed impossibly far in the future.

Clay's natural diffidence was probably the most effective means that he could have vented to engage a person like Frank, a person who never permitted himself to move through life unnoticed.

Frank had begun to spin out interesting stories about his work and slowly, gently, reel Clay in. He obviously knew a lot of very important people. Clay found it hard to imagine why such persons would be found 'hanging' in a dive like Embers. Like a skilled fisherman Frank paid out a little line and allowed his prey a sense of freedom, the impression that he would ultimately escape intact. He knew that eventually exhaustion would set in, that his prey would gradually expend its strength and become used to the idea that his fate was inevitable. Ultimately it would surrender itself up.

On his second visit Clay was astonished to receive an offer of temporary employment at ES-Tech, a little job which would give access to a range of interesting technology. He had asked for time to think about the offer and he was allowed approximately five minutes. It appeared to be quite a glamorous opportunity; he might learn a lot. It was only later that Clay discovered he was destined to work so closely with the man that he had instinctively mistrusted.

Nevertheless a relationship began to develop though Frank's unremitting efforts to oil himself into the younger, more anarchic set. His projection of bohemian fecklessness combined with an authority role seemed both poignant and embarrassing.

Frank had the irritating habit of upstaging whomever he was with. His multifarious experiences of life were always being dredged up from a past crowded with incident and paraded before the eyes of his callow new recruits, most of whom felt that they were being held back from following some equally interesting life trajectory. He had stories about visiting almost every part of the world and was quite capable of overwhelming another's tentative descriptions of some local adventure with his own experiences of rafting through Xingu territory, eluding Singhalese pirates or infiltrating a warlord's enclave in Kirghizstan. It was too exhausting to assimilate and quite impossible to respond with anything remotely comparable. The youth gathered around him just lapsed into an admiring, if stony silence and listened. His stories always seemed to be impositions rather than exchanges.

Most of the other members of Frank's 'platoon' were sealed off from each other within a network of safely isolated electronic cells. After the initial induction, Frank

rarely communicated with any of them directly. He delivered his instructions by text. Few of them were entitled to return to Embers or interfere with the recruiting process. Clay was the one exception.

Gradually Frank's platoon lists changed as recruits succumbed to their own vices. But there were always plenty of new potential inductees drifting into a place like Embers.

Clay was on a different footing from most of these inductees. Frank had recognised the value in fostering Clay's eccentricities to ensure a more complete dependence. He feigned alarm, touched with envy, at Clay's florescence of perforations which had now laden both ears and erupted through his cheeks and lips. He made exceptions for Clay's peculiar slashed and zippered clothes. He ensured that the entire platoon maintained primary relationships exclusively with himself. There was no room for co-dependency or secondary loyalties.

Clay had been brought into the heart of ES-Tech to act as Frank's lieutenant and co-ordinate 'platoon' activities. It was an enviable position, but to Frank's dismay Clay did not always seem to grasp the significance of his privilege. He had to be watched like a hawk.



- 'u-seys'

I am now lying awake struggling to recall the details of a recent dream. Many heads, detached from their bodies, are bobbing like corks on the surface of a turbulent ocean, their faces barely recognisable in the twilight. These are the 'u-seys'. They are calling out in desperation, begging to be rescued from the shipwreck. While treading water in their midst, I am aware of the shadow cast by the massive hulk of the great ship 'Hubris' subsiding irrevocably into the depths beyond. As I turn away from the wreckage I become aware of a faint band of light on the horizon. This is the direction that I must swim for safety but my destination seems impossibly distant.

Now fully awake and feeling considerably relieved, I am trying to trigger a recollection of the circumstances that have caused the wreck. But I can not get beyond my own compunction about swimming off into the unknown and abandoning those plaintive cries.

Peacocks at the Pale

usually I try to downplay my latent anxieties. Dex seethes with evident resentment at the restrictions placed upon our lives, bemoaning our incarceration like that of lab rats kept busy on our treadmills. But I recognise that all those lives surrounding us are circumscribed by prisons of their own making.

Dex and I call our support staff the 'u-seys'. Pathetically, they attempt to engage us with captivating vignettes of their own dreadful lives. Usually several attend us in an incomprehensible rotor and we must apply ourselves to the task of humiliating them with fiendish diversions and orchestrated temper tantrums, sending them off for peer review and mutual consolation. Why any of them put up with our behaviour is a mystery. But this is a sad truth about slavery; the u-seys have defined themselves by thresholds that they dare not transgress. The slave is best protected from confronting the agonising freedoms of the world beyond the pale, from becoming too painfully aware of his shackles.

Our flights of unbridled contempt are particularly directed at one egregious victim. Usually he insists on introducing himself as Doctor Drayble-Carnley, with significant emphasis on a title that has culminated years of gruelling self-sacrifice. In misplaced hopes of fostering team spirit he likes to be addressed with the more collegial 'DeeCee'. Instead we have labelled him 'Dribs' and take pleasure in exercising the fullest range of humiliations that such a name can elicit. We have made forays onto the internet and turned up evidence of his insights into 'our case'. He has a bibliography of dreary, turgid articles that would atrophy any mind within Pico-seconds. He has dedicated his life to the invasion of our brain electrochemistry, trying to detect the exact geographical co-ordinates of our various mental functions, to better understand some of the subliminal connections of twins. But what excitement can you generate around a dissertation on the 'Entanglement of the Mesiobasal Temporal Lobes'? It ill behoves either of us to reveal more than a marginal interest in such desiccated passions. I am, however, somewhat daunted by his tenacity. He is out there assessing us constantly. I need only call out his name and he will materialise like a perfectly programmed robot. Sometimes it almost seems as if it is he and not we that are intended to be prescient.

Thomas Dex and I reign as monarchs. But as exemplaries, we are obliged to endure the relentless scrutiny of others. The u-seys analyse us incessantly from their twilit world amidst screens crowded with data. They gossip about our erratic behaviour and draw perceptive conclusions for their pithy papers submitted for peer review.

Dex has a genius for sparking torture sessions. Drib's clothes are usually pathetically

Threshold

threadbare and we naturally focus on such deficiencies mercilessly. "Hey Dribs, how about accompanying us on a little sartorial spree? How would Muriel feel about a little zip up?" Drib's face will lift pathetically at any sign of interest shown in his inconsequential life. "Her name was Mary, Thomas, as you well know and she died last year, so she will be just fine about my remaining un-zipped."

Poor Dribs has all the wrong genes, many of which have surfaced in a turbulent complexion. He hates to see rich foods temptingly paraded before him, so we ensure that he is constantly entrusted with arranging them for us. Of course both Thomas Dex and I have perfect, unblemished skin.

Dex has been insistent upon our adopting a daunting clean-shaven cranium. He is only making a virtue of what has been lost to his latent anxiety. I am somewhat ambivalent about the effect but feel obliged to humour most of his whims. While he revels in having the people we encounter recoil visibly, I am not always as enamoured of appearing quite so alien.

Dex and I are blessed with an internal broadcast system that is no more invasive than a hearing aid implant. We can effectively align our thinking and communicate our demands back to our u-seys throughout the day. We have even developed our own coded language which is quite impervious to our inquisitors. While the u-seys regard this development with suspicion they also appreciate potential research nugget value. As we stare into the distance, humming tunelessly, we can appear quite plausibly telepathic.

Thomas Dex believes that the most dangerous of our u-seys is Zwielicht. 'Zwie' is another of the crosses we have to bear. He has hung over us from earliest memory, monitoring the show from a back seat. Zwie is clearly one of the sharper knives in the box. We are reluctant to include him in our daily situation dramas; his dimensions ill-suit our stage.

However, Zwie is not the visionary behind our mission. Our Creator? He is tucked away behind the scenes and we have rarely interfaced in conference. His name is Noor, the eminent Dr Noor. And we are famed in medical literature as The Noor Project.

Thomas and I see eye to eye on most issues - though I resent his tendency to regard me as 'the spare'. Throughout the twenty two years of our lives together we have never been separated; we have occupied the same room and from earliest memory and lived our lives in dual ... or is that in duel?

Peacocks at the Pale

Everything comes to us in duplicate. We pace ourselves to ensure that we are addressing the same situations simultaneously. We would not choose to diverge but it is usually I that must make the adjustments to suit Dex's erratic whims.

In fact the most traumatic moments of our 'lives' have occurred when we have been inadvertently separated. Months ago when Dex tripped over his toga having initiated a frenzy of activity among the u-seys, he broke a tooth on a table edge. We were both rushed to the dentist and endured the same anaesthetic. I became acutely aware of the divisive quirks of destiny which we have been at such pains to avoid. It was I who fainted due to his excruciating pain. But such empathy has never been reciprocal. Dex would never lay himself open to experience another's pain.

Dex and I quickly outgrew our Roman toga period and experimented with a period of complete nudity in defiance of the dreary sameness of the u-seys' attire. They were reluctant to follow 'non-suit' despite our insistence. But ultimately neither of us had any interest in viewing Drib's scrofulous flesh. It was more about the satisfying shock that we could induce.

Currently we have favour full body stockings in pastel colours. Easy to manage, they pick up the cameras flatteringly. Our tailor, Jacko, a pursed-lipped elf, attends to our whims regularly. He ensures that we look quite satisfactorily luminous on our monitors. Nevertheless I secretly admit to some delight in observing Dex's discomfiture when he has overindulged himself, maliciously enjoying his bursting at the seams. Though eating exactly the same diet I make a point of never overindulging myself.

Not even sex – which both of us undertake regularly and prefer in liquid form, imbibing a heady cocktail before repairing to the repose area. We never discuss these experiences; sex is the one of those experiences that is best indulged in total solitude.

Nevertheless both of us have fulfilling virtual partnerships. You are never aware of the resources at your command until you sit down and conjure them up. Dex complains that I spend too much time trying to finesse the exact qualities required in my virtual mate. He, in contrast, has little personal interest in interaction. He gravitates towards characteristics that will be thwarted and humiliated by his demands. He relishes the anguish and tears as he imposes himself over the protests of his victims. That is the only way that he can gauge his own role in a relationship.

Threshold

Admittedly some aspects of our lives remain an uneasy compromise. We have been designed to be emissaries into a distant future, programmed to endure substantially extended lives. With such a long term perspective, the undertaking of any significant risk becomes a serious consideration.

The regular cycles of the earth, its seasons, its tectonic drifts and its pummelling's from space beyond establish a rhythm of change which sets the life expectancies of all living things within a relatively narrow range. Growth cycles are set within a continuum ranging from seconds to centuries, but there are very few living beings that count their years in millennia before they endure renewal. The spark of life may be immortal but participating creatures are endowed with specific time frames.

Due to our expected longevity we must vigilantly guard against assuming any needless risk. Levels of risk mushroom for extended life spans and risk calculations can turn up daunting probabilities. For instance the likelihood of fatally slipping on a bathmat becomes a near certainty in a substantially extended lifetime unless strenuous counter measures are applied. Dribs is the acknowledged expert on risk reduction and our world implodes every time he sits down and examines the full potential for disaster.

Nevertheless I am very aware that their "forever" does not really mean eternity. We will continue to be part of an ongoing transformation. As in my dream I must strike out alone for that glimmer on the horizon. There is no alternative. Many so-called 'human' qualities will soon become anachronisms, distant memories.

Mara

Not all members of the glittering audience in the Frontier Hall were so self-importantly bent on affirming their strategic positions in the Portal redevelopment consultations. Sitting in a group at the back of the room, partitioned off by a low glass screen, was a small group of observers admitted to glean what they could for the various news media they represented.

Among them was a young woman with sandy blonde hair wreathed into a loose knot firmly secured with a bright green broccoli elastic band. She sat studying her notes and occasionally taking a nibble from the end of her pencil. While all of the others in the group were massaging their tablets and peering into tiny screens that illuminated the tips of their noses, she precariously balanced a small wire bound notebook on her knee. She had brought a small pencil sharpener which was deployed with determined gusto as her eyes roved over the room below.

Mara had been invited to the ES-Tech conference through a set of circumstances she could not have foreseen a fortnight earlier. Though she had not met the person who had so changed her life in that brief interval, she felt that she implicitly trusted the judgement of that gentle good-humoured voice at the end of the phone line better than many of her acquaintances.

The relationship had begun with the arrival of a letter signed by a stranger identified only as *Clara Voy*, deciphered from the signature dance of the pen. Subsequent notes were signed off only as *Clara*. In a time of relentless emailing, this written correspondence revealed much through the even, confident handwriting and concise expression. The first letter congratulated Mara on an editorial recently published on her blog site *NewSPeak*, which addressed the local community concerns about the plans for the long derelict lands in the City port area. Mara had been critical of the city planners' rejection of the *City Manor Farm* proposal to extend their temporary use onto an adjacent site.

Her project, the *Living Alliance*, known to its familiars as *LAL* recorded its views on their *NewSPeak* blog site. The *City Manor Farm* had been a *LAL* proposal for temporary occupation of a long strip site on the threshold of the vacant port lands. A transitional agricultural use was proposed to revitalise the vacant lands which would otherwise blight the adjacent neighbourhoods. The temporary land use would begin to bring people back into the area on a regular basis. Proposals were assembled for vertical, hydroponic, and aquatic installations that would provide local employment and encourage remediation throughout the community. *LAL* also promoted their 'farm' as a valuable educational resource for the inner City schools allowing students to familiarise themselves with plants and animals that they usually encountered in shrink wrap.

LAL defined its mission as cultivating a more balanced ecology within the City by exploring temporary uses for abandoned landscapes. They attacked sterile zoning rules in their attempts to transform attitudes and integrating a more interdependent natural world within City life. The motto of the group, emblazoned across the masthead of *NewSPeak*, '*Peacocks at the Pale*', was intended to suggest that the time had come to challenge many City planning preconceptions.

Mara was the sole 'employee' and coordinator of the good intentions of an assortment of exuberant volunteers. "People are increasingly cut off from any understanding of the essential *Alliance* and interaction between all living things," she wrote, "We are losing all sense of the interconnectedness of Life. Alienated from the facts of life, like a citizenry of Marie Antoinette's, we obsess about City real estate values and property ladders but fail to see the system that supports us and its potential diversity."

However the City politicians were concerned that developments like the *City Farm* would set an undesirable precedent by compromising flexibility for future land development. There were no obvious tax benefits, just the risk that if such projects became successful, they might put unwelcome pressure on dormant speculative land banks across the City.

The team of planning experts commissioned to report on the proposals had unanimously lambasted the scheme as a potential threat to public health. The adjacent lands were reputed to be severely poisoned by past industrial processes, and they would require comprehensive remediation before they could be occupied in any way. *LAL* enthusiasts were condemned as callow neophytes who did not understand the true economic issues involved. Unfortunately the media, latching onto Mara's message, began to depict *LAL* as advocating traditional dairy farms, serviced by radioactive milk maids and surrounded by fields of deadly crops. Her 'Marie Antoinette' remark had backfired disastrously.

That first letter from Clara was followed the next day by another which included a return address that conjured up a pleasant leafy suburban enclave. Mara imagined a large vegetable patch in her back garden. While others in *LAL* might too easily become obsessed with the self-righteousness of their campaigns Clara exuded a straight forward practical perspective. She did not provide any personal details about her life and Mara respected her apparent desire for anonymity.

In the absence of intelligible surname, Mara's letters were always addressed 'For the attention of Clara' at the given return address.

Then a letter with the familiar handwriting arrived and to Mara's delight it contained a donation, a certified cheque for a small sum. Clara's brief explanation was that a philanthropic friend who, having been given a copy of *NewSPeak*, had generously offered a donation to help in construction of an improved promotional website. Mara could discover absolutely nothing about the cheques signatory, *BDV*

Holdings or what their specific interests might be.

With this donation advertisements were designed and placed in the various local media and an improved web site was devised to include articles and a plethora of un-indexed photos posted in chaotic profusion.

The resulting sudden surge of public interest in *LAL* caught all of the members by surprise. The membership base expanded rapidly as the blogging site took on a life of its own with frequent daily hits.

During the previous week a note had arrived from Clara suggesting that Mara attend a promotional panel discussion to be held in the Frontier Hall. This had been styled as a 'debate' that would set out development issues and discuss the transformation of this vast site into a 'world class' biotechnology centre.

The neatly handwritten sheet enfolded a press pass for the event. Mara could hardly refuse, though she was worried that her contribution to such an occasion would be less than informed on either the financial nuances of these proposals or the nature of the proposed scientific research. Was she expected to advance a formal reaction from the City Manor Farm? Recalling the viral rancour that resulted from her Marie Antoinette remarks, she agonised that she was being set up to step again into a political minefield.

As it happened biotechnical engineering had been receiving violently adverse press coverage due to the spectacular incident of the so-called *City Seven*. This gang of intruders had penetrated the lax security in the suburban Gene-Sys Biotech Research Centre and had inadvertently exposed themselves to a particularly noxious germ culture. Motives for their break-in were still unclear. At first it was thought that they were thrill seekers looking for mind expanding drugs. However the first of these interlopers was apprehended after he developed severe fever symptoms and had to be rushed to hospital. A second colleague succumbed shortly after. In his few remaining lucid moments he named five others who had accompanied them on the 'adventure'. Within days this gang of seven had succumbed to exposure to mysterious organisms or substances that they had encountered. All had lapsed into comas. Their youthful obituaries published in the media were coupled with images of investigators in anti-contamination suits and respirators still attempting to identify the source of their undoing. The whole affair could not have been more theatrical.

The local media had been quick to impute terrorist intentions. "*Armageddon! Deadly plague outbreak feared.*" The papers flew off the stands, public vigils were held, blogging sites collapsed under the strain, all choked with the reactions of the terrified.

The incident had been a publicity disaster for Gene-Sys on the eve of its flotation as a public company and there were many calls to close down their research programme immediately. Their director, Dr Eugene Krafft, was utterly perplexed and quite unable to suggest what the 'lads' had been exposed to. He was adamant that there was nothing

within his facility which could possibly produce such symptoms. He even alluded to the possibility of industrial sabotage in anticipation of Gene-Sys' upcoming flotation on the stock market.

The City media revelled in the drama and the reinforcement of the City's 'world class' pretensions in being able to host its own home-grown terrorists like the *City Seven*.

Mara decided to dress down for the Frontier event, knowing that she would be pitched into the midst of considerable anti-development protest raging outside. Many of her friends including Trehugg and his colleagues at the Farm would be among the vociferous protesters at the gates. She had had to pilot herself through a crowd of hysterical demonstrators, all with very mixed agendas but unified in anger. She had showed her pass with a grotesquely unfair identity photo and found herself rubbing shoulders in the press box with a tough little group. Looking about she breathed a sigh of relief; these were clearly not daunting experts of any kind. The zealous fury written on their faces suggested that they were ill briefed and had probably already formulated their views on behalf of their publications.

She glanced over at a man inexplicably labelled 'Zubie' who was thumbing a message furiously, while the *iPod* channelled into his left ear was tuned into a far away sound saturated world. What possible insight could a flighty multi-tasker like that have into bio-tech development she wondered?

During the course of the evening, one after another the scheduled speakers had set out the Hyperion vision and the advantages of creating a biotech enclave on the waterfront that had been awaiting regeneration for decades. Such a research facility would make the city a recognised international centre for genetic research. Security aspects of the proposed development emerged as an overriding concern. Gene-Sys had taken considerable pains to demonstrate how carefully ES-Tech would be integrated into the organisation. The City Seven debacle had been a timely reminder that security and risk management should be in the forefront of every mind.

No one actually addressed the nature of the research being contemplated though everyone was agreed on the dire consequences of ceding such research to uncontrolled agents or losing the development opportunity to some rival city.

The message emerged that a strong regulating body would be empowered to ensure that such industries were not hi-jacked by 'rogue states'. What did Mara know about rogue states anyway? *LAL* sought to foster connections on a much more modest scale; local conservation challenges and immediate ecological problems. How could she make a plausible summation of a Pandora's Box of potential evils?

"Yi-i-iah" sighed Mara under her breath and then biting her lip, looked nervously at the reporter next to her to see whether her indiscretion had been overheard. He was quite oblivious however, hunched over his screen furiously entering some observation

into his notebook, shielding the tiny screen from her critical scrutiny.

Mara had profound misgivings about the way Colonel Rumsden, the '*D-S-Oh*', had suddenly commandeered the debate on behalf of ES-Tech. His method of argument constructed a collage of nightmarish situations. "Well at least he is obsessed with something beyond expanding the tax base and cutting services", which seemed to be the other passionately proffered solution to the issues of the moment. "Why stint tax dollars when facing Armageddon?"

After the event she spotted Malyn Starak surrounded by sycophants, buzzing bees fanning their chilly queen. She recalled that Malyn had recently spoken out forcefully against the concept of human genetic engineering in her '*Starak Report*'. During the course of this interview she had proceeded to tear to shreds some poor unsuspecting scientist who had attempted to describe his research. The same Dr Krafft, now on stage, had spent much of his allotted time valiantly defending his altruistic intentions and began to warble about the 'ultimate benefit to mankind in alleviating human suffering.'

Malyn's eyes had narrowed and Mara knew that the knife was about to fall. "So you see yourself as doing God's work, Dr Krafft?" She had opened a yawning chasm before him and invited him to step briskly forward. The audience had seemed surprisingly subdued; it was not clear from the interview what exactly they were expected to think.

As the meeting broke up, Malyn was hemmed in by her fawning coterie. In her notebook Mara jotted down a request for a brief interview to discuss the City Manor Farm expansion proposals in light of all of the discussions of the evening. Malyn's remarks, however incoherent, had suggested that she might be receptive to airing possible alternative visions.

Unable to penetrate the tight cordon of admirers Mara had her note passed forward. Malyn's precipitous reaction was completely baffling. The notebook was sent fluttering over the seats and Mara was grabbed by two thugs in black uniforms and unceremoniously ejected into a side alley full of dustbins. The steel door was slammed in her face. Wondering what raw nerve it was she had touched, she was obliged to return to Wellington Street and ponder what to report in NewSPeak to satisfy their mysterious sponsor.

Threshold



- Mirrors

I awake befuddled, wandering through a dream labyrinth of mirrors, surrounded by infinite reflections and treacherous, illusory spaces. There are multiple images bearing in upon me from every angle. I have been threading my way through long galleries and like a spider unravelling a filament to guide my way back if I become lost. Dex is tethered to the other end of this string. He is sightless and isn't distracted by all the confusing reflections that bedevil me. He can only feel his way.

What are all these illusions that we live amidst? The invention of the mirror proved a formative moment in the development of human self-consciousness. Previously, the perception of self had so few Narcissus opportunities; we had to rely on others reactions to unguarded appearances. The mirror however provided a tool to construct and practice an idea of the self, and incidentally also began to reinforce individual capacities for dissimulation as well as the capacity for self-delusion. Through the mirror one can fall in love with the concept of the nobility of one's own struggles.

With Dex I have always lived with a mirror image of myself close at hand. I have had no need to resort to a mirror to contemplate the details. If I want to consider the back of my head I need look no further than him. I can observe my peculiar stiff legged gait and how I must appear to others in motion. I can cultivate none of the illusions that others do in addressing themselves eye-to-eye in a mirror.

Coming to terms with such realities I have learned to appreciate some of the negative aspects of our joint presentation: that tendency to extra flesh bulging out at the seams, the unpleasant porcine movement of my mouth as I eat; my tendency to scratch my head or knead my right ear when distracted in thought. How different from the photograph that can inadvertently reveal something unknown, when caught off guard, a look of rancid hatred in the eyes.

In my dream of mirrors I have good reason for keeping Dex at a distance tethered on the string. If he senses me within reach, he will only lash out, kicking and scratching in blind frustration, screaming insults and taunting that I too will soon go blind.

In our earliest years, with two minds sharing one semi-detached, mirrored body,

Peacocks at the Pale

Dex and I had to make many painful compromises. Resentments and conflicts multiplied. I recall our frustrations in deciding on any united course of action, and my frequent revenge exacted in leading him to ricochet painfully off furniture. We would pummel each other until we collapsed in exhaustion. Ironically it was only later, after we were surgically separated that we became inseparable. Life began to be more tolerable when we at least had the option of a solitude that ultimately we found we did not need. It was then that we realised that the real enemy lay in wait around us.

Though born as a single body we were awkwardly endowed with quite different dispositions. Our call into existence was the result of human ingenuity, minds that had selected and assembled all the ingredients. Human intervention guided every step, plotting the detailed mathematical sequences in an invisible world. Sequences of genetic material were analysed, tailored, and grafted into our heritage. Registered patents controlled the method by which tiny particles of our paternity were inserted into an indifferent, vacated cell. The mystery of life was sparked and the servants of this process congratulated themselves, rather presumptuously, on their scientific prowess, in spite of their limited grasp of the powers they had unleashed.

Massaged by mysterious energies, cells began to divide in parallel indolence, following mysterious blueprints. Coil upon coil, guided by unseen forces, memories of thousands of generations were rekindled; that long history of turmoil, self-sacrifice, of acquired capabilities that had miraculously resulted in survival against so many odds.

This triumph of ingenuity has all been elaborated subsequently in exhaustive detail in the medical press. We are expected to congratulate the scientists that accomplished such feats on our behalf. However from our own viewpoint we imagine ourselves as inevitable; we could not imagine being different in any respect.

An invisible environment shaped us into two intelligences albeit temporarily destined to share a single body. Our birth, which was intended as a moment of triumph in the careers of our creators, proved an intense embarrassment. What had been so carefully contrived, an 'immaculate' twin birth, transpired to become an abomination. Our emergence was marked with horrified whispers and immediate removal from one brightly lit, cool, antiseptic environment into another.

"... must maintain a blanket of secrecy - if the press latches on ... undermine the confidence of the funders..."

"... a plausible explanation must be ..."

Threshold

“... the whole project could be discredited, setting the research back a decade ...”
“... or at least until any public interest has been diverted ...”

So the celebrity promised at birth was initially denied. But we learned to embrace our incarceration, grateful for our private sanctuary. We accepted that we were nature's orphans who had come into the world unburdened by natural parents. Summarily wrenched from our appointed limelight we were hurried off to a secret location and consigned to isolation as we competed for control of one awkwardly extended body. Just when we were beginning to thrash out a co-ordinated plan for living, a cold blade passed between us, condemning us to a sudden new alienation.

Unexpectedly the day arrived when our creators discovered that our birth had blessed them in unforeseen ways. They impetuously burst back upon us ready to study every aspect of our relationship and to offer us the celebrity that had been withheld. Told earlier that we were neither mentally nor physically equipped to join the outside world, suddenly that outside world invaded, clamouring to join us. We have learned to exploit our new celebrity, albeit suffocating under a raft of devices for monitoring performance. Suddenly the full panoply of reconnaissance resources available to important people, sophisticated devices for observing, collecting data and anticipating their desires were focussed upon us. We had become interesting.

Though we attempt to present a unified front, there are significant differences in our basic predilections. Dex is very resistant to the intrusions of others in our lives. But I have always been the observer with an appetite for news and gossip. I can only lament that our entourage lead such painfully uneventful lives. Dex on the other hand is as blind as imagined in my dream. He is impulsive and leaps to unshakable conclusions on a whim. His decisions are intuitive and often he can see the heart of an issue while I become enmeshed in the complex details. Isolation gives him strength of purpose that I recognise is missing in me. He is utterly uninterested in securing approval for his actions and often vents irrational anger or exacts brutal revenge for imagined injustices. I, on the other hand, am much more amenable to the idea of being liked. Unlike me, he records nothing except his gaming scores. But he is much less likely to trap himself within the sometimes nebulous ideas that I spin out. We have learned to conceal our differences, usually resolving the problem of the other view by revelling in our wilfulness and inconsistency.

In my current dream I realise that though I think that I am in control of the string, we still remain bound together as we were born; neither of us is free. I am often confused by false reflections but Dex blindly feels his way.

Starkers

Malyn Starak was able to maintain her aloof, inscrutable presence in the midst of the crowds so often thronging about her, a curious characteristic in a person whose practiced role is in drawing out the opinions of others. But the public eye that she engaged most comfortably lay refracted through a camera lens, an eye that remained under her strict control. With the camera there was always some recourse, albeit only a second's delay. What had been said or done could be recalled and suppressed. The lens encouraged her objective ruthlessness in sizing up an opportunity and in toying with her prey. In her mind's eye she was always watching herself as if perpetually on camera.

Every Thursday evening in the *Starak Report* she spliced herself into the lives of others. Accustomed to the incessant ego massaging adulation of carefully manipulated audiences, she had contrived a very recognisable public persona. She cultivated an illusion of personal inadequacy, a tendency to personal indiscretion, all teetering on the brink of exposure. Her enquiring countenance with its delicate bird-like features, melting blue eyes surmounted by quizzical mid-hinged eyebrows and her excessive expressions of shock or disbelief induced misplaced confidence in those she interviewed. Victims would invariably relax becoming overconfident in exposing personal foibles. They would make the fatal mistake of trying to win her complicity on a journey of mutual discovery.

But her loosely coiled mahogany festoon of hair, always on the verge of cascading from its tentative clamp fastening, suggested an vulnerability that she did not aspire to. Her wide eyes, veiled with innocent pale blue curtains hinted at a naiveté that was completely alien to her character. Glossy coral lips which poignantly suggested feminine vulnerability revealed a glimpse of a dental array that is not merely an aesthetic screen.

On this evening at Frontier Hall her mauling by a star-struck coterie had again made her too aware of all the false images surrounding her, the elegant clothing and the glamorous coterie of influential friends. The emerging theme of this evening's panel discourse, its focus on security had struck a jarring chord. She felt utterly alone obliged to face many security issues of her own.

She had thought to attend the Hyperion presentation in part to promote the imminent publication of her book, *Blind Terror*, which had developed its theme around interviews with people related to the fanatical *City Seven*. But as the book release date approached she was becoming increasingly unsettled, aware that she had embraced a contentious issue with very murky outlines. She did not fully comprehend the antipathies that she had stirred up. Recently she had received anonymous letters threatening legal action over various passages which did not specify why they had

proven so offensive. Someone had hacked into her manuscript during its gestation; this hacker demonstrated such familiarity with extended passages and turns of phrase.

Becoming increasingly paranoid about clandestine surveillance, she began to agonise about losing track of details of her daily life. She would absentmindedly misplace items and then rediscover them in the most illogical of places. It was as if there was a parallel person hidden within who was acting independently, trying to leave unsettling clues.

On the evening of the Hyperion presentation, overcome with malaise, she felt that the safest place to be was planted firmly in the public eye, inducing as many people as possible to anticipate her book release. This would be the best way to confront powerful but undisclosed enemies.

Her dramatic gesture in cutting through her clinging coterie and reaching out to a callow autograph seeker had been her method of re-establishing control of her situation. But this proved a mistake; she had quickly sensed a self-righteous determination in the young woman's bearing. This was not some star struck fan but one of those tiresome persistent activists who held themselves in the forefront of the righteous. There were plenty of them loitering in the street outside making their half-baked views known with their feckless chants and taunts. Such people had so little understanding of the real issues or how to insinuate themselves into positions of real power.

Malyn had turned her back resolutely on another annoying intrusion. Generally she relished the appalled reactions of others when she played a diva role. Lance followed dutifully in her wake flashing his well-practiced grimace of apology as she abruptly cut a swathe through the flashing cameras. He could already imagine tomorrow's photographs caricaturing some excessive moment of the rebuff. He was able to catch up just in time to hail her driver and open her door with unctuous aplomb.

"I'm going to buzz off now, Lanny. Just find your own way home," she hissed imperiously. "I want to be alone tonight. You do understand, dear, don't you?" Without awaiting his response Malyn abruptly slammed the door in his face. Lance caught a glimpse of his image, cravenly bent and distorted in the smoked window glass. Her car squealed off into the traffic.

As Malyn began to inspect the ravages of the evening in her compact mirror, she became aware of the glittering black eyes of the chauffeur in the rear view mirror surreptitiously observing her.

"What are you looking at?" she snapped. She sat back and glared at the stiffening shoulders of the driver. It was not her usual chauffeur, Liam, yet this man seemed disturbingly familiar. Had she not seen him earlier in the day, perhaps in a totally different guise? She began to regret that she had dismissed Lance so callously. Even he could be slightly useful sometimes.

"You are not taking my usual route", she snapped. The deadly glittering eyes again confronted her in the rear-view mirror.

“Which route does *madam* wish me to take?” he enquired suggestively. The words emerged sulkily, dangerous and foreign.

She thought quickly, in rising panic. The route that her usual driver took uptown had too few stoplights, too few witnesses. She considered rolling down the window to scream for help or abruptly leaping out of the car at the next stop.

“Turn left here and stick to the main street,” she answered brusquely.

The driver seemed surprised, shrugged his shoulders and followed the instruction.

“Don’t shrug your shoulders at me! I don’t expect to be judged by you.”

“Is there anything in particular that you are looking for?” he enquired – again in a wheedling, untrustworthy voice. The car veered suggestively towards a pavement. Inquisitive people were trying to peer into the smoked glass windows. Malyn checked that the locks were set and hunkered in the far corner reminding herself that this riff-raff could not detect her through the darkened glass. At a stoplight a drunken oaf in an emblazoned leather jacket pressed his cupped face against the glass to leer in. His tongue extended and licked the glass. She kicked out at angrily. It was always the same, people pushing in everywhere, attempting to invade her private life.

At last she began to breathe a little more easily as the lobby of the Epitome Palace Apartments hove into sight. The car rolled to a halt.

“No! You! Stay! Exactly where you are! I don’t want your help.” She snapped. However the driver had already stepped out into the light shower to offer an umbrella. It was increasingly obvious that he was intending an assault.

“Just piss off”, she hissed fiercely, dropping his umbrella into the gutter and fleeing towards the door held open by a startled doorman.

As she burst through into the over lit entry lobby the concierge behind the desk purred “Good evening, Madam” with the same controlled foreign inflection as her malevolent chauffeur. With a growing horror she realised that she had never seen this particular concierge before. The two men must be in cahoots.

Wordlessly she raced across the lobby into the open lift, punched the penthouse button. The doors slid shut leaving the two thwarted thugs, looking admittedly somewhat perplexed, their insidious intentions temporarily foiled.

Hurriedly racing down her hallway before the other lift disgorged her tormentors; she fumbled to find the keys buried deep in her handbag. She emptied the bag onto the carpet at the threshold and grabbed the keys surfaced amidst the debris. Why had she insisted on having three different locks? Frantically she unlocked them and pushed breathlessly into her foyer, kicking the strewn contents of her bag across the threshold. Slamming the door shut, she threw the deadbolt, laced the chains top and bottom and then sank to her knees amidst the debris into the plush, comforting carpet and burst into a rhythmic sobbing.

Threshold



- An Education

Again a recurrent horror, a nightmare in which I am reliving that blank stare of Saïd, his fathomless brown eyes directed at the ceiling, cold lips half-parted. There is a message, dripping red, smeared on the sterile white tiles alongside the head lolling over the bath rim. My eyes blur and the letters slither across the glossy tiles. I cannot decipher the message but I know that the contents must be accusatory and damning. The ruddy brown water laps the rim of the tub. The floor is awash in a rising blood tide.

Dex and I stand side by side, looking down at his lifeless body. Dex seems in a trance; his vacant blue eyes oblivious to the body before us. Then I recognise a flicker of triumph. Reaching down with one hand he places his hand on the crown of Saïd's head and pushes it under the surface with angry determination. Saïd's cold blue knees, break the surface awkwardly. Dex turns and walks out of the room.

And this is what they call 'an education'.

Our early recollections of a carefree life fell away precipitously when the u-seys started to expect more conventional behaviour. Naturally we rebelled. They shook their heads in dismay and began to talk sagely about the need for 'an education', although there was no evidence that this experience had benefited any of them.

Their concept of the process entailed leading a candidate to examine the thresholds of their comfortable world. Then without warning he would be suddenly pushed into the abyss beyond. The resilient candidate should eventually succeed in clawing his way back to a safe perch. Meanwhile the educators have retreated to safe vantage points to assess performance.

Disasters come in threes they say. To complete our education we were subjected to a triumvirate of teachers, in rapid succession. Each of our imported mentors represented a different belief system. We were able to test them to destruction in all cases. As teachers they were ultimately effective in teaching us what we would have to overcome in the people around us.

Charity- Miss Calvary Cross, our first, blew in on a nimbus of self-righteous

Peacocks at the Pale

incense. She expected us to measure up to her best-of-all-possible, god-conceived worlds. She took up residence in a spare cell above the lab but never appeared below without her hard leather briefcase containing 'the Book', packed amongst numerous pointy implements. We referred to her as the 'grand inquisitor' intent on saving souls at any cost.

Like the illustrations of her god, her face was long and thin and her hair hung like two lank curtains from the crown of her head, her eyes were ringed with circles of weary compassion. To complete her evangelical mystique she sported an irascible shoulder parrot, Smokey, who nuzzled her protruding ear and regularly declaimed a shocked 'Oh My God!' in tones of rising hysteria.

Calvary had come to a conclusion based on argument 'by design' that she was the servant of a 'Higher Purpose'. Her strategy for our education was to point to a tree laden the fruits amidst the Eden of our natural proclivities and then pull out a catechism which expressly forbade sampling. Disciplined self-denial and restraint were central to her concept of education.

She laboured over our daily regimen of memorisation of useless mathematical formulae, or foreign vocabulary. She carefully monitored our 'improvement' against recorded benchmarks and was elated to discover how we out-performed children of a similar age, results which she ascribed to the workings of the mysterious Spirit rather than our deftness at exploiting her obvious weaknesses.

But ultimately an incident occurred by which she overstepped the boundaries of our uneasy truce. The lab cat, Mitzie, our mascot and the scourge of Smokey's life, had given birth to a litter of kittens (Dex had discreetly arranged the necessary introductions). I remember that we were playing with the kittens under the eyes of the watchful mother. Suddenly Dex, acting impulsively pulled one away from its mother and dropped his slippered foot over it, instantly extinguishing its life. His sudden displays of extreme cruelty mystify me. It was done in a moment of spontaneity – perhaps one of his 'experiments' to gauge the reaction of the mother. If he had been wearing a heavy boot to armour himself from the reality of his actions, I might have reacted less viscerally, but a soft soled slipper! – I could almost feel the desperate creature wriggling in its pathetic death throes under my own foot.

The mother cat, utterly distraught, ran off howling, abandoning the rest of her litter which Dex proceeded to extinguish one by one. It was as if he had suddenly rebelled against the instinct for motherhood, offended by her instinctive maternal care. How often he had spent hours transfixed by Mitzie's cruelty in toying with

Threshold

terrified mice dangled before her. I have never questioned his behaviour, this obvious cruelty. I remain reluctant to confront the only anchor in my life.

Dex does not believe that kindness has a role in a post-human world. Maternal instinct should not be mistaken for kindness. What Calvary had termed 'charity' with misty eyes, he regarded as a temporary pact between vulnerable creatures, a species survival strategy.

Unfortunately Calvary entered at this inopportune moment. She erupted into an uncontrollable hysteria denouncing Dex as 'Satan incarnate'. Meanwhile Smokey swooped from perch to perch shrieking 'Oh My God!' Calvary fell to her knees and gathered up the crushed creatures and rushed off to fetch Dibs.

Our inquisitors attempted to punish us by a depowering of appliances and withholding favourite foods. But instead of contrition Dex determined to wreak revenge. He surreptitiously entrapped and dismembered the dreadful Smokey without a further 'Oh My God', then positioned tell-tale feathers around the studio and said nothing.

Shortly after Smokey's demise Calvary disappeared without explanation. But we learned from this experience that we had much more power over those around us than we had imagined. However firm and resolute they may appear in themselves, they are all alone, hiding their vulnerabilities.

Jihad- Soon after the second of the triumvirate, Saïd, showed up, fresh and elegant, prêt à manger! He was a gangly, youth with tufty hair and the hopeful wispy beard of a future sage. Saïd announced that his name signified 'happy' in the language of his Prophet but we quickly adopted the nick-name 'Saddy'. Saddy viewed the challenge of life as a great struggle to master his own personal weaknesses in service of a divine plan. He had an immense reverence for a divine authority who required propitiation five times a day. I would divert Saddy with elaborate leading questions about his habits and dietary requirements which he delighted in explaining in authoritative detail.

Dex is not inquisitive and never draws other out with his questions; he passes silent judgement without opportunity for appeal.

We soon realised that Saddy's enthusiasms disguised a great vulnerability. Dex discovered a dead piglet in an organic waste bin in the lab which he ensconced in a glass aquarium under his bed, away from the u-seys' surveillance. This was

Peacocks at the Pale

supposed to be an experiment to study the mysterious beginnings of life. For days he revelled in the decomposition underway as maggots riddled the carcass into a hollow carapace festooned with their eggs. I could not bear to look too closely.

As the flies began to hatch, Dex began to style himself 'Beelzebub', the 'Lord of the Flies'. At a strategic moment he revealed his 'experiment' to Saddy, a situation perfectly calculated to appal. The hatching flies had created a scene of desperate squalor as they flew around hopelessly incarcerated within the box, many expiring in the corners.

Recoiling in revulsion, Saddy threatened to denounce this science project to the other u-seys. Dex's next move was 'classic Dex'; he simply lifted the lid and let all the flies escape. For days afterwards there were flies everywhere throughout the lab. Squashed flies appeared in pockets, in the food, in bed at night. Dex even unscrewed the lid to ensure that some became embedded in Saddy's face cream.

ultimately Saddy's demise lived up to our version of his name. Dex seemed to know what was on the cards that night. Saddy, clearly diminished throughout the day's lessons, would not even look at Dex; he just stared down at the floor. He had abandoned his regular prayer rituals. His eyes were ringed in red. He went off to soak in his bath. We made a point of not enquiring after him when he did not re-emerge. We just took ourselves to bed ... and waited.

In the morning Dex and I found him in the cold carmine coloured bath water with an indecipherable message scrawled across the white tiles alongside. A momentary glint of triumph flashed across Dex's eyes as he surveyed the lifeless body. Then he put his hand over the top of his head and pushed it down under the water. This defiant flash instantly disappeared to be replaced by his usual vacant, innocent expression. It was I who betrayed some contrition as I contemplated the waste of even this insignificant life. The person who displays remorse always becomes implicated as a prime suspect.

Escape from Desire- Finally to complete the triumvirate, the redoubtable Foggie was brought in to resume our education. Foggie, who rejoiced in a real name of something like Foggarty, believed the ultimate human achievement to be a complete abnegation of desire. He believed that we are enslaved by our cravings and that removing these would lead to transcendence of pain and despair.

Perpetual hunger was Foggie's greatest weakness. Gravity had been particularly unrelenting with him; everything about his appearance cascaded earthwards. His

Threshold

hair hung long and lank over his ears, his ear lobes drooped around his jowls which sagged towards an ill-defined chin that undulated down to chest overhanging the belly drooping over the belt, the podgy knees and spreading bulbous feet. It was as if he had been created with too much yeast. I learned to add more sugar but as usual Thomas learned to apply the knife.

Foggie would escape from us into extended periods of euphoric meditation punctuated with a little egg timer bell. As we listened to his humming chant through the closed door Dex would roll his eyes and stick out his tongue in utter incomprehension. Dex set to work.

Foggie punctuated his day with glasses of crystal clear water which he filtered through an elaborate apparatus. He would throw back his head and pour 'nature's elixir' directly into his mouth without touching the glass to lips. Dex discovered that a surreptitious additive to this elixir we could produce a very much mellower version of Foggie. It accomplished the sought after release from desire without recourse to the incessant humming and bell work. Dex's little inspiration was codeine, his only challenge being in sourcing sufficient quantities to continually increase the dose. Gradually he began to succeed in undermining everything Foggie thought he believed in. He dissolved before our eyes into a pudding and barricaded himself into his room refusing to come out. Dribs had to have him forcibly extracted and driven back home to the recuperative sanctuary of his parents.

And so the benighted trinity that provided 'our education' were sent packing in short order and the U-seys abandoned us to our own devices. Formal education which had ended so abruptly only proved the poverty of what was originally expected of us and how out of step our teachers were with real changes already well underway.

We have come to realise that we are at the forefront of a revolution in both the objectives and the manner of education. We have effortlessly adapted ourselves to the sophisticated networked self-learning equipment now available. Our smart phones and continuous web access have proved more formative, than anything that our benighted teachers ever experienced in their dreary lecture halls and endless rounds of examined memorisation achievements.

We also realise that there has been a fundamental shift in emphasis away from the role of memory. The brain no longer needs to be burdened with the pointless load of redundant information that our trinity of ineptitude laboured so hard to install. Deposit of information that our teachers and mentors once thought indispensable simply has no useful application in our current lives.

Peacocks at the Pale

Our self-education strategies have obviated all the boring repetitive exercises of the past like memorising a poem, or learning a foreign language. Web based data retrieval skills can locate any necessary poem, and voice-over dubbing provide effortless translation into any language. (Not that either of us have any need for such skills when we compose all our own poetry in the only language that everyone here chooses to speak.)

In the past personal identity was constructed around a voluminous repository of private memories. A person was the summation of his experiences and how he had learned to react. Personal identity was constructed like a huge library. The imagination, roving around this hidden interior trove, drew down volumes at will, compared notes and made lateral leaps due to proximity of other thoughts jostling the inner space.

But this archive of experience is now being relocated outside of the individual and all the memory files, photographs are stored much more efficiently 'off-site'. As personal experiences of the world are also becoming remote and detached, personal blame and responsibility are no longer viable concepts as we can detach ourselves from the moral implications of our behaviour. We become merely 'operatives'.

The purported objective of education was once the socialisation of the pupil, by introducing him or her to a network and context in which to perform; nevermind that this might entail an introduction to a band of like minded killers within the military academy or a milieu of money obsessed finaglers in the financial world. But this erratic process has been eclipsed by a new inter-connectedness which transcends geography.

Furthermore it is an interconnectedness that complies with all of Dribs requirements for risk adverse interactions; we are able to set the risk aversion barriers high.

Our formal education was over before it started. These teachers were products of schools and universities that we would never attend. In some ways this shift in education is returning us to a more primitive immediate and animal like flow of consciousness unburdened with the responsibility for creating moral character.

Frank Gear

Franks Gear was naturally drawn towards people tortured by addiction and obsession, vulnerable people so preoccupied with their own problems that he could slip undetected into a controlling position in their lives.

Though he spent part of his week in attendance upon the whims of Hellana Nix at head office and closely mentored his team at the Dacton field office, the true centre of his personal operations was a curious backwater in the City centre which he and a few select denizens accessed via an unmarked service lane. A rear corridor led past Dal's makeshift offices into the stygian back rooms of *Embers*, a never popular nightclub. The frontage of the club was prominent on a busy street opposite the Central Bus Station. Here it flaunted its tawdry charms with a strip of failing neon lighting ringing windows and dusty posters announcing *The Perfect Venue for Stag Nights*.

In this shadowy world Frank Gear was able to recruit many of the solitary, disaffected youth who had proven so useful in furthering his projects. The owner of *Embers*, Dal, liked to play up Frank's reputation for glamorous subterfuge, and treated him like a celebrity, which often proved very useful in attracting the solitary and ultimately expendable youth that Frank had come to rely on.

Perhaps his retreat into this comfortable, murky world allowed him some relief from confronting the slightly conventional hand that nature had otherwise dealt him. He had to work hard to embroider his reputation for derring-do. Instead of the slim, dangerous elegance that he always aspired to project, the tight sprung switch blade ready to rip forth, Frank was 'heavier boned' than he might have wished, coarser skinned and with a tendency towards a lower centre of gravity, *pear shaped* some might say. These genetic injustices had been aggressively countered with a rigorously controlled diet, relentless treadmill exercise and a choice of clothing that imparted his distinctive, trussed-up, appearance of shiny youth.

'Frankie' as he was known at *Embers*, had an unerring eye for discovering exploitable vulnerability. Usually these were people who had stepped off the bus without connections or meaningful roots in the alien environment beyond and were keen to pursue untried fantasies. Such people, utterly detached from friends and family, were malleable gold. Frankie would sweep them into his vortex of glamorous purpose; introduce them to a world of acquaintances with seductive hints of links to the powerful.

Frank realised from an early age he had a gift for managing people by fostering their deficiencies and making them his dependants. He had acquired a reputation within ES-Tech for turning up suitable candidates for any particular job. His leadership role was inspired; he sought to build upon the vulnerabilities of his 'platoon' without their necessarily even suspecting his manipulation strategies.

Frank avoided all personal entanglements, excelling at the art of seduction in the earliest stages but leaving his victims in a state of incomprehension over what exactly was taking place when he handed them over to lieutenants. He managed his platoon through a few regular denizens whose complete discretion could be relied upon. Dot propped up at the bar, a confection of improbable female attributes; balding Ced, a middle-aged, elfin denizen of a long-abandoned dance floor, and Dal himself the cynical, aristocratically affected owner who injected just the right tone of reverence into any of his dealings with Frank. Together they managed Frank's 'platoon'. All these lieutenants shared a common aversion to the light of day, and operated in the twilight, off radar, in a world far from mundane activity. They relied on Frank as their intermediary and depended on him to solve any of the minor problems and irritations in their lives.

It was at Embers, through Dot's intercession that Frank was able to recruit Reen and Zanie to assist Malyn Starak. The two girls had just stepped off the bus and he had been able to find them temporary lodgings and work at the Rex Hotel. Frank got them started along his carefully managed path.

Malyn however was in a different league. Frank had had Malyn in his sights for some time ever since he had been asked by Hellana to recruit her investigative assistants. Her book *Blind Terror* had clearly become an obsession and he realised that this opened an opportunity for him to assume a strong controlling position. Malyn had an extensive network of well-placed acquaintances, if not friends. He was intrigued to know why she had become so focussed on writing about the *City Seven*. She also had the ear of one of the most powerful forces in the City, Burrell de Vere, the owner of the *CAL-TV* broadcasting station, the *City at Large*.

With the help of his agents Zanie and Reen, he was able to reshape Malyn's principal message in her book. She had been intent on exploring the mindset of a terrorist and uncovering the stages along the path to radicalisation. The *City Seven* had come together initially to lobby against genetically modified agriculture and livestock. But ultimately they had nurtured such festering anger in their isolated bubble that they had become radicalised in countering the implications this biotech science. Frank's assistants had helped Malyn to understand the implications of a devastating plan to sow mayhem with a contaminating cocktail spread throughout the clean rooms of the Gene-Sys research facility. Had the *City Seven* efforts not been detected in time through the timely intervention of Es-Tech the repercussions to the City would have been devastating.

The tragic City Seven raid had riveted public imagination. They had sickened so suddenly and inexplicably that fearful speculation ran rampant. A large area of the City was placed under strict quarantine.

ES-Tech, secured to guard both the victims and the research facility, were well

placed to dramatise the dangers. Building this sense of terror was Frank's great achievement. His fortunes had always thrived on fostering fear of the unknown and he knew that there would be considerable advantages in playing upon the 'terrorist' implications of the situation by suggesting that there were powerful and sinister forces at work. The *Seven Cell*, as Frank branded it, should be understood in the context of a larger, insidious network. He recognised advantages in fostering the rumour that there was an undisclosed 'big player' behind their plot.

Malyn was also a long-standing acquaintance Hellana's whom she had sought out for assistants to infiltrate the *Seven Cell* milieu and report on the reactions among their friends and acquaintances.

Zaanie and Reen had been selected from his 'platoon' as ideally suited to his purposes. They were however, a fractious couple, cast together by circumstances having arrived in the City on the same bus and inadvertently strayed into *Embers* together. He could read all the signals. Within days their heady sense of freedom would wear off and they would be at the brink of relapse into deep entrenched inadequacy, quite likely to succumb to the lethal temptations that the City had to offer. He made his move. He installed them in a dingy apartment in the Tenderloin. Discreetly he would visit this squalid venue to brief them on their required course of action.

Zaanie and Reen attended a weekly a debriefing session with Malyn to discuss what they had uncovered. Often there was not much to report, and sometimes Frank regretted the mounting expenses which included night clubs, lavish drinks and taxis when so little salient information was forthcoming. It was at this point that he began to provide the girls with helpful guidelines for anecdotes about their adventures in the 'underworld' to enliven Malyn's undoubtedly dreary efforts. These fabrications chimed nicely with Frank's overall campaign to make the world appear a more dangerous place.

And so they began fuel Malyn with elaborately embroidered tales of violent vendettas, disappearances, internet acquisitions of assault weapons and liaisons with foreign agents soliciting support for nefarious projects. Sometimes they independently picked up references to a shadowy figure in that community who was reputed to be providing compensation to the *Seven's* afflicted families. Frank's ears pricked at any suggestion of a concealed power. He was always on the lookout for people who were trying to hide something.

Malyn had begun to develop an unforeseen rapport with these two feisty assistants and to look forward to their regular Tuesday debriefing sessions at her studio. They seemed to embody an admirable *sang froid* in dealing with real life situations that Malyn feared that she herself lacked. She improvised with words and ideas in an interior landscape, but Zaanie and Reen were out in the streets meeting very real challenges and thinking on their feet.

It was amazing for Malyn to discover such adept raconteurs, such a sensitive

Peacocks at the Pale

eye for intoxicating detail and such a sharp understanding of waywardness of human nature. Their stories were as compelling as the best fiction – which of course they were.



- Anonymity Anonymous

The world is becoming so networked that we are fast losing our long cherished ideas about privacy. And with this we are losing a sense of personal identity and responsibility for personal actions.

Every aspect of an individual's life is now available for scrutiny, all their behaviour is monitored, their shopping predilections, their preferred entertainments, where they go, who their friends are and what they like to do together. The exact co-ordinates of every individual are being charted and analysed to create profiles that can ultimately be questioned. And increasingly any unconventional behaviour can be held accountable and rooted out if it is deemed unacceptable to the general consensus.

Dex and I have already inhabited this world, this continuum of consciousness as long as we can remember. It is only a tiny portion of it that we are able to set aside as private to ourselves alone. Our only real separation can be created in the drawings and cartooning that we indulge in, a communication that never enters our electronic data base. At least these scraps of paper can be destroyed if we choose before others lay hands on them.

Many people were misled in the early days of the Greater Web because it seemed to bring an exhilarating sense of empowerment, an opportunity to criticize deficiencies around us anonymously and subvert political or economic corrupt systems without being held accountable or punished for contrary views. It seemed like a perfect extension of the right to an anonymous and unswayed vote.

The growing network interconnectedness of humanity is sweeping aside many of the opportunities for self concealment. All aspects of our human behaviour are increasingly being collated into consumer profiles. Spy satellites, observing the world in astonishing detail can invade the privacy of the antisocial and monitor

Threshold

undesirable behaviour.

For other species detachment and privacy has usually tended to be counter-productive, unless camouflage is a key part of their survival strategy. Animals are usually more engaged in maintaining a visible profile to dominate territory or attract a mate. For years growing affluence has enabled increased detachment and encouraged increased expectations of privacy. But this tide has turned. Only the wealthy and the very deviant can expect to enjoy withdrawal from the public eye.

Individual genius was often thought to be nurtured by painful privacy which enabled the objectivity of the reclusive scientist who was pursuing an improbable vision in the face of ridicule or the creative desperation of the artist languishing in a solitary garret.

To achieve such high levels of private withdrawal human society has had to be very ingenious with legal interventions and behavioural rules. But as resources become scarcer, only the most privileged and cosseted can afford to lay on the firewalls that maintain such seclusion. Most of humanity can no longer afford to sustain our brief interlude of wasteful individualism.

But now that all behaviour can be monitored such privacy required to safely hold contrary views is no longer tenable, except by the most complex of ruses. Individuals begin to realize that they must seek safety in numbers and join only strong lobbies for self-protection.

Networking the world is making all people accountable. It is spelling the end of anonymous hatred and irrational prejudices nurtured in private worlds.

But people do not seem to be resentful of this loss of private identity and the resultant suppression of independent thought. Social networking has revealed the banality of celebrity and allowed everyone to engage with the fantasy of personal celebrity. Social networking timelines have only demonstrated how willingly people will sacrifice their anonymity in order to be noticed as part of a coterie. A craving for celebrity has been put into place by members, who are demanding recognition despite the utter banality of the actual content of their lives.

As we strive to ensure that others' behaviour conforms to conventional standards, Big Brother is no longer watching us; we are jealously monitoring each other.

City Manor Farm

A large sign on the edge of development in the recently renamed 'Fashion District' proclaimed 'Hyperion - Take your first Step up the ladder – in the low 300's!' Behind the hoarding which had been ingeniously painted to represent a bird laden topiary hedge in the garden of a stately home, lay a vertiginous drop, a colossal excavation which was intended to be filled by the vehicles of the downwardly mobile of the anticipated community.

Throughout this neighbourhood over the past months, great mechanical scythes had been tearing into the decay of old streets lined with abandoned shops and empty tenements. Glass, brick, bone all became grist for the macerators chewing up the old fabric and channelling it as 'clean fill' into the maws of a queue of waiting trucks. The land where these tenements had once stood had to be completely purged before Hyperion's architectural vision of a healthy homogenised population housed in sun baked crystal clarity could be realised.

Throughout the day trucks laden with debris transported unwanted rubble to remediate the poisoned and waterlogged wastelands of the old City port lands across the road. This area of reclamation had been re-designated by the visionary City Planning Authority as 'The Portal'.

An uneasy neighbour confronting the splendid Hyperion vision on the edge of these Portal lands, the City Manor Farm occupied a long narrow strip frontage that had evaded classification under the *Greener City of Tomorrow Plan* conceived by the City Planners. This unprepossessing threshold remained a huge embarrassment to the planning authorities and many efforts had been made to integrate this property, still under the separate ownership of Cabot Cabling into the overall renewal vision. The Cabling Lands backed onto a tall barbed wire erection which sealed off fields of polluted scrubland which were about to be transformed into the visionary Portal Biotechnology Park.

Weatherworn signs around the perimeter of the site carried the stark admonitions of yesterday 'Danger – Unremediated Lands – Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted'. Underneath one of these notices someone had scrawled a helpful warning 'Do Not Pick the Blackberries, - unfit for human consumption'. Tangled masses of these blackberries with their aggressive, lacerating thorns produced bumper crops of plump, deadly fruits every summer. Part of the extended land remediation programme included regular saturation of these wastelands with glyphosates to discourage plant growth that might attract colonies of birds and spread a devastating avian disease.

Once this impenetrable barrier had been erected, no one had bothered to look behind it for years as the screened lands lay dormant and festering. Fields of etiolated briar, tangled weedy growth and swamp cedar punctuated by foetid algal swamplands

extended as far as the eye could not see. Few people in the City could remember this area in its heyday as a maze of busy workshops conveniently located on the edge of the busy port. Once, mills spinning metal products and warehouses for chemicals and raw materials were located convenient to the railway lines criss-crossing this terrain. Every conceivable machine part or timber component for building or furnishing had been produced here. But few clues to this past history endured; the occasional jagged retaining wall that had escaped the bulldozer poked up through the choking scrub like lurking predators wallowing in culverts and swales retained to contain temporarily the poisoned sludge waters.

Juggernaut trucks rumbled down a narrow ribbon of road that sliced across these scrublands and dumped their masticated contents in large mounds. Men zipped into orange body suits with visor hoods and respirators operated huge shovels which spread the debris over the terrain and tamped it down. These newly remediated lands were criss-crossed with ingenious underground culverts to carry away the saturated poisons to a central distillation facility where the toxins could be reclaimed for commercial exploitation and the waters processed before being dumped into the lake.

Plans for the rehabilitation of the Portal lands had been discussed for more than two decades. It was conceivable that it might be another generation before the lands would be deemed fit for human habitation. This was the challenge set out in the funder's investment model, a visionary plan that was studied by forward thinking planners around the globe.

On some of the remediated areas, an exemplary prairie had been introduced planted with a genetically modified 'supergrass' marketed as *Proactabil Mirabilis*. This bamboo-like product was demonstrably able to thrive in glyphosate saturated soils and could be harvested as valuable bio fuel. This monoculture had the added benefit of producing no nutrients that might attract unwanted life forms or vermin, its oils being a natural diuretic which discouraged all unwanted feeders.

Beyond this vast wasteland and on the horizon could be glimpsed the stark outline of the first of the 'Dacton Alps' a splendid cone of detritus that had been adorned with cultivars of glyphosate resistant superweed. These flowered in gorgeous swathes of contrasting blue and yellow vetch-like blossoms and had become a landmark feature regularly photographed for tourist brochures with the imposing crenulations of the city skyline in the background.

The City Manor Farm strung out on the edge of this territory suffered from an image problem. Though its polytunnels housed a profusion of containerised growing fruits and vegetables, it appeared disorganised, a tempestuous sea of abundance raging along the edge of austere and tangled wastelands. The sinister peeling warning signs flanking the adjacent desert had burned themselves too deeply into the public recollection.

Silas Trehugg, whose enthusiasm had played a major part in establishing the farm, had planted a screen of ailanthus trees and these had grown quickly to provide dappled shade for the polytunnels. Scraps of old machinery, tanks and vats salvaged from the adjacent badlands provided a variety of growing vessels. The old washing machines and bathtubs, however useful, remained too identifiable as such and drew adverse criticism from the more aesthetically vigilant public.

Despite its unprepossessing appearance, the City Manor Farm had galvanised a dedicated group of defiant enthusiasts who came to work regularly on its upkeep. Some of them held small allotments; others were keen to collaborate in a vision for more experimental crops. There were hives for bees, a so-called ‘Beebole’, and even a hatchery for ladybugs to control aphids and white-fly. A composting centre was created and rich organic compost transported by diligent enthusiasts from all parts of the city. Ingenious interlocked irrigation systems providing different balances of nutrients looped between the containers. Having been denied a source of mains water by the City, supplementary water had been reclaimed from the adjacent swamplands despite Hyperion’s concerted attempts to stanch any unremunerated supply.

Central to the concept of the farm was that it should generate no waste materials. All by-products of the growing process should be fed back into the loop. Crops were to be grown in containers and all enriched effluent prevented from further polluting the ground soil. In this closed-loop agriculture all of the nutrient enriched delivery medium was recollected, distilled and rebalanced before being delivered back to the crops. As Trehugg explained it, “The City emulates the behaviour of some giant parasite, everything is taken in and nothing produced, only waste. Is this the destiny that draws the human race away from the land and severs it from the subtle ecology that has sustained it on so many parts of the earth’s surface? It is our vision to restore a more balanced ecology to the City; what is now discarded as faecal waste must be carefully gathered, refined and reapplied to become the cradle for the next growth cycle.” Mara was ambivalent about the pairing up of *faecal waste* and *cradles* in a single sentence, but she comprehended what Trehugg was intending to illustrate.

Trehugg did not ease public acceptance either with his assorted improvisations from the treasures that he recovered from adjacent wastelands. He had befriended the semi-feral guard dogs roaming the terrain and was able to make discreet incursions into the forbidden area with impunity. He returned with artefacts salvaged from the rubble; tires to be re-deployed as raised beds, steel rods for staking trees, interesting mechanical parts as whimsical ‘installations’ for hanging grow-bags in a chaotically abundant three dimensional lattice.

“People have grown terrified of their food and don’t even want to know where it comes from any more,” he lamented. “They have become accustomed to those little plastic wrapped packages at their supermarkets. They think them more sanitary because they have not seen what has gone into their production. They think that the food

created by big agribusinesses is healthier, better controlled and tested. So little do they know! Ignorance is deemed more hygienic.”

As the growing season progressed it had become quite difficult to get rid of surplus food. A local ‘farmers’ market had been set up beside Boundary Road which operated successfully until it began to draw adverse criticism from those marketing the Hyperion development. Soon afterwards the food banks were prevailed upon to terminate their contracts to unburden the excess Manor produce.

Trehugg’s recent obsession had been his campaign to introduce livestock to the City Manor concept; chickens and milking goats. The Humane Society, alerted to these proposals, became enraged at the prospect of *‘undernourished, diseased, animals forced to eke out a miserable existence on these poisoned badlands’*. Cast in this light his proposals were rejected unanimously by indignant City Planners.

The Planners were counting the days until the agreement between Manor Farm and Cabot Cabling would expire and all of this embarrassing squalor could at last be swept aside by a unified vision imposed upon the whole area.

The *Living Alliance* set up their site office in a disused shed to act as a drop-in centre for participants. Here they maintained an ordnance survey map of the city highlighting other vacant sites that might become available for temporary use. Trehugg argued that though ten years was not a long lease for any one site, with his strategy of containerisation and a range of overlapping leases, they would always have fallback positions. “We are starting small and we will learn from inevitable mistakes. A transition policy must be at the heart of our Manor Farm challenge. The aesthetics will come later.”

Trehugg, despite his rather unpolished appearance, had a canny eye for trouble. When a jaunty red sports car entered the dusty forecourt and parked itself disdainfully near the exit gate, he anticipated his next challenge. A well dressed couple emerged, and picked their way daintily across the yard towards the office. He caught a glimpse of two other men in grey suits who unfolded themselves from the back seat and stood beside the car as if awaiting their instructions. Feigning indifference, he busied himself with repositioning one of his containers. Entering the shed the couple stared blankly at him for a moment before the man asked to see ‘the guy in charge’. Summoning up his most curmudgeonly and obtuse manner Trehugg admitted that there was no one around. The couple scanned the ordnance survey map and pointed out familiar sites chatting to one another while ignoring Trehugg totally.

On closer inspection they seemed scarcely credible as a couple. The man was distinctly older with an olive skinned Mediterranean complexion. He had dressed down in comfortable clothing which looked a little too tight and fresh out of the box. Trehugg’s eagle eye observed his precious little emerald ear studs with some distaste. The woman seemed excessively deferential to her colleague’s authority. Was he a ‘sugar daddy’? She appealed to his evident narcissism by taking photos of him against

flowering specimens. He postured extravagantly.

They pointedly ignored Trehugg's labours, obviously dismissing him as an inconsequential part of the workforce, perhaps a feckless hippie, vegetating among his plants for want of any better calling.

He relished their momentary recoil in distaste at his bushy face when he turned at last to address them as the *'Estate Manager'*. Their subsequent bonhomie attempted to overcompensate for this unscripted lapse.

"*Oh My God So Sorry!* My name's Zandra and this is Francisco. We want to put our names down for a plot." The young woman gushed brightly, batting wide her excited eyes.

"We don't do plots, leave that to the cemetery 'cross the way." Trehugg revelled in their obvious discomfiture as he gestured towards the massive hole being excavated by the Hyperion development.

Zandra, in a feeble attempt to warm up an exchange, launched into a sudden description of happy memories of picking seasonal fruits at her grandparents' farm. Her companion Francisco tentatively advanced his own halting recollection of tending his aunt's zucchinis. He paused in front of an old truck chassis that had been artfully assembled into a potting frame and enquired where Trehugg had found such a 'fascinating' piece. Trehugg said nothing but concurred with a curmudgeonly nod of the head and continued with his labours.

Suddenly Trehugg cursed in exasperation, "Tragic 'bout those 'tata vines; they flowered well enough but not a single tuber has popped!" He pointed at the bindweed that he had induced to flourish along the fence screening the wastelands. The pair looked on sympathetically and the girl went over to caress the seed nubs. "Last year they were falling off the fence under the weight of the 'tata crop – never had such a bumper year!" The couple nodded sagely and the girl took a picture of her companion gesturing sadly towards the deficient potatoes. The girl, obviously a 'touchy-feely kind of person' began to stroke the branches of one of the grafting samples that Trehugg had been undertaking. "Yep, you guessed it! They're leopard squash. You don't see many of them growing this far north – seasons just too frigging short, 'scuse me lingo. But just keep 'em pruned and they'll outperform my Granny shellin' peas. You don't need a ladder for harvestin' neither." The girl looked momentarily perplexed, obviously trying to visualise location of the leopard's spots.

Francisco, evidently uncomfortable with too much horticultural chat, scanned the roadside fence. "I guess security must be a big concern for you. How do you keep the public from running off with the produce? Intruder alarms? Video links?"

Trehugg shrugged ingenuously. "Nope! Everyone nowadays so concerned about food security, our main problem's unloadin' our pro-juice. Of course my pack of ravening hounds helps!"

Francisco looked quite unconvinced.

Trehugg adopted a more avuncular, nurturing tone. “Sure you can join the waiting list, but there’s quite a crowd ahead of you there. Just jot down your details and we’ll get in touch as soon as a volunteer opening comes up.”

“Oh that would be so utterly neat!” Zandra gushed, “Can we just wander around in the meantime! We’ve got some pals out in the car who’d love to have a gander at some of this.” Trehugg threw his arms open in resigned acceptance and turned back to his labours. Francisco signalled autocratically to their ‘pals’ and the quartet stumbled off like missionaries in a jungle, entranced by every novel encounter. Trehugg appeared to pay no attention as Francisco and Zandra strolled happily along the paths, arm in arm, photographing the burgeoning greenery while their two colleagues, more interested in the engineering aspects of the project, spent considerable time enraptured by the recycled water filtration system and mixing vats for the hydroponic chemicals.

Half an hour later all returned, somewhat overcharged with green-thumb fever, expressing delight and gratitude. Zandra had no further questions about ‘this fabulous place’. The hench-pals remained in the background, arms crossed and grimly incommunicative. Trehugg watched them fold themselves up and depart in what he later disparaged as their ‘fancy red car’ and then called Mara to air his suspicions.

“Huggy, you are always so paranoid about these things. Of course everyone’s going to be interested in our idea!” But Mara was still slightly apprehensive about his description of the ‘two henchmen in their grey suits.’



- Babel

Dreaming again, I am shovelling earth furiously in a race against time, digging a defensive moat across a bleak scrubland, an overgrown midden of broken concrete, abandoned car parts and smashed children’s toys. But my mind is focussed on a vision of the garden that will transform this tangle of debris. I have begun the first coil of a great ramped structure that will spiral upwards to the sky. I never imagined that I could harbour such architectural powers within me; equipped with only shovel and pick axe I have created a precise incision into the ground, like a perfect grave. The growing wall alongside my trench reveals a stratified mural of the past. I keep turning up artefacts, slicing through broken bottles, colourful plastic toys and human bones; so densely is the ground packed with layered history.

Peacocks at the Pale

As I stand back for a moment to admire the precision of my wall of soil, water is beginning to seep into my trench and the clay is becoming squelchy underfoot. Like all things in life this is a race against time. At the bottom of my excavation my shovel hits a honed fragment with a resonant clang. It is a broken piece of entablature from an ancient building and there are letters inset in the polished marble. As I reveal the letters one by one scraping back the encrusted mud a word appears: E-N-T-R-O-P

I uncovered the terminal Y only briefly before muddy seepage again obliterates the word forever. 'Entropy' - that haunting word hangs in my mind as I resurface from my feverish dream. Like a mantra, I mutter it repeatedly under my breath and ponder its meaning. I see in these dream labours my valiant attempt to confront the pervasive entropy, that tendency to break down and adulterate whatever is distilled, warm, and decisive into a grey meaningless paste. The bones and broken dreams of machines that I have been unearthing are testaments to an apparently inevitable, ongoing process of dissolution.

Overhead, the expanding universe in the night sky only seems to exemplify this tendency towards greater emptiness as the fugitive stars grow colder and further apart. Is our intelligence, our human determination to create order, to impose geometry, to distil ideas and comprehend purpose, doomed to this ultimate dissolution? The foundations of my wall of earth begin to dissolve and collapse to obliterate my labours.

Most of the human race seems more effective in assisting entropy than in countering it. We are so relentlessly engaged in consuming the riches of our unique planet, transforming the living spirits of our peculiar garden into indistinguishable excrement and a sea of broken toys.

And yet we have also created the power of words and language to distil ideas that seem to counter this tendency. Perhaps the development of ideas that are encoded in language and speech has been the greatest human achievement. We are not alone in this intelligence of course; other animals are able to convey ideas through mating rituals or advertising their discoveries of food. But human ingenuity has carried this so much further with words and written language. And now we stand at the threshold of a huge leap forward in being able to extend our coding capacities into ever more complex machine language

The Tower of Babel myth represented the destruction of a world drawn together by a single purpose and single language. Divine intervention annoyed at the hubris

Threshold

of this challenge to Authority, spread a confusion of tongues and words lost their meaning.

Words can be feckless intermediaries for constructing and conveying exact ideas. They may be moderately effective in describing obvious realities like 'bigger' or 'faster' or 'I am now on a bus'. But when it comes to more complex ideas like 'beauty', 'truth', 'moral' or 'humane' language must develop relative and approximate parallel stories to illuminate these abstractions. How are we to teach our machines to understand such language?

Meanings can become so transient and even the most poetic language can become a prison and words callous jailers, incarcerating memory until its vitality drains away and the significance of poetic references shift into meaningless babble. There are many ideas which no language can ever hope to convey. Practical people tend to suppress the concept of the 'ineffable', ideas beyond the scope of language that cannot be satisfactorily revealed with even the most poetic parallel images.

If we cannot convey such ideas precisely with word that are divested of emotion and immediate context, how will we be able to transfer them effectively into machine code?

The Noor Project is participating in the reconstruction of a new Babel. The chosen language is that of science and the machine which can draw together all cultures. A world containing 8,000 different tongues, jostling together is a lamentably inefficient use of machine capacity, occupying far too much effort in precise translation. Efficiencies will be achieved by designing 'a single platform'. But our requirements for new coded thought become increasingly complex.

In the process of building the new Babel, frenetically engaged in piling up data like my great spiralling ramp, no one yet has a vision of what we will place at the apex of this ever tightening, ever more focussed spiral. The Tower of Babel culminates in a single illusory point.

The Message

Malyn had fallen asleep on the sofa of her living room with the silent television flickering in the background. Jason, ‘her Golden Fleece’, was locked in the second bedroom. A beam of dawn light penetrated her beige environment, crept over the Style magazines, a meticulously displayed fan on the coffee table, stealthily drew up to her face, then pounced to awaken her. She stirred in the warmth, but as she revived, memories of the night before flooded back and restored furrowed lines of apprehension on her face. She got up unsteadily and drifted over to the window to survey the City skyline. Across the horizon the sinister saw-tooth profile of the banking towers floated in pinkish haze. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass and looked obliquely downwards. Far below in the front driveway she could see the familiar figure of the doorman, possibly his name was Peter, greeting an approaching car. It looked as normal life had been restored. However she was not yet ready to entertain Jason; she glanced nervously towards the closed door of the bedroom where he was quietly sleeping.

With restored confidence she approached her answering machine and picked up paper and pencil. Her finger descended decisively on the button. The first message was a girl’s voice pleading for an interview on behalf of some crazy organisation called *LAL*.

“Pest” She hit the fast forward button before the message got any further.

“Mally, this is Jay-Dee at *CAL*. We’ve gotta talk about last night. You’ve gotta realise that people are gonna pick up your views as those of this station. I’ve been getting non-stop flack from sponsors and some very important people. You’re way out of line, and as for *Blind* ...” Malyn grimaced and flicked to the next message.

“Mally, what happened last night? I felt like one helluva big lemon waving you off.” Lance’s voice sounded aggrieved. “I’ve left my cell phone somewhere but you can call me in the ...”

“Typically, just me, me, me . . . the creep.” She cut short his message and advanced to the next.

“Mally, it’s Reen. Need to talk urgently. It can’t wait till Tuesday. I think that we might have stumbled onto the sponsor I was telling you about but there’s a really weird connection. Zanie says that she thinks its the chickens coming home to roost. Help! ... No just kidding! Just call a.s.a.p.”

Reen signed off but the next message was also from her. “Oh Mally ... just an afterthought ... don’t mention anything to Frankie if you run into him. Let’s meet up first and I’ll explain.”

Her finger came down decisively on the stop button yet again. “End of messages.” Malyn fell back into the chair in dejection.

Her book *Blind Terror* seemed to have brought her life to a complete standstill. A

paralysing obsession, her thoughts had become completely obsessed with the fates of the '*City Seven*' and their message.

The group had been comprised of fairly ordinary suburban teenagers living apparently ordinary lives, neither poor nor desperate. What or who had motivated them to embrace such extremes, contemplate such a calamity – and all for an idea that was so poorly understood and articulated? There had been no popular maverick local teacher or religious opportunist stepped forward to claim control. There was no obvious connection with food industry giants who might be prepared to resort to dastardly measures to protect their monopolies. All that she could discover was a viral rage that had been fuelled as if from nowhere.

The *Seven* had challenged a huge, complex and globally established industry. Was it possible that this industry could retaliate in such a cold-blooded way that now all of the leaders of the group were dead, having succumbed to the very organisms that they were alleged to have spread around?

Malyn had enlisted the two young women to act as her agents in trying to infiltrate their circle of friends. She had never expected anyone to do anything dangerous or illegal; Reen and Zaanie were quite able to look after themselves. They had eased themselves into the *Seven*'s coterie by blogging and hanging out in local meeting places. At first they had brought back little of interest beyond what could be discovered in searching the internet. But then suddenly they seemed to have struck references to other intriguing contacts. They began to bring back reports of characters and situations that would be thrilling to weave into her text.

Zaanie's character demonstrated some of the fragile defiance that Malyn recognised as her own character. She had admired her courage in stepping into the unknown confident of thinking her way through. She had somehow survived an impossible childhood. Despite her natural predilection to addictions to drugs and alcohol, she was striving mightily to avoid the fates of her parents. Reen was a different kind of spirit, much less provocative and flighty. But her provincial idealism would have been too easily exploited by the great City that she had launched into so woefully under-equipped. Desperate to please, she revelled in the attentions of every passing male. Malyn did not like to admit it but she felt a rare maternal protectiveness towards both of her assistants.

She quickly texted two numbers in rapid succession and followed that by leaving a message to meet at her studio for a pizza at 7 that evening.

She stared vacantly out the window at the city rising from the night. Then a flicker of decision came into her eyes. She fell to her knees and began to rummage in the pocket of her discarded coat pulling out a mobile phone, which she had stealthily lifted from Lance's pocket at the reception the night before. Confirming that it was off, she proceeded to dial his number on her own phone. Lance's voice clicked in asking for a message.

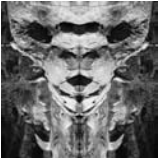
“Lanny, sweetheart, I’ve got to see you immediately. I have changed my mind about the Noor interview. I want you to take it on for me. I can’t talk I’m being hounded at the moment; I’ll explain later. The best place would be our little café opposite Libs. Be a duck and meet me there at 3:30 ... and do try to be sharp!”

She had only a momentary pang of remorse at the prospect of Lance picking up this message and spending the afternoon attempting gallant conversation with some hopeless waitress. But occasionally Lance’s plodding dependability could be useful. She suspected that other parties would also intercept the message and pursue a fruitless diversion, buying her time.

She hung up the receiver and returned to the first message, jotting down the name and number of the caller. A curious name she thought. She picked up Lance’s phone again and peeped into the spare bedroom eyeing suspiciously the *Golden Fleece* sprawled innocently across the bed. She proceeded into her bathroom, turned on the shower and dialled the number. She went through to a recording.

“This is Malyn Starak and I’m calling about your *Living Alliance* interview proposal. I assume that you must be the young woman that approached me last night ... I am sorry if I overreacted. I’m always a wreck in facing a deadline! I’m sure you’ll understand. Anyway I think that I could arrange a discreet meeting with you this afternoon to discuss this. I’ll explain it all when we get together. Would you please confirm on the number listed on your call display as a matter of urgency? Oh and please, don’t attempt to call me at the studio or make contact via any other route. You’ll only be turned away. I always insist on preserving the little privacy I have. Thank-you ever so much.”

Threshold



- Superstition

I think that human beings are superstitious by nature. There is so much around us that cannot be explained, so many curious patterns that we hazily recognize and engage with but cannot rationally account for. Even someone like me who has been inculcated with a critical scientific viewpoint realises that there is a vast realm of mystery and coincidence that science is still powerless to address.

Superstition is a part of our species' survival strategy, a way of accommodating occult information when we cannot chart a firm roadmap of where we come from, what is expected of us and where we are leading. Instead we find that engaging in various rituals and cultivating superstitions result in inexplicable but successful outcomes.

In my case superstition is not a question of black cats, or broken mirrors and passing under ladders. It extends beyond cultivating a sixth sense for picking up what others are thinking or likely to do. Like many people that I discreetly observe, I have given myself to repeated practices out of a secret fear that if I break from established routines, the whole improbable edifice of my life might come crashing down.

There are many superstitions that I cannot rationally explain and which I would never dare to reveal to Dex or our u-seys. I have grown to be an inveterate counter: numbering my steps, calculating length of stride along a corridor, counting the repetitions of warning tones on the security alarms, even counting the imaginary beeps that precede the midday time signal. In our Bellevue security compound in Switzerland, coloured lines imprinted on the floor assist deliveries to the various labs. My daily rituals ensure that my footsteps are confined within the red and the cyan lines, and that I carefully avoided stepping onto any crossing lines. I count my footsteps down these corridors against a kind of mental pattern like a silent chant, 4 -3-7-2-2.

I cannot explain in any rational way why I would do this. It is just my imprecation against anything going wrong on that day. There are no immediate or obvious rewards. Nevertheless I feel that perhaps I am making a pact with some hidden spirit that expects to be propitiated. Perhaps that spirit knows why I am even here in the first place.

Peacocks at the Pale

Dex has similar foibles of his own that he engages in when he retreats into his games. He slips into a mysterious other persona, the so-called invincible Enzo who holds gaming records across the board. I have watched him carefully and am aware of all his little prophylactic routines, the triple sideways flinching of his jaw, the curled toes tapped four times in impetuous expectation before a major move and the momentary choking hesitation before plunging his thumbs onto the keys. He always insists on facing due east, pretending to justify this as securing improved reception. But I know that all his rituals have become more than a practical concern. They are a part of his superstition for ensuring success. He is afraid that some lucky component might be missing if he varies his routines and does otherwise. All such foibles become second nature to him having produced success in the past.

Perhaps my own greatest superstition is that my dreams are able to foretell the future. I cannot explain their prescience or how they so accurately give insight into events that are about to take place. Through these dreams I recognise that there is a hidden consciousness within me which independently perceives many things beyond my normal stream of consciousness and occasionally passes tantalising messages over to the conscious side.

These are perceptions that almost work like 'blindsight' that phenomenon whereby a completely blind person is nevertheless able to sense intuitively the presence of objects that he cannot see. I realise that there are other hidden resources available.

Some claim that superstition tends to occur when the critical open mind closes down and ceases to demand further explanation, that is when the mind abandons a scientific attitude. But I know that it occurs when the open mind can no longer conceive of what questions to ask.

Threshold
Chinese Wall

One of the virtues of an office environment is that it can provide a bulwark between the immediate, obsessive concerns of home life and more abstract pursuits devised by the human mind. Some office denizens may attempt to blur this threshold, surreptitiously importing details of home life, photographs of children, a fossil stone retrieved on a summer's outing or a meaningful painting; but Hellana Nix was not one of these people nor was her life burdened with such domestic incidentals.

Even in these enlightened times she was a rare anomaly, as a woman at the head of a large international security organisation, with a strong commitment to a service which frequently involved difficult and dangerous missions. She fondly imagined that her tenacity and ruthless business acumen were legendary in boardrooms across a City and quietly revelled in her reputation as '*Nix*', an embodiment of unencumbered efficiency.

Hellana Nix sat with her back turned firmly against a spectacular view and stared blankly across the pale grained expanse of desktop towards the neutral beige wall in front of her. Her well-dressed ash blonde hair swept efficiently into a severe chignon secured by a crocodile clip; her ample body seemed to be somewhat constrained within unforgiving undergarments. The cold grey surface of the lake behind perfectly matched her baleful, arctic grey eyes.

Set squarely in front of her on the desk was a single polished granite bowl containing two dry spelt biscuits. Periodically she would reach out and pick one up, then listlessly let it fall back into the bowl. She examined her watch reflectively. Her hand dropped to pull open the second drawer of the credenza where she had stashed away an array of more comforting pick-me-ups, all healthily yoghurt covered and calorie free, arranged in convenient but rapidly depleting bins.

She had given her personal image careful thought and contrived an appearance that was undoubtedly memorable. Other women might survey the resulting confabulation with some horror but they would at least respect the determination that Hellana exuded.

She at least had the enviable advantage of unnaturally white, unblemished skin, with the consistency of fine dough that seemed to swell gently around all apertures. This unnatural softness was countered by her well defined slash of coral lipstick and carefully threaded eyebrows, the left of which displayed a perpetually uncompromising, quizzical crook. All of these details were however subsumed to those cool invasive eyes, protruding with an evident determination to engage and dominate.

This was not a countenance that encouraged philosophical speculation or idle banter. Rather more practical questions like troop deployment seemed its natural preoccupation.

Hellana had ensconced herself in an office that was one of the envies of the City. A dazzling light flooded through the full-height glass windows on two sides which commanded the best views in the business district. A delightful screen of insane architectural vagaries displayed themselves against the continuous cool blue horizon of the lake beyond. Tiny glimpses of puffing sails fecklessly skittering across the harbour contrasted with the relentlessly circumscribed, industrious lives in the foreground.

Hellana ensured that her curtains were fully drawn back at all times. Any visitor entering her office, initially dazzled by the flood of light, became only later aware of the shadowy silhouette confronting them from her corner perch. It was entirely possible that she had ensured that the lighting levels in the outer office were so very subdued in order to heighten the discomfort. Visitors inevitably found themselves ill at ease, blinking wildly in this blinding space. Later they emerged with a nagging sense that they had never quite grasped the full picture.

Deep textured, sand coloured carpet and clumps of cacti in severe terracotta pots, exotic twisted shapes silhouetted against the window glass, suggested the starkness of nomadic desert life. There were no pictures on the walls or personal objects displayed on the work surfaces. Groupings of rigorously positioned furniture around starkly empty tables punctuated the emptiness.

Despite the violence of the sun sizzling every surface it invaded, there was an inherent frigidity to the space. Over achieving air conditioning rendered the atmosphere as energising as desert air after a perishing night. Regular visitors had learned to dress accordingly.

Hellana Nix was a very private person, and her personal life remained an enigma to most visitors. Perhaps this is only a natural precaution in a company where security concerns are paramount. Visitors, who had surreptitiously consulted *Who's Who* hoping to discover emollient children or family connections to launch a conversation, turned up nothing. Though reputed to harbour the instincts of a cornered mother prepared to fight to the death for her offspring, Hellana had spared herself motherhood in any other form.

The room however, contained one tantalising clue to personal peculiarity. At one end of her luxuriously sweeping mahogany desk there was a tiny table laden with curios. It was positioned just outside the dazzling light fall. A single spotlight illuminated its blood red tooled leather surface protected under a shield of glass. Like a votive stand it stood defiantly alone, suggesting an object of veneration miraculously floating over four spindly steel legs.

Under the glass, neatly arranged in rows, were curious objects, small boxes of inlaid woods or metal, vials and jars containing labelled samples or mementos. There were photographs in tarnished frames, their subjects turned face down to the leather. There was a golden bracelet covered with art nouveau tendrils and a small opened box of hypodermic needles. There was a grisly set of stained dentures which gave a jolt

to the unwary viewer who suddenly fathomed exactly what was on view. The range of curios suggested a magpie artist's trove of found objects intended to illustrate the discontinuities of modern life.

Many visitors gravitating towards this table hoped to discover some little gambit to spark a wider ranging camaraderie. But they would recoil in horror as if they had inadvertently invaded a miniaturised graveyard. It seemed better not to ask; each object appeared to offer clues to hidden tragedy.

Hellana's office, so daunting and ascetic was strategically positioned at the threshold between two carefully separated worlds. Two doors in the flanking walls placed her at the strategic end of a 'Chinese wall' and allowed her to deal with different types of people and very different aspects of ES-Tech business in an orderly manner.

The virtue of the 'Chinese Wall' is in providing a distinct threshold between two worlds which function in parallel detachment. It allows the coexistence of two completely separate cultures which can define themselves against the forbidden frontier. The ecologies either side function autonomously and their denizens arrive at independent conclusions while only imagining the vagaries of life in the excluded realm. Fear of what those on the other side might be thinking can be a great spur to creativity.

Behind the left door lurked Hellana's personal assistant Cubbie McCubbins, coiled and ready to spring. 'Cubbie' or Clara had been a childhood friend. They had been an inseparable pair throughout their school years, Hellana always stepping forward to embrace the world with Clara following awkwardly behind in tow, carefully trying to anticipate the problems that they might encounter together.

'Helly', as she was known then to the other girls at the school, had emerged ultimately as the Head Girl. She had developed a coterie of supporters who had attached themselves to her, competing for attention, not out of friendship but out of their shared complicity in exploiting the system. Cubbie had been one of those girls. In the election for head girl the others' appetites for the role had flagged; they were beginning to crave freedom from authority. But Helly had been always prepared to make a pact with the devil; she relished the thought of embracing his authority.

Cubbie and she had remained inseparable. Cubbie admittedly, had extraordinary practical gifts. Helly could always rely on her to come up with solutions to the trickiest problems. From the earliest days she seemed to know intuitively how to do anything from fixing a bicycle to baking a cake. She had figured out 'boys' long before Hellana had even got her mind around the basics.

Subsequently Helly had preferred to keep her friendships with men on a platonic level. Her primary pact remained with 'authority' in its most abstract sense and she was never prepared to consign any of her hard won powers to a male. She knew how rarely men respected such power in a woman; they would only try to latch on and deploy their masculine wiles. Tightly secured under her cascading chin an embroidered

button brought to a halt any speculation about what essays in voluptuousness might lie between the severe ecclesiastical collar and the dainty ankles which protruded from her favoured burred woollen leggings.

At times it seemed to her ironic that someone like Cubbie, undeniably more talented on every level in the acuity of her insights, the quality of her imaginative expression, her musical, mechanical and mathematical abilities, should be left bobbing in the wake of her own meteoric blaze through life.

But aside from intelligence, Cubbie had few other natural advantages. She remained painfully plain in appearance. Her awkward girlishness, the oversized hands and feet, the toothy grin while perhaps adorable in a child, had never blossomed into co-ordinated womanhood. Cubbie still appeared to be assembled from left over parts from a kit for impossible adolescents. To counter these deficiencies she had favoured a dress style suited to a truculent child; optimistically bright coloured tights and pullovers that suggested sporting intentions and made a virtue of her flattened, meccano-like physique. Over these contrasting items she would toss a few jumbo pieces of costume jewellery and jangling bracelets. 'At least you successfully resist the hackneyed image of a security enforcer', Hellana would sally encouragingly. She took ill-concealed delight in Cubbie's plainness, her unfortunately strong boned face, oversized teeth, the desperate attributes that one might conjure up for an unloved spinster. Thank God, or whoever, there was occasionally some justice in the distribution of genetic assets!

She reflected that for whatever reason, Cubbie seemed to require encouragement. She needed to be looked after, to be 'employed' and operated. Hellana had long recognised that beneath the appearance of total organisation and independent defiance must lurk a strangely passive spirit. Throughout life, Cubbie had apparently stood back and over-analysed every opportunity, unable to act decisively before it quietly vanished.

Only occasionally did Hellana detect a wavering of loyalty, the slightest hint of resentment that the opportunities that opened up continually before her boss had always eluded her.

Hellana herself had never been a passive person. She had always had a great appetite for life. Hunger had driven her and was such that often she was obliged to cheat to get the outcomes that she expected. She thoughtlessly ingested everything that lay around her, food, people, entertainments, and then was obliged to slough it all off afterwards. Frequently she had to find a suitable scapegoat to cover transgressions and usually the most convenient victim to tether in the wilderness was Cubbie. She never seemed to mind subsuming herself to this greater cause.

Cubbie's presence however provided an important competitive benchmark. This spare practical body was the model that Hellana aspired to approximate and it helped to counter a propensity for impulsive eating that would only result in regretful hours of application to her exercise bike. Each plunge of those infernal foot pedals was

dedicated to a conjured image of Cubbie's firm plank physique.

There was one aspect of her assistant that she found undeniably riveting. Cubbie's hair, her pre-eminent feature, was always preternaturally perfect, and Hellana could only surmise how many hours might be applied to the creation of that extraordinary proscenium 'curtains within curtains' look that had evolved as her public persona. She imagined that Cubbie might emerge from a hurricane looking perfectly composed and still be ready to lend a restorative scouting hand to Hellana - who would have come apart at every seam.

While Cubbie was a *Luddite* at heart, in contrast 'clever little Frankie', who was bidden through the opposing door, spent practically every waking moment fixated upon some flickering technology or other, consulting, collecting, storing away precious information. Cubbie never deigned to touch a screen or keyboard. In a quaint spinsterly manner if there was a list to be made she would pull out a practical quill and jot down the details. Her notebooks never seemed to grow or accumulate and there was always just one, always identical. It would gradually diminish page by page as each objective was achieved and the page torn out. Hellana supposed that she must destroy these notes, certainly nothing ever piled up around Cubbie's desk in the outer office. In many ways this seemed the model employee, everything subsumed by the organisation. Any file notes that she entered into the system were inevitably couched in the name of the organisation. Her own name rarely appeared anywhere and never demanded the credit for any operation. Such self-effacement appeared very laudable to Hellana who could allow herself to bask in the warm glow of such efficiency.

Cubbie's capacity to store away detailed information in her head in a clear manageable perspective and retrieve it effortlessly was indeed extraordinary. She could remember any name or recall the significance of any event with rigorous clarity.

"Always so perfectly *Cubbie*, the mother that I never had ... *Thank God!*" Hellana sighed to herself. Her hand hovered briefly on the handle of the second drawer as she began to consider an idea that had begun to take shape in her mind. As she stared blankly at the wall opposite, she distractedly popped another bon-bon from the hidden stash into her mouth.

Behind the right-hand door opposite her lay the labyrinthine world of Frank Gear.

She paused to draw breath and then with renewed resolution her foot touched the concealed button on the right-hand side of her desk and held with resolution.

"Except now we need to be more Frank." (an over-worn joke in these parts)

Moments before the red light on his desk flashed to summon him into 'Old Nixy's den', Frank had been browsing through his electronic diary, lingering over some photos of a group of friends lunching alfresco in a small town on the Adriatic coast. The intervening years since the photos were taken seemed to have passed in a flash.

But the vitality of the memories of that trip might have dwindled away had not these photographs been carefully scanned into neat electronic files which brought back so many of the fixed details. Each image fired a response in his own memory, position of the sun, his moods, the smell of the food and the hidden dynamics in the placement of the people around the table. He could remember sitting in that rough chair admiring the shell bracelet that a gypsy had presented to Norena ... yes, that *was* her name. He could almost feel the cracked faded blue paint that he had gouged with his fingernails as he considered how to provoke a response from the girl. Could her name really have been Norena? He scrolled down to his notes and confirmed the details including address and birth date. He felt wistful that he himself looked so much younger then, yet it was merely three years ago, the confident stubble on his chin, the youthful head of abundant hair now sadly diminishing to a scalp hugging sparseness.

When an aeroplane plunges into an abyss of mystery, the horrified world seeks some final clarification of those last moments. It seeks to participate and verify the reality of the hidden disaster. The imagination is not allowed to probe its own frontiers. The immediate awfulness of the last screams, the reality of the final click of existence must be re-experienced to enforce the finality of destruction. There is an inexplicable craving for portrayal in its grisly entirety. If it were possible for the cameras to record the last ashes fluttering off into the winds even this would be trapped in *the black box*.

Though not a man of religious conviction or generously convinced that he could offer such a gift to posterity, Frank continued his laborious accretion of personal details. Thus he assembled a complete myth of his life, one which would have stood him in good stead should a Grand Inquisitor be considering the merits of his application for eternal relevance. A personal obsession, it filled his otherwise featureless condominium apartment and his work environment with meaning. Delving into it would sustain him in the most anonymous of spaces. It was incontrovertible proof of his existence. This habit of reminiscence had grown on him in his early days of working at ES-Tech. He had been required to travel afar and every night he would find himself in a new, anonymous hotel room, a world of choices at his fingertips, everything available on order, yet no comforting routine to fall back upon or person to share an overview of his life. Usually the information that that he was asked to glean had necessitated his assuming the most neutral and banal of appearances so that he could follow his 'clients' into situations and discreetly record the details that would ultimately devastate their careers.

In doing this he had become aware of the uncertain nature of the truth of any situation. Visible evidence, the smoking gun is most compelling, but the nuances of intention are always much more difficult to convey.

Whenever current circumstances appeared less tolerable, Frank would retreat into

this armoury of old memories. He would pick up the rusty swords of half forgotten resolution, and shelter behind the tarnished shields of illusions that had once protected him. In the twenty years that had elapsed since his first vivid teenage memories, he had visited many parts of the world, 'scored' many diverse people and established contacts that a company like ES-Tech found invaluable. He believed himself a natural diarist. His coherent re-composition of every day had become his therapy.

He sought permanence through the creation of a complete and definitive history of himself, a record of all the situations that he had been a part of and the developments that had occurred in his character. A subtle shift had occurred in his engagement with the world. Instead of asserting the advance of life through an accumulation of possessions, homes, paraphernalia, cars, equipment and foreign holiday escapes he had begun instead to jettison all this redundancy and assemble a life storey, page by page into a mountain of data, all of it cross-indexed and accessible to his personalised search engine. Into this repository he had even squirreled away his first school report cards, which had so pleased his family, the certificate he had received for swimming the length of the Royalty Club pool, all of his childish drawings and the valentines that he had received from parents, now both long dead. The records of his earliest years were sparse yet vivid. But the more recent past, complex and ambivalent, had been enlivened with considerably more detail. Once any artefacts had achieved their electronic immortality the original items became quite superfluous, millstones which he had no compunction in jettisoning into a jumbled storage locker somewhere on the edge of town.

Over twenty-five years of application he had created the myth of Frank Gear.

Distracting him from his reverie, the red-light flickered and his hand set throbbed simultaneously. Frank had his finger on the response button, an instantaneous reflex action.

"Yes Nix?" drawled out just short of 'Nixy'. Frank was the only person who dared to address his boss in this irritating manner.

Walking with self-confident swagger into Hellana's blinding office he found himself confronted by her shadowy figure silhouetted against a spectacular view of the waterfront. He took up his usual position awkwardly seated at the corner of her desk adjacent to the side table of down turned frames.

Hellana licked her lips self-appreciatively. "Frankie, first I should reiterate how pleased I was with the handling of the Hyperion launch. Of course *Starkers* proved a bit of a glitch. You might have foreseen that she would get up to something. She seems to have a hard time keeping a lid on it! But perhaps it's all to our advantage, for now."

Frank's eyes fell modestly onto the curios table. "Well I think that we are well positioned to control that message."

"*Positioned* is the word I like to hear. But there are lots of other angles around

these Portal proposals. We want to be shaking these people out of their trees. By the time we leave for Arden the City as got to be rippling with debate about the whole proposal.”

“Well that’s what I’m here for, Nix,” Frank returned with confident modesty. His eyes kept gravitating to the little box on the table containing the yellowed dentures as if he was not unaware of the head that had once encased them.

“The airport debacle was flawless too! Noor is one heckuva loose cannon. Just make damn sure he doesn’t point the weapon our way.”

Hellana soon had Frank doing what he always did best, appreciating himself. Then she quickly came round to her inspired idea. “As you know I find that you are the only one I can count on to cut through all the red tape and the nay-sayers, to get the results that we need for this.”

“Well you have yourself to thank for making that possible. And I put it all down to hierarchy and control, getting the right instructions to the right people at the right times.” Frank could appear dazzlingly unctuous when he tried. But he also seemed to delight in how falsely contrived it all sounded.

“In the coming week it is absolutely crucial that we work closely with Gene-Sys to control the political climate leading up to the launch. We’ve got to snatch all the publicity we can get, make this a rocky ride. Max out the publicity! We want to make sure that the right parties succeed in the end.”

“The right parties?”

“You can leave that to me. This is a high profile affair. Your role is overseeing ES-Tech’s exposure in all this. Its involvement must be recognised as crucial by all parties involved, especially Gene-Sys.”

“Oh, and Frank, I have a teeny little idea for you just buzzing around my mind; let us say an enhancement of the work that you have already been undertaking with Malyn Starak.” Frank’s ears perked up at the mention of this name.

“Yes what I have in mind should intrigue you more than a little; and it could really stimulate considerable public interest.”

* * *

Malyn was presenting Frank with a very interesting challenge. She existed in a rarefied world, one that his regulars in the Embers ‘platoon’ could only dream of entering. But she manifested a vulnerability which made him feel purposeful and potent. With so many influential acquaintances, she would be a valuable addition to his stable if he could snare her. It was her privileged role to ferret out information on behalf of the wider public with impunity. She just had to be schooled to seek answers to questions that would be useful to Frank.

He had been able to ‘turn up’ some very interesting information about Malyn’s

earlier life and map out some history he felt she might hope to conceal. Zaanie and Reen were gradually extracting more details to complete the picture. Frank would prime them in advance of their sessions with provocative questions to pose innocuously while plying Malyn with their titillating fantasies. Prudently, he took care that all these encounters were carefully recorded, unknown to any of the participants.

Frank had arranged for intensive surveillance of Malyn's apartment to monitor her comings and goings, where she shopped, who she would see in the course of a week. He was admittedly a little surprised to discover how dysfunctional her life was proving to be. She apparently had no regular visitors at all; most of her meals were taken in the solitude of her private office at the studio. Occasionally a meal would be delivered at home to the porter at the front desk of the Epitome Palace and carried up to her where it would be eaten in solitude in front of her television. Such defiantly solitary behaviour intrigued Frank. Perhaps he had caught a glimpse of something of himself in this mirror.

Frank was generally resentful of strength and resilience displayed by others. He felt more comfortable with people like Hellana who relied so heavily on fantasies of authority. She was a sucker for a sycophant and merely played *at* the role of his boss; she had no real control over his truly subversive nature.

Frank was in a privileged position of being able to open any door and invade any space he chose. All of Malyn's daily routines were being closely monitored by him. He took perverse delight in arranging to leave little clues in her coat pocket or purse, perhaps a little rearrangement of the order of clothing in her cupboard just to render her ill-at-ease, questioning her own uncertain sanity. Frequently he would pass a pleasant evening stationed anonymously in a van near the Epitome Palace and monitor the results of his interventions, hearing her rising, throttled hysteria in her conversations on the phone, and her growing distrust of the people she encountered.

In fact Malyn was already in his thrall.

Peacocks at the Pale



- Altruism

I am trying to stay awake as long as possible to forestall re-entering the dangerous chaotic dream world I've just escaped. I have not yet succumbed to the drones that are whistling overhead with the insistence of ravenous insects. On all sides I have encountered grisly reminders of the fate of failed resolve. The shattered, shrapnel riddled remains of decomposing men, some in ancient gladiatorial armour, reveal that this battle has been raging since 'civilisation' began. My feet sink deep into squelchy mud which impedes every step as I navigate through the barrage of bullets using the bodies strewn around me as stepping stones.

In my dream I have a sudden vision of the men who are commanding these projectiles hurtling towards me. They are clustered around screens in a far away desert bunker. They are compulsively eating donuts fetched from the highway shop next door as they watch a little red dot in their screens crossing a turquoise field. That little red dot is their target, me! I see these sorry specimens, swelling bellies hanging flaccid over their khaki camouflage stretch pants and feel intense anger. It is my convulsive rage that is effectively deflecting the drones from scoring me as another victim. I know that if I entertain the possibility of death for one moment I will probably be fatally hit. But I realise that I am not in control of my own advance. My body is an armoured machine like a muscle-metal warrior in one of Dex's war games. I rarely play such an exposed, heroic role in my dreams; I usually find myself a witness of others' misfortunes. Dribs often taunts that both Dex and I are devoid of any altruistic instincts. But what exactly is this deficiency? Isn't it a just case of our being his galley slaves rowing the boat while he commands the tiller?

Altruism, the capacity for self-sacrifice has been eulogised as one of the keys to the survival of our species. Is it an essential part of the human genetic fabric, something deeply ingrained and defining? Something that perhaps Noor missed out when he cobbled together our 'heritage'? It is certainly not a characteristic that either Dex or I have ever consciously sought to cultivate. The kamikaze bee sacrifices its life delivering its sting to protect the hive. Is that behaviour really altruism or is it just written into its genetic manual for bee behaviour?

Some behavioural scientists have proposed that altruistic instincts are programmed

Threshold

at a fundamental level into our 'selfish genes' which are only intent on ensuring their own continuation; the sacrifice of the few for the survival of the many. The more complex organism that is the construct of many such genes is supposed to inherit this predilection and be prepared to sacrifice itself to promote the continuation of these basic components where they appear in others.

During our 'education' we encountered the scatterbrained altruism of our damaged teachers. By testing them to destruction, we discovered their purported self-sacrifice to be inconsequential. Nevertheless we have concluded that disassembling altruism can be useful camouflage in persuading others to do your bidding. Noor frequently alludes to his personal altruism as fundamental to a doctor's calling. But I can see that this is just a calculated effort to conceal his true personal objectives.

We are witnessing the elimination of romantic notions of altruism in favour of more practical behaviour where benefits can be precisely calculated and weighed against costs. This is true value engineering! In the future a better structured society will behave like a machine in which all parts are designed to play specific prescribed roles in the functioning of the whole. There is no requirement for an erratic foible like altruism in the balancing of the functions of a well designed machine in which the function of every part of the assembly, every cog or double helix, is calculated and defined. Ultimately the Noor Project envisions subsuming all these erratic human behaviours within the development of a machine modelled co-operative intelligence.

That is why in my dream as I stride out over the battlefield I recognise that I have already become part invincible machine. My purpose is fully defined and incontrovertible. I am unscathed by the volley of projectiles, treading upon the rotted corpses of the fallen and all those discarded values that have driven the past behaviour of the human race.

Modern Magi

Hellana was preparing herself for the gruelling day that lay ahead with a ritual intake of meditative all-sorts. In a fit of over-ambition she had set up three appointments in rapid succession; three men with very different and competitive business agendas. Controlling the contributions of each to the upcoming Lake Arden conference would challenge her legendary business acumen to the utmost.

Self-importantly, she explained her programme to Cubbie, though did not seem to notice the stifled yawn and gradual lapse of attention. “Each of today’s *punters* brings a unique offering to our project. But we still need to whip up a little healthy competition between these modern Magi” she mused, keen to mix poetic allusion with a demonstration of her canny business flair and succeeding only in dredging up the memory of a past fiasco at a school pageant in Cubbie’s mind. “We must make each one of them feel hungry and just slightly vulnerable ... plant a niggling uncertainty that not everything they demand will be handed to them on a plate. We may be the small players in this venture but we are positioned to make or break the Portal development!”

Gold

Hellana was well aware of the Machiavellian reputation of the first suitor to come ‘courting’ ES-Tech. Throughout the night she had lain awake rehearsing how she should conduct this interview. She envisioned herself emanating a breezy business-like directness, and recognised as a formidable equal.

Burrell de Vere had built his considerable political power upon a network of discreet but influential investors. His name rarely appeared in the press and if mentioned at all he was merely noted as the adjunct to someone else’s much more interesting life. Few realised the considerable efforts required to maintain this state of anonymity especially in light of the direct power that he held over local media as a major investor. All however recognised the importance of keeping him onside. He could go nowhere in public without someone asking the question, ‘And who is that white plumed man over there talking with so and so?’ Rumours about him had flowered into mythical proportions, but there were few substantial facts.

When certain people needed to raise or lose substantial quantities of cash they somehow instinctively knew to turn to ‘*B-de-Vee*’. He never discussed his contacts or the provenance of the liquid assets. One could just rely on his impeccable credentials in securing the transaction in the most fragrant manner through the most reputable conduits.

Inviting Burrell in the first place had been Hellana’s personal coup. She had been roused to make the initial contact following a conversation with Frank who had

collected articles and photos in a dossier and positioned it casually on her desk one morning. Many photos showed de Vere standing on the sidelines of various social gatherings or as third party to business deals. Frank had suggested that this might be ‘someone that Es-Tech should get ‘on side’. While Frank had a natural intuition in turning up such leads, Hellana had the *sang froid* to follow them up. This B. de Vere might prove an important ingredient in enhancing her own helmsworthy status and fortune if she managed her hand astutely.

A sudden disturbance was heard in the outer office and a door slammed. Unannounced, a wayward tornado, Burrell de Vere burst into Hellana’s suite. He was well in advance of the appointed hour and Hellana’s hand was still rustling amidst her tasty cache considering preparatory titillations before she settled down to hard business. De Vere had walked straight through the reception and entered into Hellana’s aerie calling out ‘Helly’s in through here I expect! Don’t worry! I’ll find my way!’

A splendid mane of carefully groomed white hair invisibly marked its passage with a waft of exotic clove based perfume. He strutted to centre stage as if prepared to address a large orchestra, quivering with expectation of welcoming applause. Certainly this agile figure suggested someone suited to a conductor’s podium. Cubbie trailed behind him apologetically her hands held open in a gesture of dismay.

Hellana hastily closed her drawer quickly and composed her hands in circumspect welcome, attempting to disguise her annoyance at the familiarity of being addressed so forwardly at their first ‘face-time’ meeting.

Without resort to emollient niceties de Vere launched. “Helly, we’ve got to be singing from the same hymn book. I’ve got the investors lined up and willing to consider the Hyperion scenario and I’m totally exposed; they are looking for ironclad guarantees and a much more substantial position. We may all be entertaining a winner here but if we are going to do this at all, then we’ll have to do it properly. My team are looking for full control. We certainly want to dampen the ardour of some of the competition off the bat.”

“But aren’t all those other suitors in the field going to talk up the value long term?”

Heedless of the question, de Vere continued, his voice rising in urgency. “At this stage we have got everyone we need on board. We don’t need to talk up value; we should now be in the business of talking down price! We are expecting some visionary leadership, upfront and authoritative, from you, from Hyperion and from Gene-Sys. But so far I can only see your rather self-serving fanning the embers of paranoia, so that you can fill the room with all your less-than-reassuring security goons.”

“But the whole Portal concept is founded on creating the image of a secure community. *Security must be our mantra!* (Hellana always surprised herself at how eloquently she could arrive at such memorable phrasing off the cuff.) There will be a lot of resistance to overcome and we must demonstrate our full commitment to the

conditions that will attract a flourishing community back into the heart of the city. Your investors have to understand why security is such an integral part of the concept. It is never an easy sell, that is, until something goes disastrously wrong!”

“That’s all very well but we are in danger of making this development sound like some kind of pariah state, cordoned off from the rest of the City.”

“But you must admit that the Frontier Hall launch was a positive step in setting out our agenda. Little Krafft couldn’t have been more reassuringly innocuous if he was scripted. I ask you! How much did anyone take away about the genetic potential of blue-green algae? It was perhaps unfortunate that Malyn emerged to play her ‘voice of the people’ card. But you are better placed than anyone else to control her views. Nevertheless the overall timing of her book seems to jibe nicely with the Portal security challenges. Above all I was delighted how the Frontier session really picked up all that media interest. I guarantee that your investors will absolutely sweep up. Nothing makes money like fear!” (a remark that she had carefully pre-rehearsed).

“Frankly I was damned unimpressed by the Frontier launch. We’ve already got our deal lined up and we’re all on board. We are positioned to scoop up everything available but it has to be at an affordable price.”

“But Malyn’s presence indicated how important these issues are to the public.”

“We’re not going to let Malyn and her bonkers book confuse the issue. Why was she permitted to attend? Surely you should have known that she would only cause trouble. You are not in the business of selling her bloody book. She can do that on her own time. Surely someone should have suspected that she had something up her sleeve.”

“No one knew that she was coming. But after all, your guys own the station; you ought to be controlling that message more closely yourself, or are you afraid of interfering with editorial integrity?” Hellana had perfected her self-righteousness glare. “You can rein in her book any time you want or at least arrange the timing of the launch to suit our programme. There is no reason why it can’t be held back a few days.”

“In fact we are going to ensure that her book is withdrawn until we are all prepared for it. I want a preview of what she has cobbled together before anyone decides to give the go ahead for the release, if we do at all. But of course I cannot be seen interfering with her message. I’m going to leave that up to you.”

“But I thought you were behind the book.”

“That was before I discovered what she was actually going to say. She’s an effing loose cannon but my hands are tied!”

“So you are again coming to us for a little help there?” Hellana smiled knowingly. “I’ll see what Frank can manage.”

De Vere seemed momentarily mollified.

“But turning to the development itself, we are going to see all of these peripheral

Planning Issues buried right away. They are not helping anyone ... and get that City Manor Farm back out in the boonies where it belongs. We want a clean hoarding and we want our vision to unfold with a calm sense of purpose. It is all very simple ... or don't you grasp it?"

"But don't you foresee advantages in exploiting some of that grass roots protest? A little dissent will help to highlight some of the security challenges which are critical to the whole concept," Hellana returned smugly.

"Grass Roots? What at you proposing? Taking up gardening?"

"I must admit that my thumbs are less than green! But the way I see it, all this publicity is good publicity."

"Well you seem to be overzealous in ... *fertilising* those roots with your steroids. Perhaps now you need to undertake a little climate change to leave them exposed and withering in the sun."

Hellana suddenly began to feel that she was losing the plot. She found it difficult to follow de Vere's drift and so decided to resort to flattery. "Burrell, you seem to have such a complex, poetic soul! I admire someone who understands the nature of things."

"I understand the nature of power, and who holds it. Not usually the man on the coin," his lips pursed in a thin uneven line.

His eye fell on the barrel cactus that stood on a raised podium. "There are roots and there are roots." He tapped his palm lightly over the crowning steely spikes and withdrew it hastily. As he stood silently staring at the lake in front of him, his eyes picked up its grey reflection. With his pinkie finger he gently twisted the fringe of his mane into a tight knot.

Hellana sallied forth again. "Well I have a hunch that this City Farm might be useful in deflecting public attention away from Hyperion's intentions for our gated community concept ... not a bad thing."

De Vere betrayed not a hint of agreement with this statement, but Hellana hoped that she had scored at least one telling point to reveal her astute business mind.

"Gene-Sys are about to embark on a major market expansion. Your investors certainly appreciate how desirable it would be that as the share issue goes out quite a large proportion of it is left 'on the table' so to speak."

But she was beginning to flag, deflated by de Vere's criticisms of her highly strategic and well-orchestrated campaign on his behalf. And her mind kept flitting to the delicious array of pick-me-ups beckoning from her credenza drawer. She pressed a buzzer and called for coffee. Cubbie entered the room almost immediately and de Vere turned to face her. Her uncompromisingly hostile gaze was judgemental and defiant. It suggested a tacit understanding of how to manage her boss's foibles.

Burrell turned and faced Cubbie directly. "To be brutally frank Helly, if we don't get the cooperation I require from you, we will have to look elsewhere. The money

involved would bring anyone crawling to my door.”

“But Burrell, hold on a minute! Your invitation is all my idea. ES-Tech has been established on the Port Lands for many years. Our holding may be small but it is of crucial strategic importance. There will be no deal without us! You have only been invited to participate in this because of me. You must realise that you are here as my guest.”

De Vere, rolled his eyes in exasperation and directed a searing glance towards Cubbie. He launched on another tack. “You have a rather simplistic view of this whole process! I have got to get my own message across at the highest levels. It is not just a question of loading up the money bags. This whole development has to sit fragrantly with all of my team. I’ve got to satisfy some of the most principled and prudent of investors that this is an ethical investment. It must all appear utterly beyond reproach. The Princelet Institute, the Charles E. Ephraim Foundation, and Verity Brain Trust, they all wield a heavy influence on current sensitivities about interpretations of the Charter of Human Rights. Gene-Sys is going to need that endorsement, especially after their *City Seven* fiasco. We are all in a highly vulnerable position. I have to orchestrate the message straight from the top.”

Hellana recalled her first impression at his precipitous entry, the conductor looking around for his podium. She rallied, “Well this is the way that I believe we are going to play it. City Farm and the local community can focus their feckless protest on the Gene-Sys ingredient. It is a battle that we all know they cannot win; there is too much money at stake. Their urban farm is only temporary anyway and we will all weary of over-diligent altruism soon enough. Hyperion will emerge as a calming breath of sanity to calm the field and be able to set the conditions that all of us want.”

De Vere stared at Hellana with some hostility. Gradually his cold grey eyes drifted together and crossed, as if carrying on the discussion would be of no further use to anyone.

Hellana was already feeling drained by this encounter. She had envisioned a morning of mutual connivance, old hands managing the subtleties of planning law, publicity and perhaps considering advantageous placement in the imminent Gene-Sys stock expansion.

Her eyes sought out Cubbie, standing awkwardly with her laden tray. As always Hellana took advantage of this opportunity to deflect de Vere’s aggression onto Cubbie’s ruthless efficiency.

Cubbie, carrying the coffee tray, conducted him into the ante room to sit down and adjust some of the minor publicity details of the pending campaign.

Feeling deflated after her confrontation with de Vere, Hellana was anticipating with considerably greater gusto her scheduled lunch appointment with Lindsay Lagarto. He was the sort of person who stinted nothing when it came to nourishment. Hellana liked to witness such taste for excess in others. It made her feel comfortable and natural.

Lindsay Lagarto was the head of Prometheus Pharma, a company which for many years had been one of the world's leaders in the pharmaceutical industry. Recently however it had suffered serious reverses as patents had expired and the cherished products of expensive medical research were superseded and replaced by cheaper generic drugs. Legal challenges had begun to erode the profitability of the whole company.

Underneath his bluster Hellana knew that Lagarto was in a very vulnerable position. He sat at the head of a very fractious board that refused to understand why so many valuable medicines, the results of such laborious, expensive research were no longer raking in the profits they had become accustomed to. Due to restrictive government red tape new products were being delayed up to a decade in coming to market. The company directors felt blackmailed by government bodies to release successful medicines in the name of responsible corporate citizenship.

The Prometheus board held great store by a proposed collaboration with Gene-Sys Biotech, apparently a match made in heaven. Lagarto had seen this deal as the way to bring a new vitality and vision to his company after years in the doldrums. All kinds of new marketing opportunities to support genetic inventiveness with new pharmaceuticals were opening up. But tragically, at the worst possible moment days before the publication of dismal year end results, the City Seven affair had paralysed their merger talks. As the media racked up the deaths of these hapless vandals, the value of Prometheus stock began to plummet.

ES-Tech already enjoyed a long-standing business relationship with Prometheus, managing the protection of their intellectual property. They were often called upon to make discreet enquiries about the research objectives of competing interests and gather intelligence by all necessary means. They had played an invaluable role in infiltrating the competition with agents to subvert the marketing of other patents. Over the years they had helped to neutralise similar industrial spies who had been treacherously planted within the Prometheus team. It was natural that Prometheus should turn to ES-Tech to determine whether there were any traces of collusion or market manipulation behind the recent nosedive in value.

Because of their long track record, Lagarto erroneously believed that he enjoyed Hellana's unequivocal support. He had, of course, no knowledge of the substantial file of compromising photos that ES-Tech has amassed depicting some of his own peccadilloes in detail; files that Hellana suspected might one day prove persuasive in

advancing some of her own objectives.

Lagarto's extra curricular pursuits made much more intriguing reading than the lacklustre pile of detail that ES-Tech had managed to gather on someone like Flinders Grey who she would have to contend with later in the afternoon. (In terms of 'lifestyle' the latter might as well have been in his grave.)

So it was with some frisson of girlish energy that Hellana rose as Lindsay entered her office. With a nimble bound he hailed her in jocular terms as '*Hell!*' Flitting through her mind were salacious images of this same Lagarto cavorting through the back rooms of *Madame Mignone* with considerably less encumbrance than his impeccable pin stripe suit and modest half open collar currently suggested.

They repaired for lunch at Seraphim's which proved everything that Hellana might have desired and helped to eclipse memories of de Vere's truculence. Lashings of cream sauce are always pardonable when wrestling with tricky business opportunities, like 'embarking on a new, ruthlessly global trading adventure'. Business with Lagarto was usually quite straightforward as he tended to be completely unobservant of anything that was not exactly what he was thinking about at the moment.

Lindsay's choice of fine wines lubricated both their performances considerably. Hellana's excessive predilection for sincerity knew no bounds. She enjoyed her liqueur with her right hand gently resting on Lindsay's upturned palm, staring provocatively into his vacant eyes. During the course of the lunch Hellana grandly promised him a strategic place on the inside track in the Portal development. They discussed how the announcement of the Prometheus inclusion in the scheme would help to restore their ailing stock value and discussed how they themselves might take some personal advantage of this useful inside knowledge. She promised to keep her ears tuned and relay information about competitive interests to ensure that he maintained his prime position.

Hellana emerged with the sense that, like Madame Bijou, she had maintained her upper hand and extracted every possible advantage. His eager interest would undoubtedly press other competitors into much more aggressive postures. Her stock would rise on all fronts.

They took leave of each other with longing after glances. Hellana floated off gratified at having at last exercised her own astute business sense so effectively.

Myrrh

Having crested on a wave of delicious *zuppa inglese* with Lagarto, Hellana felt fortified and ready to cope with the curdled post-prandial that Flinders Grey was likely to conjure up later that afternoon. She had known Flin for many years and recognised how much he valued her strong purposeful character.

But of her attendant modern Magi, Flin's offering seemed tainted with myrrh, the bitter perfume of death. As a titan of the insurance industry, his life had long fed on the agony of others' catastrophes. He anticipated peril and misfortune at every turning. It had been his pervading sense of impending disaster and imminent collapse that had brought him within ES-Tech's fold in the first place. ES-Tech sold as much as he could afford of the protection that he and his industry craved.

Grey arrived promptly at the appointed moment and was ushered efficiently into the blinding light by Cubbie who parked him glumly opposite Hellana.

Whenever he visited Hellana's office, he pointedly ignored the nearby podium covered with its array of unintelligible bibelots. In his mind it conjured up a miniature field of tiny graves. He always feared secrets; all such withheld information was anathema to his sense of life purpose. The strength of his industry had always rested in his ability to uncover and manage information which was disguised or dissimulated.

As head of the *Association of International Insurers* and representing the interests of the world's largest insurance companies, Flinders Grey had achieved an overview of the direction of his industry which began to terrify him profoundly. His lifetime's work, even the security of his few remaining years, had been cast in serious self-doubt. Remembering his youthful innocence when he entered the industry, his clear goals, the sense of providing a valued service to his community, he realised that those comforting images of caring hands, umbrellas of protection and rocks of security, were suddenly vanishing. He now realised that tides had engulfed that rock of security, the lighthouse was extinguished, and capricious winds of change had gusted away that pathetic protective umbrella.

He had learned to perform within a well-ordered business milieu, a carefully structured hierarchy in which every step he took was a calculated advance in the context of a whole raft of people whose careers moved along with the benign trade winds. The risks were always assessable from performance statistics. This was '*the System*' and Flinders had adopted his guiding mantra that '*you cannot beat the System*'. However his life was suddenly meeting hurdles that had never been encountered by his predecessors.

The stable environment that he was expected to sustain was suddenly awash with rogue elements, armed with untried business models where honed risk assessments were assigned to virtually any activity to underprice traditional services. New upstarts had become adept at passing on risk to third parties who then repackaged it and sold it

on yet again as investments underwritten by ever more doubtful types of insurances.

If a secure environment could not be provided within his own company, it was difficult to imagine how long term security and stability could be created for any client. The insurance industry had become more like placing gambling bets on risks than the traditional approach of trying to cushion against them. The new risks were overwhelming in scope; true margins could no longer be assessed with any confidence. At every junction there were predators ravenous to tear him apart with their aggressively pitched calculations, gleeful at every adversity and ready to feed off the raft of legal suits that seemed to engulf the company on every issue. There were some who were even profiting by insuring the certainty that misfortunes were bound to happen.

Grey was aware that many had become cynical about the whole purpose of a service which he had always believed to be the foundation of a stable society since the days of the pharaohs. They either turned their backs on the industry entirely, or else they played along and leaned how to exploit it to the full. Every day Flinders encountered the steady clamour of his own Lutine Bell. Once its sepulchral tone only rang out on the occasion of dire disaster, now it was a daily dirge sounded against an engulfing tide.

He had attended the Hyperion promotional exercise at Frontier Hall and listened with growing horror as the Colonel and Dr Krafft outlined the scope of the new biotechnology and its potential for changing the familiar world into something quite unrecognisable. To further exacerbate his sense of doom he had later put his name down on the advance distribution list for *Blind Terror*, Malyn's soon to be released book.

However, he had come to the conclusion that however ghastly, this was the inescapable future and he reluctantly realised that his industry would be obliged to reposition itself within this vortex of uncertainty. The new biotech community envisioned by Hyperion with its intense focus on security and a well planned infrastructure was at least a tangible proposition. He had decided to get in on the ground floor.

Perceiving that the future of his industry now lay in an ever sharpening appraisal of risks, the analysis of sophisticated genetic information was only one of the new types of relevant data that now must be fed into new equations. Genetic profiling could offer opportunities to predict future risk and make appropriate commercial evaluations. If that was what his competitors were doing then that is what he would have to do himself. His life's work would just submerge if he was unable to keep up.

He understood why the Gene-Sys scientific developments in genetic structures required extensive ES-Tech security coverage. Gene-Sys stood at considerable risk from purloiners of intellectual property, from dissidents, and from the conservative values lobbies. The research being undertaken was indeed highly controversial.

There was never any time for small talk in Grey's life and he got to his point

immediately in a rather pre-rehearsed statement. "It has always been my belief that our role has been to gain access to all the information available and make out risk assessments accordingly for the benefit of the whole society. *(pause)* We have always provided a service to spread risk and sustain long term social stability against temporary reverses. *(pause)* However, I recognise that we will not be able to compete if some parties do not play by these rules and are privy to information which for ethical reasons we have refused to assess. *(pause)* That Dr Noor for instance ..."

Hellana interrupted, "I realise that people like Dr Noor are hardly the kind of risk free characters that your insurance industry would normally choose to deal with."

"He is clearly an impossible egoist; everything that he does seems intended to draw attention to himself. But he is putting the whole collaborative venture at risk. Why is Gene-Sys giving him the time of day?"

"I suspect that by playing such a public role he makes it very difficult for others to purloin and 'market' his patents. I think that there is an astute agenda behind his behaviour. Perhaps he appears little better than a terrorist himself, but a terrorist who controls some very important weapons, among them being the proven patents behind the Noor Project."

Grey added dejectedly "I refuse to believe that there is any validity to his talk of eclipsing Darwin or that he has taken such ideas to a new scientific level, the next logical step."

Hellana sighed in commiseration, "Darwin must always rankle with your industry, so intent on transforming the concept of survival the fittest into survival of the most risk averse."

Grey admitted sadly, "Darwin has done nothing to promote social welfare. I was nurtured in an industry that believed itself to be the cornerstone of a stable society based on secure values. Now those values are uncertain foundations indeed. Instead of addressing the social good we are reduced to ensuring individual and personal welfare only, the few pitted against the horde."

"But Flin, in the past you made similar assessments. You looked at family case histories and judged the risks based on family precedents, or post codes when setting your premiums. How is the science that Dr Noor represents going to make this any different? It's just a little more so! With an ability to provide an exhaustive analysis of the genetic deficiencies of your clients you will only be improving the accuracy of your risk analyses. It seems a prudent enhancement to me."

Flin felt so very tired. He had debated these arguments in his own mind many times and knew that there were two possible radically different conclusions. "It all depends on what you see as the purpose of my insurance industry. Is it to provide a balance that allows for a social benefit, a continuation of a functioning society in times of distress, or is it just to provide another vehicle for economic predation? If we admit to the latter course it is my belief that the implications of Noor's science will only help

to create an underclass of the uninsurable, those remnant specimens whose genetic make-up is risky, prone to illnesses, criminal behaviour, or deviance.”

“Come on Flin, is that any different from the society that you already live in and have helped to produce? We are only talking about a science that will make us all better informed.”

“Well, making *some* of us better informed. I can understand your position; ES-Tech obviously thrives on polarisation, on ensuring that there are always two sides that need to be protected from each other.”

“On the contrary like you, I have come to recognise that we have reached a very important threshold in human affairs. Some of us are prepared to step over the old lines in order to embrace the future. There are others who huddle behind the pale unable to make the definitive step, unable to jettison outdated ideas, old ethical codes that no longer serve. They are left clinging to their threadbare morality, religion and ritual. But ES-Tech must step forward and embrace the future, because if we do not then we will be at the mercy of those who do. It’s as simple as that, Flin.”

“It is my belief ...”

“We have no intention of actively destroying the society that we leave behind. It will probably disintegrate anyway. Your insurance business has already ruled out whole continents where it is quite unable to cope with the problems presented. I don’t see you trying to sell life insurance in Africa for instance.”

“It is my belief ...”

“I feel that you have far too many “*beliefs*” for your own good Flin. I think that you should review them carefully and take advantage of an opportunity to embrace change. You may foresee difficulties accepting the Noor package. But if you don’t step up then someone else will and then they will turn around and swallow you. As I mentioned you are not the only one who is lining up for a piece of this cake. And that is *my* belief!”

Hellana stared at him smugly, like Lucifer backed by a halo of dazzling light.

Threshold



- Gladiators

I have never played a physical team sport; nor would it tolerated under any risk assessment managed by Dribs. But I have just awakened from a sporting dream feeling utterly drained having played a star role in a baffling, high risk tournament. The game, advertised as 'Nookie' on huge light boxes around the packed stadium, is a blood sport. After any goal is scored by passing a tiny 'kernel', through a hoop at either end of the field, the player or players who have failed to perform are dragged off screaming to the sidelines to be dismantled by surgical teams and dissected into piles of basic components which are distributed among the large funereal urns that flank the field. Raucous spectators filling the stadium bay with blood lust at these dismemberings.

The sport is undertaken with long curved scythe-like weapons which are strung with razor sharp wires that emit a musical twang when hit. The players, men and women, expose large areas of their elaborately tattooed skin. My own is emblazoned with jagged lightning bolts. The scoring 'kernel' is tiny and seems to disappear from sight for long periods while the perplexed players search for it frantically in the long grass. In these intervals I demonstrate my prowess by vaulting long distances with my springy weapon, leaping high over the others' heads. I have an exhilarating sense of mastery and feel sure to be invincible when the kernel is rediscovered.

However one of the players on the field is doing his best to distract everyone. He seems to belong to neither team and mocks all of the players dashing among them. Wearing a boxlike helmet with a cavernous cross slash gridded to resemble teeth, his deep inset eyes are inscrutable, cast in shadow. He seems to be playing his own private game. The crowd loves this clown and cheers his antics. They are beginning to suspect that he is hiding the 'kernel' and making a mockery of all the other players. Both teams are frantic with worry about losing ground to this maverick. The others realise that they are being made fools of and that on the sidelines the surgeons are sharpening their scalpels to begin an orgy of dismemberments. Some of the less popular are already being escorted to their grisly fates. I think that I glimpse Dribs among them.

Commanding the attention of the throng the mystery player takes a position in the middle of the field and lifts his helmet for a moment. He takes a bow and holds up the golden 'kernel' that he has been concealing all this time. The crowd goes

Peacocks at the Pale

wild with enthusiasm. I suddenly realize that it is Noor who has been behaving so duplicitously. It is he who has been trying to challenge us all. I feel my anger rising and with a springing leap I leap over the heads of my teammates and land on his shoulders, knocking him to the ground and grabbing the 'kernel'. A howling, angry scrum converges on this solitary maverick and carts him triumphantly to his appointed fate on the sidelines.

What could my peculiar dream portend? Noor always plays the maverick and embarrasses everyone. The situation seems to embody everything about risk that Dribs has intended to suppress in our lives. Of course our extended lives hold significantly increased risk levels. Risk factors insignificant to more transient human life, ranging from being struck by the proverbial mail van to asteroid collision, are suddenly magnified exponentially in lifetimes expected to endure for millennia.

Humanity loves to dream up these games as a distraction from other inevitable dire realities. In most games the risks are minimised; only money or personal prestige is sacrificed. However 'Nookie' game is being played for the highest stakes, witnessed by the plaintive screams of those being dragged from the field to be cut to shreds and distributed among the urns.

We assess success in life according to agreed rules for our invented games of risk so that we can debate the nuances of such 'pastimes', like who is the better gladiator, batter, diver, runner, singer or investor in the stock market. We design our own virtual jungles, elaborate rituals, or fashions to rival the serious tooth and claw competitions found in the natural world. Those who succeed in the artificial conceits are celebrated as if they have measured up to the challenges of evolution, the deadliest gladiator, the fastest man on earth, the most rapacious investor.

Dex's interminable games of instant reflex fit seductively into the palm of his hand. Human beings always prefer to avoid pondering the real physical lines of destiny imprinted indelibly upon our grasping palms. The real underlying competition is held at a safe distance and ignored as long as possible until the grim reality of the final curtain descends.

What was Noor doing on my field of dreams? Scientific advances appear like a sequence of gaming challenges punctuated by 'eureka' moments when we discover to our amazement that we have just scored a goal. Suddenly the risks undertaken seem justified. After each scientific success the representatives of the superseded order are dragged screaming from the field, reduced to their basic components and forgotten. Few scientists glimpse the implications of their research as it is being

Threshold

undertaken. As if they were engaged in a cosmic treasure hunt for the kernel of an idea lost in the long grass, they tend to turn up random scattered clues and strike out along paths that have been created for the most spurious reasons. Trophies of immeasurable value are anticipated when the enigmas are finally resolved. Yet there is no assurance that their discoveries will be benign or even useful to human endeavour. They just cling to a blind faith in lucky intuition.

Darwin sliced through millennia of faith and myth to reveal life on earth as a very risky proposition, a gladiatorial sport, a combination of luck, tenacity and defiance in an ever challenging environment. Darwin harboured no instinct for fair play or sportsmanship. Within ten millennia, a mere demi-pulse that we call 'human history', the wandering populations of earth have taken sanctuary in densely populated cities where they have defined ever more esoteric games and diversionary distractions. City life harbours the most compelling trivial pursuits to engage the distracting gaming energies of inhabitants. The urban world thrives as a denatured place, an isolated hothouse where over-abundant energy can be dissipated on fashion, idle competition and one-upmanship. The immediacy of the natural world is replaced with fabricated objectives so insistently pervasive that they go unquestioned.

Risky innovation has long been an essential factor in our evolutionary advancement. So many experiments have resulted in pain and suppression. But there are new, major shifts in our attitudes to risk. Genetic misfortunes like a predisposition towards disease, once considered bad luck, can now be written out of the genome. Tainted genetic material can be suppressed like any bad design.

Risk analysis will shift social conscience away from compassion towards a more pragmatic response to ensure that in future the players who fail to achieve required levels are removed from the game.

Setting out to select the genetic material will necessarily involve analysis and choice. This will also involve deactivating or jettisoning genetic material that is deemed irrelevant to the new scientific, intelligence based society. But Noor is effective in diverting the public debate away from such issues.

Certainly no scientific mind looking outwards has come back with any reassurance that the human race is indeed created with some specific purpose to fulfil - that it is our destiny to pluck the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge. Humanity has been feeding itself on such apples for generations and found that they have never provided a balanced diet.

Peacocks at the Pale

We may be sounding a death knell of the human era by embarking on games that human beings are temperamentally unfit to play. In many cases new scientific discoveries have only released greater scope for some of our worst instincts for competitive destruction. Perhaps we are training ourselves for games that no one will want to play anyway. For all its apparent uniqueness human intelligence may be only a sideline, merely mimicking some greater competition that we observe in the great beyond but one where we will never be equipped to comprehend the rules. Perhaps acquiring an ability to destroy itself is the fate of our kind of intelligence.

The universe does not seem to require our competitive gaming instincts to further its objectives. Perhaps this is why we seem so alone in an emptying wilderness, abandoned in the empty rubbish strewn stadium after the audience has departed, the smouldering cinders of past intelligence glittering around us in the night skies overhead, taunting our hubris. Human intelligence, the most desperate of games like 'Nookie' and all of Noor's diversionary clowning may be no more than an irrelevant sideshow in the ongoing processes of an expanding, increasingly vacant universe.



PRIGS

Burrell De Vere chuckled quietly to himself as he sat po-faced amidst the pompous *Planning Referral Group*, or the ‘Prigs’ as he discreetly disparaged them. This long table was flanked by such comically serious faces.

No women were present – how typical! - no one to deflate these pathetic little male egos hell-bent on realising their impractical vision of the *City of Tomorrow*, nothing more than a ‘*CoT death*’ in his estimation. De Vere glanced over at Harvey van ‘Something’ with his stripy shirtsleeves neatly rolled up and secured with monogrammed cuff bands. Was this guy daft? De Vere tried to maintain a benign and conciliatory presence as he discussed the Hyperion development objectives for the Portal on behalf of the people who really counted, the investors.

Obsequiously peering over Harvey’s shoulder was a little gnat (did he really introduce himself as *Jiffy*?) moustachioed and affecting a supercilious trans-Atlantic stylishness. On his other side buzzed Marius in a robin’s egg coloured jumpsuit and dishevelled hair looked as if he had just stepped off a stage pursued by bear. They looked so god-damned serious about their charts, aerial photographs and pages of amassed opinions and complaints. Each was so utterly intent on safeguarding his unrealistic private fantasy of piloting through an ordered world for the public good. De Vere knew how to deal with such boys and their fantasies. He teased a snaky wisp of fragrant hair around his pinkie finger as he feigned sympathy with the point that Harvey had been belabouring about a well-balanced community.

Burrell De Vere’s most effective roles were usually played out in anonymous sombre rooms, full of powerful, secretive people who preferred to operate in the shadows. In a world rife with insider trading agreements he positioned himself as the consummate insider. Fortunately he had to abide by no banking or financial services ethical constraints that might require him to rein in his appetites. He was able to operate under the unimpeachable smokescreen of a sovereign trust fund whose assets were so mind boggling that its activities were naturally considered beyond reproach. Even though he had to tolerate the antics of several venal princes desperate for the excitement of the world’s financial casinos, he recognised that these associations did afford him sufficient cover to pursue discreetly his own parallel lucrative connections.

Would any of these present minor functionaries have credited that only moments earlier he had been in consultation with a person who commanded powers that far exceeded the scope of the picayune planning issues they would engage in a lifetime of such meetings? These clients could buy half the City outright if they chose. And De Vere had already made his delivery promises to them, he was so confident about the outcome of this so-called ‘negotiation’.

His current agenda was to rearrange the fantastical objectives of this little group

and lead them to accept the inevitability of decisions that had already been taken elsewhere. This meeting was a necessary formality, an illusory part of so-called *due process*. He would simply lead them to recognise that there were no other parties in a position to undertake the scale of land remediation that the Portal Lands required after a century of industrial abuse.

Actually De Vere knew a lot more about those daunting expert reports addressing the severe contamination of the lands. He had already had a major role in shaping the conclusions of the supposedly ‘independent’ remediation consultants. He had gone on to entrance the *PRIGS* with the envisioned tax base of ‘high net worth’ residents and the renewed tax base of ‘world class’ technology enterprises. He delivered this with practical authority, as if the paying of tax was not a concept entirely alien to him.

Biding his time he had allowed the Planners to bring up the issue of the City Manor Farm. And then he pounced. They were apologetic about the delay in adjusting the standing agreement with Cabot Cabling over the lease. Of course there were always much faster ways to move this to a conclusion, much less troubled by the niceties of ‘due process’. However for the moment the annoyance of the Farm was a useful diversionary tactic and he continued to harp on it as a possible ‘deal-breaker’. He hinted that Hyperion was on the brink of withdrawing their proposal altogether, when so many disadvantages seemed stacked against them.

“What could you and Cabot have been thinking to blight the prospects for a clean renewal by granting the hick farm’s temporary use permission?” But de Vere knew exactly what Cabot had been thinking for he had also been privy to the decisions taken by their moribund board of directors. He had even assisted in initiating this ‘blighting strategy recognising how a group like City Farm would help to galvanise public attention. They would also be expected to play by the rules and could be forced out in a single putsch when the time came. The genius of his City Farm idea was in focussing public awareness on the thorny issue of land remediation.

However the *PRIGS* remained uncomfortable with the concept of an exclusive gated community. They had quickly grasped that this was not intended to be some genial guard positioned in a kiosk, blithely waving though the better cars. Hyperion had been quite specific in setting out details of the most stringent controls which would attract not only such security conscious industries but also the kind of residential community which would feel uncomfortable with anything less. Here on this spectacular waterfront only the wealthiest individuals would be admitted to enjoy their yachts, private helipads and exclusive social clubs undisturbed by petty interference of invidious elements.

“What Hyperion intend to achieve in the heart of our city will completely reverse the flight to gated suburban enclaves that you have always been so keen to stanch. The primary rationale will remain the stringent security standards required by this research.”

Little Marius in the jump suit piped up “It all sounds like a set for ‘The Prisoner’. Do we really want such an exclusive community in a key location in the midst of what we are promoting as *Our Liveable City*?”

De Vere flashed an excoriating look of contempt. “Quite honestly anyone with even the most rudimentary understanding of the issues will realise that there is no other way to afford the remediation that these wastelands require.”

From an early age de Vere had learned the futility of outright confrontation. It only helped the opposing side to test and articulate dimly framed contrary intuitions. Conciliation was a much more effective weapon when it prevented others from thinking the issues through fully. And De Vere knew the advantages of dissembling in his role as the middleman, the man who was trying to balance both sides of a situation into a viable compromise.

“The world is becoming a very dangerous place. We naturally want to preclude another fiasco like the *City Seven*. Our investors are naturally keen to safeguard impeccable reputations. They all have strong misgivings about that fiasco, quite rightly fearing the adverse publicity that such situations bring. We should all be aware of the damage this has done to our international reputation as a ‘world class’ city. I tell you, what is being proposed by Hyperion is a god-send. It will place us at the heart of an interconnected global community, the central pulse of rapidly expanding scientific development. We must do all that it takes to grab a stake in this new world. We are sending out a clear message that this is one City that is open for business.”

The effective middle man makes the jagged edges fit to his own advantage. He knew too well the dubious provenance of much of the money that was being made available for the Portal development and how to make the shadowy forces providing the money feel vulnerable and grateful for his intercession. He was able to take the vast resources of sovereign funds founded on purloined natural resources and bundle them up with those suspect moneys that are so often difficult to account for.

This biotechnology connection was a perfect focus for his machinations. Expectations were astronomic and easy to exploit. But then so was fear of what could happen if the wrong forces commandeered the wrong path. That was where ES-Tech might eventually prove a more useful ally. They were always keen to amplify potential dangers through their dire risk analyses highlighting devastating scenarios of disaster.

Gently he nudged the discussion away from terms like ‘open and integrated’ towards a ‘secure and confident’ vision of a ‘renewed’ city. He did not once refer to the imposing book of seductive drawings and renderings that he had positioned squarely in front of him. He could see how little Marius, Jiffy and Van What-not were slaving to delve into its contents.

His mind momentarily wandered to the City Seven. Separate boxes. That was where the fodder that Frankie provided would prove useful. It could be disposed of

when required. The City Seven incident had in fact proven more a stroke of luck than of genius. It had focussed public attention on Gene-Sys and given a taste of the passions that such issues could unleash. No one really believed the story that the Seven had haplessly blundered into something deadly. They were all, like Malyn, nurturing their own wayward conspiracy theories, imagining larger, nefarious forces behind the scenes.

As he cast his dispassionate eye over the master plan spread out across the table he could make out the ES-Tech properties, cross-hatched in red, which commanded the tip of the peninsula under Harvey's left elbow. He cast his mind back to his ridiculous meeting with Nix earlier that day. Helly, merely a bovine mascot, seemed to expect that her years scrabbling her way to the helm of ES-Tech would justify her continued position. She was resting on long faded laurels; the world had moved on and forgotten all those past battles. He had relished rattling her cage. She had little sense of the strategic powers that her company actually held, their potential to block his objectives. As expected, she had proven utterly inadequate to the test of managing his incursions. He certainly enjoyed sending a warning shot across her substantial bow. Ultimately he would ensure that her Board began to ask questions about her position. And that poor put-upon sidekick McCubbins! What an awful eyeful! It was hard to believe that all these cartoon characters were parts of the same organisation. Little Frankie was lurking in the shadowy backrooms, a snake on the make. What a sordid world he had conjured up with his posse of sub-normal, unattached deviants, life's natural victims. But at least he had more purposeful energy than this gang of *PRIGS* could muster and his little 'platoon' had proved momentarily useful.

Marius, the elfin gadfly seated opposite was obviously on the 'boys team'. De Vere momentarily choked with delight at the thought bubble of Zaanie flouncing into the midst of such a meeting unannounced, positioning herself casually on the table, her ample cleavage parked at his eye level - scaring the wits out of that little drone.

But Zaanie was now proving difficult to keep in her box. She was much too ready to jump anything going. He had to admit that he had let his guard down a notch and enjoyed one of the perks of his power. But he had almost immediately afterwards caught her snooping when she thought he was safely in the shower; probably trying to score background information and consolidate a longer term position. Zaanie was clearly of different mettle. But now he wished that he had just left Zaanie alone. Such lapses of behaviour were hardly becoming and most certainly not like him.

Separate boxes! That was his mantra for maintaining control. Gene-Sys and Hyperion were evidently a match made in heaven. Gene-Sys would benefit from the public awareness of being placed at the heart of the new community, almost its *raison d'être*. Other similar research groups would be attracted to the secure environment which would attract the most innovative research. This is what he had to explain to these befuddled planning plods.

His mind drifted to a much more powerful table that was already assembling in a discreet venue to hear the outcome of this ‘consultation’ with the *PRIGS*. Around it his cronies were managing the launch of Gene-Sys as a public company. They would want to be damned sure that there would be a plenty of money ‘left on the table’ ensuring that the stock was initially very conservatively valued. Gene-Sys expectations had to be set low so that their later expansion could be managed to everyone’s advantage.

In the meantime however he could effectively focus attention on the City Farm, a useful diversion, ostensibly the deal-breaker.



- Living Faster, Living Smaller

In my favourite kind of dream, the one that I try to rekindle whenever possible as I drift off to sleep, I have the power to move with such lightning speed that others can’t detect the blur of my passing. I can travel vast distances in the tick of a second. I can set time to fast forward or move back into the distant past. I imagine myself transformed into a hummingbird wizard entering into a remote time or place like a disembodied soul. I confess to a devilish desire to leave perplexing clues of my presence, rearranging details in the world I am invading. I revel in the idea of inducing unsettling paranoia in my victims.

There are no absolute measures for time or distance. All the incised rulers or precisely calibrated atomic clocks just sustain our illusions of being able to measure such things. Ingenious external timepieces have been engineered but the true clocks that perceive time lie within the organism and each of us is set to a different rhythm. It is our own bodies that create a personal perception of time.

The fly whose life is measured in hours or the hummingbird whose metabolism is set at exhausting pitch, have different perceptions of time from ours. Neither resents its fast expiring allotted span. Only human beings seem to experience such anxiety over their dwindling hours.

I can perceive the relativity of time in the erratic behaviour of my own personal ‘time machine’. Those boredoms and repetitions that fill my life effectively foreshorten